

# His Own Words: The Story of John Boyes

Condensed and edited by [Geoffrey Clarfield](#)  
(October 2024)



John Boyes

*In the 1890s, ivory and food trader John Boyes had been living among the Kikuyu for two and half years. Then quite suddenly he was summoned by the British authorities, arrested at gun point, imprisoned, and charged with banditry, which if it held up in court would have had him hung for treason. He was sent down to the Indian Ocean port of Mombasa, imprisoned in the old Portuguese Port and put on trial for his life after the authorities had interviewed hundreds of witnesses from his time among the Kikuyu tribe of Mount Kenya. How could this have happened?*

*This is a story which is stranger than fiction and would better fit an author like Rudyard Kipling. Here is his story, in his own words. I have taken his story from his memoir, condensed it and edited it ever so slightly.*

I was born at Hull, Yorkshire, on 11 May 1873. At the age of thirteen, I ran away to sea, and sailed to every part of the world, in all sorts of ships from a fishing smack to a man-of-war. I eventually landed in Durban in 1896. I then heard that the Matabele war had just started. I became determined to get up to that country somehow or the other. I arrived in Johannesburg, and from there trekked on up country. Within a few days, I was out fighting the Matabele. I met there all the pioneers, Cecil Rhodes, Selous and Johann Colenbrander.

I love sitting by the campfire at night, listening to the old pioneers of the early days with their stories of savage natives, lions, and elephants. What I liked best were the stories of empire building.

After the campaign was over, I hung around Bulawayo for time. I then made my way to Mombasa. Halfway down the street I saw a white man. We had a drink together. He told me, "You are just the man I have been looking for, you are going with me on my expedition to Uganda." As we were short of porters, I persuaded him to take some donkey wagons.

About a week later we found ourselves camping at the railhead of the Uganda Railway, which was in course of construction to stop the slave trade, or at least so it was said. Lions were devouring by the dozen the Indian coolies who were engaged in building the railway and white men also. The Masai were holding up Swahili caravans and murdering the porters. All of this took its toll on the caravans that skirted the borders of their fort.

I heard that the Nandi tribe had murdered the porters who were

carrying a steel boat called Mr. William MacKinnon up to Lake Victoria. They used the material for making spears and arrowheads. The Sudanese troops in Uganda had mutinied and shot their officers. There was truly little protection for travellers along that road except for a few forts about one hundred miles apart, garrisoned with one or two white officers and about thirty to forty African soldiers. In the area around Mount Kenya the Kikuyu tribes were practically holding the East Africa company stations in a state of siege.

The Kikuyu are great guerrilla warriors. They will lie quietly in the long grass or in some dense bush within a few yards of the line of march, watching for a gap in the ranks, or for some incautious porter to stray away, or loiter a few yards behind. You cannot hear a sound and then twang the small bow, the whizz of a poisoned arrow, a slight puncture in the arm and then almost inevitable death. The Kikuyu know how to plant poison skewers in the path, pointing towards the direction from which the stranger is coming, and they have many other ways of attacking their enemies.

We managed to arrive at Fort Smith in Kikuyu land which flew the company flag. We were likely to be killed. Were surrounded by the Kikuyu and anyone who strayed too far from the fort was killed. We were not welcome in Kikuyu land. A brief time before we arrived, we heard that eight soldiers in the company's service were foraging for food and were all massacred at a nearby village. I also read about forty-nine out of fifty men, mostly Arab or Swahili in the trading caravans who had been recently wiped out by the Kikuyu.

And so, in January 1898, I said goodbye to my partner at railhead and I never met him again. I continued my track with my small donkey convoy, and about one hundred porters to Uganda. I succeeded.

Some days later, I found myself trekking across the Athi Plains, where the British later established the city of

Nairobi. In those days you could shoot as much game as you want and feed an entire caravan. But lions were everywhere, and they kept us alert.

Finally, I arrived at Nairobi River. The next day after penetrating a small forest I found myself on the border of Kikuyu country. It is a rich land. It has fertile soil, covered with cultivation peppered with small, stockaded villages surrounded by grazing cattle and goats.

Sometime later, I delivered all my loads in Uganda. I then sent the special runner with the receipt to my partner down the coast. Then I followed myself with the donkey wagons. On arriving at railhead, I was told that my partner had already left with a big safari of rifles and ammunition, but as no one could tell me where he had disappeared to, I took a contract myself and proceeded on another trip to Uganda. This trip failed. I got stuck on the African plane with three natives, one donkey, some blankets and cooking pots and about fifty rounds of ammunition. Somehow, I managed to get out of this conundrum.

