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## Reflections on the Legitimacy of Mau Mau Rebellion 50 Years after Independence in Kenya

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**Abstract**- Almost a half century after it broke out, Mau Mau uprising continues to be a subject of controversy. Major questions are: What is the legacy of Mau Mau in Kenya? What is its legitimacy? Was Mau Mau a nationalist or tribal movement? Is Kenya's independence a product of Mau Mau? As the amount of literature on the subject of rebellion continues to grow, it is becoming clear that the historical meaning and interpretation of a movement such as Mau Mau rebellion in Kenya is to be determined to a large extent by the perspective of the historian who is making the study. Mau Mau has been described as a peasant revolt, an atavistic socio-religious movement, a visible manifestation of the psychological breakdown of a primitive tribe in a modern age, a critical stage in the development of a legitimate nationalist movement, and innumerable other things.

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REFLECTIONSONTHELEGITIMACYOFMAUMAUREBELLION50YEARSATERINDEPENDENCEINKENYA

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# Reflections on the Legitimacy of Mau Mau Rebellion 50 Years after Independence in Kenya

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**Abstract-** Almost a half century after it broke out, Mau Mau uprising continues to be a subject of controversy. Major questions are: What is the legacy of Mau Mau in Kenya? What is its legitimacy? Was Mau Mau a nationalist or tribal movement? Is Kenya's independence a product of Mau Mau? As the amount of literature on the subject of rebellion continues to grow, it is becoming clear that the historical meaning and interpretation of a movement such as Mau Mau rebellion in Kenya is to be determined to a large extent by the perspective of the historian who is making the study. Mau Mau has been described as a peasant revolt, an atavistic socio-religious movement, a visible manifestation of the psychological breakdown of a primitive tribe in a modern age, a critical stage in the development of a legitimate nationalist movement, and innumerable other things.

The only element which appears to remain consistent throughout all these various views is that the context of the historian and his/her method of analysis affect his/her interpretation as much if not more than the context of the rebellion itself. However, any significant historical event is marked by its attachment to the people, events and institutions to either side of its occurrence. This nexus, or series of linkages, is the determinate, if unstated, context of the event which gives it nearly all its importance. If a movement, person or event came out of nowhere and went nowhere, people, and especially historians, would very soon forget it.

The Mau Mau rebellion continues to attract the attention of many people for the simple reason that it still has a great effect on people of Kenya and the rest of the world. Obviously it has in some fashion advanced into the present day, fifty years after independence. This linkage was established not because Mau Mau was successful, nor because it failed; it exists fifty years after independence because people, especially historians, have been unable to define the legacy which Mau Mau has left for the world. During the Emergency, the British Government was successful in its suppression of the Mau Mau fighters in the Aberdares forest. However, only a few years later, Kenya gained its independence and the right to self-government. Did Mau Mau gain Kenya its independence, or at least set the foundation for it? Many people think so, and many others do not. The point here is that in such a confused state, people tend to make of the Mau Mau rebellion what they want it to be. By any account, the problem of interpreting the significance of the Mau Mau rebellion is an important one in Kenya today. If Mau Mau is the generative source of Kenyan independence, then it is vital to Kenya's sense of history to acknowledge and cement Mau Mau connection with the present generation. To a certain extent, Kenya will remain rootless and unsure of its identity until it can settle this issue. This paper will examine some of the linkages which apparently bind Mau Mau to Kenya's past

and present, and explore the works of several historians on the subject in an attempt to find out why Mau Mau is so much a part of the Kenyan consciousness, yet detached from it. Where is the continuity in Kenyan history which must include this movement?

## I. INTRODUCTION

David Potter examines the modern historian's concept of nationalism and its effect on historical interpretation. Potter states that the historian initially seeks to use nationalism as a measurement of group unity. This aspect of nationalism leads to several major implications for the treatment of history. First, it establishes intra-group relationships rather than ethical standards as the criteria for justification of the group's actions. Secondly, it causes the historian to view nationalism as an exclusive allegiance in ignorance of the fact that nationalism builds upon its association with other group loyalties, and is in fact the sum of these loyalties, gaining strength through their strength. Third, it leads the historian to explain nationalism solely in terms of cultural factors, ignoring a necessary second psychological factor: common interests. In short, the historian opts for a formalistic, institutional, and determinate concept of nationalism that is entirely inconsistent with his initial definition. Potter believes that historians should utilize nationalism as it was originally conceived – as a descriptive term and historical tool, not as a moral sanction.

