



Time Travel, Preparing for the welcoming of Karen and Bror Blixen in their new house in 1917

Goal/Theme

- Human rights, equality, living together
- Land ownership
- Learn the history of Karen Blixen and her interaction with the local communities
- Introduce the Time Travel method

Facts

In the 19th century the Kikuyu's, Kamba's and Masai lived on the hills and slopes of the central highlands, today's Nairobi. The Masai were pastoralist and nomads, and moved from one place to another with their cattle. They occupied the eastern side, near Ngong Hills where they could find pastures for their cattle. The Kikuyu's were small scale farmers planting maize, potatoes, beans, pumpkins and vegetables. They kept a few livestock in their compounds. They lived in homesteads in extended families. A Paramount chief was the head of the group. Whenever there was a dispute the chief called in a group of elders, Kvamas, to settle the disagreement. In the ceremonies for birth, naming, initiation, marriage, harvesting, they used Ngoma drums and dances.

The first Europeans arrived in Kenya in the 19th Century: missionaries, explorers and some business men. In 1885 eastern Africa was carved-up between Britain, Germany and France, and the British assumed control of the regions of Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda. It was governed by the Imperial British East Africa Company.

The primary British interest in Kenya was land, which according to the British East Africa Commission constituted "some of the richest agricultural soils in the world, mostly in districts where the elevation and climate make it possible for Europeans to reside permanently".

The British encouraged Europeans to settle in Kenya and they could obtain a disproportionate share in land ownership, especially in the fertile hilly regions. The first settlers arrived in 1902. Over the next three decades, the colonial government and settlers confiscated the land and consolidated their control over Kenyan land. The native Kenyans became wage labourers on the white farms. Confiscating the land itself helped to create a pool of wage labourers. The British introduced measures that forced even more native Kenyans to submit to wage labour: the introduction of the Hut and Poll Taxes (1901 and 1910 respectively); the discouragement of native Kenyans' growing cash crops, the Masters and Servants Ordinance (1906) and an identification pass known as the Kipande (1918) to control the movement of labour and to curb desertion. This identification document the Africans had to hang on their neck always. Another compulsory, detested tasks was conscription to the army.

The British established in the first decades of the 1900s a property registration system that individualized and commercialized land - contradictory to the local traditions of sharing and valuing land. There was plenty of conflict from the beginning and British troops carried out atrocities against the native population. The land expropriation became an increasingly bitter point of contention.

The Kikuyus were one of the ethnic groups most affected by the colonial government's land expropriation and European settlement. In terms of lost acreage, the Masai and Nandi were the biggest losers of land. The Kikuyu did mount a legal challenge to the expropriation of their land, but a Kenya High Court decision of 1921 reaffirmed its legality.

Several of these European settler societies came to the central highlands, at today's Nairobi in the beginning of the 1900s. They obtained for themselves a disproportionate share in land ownership. In a few decades, end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century the life of the Masai, Kikuyu and others were changed completely. From being farmers and pastoralists on the fertile slopes, they lost their land and became wage laborers to the Europeans. The bitterness and anger were immense and there were many conflicts and clashes.

Karen Blixen

Karen Blixen museum was the home of the famous Danish author Baroness Blixen. The house was built in the year 1912 by the Swedish Engineer Åke Sjögren; it's currently 104 years old.

Karen Blixen was born in Denmark in the year 1885. She was the second born of Ingeborg and Wilhelm Dinesen. She enrolled in Royal art academy in Copenhagen to study art. In the year 1913 she got engaged to her Swedish cousin, Baron Bror von Blixen.

They were later on advised to venture in Africa by the mutual Uncle, Count Mogens Frijs, the Count had been to Kenya and had very enthusiastic tales about Kenya. Bror Blixen was the first to arrive in Kenya in the same year 1913. He settled on 700 acres, bought by both families which was meant for rearing cattle. Later on, he was advised to grow coffee, a fast moving cash crop; this made him to sell the 700 acre and bought 4500 acres which he used to grow the coffee.

Karen arrived in Kenya in 1914 through the port of Mombasa where they got married with Bror Blixen. They settled at Mbagathi estate where coffee was grown on a 600 Acre piece of land out of their 4500 acres. Karen coffee company was established to purchase an adjacent 1500 acres inclusive of a fully furnished stone farm house from Åke Sjögren, who had offered the house and farm for sale due to challenges that the coffee plantation was facing. Karen later named the house Mbogani and it's the current Karen Blixen Museum.

