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A Kenyan Revolution: Mau Mau, Land, Women, and Nation

A thesis
presented to
the faculty of the Department of History
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In partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree
Master of Arts in History

by
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Key Words: Mau Mau, Revolution, Kenya, Colonialism

ABSTRACT

A Kenyan Revolution: Mau Mau, Land, Women, and Nation

by

Amanda E. Lewis

The Kikuyu, the largest ethnic group in Kenya, resisted colonial authority, which culminated into what became known as Mau Mau, led by the Kenya Land Freedom Army. During this time, the British colonial government imposed laws limiting their access to land, politics, and independence. The turbulent 1950s in Kenyan history should be considered a revolution because of its violent nature, the high level of participation, and overall social change that resulted from the war.

I compared many theories of revolution to the events of the Mau Mau movement. Then, I explained the contention for land in the revolution, the role of women, and the place of Mau Mau in modern historiography. I concluded that Mau Mau should be considered a revolution even though its representation during the war and misunderstandings after independence did not classify it as such.

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CHAPTER 1

THE KENYAN REVOLUTION: A PARADIGM FOR MAU MAU

Introduction

In 1952, Kenya experienced an event that would define much of its politics from that point until the present. On 20 October, the colonial government declared a State of Emergency in which there was a colony-wide hunt for anyone suspected of being involved in the group known as Mau Mau. The origins of Mau Mau are not clear, but it did develop out of discontent among the Kikuyu people, who were the largest ethnic group in Kenya at the time, and, thus, had a large enough number to be a political concern. The group of people who became known as Mau Mau bound themselves to each other through the oath. They “ate an oath” by literally consuming meat, red soil, or some other designated medium in the ceremony. They repeated this oath, pledging themselves to the subversion of British colonialism and ultimately to independence.

The newly instated governor of the Kenya colony in 1952 was determined to take care of Mau Mau swiftly by taking the legs out from under the organization. After the assassination of the loyalist Chief Waruhiu, the governor Sir Evelyn Baring recommended that London declare a state of emergency in Kenya that would allow him to detain Mau Mau insurgents without trial. He believed the first target should be Jomo Kenyatta, the suspected mastermind behind the terrorism. Once the Emergency was in place, Operation Jock Scott cleared the slums of Nairobi of all suspected Mau Mau insurgents and sympathizers. Kenyatta was captured without any resistance on his part while the real leaders of Mau Mau resistance fled to the mountains. From there, they

planned their attacks and recruited men, women, and children to take part in the movement to rid Kenya of its British invaders. The movement began to take on revolutionary characteristics as the organization became larger and as British and Kenyan troops incessantly attacked them.¹

Mau Mau members were primarily from the Kikuyu, but others came from Meru, Embu, Maasai, and other smaller groups of Africans within Kenya. The reasons they joined were many. Initially, people joined because they had land grievances or were unsettled because of the educational and political system in place. Some were militarized urban dwellers who, because of the dire situations many of them lived in around Nairobi, for example, sought some outlet for their anger and resentment. Many Mau Mau were members of Kenyan political organizations such as the Kikuyu Central Association or the Kenya African Union, who used these organizations as a base for mobilization or were outright unhappy with the lack of action, they believed, in which these organizations were engaged.²

The historiography of Mau Mau, this nationalist uprising of the 1950s in Kenya, has broadened to include many aspects of this interesting time in Kenya's history, from politics to peasants, and from economy of land to the economy of wealth. The one point of view not detailed in its history is the revolutionary characteristics. Even if Mau Mau has not been referred to as a revolution, there is value in examining its revolutionary nature. If Mau Mau was put against a backdrop of revolutionary components and participants, as well as its contemporary literature that was the presentation of the movement to the world, then Mau Mau may be understood in a new way. This may not

¹ David Anderson, *Histories of the Hanged: The Dirty War in Kenya and the End of Empire* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2005), 61-63.

² Anderson, 23-42.

mean that Mau Mau was a revolution, but it deserves a new perspective. First, a revolution must have a specific definition.

The term ‘revolution’ has been used to describe more than sociopolitical upheavals. Because of this general usage, it is important to construct a definition of revolution to distinguish between mere cultural evolution and a rapid sociopolitical change. A historiographical study of several definitions is necessary to compare the Mau Mau uprising to other revolutionary definitions. Every revolution is different, but there are similarities that bind them all into the category of revolutions.

In the search for an acceptable definition, the best place to begin is with Crane Brinton, author of *The Anatomy of Revolution*. His focus is on what he calls “Grand” revolutions: the English, American, French, and Russian Revolutions. He said that societies are always in pursuit of a state of equilibrium, and revolutions erupt from the attempt to level the social structures. Brinton defined a revolution in three parts: the presence of internal violence, those in power are replaced by another group, usually by the revolutionaries, and finally, social change.³ He outlined several types of revolutions, and among them was the category of aborted revolutions, a useful term for Mau Mau. Abortive revolutions are ones that were “simply the failure of organized groups in revolt” to achieve a significant degree of their goals.⁴ Mau Mau can be defined in Brinton’s terms, even if it did not succeed. It was apparent from the beginning that the sociopolitical movement that came to be known as Mau Mau would not succeed, which allows it to be called an aborted revolution. This is because of the technological and

³Crane Brinton, *The Anatomy of Revolution* (New York: Vintage Books, 1965), 23-24.

⁴ Brinton, 23.

material advantages of the British who had more weapons, supplies, and political maneuverability than the Mau Mau fighters.

The nationalist movement attempted to unite the Kikuyu, along with other African Kenyans, in order to gain land rights and direct political representation. The often-violent nature of Mau Mau drew military attention from the colonial government. This in turn forced them to withdraw into the forests of the Highlands. From there, they planned attacks on British farms and against Loyalist Kikuyu. Loyalist Kikuyu were those who were supporters of the British government for many reasons. Some were employed by the colonial government, while others felt that rule by the British was better for their livelihood than an African controlled one. Before Mau Mau developed as a revolutionary body, there were previous organizations that attempted to gain these rights in a nonviolent and political manner. The Kenya Central Association (KCA) and Kenyan African Union (KAU) were the faces of the Africans' pursuit of rights. Those who became associated with Mau Mau were often members of either the KCA or the KAU, but they became disillusioned by the slow and ineffective process of political maneuvering. The revolutionary leaders commanded allegiance and were the obvious choice for leadership in the new government if they were successful in obtaining drastic social change; for Mau Mau this was independence. They indeed planned to become these leaders.⁵

One of the most remarkable social changes brought about by Mau Mau was the leaders' activation of African Kenyans in political protest. Mau Mau forced the colonial government to react and as a result the British had to change the format of African

⁵ Derek Peterson, *Creative Writing: Translation, Bookkeeping, and the Work of Imagination in Colonial Kenya* (Portsmouth, NH: Heineman, 2004), 190.

political participation. Not all social change was positive. Initial reaction to Mau Mau caused massive upheaval, primarily in the form of detention camps. Ultimately, the high number of detainee deaths affected the livelihoods of their families, and the indefinite separation of husbands from wives often resulted in split families. The “rehabilitation” process in the camps worked a profound cultural transformation within the camps that lingered in the cultural thoughts and behaviors of the released detainees. The British made a concerted effort to change the “hearts and minds” of the Mau Mau participants which meant that they rejected their oaths and pledged to become proper British subjects through work.⁶

Another influential work that contributed to the understanding of revolutions is *Political Order in Changing Societies* by Samuel Huntington. According to Huntington, a “revolution is a rapid, fundamental, and violent domestic change in the dominant values and myths of a society, in its political institutions, social structure, leadership, and government activities and policies.”⁷ Mau Mau precipitated changes in the understanding of “myths,” to use Huntington’s term, of Kikuyu society. Thousands took oaths, pledging their lives to the Mau Mau cause. If they failed to do everything possible to help Mau Mau they would die as a result of the pledge, not by the hand of a man, but by supernatural means. The oathing practice changed the way Kikuyu saw their religious life. Many turned from Christianity and back to their traditional religion when they took their oaths. The British saw the oathing as a step backward in the civilizing process. They created their own myth in regard to these elaborate ceremonies, and when the colonial

⁶ Caroline Elkins, *Imperial Reckoning: The Untold Story of Britain’s Gulag in Kenya* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, LLC, 2005), 101, 154-191.

⁷ Samuel Huntington, *Political Order in Changing Societies* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968), 264.

government began its “rehabilitation” phase in retaliation of Mau Mau, they used an anti-oath tactic to counter the “pagan” pledges.⁸

One theorist, Robert Dix proposed a “Latin American” pattern of revolution. I find the title limiting because the characteristics of this type of revolution applies elsewhere, particularly in Kenya. However, it does apply in that the guerilla form of fighting and occupation of towns as well as rural areas characterize this Latin American revolution. The revolution then becomes urban when the leaders, often radical youth, gain more support in the cities. Nairobi became a center for Mau Mau activity and oathing. In 1950, Nairobi was declared a city and the hope of the Europeans was that it would be an important imperial city, with all the modern infrastructures, buildings, and amenities. They enforced pass laws, preventing Africans from living in most parts of the city, and could only go there for work. Mau Mau oaths gradually worked their way through the Nairobi slums as more and more Africans joined the ranks of those who feared British takeover of more lands surrounding Nairobi. By 1952, in the months leading up to the declaration of an Emergency, oathing ceremonies were done en masse and in the open. Nairobi had more Mau Mau than any other region at this time.⁹ Also according to this category, Mau Mau leadership was younger as most of the older leaders stayed with the KCA and nonmilitant methods. Dix said that whether the revolution was or was not waged against a colonial authority was not a factor in his definition, but it does influence the course of the revolution.¹⁰ Ultimately, Mau Mau wanted to physically overthrow the British colonial government. Of course, this was not done on their terms,

⁸ Carl Rosberg, Jr. & John Nottingham, *The Myth of “Mau Mau”: Nationalism in Kenya* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1966), 274, 292.

⁹ Anderson, 181-193.

¹⁰ Robert Dix, “The Varieties of Revolution,” *Comparative Politics* 15 (Apr 1983): 281-294.

but they were influential in making the British realize their time in power was coming to an end.

A fourth definition, by Matthew Shugart, introduced a typology of revolutions, which was essentially a more categorized interpretation of revolutions. This typology describes the nature of the society in which the revolution originated, whether or not there was lower-class participation, and the deposing of the old regime. The Mau Mau war fit into the Eastern/anti-colonial pattern, of which the revolutions of Vietnam, Angola, Guinea-Bissau, Mozambique, and South Yemen were a part. In this category, the old regime (for Mau Mau, the foreign British government) “cuts its losses” and grants independence. Mau Mau members were predominantly the peasants displaced by settlers in the White Highlands and those living as squatters on white farms. The revolutionaries began at the rural level and were able to raise an army strong enough to resist the colonial military in the cities because the focus of recruiting shifted to the cities where large populations of poor and often unemployed people were concentrated. Shugart said that the presence of peasants turn “what otherwise might have been only a temporary political breakdown into a social revolution.”¹¹ Settlers depended on the Kikuyu as the primary labor source. When these were no longer working in that capacity, economic breakdown occurred. These former workers became the driving force behind the Mau Mau revolution.¹²

Using a much different paradigm, Peter Amann defined a revolution as a conflict between two or more power blocs. The revolution begins when a portion of the population shifts its obedience to a competing bloc, which usually takes place during an

¹¹ Matthew Soberg Shugart, “Patterns of Revolution,” *Theory and Society* 18 (March 1989): 249-271.

¹² Rosberg and Nottingham, 223.

act of insurrection. This definition allows for an aborted, or, as Amann called it, a suspended revolution. With this definition, the degree of social change, differentiation between civil wars and revolutions, and level of violence are not critical to categorization. This definition allows all three to be characteristics of a revolution. The revolution is over when one power bloc has control of the population's obedience.¹³

When compared to Amann's definition, Mau Mau could be considered revolutionary. Mau Mau was a competing power bloc with large popular support. Mau Mau had all the characteristics of a revolutionary power bloc. In addition to the support of most of the Kikuyu, there was an established elite and military style aggression. Amann further identified the revolutionary power bloc as a group that could not be suppressed by regular police action.¹⁴ The British found that the only way they could effectively suppress the Mau Mau was to bomb the forests where most of the active Mau Mau were hiding. They also established the Home Guard, which was a Kenyan African national guard. The most effective military action was the creation of detention camps complete with forced labor and torture. This was in conjunction with the Kenya police, who were stretched to its limit throughout the duration of the Emergency. The police, in an attempt to strengthen the effectiveness, were given paramilitary privileges. This created a society under military control.¹⁵

The previous definitions involve the presence of violence and an organized elite who mobilize support. There is some disagreement as to whether a revolution has to be successful in order for the movement to be called such. According to Brinton and Amann,

¹³ Peter Amann, "Revolution: A Redefinition," *Political Science Quarterly*, 77 (Mar 1962): 36-53.

¹⁴ Amann, 42.

¹⁵ David Killingray and David Anderson, *Policing and Decolonization: Politics, Nationalism, and the Police, 1917-1965* (London: Manchester University Press, 1992), 139-141.

it does not. For the purposes here, even though Mau Mau fighters did not directly affect independence, this does not affect the fact that many more aspects of Mau Mau are revolutionary. None of the definitions fit the Mau Mau movement perfectly, but no revolution is exactly the same – environmental conditions may vary. The level of participation is also always different, and the opponent reacts differently each time. However, if the motives of the Mau Mau are taken into consideration as well as its role in Kenya's independence, then the Mau Mau movement should be considered a revolution.

The definition used here to examine the Mau Mau movement in a revolution paradigm has three parts. Before all the other factors can be considered, the first thing a revolution must have is organization and an agenda. Revolutionaries may use violence, subversion, or boycotts as a method to carry meet the goals of the revolution. The second aspect of a revolution involves participation. Every group is not necessarily represented, but there is widespread, overall participation of the group from which the revolution is staged. Participation includes the recognition of an elite group of leaders. Finally, revolutions cause overall social change. This may come in the form of role reversals within the population, regime change, or a shift in the economic base. Mau Mau ultimately did not succeed in gaining land or independence as a direct result of their actions, but there is value in considering it as a revolution, or rather as an aborted one.

