

# An overview of the mau mau



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The Mau Mau insurgency from 1952 to 1960 was an uprising against the Kenyan colonial government by a section of the Kikuyu tribe. There is considerable debate as to how the Mau Mau revolt influenced the nationalist movement, which led to Kenyan independence in 1960. Maloba comments that ‘ in colonial and post-colonial Africa, no movement has been so misunderstood, so much talked about, and remained so stubbornly incomprehensible as Mau Mau.’[1]In order to discuss and understand the Mau Mau movement this essay will evaluate several variables that highlight the tribal and nationalist nature of the Mau Mau and which dimension was most dominant. These variables are; the origins of the Mau Mau, Kenya’s internal domestic affairs, the nature of Kenyan nationalism and the influence of Kenyan demography. The analysis of the tribal and national character of Mau Mau will also include the assessment of colonial policy towards the Mau Mau, while contextualising international factors that influenced the British decolonisation policy. By analysing these variables, a conclusion as to what dimension the Mau Mau insurgency had, tribal or national, will be made.

In order to discuss and examine the nationalist and tribalist dimension of the Mau Mau rebellion it is important to consider the social and political origins of the Mau Mau movement. During the 1920’s political leaders sought to raise Kenya’s political consciousness and in 1924 the Kikuyu Central Association (KCA) was formed to voice the concerns of the Kikuyu people to the government. This later became the Kenyan African Union (KAU) in 1944. Political awareness and involvement was not limited to the Kikuyu, a Luo Union was founded in 1922 in Nairobi and in 1927 the ‘ multi-ethnic,’ Kisumu Native Chamber of Commerce (KNCC) established.[2]A nationalist sentiment

was growing rapidly and after the 1947 strike in Mombasa, and during the annual KAU meeting there was a sense of urgency to achieve social and economic reform. The Mau Mau movement was born out of this urgency and the 'underdeveloped character of the nationalist movement.' [3] The Mau Mau was an 'expression of militant Kikuyu nationalism,' who broke away from the KAU conservative moderates among the Kikuyu tribe. [4] It was made up mostly of landless men who were displaced by the colonial restructure of agricultural development and the most affected. They were anxious about reform and wanted action, reacting by boycotting beers in Nairobi to murdering three policemen in Kiambu. As a part of this action, radicals from the KAU began introducing unity oaths 'with new aims of militancy and violence,' and so the Mau Mau movement were born. [5]

Political frustration was 'a symptom of social crisis.' [6] During the 1950's, the imperial government in Kenya commenced a second colonial occupation that involved significant reform in agricultural practice and land development. This was intended to improve and increase the commercial farming production of Kenya, in the agriculturally rich area in the Rift Valley known as the White Highlands, traditionally the land of the Kikuyu who 'could least afford to lose land.' [7] As part of agricultural expansion the imperial government introduced forced labour, the kipande, however in the context of domestic unrest. An increase in the cost of living through heightened taxation and low paid wages along with the launch of forced labour significantly increased discontent. Furthermore Kenya was experiencing a rapidly growing population particularly in urban areas like Nairobi. The Mau Mau and their supporters were therefore concentrated to

crowded urban areas and the Rift valley, the land of the Kikuyu, where colonial interference was greatest. Socio-economic discontent from a colonial perspective was not justified and 'African were expected to be grateful for all the benefits that occurred them.' [8] The consequence was that the British settler's, feared 'African fanaticism,' seeing Mau Mau as an organised nationalist threat that wanted to expel and eliminate the white settler population in Kenya. [9] This explains why a state of Emergency was called in October 1952. The Mau Mau were thus 'a self-serving myth rooted in European misconceptions of Kikuyu society,' that lead the British imperial government to engage in military action. [10] The social and political origins of the Mau Mau uprising underpin the evaluation of whether the Mau Mau movement was merely tribalist or in fact had genuine nationalist sentiment.

In order to evaluate the nationalist dimension of the Mau Mau uprising, the definition and the nature of nationalism in Kenya and broadly in Africa, needs to be discussed. Nationalism as a concept is subjective and complex, and the viewpoint whether colonial or Kenyan, determines your definition of nationalism; where often the two definitions contrast each other. Nationalism is arguably 'a European concept,' and from a colonial perspective it was a united mass national movement for the self-determination of a colony. [11] It can be argued that the Mau Mau uprising was not nationalist, but instead tribalist because it was not a united Kenyan movement. The recruitment of the Mau Mau was limited to the Kikuyu, and the 'narrowness of its recruitment,' meant that many Kenyan's did not feel they could join or support Mau Mau causes for national reform. [12] There was a widespread opinion among the Kenyan people that Mau Mau aimed to further Kikuyu

affluence and success, rather than implement national political and economic change. It becomes clear why, for the colonial government ' it was impossible for them to recognise and respect the legitimacy of nationalism on the part of the Africans.'[13]

