

Retelling the Mau Mau Past from the Mbeere Perspective¹

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Abstract

This article analyzes the contested historical narrative behind the Mbeere's role in the Mau Mau movement. Specifically, it explores the role of memorialization and marginalization in reconfiguring this past. With respect to the latter, the Mbeere were ostracized from the Mau Mau movement after the Kenyan Parliament, headed by Dedan Kimathi, sought to consolidate support by encouraging local officials to lobby bordering ethnic groups. As a result, the Mbeere, who were suspected to be pro-government and anti-Mau Mau, faced brutal reprisals from the Kikuyu and the Embu, key players in the movement. Although the physical violence may have ended, the symbolic violence of denial and ostracism persists as the Mau Mau movement's memory is popularized and commodified through the British government's acknowledgement of their abuse against Kenyans in the Mau Mau struggle. The dominant history of the Mau Mau rebellion is harrowing for the Mbeere Mau Mau veterans, who in fact existed and fought tenaciously against the British but were subsequently omitted from these narratives. This article draws on oral testimonies and archival sources to explore this history and potential avenues for official recognition and memorialization.

Keywords: Embu, Identity, Mbeere, Mau Mau, Memorialization, Marginalization.

The Mau Mau movement is chiefly characterized by the manner in which the residents of Central Province, namely the Embu, the Kikuyu, and the Mbeere, fiercely resisted the British invasion.² Having faced numerous humiliating defeats, the British invaders relied on reinforcements from Indians, Arab mercenaries, and

internal collaborators. Equipped with superior weaponry, the invaders engaged in what Richard Meinertzhagen terms “killing without mercy, burning all huts and razing the banana plantations to the ground.”³ Unable to stop the advances of the invaders, most Central Province residents opted to settle for peace, accepting a new standard of living fraught with oppression. Heavy taxation, compulsory labor, and ongoing land seizures of the indigenous population forced many Kikuyu to abandon their homes. Some Kikuyu families were integrated into a squatter system, while others became urban workers. The British colonial administrators sent 454 Kikuyu families to the Embu District after their lands were converted into large-scale plantations.⁴ Upon the Kikuyu’s arrival in Embu, the two communities performed the adoption ceremony (*guciarua*), which enabled them to reach a settlement and attain a peaceful coexistence.⁵

One of the strategies employed by the British government was the physical removal and relocation of the Mau Mau suspects, which it conducted through Operation Anvil. Huw Bennet acknowledges how this operation effectively dismantled the Mau Mau structures in Nairobi, pushing the movement’s activities to rural areas.⁶ Indeed, the political agitations in Nairobi and Kikuyu-occupied districts were alarmingly effective at attracting other ethnicities to the Mau Mau consciousness. To contain the spread of the Mau Mau rebellion, the colonial government adopted a “divide-and-rule” strategy, which worked well for imperialists as they gradually persuaded the Embu to resent the previously peaceful Kikuyu settlement.⁷ Essentially, the colonizers disrupted the lives of the Kikuyu by enforcing separatism and land consolidation. Meanwhile, the Embu accelerated the rejection, forcing the Kikuyu to establish villages in Itabua and Matakari as a form of strict population control.⁸ Moreover, any Kikuyu attempt to restart the Kikuyu Agricultural Clans Society (KACS) was swiftly quashed by the colonial government, as conveyed in the 1950 Embu District Annual Report: “While its [KACS] outward aims were theoretically good, there is no doubt that there were less praiseworthy aims underneath.”⁹ Unfortunately, the British officials perceived the unity of the Kikuyu as a threat to the Embu residents, which motivated them to catalyze fear and disorder.

The Mbeere who lived in the Embu District were often praised by their British administrators, which contributes to a

skewed historical narrative that fails to consider the full breadth of Mbeere participation in the Mau Mau rebellion. For example, Bernard Riley and David Brokensha suggest that the Mbeere in the Embu District were the most likely ethnicity to respond to the administration's demands, going as far as to engage in voluntary communal labor in large numbers.¹⁰ Through politicization of ethnic differences, some Mbeere were convinced they were the colonial favorites—an ethnicity set apart from the others. While the Embu and the Kikuyu resented colonial rule, the Mbeere experience was different; land-hunger and overcrowded reserves were far less pronounced in their region. Moreover, Mbeere loyalty was often associated with the accumulation of wealth. The colonial government strategically exalted the Mbeere as a community that benefited immensely from their loyalty. However, the reality of the situation proved to be quite different as the Mbeere region lagged economically behind the Embu and Kikuyu regions of Central Kenya.¹¹ The colonial officials' isolation of the Mbeere from other Central Kenya residents profoundly affected their respective memorialization in post-colonial Kenya. Despite the colonialists' efforts to detach the Mbeere from the Mau Mau movement's call for land and freedom, this article attempts to convey a different perspective of the Mbeere involvement, ultimately positioning them in a contested debate of Mau Mau history. Although their contribution is not neatly quantifiable, the Mbeere nevertheless played a critical role in the Mau Mau uprising. This paper offers a unique narrative for decolonizing existing knowledge and situating the Mbeere in a new wave of research justice for knowledge creation and achievement of liberation for those rendered invisible by a misrepresented past.

Effects of Colonial Encounters in the Mbeere Region

The colonial records used the following words and phrases to describe the Mbeere region: “arid, sandy. . . unfavourably situated. . . rocky waste. . . struggle for existence. . . inhospitable country. . .”¹² According to colonial accounts, the Mbeere region remained untouched due to the innately conservative disposition of the Mbeere themselves and their disdain of missionary influence. Therefore, the pain of losing land (and its concomitant conviction to resist the colonialists), which was the primary

motivation for joining the Mau Mau movement for other ethnicities, was not widespread among the Mbeere. Yet, careful examination of the economic and social conditions of the time reveals a more complex reality. Although the colonial records explicitly state that the Mbeere region was untouched by civilized ideas, the wage economy and “civilisation mission” disrupted their way of life.¹³ Specifically, the depletion of the Mbeere herds of goats and beehives created a unique incentive to join the Mau Mau movement. Thus, while Mbeere recruitment to the Mau Mau movement did not stem from traditional social inequities, it was nevertheless present in select regions.

The efficient functioning of the colonial government depended on the institution of chieftaincy, which attracted ambitious men who used their power to collect taxes and subject locals to colonial work. Marshal Clough states that the chiefs were under considerable pressure from their British officers to bring taxes.¹⁴ He further observes how the imposition of foreign rule caused significant changes and dislocations in Kenyans’ lives. This change altered the social norms of local communities, particularly within the Embu District, where new power structures emerged due to colonial oversight.¹⁵ The chiefs, thereafter, reflected the same pressure upon the natives. Similarly distressing for the Mbeere was the increase of the hut and poll taxes from three to twelve rupees. Failure to abide by these colonial regulations created civil cases, which were adjudicated by the council of elders (*Kiama*).¹⁶ Additionally, chiefs tended to profit from these criminal tribunal cases through their collection of bribes and fines.¹⁷ As illustrated in the table below, which documents the issues presented at the Mbeere Native Tribunal in 1951, rates of tax evasion and overall non-compliance were high in the Mbeere region.¹⁸ The markedly high frequency of criminal cases tried in 1951 indicates defiance to colonial rule and demonstrates the Mbeeres’ willingness to join forces with other disobedient communities to safeguard their autonomy.

