

Rosemary Akpan, PhD Student, Marquette University

Paper Proposal

Empire and Defiance: Colonial Governance and the Making of Anti-Colonial Struggle in Kenya, 1895-1963

Abstract

The paper aims to reapproach the Mau Mau revolt in Kenya through a closer reading of colonial reports, land commission transcripts, and oral accounts from former detainees and squatters, which reveals a larger matrix of systematic resistance due to structural and economic violence. The voluminous historiography on Kenya's decolonization, the Mau Mau uprising, continues to be framed predominantly through the lens of military guerrilla warfare and colonial counterinsurgency. Yet, the uprising spanned through the interconnected prisms of forced migration, labor extortion, and land alienation, offering a more textured understanding of Kenya's anticolonial struggle—one that centers not only the armed fighters in the forest or even the legal battles, but also the uprooted squatters, detained women, dislocated families, and coerced laborers on settler farms.

Viewing it as only a military episode or a forest war replicates the colonial state's framing without considering the culmination of decades of racialized dispossessions and exploitative labor practices that eroded the social fabric of Kikuyu life. By shifting the analytical lens to forced displacement and economic subjugation, the Mau Mau uprising emerges as a nationalist campaign and deeply intimate struggle over home, labor, and land. Resistance, therefore, was not merely aimed at military outposts or settler homes, but at the foundations of colonial administration that had made everyday life hard through visible and obscure forms. This is a more holistic way of conceptualizing the uprising's origins and role in securing Kenya's independence.

Description and Significance of the Research

In the central highlands of Kenya, among the red soils and dense mists of what the British would name the "White Highlands," the story of Wambui wa Nderitu still circulates among elders in Nyeri. Wambui recalled April 1953, a day her father was served with a notice from the District Officer ordering their family to vacate their ancestral homestead. "The white

man said it was no longer our land; she recounts.” Wambui, then a teenager, became one of thousands of Kikuyu forcibly removed and caught in the web of British colonial land expropriation and labor conscription—a living archive of policies designed to extract labor and displace people. That same year saw the capture of 4,471 men and women, who are referred to as ‘squatters’, from their farms alongside 11,000 livestock in the Rift Valley and sent to the Reserves.¹ This is not surprising because most of the Europeans' cruelty to the Kikuyu has been popularized. Colonial policies designed to repress, contain, and extract would unintentionally birth a consciousness among the colonized. The very institutions set up to control a population became crucibles for resistance. This paper interrogates that paradox.

At the heart of British colonial rule in Kenya lay a systematic restructuring of land and labor that birthed the Mau Mau revolt. Through ordinances like the Masters and Servants Act and the Native Registration Ordinance, the British alienated Kikuyu land and tethered African bodies to settler economies. The Kikuyu, whose cultural and economic life revolved around intimate relations with land, were transformed into tenants, squatters, and laborers on territory they once held as lineage property. The Native Reserves became overcrowded holding zones; the kipande system turned mobility into surveillance; and the courts, prisons, and camps emerged as new theaters of domination—and defiance. This paper will place the institutions of colonial incarceration (detention camps, forced labor settlements, emergency villages) in conversation with grassroots strategies of resistance, both overt and subtle, arguing that resistance was not only fought with arms but enacted in labor slowdowns, oath-taking, rumor networks, court subversions, and clandestine education.

In this vein, this paper looks forward to the evicted squatters (Kikuyu) and how this led to some form of organization called the Land and Freedom Army (Mau Mau uprising), bringing about resistance and independence. This organization deflected from being only military but, in its sense and characteristics, was reflected also as a subtle resistance to colonial policies of land appropriation, forced displacement, and labor extortion that was economically inimical to the Kikuyus. This analysis builds on the premise that colonial coercion was systematic, embedded in spatial control, bureaucratic violence, legal

¹ “Kikuyus forfeit 11,000 stocks,” Daily News (London), Friday 23 January 1953, 6. Accessed March 21, 2025, at the British Newspaper archives.

instruments, and economic stratification.² At the same time, African responses—particularly those of the Kikuyu intertwined survival with subversion. Women and men alike deployed kinship, culture, memory, and mobility as tools to navigate, negotiate, and resist the tightening grip of the colonial state. By tracing the intersectionality of land seizure, coerced labor, and state-sponsored displacement, this paper will offer a rereading of the Mau Mau uprising—not merely as military confrontation but as a culmination of decades-long structural violence and adaptive resistance. Following scholars of subaltern agency, this paper contends that the spaces designed to contain Africans paradoxically became incubators of collective defiance. In this reframing, the colonial village, the labor camp, and the detention center emerge not only as instruments of repression but as historical sites where resistance was imagined, rehearsed, and realized. In short, the very policy used to control these people was what bred their resistance, beyond the guerrilla warfare or military killing.

