

Mau Mau and Kenya

Randall W. Heather

Volume 19, numéro 2, fall 1999

URI : https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/jcs19_02re03

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

The University of New Brunswick

ISSN

1198-8614 (imprimé)

1715-5673 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce document

Heather, R. W. (1999). Mau Mau and Kenya. *Journal of Conflict Studies*, 19(2), 182–186.

Mau Mau and Kenya

Maloba, Wunyabari O. *Mau Mau and Kenya: An Analysis of a Peasant Revolt*. Bloomington and Indianapolis, IN: Indiana University Press; Oxford: James Currey, 1998.

Otieno, Wambui Waiyaki. *Mau Mau's Daughter: A Life History*. Boulder, CO and London: Lynne Rienner, 1998.

Clough, Marshall S. *Mau Mau Memoirs: History, Memory & Politics*. Boulder, CO and London: Lynne Rienner, 1998.

The study of the Mau Mau insurgency in Kenya has, in general, suffered from over compartmentalization. Efforts to understand this complex conflict tend to focus on specific aspects of the conflict rather than the struggle as a whole. In contrast, Wunyabari Maloba's *Mau Mau and Kenya: An Analysis of a Peasant Revolt* is an impressive survey of Mau Mau from its origins, through Kenyan independence and beyond.

In *Mau Mau and Kenya* Maloba seeks to redress what he believes to be the misinterpretations of the Mau Mau revolt by ideologues of both the left and right. He argues that Mau Mau was both a peasant uprising and a "nationalist" struggle, part of the broader fight against colonialism throughout Africa, comparing it to other Third World and European revolutionary movements. As a peasant revolt Mau Mau lacked the essential unity of focus provided by a revolutionary cadre both in terms of leadership and ideology. But it was successful, in Maloba's view, as a nationalist/anti-colonial uprising, acting as a catalyst toward independence. The nationalist argument, however, does have its limitations. Other historians cite the fact that the majority of non-Kikuyu were suspicious of Mau Mau intentions and did not see the struggle as their own. If Mau Mau was truly an anti-colonial, nationalist movement rather than a Kikuyu manifestation should not have the other Kenyan tribes joined in or tacitly supported the struggle? Maloba believes this question to be irrelevant, claiming that all nationalist movements necessarily originate with a dedicated cadre.

Maloba traces how economic and social disaffection in rural areas combined with the political radicalism of Nairobi to form Mau Mau. This movement, members of which were bound together by oath, was dedicated to the violent expulsion of Europeans and the recovery of "lost" land. Both Mau Mau and the colonial government were unprepared at the start of the Emergency in 1952. The government underestimated the extent to which support for Mau Mau had penetrated Kikuyu areas (the colony's largest tribal group) and the determination of the insurgents to resist. Initially Mau Mau held the initiative, attacked government outposts in Kikuyu areas from its sanctuaries in the forests and enjoyed widespread support among Kikuyu. In early 1954, however, the government finally came to grips with the scale of the insurgency. The security forces systematically isolated Mau Mau from their supporters and then defeated them in a war of attrition using superior firepower and resources. On the political front, Maloba provides a useful analysis of the changes instituted by the Colonial Office starting in 1954 to increase

African representation and the divisions the changes generated between the European settler community, the Kenya government and the Colonial Office. He also traces the underlying political dynamic among the Mau Mau forest fighters, the factional rivalries between literate and illiterate leaders, and the general lack of a coherent politicization within the movement.

Maloba's examination of the post-Emergency period is a helpful guide to sorting out the complications that arose along the road to Kenyan independence. Many issues relevant to Mau Mau became critical to the shaping of modern Kenya: the struggle for political dominance between the Kikuyu and the smaller tribes, the distribution of land owned by Europeans, and the internal Kikuyu splits between those who had supported Mau Mau and those who remained loyal to the colonial government. Surviving members of the Mau Mau movement, which suffered well over 10,000 fatalities in the pursuit of "land and freedom," were conspicuous by their absence in the new government or in the distribution of the spoils of independence.

