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Nordic Settler Identities in Colonial Kenya: Class, Nationality and Race in Bror and Karen Blixen's Transimperial Lives

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ABSTRACT

The British East African Protectorate began enticing white settlement to the country in early twentieth century. This article focuses on the white settler identity and experience of a Nordic couple, Bror and Karen Blixen, in colonial East Africa in the 1910s, when they shared ownership of a coffee farm near the Ngong Hills. Baron Bror Blixen-Finecke was related to the Swedish royal family, his wife and future author Karen Blixen a member of a wealthy Danish family, whose money was used to purchase the coffee farm in 1913. This article examines how the Blixens as a Nordic couple fitted in the white settler colonial community and how they related to their African servants, farm workers and neighbours. Furthermore, it discusses the problems Bror Blixen's Swedish nationality caused to the couple during World War I, when the protectorate's Swedes were suspected of harbouring German sympathies.

KEYWORDS

Kenya; colonialism; Karen Blixen; Bror Blixen; whiteness; class; African labour; coffee farming

Introduction

This article examines the white settler identity and experience of a Nordic couple, Bror and Karen, Baron and Baroness Blixen, in the transimperial space of colonial East Africa in the 1910s, when they shared ownership of a coffee farm. Their nationalities and racial position are at the centre of this study. As white Northern Europeans, they bought land and settled in a British protectorate, ruled by whites who were nonetheless greatly outnumbered by Africans, and where their Nordic nationalities complicated matters when World War I broke out. The identities and racial position of white settlers in colonial Kenya have been examined by, for example, Elspeth Huxley, Dane Kennedy and Brett Shadle, with a focus on 'persons of British birth or stock'[1] as they were the predominant white settler group. As historian Timo Särkkä has

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pointed out, constructing colonial identities was a complex process influenced by time and place among other factors and therefore 'it is imperative that colonial identities should be approached through localised case studies'.[2] This article is such a case study and concentrates on the questions of how two white Nordics from the upper echelons of their societies integrated into the white settler colonial community of British East Africa and how they related to their African servants, farm workers and neighbours. How did their nationalities, race and class factor in this equation? Collections of Karen's and Bror's letters form the main sources of this article. Karen Blixen's fictionalised memoir *Out of Africa* (1937) and Bror Blixen's not-always-so-trustworthy *African Hunter* (*Nyama*, 1936) are used for their insight into the thinking and attitudes of their authors, not so much for reporting facts.

Colonial Inheritance

Baron Frederik von Blixen-Finecke and his wife Clara had seven children, of whom Bror (1886-1946) and his twin brother Hans were the youngest. The children grew up at Näsbyholm, the Blixen family estate in Skåne, Sweden, and learnt to love the outdoors. Bror enjoyed 'the freedom of the fields and woods',[3] something that made it easy for him to settle in East Africa. In their youth, the twins partied and spent extravagantly in the social circles of Copenhagen. Bror was not too motivated or committed as a student but managed to graduate from an agricultural college in Alnarp. He was subsequently appointed manager of Stjärneholm, a small farm under Näsbyholm, from which Bror acquired knowledge and experience.[4]

Karen Christentze Dinesen (1885-1962) was born in the manor of Rungstedlund in Denmark. Her mother's family, the bourgeois Westenholzes, were traders and self-made millionaires. Karen's father's family, the Dinesens, were country people and 'cousins to the greatest noblemen in the kingdom', although they themselves were not titled.[5] Karen's father Wilhelm Dinesen had spent time as a young man in North America and lived a pioneer's life in Nebraska and Wisconsin among the Pawnee and Chippewa. He published a memoir titled *Jagtbreve* (English tr. *Letters from the Hunt)* in 1889 under the pen name Boganis – a name given to him by the Chippewa – which became something of a minor classic. When she was living in East Africa, Karen expressed pride at having a relationship of mutual respect with Africans, similar to what she imagined her father had had with Native Americans.[6] Wilhelm Dinesen committed suicide when Karen was very young, after which Aage Westenholz, Karen's mother Ingeborg's brother, had become their family advisor.[7] Karen studied art for some time at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts in Copenhagen and after dropping out in 1907, lived a rather bohemian life in the Danish capital and other European metropolises.[8]

The Blixen twins and Karen Dinesen had known each other from childhood. They were related to each other: the twins' mother Clara Blixen-Finecke and

Karen's father Wilhelm Dinesen were cousins. Karen had been in love with Bror's twin brother Hans, but he had rejected her. When Karen returned home at the age of 26, having resided and studied art in Paris and Rome, Bror was working as the manager of Stjärneholm, but getting frustrated.[9] Bror and Karen began talking about marriage in the summer of 1912, but only after they had talked about emigration, for Karen was not interested in settling down on a farm in Skåne. The couple announced their engagement despite Karen's relatives' initial opposition in December 1912.[10] Plans to emigrate were made immediately. Although both Bror and Karen were looking forward to a change of scenery and an adventure, making money was also a strong motive.

The families of both Bror and Karen already had experience of colonial settings in Asia and Africa. Karen's uncle Aage Westenholz suggested that Bror could swap his job as the farm manager of Stjärneholm farm for a manager's job at Westenholz's rubber plantation in Malaya.[11] Bror was immediately taken by the idea and writes in his memoir:

> At twenty-five one does not search one's conscience anxiously before undertaking a new task; tapping the trees for rubber was no more difficult than cutting the rye when it was ripe, and the rubber market was particularly good at that time.[12]

However, the Blixens never ventured to Malaya. Bror's uncle Count Mogens Frijs (who was also a cousin of Karen's father), the greatest landowner in Denmark, who had just returned full of excitement from a big-game hunt in East Africa and who later bought some land at Naivasha, suggested to Bror that 'a well-run farm in East Africa just now ought to make its owner a millionaire'. Bror wondered whether it would make one rich quicker than a rubber estate in Malaya and Frijs seemed to think so.[13] Bror did not have the necessary capital to buy a farm in Africa, but Karen's family, the Westenholzes, did.