Corfield was commissioned by the British Government in 1952 to compile a report on the factors which led up to the declaration of the Emergency on October 20, 1952. He states in his preface, he has reached some fairly solid conclusions regarding the nature of Mau Mau:

The origins of this unlawful association, which eventually dominated all but a small portion of the Kikuyu people both in the reserves and in the settled areas, lie deeply in the past, and in an endeavour to give the fullest consideration to any terms of reference I have found it necessary to examine almost every aspect of the social, economic, and Governmental problems which arise when a new civilizing influence impinges with suddenness on a primitive people who had stagnated for centuries. The failure of the Kikuyu to adjust themselves fully to the needs of the sudden change, together with the planned exploitation of the

attendant stresses and strains, were the primary causes and origin of Mau Mau.

Corfield here would never consider Mau Mau to be a nationalist movement – his moral scruples will not allow it. Corfield is appalled at the lawlessness of the Kikuyu.

He does not understand why the Kikuyu reacted to a situation that affected all other tribes in Kenya, but drew a response from them alone. The reason must lie in a psychological failing on their part. Corfield labels Mau Mau as an illegitimate movement on the part of a schizophrenic people, led by manipulative self-seeking revolutionaries. Corfield advises that there should be no compromise with this wholly evil movement. Corfield saw fit to state twice in his report that:

In the words of Father Trevor Huddleston, written as early as December, 1952: - 'Mau Mau is a movement which in its origins and in its development is wholly evil. It is the worst enemy of African Progress in Kenya. It has about it all the horror of the powers of darkness: of spiritual wickedness in high places. There can be no compromise, no common ground, between Mau Mau and the rest of the civilized world. It must be utterly destroyed if the peoples of Kenya are to live together and build up their country.' This is the supreme lesson to be learnt.

Carl Rosberg and John Nottingham give a complete political history of Kenya in the twentieth century, analyzing the various social and political movements which they believe feed into Mau Mau. They believe that there is a history of grievances and resistance to British authority which blossoms in the Mau Mau rebellion. Mau Mau is a legitimate rebellion which reflects one stage in a true nationalist movement:

It is our contention that the history of Kikuyu protects against aspects of the colonial state may be more fully understood as the history of a developing nationalist movement. In our view, the outbreak of open violence in Kenya in 1952 occurred primarily because of a European failure rather than an African one; it was not so much a failure of the Kikuyu people to adapt to a modern institutional setting as it was a failure of the European policy-makers to recognize the need for significant social and political reform. In suggesting that the European conception of "Mau Mau" constituted a myth, we maintain that "Mau Mau" was indeed an integral part of an ongoing, rationally conceived nationalist movement.

Rosberg and Nottingham thereby stamp their seal of approval on the Mau Mau uprising. They approve of Mau Mau, so they label it nationalistic. They also recognize, however, that Mau Mau does not fit into the traditional form of nationalism – it has some distinctively tribal elements to it. Rosberg and Nottingham state that nationalism is a European term which describes a process of political and social mobilization towards self-government in the form of the nation-state. Therefore,

the primary objective of the group must be to seize the political authority and power which will allow it to integrate its territorial and tribal elements.