The Revolutionary Situation

The build up to a revolution has certain revolutionary indicators that are often present before violence occurs and before the participants begin to mobilize, and this is the case with Kenya. The conditions in the Kenya colony from which Mau Mau developed began in the years before the First World War. The colonial government

created a system of labor for the European settler community using African workers. The settlers got cheap labor from the Kikuyu squatters under the 1918 Resident Native Labourers Ordinance (RNLO). Initially, large numbers of Kikuyu moved to the Rift Valley where most of the settler plantations were located. Here, they hoped to acquire land to support their families and live comfortably. For decades, this system was in place, but gradually the settlers wanted more and more from the squatters. Revised versions of the RNLO restricted the number of days squatters had to work on their own plots of land, and the number of days they had to work for the settlers increased. The amount of livestock, the basis of Kikuyu wealth, they were allowed to maintain was gradually decreased. During this *kifagio*, which means ‘the broom,’ squatter livestock was slaughtered or confiscated. Some provinces did not allow squatters to own any livestock. Eventually, they began to move from the squatter farms to Reserves, where other Kikuyu lived but did not work for European farmers. This was a mild resistance but caused a great disturbance in the labor source on European farms as the available labor dwindled. In turn the Reserves were overpopulated and unproductive.¹⁶

Mau Mau motives for revolution developed out of the increasing agitation over the loss of land, livestock, and autonomy. One of the organizations that developed in opposition to the RNLO was Kenya Central Association (KCA). Members took an oath, pledging their support to the KCA cause and reacquisition of African land. Members staged labor strikes, but younger members became frustrated with the gradual methods of the KCA and joined the Kenya African Union (KAU). The KAU was more radical in its oathing practices, which was done with goat meat rather than the Bible, and militant in

¹⁶ Tabitha Kanogo, *Squatters and the Roots of Mau Mau* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 1987), 37-48.

their methods. Eventually, a small group of radicals became known as Mau Mau and rapidly grew in numbers. Mau Mau was even more radical than the KAU in their tactics and agenda. They began by slaughtering cattle and goats belonging to settlers and Loyalist Kikuyu. They then started attacking the settlers and Loyalists, killing some.¹⁷ The Loyalists were considered to be those who would not take an oath because their Christian beliefs prevented it, they gained more economically and socially with the British, or they were more afraid to take an oath than not.¹⁸

In order to organize the Africans into a united body, the leaders of Mau Mau used the oath, a pledge or contract of sorts that the Kikuyu believed was sacred. Its origins are much earlier than the Mau Mau. It had been a part of Kenya's society for generations, including the Kikuyu. The first time oaths were used in modern times was in 1925 as an oath of loyalty to the KCA. It took on a more militant stance just after the Second World War when Africans who had been moved to the Olenguruone settlement began oathing to join in protest of the forced agricultural practices and confiscation of Kikuyu land. By the time Mau Mau was in formal existence, adherents had taken an oath, pledging themselves to the call for land and freedom. Oathing was the symbol of Kenyan nationalism.¹⁹ Mau Mau had developed a bureaucracy, which is something a mere revolt would not have. The governing body of Mau Mau was the Kenya Parliament. The Kenya Parliament comprised of those fighters who fled to the forests fleeing opposition in the cities and villages. They could rise to power in this informal legislative body by performing acts of bravery or stealing and killing to the benefit of Mau Mau. During the State of Emergency, the Kenya Parliament was the military governing body of the Kenya Land

¹⁷ Kanogo, 128-129.

¹⁸ Greet Kershaw, *Mau Mau From Below* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 1997), 237-241.

¹⁹ Rosberg and Nottingham, 243-261.

Freedom Army (KLFA), the armed wing of Mau Mau. When Mau Mau was successful in overthrowing the British government, they intended for this legislative body to become the leaders of an independent Kenya. It was also a means to be inclusive of all Kenyans, not just Kikuyu with Jomo Kenyatta as leader. The Kenya Parliament was to be a sign to all Kenyans, African and European, that it was a capable governing body. They held meetings for the forest fighters as well as educational lectures on how to properly fire a weapon and why it was an important gesture to the future that they were willing suffer in poverty and miserable conditions to create a free Kenya.²⁰

Violence is can be a characteristic and byproduct of a revolution, and it was central to the methods of Mau Mau as well as the counterrevolutionary forces: the British colonial government, the British military, and the loyal Kikuyu who fought with the Europeans. Historian David Anderson estimated the number of Mau Mau killed that British forces killed about 20,000 people.²¹ The Mau Mau killed 1,800 African civilians. During the course of the revolution, at least 150,000 Kikuyu were held in concentration camps. Violence erupted from all sides of the conflict. The Mau Mau became infamous for the Lari Massacre where they trapped Loyalists in their houses and then lit the homes on fire resulting in 120 Lari victims. The Home Guard led the retaliation.²² Under the declared State of Emergency, the colonial government quickly tried and executed suspected Mau Mau insurgents. The British tortured those they considered “hard-core”

²⁰ Wachanga, *The Swords of Kirinyaga: The Fight for Land and Freedom* (Nairobi: East African Literature Bureau, 1975), 40-42.

²¹ Anderson, 4.

²² Anderson, 125-130.

Mau Mau. They chose them from the thousands detained in the prison camps and beat them. Many were never seen again after their interrogation.²³

Participation was led by an elite group who were the decision makers and the face of the revolution to the public. The role of several prominent leaders of Mau Mau as well as others not directly associated with the mobilized guerilla fighting dictated the course of the revolution. The participants of Mau Mau were largely peasants from the rural areas, and they were predominantly Kikuyu. Several memoirs and biographies emerged immediately after and for many years following Mau Mau. One of the most descriptive was by H.K. Wachanga, who wrote that he was publishing one of the most important and definitive works yet created about Mau Mau. Although he made a bold statement about his importance, his book and other memoirs that followed shed light on the inner workings of Mau Mau and what they were actively doing to accomplish their goals of land and freedom.²⁴

Voices of the Revolution

The real leaders of the revolution were not the typical highly educated elite that controlled revolutions such as the American and French Revolutions. In the case of Mau Mau, the leaders seldom had more than an elementary level education. Nonetheless, through determination they laid out their aims as leaders of the KLFA. Dedan Kimathi regarded himself as the head general of the KLFA, and others did as well. One aspect that corresponds to this definition of a revolution is that the KLFA, at Kimathi's demand, kept records of their movements, meetings, and such. He carried out his work as leader of the Kenya Parliament, the governing military body of Mau Mau, by ordering discipline

²³ Elkins, 193-195.

²⁴ Wachanga, xxi-xxiii.

among recruits, demanding negotiation terms, and embodying the personality of the leader of a nation. This is an example of how Mau Mau recorded its revolutionary agenda. Of course, he was not loved by all Mau Mau, but he was respected. Kimathi wrote in his diary:

The white settlers are like a drop in the ocean among the masses of the Kenyan people, and no matter what they do they will never govern this country without our consent. Our primary aim is to dismantle their evil machinery whatever the cost...What we have to do is to unite and organize ourselves for a long struggle until we drive them from our country.²⁵

Kimathi's vision for the country went beyond creating a land for the Kikuyu. His aspirations were to have an African nation governed by Africans, not Europeans.

Kimathi, in one of his emotional speeches called on his followers

To put maximum effort in the fight and to avoid all manner of dissention among yourselves. We shall utilize propaganda in our fight because the Whiteman feeds on it. We shall continue to kill them until they realize we know what we are after. Our objective is to see that all Europeans are gone from these parts whether they like it or not. In a short while our children must begin enjoying good healthy food denied them now...The Whiteman must in the end leave this country however hard he tried and we must defeat him with God's strength and the strength of the "goat" we ate on the first and second days.²⁶

Gucu Gikoyo was another Freedom Fighter who published his memoir in the years following independence. In *We Fought for Freedom*, he detailed his personal experience in the Mau Mau movement. He did not encounter the Mau Mau until he was arrested on charges of attacking *askaris*, the African police force. In prison, he met female prisoners, whom he took care of and learned about the oathing ceremonies that were binding them all together in a fight for Kenyan freedom. His first oathing experience was forced, but he willingly became one of the militant forest fighters. His

²⁵ Maina wa Kinyatti, ed. *Kenya's Freedom Struggle: The Dedan Kimathi Papers* (New Jersey: Zed Books Ltd.) 111.

²⁶ Wachanga, 168.

account is indicative of the other Mau Mau fighters who took part either out of fear of breaking the oath or because they truly wanted to participate in the independence movement.²⁷

Many of the Mau Mau generals learned their military skills because of their participation in the Second World War. Generals Kago, Mathege, China, Kariba, Tanganyika, and Kimathi were men who tried to carry out Mau Mau's revolutionary goals. Most of these generals died for these goals. General China was the only one of these men who survived until independence. He went on to earn a college degree, trained with the Israeli army, and returned to Kenya to negotiate with the Mau Mau still in the forest, at the request of Kenyatta, to come out.²⁸ These generals were in one way or another involved in the negotiations in 1955 with the colonial representatives. Each side brought its terms of ending the conflict. The KLFA had several demands: they wanted the removal of British security forces from the forests and send them back to Britain, were to disarm all homeguards and put them into detention, release all Mau Mau from the prisons, stop the forced labor of the women, children, and old men, end the passbook system, remove the Africans from the villages they were forced onto during the emergency, and stop bombing the forests. The British refused to comply, but said that if all Freedom Fighters turned themselves in to the security forces they would give amnesty to all who committed crimes up to that point, and they would begin the process of granting Kenya independence. There was no sign that they would end the current system of governance. The Mau Mau leaders refused these terms. This effectively ended negotiations between Mau Mau and the British government. It was not until 1960 that

²⁷ Gucu Gikoyo, *We Fought for Freedom: Tulipigania Uhuru* (Nairobi: East African Publishing House, 1979), *passim*.

²⁸ Paul Maina, *Six Mau Mau Generals* (Nairobi: Gazelle Books Co., 1977), 75-93.

real plans for independence took place and they did so in London without the participation of any Mau Mau fighters.²⁹

There were other people who were highly influential in the development of Mau Mau's ideas of land and freedom who did not have a direct connection to the group. Harry Thuku was one of these. He was politically active in the years before the emergence of Mau Mau, but gave rise to the idea that the land was illegally taken from the Kikuyu and that they should have direct representation in government, but he did not do this with the aim to overthrow the British colonial government. Thuku tried to work through political avenues to gain more rights for the Kenyan Africans. It was also his idea to create an organization that would speak to all Kenyans, not just the Kikuyu. Thuku was a revered Kikuyu leader, but by the time the Mau Mau Revolution broke out, he found himself in opposition to their methods and openly denounced them.³⁰ Mau Mau targeted him for assassination, just as they had Chief Waruhiu. In the later years of the Emergency, Thuku served on a rehabilitation committee, which organized the means by which Mau Mau oath-takers could cure their psychotic adherence to the terrorist organization. What is interesting about him is the respect he commanded after both World Wars, but throughout he was a suspect figure to both Mau Mau and the British authority. When Mau Mau began to attack loyalists and British settlers, he began to take on an accommodationist persona. He was a traitor to many. His years as leader of the Young Kikuyu Association and East Africa Association put him in contact with government leaders. In his early years of political activism, he was seen as a potential threat to the establishment, and was in prison for eight years. He formed the KCA, which

²⁹ Wachanga, 99-105.

³⁰ Harry Thuku, *An Autobiography* (Nairobi: Oxford University Press, 1970), 86-72.

after being outlawed during his imprisonment, continued to run underground, and was often thought to be the organization behind the development of Mau Mau. Nonetheless, Harry Thuku was an early proponent of land rights and political representation, both of which were motivating factors for Mau Mau.³¹

Many tried to associate Jomo Kenyatta with Mau Mau, but he denied direct involvement. Most research does not connect him directly, but he still held the power of authority over much of the Kikuyu people.³² Kenyatta was a natural leader who motivated Kenya Africans to press for their rights. He became the face of the revolution, and his arrest only fueled the fire of discontent.³³ Mau Mau participants did not consider him part of Mau Mau, but they believed that he might one day become the national leader of an African controlled Kenya. Kenyatta was arrested during Operation Jock Scott, an action taken by the government to rid the cities, especially Nairobi, of their Mau Mau threats. He was then detained and tried for “managing an unlawful society” or, as Caroline Elkins put it, “fomenting revolution.”³⁴ He continued to deny his involvement in Mau Mau and the government did not have any evidence that he did so. Still, Mau Mau saw him as the father of Kenya. Kenyatta had an interesting role in the revolution. He was not an organizer, nor was he an advocate for their methods, but he still saw the Kikuyu as his people and they, as well as most other groups, saw him as their leader.³⁵

In addition to the individuals, it is important to understand the role of the masses in a revolution. During the Mau Mau Revolution, these participants were mostly Kikuyu.

³¹ Thuku, *passim*.

³² Jomo Kenyatta, *Facing Mount Kenya* (New York: Vintage Books, 1965).

³³ George Delf, *Jomo Kenyatta: Towards Truth About “The Light of Kenya,”* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1961), *passim*.

³⁴ Elkins, 39.

³⁵ Jomo Kenyatta, *My People the Kikuyu, and the Life of Chief Wangombe* (Nairobi: Oxford University Press, 1966), *passim*.

Tabitha Kanogo, a historian who has focused on the squatters and women involved in Mau Mau, argued that the most effective leadership came from the grassroots level. Squatters had little to lose by waging war against their oppressors. As a result they were motivated to organize the large number of oathed Mau Mau to gather information, ammunition, and food. They suffered the most as well, as they were herded into crowded villages or imprisoned in detention camps.³⁶ Women's activity in Mau Mau was crucial to the initial success and helped the Mau Mau last as long as they did against the British forces and Home Guard. Still, women still only made up five percent of the guerilla army. Wanjiru wa Nyamaratu was one of the more militant members and rose to leadership in the Mau Mau hierarchy.³⁷

Mau Mau Historiography

Participants contributed many memoirs to Mau Mau memory, but historians and political figures wrote many historical accounts of the revolution as well. Part of the reason it is important to look at the Mau Mau movement in the context of a revolution is because much of the historiography, particularly what was published during and just after the Mau Mau Revolution, has influenced the perception of the events. It focused on the violence committed by Mau Mau followers, not on the role it had in Kenyan independence. L.S.B. Leakey wrote *Mau Mau and the Kikuyu* in 1952, the year that the State of Emergency was declared. It was written as a sort of primer on the Kikuyu and the reasons Mau Mau emerged from this group of people. Leakey's contribution to the historiography of Mau Mau was that of understanding an uncivilized people and how they could rise out of their meager understanding of governing and land ownership to

³⁶ Kanogo, 130.

