

Priest's mission in Kenya went beyond church



Kaiser family

Father John Kaiser during his first years in Kenya, in the 1960s. He was one of the few American members of the London-based Mill Hill Missionaries society, which needed priests in Africa.

John Kaiser was warned by other priests that his style in confronting the Moi government was too reckless. Kaiser knew he was in danger but kept speaking out -- until he could no longer do so.

By Christopher Goffard, First of Three Parts
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Reporting from Lolgorien, Kenya -- Wherever he went, the man of God carried his shotgun. Like its owner, the double-barreled 12-gauge was old and broken in places, dusty from miles of hard African road. He kept the splintered stock bound together with a length of black rubber, and he believed it might be his only protection, save for the good Lord and his American name, in a country that had never felt more dangerous.

By day he ventured deep into the savanna to visit the scattered churches of his vast parish. The shotgun rested on the seat of his Toyota pickup, beside his rosary beads and Mass kit. His faithful arrived from the hills, bright in their tribal wrappings, to hear him speak in Swahili of the risen Savior, to receive a wafer on the tongue.

His red-brick parish house sat at the edge of an immense valley rolling away toward the

Serengeti Plain, and at night the shotgun stayed with him as he double-checked the locks and walked down the hallway toward his bare room. Stayed with him as he climbed into his narrow metal-frame bed and slept fitfully, hyenas cackling and whooping in the dark outside his window.

Stayed with him that morning in February 1999 when he fixed his Roman collar, climbed into his truck and drove for hours on bad roads that played havoc with his arthritic neck. Finally, he arrived at a plain-looking government building called Nakuru County Hall.

This was the setting for the Akiwumi Commission, a tribunal created to probe the causes of tribal clashes that had cost more than 1,000 lives across Kenya in recent years. Its real purpose, many suspected, was to conceal the government's central role in the violence.



He entered the crowded room, a broad-shouldered, long-limbed man with work-worn hands and thinning white hair. Three judges loomed from the bench in powdered wigs, a vestige of British colonial justice. He took a seat before a microphone at a scuffed table.

As he began to talk, his voice steady and composed, it was impossible to tell that he had been living in a state of terror for weeks, afraid that he'd never be allowed to speak, afraid that once he started, he'd never live to finish.

Nor would anyone have predicted that this obscure, deeply eccentric American churchman would become a national hero to Kenyans, his name a rallying cry.

Apart from his church and the tribes he had served during 35 years in a green, malarial

patch of East Africa, few had heard of John Kaiser, a missionary and former U.S. Army paratrooper from Minnesota. He had not yet been delivered from his aching body and messy humanity to abstraction, a clean and perfect symbol.

He arrived in Kenya in December 1964, stepping off a boat into the harsh equatorial sunlight with an Army duffel bag under his arm. His missionary society, the London-based Mill Hill order, needed priests in Africa. He was 32 and just ordained.

Assigned to the fertile highlands of western Kenya, he built churches across the countryside, quick, crude structures of red earth and river-bottom sand. A stout 6-foot-2, the priest went up ladders with pockets stuffed with bricks and pulled roof beams after him by rope.

He learned to carry a bar of brown soap to patch cracks in his truck's engine, and he sat on a crate when the front seat fell apart. He learned to carry holy water in a Coke bottle, and when he forgot the communion wafers, he used a chapati, a doughy flatbread, to transform into the Savior's body.

He baptized and buried, heard confession in the shade of eucalyptus trees, watched AIDS and malaria carry away thousands. He chopped firewood for widows, built rough-hewn schools, waded swollen streams to reach the faithful. He administered the sacraments to a dying 18-year-old girl, who received them serenely, and he wrote, "At such times, I would not trade being a priest for any position."

He hauled bodies to ancestral burial plots deep in the brush, and prayed them into the earth.

The country, with its fierce light and impenetrable dark, its jumbo maize rows and seasons of starvation, was big enough to contain his clashing selves: the priest and the paratrooper, the healer and the hunter, the collar and the gun, the man of obedience who chafed at authority.

