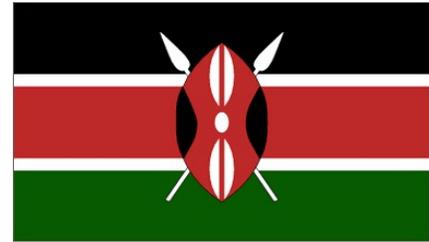


Resisting British Colonialism in Kenya

by Tabora Johnson and Tim McEnroe

In the 1950s, the western press portrayed resistance to British colonialism in Kenya as terrorist, fanatical and backward, in much the same way as the Bush administration dismissed Islamic opposition forces in the twenty-first century. The documents in this package allow students to compare western news coverage of the group it called “Mau Mau” with the way the rebels saw themselves and their struggle. Study of the Kenyan independence movement presses students to consider the question, “Who are the actual terrorists?”



Kenya is located in east Africa in the equatorial region. Ninety-seven percent of its population is of African descent and the largest tribal group is known as Kikuyu. The country was colonized by Great Britain between 1901 and 1960. British settlers, who came to Kenya because of its resources and comfortable climate, forced indigenous farmers and herders onto marginal land or made them work on European-owned farms and plantations. During the 1950s there was a sustained rebellion against colonial rule and the cost of maintaining the colony finally forced Britain to accept Kenyan independence. In 1964, Jomo Kenyatta, President of the Kenya African National Union, became the first President of Kenya.

During the 1950s, the British charged Kenyan rebels were part of a secret and savage society known as the “Mau Mau,” whose members had supposedly pledged to slaughter Europeans and drive them out of Africa. The derivation of the term may have been from the Kikuyu phrase *uma-uma* – “they are coming.” The British war against the Kikuyu, the largest group in the rebellion, was ruthless and justified by charges that the rebels were terrorists. These charges were widely repeated in the western press, including *The New York Times*. Kenyan views of the conflict come from the writings and speeches of Jomo Kenyatta and from a memoir by Koigi Wa Wamwere, *I Refuse to Die* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2002).

Timeline of the Independence Movement in Kenya

August, 1951. British believe a secret society called the Mau Mau requires members to take an oath to drive the white man from Kenya. The colonial government imposes a curfew.

October 7, 1952. Chief Waruhui, who spoke against forces opposing British to colonial rule, is assassinated.

October 1952. British announce plan to send troops to Kenya to fight against the Mau Mau.

October 21, 1952. Jomo Kenyatta, president of Kenya African Union is arrested for alleged Mau Mau involvement.

October 30, 1952. British troops arrest over 500 suspected Mau Mau activists.

November 14, 1952. 34 schools in Kikuyu areas are closed in an effort to clamp down on Mau Mau activists.

November 25, 1952. Mau Mau declare rebellion against British rule in Kenya.

January 18, 1953 Governor-general imposes the death penalty for anyone who administers the Mau Mau oath.

January 26, 1953. European settlers in Kenya create their own commando units.

April 8, 1953. Jomo Kenyatta, known to his followers as the “Burning Spear,” is sentenced to 7 years hard labor.

April 24, 1954. Over 40,000 Kikuyu tribesmen are arrested by British forces during dawn raids.

January 18, 1955. The Governor-general of Kenya offers a limited amnesty to Mau Mau activists who will not face the death penalty for participation in the rebellion.

June 10, 1955. Britain withdraws the offer of amnesty to the Mau Mau.

October 1955. According to official reports, over 70,000 Kikuyu suspected of Mau Mau membership have been imprisoned and over 13,000 people have been killed during the last three years of the Mau Mau Rebellion.

July 1959. 11 Mau Mau activists held at Hola Camp in Kenya are murdered.

November 10, 1959. State of emergency ends.

January 18, 1960 The Kenyan Constitutional Conference held in London is boycotted by African nationalists.

April 18, 1961. In return for Jomo Kenyatta’s release, nationalist leaders agree to take a role in the government.

December 12, 1964. Kenya declared a republic. Jomo Kenyatta, aged 74, is first president.