Criminal cases tried by various tribunal-1951		
Offence	Embu Native Tribunal	Mbeere Native Tribunal
1. Tax Evasion	1091	1959
2. Cess	1117	2070
3. Breaches of ADC resolutions	506	208
4. Breaches of Native Authority Ordinance	380	180

The Mbeere contribution to the Mau Mau movement is rarely acknowledged due to the efforts of colonial administrators. Unless a deliberate strategy of carefully analyzing counter-insurgency materials for the underlying contributions of the Mbeere is implemented, they will remain unjustly excluded from the war of resistance in colonial Kenya.¹⁹ The following excerpt from the Embu District Intelligence Committee illustrates how the colonial authorities misrepresented Mbeere loyalism:

In December 1953, for example, 600 Mbeere armed with bows, arrows and shield and including old warriors well over 70 years of age volunteered for a mass sweep under the supervision of the police and army.²⁰ No change in their attitude, which was well shown by 600 [Mbeere] turning up for an operation near Embu when in fact only 100 were asked for.²¹

This narrative deceptively portrays the Mbeere as indisputable opponents of the Mau Mau movement who lacked the motivation to join its ranks. Along the same line, Jack Glazier suggests that “there was almost total rejection of Mau Mau by the Mbeere.”²² A similar conclusion was arrived at by Daniel Branch, who regarded the Mbeere as keen loyalists.²³ This perspective fails to liberate the Mbeere narrative in the Mau Mau movement and continues to have a profound impact on social relations in contemporary Kenya.

The Mbeere Uniqueness in the Mau Mau Movement

In truth, one of the major mechanisms of anti-colonial resistance was supernatural power wielded by Mbeere medicine men. It is purported by scholars such as Jomo Kenyatta that men endowed with such powers were highly respected among the Kikuyu and

could communicate directly with *Mwene-Nyaga* (God).²⁴ The Kikuyu, like other ethnicities in Central Kenya, turned to God in times of distress, utilizing seers as a conduit through which they could receive Godly instruction.²⁵ Furthermore, Satish Saberwal describes how individuals could leverage Mbeere seers to deter thieves, cure illnesses, and relieve hostilities.²⁶ At the nexus of superstition, faith, and obedience, the deeply ingrained knowledge of witchcraft and magic within Mbeere culture made the Mbeere seers highly revered, garnering them the respect of people both within and outside their community.²⁷ Jeremiah Mugo, an Mbeere and Mau Mau seer, describes his role in the Mau Mau insurgency as follows: “In the Mau Mau movement, I was a seer. When I dreamt, I informed compatriots. Any extraordinary occurrence, I was left to decide the cause of action.”²⁸ The insurgents took heed of his forewarnings, allowing the movement to survive for many years. This example illustrates the centrality of individuals who possessed such unique powers. Recognizing their importance to the growth of the movement, the Mau Mau central committee yearned to control the Mbeere and their medicine men for manipulative purposes. Indeed, magic and witchcraft formed an integral part of the Mau Mau movement, making the Mbeere a target for recruitment as a result of their unique supernatural powers.

In addition to their mystic abilities, the Mbeere offered another distinct service to the movement: oathing and its associated rituals. Deeply rooted in the Mbeere culture due to its ability to promote unity and justice, oathing was leveraged by the Mau Mau movement to prevent division among the populace. One specific form of oathing in Mbeere that was especially pertinent to the Mau Mau movement was the sacrificing of a goat or sheep.²⁹ With the oversight of a medicine man who orchestrated the ritual, a goat was stabbed seven times by litigants as they uttered: “If this is not the case, may I die as the goat does.” Then the Mbeere elders dipped their walking sticks (*bakora*) in the blood before the litigants drank it.³⁰ For conflict resolution, the colonial administrators allowed the Mbeere tribunal to use the *Ruengu* oath in cases of witchcraft, homicide, and theft.³¹ Oath-taking rituals in the Mbeere region systematically progressed the Mau Mau consciousness, prompting secrecy and discipline among those who partook.³²

The Mau Mau oath was a unifying tool that drew meaning from traditional structures, rendering Kenyans conscious of their

potential freedom from colonial rule. Essentially, oathing was a process whereby initiates committed to being reborn as Mau Mau adherents. Although the purpose of the oath was the “Unity of the People” (*Uiguano wa Muingi*), it was often forcefully applied and accompanied by elements of deception.³³ For example, the Mau Mau oath was typically taken under duress; anyone who refused to take the oath underwent torture and outright elimination.³⁴ Nevertheless, the Mbeere supernatural powers remained obscured to the British colonial authorities, who, despite high levels of inquiry, were ultimately unsuccessful in properly conceptualizing the role of oathing and witchcraft within the Mau Mau insurgency.³⁵ In sum, Mbeere participation in the Mau Mau movement legitimized the Mau Mau oath for political recruitment and facilitated the construction of a Kikuyu identity premised on shared culture.

As a counter-insurgency measure, the colonial government utilized propaganda to isolate and detach the Mbeere from the Mau Mau movement by vilifying the Mbeere chiefs as vigorous opponents of the Mau Mau insurgency. They highlighted the success of their propaganda in colonial reports in 1954, at the height of the Mau Mau revolt, to demonstrate that the colonial government was winning against the Mau Mau movement. A. L. Archer, a colonial administrator, described Mbeere involvement in the Mau Mau activities in the following manner:

Having verified 60 Mbeere individuals to have taken the infamous Mau Mau oath, I found that the oath did not turn them into enthusiastic Mau Mau adherents. A potent cleansing ceremony took place at Siakago on April 23, 1953, at 5:36 pm, where the Mbeere repatriates, oathed at the Barry Johnson farm, were de-oathed.³⁶

To the colonial administrators, the malleability of the Mbeere allowed for redemption, unlike the Kikuyu, who were sent to detention and work camps to renounce the Mau Mau oath. In this way, the colonial government’s propaganda wing had varying degrees of impact on each relevant ethnicity. Its main focus, however, was to incapacitate the Mau Mau movement by “reclaiming” the many Mbeere who had taken the first oath of unity.

Given that it did not face the same punitive villagization as other areas in central Kenya, the Mbeere region was an ideal hide-out for the Mau Mau insurgents. Facing a shortage of food, Mau

Mau rebels often found relief in Mbeere generosity. For example, Muthengi Mugwate, an Mbeere Mau Mau veteran, recalled how he supplied food to the insurgents in Gachoka (Southern Mbeere) for their safety.³⁷ Moreover, the scarcity of food was not simply ecologically driven; in a telegram conversation between the Governor and the Secretary of State, the former noted how the denial of food in the Kikuyu Land Unit proved to be a successful strategy in the fight against the rebellion. As a result, the insurgents were forced into small parties to search for sustenance; eventually, they found that the Mbeere region could consistently sustain their needs.³⁸ Over time, the colonial government began to discover weak spots in areas with less fortified villages, prompting them to deploy “home guards,” which were government-funded paramilitary forces consisting of either loyal local inhabitants or official security forces.³⁹ Teams of Mbeere Mau Mau scouts responded to this development with surveillance and intelligence gathering; whenever Embu or Mbeere home guards appeared, they would send a clandestine warning: “*Runji nirwaucura*” (the river is full).⁴⁰ H.K Wachanga vividly portrays this role in the following scene: “One night, as the Mau Mau were singing and praying for Kenyatta, Mau Mau warned his group about the approach of government security forces. As a result, the insurgents were able to disperse without their presence being discovered.”⁴¹ It is within such instances that the contribution of the Mbeere insurgents routinely enabled the survival of the Mau Mau movement.

