

ABSTRACT

A BLESSING OR CURSE?: THE MBOYA-KENNEDY STUDENTS' AIRLIFT AND ITS IMPLICATIONS.

by Catherine Jimbo Odari

This thesis explores the roles played by the Mboya-Kennedy students' airlifts of 1959-1961 both domestically and internationally. While the students' airlifts contributed to the cultivation of good relations between the United States of America and Kenya, it helped determine the course of Kenyan domestic politics with lasting impact. The study revealed that the airlifts program contributed to the fall-out amongst the first crop of Kenyan politicians and consequently, ethnic rivalries between the Kikuyu and the Luo which persists today especially in the political arena. Newspaper articles, archival materials, autobiographies, memoirs, US State Department records and oral interviews were used. This study's contribution is two –fold. At the domestic level, it initiates a conversation on the effects the airlift program had on ethnic rivalries and Kenyan politics. At the international level, it advances the scholarly conversation on the change of US foreign policies in the early 1960s on the issue of race not only within the United States, but also internationally.

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IMPLICATIONS.

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CHAPTER 1

Between 1959 and 1963, Kenyan labor leader Tom Mboya, together with American Senator John F. Kennedy and a few prominent African-Americans, organized airlifts of about eight hundred East African students to the United States to attend various American institutions of higher learning.¹ The aim was to train the African students for the jobs that awaited them once Kenya attained its independence from the British. Mboya and Kennedy, however, additionally had political reasons for supporting the airlift. Kennedy, who ostensibly embraced the airlifts as part of his larger fight for civil rights, hoped to gain support from black voters in the upcoming presidential election. Mboya too, hoped to use his role in the airlifts to raise his political profile both domestically and internationally and become Kenyan leader, Jomo Kenyatta's successor.

The students' airlifts played significant roles both in preparing Kenya's future workforce and forging good relations between Kenya and the US. But while it fulfilled those objectives, it unintentionally contributed to the falling out between Jaramogi Oginga Odinga, Kenya's first Vice-President on one side and Kenyatta, Kenya's first president and Mboya on the other. Oginga and Mboya both came from the Luo community while Kenyatta came from the Kikuyu ethnic group. Those were the two most dominant ethnic groups in Kenya at the time of Kenya's independence. The falling out eventually culminated into ethnic divisions between the Luo and Kikuyu ethnic groups and Mboya's assassination in 1969. Since then, there exists a persistent tension between the two ethnicities, particularly during national presidential elections.

Some work has been done on the airlift from both the American and Kenyan side, most of which mention the airlifts as one of Mboya's achievements, but virtually nothing has been done on its ethnic implications and long-term consequences. This study's contribution is two – fold. At the domestic level, it initiates a conversation on the effects the airlift program had on ethnic rivalries and Kenyan politics. At the international level, it advances the scholarly conversation on the change of US policies in the early 1960s on the issue of race not only within the United States, but also internationally. By eventually supporting the education of Africans, the US government demonstrated its willingness to empower the black race.

There is a dearth of scholarly study on the effects the airlift had on Kenyan politics. Scholars have focused on US-African relations in the Cold War era in light of the racial

¹ Tom Shachtman, *Airlift to America: How Barack Obama, Sr., John F. Kennedy, Tom Mboya, and 800 East African Students Changed their World and Ours* (New York: St Martin's Press, 2009).

problems America faced during this period and the political actions of those involved in the U.S. civil rights movement. Very little, however, has been done on the Kenyan student airlift as an important event which fostered US-Kenya foreign relations, yet also led to a major rift among Kenyan leaders. Thomas Borstelmann and Mary Dudziak have studied the US-African relations in this period. Borstelmann's work, *The Cold War and the Color Line: American Race Relations in the Global Arena* and Dudziak's book, *Cold War Civil Rights: Race and Image of American Democracy*, focus on the impact of America's domestic racial injustices on her foreign relations in the Cold War era. According to them, America was caught in the contradiction between her advocacy for the decolonization of the African people and the lack of freedom for the African Americans at home. In her other book *Exporting American Dreams*, Dudziak reconstructs the story of Thurgood Marshall, an American lawyer and civil rights activists who travelled to Kenya on the eve of independence to help with the drafting of Kenyan constitution. The most recent work on the airlift is by Tom Shachtman, an American journalist. In his book *Airlift to America: How Barack Obama Sr., John F. Kennedy, Tom Mboya, and 800 East African Students Changed Their World and Ours*, Shachtman narrates the story of the inception, organization and the execution of the airlift idea.

In Shachtman's perception, the airlift had an impact on the 1960 presidential election. He argues that because the Kennedy Foundation underwrote the airlift, John Kennedy gained a political advantage over his opponent, Richard Nixon, in the contest for African American votes. Shachtman posits that the course towards Obama's election in 2008 was made possible by both the presence of his father in the United States as a result of the airlift and the East African airliotees' participation in the civil rights revolution of the United States.² Shachtman however, does not delve into how the airlift helped shape the rivalry between Kenyatta and Mboya on one side and Oginga on the other, and the consequences on the nation's politics.

In his book *Tom Mboya: The Man Kenya Wanted to Forget*, David Goldsworthy has done a biographical study on Mboya focusing mainly on his childhood, career as a labor unionist, politician, diplomat, constitution draftsman and economic planner. He gives a brief highlight on the airlift as one of Tom Mboya's greatest achievements. His study was done in the early 1980s. Mboya's own *Freedom and After* gives good insights into his life and engagements in the colonial and post-colonial period. Since then, much has occurred that necessitates

² Shachtman, *Airlift to America*, 236.

revisiting of the topic. This includes the winning of the coveted Nobel Peace Prize by Prof. Wangari Maathai, who was one of the airlift's beneficiaries, and the election of President Obama, whose father benefitted from grants allocated to him by the African American Students Foundation, the organizer of the airlifts.

In this study, oral interviews, U.S. State Department records, newspaper articles, and autobiographies provide a good sense of how the airlift unfolded, and the impact it had on both Kenya and the United States. It contributes to the airlift narrative by exploring how the airlifts helped forge good relations between Kenya-US relations while at the same time, it contributed to Kenya's ethnic wrangles.

Kenya's colonial history dates back to the Berlin Conference of 1884-1885. At the conference, the African continent was subdivided, and what is today known as Kenya fell under the British protectorate. In 1896, the British government bankrolled the construction of a railway line stretching from the port of Mombasa to Lake Victoria, thus connecting Uganda to the outside world. The colonial government recruited the service of the Indian "coolies" to lay the line. At the time of the construction, the most important territory was Uganda. According to the British colonial government, the railway would make it easier to protect Uganda and its Nile headwaters from foreign invasion, and consequently protecting the Suez Canal which provided the shortest route to India. The colonial government drove out several Africans who lived along the railway line forcing them to become squatters. The project cost the British government unprecedented sum of public money. In order to pay some of this back, the government decided to make use of the railway for export. The British colonial government decided to invite British settlers to exploit the territory's agricultural potential and sell their products to the world markets. The possibility of acquiring cheap land and labor attracted British settlers who migrated into the territory thus driving the Africans out of their fertile lands. The government established African Reserves which in most cases were in the rural areas and the fringes of what came to be known as the "white highlands." The most affected communities were the Kikuyus. After the land alienation, the colonial government imposed policies such as the *kipande* system of identification, hut and poll tax to restrict the movement of the Africans, thus ensuring a constant supply of cheap African labor in the settlers' farms and forcing them into wage economy. These,

together with blatant racial discrimination, generated a lot of resentment and resistance from the dispossessed Africans.³

The end of the Second World War marked the beginning of intense armed struggle. The African soldiers who had fought in the Allied forces went back home with greater global awareness of other national movements such as that in India. In Kenya, their British counterparts received their rewards in form of land. The Kikuyu ex-soldiers therefore expected to get their compensation too for their contribution in the war. This, however, was not the reality. Their conditions, and that of their fellow Kikuyus continued to worsen. Armed with the knowledge of handling guns, the ex-servicemen headed for the forest to fight for their freedom. They employed guerilla tactics and formed the *Mau Mau* freedom movement to fight their colonial masters.⁴ In 1952, the *Mau Mau* fighters allegedly assassinated chief Waruhiu who was believed to be a colonial loyalist. This sparked off a spate of arrests and the colonial government interred about one million Africans in detention camps, concentration camps and “emergency villages” where women, children and the elderly were confined under poor living conditions and where torture and rape abound. Among those arrested and detained were prominent African political leaders such as Jomo Kenyatta, Paul Ngei, Bildad Kaggia, Kungu Karumba, Achieng Oneko and Fred Kubai. The six later referred to as “the Kapenguria six” were sentenced to seven years imprisonment and hard labor in Kapenguria over their alleged role in *Mau Mau* activities. The government restricted the movements of the Africans from one district or region to the other especially members of the Kikuyu, Embu and Meru ethnic groups. It is estimated that by 1954, about three out of every four Kikuyu men were in detention.⁵ The colonial government took over their land and sent them to forced labor either in the “white farms” or in construction works such as the building of Jomo Kenyatta International Airport. The colonial government proscribed all political organizations including Kenya African Union (KAU).

The existing political conditions at the time accorded the Africans very limited opportunity to acquire higher education. There existed very few institutions of higher learning in

³ Caroline Elkins, *Imperial Reckoning: The Untold Story of Britain's Gulag in Kenya*, (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2005), p 1-22.

⁴ The word *Mau Mau* is said to have different meanings; one of them is that it is an acronym for *Mzungu Arudi Ulaya, Mwafrika Apate Uhuru*. This is a Swahili phrase that translates into the white man to return to Europe so that the Africans can attain their freedom.

⁵ Wangari Maathai, *Unbowed: One Woman's Story* (London: William Heinemann, 2007), 67

the three African countries that were under the British colonial rule.⁶ As already pointed out, the Africans, according to the colonial policy, were meant to provide labor in the settlers' farms and therefore, their education was not encouraged by the colonial government. During this period, Makerere University College in Kampala, Uganda was the only university in the whole of East Africa. By 1956, the Royal Technical College in Nairobi had begun to function and still had low enrollment levels. Most Kenyans were therefore forced to seek university education abroad. While Britain offered scholarships for degree courses at its universities, the opportunities were limited and the movement of the Kenyans out of the country restricted. The British colonial government had to thoroughly scrutinize the applicants to ensure that they were politically acceptable to leave the country especially in the period of *Mau Mau* emergency in which Kenyan freedom fighters tangled with the British.⁷ Hence Mboya's idea of an airlift came as a breath of fresh air renewing hope amongst the youths, parents and African leaders.