I knew that food was wanted by the government stations, as well as for the surveying parties on the line of Uganda Railway, and it was very profitable. Everybody knew that Kikuyu country was full of food, but any parties that have gone there to buy supplies had been killed. I believed I could get into Kikuyu country from Naivasha by going north over the Kinangop plain through the Masai country and then over the Aberdare range the highest peak which is about twelve thousand feet.

My next safari consisted of seven natives, some of whom spoke Kikuyu and by that time I spoke Swahili. We set out for the unknown. To avoid the authority of the officials at Naivasha, I entered the Kinangop plain. As I had Masai among my employees and we were welcomed. We climbed up to the bamboo forest at eight thousand feet and the next morning we trekked

over the mountain after finding an old elephant track.

As we moved into Kikuyu territory, we soon heard their warriors' war cries going from hill to hill and we could catch occasional glimpses of them as they gathered in force towards the village we were approaching. Their bodies were smeared all over with grease and red clay, which in some cases had a kind of whitewash, in which patterns were drawn according to the fancy of the individual. Fastened to their legs was a rattle. Many of the more wonderful headdresses were made of the skin of the colobus monkey and all were armed with spears and shields. In a brief time five hundred warriors, fully armed, were drawn up outside the village, and getting within speaking distance. I told my Masai interpreter to tell them that I had come to see the chief of the district. I knew then that I would only succeed with the Kikuyu if I kept up an attitude of fearlessness.

A guy came forward to conduct me to the chief whose name was Karuri. I met the chief and his compound, and he demanded that I tell him what I want. I told him that I came in peace. I told him that I came to his country to trade with him and to buy food. He questioned me in every which way. I left most of my guns in the forest to avoid trouble, but I told him that if he harmed me, my people would come and make war against him. This bluff seemed to work. Had he known I was bending the truth he could have killed me right there. I gave him a present of cloth and he then offered for his people to build a hut for me.

Kikuyu country is beautiful. It is a succession of small hills separated by deep valleys, lined with watercourses fed from Mount Kenya. Karuri's village was in a large clearing in the forests. It consisted of a cluster of houses surrounded by a high board fence called a boma in Swahili. The entrance through the Boma was by means of a narrow tunnel. The walls of the huts were made of huge slabs of wood fashioned out of large trees by the simple process of cutting portions off the

trunk. Nearby were smaller structures, with basket floors and grass roots, which I found were used as granaries, or larders, in which to store food. Not knowing what may happen, I kept my rifle near me and my bandolier ready in case of a sudden attack.

After a while the people in Karuri's village became more inquisitive, they began to look at my clothes. My boots puzzled them, and they thought they were part of my feet. Many wanted to touch and examine my gun. I did not allow this. My interpreter told me that they thought I was very foolish to come among them with only one rifle, so I told him to tell them that this gun was different from any other gun and far more effective than those carried by Arab and Swahili traders. This gun I explained could kill six men with one shot and I told him that I would show them what it would do by firing at a tree.

I fired the shot. They rush to see, and they found the hole where the bullet had entered and came out the other side. They were impressed. I bluffed again. I told him that was nothing. I said that that they went over to the side of the mountain they would see that the bullet had gone through that as well.

Tossing and turning in my hut I lay awake most of the night. Early in the morning I was woken by men shouting and running about in every direction. I heard the noise of war horns. One of the neighbouring clans had heard of my arrival, and objecting to the presence of any white man in the country, and promptly attacked Karuri's village.

My duty was clear. These people had brought the trouble on themselves by defending me. I made up my mind to help them, I grabbed my rifle, made for the scene of the fights, accompanied by a crowd of yelling warriors who were delighted by my decision. The attackers saw me and my reinforcements began to waver, but when I fired a few effective rounds, they finally turned and ran away. The triumphant warriors returned

to the village and made quite a hero of me, being convinced that their victory was entirely due to my help. I later learned that they had had a lot of trouble with this clan, but frequently raided them, killing many of their men, and carrying off their cattle and sometimes their women.

Karuri asked me if I would stay a while in his country. I said I would. I also reassured him that though my friends were coming along the caravan route they had no intention or desire to enter his country. When he asked me what I had to give him in exchange for the food, I produced a bottle of iodine some of which I had used on their wounds after the fight with good effect.