Plans were made to buy a farm in East Africa. Aage Westenholz and Karen's mother Ingeborg Dinesen each put forth 150,000 kroner to buy land. Half of Ingeborg Dinesen's investment was put in Karen's name, the sum being an advance inheritance.[14] Aage Westenholz had spent years (1885–1911) as a young civil engineer, manager and then investor in Siam and Malaysia, where he had been involved in various projects, some of which had been unsuccessful, while some had generated great winnings for shareholders.[15] With the capital acquired in Siam managing the Bangkok Tramways Co. that electrified Bangkok's tramway system and later The Siam Electricity Company, Westenholz funded the beginnings of the Jendarata Rubber Company in the Federate Malay States under British colonial rule, as well as Karen and Bror's African ventures.[16] Westenholz became the chair of the new company, Bror the director. The chair had the greatest authority in the company in regard to investment, sales or significant changes. The plan was that Bror and Karen could eventually buy the farm for themselves.[17] Bror left for the British East African Protectorate in March 1913, ahead of Karen, to see if they could

make a living in the country.[18] It was planned that they would marry once she arrived in Mombasa.

A British Protectorate had been proclaimed in July 1895 at Mombasa over the territory between Uganda and the Indian Ocean. Uganda had been proclaimed a protectorate a year earlier, as it was the site of the headwaters of the Nile, 'the life-blood of Egypt', which had been occupied by Britain in 1882. Egypt was the key to the Suez Canal, which was vital for Britain's all-important route to India. The Anglo-German Agreement of 1886 had recognised the British sphere of influence as running north from Vanga at the coast of the Indian Ocean, around the northern slopes of Mount Kilimanjaro and to Lake Victoria, that is, along what now became the Anglo-German frontier.[19] The British constructed a railway line, using a large number of Indian labourers, through the Protectorate from Mombasa to the shores of Lake Victoria in Uganda between December 1895 and 1900.[20]

The Uganda railway and the establishment of British control were costly affairs and a means to finance these had to be found. As the British rulers deemed local Africans insufficiently advanced in agriculture and commerce to make them grow cash crops for export, the idea of white settlement was seen a better choice. From 1897, when the idea was first brought up, it took some time to attract white settlers. The passage of the Crown Lands Ordinance in 1902 began the formal process of land alienation. Europeans could either lease or buy land from the Crown.[21] By mid-1903, around one hundred white settlers were trying to make a living around Nairobi, which became the administrative headquarters of the Protectorate in 1906. Some of them had arrived from Britain, some others by way of South Africa, where the Boer War had just been fought.[22] Inviting a Finnish settlement in the Protectorate was also suggested but rejected in 1902.[23] Also Russian and Polish Jews were offered a settlement scheme but that, too, fell apart in 1905.[24]

The number of white settlers arriving in East Africa picked up in the following years. All African land was made Crown land and was soon demarcated into reserves for Africans, which 'also hemmed them in as a potential source of labor'.[25] The first reserve was for the Maasai in 1904. Indians were allowed to settle in the coastal areas and near Lake Victoria, but they were not granted land in the highlands.[26] The highlands were reserved for European settlers, who were the only ones able to legally by land there.[27] The small white population of the Protectorate owned a huge chunk of the arable land of the country, but large areas remained unfarmed. Consequently, large numbers of Africans began squatting in the white highlands.[28] Until the end of the 1920s, African 'squatters', resident farmworkers on the Europeans' farms, cultivated much of the land for the landowners in exchange for their own plots on the farms.[29]

The number of Africans living in the East African Protectorate in the early twentieth century is estimated to have been close to 3 million, whereas the number of white settlers was always relatively low in comparison: In 1906,

there were 1813 Europeans; in 1916, 5438, and in 1926, 12,529. There were also always more Indians than whites in the Protectorate.[30] The majority of the African population of British East Africa consisted of the Kamba, Kavirondo and Kikuyu peoples, who farmed the central highlands, the Luo, the Nandi and the Maasai, a cattle-herding people who usually did not enter the service of the white settlers. There were also Somalis and smaller ethnic groups, such as the Dorobo, the Turkana and the Swahili.

Elite Settlers

Bror was welcomed in Nairobi in 1913 by the American multimillionaire William Northrup MacMillan, whom Bror was introduced to by MacMillan's friend, the Swedish engineer Åke Sjögren.[31] MacMillan had resided in the Protectorate since 1904 and was a significant figure among the early white settlers. Sjögren had come to British East Africa three years earlier. He had led a Swedish zoological expedition, after which he had bought a farm at the Ngong Hills. The farm was owned by the Swedo-African Coffee Company. By the time Bror arrived in the country, Sjögren had become an influential settler.[32] At the coffee company, Bror met and became friends with the Swedes Emil Holmberg, Ture Rundgren and Baron Erik von Otter, who arrived in September 1913.

Bror, who self-confessedly was after 'gold', noted in his memoir that 'Gold meant coffee. Coffee-growing was the only thing which had any future; the world was crying out for coffee from Kenya'.[33] Bror was so excited by the prospects offered by East Africa that he thought his relatives also should make investments:

> By buying uncultivated land now, and then sometime in the future selling it as an established farm, one would be certain to make a substantial profit. […] There would be no risk of losing money, as the value of land increases every month. The worst that could possibly happen would be that some terrible epidemic struck down the indigenous population, and as there are some 3 million of them this is hardly likely, since their standard of living is now rising with better employment and modernized medical aid.[34]

As Bror Blixen was welcomed to British East Africa by other fellow white settlers, Swedish, American and British alike, he, as the quote reveals, did not much reflect on the justification of the settlement project. He describes Africans in this letter as a means of getting rich, almost as an instrument, taking for granted that they would work for European settlers and that this arrangement would even improve the Africans' quality of life. Tonni Arnold writes that the world market's high coffee prices at the time seemed to support the hopes of making money quickly. Bror also knew one Captain Peter Möller, a Swede who had spent some time in Africa, including three years in Congo, and who had made a fortune by buying a coffee farm in Kenya four years earlier and now sold

part of it for a great profit.[35] On the other hand, Tonni Arnold notes, there were no safe bets in farming in Kenya prior to the WWI.[36] As the correspondence between Aage Westenholz and Bror Blixen in the summer of 1913 proves, the two of them were aware of the risks. Westenholz noted in June 1913, before a farm was bought, that not all soil is suitable for growing coffee and that something else, black wattle for example, should also be planted just in case coffee-growing would not work out. Westenholz emphasised that they needed to prepare for the possibility that coffee would not pay off – in Ceylon, farmers had had to completely give up coffee. Westenholz also remarked how he had seen the same thing happen with sugar plantations in the jungles of Siam.[37] Bror remained optimistic and remarked that in his opinion a total loss of the money that would be invested on land would not be possible even if the coffee plants would die as in Ceylon, as the value of the land would be increased by its cultivation.[38] Bror bought a 658-acre farm from Åke Sjögren in August 1913, and called it by its local name, Mbagathi. Bror discussed the matter with Aage Westenholz, who also met Sjögren in Denmark before the deal was made. They opted for a rather expensive but promising farm (Figure 1).[39]