³⁷ Kanogo, 143-146.

wage war against the British. When *Mau Mau and the Kikuyu* was first written, Leakey did not have the benefit of seeing events play out as they would. However, he was influential in developing ideas and perceptions of the Mau Mau organization. He blamed the leaders of Mau Mau for brainwashing unsuspecting, innocent Kikuyu into taking oaths and convincing them that they had unfairly lost their ancestral lands to the British settlers. Leakey was seen as the European authority on the Kikuyu. That made his opinions paramount in understanding the nature of Mau Mau. In this book, Leakey downplayed the loss of Kikuyu land. He never regarded land degradation and overcrowded Reserves as an issue. The sense the reader gets from *Mau Mau and the Kikuyu* is that the Kikuyu were largely incapable of staging a complete revolution of the government and if they did, their land management practices would prove ineffective. He said the leaders of Mau Mau were able to control the masses because they understood the psychology of the Kikuyu that they were able to trick or force them into taking oaths because they knew they would not question the traditional power of an oath. He underplayed the desire of the masses for land and self-government.³⁸ Until the end of the Emergency, *Mau Mau and the Kikuyu* was the primary source on the development of the Mau Mau movement. This little book was an influential source for the 'definitive' history of Mau Mau published by the British government in 1960, as the State of Emergency was ended.

District Reports, published by the colonial government, often mentioned Mau Mau, but simply as if it were a fact of life in the many provinces throughout Kenya. In

³⁸ L.S.B. Leakey, *Mau Mau and the Kikuyu* (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1952), 98-105.

the final years of Mau Mau, these reports described, in general, deaths resulting, oathing issues, detention camps, and what they had done to curb the violence.³⁹

F.D. Corfield's *Historical Survey of the Origin and Growth of Mau Mau* was presented to the Secretary of State for the Colonies as a "factual" document recording the problems produced from the activities of the Mau Mau. It is an interesting source because it represented immediate developing attitudes among the settlers in post-Emergency Kenya. Because Mau Mau took the colonial government by surprise, they quickly tried to squelch the uprising. When they were not successful, government officials created a persona for the disturbance that made Mau Mau look like savages incapable of a revolution, much less be able to govern themselves. Corfield's report was considered the authoritative account of the origins and development of Mau Mau as far as London was concerned. Despite the attitude Corfield took against the Mau Mau, he did reveal the complexity and severity in a way that Leakey could not understand. The report came close to describing the Mau Mau as a revolution, but Corfield stopped short of the full definition. Corfield went so far as to say that:

Mau Mau in its shortest terms was the violent manifestation of a limited nationalist revolutionary movement. [And] there were psychological factors and sociological grievances amongst the Kikuyu which favored the growth of a rebellious revolutionary movement, but there was, in my opinion, no justification for Mau Mau, which was wholly evil in its conception.⁴⁰

Fred Majdalany's history of the Emergency was in line with the Corfield Report and was heavily dependant on it as a source. According to his view, there was no distinction between the KCA, KAU, and Mau Mau. Jomo Kenyatta's involvement in the KCA and KAU automatically made him complicit in Mau Mau. Although this is an idea

³⁹ KNA, Rift Valley Province, 1959-1962, *passim*, for example.

⁴⁰ F.D. Corfield. *The Origins and Growth of Mau Mau: An Historical Survey*, Sessional Paper No. 5 of 1959/60 (Nairobi: The Government Printer, 1960), 7-8.

disagreed upon in more current scholarship, Majdalany was not completely wrong in believing this. The lines between these three bodies were blurred to the point that anyone involved in the KCA or KAU appeared to be Mau Mau or at least a sympathizer. He recognized them as revolutionaries, although not qualifying the term, and Kenyatta as one of the primary revolutionary leaders.⁴¹ There was not a great deal of difference between Majdalany's and Corfield's accounts of the Emergency. Majdalany's primary contribution was to put the story into a more readable form for the casual reader. Even the title of the book, *State of Emergency: The Full Story of Mau Mau*, might orient the audience toward thinking that what Majdalany included all aspects of the movement in an objective format, but he did not. He found it to be a complete failure on the part of the Kikuyu because they were socially inept at rising high enough socially to affect any significant change. He saw the movement as a "a type of mass neurosis which, masquerading as patriotism or nationalism, can temporarily drive a people mad." He saw the African land problem as a manifestation of the state they were forced into by the government; their traditional tribal organization was destroyed and "left them in a kind of mental and spiritual vacuum." The Kikuyu reoriented their thinking towards land acquisition, because it was stolen from them and were left with a infantile complaint (Majdalany thought) that they needed to fight to get their land back.⁴²

Leakey, Corfield, and Majdalany's works contributed to the idea that Africans were unable to carryout a full fledged revolution. Mau Mau had revolutionary characteristics, they admitted, but there was no way a primitive group of people could organized themselves into a protest movement strong enough to overthrow the

⁴¹ Fred Majdalany, *State of Emergency: The Full Story of Mau Mau* (London: Longmans, Green and Co. Ltd., 1962), 113.

⁴² Majdalany, 30,40-44..

government. This was the accepted European viewpoint. In a way they may have been right as far as they were not militarily strong enough to be successful. However, they were organized, had a group of leaders who carefully planned Mau Mau actions, and they may have become the new ruling government if they had been successful.

Jeff Koinange wrote an account of the Mau Mau Revolution, in hopes to focus the attention of the world outside Kenya on what was actually happening. In this contrast to the above writers, he wanted people to know that the movement was not an organization for “bloodthirsty, atavistic, sub-human, ‘savages.’” Koinange argued they had a plan for freedom against colonial rule.⁴³

One of the most influential histories of Mau Mau was *The Myth of Mau Mau: Nationalism in Kenya*, by Carl Rosberg and John Nottingham. It was first published in 1966, just after Kenyan independence. It has the benefits of having an author who lived in Kenya during the time of the Emergency and also had chronological distance from the events. The *Myth of Mau Mau* has remained one of the most widely accepted histories of Mau Mau because the research and interpretations endured the modern understanding of the movement. It is a timeless work even though Mau Mau scholarship has gone in different directions. The authors did not call it a revolution, but they did recognize its role in the ultimate independence of Kenya. They wrote respectfully of the forest fighters and leaders in the movement. Interestingly, they did not accept the view of Corfield that the Kikukyu at large were like sheep, but rather they fully accepted and understood the Mau Mau agenda for land and independence. They also revealed the nature of the detention camps, that they were supposed to cure Kenya of its ailments, but instead became killing

⁴³ Jeff Koinange, *Koinage-Wa-Mbiyu* (Sussex, England: The Book Guild, Ltd., 2000): 83.

grounds of Kikuyu, just as Lari and other Mau Mau targets were for the loyalists and British.⁴⁴

Mau Mau From Within: An Analysis of a Peasant Revolt, written by Donald Barnett and Karari Njama, is a contemporary of *Myth of Mau Mau*. Its focus was on those of the Kenya Land Freedom Army. Throughout the book the authors refer to Mau Mau as a revolution, which is contradictory perhaps to the title of the book, yet they never define the term. Still, with one of the authors being a Mau Mau fighter, there is qualification in the fact that they use the term. There were Mau Mau fighters who saw it as a revolution. *Mau Mau From Within* revealed the way the organization disintegrated in the Kenya Parliament and leaders were split of methods and surrender just as revolutions tend to do.⁴⁵

Conclusion

According to most classical definitions of a revolution, the goals and actions of Mau Mau can be considered revolutionary. The violence of Mau Mau and goals to exchange the current form of government a for more nationalistic one are revolutionary. The participants were both moderate and radical, which will arise in a revolution, and they struggled between themselves and outside the Mau Mau for power. Public opinion of Mau Mau varied during the crisis and afterward, as the country began a healing process, influenced the historical perception of Mau Mau. During the State of Emergency, the British desperately tried to hide the fact that a “primitive” group of people were staging a takeover of Kenyan society and politics. Kenyatta’s government urged the public to look to the future and not back toward the uncomfortable days of Mau

⁴⁴ Rosberg and Nottingham, 296-299, 334-347

⁴⁵ Donald Barnett and Karari Njama, *Mau Mau From Within: An Analysis of a Peasant Revolt* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1966), 23, 455-292 .

Mau. These points may be one reason why Kenyans do not call it a revolution and why historians have not either.

Although Mau Mau was technically not successful in overturning the colonial government through the means they implemented, they placed the British at a crossroads for granting independence. Mau Mau participants were much more organized than the British government ever conceived. They had a formal hierarchy of military leaders, soldiers, and mobilized masses. Mau Mau was both the instigators of social change and the victims of social change that resulted from the conflict. Therefore, Mau Mau could be considered to have waged a revolution to expel the colonial government in order to gain a political voice. Further research may reveal that perceptions of race influence the labeling or terminology of actions against colonial governments.

CHAPTER 2

ITHAKA: THE ECOLOGY OF MAU MAU

European settlers and Kenyans had differing views of how best to divide and use the land. Settlers' sights were set on turning thousands of acres of land into profitable farms. They did this by attracting a large number of African squatters who lived on the farms, worked for the settlers, and were allowed to farm for themselves. Some squatters lived on their ancestral lands. Others moved outside of what became known as the White Highlands, where some were able own land, but others lived collectively on Reserves, set aside by the colonial government. This was a gradual process and evolved because settlers who were unhappy with their tenant labor, wanted more land, and thus pressured the government to take action on their behalf. Land use practices of the African were their main concern. "The resident native laborer may be the mainstay of the farms, but he does not always prove an asset, except as providing a cheap source of labor at the expense of the fertility of the land."⁴⁶ In the years between the World Wars, government policy focused on creating a suitable and stable environment for the cultivation of cash crops. This impinged on Africans' autonomy to grow crops as they saw fit and to raise and graze as many cattle as they could. Africans, primarily the majority Kikuyu, activated politically and demanded land rights. Later they rose to violent protests.

The land issue will be discussed here because of its centrality to the reason so many African Kenyans fought and died during the Mau Mau uprising. Kenya's fight for land ultimately resulted in the declaration of the State of Emergency. It began in fits and

⁴⁶ KNA, Native Affairs Department, 1937, p. 187, quoted in Tabitha Kanogo, *Squatters and the Roots of Mau Mau* (Athens, Ohio University Press, 1987), 96.

starts and was seldom successful. Mau Mau became revolutionary because of the ecological frustration that emerged when the British colonial government did not meet their demand for land. The following will examine the background of the Mau Mau movement concerning how land became part of their revolutionary goals.

Kikuyu Concepts and British Practices

A thorough reading in Mau Mau historiography reveals the intricate link between the government's land policy and the origins and motivation for Mau Mau. Thus, I will attempt to explain the Kikuyu understanding of land rights and land use. I will then compare this to the white settler motivation for land and will show how British actions to secure land for the development of cash crops created disproportionate ownership that caused many black Kenyans to begin political actions to secure their ability to produce a sustainable lifestyle. Finally, I will highlight the reasons Mau Mau turned the issue of land rights into a broader revolutionary movement that forced African and European Kenyans to define their stance on land and its purpose. Intertwined among this narrative for access to land were the ecological issues such as erosion, improvement, and access to resources. Mau Mau did not separate its pursuit for independence from the practical use of land and ecological determination and what each meant for African Kenyans and European Kenyans alike.

Kenya's physical attributes, in both terrain and climate, were varied and unreliable at times. Territory was also in dispute. The Central Highlands were the primary point of contention. Its terrain was mountainous but had the coveted soils. Because of the orographic effect of the mountains, the Central Highlands could be sure of consistent rainfall, which resulted in more fertile soils and reliable crop yields. This was

not the same for other parts of Kenya, where the already inconsistent rainfall worsened the effects of soil erosion and infertility.⁴⁷

To understand Kikuyu claims to the traditional territory of their ancestors and Mau Mau desires to see it freed from European control, one must understand the specific ecology of the land and the Kikuyu use of it. The Kikuyu arrived in waves of migrating groups and moved to the Central Province in the century before European settlement in the area. Because of the ridge and valley topography, the Kikuyu settled in scattered familial groupings known as *mbari*, which was the basis of Kikuyu government and territorial claims. The fertile soils and the abundant rainfall attracted them to the Central Highland. New settlers either bought land from the people of a particular *mbari*, or an *mbari* adopted them into the community where they could farm a plot of land as if it were their own. Extended families claimed their ridge or valley, but did not link them in terms of governance.⁴⁸ The British misunderstood this form of land tenure when they tried to reform Kikuyu land ownership. They assumed that it was communal and, therefore, not conducive to cash crop agriculture.

When the Kikuyu first migrated to the Highlands, they were hunters. Soon, they began to shift to agriculture and cleared much of the forests to grow crops and graze their livestock. The Kikuyu believed the land was theirs because Ngai, who made the country “beautiful and fertile” and perfect for grazing their goats and raising millet, gave it to them. There are two theories as to how the Kikuyu understood their land ownership. The first was the clearing of forested land and initial hunting rights, which indicated that they

⁴⁷ S. H. Ominde, *Land and Population Movement in Kenya* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968), 18-19.