They thought it was great medicine and a small quantity, wrapped in paper, was exchanged for a gift of ten to twenty pounds of flour.

Before long I had a hundred loads of food sixty pounds per load and the challenge of finding the porters to carry it. I finally succeeded in persuading some of the villagers to function as porters and soon after on the caravan road, I fell in with some railway surveyors who committed to buy all my food. I made hundreds of pounds on my first trip.

I was then able to buy a large quantity of trade goods, beads, and cloth, from the Arab traders going up to Uganda. My only problem was that I could not get any rifles and ammunition. I knew that the government was starving for food, but their bureaucrats did their best to stop me.

I made up my mind that I was going to stay in Kikuyu country. I selected a spot and got them to help me to build a house in the European style. While this was going on I used to have regular visits from the witch doctors. As I was a curer, they thought that I too was some sort of witch doctor. I got the most influential of them to live near me. I had a big shed made where we met once a week. I used to kill a few sheep for

them and let them have a beer to drink. They proved particularly useful to me and functioned as my Scotland Yard.

And so, one day I heard that an Arab Safari with a lot of ivory and about one hundred rifles had been wiped out by the Kikuyu on the slopes of Mount Kenya. The people who had the rifles were a hostile and warlike clan. The fact that they had wiped out a Safari of two hundred people proved this. I made up my mind and selected one hundred of my best men armed with spears and shields. I trained them a little with sticks and my one rifle. I got the blessing of all the witch doctors and a rainmaker to keep the rain away as we had to sleep out in the bush. It did not rain.

The next day we arrived at the hostile chief's village early in the morning before daybreak. When he woke up he found himself surrounded, and before he had time to realize what had happened, I had him covered with my rifle and ordered him to tell his people to bring in all the rifles and ammunition of the murdered Arabs and that at the least sign of treachery, he would be a dead man. Only thirty rifles were working and so I gave them to thirty of the best men I could find, taking great trouble to teach them how to use them and to drill in a disciplined way.

It seemed at that time that the Kikuyu people lived in a constant state of civil war. Every day men came to me to have their wounds dressed with life saving iodine, and I heard of many being killed. Each hill had its own chief, who lived in a state of continual warfare with his neighbours. No man was safe and travelling about the country except on certain days when a sort of general market was held, could get you killed.

Karuri used to visit me every day and from him I learned all about the country. Many of the Kikuyu who were friendly to him and me were being killed because of the hostility of the neighbouring chiefs and their people towards me. There were threats to kill me every day. Some villages had been burned



and a lot of people killed. Karuri's neighbours came to me and said they had always been friendly to me and that's why other people were making war on them and robbing them.

A few days later I had a consultation with Karuri, and we concluded that the only thing to be done was to go out and fight the matter out with them. While we were still trying to negotiate a peaceful settlement, our enemies came down in force one day to attack. They numbered about five hundred warriors. We knew they were coming and our spies had been watching them.

By this time, I had taught my people new ways of fighting. I taught them to hold themselves in check and act together, instead of each man fighting for his own. Waiting until they had gotten within easy striking distance, we sent out spears and arrows supported by rifle fire. Soon we were engaged in hand-to-hand fighting. We had the good fortune to capture the enemy's chief. We won the battle. Within a few days all stolen property had been restored to their original owners causing much joy.

I was anxious to strengthen and maintain my friendship with the growing number of Kikuyu and so we organized a ceremony called Pigansangi. This is not a blood brotherhood ceremony. It is an alliance ceremony. The blood brother ceremony came much later during my stay. Pigansangi is a ritual that cements alliances between and among communities. It consists of much oratory, drinking and the sacrifice of animals.

Leaders of entire communities with all assembled swore peaceful relations to me and each other. And so, emerged an area of friendly country which now extended to the banks of one of the rivers which rises in the Aberdare range and flows in an easterly direction until it empties into the Tana River. But the fact that I had made peace among Karuri, and his neighbouring Chiefs only increased the hatred of those who were outside of our agreement.

So, what was my situation? I was in my early twenties. I had trained thirty-armed Kikuyu with rifles who were loyal to me. I also had by this time about one thousand trained men with spears and shields and they were better organized from a military point of view, than in the traditional fashion.

I also had trained myself never to show any sign of fear. I never attacked unless I was attacked first. No women or children were ever interfered with or molested. I got the seed from South Africa. In later years during the depression and the locust infestations my innovations saved thousands of lives. In my own neighbourhood I was looked upon as a great man.

