

Thomas J. Mboya Oral History Interview – JFK#1, 03/10/1965
Administrative Information

Creator: Thomas J. Mboya
Interviewer: Gordon P. Hagberg
Date of Interview: March 10, 1965
Place of Interview: Nairobi, Kenya
Length: 8 pages

Biographical Note

Thomas J. Mboya (1930-1969) was Kenya's Minister of Labor from 1962 to 1963 and the Minister of Justice and Constitutional Affairs from 1963 to 1964. This interview focuses on the Kennedy Foundation's funding of a program to bring Kenyan students to the United States and the Kennedy administration's approach to international relations, among other topics.

Access

Open

Usage Restrictions

According to the deed of gift signed September 21, 1965, copyright of these materials has been assigned to the United States Government. Users of these materials are advised to determine the copyright status of any document from which they wish to publish.

Copyright

The copyright law of the United States (Title 17, United States Code) governs the making of photocopies or other reproductions of copyrighted material. Under certain conditions specified in the law, libraries and archives are authorized to furnish a photocopy or other reproduction. One of these specified conditions is that the photocopy or reproduction is not to be "used for any purpose other than private study, scholarship, or research." If a user makes a request for, or later uses, a photocopy or reproduction for purposes in excesses of "fair use," that user may be liable for copyright infringement. This institution reserves the right to refuse to accept a copying order if, in its judgment, fulfillment of the order would involve violation of copyright law. The copyright law extends its protection to unpublished works from the moment of creation in a tangible form. Direct your questions concerning copyright to the reference staff.

Transcript of Oral History Interview

These electronic documents were created from transcripts available in the research room of the John F. Kennedy Library. The transcripts were scanned using optical character recognition and the resulting text files were proofread against the original transcripts. Some formatting changes were made. Page numbers are noted where they would have occurred at the bottoms of the pages of the original transcripts. If researchers have any concerns about accuracy, they are encouraged to visit the Library and consult the transcripts and the interview recordings.

Suggested Citation

Thomas J. Mboya, recorded interview by Gordon P. Hagberg, March 10, 1965, (page number), John F. Kennedy Library Oral History Program.

Gift of Personal Statement
By The Hon. Thomas J. Mboya
to the
John Fitzgerald Kennedy Library

In accordance with the provisions of the Federal Property and Administrative Services Act of 1949 as amended (63 Stat. 377) and regulations issued thereunder, I, Thomas J. Mboya, hereinafter referred to as the donor, hereby give, donate and convey to the United States of America for eventual deposit in the proposed John Fitzgerald Kennedy Library, and for administration therein by the authorities thereof, a tape recording and transcript of a personal statement approved by me on 10th March, 1965, and prepared for the purpose of deposit in the John Fitzgerald Kennedy Library. The gift of this document is made subject to the following terms and conditions:

1. Title to the material transferred hereunder will pass to the United States as of the date of the delivery of this material into the physical custody of the Archivist of the United States.

2. It is the donor's wish to make the material donated to the United States of America by the terms of this instrument available for research as soon as it has been deposited in the John Fitzgerald Kennedy Library.

Signed *T. Mboya*
Date *15/7/65*
Accepted *W. W. Laune*
Archivist of the United States
Date *Sept. 21, 1965*

Thomas J. Mboya– JFK #1
Table of Contents

<u>Page</u>	<u>Topic</u>
1	First time meeting John F. Kennedy [JFK]
2	Program to send Kenyan students to the United States
3	Kennedy Foundation's donation to the students' airlift program
4	Kenyan students' feelings about JFK
5	Discussions with JFK about labor issues
6	The Kennedy administration's personal approach to foreign relations
7	The younger generation's view of JFK

INTERVIEW BY GORDON P. HAGBERG

WITH THE HON. T. J. MBOYA

"This is an interview of the Honorable Thomas J. Mboya, Minister for Economic Planning and Development in the Kenya Government. The interview is being conducted in Nairobi, Kenya, on March 10, 1965, on behalf of the Oral History Project of the John F. Kennedy Library by Gordon P. Hagberg, Director of the Institute of International Education at Nairobi.

HAGBERG:

Mr. Mboya, when did you first meet Mr. Kennedy and what were your impressions of him?