There had always been two John Kaisers, at times coexisting uneasily. Growing up on a Minnesota dirt farm, he lavished as much attention on the rifle sights in his war drawings as on the sheep's wool in a schoolhouse nativity scene.

During a peacetime stint with the 82nd Airborne at Ft. Bragg, N.C., he was the gung-ho soldier who mastered bayonet thrusts, leapt into the skies from a Flying Boxcar and knelt in the chapel wondering if he could take a life.

He was the jocular bush missionary who pumped every hand he could find and who retreated for hours to the solitude of the savanna.

He broke bones in motorcycle spills, survived typhoid and hepatitis and a roof beam crashing on his neck. A crack shot, he would vanish into the elephant grass with his shotgun, stalking wildebeests and impalas, wart hogs and zebras. He hacked up the meat with his ax and distributed it among the schools.

He whittled the stocks of his guns and made his own bullets. He shook in half-rounds to conserve gunpowder and to mute the noise when he hunted, in case a game warden was within earshot. Poaching had been outlawed since the late 1970s, but that was one of man's laws and therefore negotiable.

Kaiser chronicled his life in letters to friends and family, tallying the animals he had killed, writing home for a crossbow, describing close brushes with lions. The letters also recorded his disenchantment with President Daniel Arap Moi, a man he had once regarded as a "great Christian prince."

Moi took power in 1978, succeeding independence hero Jomo Kenyatta, a Kikuyu, the country's largest ethnic group. Moi came from the smaller, weaker Kalenjin tribe and had none of Kenyatta's magnetism.

Yet he would become one of the continent's longest-reigning dictators. Moi gutted judicial independence, outlawed opposition parties and held enemies in torture chambers, naked in fetid water.

Tribal territories had been scrambled under the British and later Kenyatta, and Moi exploited the long-simmering resentments. He made a practice of wholesale land-stealing, rewarding allies and dispossessing rival groups.

In the late 1980s, Kaiser, then working in the Kisii diocese in western Kenya, watched thousands of peasant farmers streaming through the countryside with their belongings. Political bosses had unleashed Masai warriors to oust them from their land, he wrote, burning their homes and destroying their schools.

Kaiser brought the news to his bishop, Tiberius Mugendi, an aging Kenyan whom he regarded as a spiritual father. Impossible, Mugendi said. The involvement of government forces would mean the sanction of Moi, and Moi was the country's father.

"Like Pontius Pilate I washed my hands on the grounds that I had plenty of other work in a busy parish," Kaiser wrote. "In so doing I stored up more fuel for a long hot purgatory."

Then came the collapse of the Soviet Union and an end to reflexive Western support for Moi, who had cast himself as a bulwark against Marxism. Donor nations insisted on free elections.

Moi grudgingly approved multiparty politics in late 1991, but the months that followed seemed to bear out his warning -- or, as many saw it, his threat -- that in a country of divided ethnic loyalties, democracy would lead to bloodshed. To ensure his party's supremacy, Moi launched militias into war against opposition strongholds.

As villages erupted in a pandemonium of flame, arrows and machetes, Kaiser spoke up in church meetings, questioning Mugendi's refusal to speak out forcefully. He also attacked the bishop's judgment in running the diocese, his choice of a school headmistress, his method of questioning catechists. Kaiser's conduct breached a deep-dyed cultural prohibition: An African bishop, like a president, was a father figure not to be

challenged.

"My conscience is clear and I will not apologize for any of my statements or opinions. I can always admit & lament the fact that I am an undiplomatic clod, but for me that is not the point," Kaiser wrote a friend in June 1992.

Other priests warned Kaiser that his style was "too American," too confrontational. Undeterred, he put his complaints in a letter and distributed it around the church. The bishop sent word to Kaiser's missionary society: Remove this priest from my diocese.

Kaiser, who had spent decades with the Kisii people, was devastated. He would not leave without Mugendi's direct order. For hours he waited outside the bishop's house in Kisii, demanding to see him. Mugendi emerged and climbed into his car. He refused to acknowledge the priest.

"I want your blessing," Kaiser said, planting himself on his knees before the car. He stayed that way until the bishop relented, dismissing him with a quick wave, his hand tracing a cross in the air.

