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978-0-521-13090-5 - Defeating Mau Mau, Creating Kenya: Counterinsurgency, Civil War, and Decolonization

Daniel Branch

Excerpt

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Introduction

Understanding Loyalism in Kenya's Civil War

'You Can Have Your Wealth'

Colonialism in tropical Africa was announced by a battleship senselessly 'firing into a continent.'¹ In Kenya, at least, the retreat from empire looked little different. Early in March 1955, Jeremiah Nyagah, one of the indigenous opponents of the anti-colonial Mau Mau insurgency, attended the consecration of a new church in the Embu district. 'Not far from where we were,' Nyagah wrote, 'the Lancaster bombers were pounding the forest and the Mau Mau hideouts.' Despite the dropping of ordnance on to Mount Kenya in an attempt to flush out the bedraggled remnants of Mau Mau's insurgents, 'the noise of the exploding bombs did not mar the beauty of the solemn divine service.'² As the bombs fell on the last guerrillas sheltering in the mountain forests of Central Kenya, the attempts to forcibly equate might and right in the minds of colonial subjects and metropolitan citizens were no more comprehensible than they had even been. What had changed was the division of the African population of Kenya's Central Highlands into two definite camps – those like Nyagah watching the infliction of violence on the insurgents from afar and those in the forests targeted by the bombers. Over the duration of colonial Kenya's civil war, which had begun in 1952, the peoples of the Mount Kenya region had been forced by the course of the violence into one of two camps: loyalist or Mau Mau.

¹ Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness* (New York, 1999), 16.

² Rhodes House Library, Oxford (RHL) Mss Afr s 1727, Foote papers, J. J. Nyagah to M. Foote, 12 March 1955.

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Loyalists, such as Nyagah, were drawn from the same one-million-strong members of the Kikuyu, Embu, and Meru ethnic groups from which the Mau Mau rebellion sprang. Indeed, loyalists hailed from the same families, clans, and neighbourhoods as those who became their bitter rivals during the Mau Mau war that engulfed the Central Highlands between 1952 and 1956. The neat division between loyalists and Mau Mau implied by Nyagah's distance from the fighting in its latter stages was a product of the conflict rather than a cause or catalyst of the violence. Initially, that violence was more ambiguous and intimate than it later became. The case of one of the war's very first victims, Matari Muthamia, amply supports that observation.

After dark on an evening in mid-October 1952, a fortnight before Kenya's British rulers declared a State of Emergency, Matari, her sister, four other women, and the children of each were gathered together in a hut in the Meru district. Unlike Nyagah, who was the son and son-in-law of chiefs in the Embu district and later, after independence in 1963, a prominent politician and founder of a political dynasty, Matari was a relatively anonymous figure. A poor widow with a young child, dependent on the generosity of her sister and brother-in-law for her existence, Matari existed on the periphery of society. Together with her companions, and in common with tens of thousands elsewhere in Central Kenya at this time, Matari was summoned to the hut to be secretly oathed and to pledge her support for the movement that had come to be known as Mau Mau.

Oathing was a method of mobilisation and, as discussed in Chapter 1, an attempt to ensure the silence of the general population while the insurgents went about their business in localities. However, the use of oathing paraphernalia drawn from Kikuyu religion, such as raw goat meat, led to wildly exaggerated accusations of witchcraft and bestiality by the colonial regime, who outlawed the practice, and the mission churches. The denunciations of oathing by the latter led to some Christians refusing the oath and thus risking being killed by oath administrators fearful of those same individuals becoming police informers. A combination of secrecy and a willingness to use violence against recalcitrant individuals on the part of oath administrators enabled militant political figures at the head of what became Mau Mau to oath the vast majority of the population of the Central Highlands by the end of 1952 without significant interference from the state.