In addition to making money, the Blixens were attracted to East Africa by what they experienced as freedom and novelty. Karen wrote four years later about the charm of British East Africa as 'a new country' where 'one is going

Figure 1. Planting of coffee in MBagathi, with Bror Blixen on the horse. Printed with permission of Rungstedlundfonden. Image in the collections of the Royal Danish Library.

to be able to do so much'. She also wrote of Bror: 'what counted for him was not the money, it was achieving something here and helping to shape the future of this country'.[40] Bror himself described British East Africa as 'a country still in its infancy and which on the strength of its fertility and excellent climate invites pioneering'.[41] The Blixens also wrote about the lure of a virgin country not touched by an axe. It seems that Bror was interested in the land, farming and hunting, which is perhaps not surprising given his childhood and youth in Sweden, whereas Karen, though also happy to go hunting, was primarily fascinated by Africans: the Kikuyus whom she wanted to educate in the 1920s and the Somalis whom she so admired. In *Out of Africa*, Karen explains that 'from my first weeks in Africa, I had felt a great affection for the Natives. It was a strong feeling that embraced all ages and both sexes. The discovery of the dark races was to me a magnificent enlargement of all my world'.[42]

Karen arrived at Mombasa on 14 January 1914 and she and Bror were married the following morning, 'with Sjøgren, Prince Vilhelm, Bostrøm and Lewenhaupt standing as witnesses'.[43] Prince Wilhelm was the brother of Sweden's future king Gustaf VI and Count Lewenhaupt his companion. The Blixens continued to Nairobi in style, travelling by a special train assigned to Prince Wilhelm, with the Governor's private dining car attached. The Governor himself as well as the Vice-Governor were present at the official wedding reception and luncheon in Nairobi, and Karen reported in a letter that she had been called 'Baroness every other word'.[44] The marriage combined Bror's title and connections to the highest nobility in Sweden, including the royal family, with Karen's access to money. The idea of the title of Baroness appealed to Karen strongly as it implied a high position in the social hierarchy, while the money opened up new prospects for the couple.[45] In her first year of marriage, she discovered that she had syphilis – most likely contracted from Bror – which made her severely ill and necessitated treatment in Europe. A few years later she confided in her brother: 'If it did not sound so beastly I might say that […] it was worth having syphilis in order to become a "Baroness"'.[46] The combination of a title and money helped them greatly in acquiring a high status among the settlers in British East Africa. A disproportionately large number of Europeans who settled in the Protectorate before WWI were of a 'gentlemanly', upper middle- or upper-class background, which meant not only 'high' birth but also high status by education and occupation, as well as wealth.[47] Aristocratic sportsmen were attracted by the East African wildlife and many, like Count Mogens Frijs, also bought land.[48] Many members of the nobility were absentee landlords, who hired managers for their farms. Historian Dane Kennedy notes that it was often 'the younger sons of peers, sons-in-law, nephews, lesser gentry, and more distant members of the aristocratic network who took up residence in Kenya'.[49]

Bror Blixen was related to the Swedish royal family and was used to spending time in royal social circles. Karen was no stranger to high society either. In the

new country, they seem to have fit right in among the ruling elite and spent time with the highest British colonial officers and wealthiest white settlers. Three months into their life on the farm, the Governor's wife visited them, 'which appears to be something of a rare honor', and Karen noted that their 'somewhat unapproachable attitude out here on this farm commands a certain respect, as after all we must be regarded as among the more distinguished settlers'.[50] Karen emphasised their high status among the settlers several times in her letters (Figure 2).

At first, the Blixens spent time with Bror's countrymen and the friends he had made at Swedo-African Coffee. Bror Blixen's home became a place where the Scandinavians gathered and he seems to have become their spokesperson in official matters. Unlike many of the other Swedes, Bror spoke good English with an upper-class accent he had learnt from tutors on his yearly childhood stays in Falmouth. He socialised with the governor as well as with the other British administrators as he did not have anything against the administration, unlike many other settlers.[51] While Bror did not make much difference between people based on title, rank, race, class, nationality or other such matters but treated everyone the same based on their character,[52] Karen was 'conscious of her rank and kept her distance from settlers not equal to it'. The English middle-class settlers, for their part, were suspicious of her and did not welcome her too warmly at the beginning. Bror, on the other hand, was generally much better liked, for he was not a snob but great company, ready to buy drinks and charming in women's eyes.[53]

Figure 2. Karen Blixen on safari (postcard). Image in the collections of the Royal Danish Library.

Although Karen befriended some of the wives of Bror's Swedish friends, she seems to have enjoyed and spent most of her time with (titled) British upper-class settlers from Denys Finch Hatton and Lord Delamere, one of the first and most influential British settlers in the protectorate, to the Anglo-Irish aristocrat brothers-turned-into-pioneer settlers and farmers, Galbraith and Berkeley Cole, in the later years. Her view of the English improved considerably since meeting Denys Finch Hatton in April 1918. She wrote to her brother in June 1918 that she had met 'so many congenial English people recently' whereas her and Bror's relationship with most Scandinavians had grown cooler.[54] Nine months earlier Karen had noted in a letter that as Sweden and Denmark held divided sympathies during the WWI, she and Bror had decided 'to be Danish and live in Denmark'.[55] These divided sympathies may have been the reason why their relations grew cooler towards the Swedes in the country. In October 1922 Karen confessed to her mother that she had come to appreciate the English 'more and more',[56] although she still thought that 'some of the English 'middle class' are fearfully deadly'.[57]

The Blixens' Nordic nationalities were no bar to the high society of Nairobi; the important thing was that they were Western/Northern European, that is, sufficiently white. For settlers, British East Africa was a 'white man's country', to be dominated by whites rather than Africans or Indians. Yet the definition of 'whiteness' was not altogether simple. For most settlers, the British were the most superior 'white race', but the Protectorate's 'British settlers – including here Anglo South Africans, Americans, Canadians, New Zealanders, and Australians – welcomed western Europeans. They could help in the civilizing project. But whites from other parts of Europe, well, their whiteness was suspect'.[58] Southern Europeans, or even whites of a lower class, were 'not quite white', they were not considered prestigious or civilised enough. However, to Africans, these groups were all supposedly 'white'. British colonial officers felt an affinity especially towards upper-class white settlers based on their shared racial identities and social backgrounds.[59] Karen and Bror Blixen blended into this crowd well. Only the Great War complicated matters, as Bror's nationality generated suspicions among the British settlers.