That was how, exiled from Kisii, he found himself appointed chaplain of a starving hillside tent city 100 miles to the east. It was July 1994. He was 61. The place was called Maela, and Kaiser said he learned more about the Moi regime's cruelty in his six months there than in the preceding three decades.

Of Maela, people remembered the dust. They tasted it in their teeth and coughed it into their hands and slept with it in their blankets. It enveloped the polyethylene hovels where families huddled against the cold. It coated the wattle-and-daub shack where Kaiser lay at night, unable to sleep for the wailing that reached him.

Ghastly accidents were common in the cramped tents. Children jostled cooking pots and were scalded by boiling water. Infants were asphyxiated by charcoal smoke. Disease flourished. "This terrible place," he called it. "A wasteland."

The refugees, mostly from the Kikuyu tribe, a bastion of the opposition, had been chased from their farms by rangers, police officers and Masai warriors. When word of the conditions reached the international press, Moi decided to erase the camp. As government men razed it on Dec. 23, 1994, police restrained Kaiser. He watched as the tents blazed and refugees were beaten and herded onto trucks to be scattered unsheltered across the countryside.

Four days later, police officers came for Kaiser and several hundred people he was protecting in a church. He announced that he would not go peacefully. They overpowered him, cuffed his wrists behind his back and carried him to their Land Rover. The truck lurched through the night, police boots crushing Kaiser's limbs and head against the metal floor. Then they dumped him outside a church.

"A great grief," Kaiser called his removal from the refugees. Later, he would brag about how it took a pack of police to get an old man into their truck. The newspapers reported his arrest. He had become a spectacle, albeit still a minor one.

That is what brought him, finally, to a far-flung brick house in the heart of Masailand. His new bishop had sent him all the way to the country's southwestern edge, to a lonely township called Lolgorien. "No doubt to protect me," Kaiser wrote.

It was a place where Masai herdsmen used thorned acacia branches to shield their mud-hut villages from lions at night. Even in his 60s, Kaiser was quick enough to kill a rabbit with a stone or a dik-dik with a thrown ax. Enlisting villagers, he built a plain red-brick church topped with corrugated metal, like many he'd thrown up across the countryside.

Maela haunted him. At his parish house, he wrote a short manuscript about his experiences there and sent it to everyone he could think of: friends, church leaders, his missionary society. He wrote to Paul Muite, an opposition politician who had befriended him, and asked for help getting it published. People warned him it could get him deported or killed.

"I want all to know that if I disappear from the scene, because the bush is vast and the hyenas many, that I am not planning any accident, nor, God forbid, any self-destruction," Kaiser wrote.

Crisscrossing the countryside, he amassed the ingredients of an indictment. He gathered land deeds from dispossessed farmers. He documented government calls for the purge of non-Masai from the Great Rift Valley. As villagers told him their sins, the ritual of confession became a window on the country's subterranean history, its narrative of land and blood.

His body was breaking down. He flew to the United States to undergo treatment for prostate cancer. He wore a neck brace to relieve the agony of crushed vertebrae and bone spurs. Against an osteopath's advice, he roamed the hills on his motorbike to reach the Masai, and spent nights in their dung-and-ash huts, returning home crawling with lice and fleas.

As elections loomed in December 1997, ethnic carnage again racked the country. Moi held on to power through fraud and mass evictions. At church meetings, Kaiser railed against the church's passivity, what he called "the scandal of our lack of leadership." Among his targets was his new bishop, an Englishman named Colin Davies, who would tell Kaiser, "Look, don't provoke too much."

By now, Kaiser was accustomed to making his colleagues uncomfortable. Sensible clergymen knew how vulnerable a parish house could be, how speaking up too loudly endangered not just yourself but those around you. To do the work of tending to people's souls, the thinking went, the church depended on the government's goodwill.

Kaiser's logic was different. Wasn't the church's role to alleviate suffering, and wasn't the country's "paramount evil," its fratricidal violence, the handiwork of the regime? "Why then do we so easily accept the admonition of government ministers that we who are religious should 'keep off politics'?" Kaiser wrote. "Is the exaggerated adulation given to President Moi by so many leaders, even religious leaders, given out of true respect or fear?"

