

SENSATIONALISM AT WORK: CREATING THE MYTH OF THE MAU MAU

Muadi Mukenge

Misconceptions and ignorance about foreign cultures and events exist worldwide from one society vis a vis the exterior, most certainly at varying degrees. Knowledge requires time and effort, and it is easier to not expend energy, and instead to rely on another source, in this instance the media. In the United States, knowledge about Africa is even more limited and distorted due to a media which, at rare times when Africa is portrayed, persists in also communicating stereotypical and negative images, and many times reaches simplistic conclusions to complicated issues. It is with such a reality in mind that this paper will study press coverage of the Kenyan Mau Mau movement in the 1950s and attempt to show how it supported the creation of a distorted world view of those times.

This view—a myth—will be set beside the reality as presented by several sources—Josiah Mwangi Kariuki, a black Kenyan active in pre- and post-independence politics who was detained for seven years in emergency camps set up during the British crackdown on Mau Mau; Robert Edgerton, author of *Mau Mau: An African Crucible*, (1989); and David Maughan-Brown, author of *Land, Freedom and Fiction*, (1985). Kariuki's book, *Mau Mau Detainee*, tells the story of the treatment of black Kenyans before and during the State of Emergency and addresses the myths which were spread concerning Mau Mau. Taken together, these sources seek to clarify and denounce misconceptions in popular culture.

Newspapers report what they are told, and that information may sometimes be partial, depending on the source. In times of crisis, such as social unrest, access is jeopardized by reasons of national security. However, with the data it is able to gather the media decides what to print and follows a particular manner of presentation which reflects a certain viewpoint—"What we may be able to establish, rather than truth or bias, however, is what versions of events are reproduced in the production of news; who promulgates these versions. . . ."1 However objective and removed they are ideally supposed to be, in reality newspapers are characterized by the "voice" they project—liberal, conservative, moderate, etc. Sometimes papers with different voices report similarly on an issue, propagating the position of the larger society. Such was the case with Mau Mau, colonial Kenya's stunted revolutionary movement. Magazines, however, as a basic feature are

reflective of particular viewpoints, and purposefully mix facts with opinion. A magazine's voice is very clear and may change over a period of time depending on the editorship. Emphasis is on analysis, not simply regurgitation of facts.

What myth did the press propagate? Many people today believe that Mau Mau killed numerous white civilians. In fact, only 32 were killed, versus 11,503 black Mau Mau at the hands of British security forces, according to Edgerton; he further asserts that the official number of Mau Mau deaths is a "substantial, and intentional, underestimate." He continues:

Mau Mau's original target had been the white farmers, and many people in Britain had been led to believe by sensational press reports that rebels had killed thousands of white Kenyans.²

The public was also fed exaggerations or distortions of the Mau Mau persona and its actions. It is these areas which will be examined in this paper.

In assessing media tactics employed to propagate this myth, I have chosen to review selected articles (most of them leading stories) which appeared in the major, news, print media in Britain, the United States and Kenya between 1952 and 1956, from the onset of the State of Emergency to the time that the British had gained the upper hand in the struggle. These publications are: *TIME*, the *New York Times*, *The London Times*, and *The East African Standard* (now *The Standard*). It should be noted that this is not a complete and scientific survey, but selective over a broad spectrum. Therefore, I can only comment on broad characteristics of the media. Maughan-Brown makes a similar argument concerning British fiction and non-fiction literature. He criticizes literary works on Mau Mau and Kenyan colonial life in general and points to the manner in which they gave life to racist and paternalistic ideology in Britain and Kenya. He alludes to the press, but does not analyze it. Together these mediums of communication provided the populace outside of Kenya with (for many of them) their only sources of information of far away and unknown places.

