

Mau mau rebellion and the british response history essay



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In this essay I intend to explain the rise of the Mau Mau and the resulting British response from a socio political stand point. I will show that in response to the uprising the Colonial authorities perpetuated the ' myth of the Mau Mau' in order to serve their own interests and provide international justification for their actions. In effect the ' myth' was a product of wilful acceptance to prominent racial and ethnocentric views of the time. The British in fact went on to perpetuate these already prominent views imbedded in the western social consciousness and in doing so provided justification for the barbaric actions to follow, as well as igniting already prominent divides among the native people throughout the colony. This prevailing attitude spread amongst the heads of the colonial project and even to local loyalist people creating a detrimental social consciousness and ironically this myth did not diminish the cause of the Mau Mau fighters as intended, but it antagonised both sides of the divide, the myth took on a life of its own culminating in detrimental effects to both sides; in effect this turned into a war fuelled by resentment and revenge.

To show this I will firstly, give a brief overview of the political backdrop of the Kikuyu people during colonial times. Secondly, I will examine the evolution of the ' myth of Mau Mau' looking to its origins, academic justification and response to it. Thirdly, I will work through the resulting conflict showing how the myth contributed to the already multitude of divides and social misconceptions as play within the conflict; with reference to the Lari massacre and Project Anvil. Finally, to conclude I will give mention to recent events and challenges to the British courts from elderly Mau Mau fighters and show that if it was not for racial attitudes and stereotypes and with a

little more intelligent thought and acceptance this violent oppressive war could and should have never happened.

Origins political backdrop

Over three decades leading up to the ' Mau Mau' rebellion, Africans voiced plangent political concerns despite the obstruction of an unsympathetic colonial state.[1]Four issues of contention arose to be the main issues of political debate. Two of these were: low level African wages and the abolition of the kipande. European settlers wished to remain competitive in their agricultural production, which was rather less profitable than the extraction of natural resources, this meant tightening of wages for the local Kikuyu people. The kipande was an identity card enforced by the British; essentially it was used for altogether oppressive means relating to mobilization and employment. Two further deep-rooted issues arose from mid-1930 onwards. Firstly, the need to secure effective, elected African representation; previously attempts to manage politics had been utilised by way of, nominated and salaried chiefs who were effectively under the influence of European missionaries, who were by way of the chiefs effectively the voice of the Kenyan people.[2]Secondly, the issue of land appropriation and distribution, this had in fact been a bone of contention since the beginning of colonial rule, however, this was exacerbated by restricted migration of peoples and enforcement of land segregation due to tightening economic constraints on the European powers in the post-WWII period, making this the most contested argument and division in Kenya, especially amongst the Kikuyu people.

By 1950 these political contentions had evolved into three distinct political movements: Conservatives, Moderate Nationalists and Militant Nationalists. The Conservative block, comprising of: Chiefs, headmen, and senior Christian elders, their authority had been built up and greatly consolidated through association with the colonial project. These people were a product of Social conditioning; western education carried out by Christian missionaries, dogmatising a new breed of Kenyans.[3]The Moderate Nationalists emerged from the early 1920's, previously educated 'mission boys', developed westernised attitudes and prevailing Christian beliefs again by way of colonial conditioning. The old conservative chiefs were viewed as a barrier to progress and modernisation, a step away from traditional values and cultural politics.[4]A materialist rivalry fuelled and intensified their political struggles; in a battle for power the difference in agendas at first was not entirely clear.

Koinange Wa Mbiya, 'the most distinguished chief of the colonial era,' became disillusioned with the colonial regime, originally a staunch conservative supporter his views shifted dramatically over the issue of land appropriation.[5]The land reserves were diminishing and population was growing rapidly, people succumbed to hunger and even starvation, which spread rapidly amongst the native people. In a passionate speech Koinange appealed to the colonial land commission for the return of his people's 'lost lands', his appeal fell on deaf ears, the colonial powers had another agenda and his appeal was rejected.[6]Consequently, he joined the Kikuyu Central Association (KCA) an organisation he was previously vehemently opposed to. He even went as far as donating his own land and giving financial support to the Kikuyu Independent Schools Association, successfully challenging the

Christian mission's monopoly of primary education for the children of Kenya; an important factor in raising 'free thinking' Kenyan's free of dogmatism and colonial conditioning, these newly educated children would go on to fuel the rise of nationalism.[7]

The British thought that they had drawn a line under the issue, demanding compliance from their colonial subjects. However, this was just the beginning of the problem; as the white settler population grew and mechanisation aided the efficiency of the production, less and less workers were needed resulting in more repatriation to the reserves. This was exacerbated further by the Chieftains, with western ideologies of their own, believing in progress and modernity, they developed their own aspirations for wealth and power, further alienating the local Kikuyu population.