There is a watershed, which is defined by the Emergency. The socio-economic uniformity which Rosberg and Nottingham claims gives the movement its potential for united action is broken down in the hierarchical structure of the Mau Mau organization. A de-centralized vertical structure totally lacking in discipline replaces the organized protest structures extant before 1952. The forest life displaced the Kikuyu from the land they treasure and initiated the breakdown of traditional Kikuyu community structures by changing the role of the individual and women. The group which enters the forest is nearly all male and of a single generation, indeed, it more than likely draws the bulk of its members from only one or two age-groupings. There is a split between the literate and illiterate elements within the forest. The group which supposedly inherited the tradition of the KISA closes down and terrorizes many schools through its opposition to the Beecher report. The movement becomes anti-Christian. In short, the group which enters the forest is almost totally lacking in the ideological clarity which Rosberg and Nottingham describe. In fact, one could say that even if Mau Mau came out of the incipient nationalist movements of the pre-emergency era, the nationalist movement itself committed suicide the second it entered the forest. This breakdown of nationalist elements must be explained if the nationalism thesis is to hold. That the Kikuyu were the only people forced into the terrible conditions of the forest means nothing if the forest fighters chose to abandon important nationalist values simply because they were there. That Kenyatta and the rest of the Kapenguria defendants were arrested and all political and trade union activity halted means nothing if Mau Mau was not itself an expression of the true nationalism is a group loyalty that transcends and sums up other loyalties and values. The loss of its political leaders cannot explain why the values and loyalties of Mau Mau are entirely different from the nationalist movements which preceded it. If Mau Mau is to inherit the tradition of Kenyan nationalism, it must also inherit the consciousness of that movement.

These discussions are overly harsh on the subject of Kenyan nationalism. That Kenyan nationalistic development was basically a process of reaction instead of initiative does not mean that there was no such thing as a very real sense of nationalism running through the Kenyan consciousness. Karigo Muchai points out that nationalism can be something other than an aggressive sentiment:

Nationalism is essentially a negative philosophy based on strong popular feelings, demanding freedom from foreign political domination.

At first glance this statement appears to be nothing more than a reiteration of Rosberg and

Nottingham's assertion that nationalism in Africa requires the seizure of political power from the colonial government before it can bring about the integration of national and territorial elements. However, Muchai points out something else in his statement which goes beyond even David Potter's all-inclusive concept: nationalism can be a negative philosophy. Perhaps the Kikuyu could not conceive of a social unity in terms other than personal relationships; they were simply too localistic and particularistic to envision a unified Kenya; they had no sense of the community beyond the physical community level. Perhaps there was no feeling of oneness among the Kikuyu, but this does not rule out the possibility of nationalistic action. Could it be that Kenyan unity involved no psychological belief in community among Kenyans other than the complete rejection of all social confederation beyond the local level – but this a belief common to all peoples of Kenya, thereby giving them a "negative unity" that can only be seen as real opposite the Colonial Government? There was a real nationalistic movement in Kenya before the declaration of the Emergency, but the Emergency marked its collapse, not its strength at zenith. However, there must be an explanation different from the "reactive settler theory", because the Mau Mau rebellion was essentially a civil war among the Kikuyu; it was not directed against the European Administration. There was a different nationalism during the Emergency that had no connection in real terms with the developing nationalism of the pre-Emergency era. It was a nationalism of withdrawal and negative confederation which used the unified settler community as a negative reference point for the formation of a decentralized nationalism. Isak Dinesen suggests how the Kikuyu had a localistic view that could lend itself to a nationalistic confederation:

I told them that I had myself been told when I made inquiries in the matter that they must go into the Kikuyu Reserve and find land there. On that they asked me if they should find enough unoccupied land in the Reserve to bring all their cattle with them? And, they went on, would they be sure all to find land in the same place, so that the people from the farm should remain together, for they did not want to be separated.

These people considered themselves to be the people of Baroness Blixen's farm first, Kikuyu second, and Kenyans third. As Potter states in his essay, nationalism is a transcendent loyalty that sums up and must be coordinated with other groups' loyalties. The nationalistic ideology of Mau Mau was the common denominator for the forest fighters, but the sum of loyalties which made up this nationalism was something very different from one man to another. The other loyalties were so localistic as to be exclusive, yet similar enough in form that they could be brought together for a vague concept of nationalism.

This explanation shows how the Kikuyu could be on the defensive, involved in the Mau Mau movement, devoid of ideology, yet apparently stronger than they had ever been before in their conviction in independence for Kenya. Oathing has long been before in their conviction in independence for Kenya. Oathing has long been sighted as manifestation of Mau Mau solidarity in the formative stages during the late 1940's, yet even it can be cited as a sign of the fragmentation of the developing nationalism and the ascendancy of a new form:

The earliest use of an oath in a modern political context appears to have occurred shortly after 1925, when the leaders of the Kikuyu Central Association decided to introduce an oath of loyalty to the Association: the transtribal character of the East African Association had probably militated against the use of oaths in that organization.