To understand the causes of Mau Mau one has to look at the structure of colonial Kenya and the ideas which supported it. As Kariuki explains, the system rested on the premise that whites were a superior race to be served by Africans, whom they treated with contempt:

...old men were addressed as boys and monkeys; Africans were barred from hotels and clubs; Africans with land near European farms were not allowed to plant coffee; there was a wholesale

disregard for human dignity and little respect for anyone with a black skin.³

The system was one which maintained segregated facilities, left Africans politically unempowered and underrepresented (in 1952 6 Africans were appointed to a 56-member colonial Parliament), imposed taxes, granted large tracts of Kenyan land to whites for farming (displacing the Africans into crowded native reserves), and depended on cheap African labor to work there. As Edgerton states, "They (settlers) came to make their fortunes, not to extend the benefits of British civilization to Africans. Africans were to be used for labor".⁴ He continues:

. . . the compliant colonial administration imposed taxes, insisted on the kipande pass law, restricted educational opportunities for Africans, and denied them means of self-support, all as devices for compelling them to work as field hands for low wages. The standard monthly wage for a man who worked every day of the month, including Sundays, was 14 shillings. A shilling was then worth about 14 United States cents.⁵

Africans returning from World War II watched British soldiers accept land grants while blacks received nothing. For several decades black political organizations made no headway in negotiating with the British government for improvement in their status. With the return of Jomo Kenyatta from London in 1947, the Kenya African Union was founded and numerous individuals among the younger set became more militant with each setback. Organizing an armed uprising became their last resort, and that is what whites called "Mau Mau."

The role of the press in reporting social unrest was inevitably shaped by the racist and paternalistic attitudes of whites toward blacks. The press also espoused the government position. The present study will show that newspapers and magazines in Britain, the United States and to a certain extent Kenya shared the same characteristics in their reporting on the Mau Mau and the State of Emergency. Details of Mau Mau "atrocities" were vivid and lengthy. Maughan-Brown comments that the same was true of fiction: "Every conceivable stop is pulled out in the effort to nauseate the reader"; however, accounts of settler misdeeds were curt and nondescriptive: ". . . the descriptions of what the allegedly equally bloody murders do are characterized by a striking absence of blood . . . the action in this episode is all deliberately abstracted, distanced".⁶ There was no criticism of government executions. As will be demonstrated below, press discourse espoused the notion that the Africans were savage, anti-Christian, and primitive

ignoring or giving little mention of the real motives for the movement. Information was sometimes misleading and incorrect.

The American press and *The London Times* reported on Mau Mau in a manner which recreated an adventure. It was an adventure involving persons whites did not understand, and employing terminology which glorified European military machinery. Magazines such as *LIFE* capitalized on photo opportunities, running large photos of animal parts, strangled cats, funerals of Kikuyu loyalists, and somber Mau Mau captives (some of them undergoing screening, a dramatized type of "deprogramming").

Not all reporting was storytelling, however. Articles were also informative, indicating what actions were being taken by the British government, the number of forces being deployed, military blunders committed, background material on the Kikuyu, etc. For many, this may have been the first time they were hearing about the Kenyan Africans. The press as a whole failed to present balanced and accurate reporting however, giving summaries of disputes, rather than specifying the inequalities of the system. In short, white grievances were afforded more space than indigenous ones.

The reason the myth took root in people's minds goes back to the existence of stereotypical ideas about Africans and, the notion of passive news intake. As Seaton puts it, misconceptions about current events tend to take root among those who have little prior knowledge of the issue:

The media will have most impact on people who rarely discuss politics, who have limited prior knowledge of the issue concerned, who have moderate exposure to the media and whose motive for exposure is general surveillance of the political environment.⁷

Kenyan Press

Black newspapers in Kenya were banned in 1952 at the imposition of the State of Emergency and therefore the only reporting was done by white-owned papers, such as the *East African Standard*, one of the targets of this study. According to Gunilla Faringer, "*The Standard* came to dominate the East African press scene for a long time as the voice of the largely conservative white settlers, opposing African nationalist aspirations".⁸ However this review found that news articles from 1955 and after were not as sensationalist as those in Britain and the United States. While *The Standard* employed terminology such as "gangsters" and "terrorists" it

did not repeat them unnecessarily or recreate Mau Mau killings as was the pattern elsewhere. The paper was, however, in favor of Mau Mau eradication by military means.

