

# The Coming of the Pink Cheeks

BY CHIEF KABONGO AS TOLD TO RICHARD ST. BARBE BAKER

BEFORE EUROPEAN COLONIALISM, most Africans made their living from the soil. More importantly, traditional Africans considered land to be a sacred part of nature and a part of the tribe. Land was not a commodity that could be bought and sold; it was a gift from God that belonged to everybody, like the air.

After many generations—and sometimes after many centuries—a tribe became identified with a particular area. The land was their “property,” belonging not only to the living members but also to the ancestors who had worked the land and to the unborn children who would work the land in the future.

When Europeans came and “bought” land, many misunderstandings developed, for the Africans never meant to “sell” what in their eyes couldn’t be sold.

In the following selection, Chief Kabongo, of the Kikuyu tribe of Kenya, describes what happened to his people when the Europeans took control of Kikuyu land. In his lifetime—from the 1870s to the 1950s—Chief Kabongo saw the sharp changes that took place after the coming of the whites, whom he called the “Pink Cheeks.” (Adapted from Leon Clark (Ed.) *Through African Eyes*, Vol. 1. New York: CITE Books, 1991.)



Brown Brothers

European colonialism in Africa exploited people as well as resources.

For some years my eldest son had been going to a school kept by some Pink Cheeks only two hours' journey away. These were not the White Fathers, to whom my brother had gone, but were quite different. They wore clothes like the Pink Cheeks who farmed, and many of them were women. They had a medicine house where there were many ill people; there were good medicine men and good things were done and sick people were made well. Every day my son would go before the sun was high and would come back before the sun set. Then he would eat and fall asleep, too tired to sit around the fire and be told the stories and history of our people and their laws and conduct.

It was in these days that a Pink Cheek man came one day to our Council. He came from far, from where many of these people lived in houses made of stone and where they held their own Council.

He sat in our midst and he told us of the king of the Pink Cheeks, who was a great king and lived in a land over the seas.

"This great king is now your king," he said. "And this land is all his land, though he has said that you may live on it as you are his people and he is as your father and you are as his sons."

This was strange news. For this land was ours. We had bought our land with cattle in the presence of the Elders and had taken the oath and it was our own. We had no king, we elected our Councils and they made our laws. A strange king could not be our king and our land was our own. We had had no battle, no one had fought us to take away our land as, in the past, had sometimes been. This land we had had from our fathers and our fathers' fathers, who had bought it. How then could it belong to this king?

With patience, our leading Elder tried to tell this to the Pink Cheek and he listened. But at the end he said: "This we know. But in spite of this, what I have told you is a fact. You have now a king—a good and great king who loves his people, and you are among his people. In the town

called Nairobi is a council or government that acts for the king. And his laws are your laws..."

For many moons this thing was much talked of by us. Then, when no more Pink Cheeks came and things went on as they had always been, we spoke no more.

Sometimes we heard of strange happenings, or even saw them ourselves, but for the most part life was still as it had always been. The Iron Snake [railroad], which I had never seen, had come and

had carried men on it, not of our people; then a big path was made through the country half a day from our land. It was wide enough for three elephants to walk abreast. And stones were laid on it and beaten flat, so that grain could have been threshed there.

As the years passed and more and more strange things happened, it seems to me that this path or road was a symbol of all change. It was along this road

now that came news from other parts; and along it came the new box-on-wheels that made men travel many days' journey in one day and that brought things for the market that the women wanted to have, clothes or beads to wear and pots for cooking. Along this road the young men went when they left to work with the Pink Cheeks and along it too they went when that day came that they traveled to fight in the war over the sea that the Pink Cheeks made against each other.

It was along this road that many did not come back and some came with no legs, or who could not see. Two of my sons went and only one came back, and he brought only one hand and many strange new ideas and tales. Along the road, too, went the trees that men cut down when they made more and more farms. Without trees to give shade the ground was hot and dry and food grew not well.