The nationalistic content of the movement was gone, and an external form of nationalism moved in to replace it.

This shallow form of nationalism cannot, however, describe the very real and rationally constructed nationalistic ideal of Kenya's political leaders. In fact, one must explain several things. In his book, *Mau Mau From Within*, Karari Njama describes how he made plans to travel to Ethiopia to negotiate for independence as an agent for all of Kenya, not only the forest fighters. The generals in the Aberdares forest refused to submit unless all of Kenya was declared independent. There was never any mention of secession or an attempt to gain international recognition for an independent section or part of Kenya. The unit for independence in this supposedly all-Kikuyu affair was not the Kikuyu tribe, but Kenya. This nationalistic ideal was matched by the leaders of other tribes. Achieng Oneko was a member of the Kapenguria defence who was convicted but shortly thereafter acquitted because it was found that he could not speak Kikuyu, and, therefore, could not have participated in the oathing ceremonies. The significant point here is that Oneko never gave his non-Kikuyu status as a defence; he was willing to abide by the conviction the same as the others because he saw the issue to be one of Kenyan political freedom. Whether or not Mau Mau had been purged of its nationalist content, its leaders were very much a part of the tradition of nationalism that had been developing in Kenya for fifty years. Kenya was the political unit for Mau Mau leaders and nationalists alike.

Perhaps the failure of Mau Mau was not its suppression by the Colonial Government, but its failure to gain international recognition. It pursued a defensive war that was limited to a local theatre. No appeal was made to international organizations who could use Potter's distorted concept of nationalism to sanction Kenya's right to self-rule. And perhaps the success of

Mau Mau came at Hola in 1959, when the deaths of eleven detainees brought forth an international reaction of horror – within six weeks there were major debates in the House of Commons which brought the atrocity to the world's attention.

These tentative suggestions leave Mau Mau at the point where this paper began. All there appears to be arising out of these various interpretation is confusion. Is Kenyan independence a product of Mau Mau? Was Hola the first step toward independence? Who can be credited with the success?

*By refusing to lead, Mugo had become a legendary hero.*

Jomo Kenyatta has been a figure whose continuous presence has marked Kenyan politics for fifty years. He has consistently avoided the factional struggles of Kenyan politics to emerge as the acknowledged leader of Kenya. He has always been a staunch nationalist as well as a transtribal, national, essentially non-partisan figure. He was even acknowledged by both the forest fighters and the Colonial Government to be the head of Mau Mau. If there is any single person who could coordinate all the nationalistic loyalties that disintegrated during the Emergency, it is Jomo Kenyatta. However, Kenyatta himself was not one to admit his affiliation with Mau Mau:

He who calls us the Mau Mau is not truthful. We do not know this thing Mau Mau... (Note, this means, in the idiom, that we do not 'want' or 'recognize' or 'approve' Mau Mau). Speech to KAU at Nyeri, 26/7/1952.

And

We are being harmed by a thing which some people seem to call Mau Mau... Mau Mau has spoiled the country. Let Mau Mau perish forever. All people should search for Mau Mau and kill it. Speech, 24/8/1952 at Kiambu.

At Kapenguria, Kenyatta denied any connection with Mau Mau. At the time, no one was willing to believe him. The forest fighters believed that his few denunciations were for "political" reasons. The Government believed that he was not being specific about Mau Mau because he wanted to protect other fighters. Upon his release from Lodwar eight years after Kapenguria, Kenyatta was still stating his opposition to Mau Mau, and now people began to list to him. Many were surprised; many more felt betrayed:

We are determined to have independence in peace, and we shall not allow hooligans to rule Kenya. We must have no hatred towards one another. Mau Mau was a disease which had been eradicated, and must never be remembered again.

Kenyatta was determined to unite the country under his leadership. This meant that he could not offend either of the extreme groups, neither the

Europeans nor the forest fighters. He tried to make people forget Mau Mau with speeches of unity:

The most essential need which I have constantly sought to proclaim and to fulfill in Kenya has been that of national unity; nationhood and familyhood must and can be continued out of our many tribes and cultures. Nationalism rooted in loyalty to Kenya must come first.