⁴⁸ Godfrey Muriuki, “The Kikuyu in the Pre-Colonial Period,” *Kenya Before 1900*, ed. B. O. Ogot (Nairobi: East African Publishing House, 1976), 111-124.

were going to inhabit the land, keep livestock, and cultivate. The other opinion about Kikuyu acquisition of the Central Highlands was the sale of the land by the Athi. Other groups such as the Maasai lived in the Highlands area as well, but it was likely that the Kikuyu defeated them in battle and they moved to areas outside the Highlands.⁴⁹ Since the Kikuyu had such a tenuous claim to land, they had to define their territory. Therefore, when Europeans settled in Kenya and moved into the Highlands, they imposed their idea of what an African community was like, and the Kikuyu gradually lost the freedom to farm as they did formerly.⁵⁰

Imagined communities, such as the ones Benedict Anderson explained, emerged when the colonial government encouraged Kikuyu to think about their claim to land in terms of territory and not property.⁵¹ The idea of property as far as the Kikuyu were concerned was to ensure a future for their people and, specifically, their family. The colonial government helped facilitate a new understanding of what it meant to be Kikuyu or Kenyan; Kikuyu lived in this territory, Maasai lived in that territory, and whites lived here. In a way, the colonial policy of land contributed to the uprising of Mau Mau and their claim of Kenyan land. The Kikuyu began to see the land they cultivated and grazed upon was theirs by right and defined themselves as a cohesive group, not just a collection of families. The idea that the land was a gift from God to the Kikuyu people developed into a story with a biblical theme. Ngai had given them this land and they descended from Gikuyu and his wife Mumbi and their nine daughters. The story that God appeared to

⁴⁹ Godfrey Muriuki, *A History of the Kikuyu 1500-1900* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974), 34.

⁵⁰ Kenyatta, *My People of Kikuyu*, 23.

⁵¹ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (New York: Verso, 1991), see Anderson for the definition of imagined communities and its relationship to colonies, *passim*.

them and gave them the land southwest of Mount Kenya became popular during the early colonial days.⁵² It was the story to which Mau Mau oaths referred.

There were many other groups within Kenya that had certain land claims as well as the Kikuyu. The Kikuyu's situation is the focus of this research since it was their fight for land that stirred Mau Mau into action. The issue of land as far as the Kikuyu were concerned became much larger than their own territorial claims. In order to make their argument stronger and have a wider impact, they made their land claims universal. They included not only their own loss of land but also all other African Kenyans who lost land to the European settlers.

When Europeans began to move to East Africa, their strongest motivating factor was to create a colony that was a production center for export crops and a market for British goods. They met resistance to their demand that the agricultural economy switch to market goods, like cotton, wheat, coffee, and tea. George Mkangi concluded "the agro-economic systems of Kenyan societies were marginalized as a result of the incursion of a capitalist mode of production, spearheaded by the European settler community."⁵³ Certainly, the British settlers and the government had to coerce the Africans into land practices that were supposed to improve the soil quality and have a higher commodity yield resulting in capital.

In 1902, Europeans began to permanently settle the Central Highlands. At the time it appeared to them to be an uninhabited country. However, the Kikuyu, were not currently living there in large numbers because they had moved to other lands to allow

⁵² Derek Peterson, "Be Firm Like Soldiers to Develop the Country' Political Imagination and the Geography of Gikuyuland," *International Journal of African Historical Studies* 37 (2004), 72-80; Godfrey Muriuki, *A History of the Kikuyu*, 47.

⁵³ George Mkangi, *The Social Cost of Small Families and Land Reform: A Case Study of the Wataita of Kenya* (New York: Pergamon Press, 1983), 56.

the territory to lie fallow and because kinship ties had precipitated a move. The Europeans believed it to be uninhabited and uncultivated land that would be perfect for their agricultural schemes, misunderstanding that the Kikuyu had not alienated their land, but they were allowing it to go through a fallow cycle. Kenya suffered the Great Famine in the years 1898-1901, which happened to coincide with the extensive European exploration, settlement, and missionary activity. The force of the Great Famine concentrated on the Central Highlands, and subsequently depopulated the area. People had to trade with those in the north or migrate to find food. In addition to drought and food shortages, the area was stricken by a smallpox epidemic. Many Europeans created a sort of food distribution program, but others saw this as an opportunity to exert control over the territory. The opportunistic Europeans worked through some local leaders who hoped to gain wealth from the exchange. The Europeans were largely able to marginalize the Africans and settle there.⁵⁴

For the Sake of the Soil

In the years following, the Crown Lands Ordinance of 1915 passed as legislation in Kenya, which stated that Africans had no title to the lands that were unoccupied or uncultivated and if they left the land they occupied, it would go to the lessee. Usually, the District Commissioner dispensed leases for the government. As more and more settlers came to Kenya, they settled in areas before there could be a determination of occupancy. This created a squatter class of Kikuyu who were at the mercy of the new title holders. They could be evicted at will but were typically enrolled as laborers on the farms.⁵⁵

⁵⁴ Charles Ambler, *Kenyan Communities in the Age of Imperialism: The Central Region in the Late Nineteenth Century* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1988), 122-152.

⁵⁵ M. P. K. Sorrenson, *Land Reform in the Kikuyu Country: A Study in Government Policy* (London: Oxford University Press, 1967), 17-18.

The government lamented the fact that they did not have a smooth transition to an export goods market. They blamed the targeted labor supply for their lack of success. If they could only get the African labor to understand the capitalist demand for their productivity, they would have a thriving colony. Worldwide demand for cotton was high, and the British government wanted Kenya to help meet this demand. Authorities encouraged cotton production, but environmental and social conditions delayed the development of the industry.⁵⁶ White settler demand for African labor created a cycle that ultimately caused famine. When the white farms required more labor during times of planting and harvest, Africans went to work on there, usually compelled to do so. This caused a lapse in their own production levels because they had to devote all their family members to the demands of the white farmers at the expense of their own agricultural needs. These workers were not able to plant or harvest as they should have on their own land, and, thus, became dependent upon their white benefactors or the colonial government. They were reduced to living at a subsistence level, and as conditions on African land became underproductive and overpopulated, famine ensued.

European settlers were the driving force behind the colonial government's legislation to control access to land. Science was the answer they accepted to move the Kikuyu out of the Highlands. The British oriented their land usage policy around the concept that soil erosion and nutrient depletion was a result of overpopulation, "primitive" agricultural practices, and overstocking. They instituted various programs within the colony to transition African lands to new ways of agricultural production. As a result, the colonial government instituted plans to draw people out of the overcrowded reserves and onto European farms, implement new methods of agriculture that would

⁵⁶ Mkangi, 46.

increase production yet reduce soil erosion, and restrict the number of livestock Africans were allowed to own.⁵⁷

The pattern of land use in Kenya was similar to other British colonies in that it suffered the consequences of indirect rule. According to Sara Berry, the British Colonial Office struggled to find a way to have indirect rule and economically viable agricultural commercialization. This was during a time when rule of power and boundary disputes were in contest among Africans. Berry said the colonial government “walked a tightrope” between enabling Africans to take part in the commercialization of agriculture and giving them too much autonomy that would cause them to be economically independent. The Europeans tried to implement a ‘traditional’ form of governance that was supposed to reflect African elder councils. The British hoped that the newly appointed chiefs would encourage the appropriate amount of farming with subservience to European law. The problem, at the turn of the twentieth century, was that many of these groups in Kenya were fighting among themselves over land rights issues. The British were able to use this to their advantage, but by the 1950s it began to backfire on them.⁵⁸

Another aspect of the Crown Lands Ordinance of 1915, which created tension between colonizer and colonized, stipulated that all native lands were under the ownership of the Crown, and, as a result, those representing the Crown in Kenya had the right to make Reservations that natives would inhabit and cultivate. Part of the Reserves might be set apart to build roads, canals, water reservoirs, and other public infrastructures. If this provision reduced the required amount of land for Africans, the Reserve was to be compensated with other land not currently within its boundaries. The

⁵⁷ Mkangi, 53-54.

⁵⁸ Sara Berry, “Hegemony on a Shoestring: Indirect Rule and Access to Agricultural Land,” *Africa* 62 (1992): 331-333.

size of the reserve was supposed to accommodate a certain number of people plus a percentage of annual growth, and beyond that, more land must be added or “natives” had to be moved elsewhere. The European settlers thought the size of these reserves were too large and that they should be reduced and allow only for the current population. This unofficial position hoped that the overflow would be forced to become wage laborers on white farms. Subsequent legislation accommodated this desire.⁵⁹

This was only the beginning of the changes the colonial government tried to implement in Kenya. The colony’s attentions focused on the establishment of productive farms that grew cash crops for export, and European farmers wanted cheap labor for their farms. They petitioned the government to provide this labor. Once the farmers got the labor they wanted, the Kenyan focus shifted. Agrarian reform was the word of the interwar days. The Department of Agriculture heeded the cry of the settlers and implemented plans for land consolidation. Africans’ land holdings tended to be scattered and tenured by large families. The government tried various ways of creating land title legislation, but the process was slow because of their lack of understanding of how Africans claimed their land (individually or communally). Thus, the first step in agricultural reform was to consolidate the landholdings of Africans so that the land could be made more profitable. Those who enclosed their grazing land and practiced the approved modes of cultivation would receive the right to grow certain cash crops allowed by the government.⁶⁰

Another concern of the settler community was the ability of the land to accommodate grazing livestock. They blamed the large quantities of goats and cattle for

⁵⁹ M. R. Dillely, *British Policy in Kenya Colony*, 2nd Ed. (New York: Barnes and Noble, Inc., 1966), 249-252.

⁶⁰ Sorrenson, *Land Reform in the Kikuyu Country*, 69-70.

the soil erosion that decreased the usability of the land. The effort to change African farming methods involved several points to make Africans into capital machines on good land. The first was pasture control; this involved rotating grazing in fenced fields. Secondly, water management was coordinated so that there were enough watering holes to prevent overgrazing and erosion around water sources. Sustainability was the goal of both pasture control and water management so that the land could support livestock year after year. The third was making sure there was a reliable market for the Africans to sell their crops and make an income. The remaining points were culling, breeding, and disease. Farmers were supposed to keep cattle at a level that was compatible with the carrying capacity of the land. They wanted to keep a high quality of cattle breeds that were both highly reproductive and resistant to local diseases. Every effort was to be put into controlling the spread of disease among livestock, including cattle dipping. Finally, the European hope was to make the Africans' livestock an income, not a form of subsistence.⁶¹ These ecologically oriented policies were practical enough, but the problem was few Africans had the means to implement the plans. The rest were either corralled into Native Reserves or lived and worked on European farms.

The Swynnerton Plan marked the beginning of the most drastic land use changes in the short life of the colonial government. Its purpose was to enact a shift from communal landholdings with understood titles of ownership through familial ties to tenured ownership with title holdings. It also supported agrarian reforms. The purpose of the tenure reform was to make land a commodity that could be bought and sold. The European understanding of individual land holding influenced the Swynnerton Plan, which wanted to make individual landholding practices the basis of agricultural

⁶¹ David Anderson, *Eroding the Commons* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2003), 154-156.

development in Kenya. Agrarian reforms included allowing African deed holders to produce cash crops that were previously prohibited. The bulk of the Plan involved intensive land use changes. The thinking behind all this policy was that Africans had to change their ways if they were to survive in the rapidly changing environment.⁶²

The Agricultural Department used much of the energy and resources to implement the Plan's land consolidation scheme. Its purpose was to bring together all the fragmented landholdings of Africans in order to make them productive. Separately, the Agricultural Department did not see how they could be profitable. When consolidation began, the government gave farmers titles to ensure that they would be compliant with the governments land use methods. The government hoped that ownership of a title deed would encourage African owners to make their land profitable by implementing proper land use practices. Soil conservation, being one of the main reasons the colonial government desire to control African land use, involved a complicated form of terracing. It was complicated because it required a large amount of physical and monetary resources.⁶³

Land alienation of the Highlands was completed and formalized under the Kenya Land Commission, formed to investigate African claims that settlers stole their land from them. In 1932, officials from London met with settlers and Kikuyu in Kenya. The Loyal Kikuyu Patriots, led by Chief Koinange, presented evidence as to why the government needed to allocated more land to the Kikuyu, particularly in the Highlands area. They presented physical evidence and testimonials from witnesses pleading to have land returned in the sum of 60,000 acres. The Commission's conclusions bore no resemblance

⁶² Mkangi, 62-63.

⁶³ Anne Thorton, *Smallholder Agriculture in Colonial Kenya: The Official Mind and the Swynnerton Plan* (Oxford, Rhodes House Library, 1987), 15, 44.

to the Kikuyu's desires. Instead, the Commission verified settler claims to the disputed land. As a result, the Commission marked the point at which legal pressure of African politics lost its momentum. The actual land title issue was settled as far as the Europeans were concerned. Europeans understood that Africans needed productive land, but they believed the solution was to improve farming practices. This was the start of a new era of African discontent.⁶⁴

The environmental issues that developed as reserves became overcrowded was the specific use of the land. Acreage per family fell to below subsistence levels. It was the Resident Native Labor Ordinance of 1937 that provided the catalyst for African discontent. It restricted the number of livestock an African squatters could own and the amount of land they were allowed to cultivate and graze. In Nakuru, the laborers refused to sign new contracts with the farmers. Kikuyu leaders returned to the Reserves, and the civil unrest spread throughout the Rift Valley because rather than getting improved conditions as a result of years of negotiating with the government, they were given stricter rules to govern their farming.

In 1962, the British government implemented a plan of Scheduled Areas, with the intent of allocating land to Africans with the intent that it would resolve landlessness issues. Under this plan, which was officially a nonracial land allocation plan, Africans were given small landholdings, depending upon income. Africans with more significant income and farming experience were allocated larger parcels. The unemployed were going to have jobs on these farms solving the problems of labor, unemployment, land distribution, and profit. It was expected that white settlers would have to sell significant

⁶⁴ KNA/ *Kenya Land Commission: Evidence and Memoranda*, Vol. 1 (London: His Majesty's Stationary Office, 1934); Anderson, *Histories of the Hanged*, 21-23, 145.

portions of their land in order for the distribution to go as planned. The British government was financing this settlement scheme, who expected to payout over five years, through direct payments and loans. The government implemented the Schedules Areas scheme, but was interrupted by Kenya's independence.⁶⁵

Mau Mau and the Land Issue

As the legal recourse for African Kenyans disappeared, the dissatisfaction began with the squatters who found themselves located on white farms with lots of land that they used to make a profitable living. However, this ended when white settlers, who found they needed even more land and were threatened by the success of the squatters on their land, demanded that the colonial government reduce the independence of the squatters. The government passed the Resident Native Laborers Ordinance (RNLO) of 1918 so that Kenya would become an economic powerhouse within the empire. The RNLO put restrictions on the number of squatters per farm and how much livestock they could own. The legislation was revised twice. In 1937, the RNLO, after further reducing the land and livestock of the squatters, they began fleeing in en masse to reserves. In turn the reserves became overcrowded. The reserves became the location of initial recruitment and oathing for all Mau Mau.⁶⁶

Corfield's explanation on the African attachment to land showed British understanding of land arrangements in Kenya. It portrayed the African attachment to land as being akin to an animistic relationship to the land. In fact, Corfield, who represented the Crown's interpretation of Mau Mau, simply thought that the Kikuyu's frustration with

⁶⁵ United Kingdom, British Information Services, *Kenya*, I.D. 1475 (London: F. Mildner & Sons, September 1963), 11-12.