There was however one more drawback. The US State Department on several occasions, refused to provide monetary support for these airlifts until 1961 after John F. Kennedy became the President of the United States. Prior to 1961, the State Department granted scholarships to Kenyans in very limited numbers. For example, in 1957, only seven Kenyans received official scholarships and only nine in 1958.⁸ The State Department's eventual acceptance to fund these airlifts and its appreciation for the long-term consequences of the student airlifts reflect the complex framework of the Cold War. The lack of direct governmental management of the airlift reflected America's reluctance to upset the British colonial rule by offering educational opportunities and support to Kenyan students. The African American Students Foundation (AASF) supported the airlifts from 1959 to 1961. Those involved included; American industrialist, William X. Scheinman, President John F. Kennedy and African-American celebrities namely; Jackie Robinson, a baseball player, musical artist, Harry Belafonte, Sydney Poitier, an actor and, civil rights activist Martin Luther King, Jr. Each of these individuals played different roles in this process.

⁶ The three African countries included; Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania. The latter was initially under the German protectorate. After the First World War, it was transferred to the British.

⁷ Alistair Matheson, comp., *The Kenya-US Student Airlift: The Beginnings of Educational Exchange Between Kenya and the United States of America* (Nairobi, 1986), 2.

⁸ Mansfield Irving Smith, "The East African Airlifts of 1959, 1960, and 1961," PhD diss., Syracuse University, June 1966, 18.

Mboya and other Africans involved in airlifting students believed that Kenya needed to prepare personnel who would take over the institutions, administrations and professions in the post-independence setting.⁹ In his autobiography *Freedom and After*, Mboya declared that an enlightened population was necessary for economic development of the nation. In Mboya's perception, educating the people would not only improve their chances at getting better jobs and build a more skilled labor force; it would also produce a better market for the country because with greater education comes greater demands and desires among the population.¹⁰ In addition, educating the Africans would provide a bulwark against expatriates' blackmail threats. During the colonial period, expatriate civil servants made unrealistic demands on the Kenyan government and threatened to depart the country if their demands were not met. It was thus necessary to train indigenous civil servants who were more reliable to take over positions before the expatriates deserted the country.¹¹

While the airlift fulfilled this role, it, created tensions between Mboya and Oginga. Their rivalry emanated partly from their personality differences and partly from jealousies generated by the airlift initiative and subsequent political ambitions. They both hoped to succeed Kenyatta who was ageing by the time he left prison. This, they could only achieve through popularity contest that the opportunity to organize the airlift offered.¹² Mboya, unlike other African leaders such as Oginga Odinga, saw the United States as the best partner in driving post-colonial Kenya's developmental agenda. He was more pragmatic than Oginga in his dealings with the western colonial powers and the United States. When Mboya received support from African American Students Foundation, Oginga, with the support from the Communist Eastern bloc arranged for Kenyan students to go and study in the Socialist countries. Oginga followed up the students' education program with another project. He built the Lumumba Institute in 1964 equally supported by external sources from the socialist countries. In his discourse, Odinga attributed his reasons for setting up the Institute to train Kenya African National Union (KANU) party officials.¹³ Mboya and Oginga carried this rivalry even to parliament. Mboya, in his bid to outcompete Oginga, lined himself with Kenyatta. Through several of Mboya's political

⁹ Tom Mboya, *Freedom and After* (Nairobi: East African Educational Publishers, 1986), 141.

¹⁰ Ibid, 150.

¹¹ Ibid., 134.

¹² William Attwood, *The Reds and The Blacks: A Personal Adventure* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1967), 242.

¹³ Oginga Odinga, *Not Yet Uhuru: An Autobiography* (Nairobi: East African Educational Publishers, 1967), 270.

machinations, Oginga was stripped of his powers as the Vice-President and later forced out of the political party, KANU. Once Oginga was out, Kenyatta and members of his inner circle became suspicious of Mboya and his relations with the West. Kenyatta knew that in the Cold War political contest, the West was capable of installing an individual who was ready to work with them as the president of any Third World country. In the case of Kenya, Mboya would have been the most preferred candidate especially because he was still very young, intelligent and very pro-West.¹⁴ In 1969, Mboya was gunned down on the streets of Nairobi. His assassination sparked a wave of riots and hatred among the Luos who believed that one of their own had been killed by members of the Kikuyu community.¹⁵ This rivalry persists today.

Tom Mboya was the main organizer of the airlift from the Kenyan side. Examining Mboya allows us to understand the socio-political and economic context within which he operated as well as to understand the impact of the airlift on both Kenya and the United States. To that end, it is useful to examine his background in detail.

Mboya has been described in different terms but one thing they all agree on is that he was extraordinarily intelligent. Writing in the *Daily Nation* Newspaper, Kul Bhushan described Mboya as an immaculate dresser, with clear pronunciation, mastery of language, and great oratory skills. His dynamism and diplomacy was extraordinary.¹⁶ Kenyan journalist Gichinga Ndirangu described him as a “Brilliant and astute politician. He focused on ingenious ideas like the famous student airlifts; direct energy to institution building like his push for the creation of the industrial court and strengthening of trade unionism; and left an imprint on national policy through the drafting of Sessional Paper No. 10 on African Socialism that set out the beacons of Kenya’s socio-economic transformation.”¹⁷ Mboya, like Kennedy, was a young visionary leader who offered new hope to the masses oppressed by socio-economic circumstances.

Mboya was born on August 15th 1930 at Kilima Mbogo sisal estate in Thika district about forty miles from Nairobi. At the time, only European farmers could own land in the area which formed part of what was then known as the “white highlands.” Both of his parents were uneducated and worked in the sisal farms. They were Suba-Luo migrants from Rusinga Island in

¹⁴ How Kenyatta Dealt with Threat from “Turncoats” in the *Daily Nation*, Friday, December 15, 2006.14

¹⁵ From the interview with Ngala.

¹⁶ Kul Bhushan, “Kenya’s Kennedy- A Young Man’s Hero” in *Daily Nation*, Tuesday, July 8, 1969. 10.

¹⁷ Gichinga Ndirangu, “Great Leaders Leave a Memorial to their Name” in *Sunday Nation*, December 27, 2009. 12.

Lake Victoria, on the western part of Kenya.¹⁸ By 1930 when Mboya was born, his parents, Leonardus Ndiege and Marcella Awuor, had been converted to the Catholic Church by the missionaries who lived on the sisal estate. His father worked for fifteen years in the sisal estate as a laborer earning a wage of one pound per month. According to Mboya's account, his father managed to save three pounds from his meager salary to pay his school fees for the whole year.¹⁹

His first school attendance was at a local mission school where they were only taught how to recite prayers and the Catechism. He attended the school for two years before he was transferred to Kabaa in what was then known as Ukamba district. Since the school was far from his parent's home, he had to live with his religion teacher's family amongst the Akamba ethnic group. Mboya recounts that his teacher "lived very simply and very tribally with his wife and children in a mud-and-wattle hut with no sanitary facilities and no piped water. He took me sometimes to his other home in the reserve, and I still remember how dry it was, just scrub and thorn trees, and how the children were obviously lacking in vitamins and suffering from yaws and eyesores."²⁰ The conditions at the school were definitely not favorable for learning as he pointed out. "We had learned our lessons sitting under a tree; and, since we had no books or slates on which to learn writing, we used to write with our fingers or a stick in the sand."²¹ But he learned to read and write.

In 1942, Tom Mboya went to St. Mary's School, Yala-a boarding school located in central Nyanza about three hundred miles from Kilima Mbogo. To get there, he had to travel in old goods van since the wartime trains did not provide normal carriages for civilian passengers. During his vacations, Mboya worked in the kitchen of the school's Catholic priests to help his father pay for his fees that had by then risen to eight pounds per year. In Yala, Mboya became an altar boy and a choir member, and later he considered the idea of training as a priest. This however, was not to be. He became critical of the position of the Church in colonial Africa. While the missionary churches affected the rural areas of Africa by setting up schools and hospitals, their compliance with colonial regimes were questionable. Mboya argued that some of the missionaries condoned racial segregations in schools, hospitals and in the residential areas.

¹⁸ The Suba are the western Bantus who migrated from Tanzania and Uganda and entered Kenya through the western fringe of Lake Victoria. Over time, through socio-economic interactions with the Luo, they have been assimilated into the Luo ethnic group-Kenya's third largest ethnic group and are Nilotic speakers.

¹⁹ Tom Mboya, *Freedom and After* (Nairobi: East African Educational Ltd, 1986), 16.

²⁰ Mboya, *Ibid*, 17.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 18.

To Mboya, the missionaries adopted the same mentality as the colonialists and the settlers. This however, is not meant to downplay the role the missionaries have played in some parts of Africa. He was quick to note that, “On the West Coast, where there is a homogeneous African society, missionaries readily promoted African participation in all walks of life, and some of the great Africans there have sprung from a mission background. But in the so called multi-racial societies, they invariably accepted the system of segregation.”²²

The missionaries not only condoned racial segregation, but they also condemned African traditional and cultural practices such as African dances and female circumcision which they viewed as “primitive.” Mboya noted the persistent conflict between the church and those Africans who wanted to continue African traditions and customs and stood for African culture. He stated, “The church came almost to preach to us in terms of a blueprint of the British social and cultural system, which they regarded as representing civilization and Christianity.”²³ Mboya recalled that every time he went back to the sisal estate he heard missionaries say publicly that they did not like educated African boys like Mboya because they did not seem to respect tradition and be subservient to the white man.²⁴

In 1945, Tom Mboya completed his primary school education and passed well enough to secure admission at the Holy Ghost College in Mang’u. During his first year at the school, he became the medical prefect in charge of time keeping. After he completed his studies at the end of 1947, he was unable to proceed to attain the Cambridge school certificate. His father could no longer afford to pay his fees and so his desire to join Makerere College in Uganda and later proceed to study overseas did not materialize. Mboya joined the Royal Sanitary Institute’s medical school later moved to Jeanes School to train as a sanitary inspector. He became the president of the students’ council to mediate any financial and administrative problems between the students and the school’s authority. When he completed his studies at the Jeanes School, he joined the Nairobi city council as a sanitary inspector in 1951. The council members elected Mboya as the secretary of the African Staff Association. Mboya stated that it was here that his interest in the trade union movement started and that is how he began as a union leader.²⁵

²² Ibid., 19.

²³ Tom Mboya, *Freedom and After*, 20.

²⁴ Ibid., 27.

²⁵ Ibid.

At the time, trade unionism lacked vibrancy and proper organization and had low membership. The government was not keen on supporting trade unionism largely because it associated them with riots and communism. The government therefore encouraged staff associations which had no right to strike rather than trade unions.²⁶ To counter the government attitude, Mboya, together with other members of the association embarked on a nation-wide mission to mobilize members of other staff associations in order to form Kenya Local Government Workers Union (KLGWU), which they managed to register as a trade union. The union elected Mboya as the National General Secretary. KLGWU immediately affiliated with Kenya Federation of Registered Trade Unions later renamed Kenya Federation of Labor (KFL).²⁷ During the same period, the colonial government declared a state of emergency after the *Mau Mau* freedom fighters allegedly assassinated Chief Waruhiu. Following the declaration, the government banned all political organizations leaving no channel to direct political grievances. This accorded Mboya the opportunity as the leader of trade unions to dominate the political scene. Mboya led the labor movement into the formation of Kenya Federation of Labor (KFL). It was the period of mass eviction of Africans in the Rift valley, arrests and detention, property confiscation and the introduction of pass books to restrict movement. These became some of the grievances which Mboya aired through KFL.