Matari's oathing ceremony was no different in form from most other similar events. It was held at night, in secret, and at the behest of a figure close to the intended initiates. The clandestine meeting's convener

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was Matari's brother-in-law, Mugwongo Ruria, with whom the widow sat down to eat dinner every night. Fatefully, Matari was a Christian, and when her turn arrived to pledge her allegiance to the insurgents, she refused. The oathers ordered her to leave the hut to face the punishment for disobedience. As she exited the building, Matari handed her small child to Mugwongo and announced to the assembled group, 'I leave you, you can have your wealth.'³ Outside the hut she was killed by her brother-in-law, who eventually went to the gallows.

Interrogating the reasons for Matari's death is not a simple exercise. The predominant explanation within Kenyan popular memory for the violence of Mau Mau's insurgents, that it was driven by a nationalist spirit that denied expression in more peaceful forms, explains little about either this specific case or the thousands of Kikuyu killed by one another during the conflict. A more subtle explanation is needed. Petersen is right to warn that in such conditions of conflict, 'the extraordinary is inextricably linked to the ordinary.'⁴ Obviously, Matari's faith impacted on her actions, but she acted not just as a convert to Christianity disowning what she saw as the paganism of her family members. Her final words, 'you can have your wealth,' critiqued the actions and motivations of her eventual killers with what is commonly termed 'moral ethnicity,' the interrogative and contested code of behaviour governing the conduct of those who imagined themselves to belong to the same ethnic community.⁵ And in killing his sister-in-law, Mugwongo apparently felt he had to do so to protect himself, the other participants, and local activists from the potential consequences of Matari's refusal to respect the code of silence necessary for the incubation of an insurrection. Finally, although we have no knowledge of the nature of the relations between Matari and Mugwongo, it seems reasonable to assume that all was not well within the household. The death of Matari in October 1952 can therefore only be adequately understood when placed within this complex matrix of causation. To explain the violence within the communities of the Central Highlands during the Mau Mau war, an understanding of political economy,

³ Kenya National Archive (KNA) MLA/1/625, CC198/1953, 'Muthuri Gatwankure & 10 Others.' See especially evidence of Raeli Nyagara and Karimi Mugwongo, 2–3 & 8 of proceedings.

⁴ Roger Petersen, *Resistance and Rebellion: Lessons From Eastern Europe* (Cambridge, 2001), 1.

⁵ John Lonsdale, 'The Moral Economy of Mau Mau: Wealth, Poverty and Civic Virtue in Kikuyu Political Thought,' in *Unhappy Valley: Conflict in Kenya and Africa*, eds. Bruce Berman and John Lonsdale (Oxford, 1992), 463, 466–8.

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household relations, the cosmologies of actors, and the demands placed on them by their living in a time of intense conflict must all be given due consideration.

Although historians have long attempted to explain why hundreds of thousands supported the cause of armed rebellion in late-colonial Kenya, rather less attention has been given to those like Matari, who at various times opposed the Mau Mau insurgency. Loyalism is a lacuna in the otherwise substantial literature on the war. Loyalists are all too frequently depicted in this literature as a few, wealthy Christian individuals, who acted in the service of colonial masters in the pursuit of self-interest or as the unconscious agents of “divide and rule” polices.⁶ Such arguments significantly underestimate the number of loyalists, deny their agency, and assume that the division between opponents and supporters of the insurgency were determined by prior social, political, or economic cleavages within Kikuyu society. The few brief studies of loyalism make similar assumptions of the distinctiveness of loyalists.⁷

This book in the first instance attempts to answer the question posed by Matari’s actions on that night in October 1952; why, despite the plentiful grievances with colonial rule and the manifest populism of Mau Mau’s cause, did tens of thousands of Kikuyu, Embu, and Meru at one time or another oppose the insurgency? In so doing, the arguments below differ from the existing literature on three points of significance. First, loyalists were a far more important component of the conflict than readers of other accounts of the Mau Mau war would otherwise surmise. Second, it is not the difference between loyalists and insurgents that demands explanation but instead the similarities shared between the two factions that are most notable. Finally, the motivations of loyalists were far more