Origins of Mau Mau and creation of a myth

The origins of the Mau Mau contrary to the beliefs of the west and colonial governments within Kenya were heralded on very much peaceful beginnings, this can be view in contrast to Britain's greater colonial empire particularly, India, the 'jewel in the crown', where Gandhi's vision of non-violence had now seemed to transgress continents; for it was indeed this stance that the rebel Mau Mau organisation began. The first signs of integration or the population to Mau Mau sympathies arose, as we have seen, out of opposition of their own self-mastery. This choice first entailed a rejection of the leadership of many patrons, particularly the chiefs who, as one vernacular newspaper article argued in January 1948, 'should know that to be respected through fear is not as good as respect through love'. Initial

protests were intentionally carried out and lead by educated Africans with <https://assignbuster.com/mau-mau-rebellion-and-the-british-response-history-essay/>

emphasis on strong discipline and unity.[8]Even moral boosting songs proclaimed, ' we don't want war we want justice'. The newspaper Mumenyereri observed, ' Africans have no weapons', ' but their weapon is to speak the truth and to be honest'.[9]

The United Kingdom, conversely, sought to popularise a very different interpretation, and largely succeeded. This was that the troubles were a small unpopular, easily controllable, savage tribal uprising, perhaps the symptom of some form of mass psychosis, the result of the Kikuyu tribe's inability to cope with the modern world.[10]The British depiction and the official colonial/western view of Mau Mau were of a savage, violent, and depraved tribal cult, who expressed unrestrained emotion rather than reason. It sought to turn the Kikuyu people back to ' the bad old days' before enlightened British rule had brought the blessings of modern civilization and development.[11]Government intelligence reports dwelt on the ' insane frenzy' and ' fanatical discipline' of Mau Mau adherents.[12]It had been deliberately organized, according to the government, by cynical and unprincipled leaders, seeking only to satisfy their own lust for power. Depraved, murderous, and wholly evil, Mau Mau had to be totally destroyed; this view was backed up by leading academics of the time.[13]This is not to say that a brilliant ' lie' was devised, but merely that one particular version of events (which was perhaps no further from the truth than many of the other interpretations) was publicised because it cause the British less problems when trying to justify their African policies to those international neighbours to whom they had to pay heed, above all Americans. It blunted criticisms, stifled debate, and exonerated the British response.[14]In reality,

the 'myth' was more sophisticated and wider and served more tangible purpose than this would suggest. It must be recognised that not all was myth, and that Mau Mau was far from a 'standard' anti-colonial uprising, if such a creature indeed exists.[15]

By the Mid-1960's this interpretation began to be challenged by a revisionist version of Mau Mau which depicted it as an essential, if radical, component of nationalism in Kenya. First, memoirs of the Emergency by some of those active in Mau Mau began to be published, notably by J. M. Kariuki and Waruhiu Itote:[16]both who insisted that Mau Mau was a modern, rational, and nationalist political movement, not tribalist reaction. These publications set the way for two hugely influential works which would reshape academic opinion; the first, *Mau Mau from Within* by Karari Njama:[17]the second, *The Myth of "Mau Mau": Nationalism in Kenya* by John Nottingham and Carl Rosberg.[18]Nottingham and Rosberg concluded that interpretations of Mau Mau as savage and atavistic tribalism is subject to penetrating analysis as a "myth of the Mau Mau" grounded in European racism and ethnocentrism. [19]

This wilful propagating and demonising antagonised an already deeper problem of racial and ethnocentric social views. The cultural misconceptions already prevalent in the social consciousness of Europeans were evident with racial and barbarian attitudes shown towards Africans, it was this that the British government could influence, the myth they propagated further cemented these misconceptions, the colonial administration seeking advantage to pursue its own ends at state level. This attitude is clearly seen in a book by Christopher Wilson, *Kenya's Warning*; throughout the book he <https://assignbuster.com/mau-mau-rebellion-and-the-british-response-history-essay/>

writes clearly engulfed by a misconceived social consciousness. In a chapter on the Mau Mau leaders he goes on to discredit the causes of support for the Mau Mau. He tackles the legitimacy of aggravations caused by lack of land for cultivation, lack of money on account of low wages, and denial of legitimate political claims; siding in each case with the colonial project.