The International Confederation of Free Trade Unions provided a channel through which KFL could air their grievances. Its publication, *Free Labor World* availed an international platform through which Mboya illuminated the problems Kenya faced. Mboya recalled, “I wrote several articles in their publication...to help get our case to the world-the side of the unhappy story which was not receiving any publicity otherwise. At that time the only publicity from Kenya was of *Mau Mau* oaths and terrorists activities. Until the ICFTU and affiliates like the American Federation of Labor gave us the use of their publications, nothing was written of how some members of the security forces were allegedly given money if they ‘shot straight and shot an African.’”²⁸ Mboya continued to play crucial roles in the negotiations between employers, employees and the government. The most notable one was the Mombasa dock workers strike of March 1955.²⁹

²⁶ Ibid, 33.

²⁷ For more, see Ibid., 34-35.

²⁸ Mboya, *Freedom and After*, 37.

²⁹ See Ibid., 39.

In October 1955, Mboya, through his connections as a trade unionist, secured a scholarship through the Workers' Travel Association to go to Ruskin College in Oxford. He studied Political Science, Economics and Industrial Relations.³⁰ In Oxford Mboya made international connections and travelled to other parts of the world such as West Germany and the United States of America to speak about the events that were taking place in Kenya. Mboya's connection with America began in 1956. He built it through his labor union activities' sponsor the American Committee on Africa (ACOA) and its director George Houser. ACOA's main objectives were to raise special funds in the US to support projects in Africa, to establish inter-racial cooperation, oppose racial discrimination, and serve African people through educational and service projects in Africa.³¹

Through this organization, Mboya managed to secure funds from American Federation of Labor (AFL) and the Congress of Industrial organization (CIO) for the building of a Kenya Labor center and for the establishment of American Trade Union Scholarship Program for Africa. He also toured several parts of the United States delivering speeches, lecturing and giving radio and television talks about the Kenyan situation. While this move was supposedly meant to serve the interests of the Africans in Kenya who were fighting the British rule, in the course of his tours, Mboya found out about Kenyan students who were offered admission to American colleges and universities but were not able to afford the travel expenses. Some of the colleges that had offered scholarships to Kenyans had never admitted an African American into their schools. At the time of independence in 1963, the average per capita income in Kenya was less than one hundred dollars per year and not even *harambees*, in which people collectively raised money to support worthy initiatives, would help to raise sufficient funds.³² Mboya discussed this problem with Houser who in turn introduced him to a rich American Industrialist, William X. Scheinman, who paid for the air tickets for the first few individual students in 1958.³³

To run the program more effectively, Scheinman later decided to form the African-American Students Foundation in 1959, and became its first president. Other members were: Frank Montero, a Black American labor and public relations expert, Theodore Kheel, a lawyer,

³⁰ Ibid., 56.

³¹ Goldsworthy, *The Man Kenya Wanted to Forget*, 61.

³² Matheson Alistair, comp., *The Kenya-US Student Airlift: The Beginnings of Educational Exchange Between Kenya and the United States of America*. (Nairobi, 1986), 4

³³ Ibid., 6.

Jackie Robinson, former baseball player, Sidney Poitier, Harry Belafonte, Cora Weiss and Mrs Ralph Bunche. Mboya represented Kenya and later, Julius Nyerere, then President of Tanganyika and Kenneth Kaunda, Zambia's first president became board members with hope of increasing the number of students to include those from Eastern and Southern Africa region. During his second visit to the US, Mboya continued to deliver speeches and solicited for funds to charter planes for the next group of students. He managed to meet with prominent American politicians such as John F. Kennedy, Adlai Stevenson, and Richard Nixon. His appearance on national television gave him a greater image in the US which according to one writer, it prompted a commentator to say of Mboya's visit, "It was for many Americans the first occasion they began to take Africa seriously."³⁴ In Kenya too, Mboya, together with other able Kenyans including Gikonyo Kiano and Kariuki Njiiri who had returned from America organized for *harambees* through tea parties. The first chartered plane took off from Kenya in September, 1959. Together with the subsequent airlifts it is estimated that an approximate total of 800 East African students were educated in the US, thanks to the AASF and the Joseph P. Kennedy Foundation.³⁵

By this time, the American State Department played a more complementary role to this relatively private affair. There were no considerations of the impact the student educational exchange would have on the Kenya-US foreign relations, as well as Kenya's future political and ethnic rivalry, at least as the minimal government involvement suggests. Robert Stephens, the Cultural Attaché at the American embassy in Nairobi saw the gathering push for higher education as presenting an opportunity to cement bonds of mutual sympathy and friendship with the citizens and leaders of a nation which would soon be free.³⁶ He continually urged a higher level of government assistance in his memos to Washington.

The airlift program greatly contributed to the number of educated Africans who returned home to take up senior positions in the government and in the institutions of higher learning. In East Africa, more than ninety percent of the 1959-1963 airlift graduates returned home and were

³⁴Alistair, comp., *The Kenya-US Student Airlift*, 4

³⁵ Cora Weiss, "From Kenya to America," in the New York Times, May 7, 2010.
http://www.nytimes.com/2010/05/09/books/review/Letters-t-FROMKENYATOA_LETTERS.html. Accessed on November 10, 2010

³⁶Matheson Alistair, *The Kenya-US Student Airlift*, 4.

actively recruited by the government for key positions in the ministries and universities.³⁷ Some of the airlift beneficiaries included Nobel Laureate Prof. Wangari Maathai, who has served as a university professor and as an assistant minister in the Mwai Kibaki government, and Barack Obama Sr., who worked with Tom Mboya in the Economic Affairs ministry among many others. The airlift therefore met its immediate purpose of training future leaders and workforce. At the international level, the program played a role in forging good relations between the United States and Kenya.

In organizing the airlift, Mboya had hoped to develop a generation of educated Kenyans, improve Kenya's relations with the US and drive his political ambitions. He however, failed to foresee the effects the students' airlift would have on Kenyan politics. It contributed to the fall-out between the first crop of Kenyan politicians that included; Oginga Odinga, Jomo Kenyatta and Mboya himself. The falling out led to his assassination and the persistent rivalry between the Kikuyu and the Luo., even while, at the international level, the airlift helped forge good relations between the United States and Kenya.

³⁷ Tom Shachtman, *Airlift to America: How Barack Obama, Sr., John F. Kennedy, Tom Mboya, and 800 East African Students Changed their World and Ours* (New York: St Martin's Press, 2009), 226.

Chapter 2

The airlift not only played a pivotal role in enabling Kenyan students to acquire education in the United States, it also fulfilled Mboya's hopes of nurturing good relations with the US. The Cold War politics between the West and the East worked inadvertently to further Mboya's hopes. During this period, it was necessary to support Third World programs as a way of keeping off Communist influence in those parts of the world. In a memorandum to Secretary of State Dean Rusk, the Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs, G. Mennen Williams urged the State Department to increase funding for economic aid to serve political as well as developmental objectives, and advocated for the strengthening of US programs in the fields of information, cultural and educational exchange to promote the US and combat Communism. According to Williams, it was only through economic aid and education that the United States would win the trust and respect from the Africans. The US needed to gain African support for its positions on specific issues in international affairs such as the Vietnam War and to maintain friendly and effective bilateral relations with Africa.³⁸ Moreover, international rivalries dictated that the United States of America formulate policies that would ensure that newly-independent African states, and those that were still under colonial control did not fall into the hands of the Communist East once they attained their independence. It was also imperative that the US and its Allies maintain access to Third World resources within a Free World structure.³⁹ According to a memorandum written by the State Department's Special Assistant, Julius C. Holmes, to Secretary of State John Foster Dulles, dated February 6, 1958, the possibility of African nations falling into the hands of the Communists posed a real threat not only to the United States but also to the Europeans. In the memo he noted that there was need for a concerted joint effort between the Western Europeans particularly those that had possessions in Africa, and the United States to enlighten the Africans on their objectives and motives in Africa. That way, a certain degree of

³⁸ Memorandum from the Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs(Williams Mennen) to the Secretary of State (Rusk), Foreign Relations of the United States, 1964–1968, Volume XXIV, Africa, Document 200. Accessed on December 3, 2010. <http://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1964-68v24/d200>.

³⁹ George White JR. *Holding the Line: Race, Racism, and American Foreign Policy toward Africa, 1953-1961*, (Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2005), 30-32.

confidence in the American and Western European governments would be cultivated among the Africans. Consequently, it would make it difficult for the Communist ideology to penetrate the African nations. Failure would result in the weakening of Western Europe so much so as to make its defense against the Communists impossible. Support for education was one way of doing this, but the State department was still reluctant to pay for the airlifts.⁴⁰

Provision of higher education to future African leaders accorded an opportunity for nurturing mutual, cordial relations with the newly independent states. The airlift certainly played the role of cultivating friendly relations between Kenya and the United States--nations that hitherto had no meaningful diplomatic ties. Prior to the mid 1950s, Africa had been a low priority area for US foreign policy consideration. Consequently, there was very little knowledge about and less contact with Africans by the government officials. At the time, the US government was mainly preoccupied with the events in the other parts of the world, particularly in Europe (European reconstruction after the World War Two, Latin America and East Asia, specifically the wars in Vietnam and Korea). Thus the airlift increasingly became a foreign relations matter because of the role it played in the diplomatic circles. Its support was a practical manifestation of US intentions and vision for the decolonized nations, hence winning the trust of a section of the Africans. In the process of its organization, several interactions among the state officials and politicians from both countries occurred which provided an opportunity for parties from both sides to understand the problems they shared in common, such as poverty and racism; both of which hindered economic development and national cohesion in Kenya and the US respectively.