By the time that my father, Kimani, died and his spirit joined those of our ancestors, our own land was poor too. For even though many of our family had gone away to work for the Pink Cheeks, our numbers had increased and there was now no room for the land to rest and it was

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tired. The food it grew was poor and there was not enough grown on it for all to eat. Those of our family who worked for the Pink Cheeks sent us food and coins that we could buy food with, for else we could not live.

Little by little, too, the rains fell less. When I was a boy I remember the rains came in plenty twice every year, the little rains and the big rains, and on the hottest days there would be heavy dews, for the trees kept the land cool.

Now it was different; now the little rains had gone and the big rains had become little rains. The big rivers had become little ones and dried up in the hottest time, and I saw this was not good.

Now that my father, Kimani, was dead, I had been chosen Muramati of our *mbari*. I was also now a ceremonial Elder, a member of the Sacrificial Council.

It seemed to me that Ngai was tired of us. He sent so little rain. We must ask him to look upon us again and must sacrifice a ewe to please him.

I spoke of this one evening, and the Elders said it was good to make sacrifice, for the time of rain had long passed. So the day was fixed and I was chosen to be the leader.

Little Kabongo, my eldest grandson, who bore my name according to our custom, sat with

us; he spoke then as do the young age group today before their elders, but which when we were young we did not.

“This is good,” he said. “For three weeks the Pastor at the Mission School has prayed for rain.”

“Which will send rain, do you think, the God of the Pink Cheeks or Ngai?” asked a small boy.

“Neither,” announced a young man, son of one of my brothers, who was a schoolteacher. “I have read in books that it is the trees that make the rains come. Now that the trees are cut down there is no rain. In the Sacred Grove on the hills there is rain.”

The small boy was listening, full of wonder.

“And who makes the trees grow? Surely that is God,” said my grandson.

“For the Pastor says that God made everything, that God is greater than Ngai.”

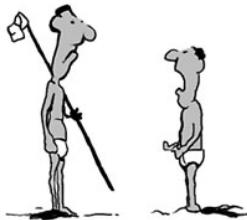
Such discussions among the young were frequent, and to hear them made me sad. For this new learning seemed to pull this way and that way so that no one knew what was right.

But all this talk did not make more food nor bring us rain.

As there was now so little land and we were so many, the boys as they became men would go away, some to work on farms for the Pink

PUNCHLINE  
by @CHRISTIAN

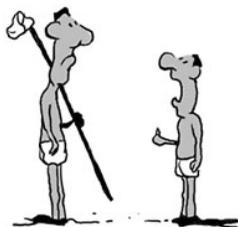
FATHER, WHY IS IT THAT OUR PEOPLE AREN'T GETTING ENOUGH FOOD TO EAT?



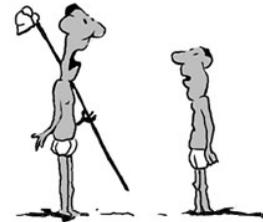
I'M AFRAID THERE'S SOMETHING IN OUR FIELDS TODAY, MY SON...



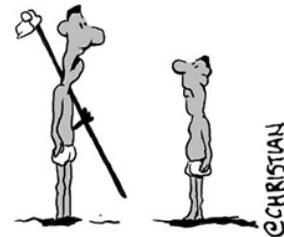
FATHER, WHAT IS IT?! DROUGHT?! LOCUSTS?! RATS?!



THAT HAS COMPLETELY WIPED OUT OUR TRADITIONAL HARVEST.



CASH CROPS...



Cheeks, some to a new kind of school-farm for men, where they learned the new customs and also some curious ways; for these grown men were made to play games like little boys, running after balls which they threw. This they did instead of good work.

Munene, one of my younger brothers, had been one of these. He had been away a long time, and when he came back he wore clothes like a Pink Cheek and he came with one of them, in a box-on-wheels, which is called motorcar, along the new road.

The Pink Cheek called a Council together and when all, both Elders and the young men, were assembled and sat round, he spoke. He spoke of Munene; he told us of his learning and of his knowledge of the customs of the Pink Cheeks and of his cleverness at organizing.