Perhaps Kenyatta simply realized that the situation was a very delicate one which required great care. His country had essentially been through a civil war, and both sides involved had to live together in Kenya. Kenyatta tried to leave the road open for individual achievement without government interference. On the subject of land, Kenyatta laid out a policy that respected everybody's rights to land in a system of private ownership. Kenya would not alienate any European land to reward the forest fighters. All land that was being used for the benefit and betterment of Kenya would be protected. Foreign investment was encouraged as long as it was good for Kenya and not meant to bring enrichment of individuals. Kenyatta called his blueprint of unity and self-betterment for Kenya "African Socialism". Rejecting two-party politics, Kenyatta called for the cooperation of the government and the people. Kenyatta's plans all went through, as the government offered no rewards for service to the Mau Mau fighters and the only opposition party (KADU) dissolved voluntarily.

Unfortunately, Kenyatta's dreams of national unity failed to materialize completely. As Potter states, nationalism must be able to coordinate with other groups' loyalties. Kenyan nationalism has had problems coordinating the sub-group loyalties of Mau Mau fighters, loyalists and Europeans. Some can accept neo-colonial rule by Africans, others cannot. It has become obvious that Kenyatta does not want to upset the existing structures or values. The leadership has changed, but the ruling values have not. Kenya is still a capitalist country which emphasizes private ownership of property and individual achievement. Independence brought African independence and self-government, but it did not bring a revolution. One real problem with this situation is that whereas the Mau Mau rebellion marked but a single stage out of many in the political career of Jomo Kenyatta, it marked the only period of political participation in the lives of most Kikuyu. These people now feel that they have a vested interest in Kenyan politics, a right to see their sacrifices playing a part in political policy-making. These people all feel a sense of anticipation that political clichés, calls to unity, and policies of accommodation cannot satisfy. Some observers might argue that the present regime has made the same mistake the British made before the Emergency, except in reverse: the suppression of opposition parties such as KADU and KPU has plugged the outlets for non-antagonistic ventilation of grievances

by the groups on the extremes of the political spectrum. Toleration and accommodation in this situation can only lead to disappointment and frustration.

In his book, *Mau Mau Twenty Years After*, Robert Buijtenhuis gives a painfully frank and accurate explanation of the dilemma which faces Kenya today. Mau Mau has created polar political groups which expect consideration of their views, and the Kenya national government is caught in the impossible task of trying to please both. Buijtenhuis points out that a country which has been through a civil war must have a selective memory. Myths are necessary for nation-building, and in this case, the right myths for the nation are the wrong ones for Mau Mau:

It is quite clear that the memory of Mau Mau, which, if it was not a tribal revolt, certainly was the revolt of one tribe, may eventually become a negative factor in the process of nation-building.

Tribalism and political factionalism are too important in Kenya today for Mau Mau to be the focus of Kenyan nationalism. After the assassination of Tom Mboya, the dissolution of KPU and the return of Bildad Kaggia to KANU signaled the end of Kikuyu-Luo tensions, but at the cost of reaffirming tribalism as the basis of Kenyan political parties – class interests were secondary. The Kikuyu dominate the economic, social and political life of Kenya. Kiamba dominates Kikuyu political activity. The call for unity is a reaction to an apparent tendency in Kenya politics to move towards an increasingly narrow political group to the exclusion of their own participation. Mau Mau is a part of this tradition of narrowing the political base. The Europeans were not as scared of African government as they were of Mau Mau government. The greatest stumbling block to the recognition of the contribution Mau Mau made towards independence is that it denies non-Kikuyu a role in the independence struggle:

Unhappily, however, although Tom Mboya and Oginga Odinga were responsible for many very laudable actions in the Kenya Independence struggle, the only thing they cannot claim is that they took part in the first fight.

Mau Mau cannot become the central tradition of Kenyan independence because it is too exclusive. Unfortunately, it appears that Kenya is faced with two legitimate claimants to the nationalist tradition: the revived leaders of the pre-Emergency movement, and the Mau Mau forest fighters. Mau Mau, however, has negative elements to it:

For the non-fighting population, the memory of Mau Mau certainly revives the sufferings of the Emergency which they blame on the stubbornness of the forest fighters. At the same time they might be ashamed at their betrayal and forsaking of the Mau Mau at a time when the freedom fighters needed help most.