It was a truism in Kenya that when Moi needed a delaying tactic, a distraction, a smoke screen, he convened a commission. The stated aim of the panel launched in July 1998 under Justice Akilano Akiwumi was to look into the tribal clashes that had claimed more than 1,000 lives in the last seven years.

Kaiser saw an opportunity, a public platform. He knew church leaders regarded his eagerness to speak as pointless, foolhardy or both. Bishop Davies considered the tribunal "a waste of time" -- did Kaiser expect to change Moi's mind? -- but did not stand in his way.

The priest planned to name names. He asked for prayers. He felt "very out on a limb." Still, he told a Kenyan friend, carpenter Melchizedek Ondieki: "I have America to defend me. I have the church to defend me."

To keep Kaiser company as he prepared, the bishop sent another priest from the Mill Hill order, a companionable Irishman named Tom Keane, to live with him in Lolgorien.

Keane quickly sensed the depth of Kaiser's fear. He heard him wake screaming from nightmares. He watched him carry his shotgun to Mass, in his truck, on his motorcycle. Kaiser slept beside it on his mattress, Keane said, "like having a woman."

Keane watched Kaiser swing from heights of energy, aflame with purpose, to depths of despondency. Kaiser played solitaire on his bed. He read Ecclesiastes. He made bullets.

At night, Keane invited him to sit on the veranda of the parish house that looked out past a sausage tree toward the rolling savanna. After the day's pastoral duties, Keane liked to relax with a beer and listen to the hyenas. "It's a beautiful evening, John," he would say.

Kaiser refused to join him. The darkness ran deep and unbroken. He would not make himself a target for enemies who might be hiding in it.

I have been working in this country for 35 years as a missionary but I should feel like a guest," Kaiser began his testimony on Feb. 2, 1999. "There are things which a guest does not normally do when he is in his host's house or country. One of those things. . . . is to criticize the government of that country."

But that, he made clear, was what he planned to do. He detailed the horrors of Maela. He described farmers fleeing police violence by the thousands. He aimed his attack at Julius Sunkuli, a Masai lawyer and a fast-rising member of Moi's inner circle. He called Sunkuli's reelection to parliament fraudulent and accused him of orchestrating land seizures in the days before the December 1997 voting.

He named more names. He declared it "general knowledge" that Cabinet ministers William Ole Ntimama and Nicholas Biwott had organized the training of thugs to terrorize farmers.

Biwott's lawyer rose to denounce Kaiser, calling his allegations "absolutely worthless."

To reimburse the dispossessed, Kaiser continued, government officials should sell their own property. There should be prayers, he said, "for their confession, conviction, repentance, and for the restitution of the landless people."

The next day, the country's big dailies ran lengthy accounts of his testimony. Sunkuli responded with fury, threatening to deport Kaiser. "Christianity will be better off without him in this district," Sunkuli was quoted as saying.

As he prepared for his second day of testimony, Kaiser wrote to his sister that he hoped she could make it to his funeral, should he die. "I hope your passport is up to date," he wrote.

He returned on Feb. 11, 1999. Lawyers took turns grilling him. Sunkuli's lawyer called him a liar.

It went on for hours. Then Kaiser said something that electrified the room. He named Moi himself as the man responsible for so much of the country's pain, the man who had the power to stop the tribal clashes but had not.

The proceedings were halted. Justice Akiwumi purged the record of the Moi remark and ordered the press not to publish it. He declared Kaiser a "busybody" and said, "You seem to be very interested in other things than spiritual matters."

Kaiser left the courtroom exhausted. He believed that he had held his ground. He wrote that he had seen fear in the faces of the government lawyers. The press had been there, and Kaiser's account -- a good part of it, at least -- was now public record. He believed that would provide a measure of safety.

Sister Nuala Brangan told him it was not safe to return to Lolgorien.

"Don't worry, I'm a good shot," the priest replied. "I'll shoot a few bullets in the air, and they'll go running."

A month after his testimony, Kaiser and Keane found themselves pursued by a white car on a dusty road a few miles from the parish house. Kaiser sped to a bridge, wide enough for just one vehicle, and hit the brakes, blocking the way. "Get out," he told Keane.