MBOYA:

I first met Mr. Kennedy - he was then Senator Kennedy - in 1959 at, I believe it's called, Asilomar, on the West Coast, near San Francisco. This was at a conference on international affairs. On this particular day the conference was dealing with African affairs. It was just after the Senator had made some statement regarding aid to India, which had received quite a lot of publicity. I was touring the United States for the second time and was mainly concerned with trying to see educational institutions and meet various community groups. I think we found a lot of interest in each other almost immediately. I had written a pamphlet published by the Fabians under the title 'The Kenya Question and an African Answer', which I gave to him and in which he was very interested. We discussed a lot about the African situation and found we were in much agreement as to our attitude about American foreign policy in relation to the African scene.

2

I was most impressed with him as a person - I sat in the conference when he spoke and was very impressed with his sincerity and what later became known as his 'popular appeal' to the audience.

HAGBERG:

Thank you. Now, during the Kennedy Administration, a large number of Kenya students went to the United States. It is generally known that you played an important role in this. The subject, it can be assumed, is one that you discussed with Mr. Kennedy during meetings - that is, both before he became President, and after he became President. But more specifically, the Kennedy Foundation, at your request, made funds available in 1960 to enable some 300 students to be airlifted to the United States for further education. I know this is a topic close to your heart. Your comments on it would be welcomed.

MBOYA:

Yes. As I've stated, when I first met Senator Kennedy in 1959, I was already trying to seek assistance from various American educational institutions and community groups for African students from Kenya to study in the United States.

I mentioned to him very casually then what I was doing and he expressed some interest in it. Later that year, when we were trying to find funds for students' travel to the United States, we found ourselves in great difficulties, and it was almost certain that students might not be able to go to the United States for the 1960 period. I flew to the United States about the middle of 1960 with a view to meeting representatives of various foundations, and discussing with them possible methods of helping us raise funds.

funds ...

that I might approach Senator Kennedy, although he was already campaigning - he was still Senator for Massachusetts - and see if he could in any way assist us. We went to his home with my younger brother Alphonse who was studying in the United States and with Mr. William Scheinman, who was a member of the African-American Students Foundation, and in his home in Hyannis Port, we discussed with him our students 'air lift' program and the difficulties we had. I asked whether the Kennedy Foundation could, in any way, assist us.

He pointed out, of course, that the Kennedy Foundation would not normally be involved in a scheme such as this, as it was designed for an entirely different purpose -- dealing with retarded and backward children -- but he promised that he would get Mr. Shriver, who was in charge of the Foundation, to look at our problem and see if they could assist us.

Arising out of this meeting, the Kennedy Foundation later decided to donate \$100,000 to the students' airlift program. We were, however, told by Senator Kennedy that he wished the matter to remain very private as he did not want it publicized in any way or form. However, this was not possible because at the time we were looking for funds, and before I met Kennedy we had already been in touch with the State Department seeking similar assistance. The State Department did not seem to be interested and said they could not find the money. However when news reached them that the Kennedy Foundation had agreed to donate \$100,000 dollars they changed their minds. The then Vice President Mr. Richard Nixon, called in my associates on the American side and told them that the State Department had revised its decision and would now be willing to assist.

By this time, of course, we had committed ourselves to the Kennedy Foundation and we turned down the State Department's offer. In fact we had always felt that the 'air lift' should not be associated directly with any Government department.

Going back to the students themselves, what was the general feeling of the students and the youth^o of Kenya about the late President and how was it manifested?

MBOYA:

First, I think, when our first batch of students arrived in the United States, they had a very good impression of President Kennedy. We had certain gifts to present to him from the group of students, and when they met him they were most impressed with his charm and simple manner and very human approach. I received letters from the students all speaking very highly of their first impressions. Our students in the United States were most excited at the prospects of the Kennedy Administration. They felt there was a definite change in the attitude towards foreign students as far as the State Department was concerned - there was more concern for foreign students and more willingness to come out and assist them in their problems; for example, getting jobs in the summer and things like that. There was greater understanding of their social problems too.

Also, the students were very much interested in the negro problem and they were very happy to see that things were beginning to move on this particular front. As usual, students are very keenly interested in the politics of their homelands and they were very keen to see the changes that were taking place in American foreign policy, especially the very close personal contact that was being established between President Kennedy and individual African leaders from the different African states.

And so, from that point of view, we began to see and to receive letters from our students in America that implied a very real excitement at the work that the Kennedy Administration was doing, and in practically every letter, reference was not only to the administrative policies of the Kennedy Administration, but also to Kennedy himself as a person, and the impact that he was making as a President on the American population,

5

Many of the students who came back during that period were particularly excited and talked about the very tremendous impact that was made.