Prior to the airlift, American diplomats both in the US and Africa appeared indifferent, aloof and had condescending attitudes towards the Africans. Some even maintained segregation within the American embassies.⁴¹ As Cold War politics progressed, Africa slowly became an area for foreign policy consideration, making it necessary for the state officials to fully understand the dynamics of the continent such as its geopolitics, economy and both human and natural resources. This would provide the US policy makers with the pertinent details and

⁴⁰ Memorandum from the Secretary of State 's Special Assistant (Holmes) to Secretary of State (Dulles), Foreign Relations of the United States, 1958–1960, Volume XIV, Africa, Document 1. Accessed on December 3, 2010 <http://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1958-60v14/d1>

⁴¹ Thomas J Noer, *The Cold War and Black Liberation: The United States and White Rule in Africa, 1948-1968*. (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1985), 35.

analysis that they required for the formulation of foreign policies towards the continent. It was in accordance with a suggestion from the Consulate General in Nairobi to the Department of State dated May 27, 1957. According to the dispatch, high on priority for the state officials was to take the necessary steps in getting to know the Africans. That way, they would be able to influence the attitudes and views of the Africans towards the United States and its values.⁴² It was more strategic to support the education of promising Africans who would take over leadership once they acquired independence. Not only would this move ensure that they would drive the growth of their economies upon their return from the United States, but also that the West would influence potential African leaders to steer their countries' economies and politics along the Western capitalists ideological models of liberty and keep them from adopting those of the Communists. Imbued in this was the competition between Washington and Moscow's urgent need to change the world in order to prove that their respective ideologies were applicable universally. The African leaders therefore provided fertile ground for their competition. Moreover, the United States has been known, from its inception, to base its foreign policy on territorial expansion, in accordance with the belief in manifest destiny. Therefore, its belief in liberty could not be limited to its borders. It had to be spread to the rest of the world for its own security purposes.⁴³ And one of the ways of achieving this was by expanding the domains of social justice and freedoms outside of the US through education. Most of the United States' Third World programs in the 1960s were aimed at education and healthcare. John F. Kennedy firmly believed that international development was an integral part of an American national security strategy. Through American-supported education, the local leaders would become important part of the modernizing middle class.⁴⁴ The students airlift as an educational venture therefore played a significant role not only in cementing foreign relationships between East Africa and the United States but also in achieving Washington's goal of spreading its version of modernity.

After the Second World War, it became too expensive for the British government to maintain colonies abroad. The colonial government in Kenya began to implement constitutional changes, albeit reluctantly, to increase the number of African representatives in the Legislative

⁴² Foreign Relations of the United States, 1955–1957, Volume XVIII, Africa, Document 52.
<http://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1955-57v18/d52> Accessed on February 18, 2011.

⁴³ Odd Arne Westad, *The Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Making of Our Times* (New York:Cambridge University Press, 2005), 14.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 1-38.

Council (Legco) in preparation for an African majority in the government and eventual independence. Washington's fear was that if the Africans finally attained independence without "proper guidance" from the West, they might embrace Communism as their socio-political ideology. Imbued in this was President Dwight Eisenhower administration's belief in the inferiority of the black race. George White, Jr. captures this attitude when he succinctly states that, "The Eisenhower administration assumed White superiority and Black primitivism to be indelible facts. This belief, and concomitant action, meant that the supreme military and economic power of the Western (White) world had to strictly monitor and control the behavior of Third World (Non-Whites) people."⁴⁵ In fact, Eisenhower's administration considered Blacks to be unfit for self-rule.⁴⁶ Hence, according to the administration, the reason for intervening in the Third World was racially-instigated. The belief in the inability of the blacks to rule themselves to a large extent stemmed from the American images of African Americans before and during the Civil War, and the Reconstruction era. In their quest for survival, the freed disenfranchised slaves were viewed as incapable of controlling themselves and could easily revert back to their "primitive" old peasant societies or could easily fall for the new collectivist ideologies such as Socialism that was now competing with capitalism for global influence. The black struggles for equality and justice indicated to Washington the urgent need for guidance. The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries' need for reforms consequently inspired the expansion of the guidance of black communities abroad through the spread of the "gospel of modernity"-- health, education and consumerism.⁴⁷

After his ten-week study tour of Africa, special assistant to the Secretary of State Julius Holmes wrote a memorandum to the Secretary of State Foster Dulles as part of the guidance agenda in which he warned against making generalizations about Africa and at the same time, acknowledged that the movement toward self-government and independence by Africans was strong and accelerating. While African self-government was likely to be carried out within the framework of Western European political systems, Holmes expressed his doubts on the possibility of the systems working out in the African context and Africans successfully governing themselves. He argued that "This vast, primitive population is largely illiterate, more than half pagan, and is practically leaping from the Iron Age into the 20th Century. Africans are

⁴⁵ White Jr., *Holding the Line*, 134.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 32.

⁴⁷ Westad, *The Global Cold War*, 22.

being pulled away from a long-accepted way of life toward a more complicated existence for which they are, in the mass, almost totally unprepared.”⁴⁸ Consequently, they, according to Holmes, were vulnerable to Communist penetration hidden under the cloak of nationalism. To solve this problem, he recommended that they put up a concerted effort with the other Western powers particularly those that were holding possessions in Africa. The exercise required the Europeans to understand Washington’s objectives and have confidence in its motives in Africa—to prevent Africa from embracing Communism which was the ultimate “danger” they were confronted with. According to Holmes, Europe would be seriously weakened and outflanked making its defense impossible if they lost Africa to the Communists.⁴⁹

Despite Washington’s doubts on the Africans’ ability to rule themselves, it was not in the interest of the US government to assume a complete takeover or full responsibility for the Africans, particularly the Kenyans once the British colonial government left the continent. Neither did it intend to give that kind of impression either to the Africans or the British colonialists. In fact, in a letter of instruction from the State Department to the Consulate General in Nairobi dated May 4, 1955, Secretary of State John Foster Dulles warned against giving the East Africans the impression that the US government would take charge of their political future instead of the British government. Dulles insisted that, “U.S. interest in this part of the continent is to work through and with the British authority: While the United States does not intend to play down in any way the promotions of U.S objectives or the presentation of American points of view, neither does it have any desire or intention of supplementing Britain by becoming, or appearing to become, an invisible or ‘shadow’ government.”⁵⁰ While the US was interested in this part of the world, it could not impose its rule upon the people. As a champion of freedom it had to be seen globally as the driver of decolonization agenda. A direct rule over the Africans would be seen as a renegade to its own ideals, a cause which the Americans fought for in the War for Independence from the British. At the same time, Washington had to tread carefully not to isolate the British colonial government whose support it urgently needed in the ideological war against the Soviet Union.

⁴⁸ Holmes Memorandum to Dulles, Foreign Relations of the United States, 1958-1960, vol. xiv, February 6, 1958,. <http://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1958-60v14/d1> Accessed on February 18, 2011.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Foreign Relations of the United States, 1955–1957, Volume xviii, Africa, Document 48. <http://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1955-57v18/d48> Accessed on February 18, 2011.

While other dispatches stressed the importance of providing education opportunities to the African students, citing among other things, the preparation of Africans for future leadership roles, and the creation of awareness amongst the Africans on what the US stood for in terms of democratic principles, the US government's support for education in East Africa remained minimal at the time. Moreover, the US government was keen not to be entangled with the internal problems between the British and the Africans. It left it to the British government to solve the problems, such as that of *Mau Mau*, as it saw fit. It was only willing to work with the British authority to ensure a smooth transition from colonialism to independence with limited involvement. This, according to the US government, was to be achieved without understating the US interest in the region which was to ensure that America won Africans as allies in the Cold War. While helping the Africans to acquire proper education was part of this process, the US government was reluctant to upset the British colonial government by offering full-fledged educational support to the Africans. Consequently, the US government found itself in a delicate position of wanting to support the Africans and at the same time, fearing to upset the British Colonial government in the process.

In 1956, the number of students supported increased to three. But support remained minimal until 1961, when John F. Kennedy became the President of the United States. While education was viewed as an element of freedom, there is a significant difference in the way Kennedy and Eisenhower's administrations handled the question of Black freedom. Kennedy took an unequivocal position on African freedom, democracy, and economic progress. He compared the African freedom struggle with the American Revolution. He stated, "For we, too, founded a new nation on revolt from colonial rule--and it was in our schools that many renowned African leaders absorbed the ideal of the American dream--the dream of freedom and security--the dream which--according to African leader Tom Mboya--is the guiding spirit of modern African nationalism."⁵¹ He believed that the African economic progress was the responsibility of the US, Western Europe and Africa. He charged that "It is primarily the responsibility of the Africans. It is also the responsibility of those European nations who have for centuries extracted

⁵¹ Remarks of Senator John F. Kennedy at Saint Anselm's College, Manchester, New Hampshire, March 5, 1960. <http://www.jfklibrary.org/Research/Ready-Reference/JFK-Speeches/Remarks-of-Senator-John.F>. Kennedy Accessed on February 15, 2011.

the wealth of that continent.”⁵² He also advised that the primary motivation of the United States’ assistance should not be the fear of Soviet aid and warned against giving the Africans an impression that the United States was only interested in them as “pawns in the Cold War.”⁵³ Kennedy disagreed with Eisenhower’s foreign policy approach. Eisenhower’s administration considered African nationalism communist subversion. Sometimes the administration took a neutral position and non-involvement as was the case of Algerian freedom struggle which Kennedy strongly opposed, as indicated by one of his speeches in which he stated that the sweep of nationalism was the most potent factor in foreign affairs at the time. The US and its allies could afford to ignore it only for a while because it would not be long before they could see the Soviets exploit it with dire consequences. The only alternative for Washington was to nurture it and give it hope and proper leadership. By doing so, the United States would greatly improve both its standing and global security.⁵⁴

Kennedy delivered a provocative speech on July 2, 1957 in which he called for Algerian independence and warned of the world’s damaged impression of the U.S.’s “head-in-the-sands” policy. *Time* magazine quoted him stating that, “Worst of all, the United State’s retreat from the principles of independence and anti-colonialism has damaged our standing in the eyes of the free world, our leadership in the fight to keep that world free ... Perhaps it is already too late to save the West from total catastrophe in Algeria, but we dare not fail to make the effort.” What the U.S. should press for, he argued, “is a solution under which Algeria would win political independence but France would keep some form of economic ‘interdependence.’”⁵⁵ While the speech drew criticisms from the Western Europeans particularly the French colonizers and a section of the US government officials, it endeared John F. Kennedy to the African leaders, including Tom Mboya, who paid him visits in his Senate Office.⁵⁶

As a senator, Kennedy put pressure on the American government to support African students and help them acquire proper education through international exchanges. In a speech he delivered at the Saint Anselm’s College, Manchester, New Hampshire on March 5 1960, he

⁵² Michael Clark ‘“New Policy Urged for U. S. in Africa; Senator Kennedy, Speaking Here, Asks Economic Aid Not Keyed to ‘Cold War’” in *The New York Times* Jun 29, 1959, 30.

⁵³ William Attwood, *The Reds and Blacks: A Personal Adventure*, (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1967), 146.

⁵⁴ Richard D. Mahoney, *JFK: Ordeal in Africa* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), 22.

⁵⁵ “Foreign Relations: Burned Hands Across the Sea,” in *Time*, Monday July 15, 1957.
<http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,809643,00.html>. Accessed on March 16, 2011.