Kaiser carried his shotgun. Keane carried an ax. They scrambled up a wooded bank into the trees, watching and waiting. It was common knowledge that Kaiser was armed, a crack shot. The pursuers, roaring up, must have sensed their disadvantage. They soon vanished.

That summer, two young women in his parish approached Kaiser for help. They said Sunkuli had raped and impregnated them when they were in their teens.

Kaiser appealed to the Federation of Women Lawyers to protect the women and pursue a criminal case. Sunkuli's loyalists tracked down the women at a Nairobi safe house and hauled them to a police station. The message was chilling: We can find you anywhere.

Still, Kaiser urged the women on, and one of them filed a private prosecution that generated a front-page headline: "Sunkuli Accused of Sex Attack." A Nairobi magistrate ordered Sunkuli to appear in court to face the charge.

"It's a just war," Kaiser wrote, "and I am on the right side."

Sunkuli, now a minister of state and a rumored successor to the president, accused Kaiser of orchestrating "a sex scandal," and called the allegations "all politics."

In late October, the government ordered Kaiser deported, on the pretext that his visa had expired. The U.S. Embassy intervened. Kaiser hid in a convent loft, shimmying down an iron pipe to the back alley when police arrived. The order was rescinded.

In its heavy-handedness, the regime was turning the priest into a symbol. In March 2000, the Law Society of Kenya, a spearhead of the pro-democracy movement, gave him a human rights award. At the banquet, a speaker compared him to the prophet Elijah. Lawyers and foreign diplomats lined up to shake his hand. He wore a Roman collar and a pair of \$10 pants.

Before the crowd, Kaiser declared that Moi should be tried at The Hague for crimes against humanity.

After the banquet, walking through Nairobi with a visiting Minnesotan named Don Beumer, Kaiser pointed to a burly man across the street. "That's one of those thugs," Kaiser said. He told his friend not to be surprised if he was killed. "They'll say I committed suicide."

Worried priests remonstrated with Kaiser. To call for Moi's prosecution was to invite retribution. They could kill us, the priests said. Can't you ease off, John? More than once, church superiors urged him to go back to the United States to rest. He said his work was in Kenya.

In Lolgorien, he went through the parish house, making sure the windows were closed and draped. He wrote: "They have tried to deport me & failed & have made death threats but what is that to a 67 year old has been."

The threats kept coming.

As Kaiser would tell friends, a game warden brought him a message: There is a plan to shoot you and plant a dead animal beside you, so it appears you were gunned down as a poacher.

A rock flew through Kaiser's window. An anonymous letter arrived in his box. He opened it. The threat was in Swahili.

Utaona moto.

You will see fire.

Then came a hand-delivered letter, on Saturday, Aug. 19, 2000, from a surprising source: Giovanni Tonucci, the pope's appointed spokesman in Kenya, known as the papal nuncio. He wanted to see Kaiser urgently in Nairobi.

Kaiser knew the nuncio did not send a summons casually, and believed he would now be ordered out of the country, exiled for good. He wept during Monday morning Mass.

That night, Aug. 21, he arrived by truck at his bishop's house outside Nairobi. He seemed unhinged, fearful. He spoke of being followed. He complained of not sleeping in three days.

His behavior over the next two days would later be scrutinized and dissected. Even after Kaiser met the nuncio and learned that he was not being thrown out of Kenya, his mood swung sharply. He played a friendly game of croquet. He pumped hands at a church construction site. He wept at lunch. He told one Mill Hill brother he felt "close to a breakdown."

On Aug. 23, he approached a fellow missionary, Paul Boyle, to announce that he didn't think he'd live through the next day.

Sometime after 6 that night, Kaiser's truck was heard leaving the bishop's gated compound. His room was left empty, the bedding stripped. He told no one where he was going.

The next morning, workmen noticed Kaiser's pickup askant in a ditch on the shoulder of a road about 50 miles northwest of Nairobi. In the dirt lay Kaiser's body, faceup. The back of his head was gone. Nearby lay his shotgun.

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