Identity Politics in the Embu Region

Before colonialism, the Embu and the Mbeere coexisted as equals.⁴² They engaged in foodstuff exchange consisting of goods like sorghum, lablab beans, pigeon peas, and finger millet, which left in caravans from the Mbeere region to Embu markets. This economic relationship displays the industriousness of the Mbeere, who understood the benefit of maintaining relationships with the other ethnic groups of central Kenya. Indeed, good relations and stable trade between the Mbeere and the Embu reactivated old ties that had endured for several generations, allowing them to travel into each other’s territory, temporarily host one another, and provide support in times of need.⁴³ These ties were especially important as Embu climatic conditions became more

agriculturally productive than those of the arid Mbeere landscape, resulting in a migration of Mbeere out of their homeland and the establishment of a food-structured relationship between the two groups. Here, Angelique Haugerud draws a connection between food security and the nuances of power and politics at large.⁴⁴ As the Mbeere livelihood became unstable, their political status also suffered, and patron-client relations evolved disfavorably. Over time, the Embu's exceptional agricultural abilities allowed them to undermine the Mbeere and treat them as unworthy competitors.⁴⁵ On the other hand, John Mwaruvie offers a shift from the static view of the Mbeere towards a more dynamic perspective of time-consciousness and effective engagement in specific activities throughout the year, such as farming, labor mobilization, and internal and regional trade.⁴⁶ On the whole, however, the Mbeere were portrayed as consumers who did not develop commensurately with the changing system, which profoundly affected their identity.

A combination of the Embu region's geography, population density, and climate fueled the growing social inequality between the Embu and Mbeere. These conditions helped to increase the wealth and prestige of the Embu, enabling them to assume a superior position within the Embu District (an administrative unit reserved for the Embu, Mbeere, Gichugu, and Ndia people). By contrast, with notably fewer geographical advantages, the Mbeere accepted a subordinate position, both politically and economically. This divergence of influence was beneficial for the colonial power, whose support was strategically shown to whichever side that best fit their wavering interests.⁴⁷ Of course, such partialities precipitated unfavourable social outcomes between groups who, hitherto, had developed mutually beneficial relationships. Angelique Haugerud captures this local shift in her analysis of old Embu songs that mocked the Mbeere's lack of self-sufficiency during the time of drought:

In Mbeere from Karamandi to Evurore, I hear from *Njumo* (a traditional dance song) that the sorghum has been infected with smut. Let it be infected again and again, for they must pay back the grain we gave them during the famine of *Kithioro*. Woe unto you Mbeere people: I will mock you again and again, even if you do not give me water. If you do not dance at home, how will you dance in a foreign land?⁴⁸

This example affirms Sherree Zalampa's claims that communities with relatively elevated statuses tend to be arrogant, boastful, and oppressive.⁴⁹ Strained by these circumstances, many Mbeere found it easier to self-identify as Embu. Conversely, only on rare occasions would an Embian pose as a Mbeerian, given that the Embu now perceived themselves far too enlightened to identify with what they considered to be a lower class.⁵⁰ As noted by Leonidas Donskis, "the shifting identity is always troubled, and the troubled identity is always shifting."⁵¹ Realizing the impact of a collective identity for Embu and Mbeere, the colonial authority framed the latter as an innately conservative and lazy people who required a great deal of persuasion and supervision to cultivate. Correspondingly, the Embu adopted a similar perspective, pronouncing the Mbeere a weak and overly dependent people.

Distrust between the Embu and the Mbeere was further exacerbated by the perceived preferential treatment of the latter over the former. First, the claims and the counterclaims regarding boundaries between the Embu and the Mbeere induced bitterness and triggered hostility, especially as the Mbeere forfeited land on the Embu-Mbeere border.⁵² In 1954, a colonial administrator noted the following: "In February . . . the Mbeere, apart from a long-standing animosity regarding their boundary within the Embu Division (an administrative region of the Embu and the Mbeere) considered the inhabitants of the latter to be all Mau Mau adherents."⁵³ Therefore, the Embu were accused of destroying political unity and social cohesion, which were considered crucial by the Mbeere for economic development. Second, merging the Mbeere within the Embu Division, rather than creating distinct administrative units, resulted in the Mbeere feeling physically exposed to Embu insurgent attacks and territorially excluded. Third, for administrative purposes, the colonial power operated exclusively from Embu territory, leaving no administrative officer posted to the Mbeere region until 1956. The Mbeere region, therefore, suffered political marginalisation and uneven development. The artificial conceptualisation of landscapes and their concomitant narratives shaped by the elites (the British colonisers and dominant ethnic groups) marginalised the Mbeere in the Embu District.⁵⁴ Lastly, as Daniel Branch explains, the Embu incorrectly alleged that all Mbeere were serving as home guards, who were the main enemy of the Mau Mau movement.⁵⁵ Ironically, during

the war, the British colonial government actually converted loyal Kikuyu, Embu, and Meru guards into home guards.⁵⁶ In short, the distrust created by the colonial administrators between the Embu and the Mbeere (who bore the worst effects) paved the way for further colonial exploitation.

The extortionate economy of Nairobi frustrated central Kenyan ethnicities equally, thereby contributing to the efficacy of the insurgency campaign and ultimately providing much-needed direction for ethnic solidarity and political consciousness. Consequently, the 80,000 souls in Nairobi city found identity in either their place of origin or, in the case of the Embu and Mbeere, in the suffering they endured together.⁵⁷ Recognizing the mounting pressure, the colonial government sought to sanitize Nairobi of the insurgency by conducting "Operation Anvil" on April 24, 1954. Led by General George Erskine, a senior British Army Officer, this military operation sought to round up all the Kikuyu, Embu, and Meru to be screened and brought to trial.⁵⁸ Before Operation Anvil, an emergency committee meeting was held to assess the situation in Nairobi. The following is a *précis* of that meeting given by the Intelligence Adviser A. M. MacDonald to the Colony Emergency Committee on January 9, 1954:

There can be no doubt that a large proportion of them are still giving active assistance to Mau Mau while another large section is not prepared to come out on the government side. In those areas where the Kikuyu are known to be actively and voluntarily assisting the terrorists, the full weight of government must be brought to bear on the Kikuyu people as a whole. This involves more drastic action than has yet been taken. Unless drastic measures are employed, the rising tide of political consciousness will sweep other tribes into agitation and possibly violence. The government hoped to reduce the swollen Kikuyu population either by removing all Kikuyu from the city or subjecting them to strict control.⁵⁹

This passage indicates the indiscriminate, brutal, and vengeful character of Operation Anvil, which became increasingly apparent as the colonial government received countless complaints regarding its effect upon the guilty and innocent alike.⁶⁰ During this time, General George Erskine deployed an estimated 25,000 security forces who directed Africans to pack only one bag and

exit the streets peacefully. Caroline Elkins noted, “all Africans were temporarily taken to barbed-wire enclosures. . . the Kikuyu, as well as the closely affiliated Embu and Meru, were separated from the rest.”⁶¹ In the end, Operation Anvil was characterized by confusion and blind expediency wherein protesters were immediately detained in special police vehicles, and military personnel often failed to distinguish between the Embu and Mbeere, who, as should be recognized, bore the weight of the “Anvil” together.

Although having endured many of the same hardships by the conclusion of the emergency on January 12, 1960, the ethnic groups of Central Kenya were not equally acknowledged for their roles in the Mau Mau movement. While the Embu were memorialized through their involvement in the Mau Mau movement, the actions of their Mbeere counterparts received far less credit. Alam Shamsul describes the Mau Mau movement as a Kikuyu, Embu, and Meru phenomenon; that is to say, in the Embu District (home to both the Mbeere and Embu), the Embu were regarded as the sole community involved in the rebellion.⁶² The official discourse reinforces the idea that “Mbeere loyalty [to the British colonialists] was beyond question, and they proved themselves energetic in keeping the Mau Mau out of their territory.”⁶³ Inside the Embu District, the memory of the Mau Mau nationalist movement is still maintained through the lens of the Embu, who obstructed the public legitimacy of the Mbeere involvement in the movement. As a result, the Mbeere lost a defining piece of their identity and were denied a specific historical narrative as actors within an integral part of Kenyan history.