Because of my Eno's fruit salts and my iodine, I was thought of also as a great medicine man. People began to believe that it was impossible to kill me, partly because I would taste the poison medicine of the medicine men employed Kikuyu, and I never interfered with their laws or religion. If people were sick, I gave them medicine. I helped him with agriculture. I introduced English potatoes and black wattle. I suspect they wanted to keep me alive and keep their own reputations alive.

Nevertheless, outside of our expanding area of peace we heard of multiple threats on my life, and we heard that hostile chiefs were banding together to come and kill me. I also became a patron of the arts and every ten days I invited Kikuyu to come to my house and dance during the daytime. This is because many of the dances involve warriors fully armed going through the motions of attack and defence.

The Kikuyu had a class of strolling minstrels. They were a privileged group, and they seemed free to roam Kikuyu land without harm. They would carry all the news and invent new songs that rose and fell like the popular ditties of London. I got a lot of information from the minstrels.

Kikuyu land was in a constant state of unrest. We heard that

people from the North were coming to attack us. For example, Wagombi, one of the chiefs of Mount Kenya wanted me dead. Or it could be the people of Tato were always threatening us. The locals did not want me to leave but I had been collecting food and had to get it to my clients.

I had reorganized our defence, and I had guards and outposts outside our village because the Kikuyu had a habit of attacking before sunrise. I knew an attack was imminent.

I knew the next attack would come across a ravine which had bridges. I had all the bridges, but one destroyed. I then perched myself at my food station and trading store on the ridge overlooking the ravine. I felt safe because the Masai were also raiding in this area. The men guarding the bridge were told to bring me word of an approaching enemy when it happened and so I quickly heard news of a large body of warriors coming through the ravine.

I organize my troops well and disciplined them so that they would only attack when I gave the signal by firing my rifle. We surprised them and overcame them. That group of Kikuyu never attacked us again. This created an opportunity for me to take the food down to the government station at Naivasha and I reported to them about what I was doing in Kikuyu country.

By this time, I was able to muster an army of five thousand men. I had a uniform, and I had uniformed riflemen. Whenever we moved, we carried the Union Jack. I realized we had to move the peace North, so I went out with my bodyguard and one hundred warriors. We marched three days to get to the district of chief Wagombe. Another chief was Karkerri and a powerful witch doctor and finally Olomondo the chief of the Wandarobo, part Masai, part Kikuyu hunters and gatherers.

I managed to persuade them that it was in their interest to become blood brothers and extend the peace further up Mount Kenya. We went through the elaborate ceremony and at the end

of the ceremony, I gave them some sheep to fulfil their request that I be recognized as the official possessor of Mount Kenya, the second largest mountain in Africa. I realized that in fact, then and there, I had become the King of the Kikuyu. Funnily enough many years later in 1932, I tried to persuade the colonial government that I was the rightful and true owner Mount Kenya, but they did not recognize my tenure.

I came back from my successful peacekeeping mission, and I heard that, yet another a group of Kikuyu called the Chinga had murdered a group of Goans on the trading Safari road from Nairobi. I managed to make it with my men to chief Bartier's village. He told me it was the Changi who had killed the Goans.

By that time, it was clear that my reputation as being someone who could not be killed was over for, they saw the Goans as my brothers and they were all dead. By that time, I also had a lot of ivory stored up, so I had to. get ready for another spate of warfare.

The Chinga had mustered about five thousand warriors, and they camped close by. We heard that they there about a mile away. They were so sure that they would kill me and conquer my friends and so they were having wild war dances drinking and feasting and talking about how they would attack us. I feared they would do so very soon, but I knew deep down that they would attack just before dawn.

And so, I told my people to make big fires to make the camp look like it was filled with more people than it was. Then I left a few people behind to keep the fires going and took all my men fully armed and crept up to the camp of our enemies. We could see them drinking and feasting around their fires. I shot my rifle and the onslaught was electrical. We showered them with arrows and bullets. They were overwhelmed and retreated. I still had to get back to my camp at Karuri's village and we had another skirmish before we got home.

We were soon outnumbered and overwhelmed. I saw masses of warriors on the top of the hill above us and rather than waiting for them to attack us, I ordered all my men to rush up the hill attacked them. We managed to push them off.