The African perspective was lacking, as it was only provided from the discourse of African members at sessions of the Legislative Council. African denunciation of Mau Mau or loyalists killing Mau Mau fighters was afforded lengthy but unbloody descriptions: "The (commissioner's) message said that their splendid action had 'delighted all loyal people in Kenya who also remembered when the Tugen aggressively demonstrated their complete rejection of terrorism.'"⁹ Indicative of whites' feelings of superiority was the fact that detainees successfully exiting from screening were determined to be "white."¹⁰

For the most part however, *The Standard* often read like extensive lists—the number of casualties on each side, ammunition captured, livestock stolen, blacks detained, etc. It also reported heavily on government decrees. The attitude toward blacks was implicit in articles about: 1) blacks who were rewarded for faithful service to their employers; 2) traditional welcomes for foreign visitors; 3) and, in one instance, a transcript of a colonel's retirement speech at a country club. It read like this: "... his remedy was to charge the leaders of Mau Mau with treason, hang half of them in the presence of the others, and then send the remainder back to their reserves to 'spread the joyous tidings.' 'It was said . . . that I was a typical example of an early Victorian settler. Subsequent events have rather proved me right and the Government have openly admitted killing 11,000.'"¹¹

Elsbeth Huxley, a Kenyan-born British and former classmate of Jomo Kenyatta's at the University of London,¹² submitted numerous editorials and feature articles on the Mau Mau, in *The Standard* as well as in U.S. papers. She took on a tone which today would be considered condescending. One such account described the hardships of settler life, of which Mau Mau was then a major component—a "fanatical society" which indulges in "obscene oath-administering ceremonies," "exploiting" grievances both real and exaggerated.¹³

However, Huxley virtually dismisses police brutality against Mau Mau detainees: "There have been cases of beating up, but these are frowned on officially; in any case, people say, violence seldom gets you anywhere."¹⁴ This is reported despite the fact that many white settlers took up arms and shot blacks indiscriminately.¹⁵ She also attempts to address the land issue—"But no Government could take land away from the settlers—who have sunk skill and capital in it for fifty years...without...setting the country back many years."¹⁶ She does not mention that land has been taken away from the Africans, in fact, land now occupied by settlers.

British Press

In its reporting *The London Times* made very little attempt to seek the African perspective. What was printed were testimonies from legislative sessions and official statements about meetings between the government and Mau Mau representatives, not interviews, as was the case with Europeans. Granted it was dangerous for ordinary Africans to speak against the government, fearing punishment, and access was another problem. Reports about land disputes was general and gleaned from government sources who provided information selectively. Rarely did the press go into how laws were actually implemented. Therefore most press were absent of balanced in-depth analysis, and this was the same for United States press.

The London Times set the tone of the conflict by first dismissing it as primitive in nature, and reinforcing the myth of Europe's civilizing mission:

Explosions of the primitive instincts of Africa, such as Mau Mau, will in the end only disappear when they have been replaced by different traditions of thought and behavior, and when it becomes clear . . . that peaceful citizenship offers more solid advantages than the baits held out by terrorist leaders.¹⁷

Such an attitude was characteristic of future articles and determined the manner in which data was selected. *The London TIMES* practiced sensationalism, often recreating killings by the Mau Mau. Some articles included irrelevant information which reinforced the fantasy image of Africans, i.e., attendants at the funeral of a chief included women "in brightly colored garments carrying flowers. Some had children on their backs"; not understanding oath-taking, *The London TIMES* termed it "mumbo jumbo".¹⁸ A correspondent submitted the following: "almost all writers on the Kikuyu agree that they are wily, suspicious, and deceitful. Then, as now, their mentality was that of the guerilla".¹⁹

The London Times encouraged force against the Mau Mau, by Africans and Europeans. One editorial explained police brutality by indigenous forces in this manner: "The latter include askaris from diverse, and some of them primitive, tribes and the old spirit of tribal warfare can easily assert itself among them"; however the British soldier is vindicated: "The British soldier in Kenya generally has a reputation for making himself friendly and equally an object of affection to the common people among whom he serves."²⁰

However it must be noted that the British Government sometimes disagreed with colonial authorities on policies toward the

Mau Mau, and the press made public their recommendations. A February 1954 article discusses London's call for a police inquiry into allegations of brutality, and also its encouragement of African political parties.

U.S. Press

It was in the United States that this study found the propensity toward sensationalism to be strongest. *LIFE* provided vivid photographs so that Americans could visualize Mau Mau. One 1952 article dwarfed by several large photos read: "The words now designate a secret Kikuyu society, half nationalistic, half voodooistic, fiercely dedicated to driving the white man out of Kenya."²¹ Not understanding the use of sacrifices in African culture, it was immediately surmised that such activities were primitive and satanic. Kariuki explains that goat sacrifices were used at various occasions to signify the sanctity of particular events. He describes oath-taking ceremonies and explains the significance of such actions as drinking blood.