⁶ See, for example, Bruce Berman, *Control and Crisis in Colonial Kenya: The Dialectic of Domination* (London, 1990), 357; Robert Edgerton, *Mau Mau: An African Crucible* (London, 1990), 82; Elkins, *Imperial*, 28–9, 49, 118, 246; Wunyabari Maloba, *Mau Mau and Kenya: An Analysis of a Peasant Revolt* (Oxford, 1998), 88–9; D. Makaru Ng’ang’a, ‘Mau Mau, Loyalists and Politics in Murang’a 1952–70,’ *Kenya Historical Review* 5 (1977), 368–9; Cora Ann Presley, *Kikuyu Women, the Mau Mau Rebellion, and Social Change in Kenya* (Boulder CO, 1992). 126; Carl Rosberg and John Nottingham, *The Myth of ‘Mau Mau’: Nationalism in Kenya* (New York, 1966), 292 & 295.

⁷ Ng’ang’a, ‘Loyalists and Politics’; Bethwell A. Ogot, ‘Revolt of the Elders: An Anatomy of the Loyalist Crowd in the Mau Mau Uprising 1952–1956,’ in *Hadith 4: Politics and Nationalism in Colonial Kenya*, ed. Bethwell A. Ogot (Nairobi, 1972); Mordechai Tamarkin, ‘The Loyalists in Nakuru During the Mau Mau Revolt and Its Aftermath, 1953–1963,’ *Asian and African Studies* 12 (1978).

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complex than too often assumed. Loyalists opposed Mau Mau because the rebellion posed a variety of threats unconnected to that against the incumbent regime. When opposition to Mau Mau arose, it initially drew on specific, local histories before later becoming a product of the cycle of violence that overwhelmed the Central Highlands through the first half of the 1950s. Mau Mau's anti-colonial rebellion thus developed rapidly into a civil war, a set of circumstances observable elsewhere.⁸

Mau Mau

Over the course of the four years following Matari's death, the anti-colonial rebellion and civil war claimed the lives of approximately 25,000 Kenyan Africans as a direct result of the violence. The vast majority of these fatalities were real or suspected Mau Mau activists.⁹ One hundred seventy African members of the official armed forces and at least 1,800 African opponents of the insurgents lost their lives.¹⁰ In contrast, 32 European settlers were murdered, and a further 63 European combatants were killed during the war.¹¹ Allies recruited from among the indigenous population of Central Kenya were then critical to the counterinsurgency campaign, inflicting 50 percent of Mau Mau casualties by the end of 1954.¹² By providing a numerically significant, temporary, irregular force financed by non-military sources, the militia known as the Home Guard swiftly and cheaply made up a shortfall in military manpower.¹³ In all, more than 90 percent of the officially acknowledged casualties of the war

⁸ See, for example, Ted Swedenberg's study of the 1936–9 rebellion against British rule in Palestine, which similarly transmuted into a conflict between Palestinians, Ted Swedenberg, *Memories of Revolt: The 1935–39 Rebellion and the Palestinian National Past* (Fayetteville AR, 2003), and Peter Hart's study of the Irish Republican Army (IRA) in Cork during the War of Independence and subsequent civil war in Ireland Peter Hart, *The I.R.A. and Its Enemies: Violence and Community in Cork, 1916–1923* (Oxford, 1998).

⁹ Blacker, 'Demography of Mau Mau.'

¹⁰ Colony & Protectorate of Kenya, *The Origins and Growth of Mau Mau: An Historical Survey* (Nairobi, 1960), 316.

¹¹ Elisha Stephen Atieno Odhiambo and John Lonsdale, 'Introduction,' in *Mau Mau and Nationhood: Arms, Authority and Narration*, eds. Elisha Stephen Atieno Odhiambo and John Lonsdale (Oxford, 2003), 3.

¹² RHL Mss Afr s 1580, File III, Hinde to Chief of Staff, 11 December 1954.

¹³ David Percox, 'Mau Mau and the Arming of the State,' in *Mau Mau and Nationhood: Arms, Authority and Narration*, eds. Elisha Stephen Atieno Odhiambo and John Lonsdale (Oxford, 2003), 123 & 130.