⁵⁶ Mahoney, *JFK: Ordeal in Africa*, 23.

outlined the problems the independent African nations were facing and proposed the ways through which the United States could get involved. One of them was the establishment of the New African Educational Development Fund--a fund through which the United States would send technical experts such as educators, agriculturalists and engineers to share knowledge with the Africans and at the same time bring more African students to the United States to train them as potential African leaders.

John F. Kennedy was categorical on the importance of educating the future African leaders. He stated that America's stake in Africa's future was large, especially because independent African nations would control twenty to twenty five percent of the votes in the United Nations. Moreover, the Communists were already taking advantage of the conditions of the independent Africans by sending money and technical aid to the continent. According to Kennedy's approximation, Ghana alone received 35 million dollars from the USSR in 1959. Therefore, the only way of ensuring that the Africans remained friendly to the West, was by promoting freedom, security and democracy in the continent. This would only succeed through the provision of the three things that independent African nations desperately needed: food, capital, and education.⁵⁷

In Kenya, the organization of the students' airlifts drew criticisms from the colonial government officials such as W. A. C. Mathiesen-the Minister of Education, who expressed concern at the floor of the Kenya Legislative Council on May 17 1960. Mathiesen argued that local colleges were in danger of losing promising students if overseas education was not limited to post-graduate work only. According to him, the East African colleges required a steady stream of students for them to succeed in developing their curriculum. He charged that if the best students continued to seek education in the United States, then it would negatively affect the education system in Kenya in the future.⁵⁸ There was however, a different view held by the Kenyans concerning the educational opportunities available to them at the time. According to Muthoni Muthiga, one of the airlift beneficiaries, there was scarcity of tertiary educational opportunities for the hundreds of students leaving school every year. The whole of East Africa was catered for by Kampala's Makerere College, a subsidiary of the University of London which

⁵⁷ Remarks of Senator John F. Kennedy at Saint Anselm's College, Manchester, New Hampshire, March 5, 1960. <http://www.jfklibrary.org/Research/Ready-Reference/JFK-Speeches/Remarks-of-Senator-John.F>. Kennedy Accessed on February 15, 2011.

⁵⁸ Smith, Ibid.

offered education only up to the equivalent of today's A-Level in the British curriculum. Every year, only a handful secured scholarships and places to study in Britain and India. In 1958, the colonial government established the Royal Technical College which later developed into today's University of Nairobi.⁵⁹ And while the United States government had helped equip the engineering workshops there, both Mboya and William Scheinman wrote letters to the *New York Times*. In his letter printed on September 6, 1959, Mboya drew attention to the large number of students in Kenya who he said "had been frustrated in their academic ambitions due to the constrictions and bottlenecks deliberately placed on the education system in Kenya." That same month, Scheinman too claimed that students at the Royal Technical College in Nairobi were unable to receive a "general Arts" education, as it was known in the US. His main argument in support of the airlift strategy was that for the first time it would enable Kenyans to follow "freely-chosen programs of higher education not available to them in Kenya."⁶⁰ To the Africans, school fees were not the main problem, as many received offers of free tuition at colleges and universities in several parts of the United States. The two main intractable issues were the high cost of air fares to travel from Africa to the United States and raising enough money for students' upkeep for all the years they would spend in the US. Mansfield Irving Smith, an American scholar who chronicled the airlifts to the US in the years 1959, 1960 and 1961, wrote about the role played by Robert F. Stephens, Cultural Attaché at the American Embassy in Nairobi. According to Smith, Stephens saw the gathering push for higher education as presenting an opportunity to cement bonds of mutual sympathy and friendship with the citizens and leaders "of a nation which would soon be free" and continually urged a higher level of government assistance in his memos to Washington. The State Department did not however, heed Stephen's plea, as illustrated by the events that followed, especially during the organization of the airlift by the African American Students Foundation when on two occasions the State Department turned down the requests of the organizers to fund the airlifts.⁶¹

Kennedy on the other hand was determined to offer support to not only the non-white population in the US but also to the Africans. He was on several occasions at the forefront of civil rights activism. An American journalist, Ted Lewis, charged that Kennedy picked Civil

⁵⁹ Phillip Ochieng, "Cora Weiss: Woman who Masterminded the 1960s Airlift to US," in *Sunday Nation*, January 21, 2007, 2.

⁶⁰ Matheson, "The Kenyan-US Student Airlift," 13

⁶¹ Smith, *Ibid*.

Rights as a moral cause through which he could display his leadership. In his article “Capitol Stuff,” which appeared on the *New York Daily News* dated June 14, 1963, Ted Lewis argued that all American presidents tend to pick a moral cause through which they can display their leadership talents. And for J.F. Kennedy, it happened to be the “moral crisis” over racial rights. In his perception, racial rights accorded Kennedy an opportunity to leave his imprint on national destiny.⁶² Kennedy had always been active in advocating for blacks’ civil rights. This expanded to include other areas outside of the United States such as Africa and Latin America. It is clear that, from the onset, John F. Kennedy was pro-civil rights and was intent on improving the lives of both the African-Americans and for people of other nations. This worked to improve relations between the US and the other countries. His interest in helping other nations was apparent in both his speeches in the United States and the programs established during his tenure such as the Peace Corps and the signing of the Fulbright Act for International Educational Exchange Scholarships and Grants.

Whichever way it is viewed, it is apparent that John F. Kennedy, from the start, was keen or at least gave the impression that he was, on helping African students get education as a way of preparing them for the leadership roles in their countries. And at the same time, he saw it as the only way of warding off the influence of the Communists on the independent African nations. His bid to support the students’ airlifts using funds from the family foundation was met with criticisms especially in the period leading to the 1960 presidential election. When donations from individuals could not fully cater for the transportation of the African students to the United States, the organizers turned to the U.S government and private organizations like Rockefeller and Ford foundation. Jackie Robinson approached Richard Nixon--then the Vice-President-- to reverse the government’s refusal to fund the airlift. Both Nixon and the private foundations made no headway with the request.⁶³

On the 25th of July, Mboya attended a conference in New York of representatives of organizations interested in education in Eastern and Central African countries. According to Frank Montero, the President of African American Students Foundation, an undisclosed State Department official turned down the request again. The African American Student Foundation (AASF) therefore decided to approach John F. Kennedy--then the chair of the Africa

⁶² Ted Lewis, “Capitol Stuff” in the *New York Daily News*, June 14, 1963

⁶³ Shachtman, *Airlift to America*, 11.

subcommittee of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and soon to be Democratic presidential nominee. On July 26 1960, Frank Montero, William Scheinman, the Vice-President and Tom Mboya visited John F. Kennedy in Hyannis Port, Massachusetts where they presented their request to him. Kennedy pledged to use funds from his family foundation to bankroll the airlift in 1960. When Nixon's office learned that Kennedy was interested in funding the project, it pushed for a reversal on the State Department's refusal to fund the students. Pennsylvania Republican Senator Hugh Scott however, accused the foundation of "outbidding" the State Department for political reasons.⁶⁴ At the Senate meeting, Scott charged that "the long arm of the family of the Junior Senator from Massachusetts had reached out and attempted to pluck this project away from the U.S Government." He expressed surprise at the decision of the AASF but stated that he could "understand the pressures brought by the Kennedy people and their anxiety to take over the functions of the Government in advance of the elections."⁶⁵ Kennedy responded to Scott's accusations angrily and described them as "the most unfair, distorted and malignant attack I have heard in fourteen years in politics." He then explained his relationship with the airlift and the organizers and said that he and his family went into it reluctantly when Mboya and the other organizers approached them for help after the Federal Government had turned their request down. They felt that they had to intervene in order to avert the wastage of two hundred and fifty scholarships in the United States. Most importantly, it would have been very unfortunate to disappoint two hundred and fifty students who had hoped to acquire their education from the United States. Those were the driving factors for the support of the airlift.⁶⁶

In his later response after the State Department accepted to fund the airlift, Arkansas Democratic Senator J. W. Fulbright stated that the State Department had offered funds for the airlift only under pressure from Nixon's supporters and that the AASF officials had already accepted funding from the Kennedy foundation which was more reliable and promising. The Kennedy Foundation offered \$100,000 for the airlift.⁶⁷ This event illustrates the political role the airlift played in American politics.

⁶⁴ Leonard Ingalls, "Critics of Airlift Soothed in Kenya" in *New York Times (1923-Current file)*; Sep 6, 1960; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The New York Times (1851-2007), 24.

⁶⁵ Mahoney, *JFK: Ordeal in Africa*, 32.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Martin Arnold, "African Students Deny U.S Report: Say State Department had Opposed Air Transport Plan from the Start." in the *New York Times* Aug25, 1960, 20.

In many ways, the Department of State mainly played a complementary role to the African American Student Foundation in organizing the airlift in 1959. This position is manifest in its refusal to provide funds for the students' airlift despite it being an opportunity for fostering relations with the African continent during this crucial moment when African support was of significant importance, especially because there were several US- trained Kenyans who went back home to take up key positions in the government, notably Nobel Laureate Prof. Wangari Maathai who is the founder of the Green Belt Movement and served as a cabinet minister in President Mwai Kibaki's government. Barack Obama Sr, though not in the airlift, he benefitted from the funds that were provided by the organizers and later went home to become a senior government economist. There is no time the Department officials and the organizers of the airlift ever met to discuss the major issues surrounding the project. As such, it was only discussed at the policy level between the Assistant Secretary for Congressional Relations William B. Macomber and House Representative Charles Digg.⁶⁸ Consequently, the manner in which the request for State Department support was handled by the State officials reflects the reluctance of the Department to assist with the funding and encouraged the African American Student foundation to proceed with the project without involving the US government.

It was not until Kennedy's presidency that the State Department began to support the students airlift. Phillip H. Coombs, US Assistant Secretary of State for Education and Cultural Affairs, announced the State Department's approval for proposals drawn up by the Institute of International Education (IIE) to provide support for students from East and Central Africa. Consequently, the US government provided a sum of more than \$100,000 in the form of a grant to set the 1961 scholarship program rolling. This was the first time that direct US government financial support had been provided to the African airlift programs. This money was to be used primarily to cover student costs in upkeep and travel within the United States.⁶⁹ It was Kennedy's administration therefore that worked hard in pursuing the reversal of the State Department's initial position on funding the airlift.

Through its organization, and implementation, the airlift fostered friendly relations between the United States and Kenya. The new crop of leaders who were trained in the United States as well as those who were involved in the organization ensured that independent Kenya's

⁶⁸ Smith, "The East African Airlifts of 1959, 1960, and 1961," 11.

⁶⁹ Alistair Matheson, comp., "The Kenyan-US Student Airlift: The Beginnings of Educational Exchange Between Kenya and the United States of America." unpublished article (Nairobi, 1986), 20

economy and politics were steered along the western capitalist path as Washington had intended. This is evidenced by the *Sessional Paper No. 10 of 1965 on African Socialism and its Application to Planning in Kenya*. This was an economic blue print which Mboya as the Economic Minister authored. Theoretically, the paper was to offer a framework for economic development using a unique model of African Socialism, an alternative to both Capitalism and Socialism. In practice however, the country's political and economic development followed the western capitalists' path. This was a manifestation of western influence on the leadership of the country due to the relationship both countries had with each other.