Questions of Loyalty During World War I

When the war broke out, disturbances on the German-Tanganyika border, which was two hundred miles long and ran mostly through the Maasai Reserve, were expected and the Swedes in British East Africa had to solve the question of their allegiance. Bror reminisced in his book *African Hunter* that a day before the beginning of the Great War in August 1914, a group of Swedes met at his house to discuss the political situation with the limited knowledge at their disposal:

> No one knew anything, and rumors of decisive naval battles in the North Sea were already in circulation. We Swedes all felt that Sweden sympathized with Germany. We discussed our position in the event of an alliance between those countries coming about and agreed that the only thing we could do was to offer our services to England, our adopted country, with the reservation that we should be freed from military service if Sweden joined Germany.[60]

It is likely that the Swedes in Nairobi had to act before they knew the position of their country of origin. As Bror Blixen wrote in the quote above, the Swedes 'felt' that Sweden had pro-German sympathies but news of the situation in Northern Europe may have taken some time to reach the protectorate.

Sweden declared its neutrality on 3 August 1914 and affirmed it jointly with Norway five days later. However, Michael Jonas points out that Sweden orientated intensely toward Berlin, which set Sweden apart from the other neutral countries during the war. A significant segment of the Swedish society sympathised with the German war effort and were even in favour of Sweden joining on the side of the Central Powers.[61] Denmark's neutrality was somewhat compromised by its 'enforced concessions towards Berlin', including the mining of some Danish straits.[62]

The day after the meeting of the Swedes at the Blixen house, Bror and Erik von Otter bicycled to Nairobi to recruit. Initially, Bror joined a corps formed by his old South African friend called Bowker, but when nothing really happened in the next ten days, Bror grew impatient and asked to join a unit that might go to the front soon. Subsequently, Bror was commissioned by Captain Woosnam, head of the Intelligence Department, to arrange a communication system between Nairobi and Lord Delamere's headquarters. Delamere served as the commanding officer on the Maasai border. Bror and some other Swedes organised a communication service with motorcycles, cars, bikes, African runners and carrier pigeons, from the frontier to a station at Kijabe.[63] Karen explained to her mother in a letter that 'Bror joined up as a volunteer, – kind of "unfighting", as he went for the purpose of passing information; Ture [Rundgren], Gethin, [Nils] Fjæstad (from Swedo) and [Herbert] Kjellberg are serving under him, and they have various stations to man on the road between Kijabe and the frontier'.[64] There was no fighting on the particular front where Bror was active, and the force was withdrawn after three months, in November 1914. Bror returned to his farm, and although he had made it known that he was willing to serve again if required, his involvement in the war ended there.[65] Karen had also participated; she had organised the transport of supplies from Kijabe to the line of communication. It is possible that Karen's involvement in the war effort made her appear less suspicious, for her friendship with the German Lieutenant Colonel Paul von Lettow-Vorbeck, who now commanded the German East African forces, was common knowledge.

During the voyage to British East Africa, Karen had become acquainted with von Lettow-Vorbeck. Karen described him in a letter to her mother as being

'such a friend to me'.[66] Some months later, in May 1914, von Lettow had commissioned Karen 'to buy ten mares for the Kaiserliche Schutztruppen at Dar-es-Salam'. Karen was not paid to do it, but she hoped to receive a carpet from von Lettow if he was satisfied. Karen wrote to Ellen Dinesen that she liked 'the Germans much better than the English'.[67] In *Out of Africa,* Karen writes that she had gone to Naivasha to buy the horses for von Lettow shortly before the outbreak of the war, and although the mares were never sent across the border, she could not escape the fact that she had, 'at the outbreak of the war, been buying up horses for the German army'.[68] This made the British settlers eye her with suspicion.

Volunteering for service did not dispel all mistrust the British felt towards the Swedes. What Jonas calls 'Sweden's pro-German leaning and the country's ambivalent behavior'[69] especially in the early years of the war, made Bror Blixen's position in British East Africa complicated. Karen wrote to her mother in December 1914:

> I think the English are starting to look slightly askance at us, that is, at the Swedes, which is not so surprising actually, since every one of them sides with the Germans […] Our neighbor Van de Weyer has made a collection to help the Belgians and the Danish and Swedish farmers are trying to improve their position with a generous donation to this fund from the Swedes and Danes at Ngong – but it is hard to raise money these days, God knows. It is unfortunate that Denmark and Sweden have no colonies; so one always feels a foreigner, – now, the English are particularly foreign to me, so it is lucky that I feel for the Somalis and natives like brothers.[70]

Karen's Scandinavian identity and apparently the fact that she did not come from a major colonial power made her feel somewhat isolated from the English, something that she seems to have overcome in her later years in East Africa, when she spent more time with the titled class.

The Blixens spent some time in Europe during the war. Karen was severely ill and returned to Denmark in June 1915. Bror spent several months with her in the summer of 1916 and they returned together to British East Africa in November 1916. The same suspicions of their allegiance continued to haunt them. In July 1917, Karen wrote to her mother how they had been involved in 'a very unpleasant affair', when a series of articles appeared in the local newspaper *The Leader*, 'seeking to cast suspicion on the Scandinavians here, in particular on Bror, and which ended by directly accusing them of harbouring German interests and receiving money from apparently tainted sources'.[71] Instead of a public dispute in the newspaper, which Karen thought would probably have caused great harm to them, Bror gave an interview to the writer of the articles, after which the writer, Mr. Bromhead, promised to retract the story in the same newspaper. Furthermore, Bror had met with the acting Governor, who was kind and understanding and had suggested that the Scandinavians should have a Consul to represent them.[72] In February 1918, the cloud of suspicion had been dissolved and 'people out here ha[d] begun to show us such kindness and

friendliness'. Karen attributed this to their reserved and non-pushy behaviour and noted that '[i]n time I think we will take our place among the leading people here; I have a feeling that this country belongs to us'. By this, she seems to have meant that they understood and loved the country unlike most white people there.[73] In December 1918, Karen again mentioned the 'continuous gossip' people had been spreading about the Blixens' pro-Germanness to her brother. She continued that the fact that her brother being awarded the Victoria Cross, the highest military decoration that could be awarded to members of the British Armed Forces, for his valour in battle in France in August 1918 had been mentioned in the local papers had finally put an end to all such talk.[74]