Writing and Framing the Mau Mau: Historiographical Legacies and Unfinished Questions

Scholars and popular writers have served Mau Mau history well.³ Fairly unique within Kenyan historiography, writers have produced several accounts, some in indigenous languages and by foreign writers. Central to this history is the writing about Dedan Kimathi, who led the armed resistance in the 1950s until his capture and execution in 1957. There has been a flood of writings from the late 1970s until the present on the Mau Mau movement. However, due to word constraints, I cannot mention all these scholars in this proposal. Nevertheless, their insights have been incorporated, and their works will provide a foundation for addressing the research gap, which will be discussed in the paper.

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, one of Kenya’s foremost literary voices, has written about Kimathi in fictional and dramatic form, most notably in *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* (co-

² Antonio Gramsci, *Political Thought: Hegemony, Consciousness and the Revolutionary Process* (Oxford University Press, 2011) (First published 1987), 8. As Antonio Gramsci reminds us, hegemony is never total, and the fragments of resistance, however episodic, speak to the enduring struggle over land, labor, and belonging.

³ Several scholars have drawn attention to the challenges of terminology and interpretation when describing the Mau Mau movement, especially considering its portrayal in colonial archives as a terrorist uprising. See B.A. Ogot and E.S. Atieno Odhiambo (eds), *Mau Mau and Nationhood: Arms, Authority and Narration* (Oxford: James Currey, 2003), 2; David Anderson, *Histories of the Hanged: The Dirty War in Kenya and the End of Empire* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2005), xi. For the purposes of this article, Mau Mau is understood not simply as a rebellion, but as a multifaceted nationalist movement that drew from deep grievances over land, freedom, and colonial injustice.

authored with Micere Githae Mugo). This play reframes Kimathi not as a terrorist, as colonial propaganda painted him, but as a visionary leader and martyr for the Kenyan anticolonial movement and resistance. Other indigenous writers, such as Maina wa Kinyatti, a Marxist historian and former political detainee, have contributed through archival excavations and oral histories that echo the voices of former Mau Mau fighters and detainees. His works foreground the movement's ideological motivations and grassroots organization, particularly its class-conscious critiques of colonial capitalism. Historian Bethwell Ogot has challenged colonial narratives that portrayed Mau Mau as a violent, criminal rebellion and instead reframed it as a legitimate nationalist struggle for independence. Ogot emphasized the social and economic grievances, particularly land dispossession and political exclusion, that fueled the uprising, especially among the Kikuyu. He also highlighted the complexity of the movement, arguing that Mau Mau was not merely a Kikuyu affair but a broader expression of African resistance.⁴

Among foreign writers, Caroline Elkins's groundbreaking book documented the systemic violence, torture, and repression of the colonial detention camps.⁵ Elkins relied on survivor testimonies and archival sources to expose the scale and brutality of British counterinsurgency measures, challenging long-held narratives of benevolent colonialism. David Anderson situates the escalation of the government's counterinsurgency in white settler fury over Mau Mau targeting and 'killing bwana.'⁶ Focusing heavily on the legal and judicial dimensions of the repression, he reconstructs the political trials and public hangings that characterized the colonial response.

Together, these writers have shaped our understanding of the Mau Mau from multiple angles: as a grassroots revolution, a symbol of postcolonial resistance, and a case study in imperial violence. While foreign scholars have often exposed the structures of repression, indigenous writers have kept alive the memory, moral weight, and nationalist legacy of Mau Mau within Kenyan political consciousness. Unsurprisingly, the Mau Mau revolution is remembered differently. It is prominently featured in Kenyan popular memory as, among other things, a freedom fight and a symbol of resistance. In particular, the legal and

⁴ Through his writings and editorial work—most notably in *Mau Mau and Nationhood: Arms, Authority and Narration*, which he co-edited with E.S. Atieno Odhiambo—Ogot advanced a decolonized perspective that centered African voices and treated the Mau Mau fighters as freedom seekers rather than terrorists.