Chapter 3

The Mboya-Kennedy students' airlifts contributed to the development of friendly relations between the two countries in the Cold War period. In Kenya however, it contributed to the rivalry that evolved amongst the first crop of post-colonial Kenyan politicians. It intensified the rift between Tom Mboya and Kenya's first president, Jomo Kenyatta on one side and the late Jaramogi Oginga Odinga, one of post-colonial Kenya's most prominent politicians on the other. Later, the rivalry took the form of ethnic contest between the Luo and Kikuyu communities. The rivalry continues to manifest itself to this day, particularly in the political arena, characterized by mistrust and jealousies and sometimes ethnic clashes as was experienced in the electoral violence of 2007.

Oginga's rivalry with Mboya emanated partly from personality differences and partly from jealousies generated by the airlift initiative and political ambitions. They both hoped to succeed Kenyatta, who was ageing at the time. This they could only achieve through popularity contest such as the opportunity the organization of the airlift offered. In his memoir, former America's ambassador to Kenya William Attwood recalled that, temperamentally and ideologically, Mboya and Odinga were natural rivals. He stated, "At thirty-four, Mboya was cool, reserved, modern-minded, pragmatic and hard-working. He scorned Odinga's histrionics and sloganeering, just as the latter despised Mboya's seeming intellectual arrogance."⁷⁰

To understand the origins of Mboya-Oginga personality and ideological differences and how the airlift initiative aggravated it, it is imperative to put their backgrounds in perspective. Both Mboya and Oginga hailed from the Luo ethnic group. Mboya though belonged to the Suba community, since been assimilated by the Luo and whose large majority are now considered to be Luos. Jaramogi Oginga Odinga was born in a village called Nyamira Kang'o, in Sakwa Location, Central Nyanza District, near Lake Victoria in the western part of Kenya among the Luo community. His birth date was not officially recorded because, according to him, his parents were "uneducated." By working out the seasons and events surrounding his birth, he approximated it to be around October of 1911.⁷¹ He started his schooling in Maranda primary school, a missionary school and, at the age of sixteen, he sat the common entrance examination for admission in Maseno School. Oginga was not very enthusiastic about going to school. In his

⁷⁰ William Attwood, *The Reds and The Blacks*, 242.

⁷¹ Oginga Odinga, *Not Yet Uhuru: An Autobiography* (Nairobi: East African Educational Publishers, 1976), 4.

autobiography, he recalled his truancy on several occasions, especially when he was supposed to transfer to Maseno School, which was thirty five miles from his home.⁷² Through the intervention of his brother and that of Carey Francis, the head teacher of Maseno School, he managed to finish his studies at Maseno and proceeded to Alliance High School in Central Province in 1935. At Alliance High School, Oginga learned how to interact with people from different ethnic backgrounds. In his autobiography, he stated that “We learned that different tribal backgrounds were no obstacle to our living together. Inevitably, at the beginning, there were incidents but out of them grew a feeling not of tribal differences, but of Kenyan identity.”

⁷³ In the pre-colonial period, inter-ethnic interactions were only limited to trade and cattle raids. Intermarriages were also very rare. Consequently, there was a strong sense of ethnic identity rather than a national one. This should, however, not be misconstrued to mean inter-ethnic animosity. In most cases, different ethnic groups had a cordial relationship with each other for the purposes of trade and peaceful co-existence. During the colonial period, this was altered through the implementation of the divide-and-rule policy, in which ethnic groups were pitted against each other by the colonialists. Thus, when Oginga and his contemporaries from other ethnic backgrounds went to boarding school together, they realized that, contrary to what the colonialists made them believe, they actually had shared interests with each other and hence there began the building of Kenyan identity rather than a focus on their ethnic differences. It is notable, however, that the same politicians later appropriated ethnic differences for their political ambitions.

In 1936, Oginga sat for the Cambridge School Certificate and passed well enough to land him a scholarship to study at the Makerere College as a school teacher. Throughout his studies, Oginga Odinga had difficulties in funding his studies, forcing him to take up menial jobs as a house servant or sometimes accepting assistance from the school’s headteacher, Carey Francis, to raise the school fees.⁷⁴ He later founded a business venture called the Luo Thrift and Trading Corporation which, together with news stories in the weekly newspaper *Ramogi*, gave him popularity amongst members of the Luo community.⁷⁵ In an interview with Musambayi Katumanga, he stated that the Luo Thrift and Trading Corporation was a populist project that

⁷² Ibid., 31-32.

⁷³ Ibid., 37.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 36.

⁷⁵ Odinge Odera, *My Journey with Jaramogi: Memoirs of a Close Confidant* (Nairobi: African Research and Resource Forum, 2010), 21.

was mobilizing resources from the local Luo community and creating an impression that it was helping in the economic uplifting of the members of the community.⁷⁶ According to Odinge Odera, Oginga's close confidante, while Oginga was focused on economically empowering the Luo community, he also encouraged the continued practice of Luo traditions and customs despite the opposition by the Christian missionaries who were by then penetrating the interior parts of the East African region. This earned him a lot of respect among the Luo community, which consequently installed him as the *ker*, chief Luo elder.⁷⁷ His popularity among the Luo came to play when he joined national politics and competed with Mboya as a potential Kenyatta successor. Tom Mboya, on the other hand, already discussed in the first chapter, came from the Suba ethnic group which was later assimilated by the Luo community. He was born and grew up in Thika, Central Province and moved to Nairobi. Consequently, he was not recognized by the Luo as one of them. He was however, recognized both nationally and internationally due to his activities in the labor union, and his leadership role in the organization of the students' airlift. In fact, writing in 1962, Alan Rake argued that Mboya was one of the best-known African leaders on the continent after Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana.⁷⁸ In 1958, he was elected unanimously as the chairman of the first All African People's Conference held in Accra, Ghana which initiated the launch of independence campaigns within African nations that were still under colonial rule. After the conference, Mboya came for an intensive tour of the United States, during which he was awarded an honorary degree of Doctor of Law by Howard University, Washington, and managed to secure student scholarships for the Africans.⁷⁹ Until his death, however, he did not enjoy popularity amongst the Luo like other politicians such as Kenya's former Foreign Affairs Minister, the late Robert Ouko, and Oginga Odinga did. Mboya was the urbane, cosmopolitan politician. He enjoyed the support of the younger, urban, working-class section of the population, while Oginga Odinga was more rural-oriented, drawing a large majority of support from the rural folks.⁸⁰ This however, does not mean that Mboya did not value his ethnic identity. His biographer David Goldsworthy noted that Mboya took pride in being a Luo, which he demonstrated through his participation in the affairs of the Nairobi branch of the Luo Union. He

⁷⁶ Interview with Dr. Musambayi Katumanga, carried out in Nairobi, Kenya in the summer of 2010.

⁷⁷ Odera, *My Journey with Jaramogi*, 39.

⁷⁸ Alan Rake, *Tom Mboya: Young Man of New Africa* (New York: Doubleday & Company, inc., 1962), 172.

⁷⁹ "Tom Mboya: Leader and Statesman," in the *Daily Nation*, Monday July 7, 1969, 15. The word Africans is used because even though the African organizers of the airlift were Kenyans, some of the Airlift beneficiaries came from Zambia and Uganda.

⁸⁰ Odera, *Ibid*, 44.

visited his home in Rusinga Island whenever he could despite being born and bred in Nairobi and he also married within the tribe.⁸¹

Mboya engaged in important national socio-political and economic activities. Very few Kenyans, however, talk about him. He seemed to have faded away from the memory of many Kenyans and the younger generations have no personal recollections of him.⁸² It was not until recently when Obama's presidency invoked the airlift narrative that Mboya's popularity was resurrected in Kenya. In 1959, Barack Obama, Sr came to study in the US at the University of Hawaii. Even though he was not in the airlift, the airlift organizers funded his upkeep in the US.⁸³ He was the first African student in the institution where he met Ann Dunham, President Obama's mother. Therefore, many Kenyans consider Tom Mboya to have played a figurative midwifery role in the birth of America's first black president, hence the resurrection of his (Mboya's) popularity.⁸⁴ Through the students' airlifts and Labor Unions' activities, Mboya became a close ally of the West. His growing popularity in the US was a source of unease not only for Oginga Odinga, but also for Kenyatta.⁸⁵ The West on the other hand was suspicious of Oginga and charged that he was pro-Communist. Attwood however, completely disagreed with this term and warned against branding the African politicians pro-East or pro-West. He instead suggested that they should be referred to using appropriate terms such as moderates/radicals, pragmatists/ ideologists. They were essentially African nationalists who did not expect to be dictated to by whether the US or the Soviet Union. He argued that African leaders, with a few exceptions, were simply pro-themselves.⁸⁶ Katumanga noted that Mboya was in essence a "western-construct." According to him, the Cold War expediencies made it necessary to propel western-friendly politicians such as Mboya to the international level, hence the reason why he was more popular internationally than locally.⁸⁷ This fact, according to Odera, made Oginga believe that Mboya was being manipulated by the West and accused him of "being a stooge of the imperialists."⁸⁸ Writing in 1962, Rake noted that "Of all the African nationalist leaders south

⁸¹ Goldsworthy, *Tom Mboya: the Man Kenya wanted to Forget*, 25.

⁸² Goldsworthy, *Tom Mboya: the Man Kenya wanted to Forget*, ix.

⁸³ Dana Seidenberg, "Gloria Hagberg: Cold Warrior for Racial Equality," in *The East African Magazine*, February 9-15, 2009. iv-v.

⁸⁴ Kevin Kelley, "Mboya Link in Obama Story: One of Kenya's Founding Fathers Organized Historic Move to the US," in the *Daily Nation*, Wednesday, April 2, 2008, 9.

⁸⁵ "How Kenyatta Dealt with Threat from 'Turncoats,'" in the *Daily Nation*, Friday, December 15, 2006, 14.

⁸⁶ Attwood, *The Reds and The Blacks*, 239.

⁸⁷ Interview with Musambayi Katumanga in the summer of 2010.