Positionality: The Core and the Periphery

Representation in the Mau Mau historiography depended on the location one settled with respect to Mount Kenya and Nairobi. Markedly, the Mau Mau narratives tended to favor areas nearest to the core (Nairobi and Mt. Kenya), while the peripheral regions, such as the one inhabited by the Mbeere, were insignificant in the Mau Mau historiography. Accordingly, the Kikuyu, living closest to Nairobi, were the first ethnic group to be incorporated into the cash economy, which ultimately shaped their lifestyle and perception of Europeans.⁶⁴ Representation also depended upon the accounts of colonial administrators, who took it upon themselves

to decide which version of the Mau Mau movement history was fit for public consumption. To avoid future criticism and draw a veil over the past, the British officials handled the most candid reports by either destroying them or flying them to London.⁶⁵ These actions suggest that the colonial state played a significant role in silencing the narratives of the Mbeere and other communities in the Mau Mau movement.

Geographically, the Mau Mau movement penetrated lands well beyond the borders of the Mbeere region. To this end, the urban-based Mbeere infiltrated the Ukambani region to encourage greater voluntary support of the Mau Mau movement and spread the appeal of land rights and freedom.⁶⁶ Additionally, the outward expansion of Mau Mau ideology eventually resulted in the establishment of oathing in the Embu District; this is evidenced by many chiefs in the Embu District, such as Fausto, Muruatetu, Paul Makenda, and Manunga Ngochi, who decided to take the oath.⁶⁷ Thanks to Mau Mau efforts of secrecy and concealment, it was difficult for the British colonial government to blame these chiefs, enabling many of them to escape repressive counter-insurgency campaigns. Regarding the Mbeere themselves, the colonial authorities believed that they were impervious to Mau Mau indoctrination despite their proximity to the “core” of the movement.⁶⁸ In contrast, the Ukambani region, where the Kamba lived, was far from Mt. Kenya (the “core”), yet the British nevertheless recognized the Kamba involvement in the Mau Mau movement. Similarly, Narok, despite being located along the “periphery,” is recognized by the British to have been profoundly influenced by the movement.⁶⁹ Despite the massive infiltration that occurred in Mbeere locations, coupled with the state’s acknowledgement of Mau Mau influence in the Kamba and Narok locations, it is clear that the exclusion of the Mbeere from the Mau Mau struggle was deliberate and politically motivated.

Eventually, the Mau Mau movement adjusted tactics, and forests were no longer the primary theater of the conflict. Insurgents oscillated between the African land reserves and Nairobi, enhancing the Mau Mau movement’s network. Due to the worsening economic situation in the Mbeere region, many Mbeere had begun migrating to Nairobi since before 1930. The Embu, Meru, and Kikuyu, who were already present in the city, consequently included these newly-urbanized Mbeere in oathing ceremonies

that progressed social solidarity and raised political commitment.⁷⁰ That being said, Mwaniki Kabeca refutes the claim that peripheral communities never participated in the Mau Mau movement: “The Mbeere are a secretive community. They took the Mau Mau oath and participated discretely. The Mbeere appeared to be against the Mau Mau movement, and the colonial administrators perceived them as extremely loyal.”⁷¹ Kabeca further argues that Mbeere participation in the Mau Mau movement was complex insofar as their chiefs often shielded them from interactions with the Embu, Kikuyu, and Meru.⁷² In her biography, Mukami Kimathi explains that despite his best intentions, her husband’s decision to send her to Nairobi was, in fact, negligent: “He had thrown me into the lion’s den that was Nairobi.”⁷³ On arriving in Nairobi, Mukami Kimathi lived in an ethnically arranged area where she, along with many other Mbeere, suffered alongside the Kikuyu, Meru, and Embu. She contends that the colonial government segregated the Central Province communities in Kariokor, Bondeni, and Bahati to stop the spread of anti-imperialist ideas. Within the communities mentioned above, the Kikuyu, Mbeere, Meru, and Embu were all suspects because of their ethnic group affiliation. Thus, contrary to the narrative advanced by some scholars, the Mbeere were both present and actively involved in the movement’s Nairobi-based activities.

As the Mau Mau violence intensified, the colonial government responded by issuing passbooks to censor movement and cast surveillance over the Kikuyu, Mbeere, and Embu alike. These passbooks were issued to ethnic groups suspected of deep involvement in the Mau Mau movement and enabled close supervision by the colonial government.⁷⁴ Unfortunately, archival evidence about the issuance of passbooks does not shed light on why the Mbeere, who were issued passbooks and subjected to the same curtailing of personal freedoms as their Kikuyu, Embu, and Meru counterparts, were nevertheless found to be “loyalists.” Notably, the passbook order dated February 11, 1954, crippled the movement of all Kikuyu, Embu, and Meru citizens:

No adult Kikuyu, Embu or Meru may move or reside outside his or her Native Land Unit unless in possession of a passbook bearing a special endorsement valid only for a specified move or permit to reside, that such passbook shall be carried

at all times outside Native Land Unit and shall be produced on demand by any authorised person.⁷⁵

Despite their lack of mention in the excerpt above, oral evidence reveals how the Mbeere who worked in Nairobi and other towns such as Mombasa possessed passbooks.⁷⁶ As shown in the following correspondence between the Taita District Commissioner and District Pass Officer, it was hard for colonial administrators to distinguish between the Embu and the Mbeere:

Mr Munyi Musungu, an Mbeere, was charged before Second Class Magistrate Voi on January 13, 1958 with failing to preserve his Kikuyu, Meru and Embu passbook, contrary to section 20(e) of the Emergency Regulations 1954. He was fined Shilling (Shs) 5, which he paid as court fines receipt No. 251822 of 13.1.1958. On January 15, 1958, District Pass officer Mombasa wrote a letter to the District Commissioner Taita District that Munyi Musungu-Passbook No. 28766 was a member of the Mbeere ethnic group and was not required to have a passbook.⁷⁷

Hence, the Mbeere were in fact subjected to the same surveillance and scrutinization that was reserved for suspects of the Mau Mau movement.

Labelling in Colonial Embu District

One especially gruesome tactic utilized by Mau Mau insurgents was the “labelling” of individuals who failed to adhere to the doctrine of the movement. One scholar, Teboho Ansorge, draws a connection between the ear cutting conducted by the insurgents and an ancient, shameful Babylonian punishment reserved for individuals who neglected to pay their fines. In this way, ear cutting was a physical manifestation of one’s dereliction of authority.⁷⁸ In particular, the Mbeere witnessed frequent labelling attacks in the 1950s; archival and oral evidence suggests that this ear cutting spree was orchestrated by none other than Mau Mau insurgents.⁷⁹ Chief Kombo of Mavuria reported one such attack on an Mbeere caravan resting en route to the Embu market at Gachoka on the night of February 1, 1953. Respondent X, an Mbeerian brought up in Embu, narrated how they planned and executed the Gachoka attack.⁸⁰ During the initial confrontation, it became apparent that

most of the present Mbeere residents had refused to take the Mau Mau oath of unity. Consequently, led by Mwangi Chege and Boniface Maina, the battalion felt compelled to attack. Since it was impossible to oath them all simultaneously, it was decided that they should instead be engraved with a mark. At this moment, the Mau Mau insurgents agreed to mark the Mbeere by clipping their ears; specifically, they selected the right ear for the men and the left ear for the women. This engraved sign (*rori*) signified their refusal to take the oath and signified a permanent transition to a lower status. Respondent X rationalized how such arrangements of physical punishment and their accompanying demotion was the best way to compel conformity and support the goals of the Mau Mau insurgency.

