

FACE TO FACE WITH JOMO KENYATTA



In 1977 InspirEd reporter Mark Question was able to sit down with the Kenyan leader, Jomo Kenyatta, who died the following year at the age of 87. This is the transcript of that interview.

Question – Mr. Kenyatta, I want to first say that I am very pleased that you were willing to speak with me today.

Kenyatta – I am happy to do this, especially because it is important for me that people around the world understand the situation in Africa today. Much of what is happening now is because of the years of colonial rule there.

Question – Why don't we begin with that topic then? I know that in the late 1800's many European nations were scrambling to gain control of land in Africa and the takeover happened very quickly. Why was that?

Kenyatta – European nations were very strong, with superior weapons. In addition the world accepted the idea that Africans needed help, believing our culture to be inferior to theirs. In a conference held in Berlin, Germany, in 1884, the African continent was neatly divided among Europeans into what they called "spheres of influence." Our continent was given away and we were given no say in the matter.

Question – As I understand it, the Europeans were mostly concerned with making money from their African colonies.

Kenyatta – Indeed that is true! And that being their goal, they tried to run our countries as companies, at least at first.

Question – What do you mean?

Kenyatta – Well, take my land of Kenya, for example. Kenya, one of many British colonies, was set up as the Imperial British East Africa Company. Their goal was to build a railroad to ship our crops and other products to the coast to sell in international trade. Our people were forced to work on the railroad, and then the British stole our crops and our resources. When our people tried to rebel, they were killed.

Question – It sounds very brutal.

Kenyatta – It was. Armed patrols looking for guerrilla fighters killed men, women, children, and their animals.

Question – Did the same sort of thing occur in other parts of Africa?

Kenyatta – Yes, basically, which is why the colonial rulers had to change their approach. Next they tried sending people over to rule us directly. Many settlers came and took the best lands, driving out the people that were there. To make matters worse, African people were forced to pay ridiculous taxes and in turn were separated from the white settlers. The racial divisions were very strong, so our people resented the colonial rulers even more and often rebelled. 2.

Question – Again, you believe that Kenya is representative of the problems of all of Africa?

Kenyatta – Situations differed somewhat. Some colonial rulers tried working through the tribal kings and community leaders to control the people. 2

Question – That seems like it might have worked better. If they could get the rulers to cooperate, then their people would obey their own rulers.

Kenyatta – You are thinking like a Westerner. You assume that because a man is king, he has all the power. That was not usually so in African society. Tribes were often ruled by kings who shared power with tribal councils and elders. Some tribes had no kings at all. Each tribe was different, their leadership was different, and their laws were different, and they changed if they needed to.

Question – So the Europeans thought all tribes, all kings, and all laws were the same?

Kenyatta – So much so they even grouped tribes together under any king who would help them. Those kings that were willing to work with the Europeans were given all kinds of privileges and became too powerful. They were selfish and stopped caring about the needs of the people. These kings then became the enemies of their people, who rebelled against them. 2

Question – So no matter what the Europeans tried, ruling the African people was no easy task.

Kenyatta – That is true. Regardless of the European country or the African colony, the situation was unfair. Africans wanted to rule themselves.

Question – Let's talk about you and Kenya. When did you become involved in Kenya's independence movement, and how?

Kenyatta – My first position was in the Kikuyu Central Association in the 1920's.

Question – Kikuyu is your tribe?

Kenyatta – Yes. I was their representative to the British. I was to tell why my people were so unhappy. 3

Question – Did the situation improve when you spoke to the British?

Kenyatta – Of course not, the situation remained unchanged until World War II. The British then only cared about defending their land and defeating Hitler. Then after the war our fight grew stronger. We formed the Kenya African Union (KAU) to fight for our rights.

Question – Weren't you the leader of the KAU?

Kenyatta – The KAU actually formed in 1944, and I became the leader in 1946. The KAU was a political group. We wanted to gain power in the government and arrange a peaceful turnover of power.

Question – But you were put into jail in 1952, weren't you? Why were you jailed, if your efforts were peaceful?

Kenyatta – Many Kenyans, particularly the younger people, were dissatisfied with the slow political process. They wanted change fast. I could understand this since after the war the economic situation was very bad, so poor people were worse off than ever. An organization called the Mau Mau formed and began a series of violent protests and attacks. I did not participate, nor was I part of the group, but the government thought I was, so they arrested me.

Question – How long did you spend in prison?

Kenyatta – Nine years, but putting me in jail could not stop the independence movement. It was a very violent time, but the KAU remained strong despite British abuses.

Question – So what made the British finally release you?

Kenyatta - By the late 1950's it was becoming clear to the colonial rulers that their time in Africa was coming to an end. The European empires began falling apart in the years after World War II. They lost most of their other colonies and knew they would have to give up their African colonies as well. When they realized this, I was released.

Question – And you were a hero to your people.

Kenyatta – I would say that I was a symbol to my people of the long struggle we had been through.

Question – So they elected you president.

Kenyatta – I am proud to say that my people elected me as the first president of the Republic of Kenya. My people deserved to rule themselves, and they achieved that.

Question - I know that you were able to unify the many different groups of people in Kenya under your leadership, but that was not the case in other African countries that were formed during this period. What did you do differently?

Kenyatta – I am sure that the peaceful approach of the KAU helped the situation in Kenya, but we too have had problems. I think what the Europeans did in the years before independence has made it difficult for all of modern Africa. The organization of countries under colonial rule was based only on what was good for Europe. No consideration was given to tribal boundaries or cultures. As in Kenya, many tribes live within the borders of African nations and often do not agree on issues.

In trying to control Africans the Europeans disrupted the cultural ties. I told you earlier that in some countries tribes were grouped under kings chosen by the colonial powers. Other changes were also made. For example in Rwanda and Burundi the Belgian rulers divided people into tribes, which were really social classes they called “Hutus” and “Tutsis.” Hatred that was nurtured by the Belgians now remains between them.

Question – I think I understand. The social order was so disrupted by colonial rule that it has been hard for African people to regain that order.

Kenyatta – That is what I am saying. I am not trying to say that all of Africa’s problems are to be blamed upon Europeans, though. Africa certainly had problems before the Europeans became involved in its history. We had wars and poverty and slavery, but we also had much for which to be proud. African empires achieved great things. We had strong cultural traditions and pride in those traditions. Our culture was damaged by European involvement, first by the slave trade and then by colonial rule. Tribes that once lived together peacefully now distrust and hate one another.

Question – Do you think the damage will be repaired?

Kenyatta – If you mean do I think the cultures and tribal relations will ever be as they were in the past, the answer is no, but I do think African nations can solve their problems and will.

Question – Mr. Kenyatta, it has been such an honor for me to meet you today.

Kenyatta – I, too, have enjoyed our meeting. I hope that I have been able to help you and those that read the interview better understand the people of Africa.

Question – You certainly have. Thank you very much.



colonial catastrophe

DIRECTIONS: Use the information from this lesson to complete the web.