When President Kennedy died, the shock that was registered in this country was particularly noticeable because it was the first time that the death of a foreigner, and a foreign "head of State, had registered so sharply. It was as though someone very close at home had died and people reacted spontaneously in practically every little town and village in this country.

We, as a party, had organised various public meetings during that week and one could see the tenseness and the shock that registered in the remotest places we went to. I remember accompanying our present Vice President to some meetings during that week-end, and I saw very clearly that President Kennedy's personality had penetrated deep in the villages quite remote from the normal political atmosphere of the country.

The students who came back and those who were already working in Kenya were just as shocked as those from whom we heard who were still in the United States.

HAGBERG:

Switching to another subject, as a former leader in the trade union movement, both in Kenya and in the international field, did you discuss labour matters with President Kennedy?

MBOYA:

Yes. I remember a visit with President Kennedy at the White House in the company of President Kaunda - and this was just on the eve of the Cuban crisis, or rather the morning after the news broke out. Despite this news and despite the fact that this was a very pressing political question, he still found the time to meet us and to discuss with us the African scene.

In...

6

In the course of these discussions, we were able to put before him the political problems of our two countries and to hear from him of the American reaction to our problems and what he thought his Administration could do. We particularly wanted him to impress upon the British the problems in East and Central Africa. We found him most understanding. I personally discussed with him, both at Asilomar in the West Coast when I met him and later on in Hyannis Port, labour questions and also the relations between our own labour movement and the AFL. CIO, and found he was quite, not only interested, but informed about the trends in the labour movement at the international level, especially the interest of the American organised labour in what was happening in Africa.

HAGBERG:

You've already touched upon this particular question, but generally speaking, what changes would you say there were in relations between the United States and Africa, and in particular, between the United States and Kenya, during the Kennedy Administration? What were the reasons for such changes?

MBOYA:

I think this has been said very recently in some of our local press in their appraisal of the trends in relations between America and our different countries in Africa.

I think what struck one very very strongly was the relations at personal levels. I think there was something in the Kennedy Administration which was so personal that everything became identified with his own personality and his own personal relations with people. His keen personal interest was immediately conveyed to the Heads of States who met him and this almost created, as it were, not just better diplomatic relations but personal relationships between Africa and America.

It was ...

7

It was the beginning of a completely new era in our foreign relations with America. It also created a departure which Africa had always been looking for from the days when American foreign policy vis-a-vis Africa was conducted through Britain or France, through NATO allies and so on, to a more direct relationship. I think this was perhaps the biggest development during the Kennedy Administration.

I don't want to say very much about the present Administration, but this is what some people feel is lacking in the present Administration - this personal approach to things; contact with people at a personal level - became one of the main stamps of the Kennedy Administration insofar as foreign policy in relation to Africa was concerned.

HAGBERG:

Are there any observations you would like to add that have not been covered in the questions I have asked?

MBOYA:

I think there's only one that I would like to make. From the point of view of the younger generation, President Kennedy offered much excitement and hope in the future. They saw in him a young man who understood the modern world and the problems of the younger generation - the problems of the younger people who were trying to handle all the intricate questions of the scientific and modern world. They saw in him a very enlightened outlook, full of youthful hope for the future. This is a difficult thing to state in so many words, but it's something that struck one, something that one began to hope for. Even though he did not say very much or do very much, there was always this feeling that at last there was someone talking the same language with all of us.

Another thing is that people saw in President Kennedy, in Africa at any rate, a very enlightened approach insofar as the Cold War was concerned. They saw in him a man who matched the energy and intellectual ability of Premier Khrushchev, which in our view, was missing during the previous Administration. There was a growing hope that at last between the Americans

and the Russians there were leaders in charge of affairs who saw the world in a new perspective, in a new light and who were willing to experiment with things, to take risks so that we could move closer towards world peace.

I think this was a very big contribution that President Kennedy personally made to the world. At least he gave the world that much more hope.

HAGBERG:

Thank you very much Mr. Mboya, for this most illuminating discussion.

The foregoing was an interview with the Honorable Tom Mboya, Minister for Economic Planning and Development in the Kenya Government. It was recorded for the Oral History Project of the John F. Kennedy Library on March 10, 1965, in Nairobi, Kenya. The interviewer was Gordon P. Hagberg, Director of the Institute of International Education in Nairobi."