The scars from the Gachoka attack bore witness to the harsh realities of the Mau Mau war of resistance. Ear mutilation was a crude, egregious, and unnecessary practice, especially in the case of Gachoka, in which the option to oath was unavailable. On December 4, 1953, a similar incident occurred when an Mbeere man and his wives had their left ears removed by a gang of eight men at Kiamuringa before being oathed with their own blood.⁸¹ Here, “labelling” was a form of domination, placing all those who were ostensibly anti-Mau Mau on public display.⁸² Essentially, ear cutting relayed to the residents of Central Kenya that the Mbeere were against subaltern consciousness, a grave generalization that carried implications beyond disfigurement. Tellingly, the colonial government was unbothered with the atrocities inflicted upon the Mbeere. This is evidenced by its lack of effort to separate the Mbeere (“loyalists”) from the Embu (Mau Mau suspects), as was planned in the case of the Meru.⁸³ Instead, individuals in the Mbeere region continued to disappear without a trace, prompting great fear and hysteria.⁸⁴ By and large, it is clear how the act of ear clipping contributed to the near-elimination of the Mbeere narrative in the Mau Mau war of resistance. The following is one Embu account of how the Mbeere came to lose their ears:

Immediately after the movement started, adverts and invitations were calling on those who would become soldiers and help the White man fight the Mau Mau. The Mbeere men came to a place called Embu and asked them, “Where is this office where people are being employed as soldiers to beat

the Embu?" They told them that if that is all they wanted, they should follow them to be shown. They were taken to that place between Ugweri and Mbeere, at the boundaries, around 1953 to 1954. The guide showing them the way took them into a bush where the Mau Mau insurgents were. They were told that "You know you are our brothers; if it were not for that, we would have cut your throats, but we will give you a mark so that you do not talk such nonsense again. Each one of them had an ear chopped off."⁸⁵

The described incident highlights the division that grew between those who supported the Mau Mau movement and those who stood against it. Those who possessed the authority to "label" (the Embu) also wielded the power to socially construct a distinct group of "others" (the Mbeere), who, due to low population density and lack of political voice, could not control their image. To the residents of the Embu District, ear clipping was normalized as a legitimate method for social classification. Overall, the cataloguing of the Mbeere as loyalists severed them from subaltern consciousness and left them vulnerable, alienated, and insecure.

Needless to say, ear clipping left an irreversible imprint on the Mbeere mind. Within the interviews conducted for this article, there was a general feeling of subordination and inferiority among the Mbeere, evoked in statements such as "*Mumbeere ti Mundu*" (the Mbeere are less human).⁸⁶ Worse still, fears of "contamination" caused by association with the Mbeere persist today, limiting their social mobility and thus their livelihoods. Furthermore, although the Mbeere frequently suffered from Mau Mau attacks, the colonial administration failed to address their grievances seriously. The following passage from the Embu District Intelligence Committee reveals either their lack of awareness or their decision to strategically ignore the reality of the situation: "the Mbeere are extremely good and are indignant about this latest ear amputating out-rage. They are perpetually expressing their keenness to come to grips with the enemy."⁸⁷ Thus, although the British recognized the potential for further attacks and reprisal, they chose to act in service of their own interests, framing the circumstances in a manner that meant that protection for the Mbeere was unwarranted.

The Role of the Mbeere Chiefs in Countering the Mau Mau Insurgency

The chieftaincy institution was a necessity for the British government, whose colonial officials were too few and too scattered across the colony to govern the territory by themselves.⁸⁸ Although the position of chief was non-existent among the Kikuyu and the Mbeere during pre-colonial times, it was determined by the British to be crucial for the administrative hierarchy of Kenya.⁸⁹ Eventually, the chiefs were granted a monopoly of power over the implementation of policies in African Districts. Therefore, at least provincially, the administrative burden rested on the chiefs, an entirely new and largely unpopular establishment in many parts of Kenya. Despite widespread dislike for the institution, many aspired to be chiefs in the Mbeere region. Those appointed to this position had already served the administration as sublocation headmen or tribal retainers. In some instances, the administrators appointed people to the status of chieftaincy based on relatives who had previously served in government positions. For example, in the Kiambu District, sixteen chiefs were succeeded by a relative, illustrating a tendency to keep appointments within the same family.⁹⁰ However, it must also be noted that the chief's position was precarious—one either worked in the interest of Europeans or for their fellow natives.⁹¹ Although working for European interests presented an opportunity for personal aggrandizement, it came at the risk of removal by those over whom the chiefs were commissioned to preside.

As local political administrators, chiefs often seized new opportunities to enrich themselves through subtle albeit observable methods, such as fraudulently acquiring land. Years later, they would eventually own small businesses, large herds of goats, and transport companies.⁹² However, with the benefits of colonial support came a growing disconnect between chiefs and their fellow natives, as well as immense pressure to carry out government directives without fail. In some cases, appointed chiefs were tasked with disseminating propaganda through local meetings (*baraza*) to sustain the bureaucratic systems.⁹³ In other cases, faced with widespread resistance, the colonial government demanded that these chiefs address the violent opposition of agitators. To that end, in order to drive their campaign, the colonial administrators often

reminded the Mbeere chiefs of their expendable nature. One of the more notorious ways in which chiefs contributed to the colonial penetration of the Mbeere region is by determining the most administratively efficient locations for the future construction of colonial buildings.⁹⁴ Due to the concomitant increase in supervision and oversight, this colonial strategy resulted in a great schism between the Mbeere chiefs and the natives; however, upon realizing the military power of the colonial government, the natives eventually adopted a more cooperative perspective.⁹⁵ Unfortunately, tensions were further exacerbated by the numerous other duties that were expected of chiefs, including their burden under the District Commissioner to remit taxes.⁹⁶ In sum, chiefs occupied a crucial position that played a pivotal role in determining the direction of the colonial administration.

With respect to their role in the Mau Mau movement, the Mbeere chiefs would eventually begin moderating even the most culturally sensitive aspects of Mbeere life. Like the Kikuyu, the Mbeere conducted clitoridectomy as a process of female initiation to adulthood.⁹⁷ Older women, respecting their cultural traditions, defied the government directive to stop clitoridectomy, which was issued as a punishment for suspected Mau Mau supporters.⁹⁸ In the Embu region, clitoridectomy was under serious debate between the older generation of women and the men who served in the Local Native Council, especially the Embu and Mbeere chiefs (who appeared as the main protagonists of the government).⁹⁹ This exchange between tradition and the desired outcomes of the colonial government is expressed in the following oral evidence that describes an incident that occurred in Mavuria:

I would not say that Kombo was a good man. He arrested us for branding our bodies with letters that he associated with the Mau Mau movement. We were arrested and kept at Kavondori where we dug trenches. Kombo refused us to be circumcised, citing our mothers had taken the Mau Mau oath, but we did it in secret.¹⁰⁰

This episode shows how chiefs were willing to arrest anybody suspected of affiliation with the Mau Mau movement, regardless of the cultural significance of their alleged transgression. Over time, the Mbeere were made to believe by their chiefs that the Mau Mau insurgents were terrorists (*mang'ei*).¹⁰¹ This strategy was

successful, as minimal contact between locals and suspected Mau Mau supporters resulted in a significant loss of traction among the passive insurgency wing.¹⁰²