⁸⁸ Odera, *ibid*,

of the Sahara, Mboya is probably the one who has associated himself closest with the United States of America.”⁸⁹

The exact date of Jomo Kenyatta’s birth is not documented. His biographer Jeremy Murray-Brown placed it between 1897 and 1898 based on the years of Kenyatta’s first contacts with white missionaries.⁹⁰ He was born in Gatundu to parents who were peasant farmers named Muigai and Wambui. His father died while he was still very young and his uncle Ngengi inherited his mother.⁹¹ His name therefore changed from Kamau wa Muigai(Kamau, the son of Muigai) as he was known from the time of his birth to Kamau wa Ngengi(Kamau, the son of Ngengi). Kenyatta moved to the Church of Scotland Mission at Kikuyu near Fort Hall now known as Murang’a where he received five years’ education. At the mission school he learned the English language, arithmetic and Bible instruction as well as vocational training particularly carpentry which, according to Guy Arnold, he did not like very much.⁹² Kenyatta was baptized Johnstone at the Scottish Mission School but later substituted it with Jomo meaning “burning spear.” He also took up the name Kenyatta, a nickname he acquired because of the beaded belt he wore and which is referred to as *Kenyatta* in the Kikuyu language.⁹³ In 1914, he left the Church of Scotland Mission for Nairobi where he got a job as the Supreme Court interpreter and later transferred to the water department of the Nairobi Town council where he worked as a meter reader. During this time, Kenyatta was not actively involved in politics. In 1922, he joined the East African Association, a multi-ethnic political association founded by Harry Thuku from the Kikuyu ethnic group to condemn the newly introduced colonial laws such as hut and poll tax, the *kipande* system of identification, land alienation and forced labor. Later in the year, the colonial government proscribed the party and its leader, Harry Thuku, was arrested and exiled in the remote northern part of Kenya. Kenyatta then joined a newly formed political association known as the Kikuyu Central Association, even though as a civil servant, he was not allowed to engage openly in politics.⁹⁴ Kenyatta left Kenya in 1929 for England, where he lived for fifteen

⁸⁹ Rake, *Tom Mboya: Young Man of New Africa* , 170.

⁹⁰ Jeremy Murray-Brown *Kenyatta* (London: George Allen &Unwin, 1979), 323.

⁹¹ Wife inheritance is a traditional practice that was common amongst Kenyan communities. It was believed that when an individual dies, his brother took over his place as the head of the family and was permitted to have more children with the deceased’s wife in order to ensure the survival of his lineage.

⁹² Guy Arnold *Kenyatta and the Politics of Kenya* (London: J.M & Sons Ltd, 1974), 15.

⁹³ Attwood, *The Reds and The Blacks* 167.

⁹⁴ Arnold, *Kenyatta and the Politics of Kenya* , 18-21.

years studying Anthropology at the London School of Economics. When he returned to Kenya, he became the leader of Kenya African Union, a political association that was to agitate for the return of the Kikuyu land and decolonization of the nation. When the state of emergency was declared in the country due to the *Mau Mau* activities, Kenyatta, together with five other nationalists whom the colonial government suspected to be the masterminds of the *Mau Mau* activities were arrested and detained.⁹⁵ Subsequently, the government banned all national political associations.

The three politicians Oginga, Mboya and Kenyatta, had a lot of similarities in their backgrounds. They were all born in poor families that could not afford to pay their school fees. Their passion for education was not only illustrated by their resilience in getting their own education under adverse personal circumstances, but also in their attempt at providing educational opportunities for other Kenyans who were at an economic disadvantage just as they did earlier in their lives. Hence, they could not help but pay attention to the needs of their younger compatriots for higher education. Oginga and Mboya both knew that the only way to escape the chains of colonialism and building the economy of their nation was by empowering their fellow Kenyans through the provision of western education and technology.

Support for higher education of the younger generation, however, came with political implications. Support for political causes and candidacies could be won by bringing overseas education within reach of the African students, especially in the tumultuous period of colonization with its restrictive policies, which accorded very minimal educational opportunities to the ambitious students. In an interview with Phillip Ochieng, a Kenyan journalist and an airlift beneficiary, he stated categorically that Mboya's support was purely philanthropic and had nothing to do with his political ambitions.⁹⁶ The events that followed the organization of the airlift and which further led to the falling out between Oginga and Kenyatta and the assassination of Mboya, however, suggest otherwise. Both Mboya and Oginga used it for popularity gain in order to drive their political agenda.

The proscription of the political associations in the period following the declaration of state of emergency meant that all grievances the Africans had against the colonialists had to be channeled through the trade unions. No one was more prepared to handle the job than Tom

⁹⁵ Attwood, Ibid, 239.

⁹⁶ Interview with Phillip Ochieng in Nairobi, Kenya in the summer of 2010.

Mboya. He turned the Kenya federation of Labor (KFL) into a quasi-political vehicle.⁹⁷ The job contributed to his popularity particularly in the urban areas of the country. During the emergency period, a segregation policy was formulated by the government, which required that the major ethnic groups lived in separate estates. For example, the Luos were to live in Kaloleni while the Kikuyu, Meru and Embu lived in Bahati. This was to ensure that the latter ethnic groups remained isolated from the rest. It was a divide-and-rule tactic employed by the colonialists to try and scuttle the independence movement. Mboya was thus forced to live among the Kikuyu because of his union activities, which aimed at helping the Kikuyu who were the most disadvantaged group at the time. This according to one newspaper article earned him some degree of resentment from the Luo community which saw him as not a “good enough Luo” because he spent much of his time with the Kikuyu.⁹⁸ While writers contend that Mboya was the politician of that era who would have saved Kenya from descending into one of the most ethnically-divided African countries, in reality, his close association with Kenyatta pushed away the Luo from the Kikuyu. The Luo supported Oginga Odinga and therefore expected Mboya to do the same.⁹⁹

In 1957, Oginga Odinga decided to give up his position as Luo elder and join national politics. He explained his sympathy with the members of the Kikuyu ethnic group whose land had been taken by the British colonial settlers and who faced subsequent persecution by the colonialists. He also stressed the need for the members of the Luo community to actively participate in the struggle for freedom from colonial rule.¹⁰⁰ In that year’s nationwide franchise elections limited by education and income, Jaramogi Oginga Odinga was elected to represent Central Nyanza in the Legislative Council, while Tom Mboya was elected to represent Nairobi. He beat his opponent, Argwings Kodhek, another Luo in the legal profession, who was Oginga’s preferred candidate. Mboya later found out that Oginga Odinga was not happy with his victory.¹⁰¹ In the pre-colonial Kenya, gerontocracy was revered, perhaps stemming from the African traditional practices of the rule by council of elders. It was therefore expected that

⁹⁷ Henry Gathigira, “Tom Mboya the Hawk-eyed Youth who became a Dutiful Servant of his People,” in *The Daily Nation*, Monday July 7, 1969, 8.

⁹⁸ Murithi Mutiga, “The Mboya Assassination: the One Leader who could have Stopped Kenya’s Descent into Polarised Nation” in the *Sunday Nation*, July 5 2009, 22.

⁹⁹ Larry Grubbs, *Secular Missionaries: Americans and African Development in the 1960s*, (Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2009), 40.

¹⁰⁰ Odera, *My Journey with Jaramogi*, 40.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 42.

Mboya would naturally take orders from Oginga Odinga who had once been the *ker mar Luo*, the elder/supreme leader of the Luo ethnic group, an expectation that Tom Mboya defied and which led Oginga to describe him as “a rabid black dog that barks furiously and bites everything in its path.”¹⁰² He was a forward-looking man who lived ahead of his time. This quality helped shape his vision for post-independence Kenya and earned him both admiration and envy when he organized the students’ airlift from 1959 to 1961, an event which attracted both praise and criticism. *The New York Times*, for example, reported how the project sparked a bitter row between the two political parties, the Kenya African Democratic Union (KANU) and the Kenya African National Union (KANU). Masinde Muliro of KADU accused the organizers of the program of enrolling members of the two major ethnic groups (Kikuyu and Luo) into the program, at the expense of the other ethnic groups. He further expressed doubts of whether the organizers were genuinely interested in Kenya’s development and were not just politicians interested in getting votes.¹⁰³

In 1960, the Lancaster House Conference was held in London. During the meeting, a resolution was passed that gave Africans, for the first time in colonial Kenya, majority seats in the Legislative council. The African nationalists were, however, not united in the way they wanted post-colonial Kenya to be governed. A section of the politicians representing the smaller ethnic groups felt that their interests would not be adequately represented and would be dominated by those of the politicians representing the larger ethnic groups that comprised of the Luo and the Kikuyu. Those representing the smaller ethnic groups therefore formed the Kenya African Democratic Union (KADU) and their leaders came from the Kalenjin, Luhya and Coastal ethnic groups. Those representing the major ethnic groups of Luo and Kikuyu formed Kenya National African Union (KANU).¹⁰⁴ In the May 1963 elections, KANU won the elections and formed a government with Kenyatta as the Prime Minister. The rivalry between the politicians representing the two political parties was the reason why the KADU members accused organizers of the students’ airlifts of favoring the major ethnic groups over the minority groups. While it seemed like it was an inter-party rivalry, there was also an intra-party aspect to it between Odinga and Mboya who strived to outcompete the other for popularity. Odera noted in

¹⁰² Murithi Mutiga, “The Mboya Assassination,” 22.

¹⁰³ “Mboya Foe Critical of Student Airlift” in *The New York Times*, Sept 13, 1960, 4.

¹⁰⁴ Thomas Burgess, “The History of an Ideal” in Paul J. Kaiser and F. Wafula Okumu(eds), *Democratic Transitions in East Africa* (Hants: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2004), 23.

his memoir that the airlift was one of Mboya's enviably greatest achievements for the country and for himself. It posed a challenge to the other Kenyan politicians.¹⁰⁵ It certainly sparked Oginga's urge to prove that he could do the same with support from the Eastern European countries. Hence, during his trip to the United Kingdom to attend the Lancaster House Conference, he managed to arrange for such an airlift.

In 1960, a section of Kenyans residing in the United Kingdom, including Othigo Othieno and Osumba Langi, urged Oginga Odinga while on his trip to the Lancaster House Conference to secretly sneak to Egypt. They argued that the visit "would be in his interest and would possibly be the break-through he needed in his political life."¹⁰⁶ This plan revealed the extent to which Oginga was desperate to gain support from the Eastern bloc in order to counter Mboya's popularity, both nationally and internationally. In Egypt, former Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser assisted Oginga to arrange for meetings with several leaders from different countries in the Eastern bloc, including East Germany, the Union of Socialist Republics (USSR), Czechoslovakia, and the People's Republic of China. Through those meetings, Oginga was able to secure different forms of support from the Eastern countries including scholarships for a similar program for African students. He later confided in Odera that he "wanted to prove to the Kenyan colonial authorities that the people of the Socialist countries were not the monsters the Western nations had painted them to be."¹⁰⁷ Through the Socialist governments, he managed to secure scholarships for Kenyan students who began to leave the country for further studies in the Eastern European countries. Most of the students were enrolled for technical training courses, such as engineering and medicine unlike those who went to western countries who were mainly enrolled in the Social Sciences.