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were Kikuyu, most in all likelihood killed by their fellow inhabitants of Kenya's Central Highlands.¹⁴

The trigger for this violence was (of course) the intense grievances felt by Mau Mau's insurgents and the reaction of the colonial regime to the growing radicalisation of the colony's politics. The insurgency emerged from a triangle of discontent. The southernmost point was the colony's capital, Nairobi, where an underemployed, largely Kikuyu labour force was housed in the squalid neighbourhoods of the city's African quarters. Urban unrest was channelled towards militant politics by figures closely connected to the trade union movement and the city's criminal underworld. To the north of the city, on the slopes of Mount Kenya and the Aberdares range, lay the Native Reserves of Central Province. The internal boundaries between the districts of Central Province reflected the colonial mind, neatly delineated according to the assumed ethnic origin of the population within. So Embu belonged to the Embu district and Meru to the Meru district. Kikuyu were divided between the three districts of Kiambu, Fort Hall (later known as Murang'a), and Nyeri. In truth, the Kikuyu, Embu, and Meru have more in common culturally, linguistically, economically, and historically than markers of difference. For that reason, all three are referred to collectively here as Kikuyu except when explicitly stated otherwise.

Land was in short supply by 1945 in these overcrowded districts. The poor were thus forced off their holdings and cut adrift by the Kikuyu elites. To the west in the Rift Valley Province and along the rest of the White Highlands, another wave of dispossession swept through the colony in the post-war period. With the mechanisation of the large European farms, the Kikuyu squatter labour forces were rendered redundant and an unwanted burden on the white farmers. Their steady expulsion back to Nairobi and Central Province induced an ethnic solidarity among the Kikuyu population against their colonial oppressors. But this sense of common grievance was insufficiently strong to silence either the contradictions within Kikuyu society or disquiet with its eventual manifestation of militant and violent political action that became known as Mau Mau.

Mau Mau's rebels lacked coherence and organisation after its leadership, real and imagined, was decapitated by the arrests that marked the onset of the Emergency on 20 October 1952. Large numbers of known and suspected activists were detained and British and imperial troops deployed to the colony. Initially, the movement was tied together

¹⁴ Atieno Odhiambo and Lonsdale, 'Introduction,' 3.

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by the lines of communication created by decades of labour migration from smallholdings in the Native Reserves to the settler farms and the city of Nairobi. Coordination of thought, word, and deed was, however, disturbed by the violence, mass detentions, and forced removals of population that followed in the wake of the colonial state's declaration of war. In response, thousands of dissidents fearing capture took to the forests of Mount Kenya and the Aberdare Mountains in the final weeks of 1952. From there, they launched their guerrilla campaign. Mau Mau's recourse to insurgency was not at a time of its choosing but instead a reaction to the commencement of the Emergency. Beyond a vague and ill-defined commitment to land and freedom, Mau Mau's own discussions of aim, purpose, and legitimacy of violence were therefore left unresolved. The forests became the location for debate, factionalism, and contestation rather than the base for a unified rebel army.¹⁵

The insurgency must be partly explained by one of the most profound contradictions of colonialism – the establishment by European rulers of modernity as the benchmark for citizenship while restricting the ability of colonised peoples to attain that standard.¹⁶ Denied access to education, land, state institutions, and public services, Kenya's African communities were socially alienated, economically marginalised, and politically disenfranchised. Exacerbated by the proximity to European settlers, the legitimate grievances that ultimately manifested themselves in Mau Mau were more keenly felt after World War II than previously. But the anti-colonial agitation only superficially masked significant competition and contradictions within those same communities. Debates over land tenure, the status of poor and wealthy, patron–client relations, and the reciprocal responsibilities demanded of both were the very stuff of Central Kenya's political debates over the previous five decades at least. The Central Highlands had been increasingly beset by social conflict prior to the civil war of the 1950s. Neighbours and relatives took one another to court to protect their access to the scarce and valuable commodity of land. The wealthy lamented the poor for their unwillingness to work, while the poor accused the wealthy of failing in their duties as patrons to provide sufficient land to labour on. The position of Christianity and its adherents

¹⁵ John Lonsdale, 'Authority, Gender and Violence: The War Within Mau Mau's Fight for Land and Freedom,' in *Mau Mau and Nationhood: Arms, Authority and Narration*, eds. Elisha Stephen Atieno Odhiambo and John Lonsdale (Oxford, 2003).