⁵ Caroline Elkins, *Imperial Reckoning: The Untold Story of Britain's Gulag in Kenya* (Macmillan, 2005), 50

⁶ David Anderson, *Histories of the Hanged: The Dirty War in Kenya and the End of Empire* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2005), xi

administrative discrepancies in the occasionally *ad hoc* way colonial repression was executed based on the divide-and-rule principles deserve greater emphasis.

Notwithstanding the fairly extensive Mau Mau historiography, some aspects of colonization and counterinsurgency in Kenya will benefit from re-examination and treatment of its broader sociopolitical and economic dimensions. Historiographical attention has been drawn to the scale and consequences of British counterinsurgency operations, including mass detentions, torture, and land dispossession, which had a heavy impact on the Kikuyu and other communities involved in the uprising. In particular, the entrenched focus on the Mau Mau as a military or insurgent movement has sometimes obscured the more profound structural crisis that catalyzed resistance. British colonial policy in Kenya, especially in the Kikuyu-dominated central highlands, produced a landscape defined by dispossession, racialized land tenure systems, and coerced labor migration, long before the armed struggle emerged in the 1950s.

We see many administrative irregularities in this arena that characterized colonial Kenya, just like other colonial zones. This was one that privileged white agricultural capital at the expense of indigenous land rights and mobility. The displacement of tens of thousands of Kikuyu, coupled with their increasing confinement to crowded reserves and squatter settlements, suggests that the Mau Mau war should be reimagined not simply as a military rebellion, but in its real sense, a violent culmination of a protracted, bureaucratically managed crisis of forced migration and labor extortion, which this paper aims to address. To this extent, the Mau Mau revolt emerges as a demand for restitution, a radical response to the colonial state's strategic appropriation of land, labor, and belonging. If we are to understand the true scope of Kenya's anticolonial resistance, then Mau Mau must be read not in isolation as a warfare revolution. Instead, it is the gravitational center of a larger contest over the meaning of home, identity, and sovereignty in the shadow of empire. The colonial government in Kenya relied not merely on military conquest but on an elaborate and insidious system of indirect rule that fused land alienation with bureaucratic control. The imposition of the hut and poll taxes compelled many Kikuyu to seek wage labor on settler farms, effectively drawing them into the orbit of colonial capitalism. Simultaneously, the Native Lands Trust Ordinance and Land Registration Acts enabled the Crown to survey, register, and dispossess entire communities, reducing ancestral lands to extractive plots in service of settler agriculture. These bureaucratic incursions were not neutral or benign. When

the Mau Mau rebellion formally erupted in 1952, the colonial bureaucracy had become more than a governing apparatus; it was a spatial and ideological architecture of domination. As Tabitha Kanogo and Caroline Elkins have shown, many evicted people became squatters, tenants on European farms who paid rent in labor.⁷ This squatter economy produced a class of landless Kikuyu peasants entirely dependent on settlers' goodwill, labor policies, and fluctuating global markets. The compounding frustrations of land loss, unlivable wages, and paternalist control shaped the crisis that would eventually erupt. For instance, exploitative colonial mechanisms such as detention camps and forced village settlements, built to subdue opposition, boosted the underground movement as they became hotbeds of resistance. In other words, the Kikuyu repurposed these camps for the growth of resistance, using them as sites for covert political organization.⁸ Similarly, urban cities in Kenya became a network for labor mobilization for protests and strikes.⁹

Methodology and Sources of Information

My key insights will come from archival materials at the Kenyan Historical Documentaries, Library of Congress, and British newspaper archives, which consist of official reports and policy documents from Kenya and the British Colonial Office. Most personal accounts, including testimonies from the Mau Mau fighters, court records, and memoirs, will come from mainly verifiable secondary sources and digitized library sources. These have also been expressed in newspapers in colonial Kenya from 1945 to 1960. These sources will be subject to qualitative historical interpretation to offer a fresh perspective on Kenyan independence.

⁷ T. Kanogo, *Squatters and the Roots of Mau Mau, 1905-63* (East African Publishers, 1987), 63.

⁸ Colonial labor policies imposed unreasonable working conditions, low wages and hardly any form of mobility leading to resentment from workers.

⁹ Bethany Rebisz, "Violent Reform: Gendered Experiences of Colonial Developmental Counterinsurgency in Kenya, 1954-1960," PhD diss., University of Reading, 2022, 100.