The German forces in German East Africa were always outnumbered by the Allied troops,[75] which also established a blockade in February 1915 on the coast. Since they could not expect any additional troops, Lettow-Vorbeck knew that he would have to lead targeted assaults and guerrilla tactics against the enemy rather than vast, frontal operations, and thus try to slow down and occupy the enemy. He was successful in that the British forces did not manage to conquer German East Africa nor stop Lettow-Vorbeck, whose troops surrendered only on 25 November 1918, two weeks after the Armistice in Europe.[76] After the war, Karen complemented the English for speaking of von Lettow, who had not been caught, 'with the greatest appreciation and [for] consider[ing] him to be one of Germany's top men in this war. I think it is interesting to have known him; one does not meet so many outstanding men in one's life'.[77] Despite Karen's admiration and perhaps even affection for von Lettow before the war, she mentioned in a letter to her mother the Danes' 'ancient hatred of the Germans' and how disastrous it would be for Europe if the Germans won. At the same time, she was very annoyed by English boastfulness and self-satisfaction.[78]

Establishing and Managing a Farm

To run a large farm in British East Africa, Europeans needed to secure African labour. In his memoir, Bror notes that finding labour for the farm in 1913, when he had first arrived in British East Africa, was a real difficulty. He needed 700 workers and the way to employ people was to meet with various chiefs in the region: 'I had to induce them by appropriate methods – bribes and fair words – to order for their subjects to join my expedition and accept work on my coffee plantation'. He goes on to describe what he calls 'the black mentality', by which he means that a promise given one day could be retracted the following day.[79] Bror describes his experiences in trying to employ both workers for the farm and porters for the trip to the farm and his frustration when the promises of the chiefs came to nothing. It is obvious from his story that they and other white men looking to hire labour were being played by the chiefs, and

perhaps also by the workers and porters themselves. The white expectation was clearly that demands for labour would be met. Historian Opolot Okia has noted that although Africans were pushed into the labour market by taxation and coercion, European settlers were worried about the labour supply and demanded the administration to assist in the matter. In 1912, the government convened the Native Labour Commission to examine settlers' complaints about labour. A consistent theme in the depositions of Africans was the power exercised by headmen and colonial chiefs in forcing Africans to work for Europeans. The chiefs, in turn, acted on the orders of administrative officials.[80] When the Commission's report was completed in August 1913, the governor, Sir Henry Belfield, noted his personal approval of impressing upon Africans that the government wished them to find outside employment (Figure 3).[81]

In keeping with the above, Bror eventually asked his friend, district commissioner Tudor Owen to help him with a local chief, Kater, who was again tricking him. When Owen explained that his government did not want any trouble with the locals, Bror instructed him by saying that Owen had the power and 'power notoriously exists to be abused'. Owen finally agreed to support Bror 'in giving King Kater a bit of a fright, and that worked – fifty per cent at least. The next morning I had two hundred men'. These workers he took to the plantation.[82] The recruits were mainly Kikuyus and Kavirondo – the Maasai who lived close by preferred cattle herding to clearing and cultivating the land and seldom entered the service of settlers. The clearing of the land, ploughing and planting of the coffee seedlings was hard work performed by Africans and supervised by Bror and six other European managers, which included three other Swedes.[83] When Karen arrived, the farm had as many as one thousand Africans working on it. In addition, she had many household servants, remarking that 'I think one can put up with any sort of hardship if one has plenty of servants'.[84]

Figure 3. Recruiting Kikuyu workers for the farm. Printed with permission of Rungstedlundfonden. Image in the collections of the Royal Danish Library.

Soon after her arrival, Karen explained in a letter how she had met with the big chief of the Kikuyu, Kinanjui, 'who rules over a million Kikuyu', and that he had promised that the Blixen farm would always have workers, which was 'an invaluable asset' there. By contrast, Sjögren, who had 'enthusiastically adopted the English stupidity', ended up alienating the chief through his arrogance. According to Karen, Kinanjui was 'far wiser than Sjøgren and in a position to bring all his work to a halt by keeping his people away from it, which he does'.[85] Karen clearly felt the need to set herself apart from the white middle-class settlers in the Protectorate, including the Swedes. Karen wrote to her aunt Bess that.

> the natives (among whom the Somalis cannot be included, they are immigrants from Somaliland, Muhammadans and of Arabic stock, who look down on the Negroes) are my greatest interest out here; but I think that I, – and Bror, – are about the only people here who really do have that interest. Where the natives are concerned the English are remarkably narrow-minded; it never occurs to them to regard them as human beings, and when I talk to English ladies on racial differences and such matters, they laugh patronizingly, touched by my eccentricity. Of course, the natives, who in many ways are more intelligent than they are, take advantage of this, but there will never be any understanding and cooperation. […] When I observe the various races here I feel that the superiority of the white race is an illusion.[86]

Karen criticises the white settlers of the area, especially the Englishwomen but also some Swedes, when discussing their habit of using the lash on their African workers. In Karen's view, these situations arose from misunderstandings which were caused by the whites' inability to speak the local language. According to Karen, the labour problem about which the English continuously complained but did nothing about, except for demand the government to tax the Africans more heavily, was easy to solve. She noted that she herself would certainly not work in a place where she could be thrashed. Yet, she saw that the *kiboko* [a whip cut from hippopotamus hide] did not do the Africans 'much harm', but that imprisonment would kill them. So even if she was against a liberal use of the *kiboko*, she certainly viewed Africans as biologically different and was not altogether against the practice. As Shadle remarks, 'perhaps more than most white settlers, Karen Blixen […] promoted herself as a feudal lady, selflessly protecting her retinue of dedicated Africans'. Yet, her character differed from those of the English settlers she loathed 'more in degree than in kind'.[87] This would seem a fitting description, as the following quote from Karen testifies: 'one loses a good deal of racial superiority out here; it seems obvious to me that the natives surpass us in many ways. Admittedly they cannot learn as much as we can, but when it comes to acquiring the skills needed in order to live out here, they are far more adept than we are'.[88] Karen may have lost some of her sense of racial superiority but by no means all of it.

