



Global Nonviolent Action Database

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Kenyan Kamba tribe successfully resists colonial livestock control by the British, 1938

March

1938

to: December

1938

Country: Kenya

Location City/State/Province: Machakos

Location Description: *The controversial erosion-control practices were implemented in Machakos, but the protesters traveled to Nairobi to communicate their message.*

Goals:

The Kamba people aimed to stop the mandatory seizure of livestock being implemented by the colonial government.

Methods

Methods in 1st segment:

- 002. Letters of opposition or support

Methods in 2nd segment:

- 002. Letters of opposition or support
- 006. Group or mass petitions

Methods in 3rd segment:

- 038. Marches

Methods in 4th segment:

- 162. Sit-in

Methods in 5th segment:

- 079. Producers' boycott
- 126. Boycott of government departments, agencies, and other bodies
- 141. Civil disobedience of "illegitimate" laws

Methods in 6th segment:

- 079. Producers' boycott
- 126. Boycott of government departments, agencies, and other bodies
- 141. Civil disobedience of "illegitimate" laws

Additional methods (Timing Unknown):

- 055. Social boycott
- 082. Refusal to let or sell property
- 129. Refusal of assistance to enforcement agents

Classifications

Classification:

Defense

Cluster:

Economic Justice

National/Ethnic Identity

Group characterization:

- Kamba tribe members

Leaders, partners, allies, elites

Leaders:

Muindi Mbingu (Samuel Muindi), Elijah Kavulu, Isaac Mwalonzi, and Simon Kioko

Partners:

Not known

External allies:

Kikuyu Central Association- Jomo Kenyatta

Isher Dass

Involvement of social elites:

William Kitonga- stock surveyor

Norman Leys and William Macmillan- British sympathizers

Joining/exiting order of social groups

Groups in 1st Segment:

Groups in 2nd Segment:

Groups in 3rd Segment:

Groups in 4th Segment:

Groups in 5th Segment:

Groups in 6th Segment:

Additional notes on joining/exiting order:

Joining order not known.

Segment Length: *Approximately 40 days*

Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence

Opponents:

British colonial government of Kenya

Nonviolent responses of opponent:

Not known

Campaigner violence:

Violence by Kamba campaigners was limited to the attack of a government headman and the cursing of government officials.

Repressive Violence:

To intimidate the Kamba people into subjugation, officials seized 2500 cattle and grazed them outside of the reserve. The Kamba people, in all but one case, did not violently resist the seizure of their cattle. They adamantly refused to comply with the officials' demands of branding in order to reacquire their livestock.

This aggressive tactic by the government only fostered more support for the Kamba organizers' campaign to stop the destocking

Success Outcome

Success in achieving specific demands/goals:

6 points out of 6 points

Survival:

1 point out of 1 points

Growth:

2 points out of 3 points

In the early 1900s livestock, often the currency of exchange, formed the foundation of the Kenyan Kamba tribe's economy. A family's herd size determined its wealth. As Britain colonized Kenya, this localized provisioning enabled the Kamba to remain relatively self-sufficient.

As early as the 1920s, the British government was aware of over-grazing of the Kamba Machakos reserve. In 1929 the Agricultural Department reported that the Kamba people were grazing approximately 245,000 cows on the reserve, though the land could only support about 53,400. Colin Maher, the government's chief soil conservation officer, described the poverty of the Kamba on the Machakos reserve and attributed it to overgrazing.

Between 1929 and 1934, the Agricultural Commission and Carter Land Commission recommended destocking the land (decreasing the number of cattle an individual could hold). The colonial government submitted proposals to the Machakos Local Native Council to curb the effects of overgrazing.

The Kamba people accepted the colonial government's subsequent policies of trenching, hillside terracing, and planting of napier grass and sisal trees with resentment. In 1938, the colonial government influenced the Liebegs firm to open a meat-canning factory in the vicinity of the Machakos reserve. Since Liebegs built the factory to process 70,000 cattle per year and had a break-even point of 40,000 cattle, the decision by the colonial government to invite the firm implied that, contrary to what tradition suggested, the Kamba people would be willing to sell their cattle in large quantities.

The governor ordered that Liebegs be provided with cattle, suggestive of his intents to commence destocking on the Machakos reserve. The Kamba people perceived this as a direct imposition on their way of life, and they mobilized against the colonial government to resist it.