It should also be noted that the Mbeere chiefs were quick to salvage or “de-oath” those who had been indoctrinated as an alternative to incarceration. Oral evidence reveals how chief Kombo, the oldest chief and longest-serving chief in Mbeere, administered a cleansing oath (*gutahekio*) as a form of counter-oathing.¹⁰³ In this way, chief Kombo demonstrated his worth to the colonial government through his ability to “reclaim” lost Mbeere individuals. One Mbeere chief stands out among the rest as being particularly instrumental in the fight against the Mau Mau insurgency. To prevent the pervasion of the Mau Mau movement in the Mbeere region, Chief Mwandiko of Evurore went to extreme lengths; rather than working towards political integration, Mwandiko chose instead to engender antagonism between the Embu and the Mbeere, effectively undermining the vision of land and self-mastery for all Kenyans. To European officials, however, Mwandiko was an ideal chief for their version of modern progress. The Mbeere, interestingly, did not all share the same assessment of their chief; while some viewed him as warlike and tribalist (ethnocentric), others believed him to be a “true Mbeere,” ready to defend his people from Mau Mau attacks.¹⁰⁴

Nthiga Mukinyango, an Mbeere who was interviewed for this article, recollected how Mwandiko created ruthless para-administrative and military bodies who mercilessly implemented his command.¹⁰⁵ He further recounts how, during a cleansing ceremony in Ishiara, chief Mwandiko and several tribal retainers severely beat him and others.¹⁰⁶ After, Mwandiko called for a *baraza* (meeting) for the people of Ishiara, Nguthi, Evurore, and Kathera to make an example of those suspected to be Mau Mau supporters.¹⁰⁷ Here, Mwandiko ordered a tribal retainer to torture the Mau Mau suspects.¹⁰⁸ To make matters worse, Chief Mwandiko also authorized the Mbeere in Evurore to retaliate and attack the Embu on sight, solidifying the rupture between the two groups. Jackson Ireri, an Embian who worked in Ishiara as a primary school teacher, recalled how chief Mwandiko fueled hatred even against Embu teachers in the Mbeere regions.¹⁰⁹ Ultimately, Chief Mwandiko’s actions in response to the Mau Mau insurgency helped advance a perspective of this history, which

inappropriately categorizes the entirety of the Mbeere people as advocates of the colonial administration.

Together, the colonial government and the Mbeere chiefs fabricated stories of injustices linked to the Embu, who supported the Mau Mau movement.¹¹⁰ The following statement by Chief Mwandiko is representative of their counter-indoctrination strategy: “There is no way the eyes of *Muembu* and *Mumbere* can see each other; the Embu eyes can burn the Mbeere eyes since Embu are murderers.”¹¹¹ Chiefs, as colonial agents, offered information that predominantly served the colonial interests. In his recent study on propaganda generated in the Mau Mau war, Myles Osborne maintains that the colonial government’s engagement in information production and dissemination of materials was meant to discredit the Mau Mau movement and inspire confidence in the government over the rebellion.¹¹² Along the same lines, the colonial government publicized its “best interests” for the Mbeere and promised projects that were slow to materialize. Similarly, they drew attention to the benefits of colonial development programs to minimize the influence of the Mau Mau movement upon the Kenyan public.

Conclusion

Most scholars laud the contributions of the Kikuyu, the Embu, and the Meru in the Mau Mau movement at the expense of peripheral communities such as the Mbeere. The Kikuyu, Embu, and Meru have used their historical involvement in the Mau Mau movement to claim ownership of their respective narratives, legitimize claims of immense suffering from the brutality of the colonial government, and gain political and economic control. On the contrary, the peripheral communities, who try to claim victimhood in the Mau Mau narrative, are blocked by the lauded communities who deny them recognition for their genuine contributions. In Embu County, the Embu ethnicity controls the Mau Mau insurgency’s narratives and interpretation; this allows them to construct a public memory that rationalizes their participation and diminishes the role of others. Exploring the Mbeere account of this conflict gives voice to the silence and helps to decolonize existing knowledge for the peripheral masses. Fortunately, credible information derived from the Mbeere Mau Mau veterans concerning

the incontrovertible realities of the colonial encounter adds a new dimension to understanding the Mau Mau movement in Kenya and its role in shaping contemporary societal issues. It is necessary for the collective memory to challenge the dominant image and offer a counter-representation, which presents open-ended interpretation, expands existing knowledge, and enhances imagination. Thus, there is a need to credit peripheral communities like the Mbeere, whose history was sanitized by colonial administrators, dismissed by post-independent governments, rationalized by scholars, and manipulated by the Embu populace to influence the Mau Mau historiography.

Notes

¹ The materials for this article are from ongoing PhD research titled “At the Periphery in Mau Mau Discourse: A Case of the Mbeere of Embu County, Kenya: 1952-2014” at Karatina University.

² Maina Kinyatti, *History of resistance in Kenya*, revised edition (Nairobi: Mau Mau Research Center, 2019), 6-12.

³ Richard Meinertzhagen, *Kenya Diary 1902-1906* (London: Eland books, 1957), 51.

⁴ Colony and protectorate of Kenya (KNA/DC/MRL/1/6/2).

⁵ A Report on the Squatter Problem by the Special Commissioner (KNA/BB/3/154).

⁶ Huw Bennet, *Fighting the Mau Mau: The British army and counter-insurgency in Kenya* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 25-26.

⁷ Richard Morrock, “Heritage of Strife: The Effects of Colonialist “Divide and Rule” Strategy Upon the Colonised Peoples.” *Science & Society* 37, no. 2 (1973), 129-51.

⁸ Colony and protectorate of Kenya (KNA/DC/MRL/1/6/2).

⁹ Embu District Annual Report, 1950 (KNA/DC/EBU/1/9).

¹⁰ Bernard Riley and David Brokensha, *The Mbeere in Kenya, Vol.1; Changing Rural Ecology*. (London: University Press of America, 1988), 44.

¹¹ Daniel Branch, *Defeating Mau Mau, Creating Kenya: Counter-Insurgency, Civil War and Decolonisation* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 101.

¹² Bernard Riley and David Brokensha, *The Mbeere in Kenya, Vol.1; Changing Rural Ecology*. (London: University Press of America, 1988), 44.

¹³ Embu Annual Report 1930-1938. (KNA/DC/EBU/13).

¹⁴ Marshal Clough, *Fighting Two Sides: Kenyan Chiefs and Politicians, 1918-1940* (Niwot: University Press of Colorado, 1990), 16.

- ¹⁵ Marshal Clough, *Fighting Two Sides: Kenyan Chiefs and Politicians*, xx-xxiii.
- ¹⁶ Political Record, Part II. (KNA/DC/EBU/3/2).
- ¹⁷ Focus Group Discussion (FGD) held at Kombo Munyiri sub-location on January 31, 2020.
- ¹⁸ Embu Annual Report 1951, Appendix No. 8, the criminal cases tried by various tribunals in 1951 (KNA/DC/EB/1/10).
- ¹⁹ Alam Shamsul. *Rethinking the Mau Mau in Colonial Kenya* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan Press, 2007), 24.
- ²⁰ 'Loyal People of Mbeere,' Muembu, December 26, 1953 (KNA AHC/9/22).
- ²¹ Embu District Intelligence Committee December 17, 1953 (TNA/ FCO 142/5766). The colonial administrators sometimes referred to the Mbeere in the plural as Wambere.
- ²² Jack Glazier, "Ritual and Social Conflicts: Circumcision and Oath-Taking in Mbeere." Discussion Paper No.4 (Nairobi: Institute for Development Studies, University College of Nairobi, 1970), 1-2.
- ²³ Daniel Branch, *Defeating Mau Mau*, 101.
- ²⁴ Jomo Kenyatta, *Facing Mount Kenya: The Tribal Life of the Gikuyu* (London: Secker and Warburg Publishers, 1938), 40-43.
- ²⁵ Jomo Kenyatta, *Facing Mount Kenya*, 40-43.
- ²⁶ Satish Saberwal, *The Traditional Political System of the Embu of Central Kenya* (Kampala: Institute of Social Research, 1970), 90-93.
- ²⁷ Maloba Wunyabari. *Mau Mau and Kenya*, 125.
- ²⁸ Jeremiah Mugo, oral interview (OI) held on February 5, 2020, at Siakago.
- ²⁹ On March 31, 1914, Embu District Commissioner Kenyon-Slaney highlighted various forms of oathing in the Mbeere region. See the Political record, part II (KNA/DC/EBU/3/2).
- ³⁰ Political record, part II (KNA/DC/EBU/3/2).
- ³¹ Minutes of a meeting of the Embu African District Council held at Embu on August 21, 22, 23 and 24, 1951 (KNA/BD/5/9). Ruengu means the spleen.
- ³² FGD held at Kombo Munyiri sub-location on January 31, 2020. Notably, the Mau Mau oath ended with the following phrase: "May this oath kill me if I reveal its content." This oath was used across many societies in Central Kenya. Its final phrase served to penalize its transgression.
- ³³ Renison Muchiri. "The Religious Factors in Mau Mau with Particular Reference to Mau Mau Oaths." (1978). NMA Thesis, University of Nairobi, 45-46.
- ³⁴ John Lonsdale, "Constructing Mau Mau," *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 40, (1990): 239-260.
- ³⁵ Henry Mwaniki, *Mbeere historical texts* (Kijabe: Kijabe printing press, 2005), 3. See also Alam Shamsul, "Rethinking the Mau Mau in Colonial Kenya," 45-46. Shamsul argues that the colonial authorities eventually linked magico-religious beliefs to political factors in order to establish a sense of equilibrium between the past and the present.