⁶⁶ Tabitha Kanogo, "Rift Valley Squatters and Mau Mau," 119-134.

their land holdings (or lack of) was unreasonable. He removed from the history of Mau Mau, the centrality of the land issue:

It is not within the scope of this historical survey to deal with the 'land question' in any great detail. Nor would it in fact be a particularly fruitful exercise because however conclusively it can be shown that the settlement of Europeans in the empty spaces of the White Highlands was fully justified in the prevailing circumstances...the cardinal point to bear in mind is not whether these claims to 'the stolen lands' had any real substance, or whether such as were justified were dealt with equitably by the various commissions set up by Government; it is a fact that by a process of auto-suggestion, self-deception, and the propagation of patent lies, a sufficiently large number of Kikuyu believed they were true to enable the agitators to make full use of this highly explosive source of discontent.⁶⁷

This shows the shift in emphasis during the declaration of the Emergency. Before the Emergency, political and economic focus was on converting the "natives" to sound agricultural practices and crops for profit.

Africans had to deal with the consequences of the government's land use policies. The hoped for pasture control was not feasible because much of the land that would have been used for rotating their livestock was either owned by settlers or was separated by inaccessible land. Water management was unlikely because the water levels of the watering holes were too low, and this caused worse erosion. For the Africans, it was important to maintain a large herd during times of drought because there was a deficiency of other means of subsistence; therefore, sustainability meant something different to Africans than it did to the European settlers. The reality of market access never materialized. Due to the quarantine regulations, access was limited and sometimes completely absent. Culling had to be forced upon the Africans because they did not see any need to get rid of their wealth and potential sustenance. Africans' ability to fight disease in livestock was difficult because of the limited number of veterinary officials

⁶⁷ Corfield, 11.

who were in charge of the cattle dipping and inoculation procedures. Many saw no need in selling livestock to purchase goods when it was central to their social structure and wealth.⁶⁸

Tabitha Kanogo, whose research into Mau Mau focuses on squatters, found that the origins of Mau Mau were from the bottom, the squatters. Their grievances against the government and settlers centered around the lack of land and the process by which they lost it. The mass of these squatters suffered from the *kifagio* that wrenched their livelihood from them and from the loss of land to provide their means of sustenance. It was because of this social disturbance that the squatters took the oath of Mau Mau. Most who oathed in the early days of the movement were from this group of Africans. They joined with those in the city who suffered difficult circumstances that were also a result of the drastic changes in land entitlement and access. Matters were made worse when the discontented squatters were moved from the farms where they worked and had a very small plot of land to the detention camps.⁶⁹

These detention camps were supposed to be temporary devices to curb the drastic rise in violence, but they were another example of how ecology and the use of the environment ignited a revolutionary movement. These detention camps were the antithesis of the agricultural system in which the government originally wanted Africans to participate. They were removed from the farms and from their own land. Africans who were able to retain their land were Loyalists. This created a social division between Loyalists and Mau Mau based upon land: the haves and the have-nots. Because of the Swynnerton Plan, the separation between the landed and the landless, the government

⁶⁸ Anderson, *Eroding the Commons*, 154-155.

⁶⁹ Kanogo, *Squatters and the Roots of Mau Mau*, 130-139.

used land as a leverage against those who took an oath to Mau Mau. In retaliation to the government land policies, which prohibited the independence of the African farmer to grow and graze as usual, Mau Mau on many instances destroyed the land of Loyalists who acquiesced to colonial agricultural methods. Loyalist were rewarded with land and the permission to grow profitable crops.⁷⁰ Mau Mau equated Loyalist Kikuyu with European settlers who opposed them and treated them with the same contempt, but nevertheless, they fought for all Kenyans to regain all of Kenya.

In conjunction with the 1937 RNLO, settlers focused on the aspect of soil conservation as a means to remove and relocate “redundant” squatters in the White Highlands. They used the excuse to move some of the Africans from the Native Reserves near the Highlands to areas that were less densely populated. The Olenguruone Settlement Scheme resulted when many Kikuyu were moved to this area in Maasai territory. Their argument was that the Africans did not have enough land to prevent erosion, but in actuality they wanted to get rid of the threat from agitated Kikuyu. Olenguruone provided the impetus for the struggle for land that had been unfairly taken from them. Squatters were moved there in the early 1940s and were to be a model for other African Reserves for proper agricultural practices and the removal of antiquated African land use. Mau Mau used the Olenguruone disaster as an example of why the colonial governments’ land reforms were not helpful for Africans, and reasoned that this was cause for the displacement of white settlers instead.⁷¹

Soil conservation and terracing schemes continued throughout the early days of the Emergency. Either those called upon to work on communal projects were Loyalists

⁷⁰ Elkins, 126-127.

⁷¹ Kanogo, *Squatters and the Roots of Mau Mau*, 105-116.

who had land or were squatters, repatriated Kikuyu, or Mau Mau detainees out on work duties. In 1952 and 1953, repatriated Kikuyu did not spend much time in detention camps, but they were sent back to reserves or in collectivized villages where they worked on land improvement projects.⁷²

In 1952, the year the State of Emergency was declared, the Central Province recorded the widespread agitation of Mau Mau and oathing ceremonies, which corresponded to the speeches given by Jomo Kenyatta and Koinange. They incited the crowds with their encouragement to all to fight for the “return of our stolen lands.”⁷³ Frustration developed over the previous thirty years turned into widespread protest, but this time it was different from that of the KCA. The violence erupted out of an act of desperation for the land they believed they were entitled to and for the independence of using the land as they did traditionally. They no longer wanted to be subject to the whim of the settlers and to the dogmatic rules of the Department of Agriculture. Thus, issues of land entitlement were at the root of Mau Mau although it did not remain the only goal. However, it is necessary to understand the importance of land in a war fought largely by peasants. The Kikuyu’s history with the land was ambiguous, but when considering what developed as agricultural policy, that becomes secondary. The primary reasons Mau Mau contested colonial land access was because they found in the land and their use of the land to represent their identity. In the years of the Emergency, the identity of who Kenyans were was not about who had access to land, but it also meant the absence of British colonial rule.

⁷² KNA, AR 1953 Central Province, 2801/5, p18

⁷³ KNA, AR 1952 CP, 2801/3, p1.

CHAPTER 3

UNEXPECTED REVOLUTIONARIES: THE WOMEN OF MAU MAU

Mau Mau historiography largely ignores the role of Kikuyu women as revolutionary participants, except for a few generalizations. The fact that women are mentioned at all tends to hint at the role women had was important to the continuing revolution. Early histories offered an occasional mention of women, seldom by name, and usually in conjunction with their husbands. Women are a necessary component in the revolutionary process, and this is not exclusive of Mau Mau. Women have played important roles in revolutions' success because "its ultimate triumph depends upon successful appeals to women and families to supply resources to nourish it. As primary producers, women are essential for a sustained challenge to the state to be successful."⁷⁴

The following will explore the representation of women in the historiography of Mau Mau through various literary mediums. Government documents rarely mention women, and official government histories and those written just after Kenyan independence do not reveal the possibility that women played an important role in Mau Mau's revolutionary endeavors. Memoirs of male Mau Mau members only mention women on occasion to have had an intimate role in Mau Mau. However, some recently written histories have included women's active role in Mau Mau, based largely on oral history. Finally, there are a few accounts dedicated specifically to Mau Mau's revolutionary women.

⁷⁴ Mary Ann Tétreault, "Women and Revolution: A Framework for Analysis," in *Women and Revolution in Africa, Asia, and the New World*, Mary Ann Tétreault, ed. (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1994), 4.

Kikuyu Origins

Women had a place of importance in Kikuyu stories of origin. According to Kikuyu creation stories, God gave the Highlands to the Kikuyu ancestral parents, Gikuyu and Mumbi. The Kikuyu were the descendant of their nine daughters. They had shifting roles in Kikuyu society, as their legends repeated.⁷⁵ These changed again with Mau Mau and again after independence.

Jomo Kenyatta said that nowhere in Kikuyu legend did any social revolution come from without, as it did with the advent of the colonial government, but only came from within. One of these revolutions occurred because women's role in society changed. He said women, who had ruled Kenya for generations in a matrilineal society, "forgot their responsibilities, and remembered only the privileges of rulership."⁷⁶ The men revolted against their rule and replaced polyandry with polygamy. Kenyatta reminded his readers that this was only the men's point of view. There was no record of the women's perspective on of this revolution.⁷⁷ This shows that women have always been an important part of Kikuyu history and their exclusion from modern history diminished their place in world history in general.

Pre-colonial social structure centered on the kinship unit called an *mbari* and regulated the use of all land, food, and rituals. Adolescents were initiated into age groups. It is likely that women within the same age groups formed women's councils. Men's

⁷⁵ M.P.K.Sorrenson, 5; Muriuki, *A History of the Kikuyu*, 63; Kenyatta, *Facing Mount Kenya*, 3-20.

⁷⁶ Kenyatta, *Facing Mount Kenya*, 8-9.

⁷⁷ Kenyatta, *My People of Kikuyu*, 7-8.

councils are well documented and functioned as the governing bodies. Women's councils probably formed when they found that their position and resources were threatened.⁷⁸

Women were responsible for food production and dispersal within the Kikuyu division of labor. They also cared for the children, made pottery and beadwork, and thatched their homes. Men depended upon women for their food, which for women was a leverage for power and control. Women often worked in co-operatives to ease their work burden. They also functioned as an aid in childbirth, wedding, social education, and initiation ceremonies. Communities recognized women for their role in ensuring the future of their family.⁷⁹ This would begin to change as colonial control forced them to adapt to a new and foreign social, economic, and political system. However, the role of women within Kikuyu communities indicated the place they had in the course of Mau Mau's revolution. Mau Mau fought for land, which from which women worked to make a productive living for their families, and freedom, an idea women valued but did not receive the benefits they might have.

Official and Historical Documentation of Women

Official government documentation of Kenyan women did not reflect genuine understanding of the reality of their lives. These government officials did not think that women living on the reserves suffered largely. They certainly did not think that women's lives were disrupted more than men's lives by social and political upheavals. District Commissioners and others responsible for the writing and publication of District Reports usually focused on the political and economic aspects of their District, and the social

⁷⁸ Beth Maina Ahlberg, *Women, Sexuality, and the Changing Social Order: The Impact of Government Policies on Reproductive Behavior in Kenya* (Longhorn, PA: Gordon and Breach Science Publishers, 1994), 60-62.

⁷⁹ Ahlberg, 64-69.

implications of the day-to-day operation of life was taken for granted. As a result, official documents are devoid of recognition of women's involvement in the daily life of Kenyan politics.⁸⁰

Some sources noted the close relationship between women and oaths taken by Mau Mau adherents. District officials in the Central Province believed that Mau Mau men were using women's naiveté to coerce them into taking oaths and administering them because they thought that women would not question the notion that death resulted when the oath was broken.⁸¹ Most district reports do not mention any African women by name. They seldom include women in their discussion of agricultural development although women were key to the government's farming schemes. However, in the District Reports, they received no recognition. The reports did not acknowledge the force used upon female detainees. Male prisoners worked on many, if not most of the work projects. However, women worked on the projects as well. They had the added burden of caring for their children at the same time. Some women carried children on their backs, worked while they were pregnant (often as the result of rape by the prison guards), and had to find time to search for food for the children. Children did not have a food allowance in the prison camps.⁸² Their absence created a hole in the accuracy of the government's documentation. On the eve of the national election, when many Africans, now free to participate in the democratic process, people gathered to listen to the political speeches of those who hoped to have a place in the new independent government. The District Commissioner remarked that illiterate women made up the majority of voters in

⁸⁰ KNA, G. Sluiter, May 1956, Official Colonial Correspondence regarding the social, economic, and health conditions of subjects in Nairobi and Embu districts, 2804/1 p. 18.

⁸¹ KNA, AR 1954 CP, 2801/5, p.11.

⁸² Elkins, 288-192.

the Central Province in 1961. The fear, alluded to in the 1961 report, was that this “gullible audience” might fall prey to the false prophesy of “utopian hopes,” as if they were incapable of determining who would best represent them. It was as if the colonial government, about to be displaced from their position of authority, thought that false prophets would easily mislead African voters. These same illiterate women were also deluded to think that Mau Mau was the savior of Kenya, according to the Annual Report.⁸³

F.D. Corfield’s historical report had sparse reflection on women. None were mentioned by name, and their imprisonment in detention camps was not remarked upon at all. He focused on the political sequence of events, at the exclusion of much else, including women’s roles. This is not surprising because the colonial government’s priorities were to capture the leaders in hopes of cutting out the source of dissent among the revolutionaries. Corfield’s report reflected the government’s anthropological understanding of Mau Mau, in that the force of discipline came from the leaders’ insistence on using oaths. In retaliation, they captured as many male leaders as possible and developed a policy of rehabilitation.⁸⁴ Corfield failed to recognize that women were a powerful force behind the efficacy of the oaths as influential figures in families. Since Corfield’s report was the official history of the government’s efforts to suppress and eliminate Mau Mau, his omission of women was the example for future historical accounts.

Historical works reflected what government documents failed to do, and some writers acknowledged women’s place in Kenyan society. Tom Mboya, a Luo and

⁸³ KNA, AR 1961 CP, 2801/5, p.2.