Despite refraining from the extreme measures to which some of the other European settlers resorted and despite her 'pro-nativeness' which caused her trouble with the English,[89] she shared many beliefs with the other Europeans, such as not educating the Africans too much or the right of Europeans to rule over Africans. When her beloved servant Farah wanted to go to school in October 1914 and learn to read, Karen would not help him, because she felt that schooling Africans would lead to 'their becoming unhappy and useless'.[90] White settlers believed in civilising Africans but not to a too great extent. Missionaries were criticised for teaching too much to Africans, whereas settlers thought that Africans should only be taught such things as the value of hard work rather than democracy or equality. Settlers should be the teachers, guides and parents slowly instilling civilisation in Africans but since the latter were decades, if not centuries behind, this would need to be a slow process during which the Africans should be treated like children.[91] Karen Blixen, too, thought of herself as a parent to her African 'children'.

On the one hand, Karen admired the Africans and treated them with at least more dignity than the other Europeans, partly because she needed to secure labourers for her farm, and partly out of interest and respect for them. On the other hand, she never had any qualms about the colonial system, whereby European settlers bought large pieces of land from the British rulers, employed African labourers for a pittance and tried to make a profit solely for their own benefit. Furthermore, in October 1914, she began what she called her 'housewifely activities by giving (not personally) each of my "totos" (small houseboys) 20 strokes of the *kiboko*, because they had been stealing and getting drunk and had just about murdered three other boys!'[92] She clearly felt it to be her duty to arrange for this physical punishment of young African boys working for her, to 'scare them off' drinking, and otherwise civilise and educate them. She also called, like the other white settlers, grown African men 'boys'.

Yet, due to her usually kinder demeanour towards Africans, Karen was able to remark that her neighbours had trouble getting African farm workers due to their liberal use of the lash, whereas all of her migrant workers and servants were returning.[93] These migrant workers travelled to work sites where they laboured for three to four months to earn money for taxes, dowry, bridewealth or manufactured items. Corporal punishment of Africans by Europeans was illegal but nevertheless widespread.[94] Africans were made to pay taxes in order to not only increase government revenue but also to make the Africans work. The 1902 hut tax taxed the dwellings of married African men and the 1908 poll tax taxed unmarried men above the age of fifteen. Thus, all African males had to pay taxes and to do this, they had to either be employed or own sufficient land to produce enough market commodities. Taxation was so heavy that it usually came up to 75 per cent of the wages.[95] Karen may have gotten it wrong when she remarked that 'the natives out here do not need to

work; they are more interested in entertainment: buying themselves a few luxuries, lamps, tobacco, etc.'.[96] Later on, the Blixen farm had Kikuyu 'squatters' living on the plantation (Figure 4).

Despite being able to employ workers, the farm was in financial trouble already in early 1915, partly because the government had taken their best oxen for the war effort. Bror had had to ask for more money from the Westenholzes. After a lively correspondence and explanations, the money trouble was once more sorted, and a new family company, the Karen Coffee Company Ltd., was formed in the summer of 1916. Many family members invested money in it and bought shares and a loan of one million kroner was obtained from a bank. The Karen Coffee Company bought Åke Sjögren's Swedo-African farm, which consisted of the 4,800-acre Mbogani farm, where 100 Kikuyu families resided as squatters, at the Ngong Hills and another one, 5,336 acres, in Uasin Gishu.[97] When the Blixens returned to East Africa from Denmark in November 1916, they moved into a larger house, formerly owned by Sjögren. It was that house Karen described in *Out of Africa*.

Karen Blixen was often respectful and expressed admiration for of her African servants and workers – 'I am absolutely convinced that the natives are the "best class" out here'[98] and 'my best friends are Muhammadans and they are vastly superior to the English people here'.[99] Yet she made comments like 'one is never afraid of natives, or no more than one would be of – one's own – savage dogs'[100] and 'I can't really define what it is that makes the natives so likable; in reality they have more bad qualities than good ones and they are all stupid and unreliable'.[101] She also compared Africans to animals in her memoir, including 'ants', 'the spurfowl', 'fishes in deep water', 'angry cobra',

Figure 4. Agricultural work at the farm. Printed with permission of Rungstedlundfonden. Image in the collections of the Royal Danish Library.

'male leopard', 'fighting bull', 'sheepdog', 'old ram' and likened an ill Kikuyu boy to 'a sick animal'.[102] Furthermore, she constantly makes generalising statements about 'the Natives' for her presumably white Western readership in *Out of Africa*. Prominent Kenyan novelist and academic Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o has called out Karen Blixen for likening and comparing Africans to animals and described *Out of Africa* as 'one of the most dangerous books ever written about Africa', for 'the racism in the book is catching, because it is persuasively put forward as love'.[103]

In the last years of the 1910s, the Blixens continued to struggle with the farm. In 1917, the farm was plagued first by extremely heavy rains and then a prolonged drought. Furthermore, their farm manager Åke Bursell left and bought his own farm.[104] In June 1918, the rains fell short causing a severe drought, and Karen reported to her mother that the 'natives' were on the brink of famine and maize had been brought in from South Africa to feed the farm workers. The situation was so bad that most farmers had reduced the number of workers in their employ since they could not feed them.[105] Thousands of Africans died. The Blixen farm was not spared from disaster, and it produced no profit at all in 1918. What made matters worse was that Bror had taken new loans and invested money in questionable improvements. He also accumulated large private debts.[106] The harvest of 1919 was fairly good, and the Blixens sailed to Europe in first class to meet their family and enjoy some European luxuries.[107] Bror spent seven months in Europe, and Karen sixteen months. She was treated for syphilis and also suffered from the Spanish flu and blood poisoning. At least some members of the family knew about the syphilis and about Bror's constant infidelities, which raised the ire of Karen's family, even though Karen herself had an affair with Denys Finch Hatton. Aage Westenholz wanted Bror to step aside for financial as well as moral reasons. Westenholz contemplated selling the farm and was supported by some other shareholders of the company.[108]