There were several Scandinavians in the area, who had taken over land to grow various crops. Karen and Bror Blixen socialized with them, had parties together and went on hunting safaris. The Great War caused complications not least because there were sympathies for both the British and German side.

Karen Blixen was diagnosed with syphilis in 1915 and went back to Denmark for treatment. After successful treatment she returned to Kenya.

The Blixen's moved to the house in 1917 and lived in it for fourteen years. During her stay, Karen interacted with the local people (Kikuyu, Kambas, Somali and Masai) and the house and farm became a meeting place. The Kikuyu were employed as farm workers and got a small plot of land to settle. The pastoralist Masai were neighbors to the farm. One of the Masai, Ali, a muslim, was employed as the cook and his son Tumbo spent a lot of time in the house. Karen was hospitable to the natives, even though she was not a trained medical doctor, she offered medicare, she built a school for the children, she offered them jobs. She planted maize on 200 acres of her land to feed them. She empowered women through training them on how to knit. She embraced the culture of the local people like the Ngomas (Kikuyu traditional dances) and the Kiamas (A group of elderly men who settles disputes).

Karen had different talents including storytelling, painting, naturalist, and author. Today, pieces of her paintings, some of them of the local people she interacted with, and the books she wrote are exhibited in the Karen Blixen Museum. The marriage did not long as they separated after four years and later divorced in 1925. She met Denys Finch Hatton who was a hunter and trader and owned several businesses across Kenya. They became lovers and Denys could stay in Karen's house in between his Safaris. Before long, Denys met his death through plane crash in 1931.

Karen's coffee farm faced various challenges like acidity of the soil, high altitude, locust invasion and frost as well as the untimely death of her lover, Denys Finch Hatton. She tried to save the farm by planting flax but it also failed. Her family members could not continue to support the failing farm and she had to sell it as it was declared bankrupt. She left after resettling the local people on the Dagoreti reserve in 1931.

Scenario, Preparing for the arrival of Karen Blixen at the new house in 1917

The Masai and Kikuyu have seen a lot of Europeans coming the last decade. The foreigners have taken over their land and made it into large farms for various crops. They have built stone houses and churches. The Kikuyu are farmers and has been used to cultivate their own land and now they are wage labourers and squatters. The Masai has been forced to leave their best pastures and grazing land and move to other places. Life has totally changed. There is bitterness and anger, that have caused conflicts and clashes. But nothing has helped.

And now one of the Europeans has extended their farm immensely. Karen and Bror Blixen are well-known to some, but not to everybody. They have a coffee-farm close by and they have bought the adjacent land and made it into a huge farm.

The previous European owner of the nice stone-house, built a few years ago, has moved out and now Karen and Bror Blixen are moving in. A baron and a baroness, two persons with power and influence. So many people, so many workers are dependent on them. And they are coming to take over the farm and the house today!

Some of the Kikuyu workers have been called in to help in the preparations, cleaning and making of the food. The Masai are expected to do some dances and singing to welcome the new owners, colorful painted and wearing their jewelry.

Many of the Masai and Kikuyu are concerned. The Europeans are not treating them as equals. What will happen to my life in the future, can I keep any of my traditions? Can we live together, side by side? At the same time, there is curiosity. What kind of persons are the new couple? Are they interested to interact with us, to learn from each other? Will there be any changes on the farm, for me?

Key Questions

- My life has changed totally. What is my way of living, my traditions, my identity, as a Kikuyu or Masai? What will the future entails? What do I want to keep, what to leave, what is possible?
- Can we reach equality between different groups of people, different gender, how? How do I show respect for the other? Live together?
- Who does the land belong to?

Roles

Everybody keep their age and gender

The students and most adults are local Kikuyu and Masai

Baron Blixen, Karen Blixen, Farm manager, Åke Sjögren, Ali and Tumbo

Paramount chief Kinyanjui, Village elder, Masai chief, Farah Ahmed

Activities

- Cleaning of the compound, the patio and the front lawn
- Cleaning of the house
- Practice songs and dances (Ngomas)
- Bead making, (Face painting)
- Writing, Kikuyu, Masai and English words
- Food preparation
- (Knitting, sawing)
- (Making medicine from herbs)

Time Plan

- 08.00 Prepare the site
- 09.00 Welcoming of Time Travel trainees and students
Background, scenario, roles, rules
- 09.40 Initiation, Masai/Kikuyu prayer
Activities and discussions
- 10.30 Arrival of Karen and Bror von Blixen, they discuss with the groups
Presentations and concerns
Dances
Short speech of Karen
- 10.50 (Planting of a palm tree)
- 11.10 End of Time Travel
Reflection
- 11.30 End

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