¹⁶ John Comaroff, 'Government, Materiality, Legality, Modernity: On the Colonial State in Africa,' in *African Modernities: Entangled Meanings in Current Debate*, eds. Jan-Georg Deutsch, Peter Probst and Heike Schmidt (Oxford, 2002).

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within Kikuyu society was hotly debated. Husbands and wives accused each other of failing in their marital duties.¹⁷ In the context of violent anti-colonial rebellion led by some of the most vociferous and divisive participants in those preexisting internal political and social contests, it is not surprising that many others formed alliances with the colonial government to access the resources necessary to settle these more immediate and pressing disputes.

Loyalism and Civil War

The Mau Mau war is most usefully conceptualised as a helix, with the strands of anti-colonial and civil war violence intertwined. The first strand has dominated the attention of historians and Kenyan public alike. Within the attempts to depict Mau Mau in the broad strokes of ‘atavistic tribalism,’ ‘militant nationalism,’ ‘peasant war,’¹⁸ or, more recently, ‘incipient genocide,’¹⁹ loyalists appear as peripheral figures. Whenever the Mau Mau war is understood as one between Africans and Europeans, the internal aspect is set to one side and loyalists relegated in importance. It is, therefore, the second strand of the helix, that of the civil war, that is discussed in this book. Mau Mau rebels found themselves opposed by a growing body of loyalist opponents prepared to use fair means and foul to challenge the insurgency. As an ‘armed conflict within the boundaries of a recognised sovereign entity between parties subject to a common authority at the outset of the hostilities,’ Kenya in the 1950s experienced an irregular civil war.²⁰ Many within and outside of Kenya would contend that the label of civil war is inappropriate for an anti-colonial rebellion on the basis of the asymmetric nature of the violence.²¹ Unquestionably,

¹⁷ For further discussion of these aspects see Anderson, *Histories*, 9–53 & 139–51; Greet Kershaw, *Mau Mau From Below* (Oxford, 1997); Lonsdale, ‘Wealth, Poverty and Civic Virtue,’ 263–314; Derek Peterson, *Creative Writing: Translation, Bookkeeping, and the Work of Colonial Imagination* (Portsmouth NH, 2004).

¹⁸ Bruce Berman, ‘Nationalism, Ethnicity, and Modernity: The Paradox of Mau Mau,’ *Canadian Journal of African Studies* 25 (1991), 196.

¹⁹ Elkins, *Imperial*, 49.

²⁰ Kalyvas, *Logic of Violence*, 5. Kenya in the 1950s is considered to have experienced a civil war by the quantitative definitions used in much current literature (1000 fatalities killed during military combat with at least 100 on average per year over the duration of the conflict and a minimum of 100 fatalities on both sides). See Jeremy Weinstein, *Inside Rebellion: The Politics of Insurgent Violence* (Cambridge, 2007), 16.

²¹ See, for example, Michael Chege, ‘Britain’s Gulag: Critics Got Facts Wrong,’ *Daily Nation*, 17 March 2005.

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a significant majority of those killed in the war were, at the time of their death, suspected or actual supporters of the insurgency. But most were killed by loyalists.