TIME, which provided a large bulk of reporting on Mau in the United States, ran the following:

Part land hunger, part savage revolution against the domineering white man and the bewildering 20th century. . . the Mau Mau have already mutilated . . . with their favorite weapon, the panga—a long, machete-like knife.²²

The magazine also printed the following revealing statement from a white settler—"If we're kind to the Kukes (short for Kikuyu), what more can they want? They've only been down from the trees for 50 years".²³ Unlike most press, the correspondent talked to Kikuyu hired hands, who explained that their status as laborers did not allow them enough salary to buy their own farms. Describing the reality of black life in Kenya was rare for *TIME*—it was overshadowed by the emphasis on fanaticism and violence. Maughan-Brown puts it this way: "The causes of 'Mau Mau' were socio-economic, not 'psycho-pathological' as the settlers and their apologists tried to maintain".²⁴

The same *TIME* article later expresses suspicion that Jomo Kenyatta, falsely believed to be the leader of Mau Mau, was a Communist: ". . . Kenyatta spent the '30s in Moscow as a student guest of the Kremlin, returned to Kenya to spread the Red gospel."²⁵ "The '30s" implies that Kenyatta spent close to or an entire 10 years in Moscow. In actuality he spent one year, 1932-33, in addition to a very brief period in 1929.²⁶

The diction used by *TIME* reinforced sensationalism. Some examples: ". . . the Fusiliers bagged 76 Mau Mau," "slash to bits," "terrorists," ". . . and the riflemen leaped from their trucks and charged."²⁷ These modifiers were part of recreated Mau Mau "atrocities" and encounters with government forces. Lengthy, detailed recreations were common in the major press studied in this paper.

This study found that the *New York Times*, with few exceptions, ran very brief articles on Mau Mau—three to five short paragraphs for example—which appeared at a much reduced frequency than in the *London Times*. Although the *New York Times* (*NYT*) contained less opinion in its reporting, its editorials shared many of *TIME* magazine's features, writing of a "return to paganism—to the 'leopard man,' to ritual murders, to primitive magic and terror".²⁸ Many articles repeated that Mau Mau were allegedly "pledged to drive all Europeans out of Kenya".²⁹ For the most part, the *NYT* reported on the colonial government's attitudes toward Mau Mau and the directives implemented to counter it. The public was informed, for example, that according to Oliver Lyttelton, British Colonial Secretary, "it was 'quite wrong' to link the Mau Mau secret society directly to economic causes".³⁰ The bulk of this information was received from Reuters News Service, so *NYT* was not doing its own reporting. Lacking was any reporting on Mau Mau grievances. Without this, the public knew only that Mau Mau killed, and that is the impression which lasted.

Nation magazine is an exception to the above. Articles not only reported unfolding events, they also criticized British policies and called for an addressing of Mau Mau grievances. For example one 1952 editorial points to the remarkable difference between land holdings of whites and that of Africans, and criticizes emergency measures which will "suspend civil rights. . . this policy appears to us the negation of statesmanship."³¹ Its diction does not resemble that of other papers, "terrorists" and "vicious" do not appear. With a very small circulation however, it could not substantially challenge the reporting of *TIME* and *Newsweek*.

However, after 1955 some of the larger media appeared to become less biting and sensationalist. By 1956, *TIME*'s tone had lost some of its punch. The Mau Mau movement had lasted longer than previous articles had estimated, and the possibility of independence for Kenya was being discussed. The attitude change is seen in the following January 1956 article, "No longer able to jail Africans for 'seditious' talk about political rights, the white settler gulps hard and smiles wanly. He knows his days are numbered."³²

The Other Side of the Story, Then and Now

Kariuki was a member of the Kenyan African Union (KAU) when detained in 1953. A teacher and recruiter for KAU, he had taken two Mau Mau oaths and acted as a liaison between forest fighters and the exterior, expediting communication, lodging them when they entered the urban area, etc.