The initiative was however, not without challenges. The colonial government imposed restrictions on travel and study abroad especially to the socialist countries. Generally, the British colonial government did not encourage the Africans to travel abroad. It was even harder for African students to travel to Eastern European nations. Some of the students had to sneak out to Cairo or Tanzania from where their travel plans would be made. African students' desperation for education was evidenced by instances where the students had to trek from Uganda, through

¹⁰⁵ Odera, *My Journey with Jaramogi*, 43.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid, 62.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 43.

Sudan, to board a steamship to Cairo.¹⁰⁸ From the political perspective, Oginga Odinga was driving his political agenda of replicating Mboya's scholarship initiative, the challenges the students faced en route to the East notwithstanding. In his memoir, Attwood noted how the students who went to the Soviet Union expected a warm reception only to discover how much they were resented by the all-white people. Those who refused to embrace Communism lived in fear for their lives. Nicholas Nyangira, one such student, later wrote an article in which he stated that "what I learned in six months in the Soviet Union is what some Africans will never learn..."¹⁰⁹ Yet, according to Odera, Oginga was relieved that he was doing to Kenyan students what Mboya had done by helping students proceed to the United States.¹¹⁰ This illustration demonstrates that it mattered less to the politicians what the experiences of the students were once they left the country for further studies abroad. All they wanted was to be hailed for making arrangements for the students to seek education outside of Africa. It also illustrated how politicians from the Third World appropriated the East-West rivalry for their own political gain.

Oginga Odinga admitted to receiving financial assistance from the Communists and the West leveled accusations against him of accepting Communists' money in order to counter the assistance the West was giving to their friendly politicians like Mboya. Oginga responded by noting that there was nothing particularly wrong with accepting the financial assistance from states that would accept Kenya as an equal and as a friend. He stated categorically that he was willing to accept aid from any country in the world, including the Communist countries as long as they regarded Kenya as their equals and friends. He noted, "Freedom of Association is a cardinal principle of democracy. This includes, among other things, the freedom of befriending whoever you choose. It follows that, under democracy, I am at liberty to have friends anywhere in the world, whether in the East or in the West; whether in Russia, or in America. This means that my friends in Russia, China or America may accept gifts from me, likewise, I can accept gifts and other assistance from them."¹¹¹

According to Odera, however, Oginga was not a Communist. He was a committed African Socialist who did not even understand the system well enough and was not interested in

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 44.

¹⁰⁹ Attwood, *The Reds and The Blacks*, 186.

¹¹⁰ Odera, *ibid.*

¹¹¹ Ibid., 64.

the ideology as propagated by the socialist countries.¹¹² Following this argument, he was therefore an opportunist who took advantage of the Cold War rivalry between the East and the West blocs to drive his own political agenda. It was these events that helped shape his rivalry too with Mboya and Kenyatta. Mboya continued to receive the support of the West and began to be seen as threat even in the Kenyatta government, especially among Kenyatta's close allies who were also interested in succeeding Kenyatta. This rivalry continued to modify itself in the political circles in Kenya both in the period leading to independence and after.

Mboya and Oginga's rivalry manifested itself in the Legislative Council, where they were expected to speak with one voice as Africans. In the state of emergency period, Oginga and other members of African Elected Members Organization(AEMO) pushed for the proper treatment of Kenyatta and the other five nationalists (Kungu Karumba, Achieng Oneko, Bildad Kaggia, Fred Kubai and Paul Ngei) while they were detained under deplorable conditions in the remote parts of northern Kenya. This followed a letter that Kenyatta and his fellow prisoners had written and carried by the British *Observer* informing the AEMO members complaining of the conditions under which they were detained in Lokitaung. Mboya was requested to move a motion for an inquiry into the prisons and the detention camps in the Legislative Council. During the discussion, Oginga reiterated that those who were detained were the political leaders of the Africans before their arrest and even at the moment of the detention, they still remained their political leaders. This declaration did not go well with Mboya who argued that Oginga's statement would create the wrong impression about the real reason for moving the motion. It should be noted that the six nationalists were arrested because the colonial government suspected them to be engaged in *Mau Mau* activities. Therefore, Mboya's fear was that Oginga's statements would not impress the colonialists and would jeopardize their freedom struggle. Oginga's radicalism would, however, not let him apologize for his statements. That was his stand with regards to the detained nationalists and he continued with that tenacity. Oginga's early relationship with Kenyatta was very cordial. In fact, Oginga was one of those nationalists who championed the movement for the release of Jomo Kenyatta. He was behind the "No Kenyatta no Uhuru"¹¹³ slogan in which the KANU members pledged not to form an African government once freedom was granted until Kenyatta was released. Oginga argued that no African

¹¹² Ibid, 66.

¹¹³ *Uhuru* is Swahili word for Freedom.

government would be recognized in Africa as truly free and representative as long as Kenyatta was in exile or prisoner. As it later turned out, according to Oginga's accounts, Mboya and James Gichuru, a politician from the Kikuyu community who was also KANU's president, held discussions secretly with Colonial Secretary Ian Macleod in London and did not inform the other KANU members about the subject of their discussion. Through their investigative efforts, they discovered that Macleod had tried to convince Mboya and Gichuru to go ahead and form the government without Kenyatta. It became apparent that the British and the United States were keen on preparing Mboya for leadership in the place of Kenyatta and, with Gichuru's help, he would be able to rally support from the Kikuyu community. Oginga was therefore the stumbling block for both Mboya and the colonial authority.¹¹⁴

Once Kenyatta was out of detention, Mboya's camp tried to keep Kenyatta under their thumb in order to isolate Oginga and to create a rift between Oginga and Kenyatta. According to the *New York Times*, Mboya charged that Oginga had used large amounts of money received from the Communist China to build his popularity. In addition, they saw Oginga as a threat to both Kenyatta and Mboya and a disruptive force in the post-colonial Kenya.¹¹⁵

Kenya attained independence in 1963 with Kenyatta as the prime minister, and in 1964, when it became a republic, Kenyatta became the president and Oginga Odinga the vice-president. He steered the country's economy on the western capitalistic path and strengthened his government using western aid programs. According to William Attwood, many Kenyan leaders' approach to the challenges Kenya was facing was more pragmatic than ideological except for Oginga Odinga.¹¹⁶ This proved to be a source of disagreement between the two. Mboya was a diligent cabinet member and asset to Kenyatta's government. As minister for Constitutional Affairs, Mboya championed the amendment of the Kenyan Constitution which increased the powers of the President. As Minister for Labor, he created the Central Organization of Trade Unions, the umbrella organization of all Trade Unions in Kenya, and the predecessor of current Central Organization of Trade Unions (COTU) and as the Economic Planning minister, his main contribution was the drafting of the *Sessional Paper No. 10 on African Socialism and its Application to Kenya*, a policy document that outlined post-colonial Kenya's path to Economic development. Kenyatta, however, became very wary of the politicians and their intentions and he

¹¹⁴ Oginga Odinga, *Not Yet Uhuru*, 198-200.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 223

¹¹⁶ William Attwood, *The Reds and The Blacks*, pp 172.

began to isolate them gradually. It was clear to Kenyatta that Mboya had very close links with the United States through trade unions and the airlifts initiatives. He was therefore a veritable tool of the West in the Cold War. According to a special newspaper report, Kenyatta was aware that with the Cold War power game, the US could install Mboya as the president if it so wished, especially because of his affiliations with International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU) which had been linked with CIA activities and through which he received huge sums of money. He was therefore an easy choice for presidency if the opportunity arose. This contributed to Kenyatta's insecurity. Mboya's efforts to build alliances in the political arena were often thwarted by Kenyatta. He sidelined those he suspected to be Mboya's close allies and kept them off the center of power. Such people included Mwai Kibaki, Kenya's current president.¹¹⁷

Oginga's fall-out with Kenyatta began as soon as the government was formed and he was named the Vice-President. He hoped to take over from Kenyatta whom he saw as old and frail, not likely to stay in power for a long time.¹¹⁸ His hope did not materialize. Through Kenyatta and Mboya's machinations, the post of Deputy President of the KANU party, a position held by Oginga, was abolished. In 1966, tired of humiliations Oginga formed a new political party, Kenya People's Union (KPU). While he still remained the Vice-President of the nation, he had been stripped of all his other portfolios. Decisions were made in both the government and parliament without his being informed. In April, 1966, he formally tendered his resignation. Kenyatta's government placed numerous obstacles before Odinga's party to ensure that all its political activities were jeopardized. It delayed registration of the party, denied it rally permits and exerted pressure on the members to defect back to KANU and spread hateful propaganda about the party. Eventually, Oginga was arrested and detained until 1971.¹¹⁹

Mboya's assassination in 1969 led to the ultimate division between the Kikuyu and the Luo ethnic groups. The perception that a section of Kenyatta's administration masterminded Mboya's assassination poisoned the relationship between the two rival communities. Police investigations implicated Nahashon Isaac Njenga Njoroge, a former member of the KANU Youth Wing and a former chairman of the Central Ward of KANU's Nairobi branch from the Kikuyu community. He was convicted and sentenced to death. During the hearing, a senior police officer testified that on his arrest, Njenga had asked, "Why do you pick me? Why not the

¹¹⁷ "How Kenyatta Dealt with Threat from 'Turncoats'" in the *Daily Nation*, Friday, December 15, 2006.14

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

big man?” but when asked who the big man was, he declined to reveal it.¹²⁰ His statements sparked off speculations but it still remains a mystery who the “big man” was. Later that year, during the inauguration of the New Nyanza General Hospital (locally referred to as *Russia*, because it was built with funds from the Soviet Union), angry Kisumu residents booed at Kenyatta and threw stones at the dais where he was seated.¹²¹ The Luos identified with Mboya in death, because in the villages and towns Nyanza province, the younger generations grew up being told that Mboya was killed by a Kikuyu. The events that followed Oginga’s suspension from the party, such as the banning of the formation of opposition party, and Mboya’s assassination, led many Luos to believe that the Kikuyu community was intent on marginalizing them away from the center of power.

¹²⁰ Goldsworthy, *Tom Mboya: The Man Kenya Wanted to Forget*, 283-284.

¹²¹ Murithi Mutiga, “The Mboya Assassination: the One Leader who could have Stopped Kenya’s Descent into Polarised Nation” in the *Sunday Nation*, July 5 2009, 23.

Conclusion

The airlift was beneficial to the African students from varied ethnic backgrounds. It helped in the preparation of future leadership in Kenya during the adverse period of colonialism. In the process, the airlifts promoted good relations between Kenya and the United States. It, failed however, to unify the country. It instead contributed to intense rivalry among the first crop of politicians and between the two major ethnic groups with tragic repercussions. In the 2007 general elections, a major ethnic clash occurred between the Luo and the Kikuyu whose genesis was traced back to the 1960s. Mboya's unpredicted assassination also stemmed from the rivalry. Thus, while the airlifts contributed positively to the development of Kenyan leadership and workforce, they had unexpected tragic consequences.

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