When Karen returned to what was now the Crown colony of Kenya in late December 1920, the future of the farm was at stake. After her arrival at Mombasa, Karen wrote to her mother that according to her friend Olga 'everything is in an appalling mess at my farm; apparently Bror has taken out a new 'Bill of sale' on all my furniture, which will probably fall due soon'. She continued that there had been people living in their house the whole time and her glass and china had been used for target practice. Karen also noted that Bror was of the opinion that there was 'absolutely no possibility of a loan'.[109] Selling the farm was seriously discussed for months as the economic position of the farm kept deteriorating. The chairman of the company, Aage Westenholz, travelled to Kenya in the spring of 1921 to inspect the farm and willing to sell it. It would have been difficult to sell the farm for what it was worth and although Karen tried to secure a loan to buy the farm for herself, she failed. However, despite another serious drought in 1921, Karen still wanted

to save the farm and the Karen Coffee Co. and Aage Westenholz managed to raise enough money from home and from Kenya. An agreement was signed in June 1921, which made Karen the managing director of the farm and forbid Bror from having anything further to do with the plantation. Karen was somewhat bitter about this resolution but agreed.[110]

Karen's family pressured her to get a divorce. After Aage Westenholz had left Kenya, Karen wrote to her mother about how reluctant she was to separate from Bror, since the two of them were so strongly bound together by their life in Kenya.[111] In the end it was Bror who wanted a divorce, Karen wrote to her mother in January 1922, because Bror thought he would do better and be happier if they divorced.[112]

Bror Blixen does not write much about the farm in his memoir. He mentions the war and the difficulties that ensued and continues, with embellishment: 'The plantation had to be sold – my home was broken up. I stood there in the forest empty-handed. But I still had my sporting rifle'.[113] He went on to have a successful career as a professional hunter. He left Kenya in 1938. Karen Blixen continued to take care of her farm until 1931, when the farm was sold and Karen moved back to Europe permanently. Karen explains in *Out of Africa* that their farm was too high up for growing coffee: the coffee trees suffered from frost and winds during the cold months. Furthermore, as discussed above, the drought in the area devastated the crops. Therefore, in the Ngong country, the Blixens never got the same yield of coffee to the acre as the farmers in the lower districts of Thika and Kiambu did.[114]

Conclusion

Karen and Bror Blixen both hailed from families that had colonial possessions in Asia or Africa and their close relatives had spent significant amount of time in colonial settings. Transimperial lives were thus almost in their blood. They both came from privileged backgrounds, one from a very wealthy family, another from aristocratic circles. Both also had restless natures. There did not seem to be anything that would have stopped them from leaving Europe and beginning a new and exciting life together. Their whiteness and titles gave them access to the upper social and political circles in British East Africa, which was an extreme hierarchical society with people from all over the world and from various empires coming together.

Whereas Bror's integration into the settler community was eased on the one hand by his nationality – he met fellow Swedes at the Swedo-African Coffee farm – and by his upper-class accent and title on the other, which helped him become popular among the more prestigious settlers as well, Karen's nationality did not seem to help her. She did not meet many Danish countrymen or – women in Kenya, yet her marriage to Bror gave her a title which eased her way into the high society of the country. Both were also deemed white

enough by the British to be acceptable and respectable. But while Bror's nationality helped him in the beginning to settle into the country, it caused the couple problems during the Great War, when Bror and other Swedes were suspected of harbouring German sympathies. They had to work hard to prove their reliability in the new transimperial circumstances.

The couple's relationship to Africans was complex and ambivalent, especially in Karen's case. From the beginning, they had accepted the order of things – surely they would not have moved to British East Africa if they had not – and took it for granted that they were the ones to buy land and to make a profit, relying on cheap African labour. Neither of them was as prejudiced against Africans as the average Britons seem to have been but neither did they treat their African workers as equals. Karen's feelings toward her servants and workers varied from adoration, friendship and trust to patronising disrespect, pity and occasionally violence. Their attitudes differed from their British counterparts but did not totally contradict them. Their nationalities mattered mainly in wartime, their whiteness and titles also in peacetime.

Notes

1. Quote from Kennedy, *Islands of White*, 1–2; Huxley, *White Man's Country*; Shadle, *The Souls*.
2. Särkkä, "Imperialists Without an Empire?" 99.
3. Blixen-Finecke, *African Hunter*, 3–4.
4. Aschan, *The Man Whom*, 3–13.
5. Thurman, *Isak Dinesen*, 24.
6. Ibid., 31, 34–36, 47.
7. Aschan, *The Man Whom*, 20.
8. Thurman, *Isak Dinesen*, 113–31.
9. Aschan, *The Man Whom*, 17–20.
10. Thurman, *Isak Dinesen*, 132–33.
11. Blixen-Finecke, *African Hunter*, 5–6. For Aage Westenholz's entrepreneurial experiences in Siam and Malaya, see Martin, *The UP Saga*, 17–43.
12. Blixen-Finecke, *African Hunter*, 6.
13. Ibid., 6–7.
14. Arnold, *Bror Blixen*, 72–73.
15. Ibid., 87–88.
16. Martin, *The UP Saga*, 17–22.
17. Arnold, *Bror Blixen*, 72–73.
18. Ibid., 73.
19. Mungeam, *British Rule in Kenya*, 1–8.
20. Trzebinski, *The Kenya Pioneers*, 15.
21. Okia, *Communal Labor*, 39.
22. Shadle, *The Souls*, 12–14; see also Kennedy, *Islands of White*, 22.
23. Huxley (*White Man's Country*, 117) writes that the plan was rejected by the Commissioner in December 1903; according to Aschan, *The Man Whom*, 25–26, the plan was rejected by Finns in 1902.
24. Huxley 1980, 117; Kennedy, *Islands of White*, 24.