Perhaps one of the more beneficial contributions Kariuki makes is to explain the significance of oath-taking among Kenyans and other African communities as well. Oaths were taken at important rites of passage—i.e., marriages—before raids, to bind land transactions, etc.; the oath of the Mau Mau "was intended to unite not only the Kikuyu, Embu, and Meru but all the other Kenya tribes . . . for bringing together and solemnizing certain transactions."³³ The contradiction in finding African oath-taking strange is that whites had the same tradition in the Freemasons, he observed.³⁴

Following is the Oath of Unity (*Ndemwa Ithatu*), described by the British press as "mumbo-jumbo":

I speak the truth and vow before God
 And before this movement,
 The movement of Unity,
 The Unity which is put to the test
 The Unity that is mocked with the name of "Mau Mau."
 That I shall go forward to fight for the land,
 The lands of Kirinyaga that we cultivated,
 The lands which were taken by the Europeans
 And if I fail to do this
 May this oath kill me,
 May this seven kill me,
 May this meat kill me.
 I speak the truth that I shall be working together
 With the forces of the movement of Unity
 And I shall help it with any contribution for which I
 am asked
 I am going to pay sixty-two shillings and fifty cents
 and a ram for the movement
 If I do not have them now I shall pay in the future.
 And if I fail to do this
 May this oath kill me,
 May this seven kill me,
 May this meat kill me.³⁵

Contrary to reports, the above (the first of three oaths administered by the Mau Mau) clearly stresses a unity of purpose for redress of an issue which is dear to them—the land. True to reports, death was warranted for those who don't follow through on their promise. The drinking of blood bound oath-takers to the vow.

There was another side to Mau Mau, and Kariuki acknowledges it. He explains the extreme measures—death of traitors, forced oath-taking—of the Mau Mau as not unique but in fact similar to the violence practiced by the state itself, and as a disciplinary measure in revolutionary movements.³⁶ The press exaggerated the bloodiness of Mau Mau killings, which were usually administered with a panga, a long machete-like knife. Maughan-Brown criticizes such press tactics:

But it appears to be another structural falsehood of the myth that "Mau Mau" generally killed with unnecessary bloodiness and savagery. . . . As Kariuki points out, "someone killed by a panga looks in worse shape than someone killed by a rifle, because a panga will not kill cleanly".³⁷

Kariuki attacks other press accounts:

The stories of . . . bestial intercourse with animals (during oath-taking) . . . are either fabrications or . . . they must have been confined to a minute number of perverted individuals driven crazy by their isolation in the forests. To imply that these sorts of oaths were indulged in wholesale by most of the Kikuyu tribe is like saying that all Englishmen are child-rapists and murderers simply because a few Englishmen do this every year.³⁸

The *Ndemwa Ithatu* makes its sanction under God, which would indicate that oath-takers were not "anti-Christian," as charged in all press. Kariuki clarifies the Mau Mau position in the following manner:

It was not that we were anti-Christian, merely that the struggle on earth was so desperate that Christianity could not be allowed to interfere. We had also noted that our enemies, in their cunning, were using it as a weapon against us. We considered it should not be degraded in this way.³⁹

Also revealing is Kariuki's account of life in detention, which sheds light on the harsh conditions created by the British as they sequestered entire Kikuyu communities suspected of being sympathizers to the Mau Mau. Eighty-thousand were detained in this manner.⁴⁰ Torturous beatings, poor food or lack thereof, overcrowding in camps, and unsanitary facilities were common. Kariuki himself was beaten

repeatedly for writing letters of complaint to the government. After one such incident,

My face was puffed up and split open, my right knee was fractured just below the kneecap by a club, and my chest was pierced by a strange instrument like a black truncheon with nails in it.⁴¹

While awaiting screening, detainees were engaged in development projects such as laying roads, transporting supplies for miles to construct buildings, digging ditches, etc. Many died in the process—"Let us not forget that Nairobi's Embakasi Airport . . . was built on the sweat and blood of our people fighting for freedom and it will remain a permanent memorial to those who died in the prison during its years of construction."⁴² Many of these deaths were not reported to the public.

(Ironically, Kariuki's propensity for speaking out against abuse of any kind also cost him his life. Kariuki was appointed private secretary to Kenyatta when the latter became president of Kenya following independence, but in the 1970s the relationship soured as Kariuki, now a powerful member of Parliament, criticized the extravagant lifestyle of Kenyatta appointees.⁴³ He was found murdered in 1975 after being arrested by police).