⁸⁴ Corfield, *passim*.

member of the Legislative Council, pressed the government to give Africans elected representation. He called women to action, and he encouraged them to fill positions in all sectors of Kenyan society because they had the power to influence by their sheer numbers. He said they should not only be mothers and wives, but they should work in agricultural business, civil service, trade unions, and politics. They were needed because many men had left their homes to find employment in the cities; women were needed, he believed, to fill in the positions traditionally held by men. His proposition was that women should form a mass movement to challenge the government. He recognized that women had the power to influence their families and therefore, society. Other leaders during the Mau Mau era openly recognized women to have the ability to help Kenyans achieve their goal of land and freedom. However, this is an indication that women could have had an influential role in the Mau Mau movement.⁸⁵

The most notable history of Mau Mau, by Carl Rosberg and John Nottingham, reflected on the general role of women in the movement. Women were a large presence in the crowd that gathered to protest when the police arrested Harry Thuku. The authorities ordered them to disperse, but the women began to cry out in their ululations that was intended to press the men to action. Rosberg and Nottingham remarked that the Kikuyu women had a political power that was underestimated by the authorities. They also commented on the government's belief that rehabilitation was more important for women because they had such influence over their families and were often the main Mau Mau force in the home. It is remarkable that they mentioned women because their focus was on the origins of Mau Mau and not necessarily the outcome of the movement. They revealed that women had a keen interest in the nationalist movement because of their

⁸⁵ Tom Mboya, *Freedom and After* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1963), 161-163.

position as the primary food producers in the family.⁸⁶ Like Mboya, Rosberg and Nottingham were influenced by the events just after independence, newer historical works still do not fully integrate the role of women in the revolution, but still many acknowledge them in minor ways.

Modern Historiography

Historians, who have published in recent decades, have covered many aspects of Mau Mau, from the role of particular leaders to the driving force of the squatters. There are general as well as specific accounts, but a few of them mention the role of women in the movement. Those that do are usually generalizations. The following will examine several prominent sources on Mau Mau for their inclusion of women.

Greet Kershaw wrote about women and their ideological ties to the land. Girls were used in the bartering price of forested land. When a man was negotiating the price for a new plot of forested land that he wanted to acquire and clear, often a girl was included in the price. The father and landowner did not exchange the girl as a slave, but as insurance for a bride price. When looking at this in the context of Mau Mau, it is understandable that a woman might not be the obvious revolutionary.⁸⁷ Although Kershaw researched many statistical aspects of Mau Mau, she did not consider the social implications of women who participated.

Tabitha Kanogo is known for her research of Kikuyu squatters and their role in Mau Mau. She said that women's place in Mau Mau was of great importance although she only made short mention of them. According to Kanogo, women were often the Mau Mau stronghold in families. Husbands had to either take an oath along with her or remain

⁸⁶ Rosberg and Nottingham, 50-55, 338.

⁸⁷ Kershaw, 22-25.

silent about their beliefs or they could become a target of Mau Mau execution. In the beginning of the Mau Mau Emergency, when many fled to the forests, women were not initially allowed. When Forest Fighters realized that women were valuable allies, they began to allow single and widowed women who were trusted to remain secretive. Some women eventually became Forest Fighters, and those women who were found to be unshakable in their adherence to Mau Mau oaths were inducted into the Inner Secret Council, formerly open only to men. Kanogo mentioned one woman in particular, Wanjiru Nyamarutu who was known to be a “hard core” Mau Mau and one who was respected by both men and women. She was in charge of the distribution of food and gathered intelligence. Kanogo said she was responsible for the change in the way Mau Mau thought about women and their role in Mau Mau.⁸⁸

In contrast to Kanogo, Donald Barnett and Karari Njama said that the presence of women in the forest disrupted the military process. Women, who lived in the forest among the Mau Mau fighters were said to be wives. The Barnett/Njama account of women in the forest acknowledged that women received ranks as high as colonel while others had specific jobs in the camps, which usually coincided with traditional female roles. However, women were not as significant in military operations carried out by the Forest Fighters.⁸⁹

Frank Furedi wrote an account of the Bahati settlement scheme where Kikuyu organized a protest against low government wages. The government recruited Kikuyu to move to the Bahati Transit Farm where it was assumed that they had no means of employment or no legal claims to land but who could perform physical labor. Women

⁸⁸ Kanogo, *Squatters and the Roots of Mau Mau*, 143-149.

⁸⁹ Barnett and Njama, 221-227.

were particularly upset with the unstable situation they were in, where they were paid minimally and had no guarantee that they would not be shifted to another settlement area. The husbands, when they saw that their wives had real grievances, petitioned the Kenya African National Union (KANU) to help them convince the government to grant them their wishes, which was to become permanent settlers or acquire titles to the land. However, because of the political situation at the time, KANU ignored them. Furedi said that the forced labor of women was one of the main reasons squatters began to organize politically and why they joined Mau Mau in large numbers. The social change removed women from their traditional roles in growing and making food for their families and sent to labor on public works projects. In this manner, women were part of the reason Mau Mau rose to revolution; women, who were so intricately tied to the productivity of land, lost the essence of their traditional role and identity in sustenance.⁹⁰

David Throup documented another protest led by women who were arrested for refusing to work on a grass planting scheme, known as the Murang'a Protest; it was an example of women protesting the change in their social role. They thought that the time they were spending on planting grass that would have no benefit to them and was wasted and their families were suffering because wives and mothers were taken away from sustenance agriculture. Throup limited his inclusion of women to this one protest.⁹¹

John Lonsdale integrated women's place in Mau Mau history by explaining how their presence in the Forest Fighter camps and activity gathering supplies on the Reserves were both results of the changes colonialism impressed upon them and causes of future social upheaval. He said after independence, women found marriage to be more of a

⁹⁰ Frank Furedi, *The Mau Mau War in Perspective* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1989), 196, 91.

⁹¹ David Throup, *Economic and Social Origins of Mau Mau* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1988), 155-157.

hindrance to their livelihood. Lonsdale went on to write that marriage created a division between Loyalists and former Mau Mau. Loyalists were known as *itungati*, or junior elders; former Mau Mau were called *kamatimu*, or boys. The issue of gender factored into post-colonial division of land and class.⁹²

Women made up a large portion of prison camp detainees, and Caroline Elkins included their experiences in her monograph about the detention camps created to house and rehabilitate Mau Mau adherents. There were many women within the “Pipeline,” as the government called the system of detention camps throughout Kenya. Her work concerning female detainees was based largely upon oral histories. Official records did not reflect the extent of torture and intimidation women endured in the camps. Early in the Emergency, specifically starting with Operation Anvil, the government cleared African sections of Nairobi and other cities of anyone suspected of being connected to Mau Mau. These people were mostly comprised of Kikuyu. They were kept in compounds surrounded by barbed wire fencing. The prison guards made sure that all detainees suffered constantly so they would be more likely to renounce their oath. Sometimes, the prison guards would force the women through “rehabilitation” where the prison officials kept them at the edge of starvation all the time; for many women and their children, starvation was the cause of death. Others died at the hands of the prison guards. Elkins wrote of the torture methods used to extract information from the women or intimidate them into confessing to be Mau Mau. Women endured rape and sexual abuse.

⁹² John Lonsdale, “Authority, Gender, and Violence: The War Within Mau Mau’s Fight for Land.” in *Mau Mau and Nationhood*, eds., E.S. Atieno Odhiambo and Lonsdale (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2003), 62-69.

They had to bury their own dead, and they were often forced to chant: “This is independence,” to remind them that death was their only hope for freedom.⁹³

Kimithi Camp was one of the main female camps on the “Pipeline.” It was used to hold the large numbers of women whom the Home Guard and colonial government thought to be dangerous; many of them were detained simply because they were Kikuyu. Many proved not so easily persuaded by starvation and torture; some were shot if they were thought to be hard-core and had no potential for rehabilitation. Prison guards’ mindset was that Kikuyu women were intellectually weak and could be easily rehabilitated. Once they were “rehabilitated,” the women were released into the public with the expectation that they would be productive members of society, but more importantly, that they would no longer be influenced by Mau Mau adherents, but rather an anecdote.⁹⁴ Caroline Elkins showed how women were intimately connected to Mau Mau and the political repercussions.

Women in Mau Mau Memoirs

Mau Mau fighters, who have written memoirs of their experience of the revolution and ideas concerning the history and future of Kenya did not give much credit to the women who smuggled food, ammunition, and intelligence. Those who included women in their accounts wrote of wives, specific family members, or women generally. They seldom gave credit to female fighters or those who died in their efforts to get supplies or ammunition to the forest. The following is an overview of some of the memoirs and collections of documents about or by Mau Mau fighters that give credit to

⁹³ Elkins, 123-124, 244-265.

⁹⁴ Elkins, 219-239.

women in the forest, actually fighting and living in the reserves working to sustain their families, broken by the war, and gathering supplies to be sent to the forest.

Maina Kinyatti compiled a collection of Dedan Kimathi's correspondence and official KLDA documents. Kinyatti intended for his work to acknowledge the importance of Kenyan intellectuals and give credit to the work of Mau Mau fighters for independence. Kimathi composed a charter for the KLFA naming Mau Mau's grievances against the government. In the charter, he stated that "foreigners," or European settlers must stop taking advantage of Kenyan women and girls. He also opposed the pass system in which women suspected of Mau Mau association had to carry to move about the country. He believed this was disrespectful and humiliating for Kikuyu women. In these statements, he acknowledged the place women had in the Mau Mau movement. Women were part of the reasons they were fighting against the colonial government because the government forced women to change their traditional roles to fit the official understanding of Kikuyu culture. The government made them work on public works projects taking them away from their traditional duties of food production and childcare.⁹⁵

In a letter to Kimathi, General Ihuura Irati Mbuci reported that he and his soldiers were attacked by airplanes and had very little food; however, he also indicated he expected an unnamed "woman leader of this region" would hopefully prevent them from starving to death. It is likely that those who read the letter knew who this woman was, but the General did not mention her name to protect her. The letter shows that the fighters often depended on women for food even as they continued their resistance to British

⁹⁵ Kinyatti, 16.

rule.⁹⁶ Speculatively, women had access to food because of their close connection to other women who were actively producing food. In which case, women's traditional roles kept fighters alive and the revolution active.

Women definitely had a presence in the forests, and this was reflected in *The Swords of Kirinyaga*, H.K. Wachanga's reflection of his experience as Mau Mau General Secretary, which provided an outline of the Freedom Fighter's regulations for behavior. It stated in the first point that all Freedom Fighters were to refrain from all sexual contact with women while in the forests or they would suffer twenty-four lashes. While in a reserve, he would have to be cleansed from a witch doctor before he could return to the forest.⁹⁷ Women in the Reserves, whether or not they allied themselves with Mau Mau, depended upon Home Guards for survival. Their husbands were either fighting in the forests, working in the cities, or dead. Even if they supported their husband's involvement with Freedom Fighters, they had to obey the Home Guards' commands if they were to be safe and provide for their children. Wachanga said they may have acted as though they were loyal to the government, but behind the scenes they continued to smuggle supplies when they could. The government, which thought it had more loyalty than it probably did, formed a group of women who proved their loyalty by patrolling with white soldiers, armed with pangas (large swords), and went into the forests hacking to death any Mau Mau they found. They were called Hika Hika, and Mau Mau's version of this vigilante group of women were known as the Wangu Group. Each went out into

⁹⁶ Kinyatti, 103.

⁹⁷ Wachanga, 37.

the countrysides looking for the enemy who may have been a friend, neighbor, or relative.⁹⁸

Mbiyu Koinange wrote of the Kikuyu people and their grievances against the government, but he did not write to convict the government of crimes. Instead, he said that the Europeans did not understand his people, who were a unique and lively people with hopes, aspirations, and a close connection to the land. He dedicated *The People of Kenya Speak for Themselves* to Njeri, the leader of the African Women's League. The African Women's League formed in 1940 in order to work with women to build a place for girls to go to school. Koinange commented that Njeri was a respected woman whom all revered and that she gathered and motivated her group of women to raise money to build a dormitory for the girls at the Kenya Teachers College. When men tried to interfere, she told them to leave. She empowered women to work together while taking care of their families. Koinange said that Njeri was only one example of how Kenyan women fought for what they thought best not only for them and their families but for the community at large.⁹⁹

Ngugi Kabiru, a Mau Mau gun smuggler, said that women suffered severely, as did the men, in the detention camps, enduring the same physical, sexual, verbal, and emotional abuse of which Caroline Elkins also wrote. Kabiru's work was a true memoir; he wrote of his life in the context of a larger event. However, he does allow the reader to

⁹⁸ Wachanga, 96-97.

⁹⁹ Mbiyu Koinange, *The People of Kenya Speak for Themselves* (Detroit: Kenya Publication Fund, 1955), 49-53.

have a small glimpse at women's place as Mau Mau detainees who suffered along with the men.¹⁰⁰

Gucu Gikoyo recalled his experience with female fighters in *We Fought For Freedom*. He said that he and the General of the Forest Fighters rescued Nyagiko, a woman wanted by the government. They brought her into the forest where the hope was that she would be safe. She joined Gikoyo and the General on a trip to acquire weapons and hopefully speak with Mau Mau leaders in Nairobi. Wanjiku and Wanjiru, two other female Forest Fighters, joined them on the trip. Gikoyo's story did not reveal any sign that the women were treated any differently as fighters than the men. They were responsible for intelligence and subverting the enemy.¹⁰¹

It is likely, however, that the women of these men's memoirs had a much more subtle role. One thought is that the anonymity the writers allowed the women was because they wanted to protect their lives outside the Forest Fighter world. They were in part protecting their unusual role in violence and their ambiguous sexual purpose. If the outside world understood what their lives were like as fighters, the women would not return to a normal family life.¹⁰² Anecdotes from memoirs cannot provide a broad understanding of the women who participated in and believed in the purpose of the Forest Fighters.

The Revolutionaries in Focus

There are only a few works that focus entirely on Mau Mau women. These authors acknowledge the fact that their work is only the beginning of what could become

¹⁰⁰ Ngugi Kabiro, *Man in the Middle: The Story of Ngugi Kabiro* (Richmond, B.C.: LSM Information Center, 1973), 46.

¹⁰¹ Gucu Gikyo, 104-107.