We could not get to Karuri's village and so we went back to Bartier's village. Luckily, my blood brothers were sending reinforcements and soon I had a force of several thousand of the finest fighters in the country camped out nearby. They were ready to fight. They decided to invade and conquer the Chinga people, and they did so. After these battles I was in complete control of Kikuyu land and every chief saw me as the paramount leader. I had extraordinarily little time to enjoy the peace for catastrophe was on the way.

Before the next challenge came, I took the time to write up all my adventures and sent them to the government authorities down country, hoping that my efforts would be noted and appreciated. And so now I was thought of as the paramount chief of the country. I could send my messengers anywhere, unmolested.

One day we were having a council and I noticed an elderly man, a stranger to that part of the country and I immediately realized that he was suffering from smallpox. The Kikuyu wanted to kill him, but I told him that to contain the disease we needed to create an isolation camp for him and bring them food at a distance. My instructions were ignored and soon I saw the man in the crowd.

The smallpox spread rapidly and hundreds if not thousands of people died. I managed to get vaccinations sent up from Naivasha and I personally vaccinated thousands of people but many whole villages got wiped out. And if the smallpox epidemic was not enough, the rains failed for the next two seasons and brought about a famine.

On one of my trips down to Nairobi I saw thousands of people

starving by the road. I agreed to take them up to Karuri's village and insisted that those Kikuyu with livestock allow me to kill them to feed people until I could get them to Karuri's land as he had food stored up. I got thousands up to my headquarters, but many other thousands died.

I had been in Kikuyu land for just under three years. One day a messenger came from the government to my compound and said that government officials wanted to now take over the country. I called the Kikuyu chiefs together and explained to them what that meant. I said we should bring as many chiefs as possible and their followers to the government station to demonstrate our goodwill. Just before we arrived at the station, I realized that the government officials may see us as an invading force, so I had everyone halt a mile away and I walked in by myself.

I had a pleasant breakfast with the officers. I explained the situation and they agreed my people could come to the station. I had ordered my people to disarm. I was then told that my bodyguard were under arrest for bearing arms and wearing British uniforms. My chief sin was that I was flying the Union Jack without authority. I ironically asked the officials whether they expected me to fly the Russian flag or the British flag? They were not amused.

Once my men were disarmed, I was also told I was under arrest but that I can retain my cooking staff and personal servants, and that no restraint would be put on my movements as long as I promised not to escape. I managed to get a gramophone so entertain myself.

Soon after I was given a summons that said: *I charge you, John Boyes, that during your residence in the Kenya district, you waged war, set shauris, impersonated government, went on six punitive expeditions and committed dacoity."*

I asked them what they meant by dacoity and they explained to

me that it was a term from Hindustan meaning a native outlaw. I was sent down to Nairobi to be tried. I was amused but I realized that if any of the charges were supported, I could be hung for some form of treason or banditry. The whole thing was a joke, and I was allowed to have many hundreds of my followers walk me down to Nairobi with the government guard of five or six people. The guards were so spooked that they handed me all the documents of my accusation for safekeeping.

When I presented myself to Nairobi the officials did not have time for me, and I had to wait around all day until they finally arrested me with guards with fixed bayonets. Then I was sent down to Mombasa to be tried by train and I was incarcerated in the old Portuguese Fort Jesus.

The government meanwhile had interviewed up to four hundred witnesses about my behaviour in Kikuyu land. They thought they had an ironclad case. Except that everyone of these witnesses spoke in my favor. The judge was embarrassed, and he acquitted me without a stain on my character. He apologized and told me that he felt badly that my time had been wasted.

And so, I returned to Kikuyu land where I continued my food buying and ivory trading and support for the government. Later, I advised the East African Rifles as a guide and intelligence officer in their final pacification and administration of Kikuyu. Eventually my work came to the attention of the Governor of Kenya Sir Charles Elliot. He told me "I should like you to show me your country."

And so, we engaged porters, and I brought him into Kikuyu land where he met every one of the chiefs that I had befriended, and they handed the whole country over to him and the British government. After he left, I went back to my house at Karuri's village. I continued to trade in food and ivory.

I had been the King of Kikuyu land for less than a year.

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Geoffrey Clarfield is an anthropologist at large. For twenty years he lived in, worked among and explored the cultures and societies of Africa, the Middle East and Asia. As a development anthropologist he has worked for the following clients: the UN, the Rockefeller Foundation, the Norwegian, Canadian, Italian, Swiss and Kenyan governments as well international NGOs. His essays largely focus on the translation of cultures.

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