In conclusion, this paper has argued that one aspect of Mau Mau was sensationalized, while the "other" was for the most part neglected by the larger-sized press. The good of the Kenyan government and the bad of Mau Mau were afforded the most space, while the opposite for each case was usually ignored. The racial climate at the time made acceptance of such news accounts possible. Scholarly work such as Maughan-Brown's and Edgerton's indicate for present generations that much was misunderstood and intentionally misconstrued about the Africans, and, the dominantly Kikuyu Mau Mau armed struggle. The personal accounts of Mau Mau detainees and fighters such as Oginga Odinga and Bildad Kaggia particularly shed light on Mau Mau's actual intentions, the various motives of black political groups, and the daily experience of Kenyan blacks under colonialism.

NOTES

- ¹Jean Seaton and Ben Pimlott (eds.), *The Media in British Politics* (Aldershot, England: Avebury, 1987), p. 93.
- ²Bob Edgerton, *Mau Mau: An African Crucible* (New York: The Free Press, 1989), p. 106.
- ³Josiah Mwangi Kariuki, *Mau Mau Detainee* (London: Oxford University Press, 1963), p. 21.
- ⁴Edgerton, *Op. Cit.*, p. 9.
- ⁵*Ibid.*, p. 19.
- ⁶David Maughan-Brown, *Land, Freedom and Fiction: History and Ideology in Kenya* (London: Zed Books, 1985), pp. 134-135.
- ⁷Seaton, *Op. Cit.*, p. 47.
- ⁸Gunilla L. Faringer, *Press Freedom in Africa* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1991), p. 11.
- ⁹"Tugen Tribe Praised for Killing 'General,'" *East African Standard*, March 25, 1955.
- ¹⁰"Church and the Emergency," *East African Standard*, February 4, 1955.
- ¹¹"Col. Grogan recalls his remedy for Mau Mau," *East African Standard*, October 1, 1956.
- ¹²Edgerton, *Op. Cit.*, p. 44.
- ¹³Elsbeth Huxley, "What Life is Like for a Settler in Kenya," *The New York Times Magazine*, June 6, 1954.
- ¹⁴*Ibid.*
- ¹⁵Edgerton, *Op. Cit.*, p. 151.
- ¹⁶Huxley, *Op. Cit.*
- ¹⁷"The Queen's Place," *The London Times*, November 8, 1952.
- ¹⁸"Kenya Leader's Pledge: Africans Urged to Cooperate," *The London Times*, October 25, 1952.
- ¹⁹"Background to Mau Mau," *The London Times*, March 1, 1954.
- ²⁰"Conduct in Kenya," *The London Times*, January 27, 1954.
- ²¹"Murder by the Mau Maus," *LIFE*, November 3, 1952.
- ²²"Kenya: The Meow-Meows," *TIME*, November 3, 1952.
- ²³"Kenya: Panga War," *TIME*, November 10, 1952.
- ²⁴Maughan-Brown, *Op. Cit.*, p. 29.
- ²⁵"Kenya: Panga War," *TIME*, November 10, 1952.
- ²⁶Edgerton, *Op. Cit.*, p. 43.
- ²⁷"Kenya: The Darkening War," *TIME*, March 8, 1954.
- ²⁸"The Mau Mau," *The New York Times*, September 18, 1952.
- ²⁹"Desecrations Laid to Kenya Terrorists," *The New York Times*, September 17, 1952.
- ³⁰"Kenya Raids Continue," *The New York Times*, November 3, 1952.

31 "Totalitarian Suppression in Kenya," *Nation*, December 6, 1952.

32 "Kenya: Votes for Black Men," *TIME*, January 23, 1956.

33 Kariuki, *Op. Cit.*, p. 31.

34 *Ibid.*, p. 18.

35 *Ibid.*, p. 39.

36 *Ibid.*, p. 38.

37 Maughan-Brown, *Op. Cit.*, p. 39.

38 Kariuki, *Op. Cit.*, p. 33.

39 *Ibid.*, p. 36.

40 Edgerton, *Op. Cit.*, p. ix.

41 Kariuki, *Op. Cit.*, p. 129.

42 *Ibid.*, p. 154.

43 Edgerton, *Op. Cit.*, p. 229.