- ³⁶ Embu District Intelligence Committee Summaries, 1953-1954 (TNA/FCO 141/5766).
- ³⁷ Muthengi Mugwate OI held on February 4, 2020, at Gachoka.
- ³⁸ Mau Mau unrest; denial of food to Mau Mau. 1953-1955 (TNA/FCO 141/6201).
- ³⁹ Mau Mau unrest; action after Operation Anvil; operations in 1955; plans submitted in response to War Council Directive No. 3. 1955-1956 (TNA/FCO 141/5703).
- ⁴⁰ FGD held at Mwanyare on February 3, 2020. See also Bruce-Lockhart Katherine, "Unsound Minds and Broken Bodies: The Detention of Hardcore Mau Mau Women at Kamiti and Gitamayu Detention Camps in Kenya 1954-1960," *Journal of Eastern African Studies* 8, no.4 (2014): 590-608.
- ⁴¹ H.K. Wachanga, *The Swords of Kirinyaga: The Fight for Land and Freedom* (Nairobi: Kenya Literature Bureau, 1978), 20.
- ⁴² FGD held on February 3, 2020, at Mwanyare. The respondents asserted that the Mbeere could not steal from the Embu and vice versa.
- ⁴³ Angelique Haugerud, *The Culture of Politics in Modern Kenya* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 120.
- ⁴⁴ Angelique Haugerud, "The Culture of Politics in Modern Kenya," 120-121.
- ⁴⁵ Embu Handing-Over report 1956 (KNA/DC/EBU/2/6).
- ⁴⁶ John Mwaruvie, *Pre-colonial Mbeere Economy: Coping Strategies in an Arid Environment* (USA: LAP LAMBERT Academic Publishing, 2011), 120-147.
- ⁴⁷ Political Record, part II- Divisions and Locations (KNA/DC/EBU/3/4). The District Commissioner (DC) Crampton once described the Embu as one of the dominant races of the region.
- ⁴⁸ Angelique Haugerud, "The Culture of Politics in Modern Kenya," 121. Kithioro is a verb meaning to twist or trick. The 1917-1918 famine was known as yura ria kithioro, which means "when people deceived each other to obtain food."
- ⁴⁹ Sherree Zalampas, *Adolf Hitler: A Physiological Interpretation of his views on Architecture, Art, and Music* (Ohio, Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1990), 121.
- ⁵⁰ Embu Handing-Over Report 1956 (KNA/DC/EBU/2/6).
- ⁵¹ Leonidas Donskis, *Troubled Identity and the Modern World* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan Press, 2009), 10.
- ⁵² Boundaries within the Mbeere Division (KNA/DC/EMB/3/3).
- ⁵³ Embu District Annual Report, 1954 (KNA/DC/EBU/1/13).
- ⁵⁴ John Mwaruvie, *Pre-colonial Mbeere Economy*, 173-174.
- ⁵⁵ Daniel Branch, "The Enemy Within: Loyalists and the War Against Mau Mau in Kenya," *The Journal of African History* 48, no.2 (2007): 291-315.
- ⁵⁶ Mau Mau unrest; action after Operation Anvil; operations in 1955; plans submitted in response to War Council Directive No. 3. 1955-1956. TNA/FCO 141/5703.
- ⁵⁷ David Anderson, *Histories of the Hanged: The Dirty War in Kenya and the End of Empire* (London: Norton Publishers 2005), 35-37.

- ⁵⁸ Irving Kaplan, et al., *Area Handbook for Kenya*, (Washington, D.C: U.S. Gov't Printing Office, 1976), 56-60.
- ⁵⁹ Emergency Committee; minutes of meetings, 1953-1954 (TNA/FCO 141/6554).
- ⁶⁰ Maloba Wunyabari. *Mau Mau and Kenya: An Analysis of a Peasant Revolt* (Nairobi: East African Educational Publishers, 1994), 86-87.
- ⁶¹ Caroline Elkins, *Imperial Reckoning: The Untold Story of British Gulag in Kenya* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2005), 122.
- ⁶² Alam Shamsul. *Rethinking the Mau Mau in Colonial Kenya*, 23.
- ⁶³ Embu District Annual report, 1953 (KNA/DC/EBU/1/12).
- ⁶⁴ Wanyumbari Maloba. *Mau Mau and Kenya: An analysis of a Peasant Revolt* (Nairobi: East Africa Educational Publishers, 1993), 45-46.
- ⁶⁵ Owen Bowcott and Richard Norton-Taylor. "Britain destroyed records of colonial crimes." *The Guardian*. Accessed March 5, 2021. <https://www.theguardian.com/uk/2012/apr/18/britain-destroyed-records-colonial-crimes>.
- ⁶⁶ Information Officer's Report (KNA/BB/8/17).
- ⁶⁷ Chief Fausto gave a voluntary statement regarding his attendance of a meeting in January 1950 at Senior Chief Muruatetu's house. Present at this meeting were five other prominent chiefs and eleven others prominent persons in the District. The meeting sought to evaluate how those present could further the agenda of the Mau Mau movement and simultaneously maintain its secrecy (TNA/FCO 141/5766).
- ⁶⁸ Embu District Annual Report, 1955 (KNA/DC/EBU/1/14).
- ⁶⁹ Handing-Over Reports (KNA/EP8/2). Kenya National Archives, Nakuru.
- ⁷⁰ Alam Shamsul, *Rethinking the Mau Mau in Colonial Kenya*, 36. Indeed, the Mbeere were already in Nairobi in search of greener pastures before 1930. See also David Anderson, *Histories of the hanged: the dirty war in Kenya and the end of empire* (London: Norton Publishers, 2005), 188-190. For those who lived in Nairobi, accepting the Mau Mau oath was more comfortable than outright refusal. The male migrant wage earners who came to Nairobi from Murang'a, Mbeere, and Embu region never lost ties with rural areas, unlike communities who came from the distant regions of Nyanza and Mombasa. Notably, those who came from Central Province were far less likely to become urbanised. Essentially, these groups from Central Province consisted of rural men who went home and informed their people about the city of shanties, paltry wages, and the Mau Mau movement's promises of self-emancipation.
- ⁷¹ Mwaniki Kabeca, OI held at Mutunduri on February 8, 2020.
- ⁷² *Ibid.*
- ⁷³ Wairimu Nderitu, *Mukami Kimathi: Mau Mau Freedom Fighters* (Nairobi: Mdahalo Bridging Divides Publishers, 2017), 97.
- ⁷⁴ Muthoni Likimani. *Passbook number f.4 7927: Women and Mau Mau in Kenya* (Houndmills, Macmillan publishers Ltd, 1985), 40-44.
- ⁷⁵ *Emergency: Kikuyu, Embu, and Meru (KEM) passbooks and loyalty certificates. 1954-1959* (TNA/ FCO 141/6740).