“Because of this,” he said, “and because he is a wise man, the Government, the Council of Muthungu that meets in Nairobi, have honored him and, in honoring him, are honoring you all.”

He paused and looked around at us. Beside him Munene stood smiling.

“He has been appointed Chief of this district and he will be your mouth and our mouth. He will tell us the things that you want to say and he will tell you the things that we want to say to you. He has learned our language and our laws and he will help you to understand and keep them.”

We Elders looked at each other. Was this the end of everything that we had known and worked for? What magic had this son of my father made that he who was not yet an Elder should be made leader over us all who were so much older and wiser in the ways of our people? It was as if a thunderbolt had fallen among us.

## Rule of the Pink Cheeks

“Your new Chief will collect the tax on huts, and choose the places for the new schools that you will

build everywhere, so that your children may be taught to read and write. He will raise the money for that from you all. I have spoken.”

When the Pink Cheek had gone there was much talk. We asked Munene to tell us how this had come about and why he was set above the Elders in this way.

“It is because they do not understand our laws and Councils, he told us. “Because I speak their language and because when I went away in their wars I had many medals.”

The medals we knew about, for we had seen them. Many had them.

We spoke then of the tax on huts. It was heavy, for some men had many huts. Those men who had gone to work on the farms of the Pink Cheeks sent us money, but this we needed to buy food. More men, therefore, must go.

Munene gave us some good advice. He told that men were wanted in Nairobi to build the new houses made of stone, both for the Pink Cheeks to live in and where they sat to make business

and trading. Our men could go there and earn coins and then they could come back when they had plenty.

This was good, for in this way we would pay our tax and no man would be taken by the Pink Cheeks for not paying. So our young men went away down the new road, we were left to grow what food we could, and all was as usual.

It was while these men were still away to make money for our hut tax that 10 of our people came back from the farms where they worked. They were not needed, they said, there was no work for them there. With many others, they had been sent back without money and without food, because there were bad people who troubled the land.

This was the beginning. Along the new road had come big boxes-on-wheels that they called lorries [trucks], in which they had carted logs from the forest. Now these came filled with people. Many had no homes, for their land had gone to the

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Pink Cheeks. Some had no homes because their land had gone to be mined for gold. We could not let them starve, so we took them on our land.

It was the end of the dry season and there was little food left in the storehouses. Our *mbari* had now grown big, and all these newcomers on our land must eat too. Altogether there were 1,200 people on the 200 acres of land [that had been in our family since my grandfather's father.] There was not enough room to grow all the food.

In the dry season many goats and cattle had died for want of water. The harvest had been thin and there was little left, and there was no money to buy food; the last had gone for our hut tax. I heard the crying of children and I saw the women weaken in their work. The old men would sit near their huts, too feeble to walk.

Wangari, whose once-strong breasts hung like empty bags and whose eyes were deep in her head, came to me where I sat by my hut.

"Kabongo, son of Kimani," she said, sitting close, "we women are tired; there is no food and the children are hungry; the young men have no stomachs and the old men are withering as dry leaves. You yourself are weak or before this you would have taken counsel with the Elders. Speak now, for our people wait to hear your word."

I was roused. What she said was true. This was no time to sit and wait. We must hold Council.

The Council met again under the Mugomo tree. There were few, for the new laws of the Pink Cheeks had forbidden big meetings. I looked round at my friends and was sad. Their faces were anxious and their skin was loose on their bones. Even Muonji, who always used to joke, had no smile. For each one had been hungry for many days, and each one told the same story. Everywhere there was a shortage of food, for there was no land and all the time people were being sent back from distant parts. There was uneasiness and some of our tribesmen were troubling our people too much because they wanted to drive the Pink Cheeks out of our country. This the Elders told in Council and were uneasy, for we wanted no war with the Pink Cheeks; we only wanted land to grow food.

"We must ask the Council of the Pink Cheeks to lend us some of the land we had lent to them," said one who came from a place where there was land held by the government for future farms and not yet in use.