However nationalism from an African point of view is in contrast to the imperial definition and is debatably ' the aspiration of a future self-governing nation.'[14]Therefore whether the movement was along tribal lines was not imperative; nationalism was a force against the imperial movement with the aim of self-government. Thus it can be argued that the Mau Mau uprising was nationalist because although the majority of Mau Mau and KAU were from the Kikuyu, their aims were, to improve Kenya's socio-economic condition. Obhaimbo & Lonsdale highlights the fact that ' militant minorities have typically made states.'[15]Furthermore the fact that unionist organisations formed along various tribal lines, such as Luo Union who had nationalist aspirations, emphasises how ethnic division did not detract from nationalism. The argument that nationalism had to be a mass movement is limited and does not take into account the fact that other diverse ethnic political groups such as the KNCC, aimed to address the socio-economic grievances of all ethnicities. Hence the Mau Mau can be said to have been a nationalist movement and ' to see this liberation struggle as the manifestation of purely Kikuyu frustrations is to play into the hands of the colonial rulers.'[16]

The view that the Mau Mau uprising was without nationalist sentiment does not consider the demographic nature of Kenya and how this impacted the development of the Mau Mau movement. In the 1950's Kenya ethnic

diversity consisted of more than eleven different ethnic groups with the largest ethnic group being the Kikuyu, forming 20% of the population. This complex ethnic population meant that the idea of a nation was not straightforward, particularly when political loyalty was tribal. Consequently the Mau Mau uprising can be described as ‘ ethnic nationalism,’ or ‘ territorial nationalism,’ which is understandable considering the fact that the Kikuyu people were most affected by drastic imperial policy.[17]This was particularly after World War II, in the Rift Valley and in the overcrowded towns. Additionally the hypothesis that Mau Mau was not a nationalist movement is an inadequate explanation of the uprising because the Kikuyu were the largest tribe in Kenya and had a genuine claim for democratic legitimacy by representing the majority ethnic group. Although the Mau Mau did not have the full support of the Kikuyu community, the Kikuyu as a tribe had the potential to unite Kenyan’s towards self-determination. This was the case after the Mau Mau rebellion when between 1958 and 1960 leaders such as Kenyatta from the KAU were able to incite a nationalist movement despite having Kikuyu origins.

From a British colonial perspective the Mau Mau was disputably not a nationalist movement but a social and economic affair. The socio-economic unrest was instead based on tribal lines dividing the Kikuyu. The grievances of the Mau Mau were not seen as political, i. e. achieving self-rule and were therefore not nationalist. The imperial government to some extent attempted to address the social-economic grievances of the Kikuyu acknowledging that there was discontent, but did not recognise the genuine nationalist dimension. By introducing the Swynnerton plan in 1954 the

settlers endeavoured to integrate Kenyans into the market economy by allowing them to grow cash crops and preventing the disruption of agricultural production. However because ' there was a tragic misreading of the depth of African hatred of the colonial state,' this increased division and social unrest.[18]The imperial government did not associate this unrest with nationalism and thus saw the Mau Mau rebellion as a tribal and not nationalist affair. Throup points out that ' the government's failure to solve these problems lay at the heart of Mau Mau,' which emphasises how the socio-economic problems that Kenya faced were not recognised as nationalist by the colonial government.[19]

Furthermore the idea that the Mau Mau rebellion was merely tribalist does not explain why there was heightened political activism from 1952 onwards. The Mau Mau actively petitioned for political change which is debatably nationalist activity. It can be argued that the Mau Mau movement had a genuine nationalist dimension as it was a reaction to the second colonial occupation and social frustration. The socio-economic grievance such as, a low standard of living and low wages, could only be truly addressed through political change. Historically, European revolutions were a consequence of social aggravation, and Maloba compares this to the Mau Mau insurgency. [20]The opinion that Mau Mau was therefore not nationalist but a social and economic reaction does not hold true in the when you consider the fact that socio-economic problems cause a political reaction.

It can be said that the Mau Mau movement from an imperial standpoint was debatably a civil war and not a nationalist affair. The British settlers saw the Mau Mau as a terrorist organisation, which was unwilling to work with Kikuyu

moderates, who aimed to achieve constitutional change. The unrest was arguably between revolutionary and moderate Kikuyu and this disunity undermined any nationalist action. Darwin comments that the settlers ‘dismissed African nationalism as an agitator’s ramp, a retrograde racialism.’[21]The opinion that the Mau Mau revolt was a civil war is supported by the fact that it is estimated that over 12 000 Kenyan’s mainly Kikuyu died in the Mau Mau uprising, where as in contrast over 100 white settlers died. The high number of Kikuyu casualties emphasises the tribalist nature of the Mau Mau uprising and supports the premise that the Mau Mau revolt was not a nationalist movement. Moreover the fact that some affluent, moderate Kikuyu were allowed to grow cash crops, when land was primarily the Mau Mau’s main grievance aggravated social divides. The civil war dimension is maintained by the opinion that the Mau Mau felt betrayed by the moderate Kikuyu and Kenyans who worked with the white settlers. This explains why the Mau Mau tried to instil political loyalty through oaths ‘designed to cement the Kikuyu community behind as yet undefined radical action.’[22]The social polarisation and disunity between the Kikuyu meant that national reform for all Kenyans was arguably not Mau Mau’s aim.