It is these all-too-often misunderstood Kikuyu allies of the colonial state that are the subject of this book. The term loyalist is not used to imply any sympathy for colonial rule on the part of Kikuyu opponents of Mau Mau. In such contexts, almost every term used to describe actors and conflicts is contentious. ‘The politics of naming’ was as much a part of the Mau Mau war as any other.²² Because of the discrepancy between the commonly accepted meaning of the term loyalist – a pro-imperial actor – and its actual operational definition in the Kenyan context – an opponent of Mau Mau – it is clear that it is a noun that has the potential to misrepresent rather than explain actions. However, loyalist is persevered with here as, first, the label that is commonly used within the historiography on Mau Mau to denote a Kikuyu opponent of the insurgency and, second, the term that those opponents would themselves recognise. Moreover, alternatives to loyalist are not readily forthcoming or satisfactory. The label of surrogacy, a term used by Anderson, implies that the motivations for Kikuyu opponents wishing to see Mau Mau were not independent of those of the colonial government.²³ Although encouraging and frequently cajoling, colonial masters did not impose alliances on a pliant set of individuals.²⁴ Collaboration is a long-used term within the field of imperial history in such contexts, particularly in relation to the period of the colonial conquest. However, it is clear that collaboration is analytically problematic as readers coming to such debates from outside of that intellectual tradition so commonly understand the term pejoratively. For those reasons, loyalism is retained here to describe the series of alliances forged between Kikuyu opponents of the Mau Mau insurgency and the colonial government, albeit with unequal distributions of power.

These alliances between individual Kikuyu and the colonial regime were largely a product of the violence of the war itself. Initially temporary arrangements, the alliances assumed a degree of permanence only during

²² Mahmood Mamdani, ‘The Politics of Naming: Genocide, Civil War, Insurgency,’ *London Review of Books* 29 (2007).

²³ David Anderson, ‘Surrogates of the State: Collaboration and Atrocity in Kenya’s Mau Mau War,’ in *The Barbarisation of Warfare*, ed. George Kassimeris (London, 2006).

²⁴ The arguments advanced here have much in common with those made for Nyeri in Derek Peterson, ‘The Home Guard in Mau Mau’s Moral War’ (paper presented at the African Studies Association annual meeting, Boston 2003).

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a division of Kikuyu society that took place after the war had broken out.²⁵ At different stages of the war, most Kikuyu were both supporters of Mau Mau and allies of the government, sometimes even simultaneously. The conflict between loyalists and insurgents was not fought by two easily identifiable adversaries.²⁶ In the first instance, violence within local communities broke out along political, economic, and social faultlines produced during the decades prior to the insurgency. However, once initiated in those local communities, a distinctive cycle of violence was triggered. Entrepreneurs sought to exploit the prevailing conditions of war, individuals sought revenge, and the majority of the population of the Central Highlands simply looked to survive the conflict. Behaviour was thus informed by the ever-changing endogenous dynamics of the conflict, ‘the logic of violence,’ as much as by Mau Mau’s long and well-known prehistory.²⁷ These complex dynamics produced new groups of actors and temporary allegiances that cut across the prior cleavages, with rich and poor, men and women, young and old represented within the two predominant factions of loyalist and Mau Mau. Although the intellectual roots of both had common origins in the moral economy of colonial Central Kenya,²⁸ these allegiances were, it must be stressed, not determined in conditions other than duress and coercion.

The Micro-Foundations of Violence

Such arguments have been significantly informed by theoretical and comparative studies of similar episodes. As an asymmetric, irregular civil war fought between a state and a rebel group, the conflict in Kenya is far from exceptional. The tens of thousands of Kenyan fatalities of the 1950s number among the 16 million or so killed in civil wars fought globally since the end of World War II.²⁹ Like Mau Mau, the majority of rebel groups

²⁵ Greet Kershaw, ‘Mau Mau From Below: Fieldwork and Experience, 1955–57 and 1962,’ *Canadian Journal of African Studies* 25 (1991), 288–9.

²⁶ Derek Peterson, ‘Writing in Revolution: Independent Schooling and Mau Mau in Nyeri,’ in *Mau Mau and Nationhood: Arms, Authority and Narration*, eds. Elisha Stephen Atieno Odhiambo and John Lonsdale (Oxford, 2003), 93.

²⁷ Kalyvas, *Logic of Violence*.

²⁸ John Lonsdale, ‘The Moral Economy of Mau Mau: The Problem,’ in *Unhappy Valley: Conflict in Kenya and Africa*, eds. Bruce Berman and John Lonsdale (Oxford, 1992), 266.

²⁹ James Fearon and David Laitin, ‘Ethnicity, Insurgency, and Civil War,’ *American Political Science Review* 97 (2003), 75–90.