[20]He demeans the intentions of the Mau Mau leaders as 'acting in their own interests', 'having no interest in the welfare of the masses', 'deluding them with promises [the masses]'. Essentially the non-conformity with western ideas is seen as backward, primitive and uneducated.[21]Mau Mau supporters were belittled by loyalists as impoverished criminal delinquents and so, it was believed, morally ill-equipped to lead political action or participate in debate: 'When you kill your fellow men because of foolishness, I tell you that you are far from becoming a leader of any sort.' (Letter E. Munene to editor, 30th Jan 1954)[22]Mau Mau forest fighters were frequently derided by loyalists as 'wild animals' and in particular 'hyenas'. [23]

The British response-

In October 1952w, the new colonial administrator took an altogether more decisive approach to the situation in hand; opting for a more heavy handed approach and military response the Mau Mau rebellion, to be implemented immediately. A State of Emergency was declared and the British colonial government of Kenya waged a violent counter-insurgency campaign against the Mau Mau rebels. In this effort the regime was assisted by collaborators, known as loyalists, drawn from the same communities as the insurgents. This created an "ambiguity of allegiances" of which were influenced by propaganda and events on both sides of the divide; loyalism in fact seems to

have been a product of the same intellectual debates that had spanned the Mau Mau insurgency itself.[24] Francis Gatheru was a staunch supporter of the loyalist and colonial cause during the state of emergency, his reasoning for standing opposed to his fellow was ironically deduced for the very same reasons from which the Mau Mau sought revolution. Gatheru dismissed the idea that oaths of allegiance to the Mau Mau were taken by way of ritualistic nature, and it was the threat of supernatural punishment that compelled most to pledge their support to the insurgents. Admitting this this was a factor, but exaggerated by the British; who propagated this demonised dark nature of the local people. Instead Gatheru points to the Mau Mau's promise to deliver 'freedom, land and every good thing we wished to have' that primarily won over the hearts and minds of the local people. This suggests that contrary to the British claims that the majority of people were oathed voluntarily. Proclaiming 'ithaka na wiathi' meaning 'self-mastery through land', it is clear that the militant Mau Mau leaders had utilised the primary contention that could unite the people against the colonial regime.[25] What followed was in effect a civil war, more than 90 per cent of the 13, 000 officially acknowledged casualties of the anti-colonial and internecine violence were Kikuyu, Embu or Meru; most of which were killed by their fellow inhabitants of Kenya's Central Highlands. Gatheru now disillusioned and horrified by the conflict, saw his people no closer to 'self-mastery', they were fighting an unwinnable war; up against the full force and technological advancement of the British Empire. What Gatheru realised as did much of the native population that 'we are not to get any ware by prolonging the situation', 'if we are getting the opposite of what the Mau Mau promised us

when we were taking the oath, why then ... shouldn't we do the contrary of what we promised?'

The divide was widening, the British played the natives against one another; in an already divided population with a huge number of grievances and contentions it was easy to mobilize support on either side. On the loyalist side: demonising propaganda, colonial education/westernisation, Christian indoctrination, material superiority, non-violence, political ends and even monetary incentive and bribes. On the Mau Mau side: land contentions, living/working conditions, land hunger, wage levels, material divides as well as traditional and cultural issues all played apart. Most strikingly as the contention between the sides intensified revenge was a clear motive on both sides in the ambiguity of allegiances. Fuelled by principles of modernisation, progress and westernisation, old moderate leaders now in control of the Mau Mau organisation, looked to oust not only the colonial powers but also the stooge chiefs, who according to them were holding back the nation and not radical enough in their western attitudes. These leaders utilised the grievances of the peasants, primarily issues relating to land appropriation, to add to the numbers of the Mau Mau fighters/militants. Other kikuyu people saw the war as unwinnable and tended towards loyalist persuasion along with other settlers who had ' benefited' from colonial education/conditioning and Christian dogmatising; their political attitude to the war was one of non-violence. When the violence inevitably did start propaganda further divided the two camps, the freedom fight became embroiled in a fight between Kikuyu interests and developed into a vendetta of revenge not freedom.