¹⁰² Lonsdale, 62.

a growing field in Mau Mau historiography. Much of what has been published is based upon oral history. This seems to be the only reliable source at this time to further research on women's role in Mau Mau. There was little official documentation of women other than the sparse records of those who filtered through detention camps.

Muthoni Likimani compiled oral histories of women who were in some way connected with the Mau Mau movement. Some were participants, others were loyalist, and some fell in between. She titled the book *Passbook Number F.47927* because this was her numerical designation within the government's system to track potential Mau Mau sympathizers. The title recognized the fact that women were faceless as far as the government was concerned, and she was one of the many stories. Her purpose was to reveal "why men have kept blinders on their memories when it comes to women active in Mau Mau." She also proposed that the colonial period reduced African women's power. She does this by documenting women's account of their participation and influence, and secondly, explaining how colonialism devalued women's influence and restricted their access to new opportunities and resources. In sum, she concluded that women suffered disproportionately more under colonial rule than men.¹⁰³

She did not focus on women who were members of the Kenya Land Freedom Army, but who were participants in other ways. Two of her accounts reflect the difficulties women had in finding and maintaining an identity within the system. When obtaining a passbook, women had to fit into two categories, wives or prostitutes. One single woman had to pretend to be a man's wife in order to have legal status. Another story recalled the conditions women had to help each other keep up with childcare, gardening, and daily chores while working on communal public works projects. Likimani

¹⁰³ Muthoni Likimani, *Passbook Number F. 47927* (New York: Praeger Publisher, 1985), 9.

highlighted the daily problems of women who struggled to keep their households together while trying to stay out of detention camps. Some women's stories reflect the direct participation of women in Mau Mau's struggles, in which they hid people or attacked a Home Guard's post. She said that women were willing to lay down their lives for the causes that promised them they would have political and social freedom from colonial oppression and a future for their families. Her final stories are about women who were detainees in prison camps and how their lives changes as a result. She highlighted the sexual assault and humiliation suffered at the hands of prison guards.¹⁰⁴

Conclusion

Not all Mau Mau histories are included in this analysis. Some who did not mention women were not included because their work did not necessitate inclusion of women. However, the exclusion of active and passive female Mau Mau participants is rarely justified because they were an integral part of Mau Mau's purpose and plans. Women fought in the revolution and they were a part in the machine that ran Mau Mau.

Government Annual Reports do not accurately reflect women's participation in Mau Mau. The correlation between these reports, memoir descriptions of women, and women reflecting on their own roles is not immediately clear, but the presence of women was common among the Forest Fighters. They were needed on the Reserves and in the cities to not only carry out everyday tasks and to gather intelligence and aid. Official colonial histories did not give credit to women either; the Corfield Report was more concerned with the political consequences of the social and economic disruption.

Mau Mau memoirs gave credit to some women in the struggle; readers are able to see that female fighters were not a novelty. One does not get the impression from these

¹⁰⁴ Likimani, *passim*.

memoirs however that women were necessary in the everyday progress of the movement. Memoirs are still important to understanding women's place in Mau Mau history even though they do not replace the women's own words. Women were the unexpected participants in a revolution to gain independence and access to traditional lands. They were marginalized in their own time, and historians have pushed them to the periphery as well.

CHAPTER 4

“WE ALL FOUGHT FOR FREEDOM”: MAU MAU’S NATIONALIST REVOLUTION

The title is a contradiction of terms with regards to the Mau Mau movement and its place in Kenyan independence. Jomo Kenyatta’s newly independent government had to unite a disconnected population under one nationalist movement in order for the democratic process to begin. Even if everyone fought for freedom, according to Jomo Kenyatta, everyone was supposed to leave behind the dark memories of the past if healing was to begin and national unity to be a success. He said, “We are going to forget the past and look forward to the future...Let us join hands and work for the benefit of Kenya, not for the benefit of one particular community.”¹⁰⁵ Mau Mau’s second goal was to free Kenya of its European invaders, but Mau Mau’s place in Kenya’s history became a victim of historical amnesia. Part of the problem is that historians cannot agree on a history to bestow upon Mau Mau. Historians who have been so influential in the field have not been able to reach a conclusion that satisfied their colleagues, nor can they satisfy the politicians and the fighters. As a result, Kenya has not yet determined who really fought for freedom. Did Mau Mau really fight for all Kenyans? Who really fought for Kenya’s freedom?

National Unity Through Mau Mau’s Revolution

Mau Mau fought for land and freedom, and the core fighters said they were doing it for all African Kenyans. Their members may have been Kikuyu in majority, but they had other oathed African members as well. Even considering the make up of Mau Mau, historians and politicians argued as to whether Mau Mau was nationalist in its purpose

¹⁰⁵ Elkins, 362.

and actions. In Mau Mau memoirs, the writers continuously reminded their readers that their goal was freedom for all Kenyans no matter their ethnic origins. This idea has been the crux of much historical and political debate.

The colonial government did not want to have the label of “nationalist movement” attached to Mau Mau. They had a great fear of what nationalism could mean in their colonies. In a larger, post-war sense, they were in favor of nationalist movements as a sign that their colonies were ready for independence and would have a smooth transition by means of moderate leadership. This was not the case with Kenya where they feared any political activism against colonialism. As a result, officials in London and Nairobi categorized Mau Mau as a return to savagery. Authorities believed that it was only a tribal problem and could be handled as such, and if it was only tribal there was no fear of a nationalist movement that would preempt their plans for eventual independence in a few more decades. This was reflected in their official history, the report written by F.D. Corfield.¹⁰⁶

Even before the Emergency was declared, public opinion believed that Mau Mau was another reason the civilizing mission was necessary for the improvement of African societies. Some national newspapers highlighted Mau Mau’s violence and the deaths of white settlers. As a result, British citizens in the home country thought retaliation methods by the colonial authority were warranted because settlers and the other tribal groups needed protection. In the beginning of the Emergency, Mau Mau was on the front cover of every newspaper every day. By the end of the Emergency, the same papers were reporting the deaths of Africans at the hands of the British counter-insurgency forces.

¹⁰⁶ Bruce J. Berman, “Nationalism, Ethnicity, and Modernism,” *Canadian Journal of African Studies* 25 (1991), 189; Corfield, *passim*.

Public opinion was no longer so single-minded in their opposition to Mau Mau, and decolonization was not such a bad idea anymore. This outside support highlighted the nationalist forces within Kenya, and Mau Mau was at least a component of the nationalists.¹⁰⁷

Carl Rosberg and John Nottingham wrote Mau Mau history in light of nationalism, and *The Myth of "Mau Mau"* dispelled the idea that Mau Mau was a return to savagery and atavism. They said Mau Mau was a nationalist movement by emphasizing its efforts to eradicate colonialism in Kenya and create African Kenyan majority government. They exposed three key myths about Mau Mau. First, Kenyan Europeans believed that the government was doing all that was necessary and meaningful in response to African problems, particularly related to land and governing practices. They also believed that Mau Mau was no different from other religious cults that developed because of the cultural confusion that the introduction of Christianity created. Finally, European settlers thought the oaths that Mau Mau was notorious for was a total rejection of the modernity colonialism bestowed upon Africans. Rosberg and Nottingham deliberately rejected these myths.¹⁰⁸

The crucial element in making an African protest movement a nationalist movement was its "rejection by the protest movements or political parties of the legitimacy of the colonial system." This, according to Rosberg and Nottingham was the reason Mau Mau was a nationalist movement, which they based on typologies proposed

¹⁰⁷ Joanna Lewis, "'Daddy Wouldn't Buy Me a Mau Mau': The British Popular Press and the Decolonization of an Empire," in *Mau Mau and Nationhood*, eds. E.S. Atieno Odhiambo and John Lonsdale (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2003), 227-247.

¹⁰⁸ Rosberg and Nottingham, 321-334.

by Thomas Hodgkin.¹⁰⁹ However, they also recognized the complexity of nationalism within the context of Kenya. All African ethnic groups in Kenya had grievances against the government, but it was the Kikuyu who protested against the government. From this, the violent revolutionary segment gained prominence. Nottingham and Rosberg also implied that Mau Mau should be considered a nationalist movement because the environment in which it occurred prevented it from spreading to other groups. The government prevented this, and the Kikuyu carried out the nationalist agenda of opposition to the colonial government and direct political power. The Kikuyu carried the nationalist banner because of their political prominence that emerged because they wanted their “stolen lands returned. Their population exceeded the carrying capacity of the reserves and villages; thus, they believed that the only way they would have the dignity of owning productive land was to take control of the government. They did not intentionally alienate other African groups; other ethnicities such as the Maasai geographically lost more land than the Kikuyu. The Kikuyu had a higher population and this aggravated the land issue.¹¹⁰

Frank Furedi said that by describing Mau Mau in unflattering ways, they prevented the movement from the label of nationalist. The British government was overcome by fear of nationalism, although in theory they were in favor of a strong sense of nationalism. It just had to be the nationalism that they had prepared for, and Mau Mau was not. They thought that if they could stop Mau Mau from spreading to other groups, they could control the development of Kenyan nationalism. They did this through military control, villagization, and a highly refined propaganda machine. When the

¹⁰⁹ Rosberg and Nottingham, 348.

¹¹⁰ Rosberg and Nottingham, 348-354.

revolution drug on, they began to call it a civil war in an attempt to minimize its potential for nationalism.¹¹¹

Memoirs' contribution to the nationalist complex have been sketchy. Most memoirs were published in the late 1960s and 1970s en masse, and the majority of them were written or dictated by the "elite" members of Mau Mau and were in some way connected with the KLFA. Their contribution to Kenya's nationalism rested in their assurance to readers that Mau Mau fought for all African Kenyans.¹¹² They wanted land to be fairly distributed to all, although the practicality of his was in question. Gucu Gikoyo said in the opening paragraph of *We Fought For Freedom*, "I have a great pleasure in relating the story of how *our* heroes in the forest fought and died for *our* independence."¹¹³ I italicized the plural pronouns because they point to the audience Gikoyo was writing to, which was all Kenyans.

Readers of Mau Mau memoirs can find a subtle conversation taking place between them, arguing about their place in Kenya's collective history. As Gikoyo's statements suggested that Mau Mau fought for all Kenyans. H.K. Wachanga's *Swords of Kirinyaga* reminds the reader of Mau Mau's efforts, which he thought were being forgotten by the new government. He reiterated the hopes of the Forest Fighter leadership that *they* would become the new government of an independent Kenya: they deserved it because they had been the fighters who actively pursued freedom! Although they fought for all Kenyans, they deserved this place of honor for their sacrifices.¹¹⁴

¹¹¹ Furedi, 198-220.

¹¹² O. W. Furley, "The Historiography of mau Mau," in *Politics and Nationalism in Kenya* Bethwell Ogot, ed. (Nairobi: East African Publishing House, 1972), 108.

¹¹³ Gucu Gikoyo, *We Fought For Freedom* (Nairobi: East African Publishing House, 1979), 1.

¹¹⁴ Wachanga, 111.

Maina Kinyatti edited a collection of Dedan Kimathi's papers. In the introduction to the collection, Kinyatti said that he was publishing what papers did survive the British's defeat of Mau Mau because they were merely a remnant of what had either been destroyed or confiscated by the government, which is still archived and not to be opened until 2013. He asked, "Is the whole affair then a cover-up, a conspiracy to protect those Kenyans and British settlers who committed murder and other serious crimes and atrocities against the Kenyan people during the war of national independence?"¹¹⁵ He made two points here. One was that the preservation of historical documents has limited the study of Mau Mau, and thus Kenyan history. The second is that the crimes committed by Loyalist and British authorities hurt the national interests of Kenya.

Just as Benedict Anderson has explained, nations are formed out of an imaginary origin to become something that never was exactly as remembered.¹¹⁶ Kenya's hope was to become a unified nation out of so many different groups with different remembered histories. As Anderson stated these groups are porous and indistinct. Mau Mau has been rejected by many, and, yet, it has been claimed by many others. Therefore, when considering Kenya's collective history, the idea of imagined communities is a perfect explanation of how so many groups became one nation. Despite their cultural and linguistic differences, Kikuyu, Meru, Embu, Maasai, and so many more groups had a common history in that they were in some way affected by colonial expansion. Each had a different experience, but this was their common thread, through which they might tie their nationalist spirit.

¹¹⁵ Kinyatti, xviii.

¹¹⁶ Benedict Anderson, 1-7.

Jomo Kenyatta

When examining Mau Mau's historiography, there is one continuous thread throughout. That is the presence of Jomo Kenyatta's name. He was imprisoned at the beginning of the State of Emergency and was not released until the eve of independence. However, his name was recalled throughout Mau Mau's struggle. He did not claim them, but they claimed him as the future father of an independent Kenya. I will examine Kenyatta's role in the nationalist movement and how Mau Mau's place in Kenya's history was at least partially determined by his actions early in his Presidency.

Kenyatta had a unique education that made him the proper moderate leader for the government to groom for a place in the independent government. But he wasn't their first choice. He was educated in both worlds, a Kikuyu education and a European education, and became politically active in 1922. Kenyatta joined the Young Kikuyu Association in his early twenties. A few years later, he joined the Kikuyu Central Association (KCA) and became a full time politician three years later. He became editor of *Mwigwithania*, the affiliated newspaper with the KCA. He put forth his ideas about the inequality that he believed existed in Kenya and which caused suffering for the Kikuyu people in this medium. "Pray and Work," he urged his readers with the intention of motivating them to unite, and he hoped to teach them to help themselves so they would not be dependant on the government. His political life had just begun and was coming onto the radar of the government. Kenyatta went to London to petition the government for concession to the Kikuyu people who wanted fairer legislative representation and land practices. He was politically unsuccessful, but he learned a lot about how the government in London worked. More than that, he discovered what his place in Kenyan politics could be. A few

years later, Kenyatta reported Kikuyu grievances to the Carter Commission. As he developed a political personality, he was learning how to be a skillful orator. This would be key to his popularity with African Kenyans and not just Kikuyu. Kenyatta was not yet a national leader; however, the next phase in his life would make him such.¹¹⁷

For much of the 1930s, Kenyatta was going to school in England. He wrote a thesis on the anthropology of the Kikuyu people despite the fact that he had no formal higher education degree. *Facing Mount Kenya* was an intellectual study on the Kikuyu, but was also an insight into Kenyatta's background and the why's and how's of his political influences. During the time he lived in England, working on his thesis, which was soon to be a monograph, he lived and learned about the English as a people. Kenyatta was asked on many occasions to speak about Kenya, and it was in these situations that he learned how to adapt to his audience so he captivated their attention and respect. George Delf, who wrote a biography of Kenyatta after he was released from prison, said that he practiced a healthy combination of "austerity and self-indulgence." This, he believed, was why Kenyatta was so successful in the final years leading up to independence. He knew how to play both sides of the field. He was, in short, an excellent diplomat.¹¹⁸

His political notoriety came in to full force when he took over as Secretary of the Kenya African Union (KAU). Kenyatta became a full fledged public figure, at least among the Kikuyu, as he drove from village to village on his motorcycle. He stopped and spoke with families, and he developed a notoriety he did not have before. Children listened for the motor of his bike and cheered as he drove by. Even though he had Kikuyu interests at heart, he had subtle ways of showing his multicultural hopes for Kenya. In

¹¹⁷ Delf, *passim*.