Additionally it can be said that thanks to colonial propaganda the portrayal of the Mau Mau by the imperial administration was as a merely tribal uprising. Maloba emphasises the importance of the depiction of the Mau Mau as a terrorist movement observing that the colonial government had ‘victory in the propaganda war,’ which served to further socially segregate the Kikuyu.[23]The fact that the colonial government were able to successfully use propaganda to increase the division between the Mau Mau and the



conservative Kikuyu shows how imperial rule arguably caused what was seen as a civil war.

The argument that division among the Kikuyu meant the Mau Mau revolt was not nationalist is the strongest critique of a nationalist Mau Mau. However it can be argued that the disunity among the Kikuyu was caused by the imperial office in Kenya who intended to weaken any nationalist sentiment by socially polarising the landless Kikuyu against the conservative, more affluent Kikuyu. Berman remarks that ' the provincial Administration deliberately attempted to prevent the KAU from becoming a national organisation by a policy of divide and rule playing in inter-ethnic hostilities.'[24]Furthermore, in the 1920's and in 1944 the KAU was a united Kikuyu political party that sought constitutional change. Due to social-economic division the young landless Kikuyu felt betrayed by conservative Kikuyu who were working with the settler government. In this way the imperial government undermined what had started out as a nationalist movement by dividing it. It can be argued that the colonial administrations divide and rule policy was a way of trying to prevent a nationalist movement in Kenya. The Mau Mau rebellion was therefore a more radical expression of the original aims of the KAU and trade union intensions and it can be said that the division between the Mau Mau and KAU did not detract from nationalism in Kenya.

From a colonial perspective the Mau Mau Uprising was not a nationalist movement, as it was unsuccessful and did not result in Kenya's self-determination. White settlers were debatably reacting to an ethnic divide as they had in India, when they gained independence in 1947. Britain reacted to

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the Malayan uprising by using military force and thus this method was seen as a successful way of putting down a threat to imperial rule. The same principles were then applied to Kenya, although paradoxically both Malaya and Kenya gained independence after the Mau Mau Insurgency and Malayan Revolt. The notion that, the reason why the Mau Mau uprising was not nationalist was because it was unsuccessful does not stand when you consider the fact that ' mass nationalisms of the 1950s and 1960s in tropical Africa rarely mobilised a whole colonial territory.' [25] It therefore can be said that like the Malayan uprising, the Mau Mau rebellion was in fact nationalist.

During the 1950's British colonial rule was successfully challenged by nationalist movements, for example in Ghana. They achieved independence in 1957, during the Mau Mau rebellion and inspired nationalism in Kikuyu radicals who were eager for change. This helps to explain why Mau Mau movement came about in 1952 and lends itself to the idea that decolonisation had become an achievable political reality. Lonsdale and Obhaimbo point out that ' it [does not] matter that Mau Mau was not victorious on the battlefield,' because it paved the way to independence. [26] The Mau Mau rebellion undermined the white settler's authority and resulted in the loss of the consent of the governed and consequently democratic legitimacy. Additionally during the Mau Mau rebellion, the French Algerian War was taking place from 1954 to 1962, which resulted in the fall of the Fourth French Republic. This challenged colonial rule as a whole internationally, having a knock on effect on British colonial policy. Darwin observes that ' the struggle against Mau Mau set in motion political and social changes which were to undermine steadily the power of the white

settler community.’[27]It can therefore be said that in an international context the Mau Mau rebellion was a nationalist movement.

In conclusion it can be stated that although the Mau Mau movement was based on Kikuyu tribal grievances and therefore was clearly a tribalist rebellion, it was not without a true nationalist dimension. The Mau Mau rebellion was ‘ not a conventional nationalist movement,’ because both nationalism and tribalism are complex concepts and the combination of the two produced a multifaceted nationalist movement.[28]Both nationalism and tribalism need to be considered alongside each other in order to gain an understanding of the impact that Mau Mau had on Kenyan independence. When reflecting on the Mau Mau rebellion, the Kenyans had more in common as a tribe than as a nation because of the diverse ethnic composition of Kenya. Therefore to say that there was not a genuine nationalist dimension to the Mau Mau uprising is reductionist and doesn’t acknowledge the origins of Mau Mau and how their nationalist aims were the foundation of independence in 1960. Furedi maintains this argument and points out that ‘ the defeat of Mau Mau was conditional on the emergence of African nationalist politicians who possessed authority and credibility.’[29]To conclude it can therefore be argued that the Mau Mau Uprising was part of the foundation of Kenyan nationalism.