In March 1938, the Kamba sent a telegram to the Colonial Office expressing their opposition to mandatory destocking. In May, however, Kenya Governor Robert Brooke-Popham launched the coercive destocking process in the Machakos reserve.

The process began with surveys of stock, followed by meetings with Kamba elders defining the number of stock to be held by each individual Kamba community member and requiring that these be branded. Excess stock were then required to be sold to private dealers, such as Liebegs, or would be confiscated by the government.

The colonial government successfully launched its project and by July 1938 more than 20,000 total cattle had been sold. The Kamba people, however, boycotted meetings in which the stock quotas would be allocated. They sent a second telegram to the Colonial Offices as well as a petition against the practice.

Muindi Mbingu (Samuel Muindi), Elijah Kavulu, Isaac Mwalonzi, and Simon Kioko used their educated background and understanding of opposition movements to organize their fellow Kamba people through informal meetings in opposition to the colonial destocking mandate. The organizers publicized their dissent through the Kikuyu Central Association in Nairobi, letters to Kenyan politicians, and through the Kikuyu nationalist publication Muiguithania.

Based in London, Jomo Kenyatta of the Kikuyu Central Association served as an ally to their cause by writing letters about Kamba grievances to the newspaper *Manchester Guardian*. Kenyatta spread word of the Kamba cause to the League against Imperialism, the Union of Democratic Control, the Fabians, and the Workers' Educational Association. He garnered the support of Norman Leys and William Macmillan by writing in favor of the Kamba position. Another ally, Isher Dass, spoke about the Kamba's case to the Kenya Legislative Council.

When the colonial officials arrived at Iveti (a locality within the Machakos reserve), the Kamba people there refused to have their livestock branded. To intimidate the Kamba people into subjugation, government officials seized 2,500 Kamba cattle and grazed them outside of the reserve.

The Kamba people, in all but one case, did not violently resist the taking of their cattle. The officials stated that they would only return a cow to its owner if the owner agreed to brand it. The Kamba stockholders refused to comply with the officials' demands.

This aggressive tactic by the government only fostered more support for the Kamba organizers' campaign to stop the destocking. Inspired by the Kikuyu Central Association, they formed the Ukamba Members Association. Some members explained their decision to join the Ukamba Members Association with their indignation at the unjust seizure of wealth. Others expressed suspicion that the government sought to undermine the Kamba provisioning economy, so that they would be forced to labor on the European settlers' farms.

Residents of Machakos and elsewhere expressed their support by shunning those who spoke in favor of the government's management program.

Leaders of the Ukamba Members Association requested a meeting with the governor after the cattle raid in Iveti but the governor refused. They then organized a march of 2,000 people. These Kamba people walked to Nairobi where they remained for six weeks until the governor agreed to meet with them in Machakos.

The Kamba maintained a respectful tone, even during sit-ins in Nairobi. Their action was covered by newspapers in Britain: *The Times*, *Telegraph*, and the *Yorkshire Post*, and through correspondence columns in the *Manchester Guardian*.

In Machakos on 25 August 1938 the Governor announced the end of compulsory sales of stock. However, he stated that the destocking would continue, including the quotas for individual ownership.

In response to the Kamba's refusal to sell their stock, a frustrated government official in September expressed his frustration that the Kamba refused even to negotiate with officials.

On 4 October the government arrested Muindi Mbingu, the most prominent leader of the Ukamba Members Association and

deported him to Lamu. The people continued to boycott voluntary cattle sales.

The government, acting in line with the Attorney General's legal advice, decided to return the cattle to the Kamba people; if they had not been claimed and branded within a week, to confiscate them.

This plan was in place through 1 December 1938, but was not carried through. Instead, the government returned the seized cattle without further demands.

The colonial government expressed its intentions to continue with its land conservation work through education and voluntary management by land-owners.

It is possible that the destocking plan was not carried through for fear of a violent Kamba uprising. The government noticed increased alliance between the Ukamba Members Association and the Kikuyu Central Association, as well as loyalty toward the Kamba among government police and army ranks. Following the end of mandatory destocking, some Ukamba Members Association branches dissolved. Generally, though, the Ukamba Members Association maintained strong support, and cultivated these seeds of political engagement for a later nationalist movement.

Research Notes

Sources:

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