¹¹⁸ Kenyatta, *Facing Mount Kenya*, vii-xxi; Delf, 95-119.

Mwigwithani, he continued to support churches, government officials, and chiefs and encouraged agricultural development and Western-style education. Kenyatta was always teetering on the fence between the Kikuyu agenda and accommodating the colonial authorities. Still, he wanted more than a reconciliation between these two groups. He needed to unite all African Kenyans behind one cause. He had hoped to do this through the KAU.¹¹⁹

Still, putting Kenyatta in the context of nationalism and Mau Mau is as hard as defining who he really was. It has been said that he “appeared all things to all men” and was “a man of mystery and of hidden power.”¹²⁰ In the years before his arrest and imprisonment, he had made a great effort to unite all Kenyan Africans behind independence. Independence would only be possible if all worked for it, meaning through honorable labor and construction, not through violence. He had been in contact with Nehru of India and promoted a nonviolent exchange of power between the Europeans and Africans. However, in his typical, ambiguous manner, he did not outright condemn Mau Mau. At Nyeri, in 1952, he spoke for a KAU crowd:

He who has ears should now hear that KAU claims this land as its own gift from God and I wish those who are black, white, or brown at this meeting to know this. KAU speaks in daylight. He who calls us the MAU MAU is not truthful. We do not know this thing MAU MAU...KAU is not a fighting union that uses fists and weapons. If any of you here thinks that force is good, I do not agree with you...I pray that we join hands for freedom, and freedom means abolishing criminality.¹²¹

¹¹⁹ Jeremy Murray-Brown, *Kenyatta* (New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., 1973), 125-126, 271.

¹²⁰ Murray-Brown, 271.

¹²¹ Murray-Brown, 271-285.

However, in a seemingly contradictory statement he said that freedom would only come with bloodshed.¹²² Since the government did not know which way Kenyatta really fell upon the political spectrum, they assumed he was the leader of Mau Mau.

Then, there was a long gap in Kenyatta's involvement. He was arrested during Operation Jock Scott, where he and dozens of other suspected Mau Mau were rounded up in Nairobi and surrounding areas. He was a prisoner of the colonial government from October of 1952 until April of 1959. Almost immediately after his release, he was offered the presidency of KANU, which he accepted. With the support of the colonial government, Kenyatta accepted the position of Prime Minister. Just before independence, in his typical way of confusing the public, he appeared with Mau Mau Field Marshal Mwariama. He and the Field Marshall were showing the world that the end of an era had arrived. Mau Mau could come out of the forests.¹²³

Kenyatta republished a book he first wrote in 1942, called *My People of the Kikuyu*. This was a separate work from *Facing Mount Kenya*, and in the forward to the new edition he wrote that this work was to remind the Kikuyu of their history. "This book was first presented in defiance, as a tribute to those members of the Kikuyu – and indeed of other tribes – who already had spent or sacrificed their lives in the service of African ideals...It is the whole culture of our people that now freely graces the present and will underlie our future."¹²⁴

What does this all have to do with Kenyatta and the place of nationalism in Mau Mau's history? Mau Mau claimed him as the father of Kenyan freedom. The colonial government imprisoned him and then made him the leader to take Kenyans in to

¹²² Murray-Brown, 271-285.

¹²³ Murray-Brown, 354-369.

¹²⁴ Kenyatta, unnumbered pages.

independence. He both rejected and accepted Mau Mau. He respected Europeans individually, but he despised colonialism. Nonetheless, this one man, whom no one understood completely, embodied all of Kenya, its people, land, and history.¹²⁵ It is this sense of history that was such a problem for an independent Kenya.

Where are the Freedom Fighters?

Independent Kenya suffered an identity crisis while it was celebrating its newfound freedom. As said before, historians and politicians argued about Mau Mau's place in this new identity. Former Mau Mau Freedom Fighters still live in Kenya, or at least those who survived and have made a home for themselves out of the confusing history of Mau Mau. However, their presence only compounded the historical crisis of its united or divided past.

This debate about the place of Mau Mau in Kenya's history created a sense of confusion compounded by the historical amnesia. All parties involved have, in one way or another, tried to put forth a history that either did not happen or was a distortion of facts. Here, again, is a problem. These "facts" cannot be confirmed because of the lack of documentation that records the actions of forest fighters, or a roll with Mau Mau members names on them. Outside impressions have also impinged upon the creation of Mau Mau history.

Throughout Mau Mau's existence, there had been the thought that Mau Mau was nothing but a savage rejection of modernity. For the most part, this myth has been revoked. However, there is still an element of this thought when trying to connect Mau Mau to national history. Corfield's Report was one of the driving forces behind this, but

¹²⁵ E.S. Atieno-Odhiambo, "The Formative Years: 1945-1955," in *Decolonization and Independence in Kenya, 1940-93*, eds., B.A. Ogot and W.R. Ochieng (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1995), 34.

it cannot be forgotten that newspapers and periodicals in Britain, and probably in Kenya as well, convinced the public that this was what Africans would become if they were not monitored by a colonial system.¹²⁶

E.S. Atieno Odhiambo asked the question that so many historians, politicians, and ordinary Kenyans have asked who will eat the fruits of freedom, or *matunda ya uhuru*? One would think that nationalism was fought for all Kenyans, but the practical issue of land distribution ended any utopian idea of equal land for all or land for those who fought, or land for squatters whose property was stolen. Mau Mau's nationalism was in question and Atieno Odhiambo proposed several theses that give the fruits of Kenya's independence to different parties. KAU and KANU party leaders said that those who were imprisoned but not detained for their efforts in the revolution should be rewarded with land. This meant that only those in positions of leadership in the dominant parties would benefit. Mau Mau fighters said that those who went to the forest and engaged in combat should be considered first in the dispersion of land. Ruling elites in an independent Kenya said that only those who were part of the Kikuyu group, including Meru and Embu, should benefit the most because they were the shining example of Kenyan nationalism because they fought for freedom and land, suffered the greatest under colonial rule, and had done all this on behalf of all Kenyans. A combined thesis of KANU and KADU ideology stated that all deserve the fruits of freedom, "even those absent from the psychodrama of Mau Mau" Another thesis said that those whose children went to missionary schools and became the respected elite in Kenyan societies should

¹²⁶ Robert Buijtenhuijs, *Mau Mau: Twenty Years After, The Myth and the Survivors* (The Hague: Mouton and Co., 1973), 43-47.

have the first fruits of freedom. All the previous ideas of who should be the benefactors of freedom constitute an elite who would benefit above others.¹²⁷

There were two components of the “bourgeoisie” theories. One was held by those who believed that “all fought for Uhuru” meant all Kenyans, and thus the common man should get first choice of fruit. The final thesis stated that all were “patriots” and therefore all “nationalities” took part in the independence of Kenya, whether they were active or passive Mau Mau, a loyalist (for they were just trying to do their part for Kenya as well), or even dead before the revolution began. Atieno Odhiambo remarked correctly that this was not based upon any historical interpretation but was nationalism stretched to its limits.¹²⁸

Bethwell Ogot, a central figure in the writing of Kenyan history questioned the place of certain heroes, primarily Jomo Kenyatta and Harry Thuku. Both of these men at some point in their lives rejected Mau Mau as a threat to society. Kenyatta has been explained, but Thuku spent time in jail when he was accused of working against the government. When he was released, he lived a quiet life farming and counseled the government on “rehabilitation” techniques. But the overall issue here is the role of heroes in Kenyan history. Every nation has them, but each chooses whom to honor.¹²⁹

John Lonsdale said that Mau Mau ultimately failed, but they prevented Britain from continuing their colonial rule. Thus, Mau Mau was a nationalist movement. They were the primary contributors, and he explained why this was the situation. Other groups joined Mau Mau, but it was the Kikuyu who had the most to lose. They feared more for

¹²⁷ E.S. Atieno Odhiambo, “Matunda ya Uhuru Fruits of Independence: Seven Theses on Nationalism in Kenya,” in *Mau Mau and Nationhood*, Odhiambo and Ogot, eds., 37-45.

¹²⁸ Odhiambo, “Matunda ya Uhuru Fruits of Independence: Seven Theses on Nationalism in Kenya,” in *Mau Mau and Nationhood*, 37-45.

¹²⁹ B.A. Ogot, “Mau Mau and Nationhood,” in *Mau Mau and Nationhood*, 17.

the loss of their land, their population was scattered and close to extinction, Kikuyu living in urban areas were living in conditions that lowered their standard of living, and they were internally divided so they searched for public solidarity. For these reasons, the Kikuyu, by way of Mau Mau, carried out a nationalist revolution. Other groups who lost land and autonomy did not revolt. The Kalenjin lost more land than the Kikuyu did, but the British kept them in favor by allowing them to own more cattle. The Luo, Luyia, and Gusii did not have the internal struggles as the Kikuyu did.¹³⁰

After independence, when KANU had control of the government, Marshall Clough said there was a cult of Kenyatta. This contributed to the confusion of where Mau Mau and Kenyatta converged. He said that there were three phases of a “crisis of memory.” In the first state of crisis, Kenyatta published *Suffering Without Bitterness* in which he explained his role in nationalist developments from the 1920s to 1963. In the second phase, oathing, which was central to Mau Mau participation, was reinstated, but this time they were pledging allegiance to Kenyatta. The third occurred when Kariuki, a man who had supported Kenyatta for years, had begun to conflict with the current politicians because he said that wealth was concentrated among a few and should be disbursed. He was murdered. There was a public outcry accusing the government of wrongdoing.¹³¹

These were just a few of the historians who found themselves in the midst of a public history debate. This “production of history” called Mau Mau everything from an “embarrassment” to the salvation of Kenyan nationalism. The above historians engaged in public debates about their place in writing Mau Mau history. Former Mau Mau said

¹³⁰ John Lonsdale, “Authority, Gender, and Violence: The War within Mau Mau’s Fight for Land and Freedom,” in *Mau Mau and Nationhood*, Odhiambo and Ogot, eds., 54-56.

¹³¹ Marshall S. Clough, “Mau Mau and the Contest for Memory,” *Mau Mau and Nationhood*, 258.

that these historians had no right to interpret Mau Mau because they had no real understanding of the true motives of the fighters. Only the first hand participants could do this. Politicians tried to influence the writing of Mau Mau nationalist history by sponsoring “official histories, like the Corfield Report.” Mau Mau was left on a divided historical field.¹³²

Historians and the Nationalist Debate

It is still important for historians to take part in the political debate of Mau Mau, but there is a need for historians to disconnect themselves from public understanding of history so that sources can be revealed without a false hope of forging a history that is not there. Historians who do not have a close connection with the political world of Kenya should pursue Mau Mau history. They may understand things from an outside perspective, which those so closely associated with Mau Mau history cannot have.

Conclusion

It is important to consider Mau Mau in a paradigm of revolution because it acknowledges all aspects of the movement. Many of Mau Mau’s revolutionaries did not become the leaders of a newly independent Kenya, nor were their actions the sole reason for this independence, but they were indisputably influential in the ending of British rule. They also paved the way for Jomo Kenyatta to become the nation’s first president, who had a significant amount of success over a newly formed nation. This can be traced through Mau Mau’s well developed historiography. Its revolutionary nature, when compared to a reasonable definition of revolutions, is apparent. However, because of political representation and historical interpretation, its place in the world’s revolution

¹³² Atieno-Odhiambo, “The Production of History in Kenya: The Mau Mau Debate,” *Canadian Journal of African Studies* 25 (1991), 301-304.

has been vacant. Mau Mau was an organized group with a definite agenda. Africans from all sectors of society participated in the revolution, men, and women, rural and urban, Kikuyu and other groups. More than any other event in modern Kenyan history, Mau Mau affected a significant social change in the Kenyan social order. Family structure was reformed because of land distribution and separation in detention camps. The government was in a constant pursuit of land use equilibrium.

The land issue was one of Mau Mau's primary goals to accomplish in its pursuit of the destruction of British rule. Its centrality to everyday life necessitated government intervention as Mau Mau formed its tactics to gain land for Africans and push white settlers to the periphery. Land, so key to Kikuyu identity, was also a commodity the British wished to exploit. This created tension that could only be fully understood by understanding why Kikuyu wanted equitable distribution and why the British fought so hard to keep its productive abilities at a level to profit the colony and the British Empire as a whole.

Women's place in Mau Mau, often overlooked, was key to the implementation of Mau Mau guerilla tactics and to maintaining a semi-normal way of life for families during this turbulent time. Women were found in the forests fighting among the male Freedom Fighters, but they were also detained because of their close involvement. This is perhaps one of the most telling aspects of the threat women was as a participant in the revolution.

Finally, Mau Mau's place in Kenyan history is a disputed era. Its representation at the time of its occurrence was confused and misrepresented. This presentation affected the official historiography published in the final years of Kenyan colonialism. Early

historical writing had to shift through the inaccuracies, political agenda's, and large picture of Mau Mau. Later histories focused on various detailed aspects of Mau Mau, from land to personal accounts. A few mention the revolutionary nature of the events, but none categorized it as a *revolution*. The connotation of a revolution is that it had major and long lasting influence on the history and identity of a people, as Mau Mau did in Kenya.

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