All agreed that this would be good and for Munene, who as Chief was our spokesman, we made a message to give to the governor. What we



*Cecil Rhodes, British colonialist, southern Africa.*

told to Munene he made marks with and, when we had finished, he spoke it to us again and it was good.

Munene took our message and he took also a gift of honey and eggs and went away down the long road and left us to wait.

We waited many days, with hope. It was a whole moon before Munene came back. He came to us slowly and sadly, and we knew from his ways that the news was bad.

“They will not give the land,” he said. “They say they have no more land for us.”

And he told us many things that were not good; he told us of rebellions of some of our people, bad men who took our laws and ceremonies and degraded them; of the Pink Cheek warriors and of some he called Police who did unjust things to our people, who took good men and loyal to the Queen away from their work, and after much useless talk, sent them too to live on this land where there is no food.

So I am sitting before my hut and I wait. For soon the time will come for me to creep away into the forest to die. Day by day my people grow thinner and weaker and the children are hungry; and who am I, an old man, to eat the food that would come to them?

As I sit I ponder often on the ancient prophesy of Mogo wa Kebiro. Has the Pink Cheek brought good to my people? Are the new ways he has shown us better than our own ways?

Something has taken away the meaning of our lives; it has taken the full days, the good work in the sunshine, the dancing and the song; it has taken away laughter and the joy of living; the kinship and the love within a family; above all, it has taken from us the wise way of our living in which our lives from birth to death were dedicated to

Ngai, supreme of all, and which, with our system of age groups and our Councils, ensured for all our people a life of responsibility and goodness. Something has taken away our belief in our Ngai and in the goodness of men. And there is not enough land on which to feed.

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These good things of the days when we were happy and strong have been taken, and now we have many laws and many clothes and men dispute among themselves and have no love. There is discontent and argument and violence and hate, and a vying with each other for power, and men seem to care more for disputes about ideas than for the fullness of life where all work and live for all.

The young men are learning new ways, the children make marks which they call writing, but they forget their own language and customs, they know not the laws of

their people, and they do not pray to Ngai. They ride fast in motorcars, they work fire-sticks that kill, they make music from a box. But they have no land and no food and they have lost laughter.



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# The Coming of Pink Cheeks

BY BILL BIGELOW AND BOB PETERSON

## Ask students to discuss or write:

- List the ways that the Pink Cheeks transformed Kikuyu culture.
- Why didn't the Kikuyu simply attack and drive out the Pink Cheeks?
- How was the new road a "symbol of all the changes," as Chief Kabongo says?
- How does "the coming of the Pink Cheeks" affect the Kikuyu's relationship with Ngai (God)?
- According to the reading, what do the Pink Cheeks want? What are they after?
- Kabongo says that "Something has taken away the meaning of our lives." What is that "something"?
- The final lines of the reading describe how life has changed for the new generation of Kikuyu: "They ride fast in motorcars, they work fire-sticks that kill, they make music from a box. But they have no land and no food and they have lost laughter." Does the experience of the Kikuyu have any significance for us today?

## Other possible activities:

- Ask students to write a letter to Kabongo from his deceased father, Kimani, or from another ancestor, reflecting on what has happened to the Kikuyu.
- Wangari comes to Kabongo in his hut and scolds him: "[W]e women are tired; there is no food and the children are hungry; the young men have no stomachs and the old men are withering as dry leaves. You yourself are weak or before this you would have taken counsel with the Elders. Speak now, for our people wait to hear your word." Ask students to write the speech that Kabongo could give.
- Ask students to do a "text-rendering" of the reading, underlining words, phrases, or passages that they find poignant and then read these aloud as a choral poem.
- Brainstorm ideas with students for a dialogue (two-voice) poem. Some possible pairings include: Kabongo and a white colonialist; the Africans' Ngai and the Europeans' God; Wangari and Kabongo, etc.
- See other readings in the valuable book *Through African Eyes* (edited by Leon Clark) for more resources on the effects of colonialism on Africa.