Lari massacre

The Lari massacre was the war's iconographic moment. The attack on Lari had been carefully planned and was not as reported an indiscriminate act of violence, the homesteads attacked had in fact been very carefully chosen. All of the victims were the families of local chiefs, ex-chiefs, headmen, councillors and prominent Home Guard. What followed was not planned or strategic in any manner whatsoever, purely an act of enraged revenge; a second massacre took place at Lari that night. It was perpetrated by the Home Guard, later joined by other elements of the security services, who took revenge on any persons in the location they could lay their hands on whom they suspected of Mau Mau sympathies. Propaganda and spin followed the inevitable cover up, 'mopping-up operations'.^[26] This tragedy not only was a catalyst for events to come but epitomised the war, Kikuyu fighting Kikuyu, in essence a civil war perpetuated by myth blatant cultural misunderstanding as well as prominent racial and ethnocentric attitudes.

Project Anvil

When dawn broke on the morning of 24 April 1954, Nairobi's citizens woke to find their city under siege. Over the previous four months an elaborate scheme had been worked out to systematically search the city and to 'screen' every African.^[27] This rigorous process left nothing unturned all documentation had to be present and correct, with even the slightest discrepancy cause for suspicion. Africans were hustled out of their houses and herded into barbed-wire compounds, where they waited for the cogs of colonial bureaucracy to turn. A crude system of classification was put in place, highlighting the racial problems stirring, of the Africans screened

they were classified as 'white', 'grey' or 'black'; black used to connote danger and allegiances to Mau Mau; and white used to connote not a threat to society and to be repatriated; highlighting the prominent racial attitudes of the time. The legal basis of the screening and detention camps was set up by a Delegated Detention Order, where by under the emergency law, suspects could be detained without trial simply by a signature of any officer of the rank district officer or above. Nothing more was needed to condemn a man to incarceration for two years or more. Suspicion that man had taken an oath, or even that he was thought to be in sympathy of the Mau Mau, was sufficient for detention without trial. Accusations made by others, such as the hooded loyalist informants (gikunia) used at Langata, needed no corroboration; their silent and anonymous testimonies would condemn many men to the detention camps. The use of elders brought from the reserve in the screening of men was intended to act as a check against any possible victimization, but it was impossible to prevent score-settling or personal vendettas.[28] In the morass of Operation Anvil, there were masses of cases of mistaken identity, and once labelled it was exceedingly difficult to challenge a detention order, bureaucratic procedure had taken over from common sense: with these numbers, what did it matter if one more kikuyu was detained? And if in any doubt, it was surely better to detain the man than let him go? By 26 May, when Anvil finally came to an end, the numbers screened had climbed about 50, 000; nearly half the total number Kikuyu in the city and been imprisoned, by the end of 1954 one-third of all Kikuyu men were said to be in prison, these detainees had not been convicted of any crime and were all held without trial.[29] Special Branch reckoned that 700 of these were 'hard-core' Mau Mau, a measly 3 per cent of the total detainees;

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with the evidence against the majority being nothing more than pretty slight, but no one seemed concerned by this alarming statistic, to job had been done.[30]

By late June, Morrison, the General Secretary of the Christian Council of Kenya, wrote to the governor, Sir Frederick Crawford, about more than sixty Kikuyu Christians who had been rounded up in Operation Anvil. The loyalty of these men was above question; yet it appeared they had been swept away into the detention camps as Mau Mau suspects. Effort were made to locate the men, however, Morrison reports, ' We are informed either that persons cannot be traced, or that they must be re-screened, or that they cannot return to Nairobi because they were self-employed, or some other reason is given which prevents or delays release.' The government was in danger of alienating the one group among the Kikuyu on whose support they must ultimately rely as a nucleus for influencing the rest.[31]