25. Okia, *Communal Labor*, 39.
26. Kennedy, *Islands of White*, 22.
27. Shadle, *The Souls*, 14.
28. Okia, *Communal Labor*, 39.
29. Shadle, *The Souls*, 14.
30. Ibid., 14.
31. Blixen-Finecke, *African Hunter*, 13.
32. Arnold, *Bror Blixen*, 79; Ericsson, *Patriarken på Mälsåker*, 48–49, 58–61.
33. Blixen-Finecke, *African Hunter*, 14.
34. Bror to his sister Ellen 15 July 1913. Blixen, *The Africa Letters*, 4.
35. Arnold, *Bror Blixen*, 87.
36. Ibid., 86–87.
37. 24 June 1913. Aage Westenholz to Bror Blixen. Rostbøll, *Karen Blixens afrikanske farm*, 38–39.
38. 20 July 1913. Bror Blixen to Aage Westenholz. Rostbøll, *Karen Blixens afrikanske farm*, 127.
39. Thurman, *Isak Dinesen*, 136; Arnold, *Bror Blixen*, 86–91.
40. 20 May 1918. Dinesen, *Letters from Africa*, 69.
41. Bror Blixen to his sister Ellen 15 July 1913, Blixen, *The Africa Letters*, 4.
42. Blixen, *Out of Africa*, 25.
43. 20 January 14. Dinesen, *Letters from Africa*, 2.
44. 9 January 1914. Dinesen, *Letters from Africa*, 3.
45. Thurman, *Isak Dinesen*, 135, Aschan, *The Man Whom*, 18.
46. 5 September 1926. Dinesen, *Letters from Africa*, 281.
47. Kennedy, *Islands of White*, 44–45.
48. Ibid., 44.
49. Ibid., 44.
50. 5 April 1914. Dinesen, *Letters from Africa*, 6.
51. Arnold, *Bror Blixen*, 119.
52. Ibid., 119; Thurman, *Isak Dinesen*, 155.
53. Thurman, *Isak Dinesen*, 155.
54. 1 June 1918. Dinesen, *Letters from Africa*, 71.
55. 26 September 1917. Dinesen, *Letters from Africa*, 55.
56. 27 October 1922. Dinesen, *Letters from Africa*, 136.
57. 2 August 1923. Dinesen, *Letters from Africa*, 162.
58. Shadle, *The Souls*, 6.
59. Ibid., 5–6.
60. Blixen-Finecke, *African Hunter*, 274–75.
61. Jonas, "Neutral Allies," 96–97.
62. Ibid., 98.
63. Blixen-Finecke, *African Hunter*, 275–76; Aschan, *The Man Whom*, 39–41; 12 August 1914, Dinesen, *Letters from Africa*, 13.
64. 23 August 1914, Dinesen, *Letters from Africa*, 13.
65. Blixen-Finecke, *African Hunter*, 278–79.
66. 9 January 1914. Dinesen, *Letters from Africa*, 2.
67. 13 May 1914, Dinesen, *Letters from Africa*, 10.
68. Blixen, *Out of Africa*, 299.
69. Jonas, "Neutral Allies," 100.
70. 3 December 1914. Dinesen, *Letters from Africa*, 26.
71. 29 July 1917. Dinesen, *Letters from Africa*, 51.

72. 29 July 1917. Dinesen, *Letters from Africa*, 51.
73. 26 February 1918. Dinesen, *Letters from Africa*, 60.
74. 13 December 1918. Dinesen, *Letters from Africa*, 91. Thomas Dinesen had wanted to follow in the footsteps of his father and grandfather and fight against Germany. He managed to enlist in the Royal Highlanders of Canada in 1917 after his attempts to join the French Army, the British Army and the American Army had failed. He earned the Victoria Cross and the French Croix de guerre in France at the Battle of Amiens in August 1918. (see e.g. Arnold 1993, 156).
75. Although the number of troops in British East Africa was not large at the beginning of the war, 3600 men, reinforcements came from India, South Africa and elsewhere so that the British Army had more than 50,000 men (whites, Africans and Indians) and 57,000 porters in 1916. The German forces consisted of at most 3000 Germans and 11,300 Africans, which already included those involved in supplies and administration. (Chanson, "German East Africa," 285–86).
76. Chanson, "German East Africa," 287.
77. 12 January 1918. Dinesen, *Letters from Africa*, 57–58.
78. 22 October 1914. Dinesen, *Letters from Africa*, 23.
79. Blixen-Finecke, *African Hunter*, 14–15.
80. Okia, *Communal Labor*, 48–49.
81. Ibid., 55.
82. Blixen-Finecke, *African Hunter*, 15–26.
83. Aschan, *The Man Whom*, 34–35.
84. 18 November 1914. Dinesen, *Letters from Africa*, 26.
85. 1 April 1914. Dinesen, *Letters from Africa*, 5.
86. 1 April 1914. Dinesen, *Letters from Africa*, 4.
87. Shadle, *The Souls*, 45–46.
88. 22 April 1914. Dinesen, *Letters from Africa*, 8.
89. 5 September 1926. Dinesen, *Letters from Africa*, 283.
90. 22 October 1914. Dinesen, *Letters from Africa*, 23.
91. Shadle, *The Souls*, 26–27, 32–33.
92. 6 October 1914. Dinesen, *Letters from Africa*, 17.
93. 18 November 1914. Dinesen, *Letters from Africa*, 25–26.
94. Okia, *Communal Labor*, 41.
95. Ibid., 45–46.
96. 18 November 1914. Dinesen, *Letters from Africa*, 26.
97. Thomas Dinesen quoted in Dinesen, *Letters from Africa*, 32; Arnold, *Bror Blixen*, 150–55.
98. 23 September 1913. Dinesen, *Letters from Africa*, 15.
99. 13 September 1917. Dinesen, *Letters from Africa*, 54.
100. 13 May 1914. Dinesen, *Letters from Africa*, 11.
101. 8 July 1923. Dinesen, *Letters from Africa*, 160.
102. Blixen, *Out of Africa*, 26, 27, 29, 122, 135.
103. Ngũgĩ, *Moving the Centre*, 133.
104. Thurman, *Isak Dinesen*, 175.
105. 1 June 1918. Dinesen, *Letters from Africa*, 72.
106. Thurman, *Isak Dinesen*, 190.
107. Ibid., 193.
108. Ibid., 195.
109. 30 December 1920. Dinesen, *Letters from Africa*, 104.

110. Dinesen, *Letters from Africa*, 105, editor's note, and Karen on 25 October 1921, *Letters from Africa*, 115.
111. 26 July 1921. Dinesen, *Letters from Africa*, 108.
112. 23 January 1922. Dinesen, *Letters from Africa*, 122.
113. Blixen, *The Africa Letters*, 26.
114. Blixen, *Out of Africa*, 275.

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