- ⁷⁶ FGD discussion held at Kombo Munyiri sub-location on January 31, 2020.
- ⁷⁷ Central Report Annual Report (KNA/PC/Coast/2/1/80).
- ⁷⁸ Teboho Ansoorge, *Identify and sort: How Digital Power Changed World Politics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 22-23.
- ⁷⁹ Embu District Intelligence Committee Summaries, 1953-1954 (TNA/FCO 141/5766).
- ⁸⁰ Respondent X, OI held at Siakago on February 5, 2020. Respondent X was involved in the Gachoka attack. For security purposes, the researcher concealed the identity.
- ⁸¹ Embu District Intelligence Committee Summaries, 1953-1954 (TNA/FCO 141/5766).
- ⁸² Subaltern implies the dominated and, in this case, connotes those who comprised the Mau Mau movement. Subaltern consciousness is the reality of the state of being that unites people for a particular transformation.
- ⁸³ Mau Mau unrest; action after Operation Anvil; operations in 1955; progress reports on War Council Directive. No. 5. 1955 January 1 - 1955 December 31 (TNA/ FCO 141/5701).
- ⁸⁴ Embu District Intelligence Committee summaries, 1953-1954 (TNA/FCO 141/5766).
- ⁸⁵ Mwaniki Kabeca, OI, held at Mutunduri on February 8, 2020. In Embu dialect, “chopping off” translates to (gucuma).
- ⁸⁶ Rosalind Eyben and Joy Moncrieffe, *The Power of Labelling: How People are Categorized and Why it Matters* (London: Earthscan Publishers, 2007), 90. Rosalind Eyben and Joy Moncrieffe assert that “persons who are considered ‘not quite human’ can suffer physical and psychological torture, seemingly without recourse.”
- ⁸⁷ Embu District Intelligence Committee summaries, 1953-1954 (TNA/FCO 141/5766).
- ⁸⁸ Gerrishon Ndubai, *The Ameru in the Mau Mau, 1945-1965* (Master’s thesis, University of Nairobi, Kenya, 2012), 115-117.
- ⁸⁹ Evanson Wamagatta, *Controversial Chiefs in Colonial Kenya: The Untold Story of Senior Waruhiu wa Kungu, 1890-1952* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books), 1.
- ⁹⁰ Robert Tignor, “Colonial Chiefs in Chiefless Societies,” *Journal of Modern African Studies* 9, no.3, (1971), 339-360. Tignor, using the Munyiri family, gives an example of how hereditary rule worked in Nigeria among the Ibo and the Kombo. The Munyiri family typifies the neo-hereditary line of succession wherein chiefs remain in power for generations. In an FGD discussion held at Kombo Munyiri sub-location on January 31, 2020, it was reported how the Kombo Munyiri family is, to this day, still regarded as a royal family and has been since 1912.
- ⁹¹ Carl Rosberg and John Nottingham, *The Myth of Mau Mau: Nationalism in Kenya* (Stanford: First Meridian Publishers, 1970), 82-83.

⁹² Mwandiko Ngira file (KNA/ADV/M/12). Chief Mwandiko of Evurore, who owned a lorry for transportation purposes, is a fitting example.

⁹³ Michelle Osborn, "Chiefs, Elders, and Traditional Authority," in Cheeseman, Nic et al., *The Oxford Handbook of Kenyan Politics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), 297.

⁹⁴ Ben Kanyeji, OI, held at Nthawa on February 5, 2020.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

⁹⁶ Angelique Haugerud, *The Culture of Politics in Modern Kenya*, 127. Astonishingly, chiefs in the Mbeere region were neither subjected to personal threats nor destruction of their property during the Mau Mau period. See also, Embu Handing-Over Report 1956 (KNA/DC/EBU/2/6). Ben Kanyeji, OI, held in Nthawa on February 5, 2020. The colonial government also paid tribute to chiefs who performed exceptionally well. For example, chiefs Muruatetu of Embu, Waruhiu of Kiambu, and Nderi of Nyeri were granted the title of senior chief.

⁹⁷ David Anderson, "Women Missionaries and Colonial Silences in Kenya's Female Circumcision controversy, 1906–1930," *The English Historical Review*, 133, no. 565 (2018): 1519.

⁹⁸ Charles Ambler, "The Renovation of Custom in Colonial Kenya," 150-151.

⁹⁹ David Anderson, "Women Missionaries and Colonial Silences," 1512-1545.

¹⁰⁰ Julieta Mutave in an FGD held on February 3, 2020.

¹⁰¹ FGDs held on January 31, 2020, and February 3, 2020, in Kombo Muniyiri and Mwanyare locations.

¹⁰² The passive wing within the Mau Mau insurgency included the civilians who supported the militant wing (fighting group) with food, intelligence, recruiting, and supplies.

¹⁰³ Correspondence on Subversive Movement (Mau Mau Movement) Cleansing Ceremonies (KNA/ZA 1/5). Notably, the Mbeere chiefs did not follow the cleansing procedure outlined in the memorandum of 'gutahekio' ceremony. For example, in the Mbeere region, the chiefs determined both the venue of the cleansing ceremony and the species of sacrificial animal, not the witch doctor. After the sacrifice, the witch doctor asked the cleansed individual to lick the sacrificial blood and immediately restate the Mau Mau oath they took. In the process, the recipient would spit and reply, "I emit it." One was considered "clean" after the process. It is striking how one could discharge an oath taken many months prior.

¹⁰⁴ FGD held at Kombo Muniyiri sub-location on January 31, 2020, and Mwanyare on February 3, 2020.

¹⁰⁵ Adriana Nthiga Mukinyango OI held at Kathimari-Nguthi Sublocation, February 10, 2020.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁷ Chrispin Mate OI held at Kanyuambora on February 8, 2020.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.* According to Chrispin Mate Mau Mau adherents were beaten mercilessly by a tribal retainer named Mwombobo.

¹⁰⁹Jackson Ileri made this claim in an OI held at Karungu-Kyeni Central on February 12, 2020. He explained how he used to teach at Karangare, which is near Ishiara town. “The ones (Embu) who were far had come in a rush as they had been chased away from their stations of work, so they all came, and we congregated at Ishiara (Mwandiko’s office). So, when we went, chief Mwandiko blew a whistle and called a meeting. He raised the alarm, and all people met at the field in the chief’s camp. Remember [the Embu teachers] were also at the camp. So the chief briefed the people and informed them how the Mau Mau had beaten up people at Kanyuambora. Then he asked the people, even as we are speaking, who are these (referring to us), is it not the same Embu?”

¹¹⁰History of Mau Mau; Pre-Emergency period; Sociological causes of Mau Mau 1954-1959 (TNA/FCO 141/6582).

¹¹¹Jackson Ileri made this claim in an OI held at Karungu-Kyeni Central on February 12, 2020.

¹¹²Myles Osborne, “The Rooting out of Mau Mau from the Minds of the Kikuyu is a Formidable Task”: Propaganda and the Mau Mau war. *The Journal of African History* 56, no.1 (2015): 77-79.