

Activity 4. Multiple Perspectives on the Independence Movement in Kenya

Instructions: The edited excerpts from a 1952 *New York Times* article present a Western view on the Kenyan struggle for independence from Great Britain after World War II. Koigi Wa Wamwere, a Kenyan political activist and writer, responds in passages from his autobiography where he discusses his uncle's involvement in the Mau Mau rebellion. Read each document and answer the questions that follow them. Be prepared to discuss the follow-up questions at the end of the assignment.

Follow-up Questions for Discussion

1. *The New York Times* describes the Mau Mau rebellion as a rebellion against civilization and Christianity. In your view, are colonization and imperialism justified if they bring modernization and civilization?
2. We live in an era when people in power loosely label their opponents as terrorists. Wamwere and other Kenyan rebels did not deny the “crimes” that the British accused them of committing against White settlers and their African allies. In your opinion, were the Mau Mau terrorists or freedom fighters? Explain.

1. The Mau Mau Rebellion According to *The New York Times*

Source: “The Mau Mau Rebellion,” *The New York Times*, September 18, 1952, p. 28

A. We live in a tortured period of history when strange and primitive forces are coming into their own again. Our civilization often seems but a veneer covering dark abysses.

Now and then the surface is pierced and we see frightening things . . . If we who comfortably read this newspaper over breakfast table here were living in East Africa these thoughts could have a terrifying meaning. Little items have been appearing in recent weeks, coming from Nairobi, the capital of the British Crown Colony of Kenya. One day it is about Christian missionaries fleeing for their lives. Another is about men being struck down on lonely farms or roads in the night.

B. It is the Mau Mau which is causing all this trouble and anxiety — not very serious trouble, but there are alarming signs of a concerted and organized effort at terrorism, which is linked to political, social and racial aspirations. The Mau Mau is a secret society formed from the Kikuyu tribe whose millions or so members live in the fertile highlands around Nairobi . . . It is inevitable in our time that the white missionary should be tied to a hated imperialism. In turning on the missionary the rebellion soul rejects the Christianity which the missionary brought. In Africa this does not seem to mean falling back on atheism or agnosticism; it means a return to paganism — to the “leopard man,” to ritual murders, to primitive magic and terror. That is how the Mau Mau works.

Questions

1. According to this article, who are the Mau Mau?
2. What words does the article use to describe what is taking place in Kenya?
3. If this article is representative, what is the western view of the Mau Mau?

2. A Kenyan Rebel Explains why the Mau Mau Fought

Source: *I Refuse to Die, My Journey for Freedom* by Koigi Wa Wamwere (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2003, pp. 99-100)

A. For Africans, land meant more than food and a house. It was their permanent residence before, during and after life. To fight for land and freedom, Mau Mau was trying to secure their eternal existence. Refusing to understand this, the British subjected

them to a great misrepresentation. They called the *itoi* (rebels), *imaramari* (terrorists), *washenzi* (primitive people), as well as atavistic, cannibalistic and beastly. In the minds of the British, Mungai [my father's younger brother] and his comrades were not fighting for freedom. Africans knew of no freedom. They were fighting to return to a past of primitiveness, darkness, death and evil. The British accused Mungai and his comrades of foolishly sacrificing their lives for death . . . Mungai went to the forest not to lose his own life, but to protect African life from being snuffed out by British colonialism. He went to the forest not because he loved going for days without food as a guerilla, but because he wanted to recapture stolen lands and end hunger for himself and other Kenyans.

B. Like other young men, Mungai was married and wanted to have a family but he did not want to be a father whom white people called *mboi*, a boy, and humiliated before his own children. He did not want to be a father and a husband who begged the white man for the food of his family. He died for the security of his wife and children against colonial rape and assault. He went to the forest to fight for human rights of his people . . . The Second World War had taught Africans two lessons: With guns, they could kill white people. If the German Hitler could be fought, so could the British Hitler. After the war, British soldiers had come to Kenya to be rewarded with land. African soldiers had returned home, not to be given land, but for the lucky ones to be hired as laborers of those who fought with them in the same trenches in Europe and Burma. This was the injustice that had driven Mungai and the Mau Mau to the forests.

Questions

1. According to this author, why did the Mau Mau challenge the British?
2. How did the British misrepresent the independence struggle by Kenyans?
3. What lessons did Africans learn from World War II?