Archdeacon Peter Bostock, of the Anglican Church, visited Langata in person twice during the June in an effort to identify the ' missing' men. He was shocked and disturbed by the experience. He described the conditions as ' grossly overcrowded' and stated that the home guard were only ' barely in control', it seemed as is the camps were ' a law unto themselves'.[32]

In January 1955 the Church of Scotland moderator in Kenya, David Steel, startled his Presbyterian congregation with an impassioned attack from the pulpit against the arbitrary callousness of government policies, taking Operation Anvil as his principle case. Steel described how the government had alienated Christian support through its heavy-handedness, summarily

throwing the innocent into detention, where they were contaminated by the wicked, and failing to protect decent people from the abuse of those whom the government armed as their protectors, the Home Guard. Carelessness, an utter disregard for the rights of Africans had resulted in many honest, law-abiding citizens being incarcerated during anvil. Steel also referred to 'more sinister forces' at work; citing 'false accusations' that had been 'deliberate and calculated', heavily criticising the system of informants branding it 'far from infallible' and suggesting that this had happened more frequently than the security forces were prepared to concede.[33]

The army fought against Mau Mau's military confusions. These were very different from those which haunted the liberal myth of modernization; a contrast between modernisation, progress and capitalist attitudes with an eerie respect to the shared experience of war, based on strategy, respect, loyalty, and noble attitudes.[34] They rose above the prominent racial attitudes, fighting together, side by side with Africans during the war had instilled respect and honour amongst the troops and even the generals. General Erskine, commander during the critical first part of the war, took a simple soldierly view of the oaths which so disturbed the understanding of most observers. He recognised that Mau Mau had grievances and an aim, to eject Europeans. The connexion between strategic end and nauseating means was crisply rational.[35] The colonial secretary, Oliver Lyttelton, was struck by a nobler likeness between forest fighter and British soldier. A veteran of the Great War, he respected men who, contrary to their 'tribal reputation', had 'more than once pressed home attacks against wire, and in the face of hot fire, and heavy casualties.' He had asked no more of his

Grenadiers. If Mau Mau gallantry was explained by 'dutch courage ... doped with hemp', had he not too, like others in this war, braced himself with rum before battle? Such recognition of equivalence, so contrary both to the racialism which denied a common humanity and the liberalism which pitied dupes, was politically important. Even Churchill commander and chief himself was held to have thought the 'fibre, ability and steel' of the Kikuyu deserved to be acknowledged by an offer of terms.[36]After sixty-eight hours of interrogating the captured 'General China', superintendent Ian Henderson, the boys' own hero of the settlers' war, concluded that his prisoner was a 'complete fanatic'. Was he then mentally ill? Not at all. China had 'a good brain and a remarkable memory.' He knew why he was fighting; 'his sole wish was to expound his political testament before Legislative Council and walk to the gallows without trial.'

It took the tragedy of Hola camp, where eleven 'hard core' detainees were beaten to death in the name of modernisation, to bring the British government round to the military view. As Margery Perham put it, the hard core were determined to prove that they 'were not in the grip of some remedial obsession but pursuing logical and irrevocable political aims.' The detainees might have put it differently. The immediate issue was work and its refusal. Their case was simple. They were political prisoners, not criminals. To work to order would be to admit to wrong. Work was a proper demonstration of responsibility for free men; under any other condition it was slavery.[37]Britain could not continue to remake Kenya by force when other European powers were abandoning attempts to remodel colonial rule for the moral high ground of informal empire. A political war must be ended

by political means. Civilization had to gamble on concession and agreement, not enforced by the tyranny of good intentions and warders' truncheons. Within months of Hola came Lancaster House and the prospect of majority rule.[38]Only international and metropolitan pressures could compel the United Kingdom to decolonise, and so the 'myth of Mau Mau' served the useful purpose of forestalling any concerted international effort to redirect United Kingdom policy and of blunting the criticisms emanating from those countries to whom the British were obliged to pay heed. By dissociating the uprising from the global forces of nationalism and communism, by stressing its violent and uncompromising nature, and by constantly asserting the ease which it would be defeated, it succeeded in this aim, as any reading of the United Nations' records for the period will testify.[39]

Conclusion