For several years Kenya tried to pass over the difficult problem of acknowledging Mau Mau. This

approach led to only greater problems. Today Mau Mau is recognized, but not at the national level – there has been a localization of the myth:

there might be some 'method in the madness', in the sense that the Kenya Government seems to distinguish sharply between the national level, where it has to steer a middle course between conflicting interests and myths, and the local level where people are more or less left free to follow their inclinations in honouring the freedom fighters.

However, Buijtenhuis points out that there is another reason for the localization of the myth of Mau Mau:

I do not have much information about this, but I did get the impression in Kenya that, at least among the villages in Kikuyu land, the myth of Mau Mau is often a 'split up' myth, that while people are very well acquainted with the facts of their local history during the Emergency, they know only a few rather loosely connected facts about the Mau Mau revolt in general.

This statement points right back towards the localistic, particularistic view that was explained earlier as a part of the "negative unity" model of nationalism. Mau Mau cannot be the central myth of the Kenyan nation, for it does not represent a unified myth at the national level. Buijtenhuis claims that Mau Mau was a case of "tribalism serving the nation". This tribalism, however, was not hostile to other ethnic groups. Although exclusive and somewhat de-centralized, Mau Mau was a nationalist movement:

The Mau Mau movement, although largely a Kikuyu movement by recruitment and in terms of its symbols and ceremonies, thus wanted to serve a group of political leaders – some Kikuyu, others not – about whose national outlook there can be no doubt. I think this proves sufficiently that in the end the Mau Mau fighters thought more in national terms than in tribal ones, and for this reason I am convinced that the question of whether Mau Mau was a tribal or a national movement is a faulty one. Mau Mau was both.

Localization of the myth of Mau Mau has been pursued in an attempt to make sure that the people of Kenya recognize the difference between these two elements in Mau Mau. It is probably the only solution, although it is not a satisfying one. Buijtenhuis suggests that localization of the myth be accompanied by local, but official government assistance in recognition of the national elements in the myth.

The position of Mau Mau in the continuum of Kenyan political history is a difficult, but not impossible one to define. Kenya had a growing legitimate nationalist movement before the Emergency whose forms arose in response to similar institutional forms on the side of the Colonial Government. As the settler position became less stable within the Empire, the settlers were forced to consolidate their political authority and power by denying the natural progression



of this movement. The settlers' subsequent decapitation of the trade-union movement and the major political parties cut away any hope for moderate political action and forced the ascendancy of militant Kikuyu elements. The Emergency marked the conflict between the Colonial Government and this radical wing. The movement to the forests marked the withdrawal, the fragmentation, and the complete breakdown of any of the elements of the nationalist movement which might have remained a part of Mau Mau ideology. The Mau Mau went into the forests without an ideology, a group completely separated from the established nationalist structures. Mau Mau was a response to a political blunder on the part of the British.

Today, however, Mau Mau is a true nationalist movement, after the fact. As they went into the forest, the Mau Mau fighters could not have had a clear conception of themselves as a nation. However, the stigma of defeat, the utter isolation from forms of legitimate political expression, the detachment from the British and other Kenyan tribes, the memory of a unity of common experience, and the great sense of real political consciousness of nationalism among the former forest fighters and many Kikuyu which rivals, but has very little to do with, the pre-Emergency nationalist movement. The Emergency bestowed upon the forest fighters a legitimacy which did not even exist before. The problem today is that form of the traditional nationalism whose development in a sense caused the Emergency, and a vigorous revolutionary form of nationalism which was created by the Emergency. As David Potter suggests, it is actually impossible to determine which of these groups has a legitimate claim. What is becoming obvious is that it might not be possible to coordinate these two nationalisms. Mau Mau is linked to the Kenya of today in a very real sense. But Mau Mau is a negative philosophy: it was created as a localistic, "negative unity", and it continues to be a movement in opposition to the national level norms, policies, and values of the present government.

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