Conflicting Interpretations of the Kenyan Struggle for Independence

Examine the conflicting interpretations of the Kenyan rebellion and war for independence presented in *The New York Times* (A) and by Jomo Kenyatta and Koigi Wa Wamwere (B). After reading the excerpts from the articles and statements, write a 250 word letter to the Editor of *The New York Times* either supporting or opposing its position on the “Mau Mau.” Note that Jomo Kenyatta argues that the K.A.U. or Kenya African National Union, not the mythical Mau Mau, is leading the rebellion in Kenya. Koigi Wa Wamwere acknowledges that the guerilla fighters and the Mau Mau are the same, but believes they are justified in their struggle.

A. *The New York Times* Presents Western Views on the Kenyan Rebellion and War for Independence

1. The Mau Mau (September 18, 1952)

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. . . . 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.

2. Desecrations Laid to Kenya Terrorists (September 17, 1952)

Headless dogs have been nailed to Government notice boards and dead goats place on church altars by the Kikuyu tribe’s secret and terrorist Mau Mau Society, a member of the Kenya Legislative Council charged here today. . . . The Mau Mau Society, said to exist in the 1,000,000-strong Kikuyu tribe in Northern Kenya, is pledged to drive all Europeans out of Kenya. Mr. Usher said evidence for the existence of the Mau Mau Society was “superabundant.” In addition to the headless dogs and goats on church altars, he mentioned “murderous” assaults on missionaries, murder and mutilation of police informers and witnesses, and attacks on chiefs and headmen opposed to Mau Mau. He called for legislation that would exterminate “this filthy thing.”

3. Behavior of Troops in Kenya Defended (January 27, 1954)

Anthony Head, British Secretary for War, who has just returned from an inspection trip to Kenya, denied today that British Army units in the colony had engaged in “indiscriminate shooting, irresponsible conduct or inhuman practices” in suppressing the native Mau Mau rebellion. In the House of Commons, Mr. Head cited the findings of a court of inquiry set up in Kenya in December under the chairmanship of Lieut. Gen. Sir Kenneth McLean, which received evidence from 147 military and civilian witnesses. On that basis and on observations during his visit, he said, “I am convinced that the British Army, under difficult and arduous circumstances, has shown that measure of restraint backed by good discipline which this country has traditionally expected” An inquiry was begun after widely publicized complaints that British troops had offered monetary prizes as rewards for the killing or capture of wanted Mau Mau suspects, and had resorted to torture to gain information.

B. Kenyan Rebels Explain their Struggle

1. Jomo Kenyatta's speech at the Kenya African Union meeting (June, 1952)

Source: http://www.africawithin.com/kenyatta/speech_at_kau.htm

I want you to know the purpose of K.A.U. It is the biggest purpose the African has. It involves every African in Kenya and it is their mouthpiece which asks for freedom. K.A.U. is you and you are the K.A.U. If we unite now, each and every one of us, and each tribe to another, we will cause the implementation in this country of that which the European calls democracy. True democracy has no color distinction. It does not choose between black and white. We are here in this tremendous gathering under the K.A.U. flag to find which road leads us from darkness into democracy. In order to find it we Africans must first achieve the right to elect our own representatives. That is surely the first principle of democracy. We are the only race in Kenya which does not elect its own representatives in the Legislature and we are going to set about to rectify this situation. We feel we are dominated by a handful of others who refuse to be just. God said this is our land. Land in which we are to flourish as a people. We are not worried that other races are here with us in our country, but we insist that we are the leaders here, and what we want we insist we get.

K.A.U. 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. K.A.U. speaks in daylight. He who calls us the *Mau Mau* is not truthful. We do not know this thing *Mau Mau*. We want to prosper as a nation, and as a nation we demand equality. . . . It has never been known in history that a country prospers without equality. We despise bribery and corruption, those two words that the European repeatedly refers to. Bribery and corruption is prevalent in this country, but I am not surprised. As long as a people are held down, corruption is sure to rise and the only answer to this is a policy of equality. If we work together as one, we must succeed.

2. Why Mau Mau Fought

Source: *I Refuse to Die, My Journey for Freedom* by Koigi Wa Wamwere

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 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...

Contrary to British propaganda, Mungai did not love the cold and rain of forest life. He went to the forest because the cold of colonial racism and the color bar was greater. He was willing to freeze in the jungle to end the cold and rain of racial discrimination, unemployment and the hunger of the perennially underfed African child.

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.