There are shortfalls. Maloba tends to adopt an overly Mau Mau/Kikuyu-centric perspective to the Emergency resulting in a sometimes unbalanced view of events. For example, he places heavy and repeated emphasis on the bravery of Mau Mau fighters and the brutality of many of the settler-based units of the security forces. It is true that many Mau Mau, outnumbered and outgunned, fought bravely and with great resourcefulness. But it is also true, and largely unmentioned by Maloba, that many other participants displayed heroism in the struggle, such as Kikuyu loyal to the government who remained in a native reserve dominated by Mau Mau. And while there were many incidents of brutality by some units of the security forces, Mau Mau was hardly an innocent party. At Lari in March 1953 close to 100 Kikuyu were killed in a Mau Mau attack, two-thirds of them women and children, either hacked to death or burnt alive. During the time of Mau Mau brutality was a stranger to neither side. Another difficult issue, the motivations of Mau Mau who changed sides during the conflict to join "pseudo gangs" against their former comrades, is dealt with too casually.

The book is well organized and well written. Maloba's contribution to the study of Mau Mau is not in any new evidence unearthed but rather his thoughtful and, at times, provocative interpretation of the meaning of the movement and its legacy. *Mau Mau and Kenya* provides a comprehensive and accessible examination of many important issues linked in modern Kenyan history and is an obvious starting point for study of the period.

The chief disappointment in Wambui Waikayi's autobiography, *Mau Mau's Daughter: A Life History*, is as much what isn't said as what is. Her life has spanned the formidable period of modern Kenyan history from the upsurge in nationalist feelings in post-1945 East Africa, through the Mau Mau insurgency, the struggle for independence and up to the current problems of an evolving Kenyan democracy. Waikayi participated in the Mau Mau rebellion, was arrested and detained, and, after her release, rose through the ranks of Jomo Kenyatta's ruling Kenya African National Union (KANU) party to head its women's branch in Nairobi. After the death of Kenyatta in 1978 and the rise of a non-Kikuyu, Daniel arap Moi, to the presidency, Waikayi's political fortunes waned. Like

many other Kikuyu, Waiyaki was forced out of her party posts and her marriage to the prominent attorney, S.M. Otieno, a member of the Luo tribe, was used against her. She resigned from KANU in 1985 in protest against overt tribalism and the lack of internal party democracy. A new phase of Wambui Waiyaki's tribulations began the next year with the death of her husband and the extended battle with his family over a burial site, which became a social and legal issue of national prominence. In recent years she has been active in the Forum for the Restoration of Democracy (FORD) and its efforts to bring multi-party democracy to Kenya.

Yet for all this time near the centre of Kenya's political life the reader gains few new insights into life as a KANU insider nor the personalities and activities of key figures such as Kenyatta, Oginga Odinga or Tom Mboya. Instead, the book is heavily laden with the minute details of her life from lengthy conversations with family members to her journey in 1972 to the Soviet-sponsored Afro-Asian Women's Solidarity Conference convened in Outer Mongolia (really). The reader is only provided with brief glimpses of the outside world. It is not unlike being a passenger on a sightseeing bus that refuses to stop at the important attractions. Fully one-third of the book is taken up by the "burial saga," her 18-month long fight with her husband's family over the location of his grave. Although her case raised important issues about the legal rights of females in African society, and is recognized as such by several international groups, the weight of details is probably of interest only to specialist readers.

Wambui Waiyaki does not fit the mold of the typical Mau Mau participant. She was born into a prominent Kikuyu family and brought up a Christian, unlike the majority of insurgent fighters, many of whom were illiterate and from the lower rungs of the socioeconomic ladder. Her father, the first African chief inspector in the Kenya Police, was subsequently detained, but we learn little about his situation or motivations. And also unlike many Mau Mau whose commitment to fight was the result of social and economic conditions, Waiyaki's hatred of the colonial regime is linked to the death of her grandfather, a prominent Kikuyu leader, at the hands of the British in 1892.

In her description of the Emergency period Waiyaki provides an interesting perspective on the important role played by women in Mau Mau as couriers, intelligence gatherers and procurers of weapons. Interestingly, she was picked up by the security forces on several occasions while operating in and around Nairobi but managed to secure her release through the testimony of noteworthy friends who vouched for her innocence. It is unclear how much time Waiyaki actually spent as a Mau Mau operative, perhaps as little as a few months. Unfortunately, she does fall into the trap of overly exaggerating Mau Mau exploits in the field (which she did not witness), especially incidents where she had allegedly provided vital intelligence. Her assertion that 93 European members of the Security Forces died in a single attack at Kandara (only 67 were killed during the entire Emergency) undermines her credibility. It must be filed away along with her claim of possessing a spy camera given to Mau Mau by President Tito of Yugoslavia.

In *Mau Mau Memoirs: History, Memory & Politics*, Marshall Clough brings together with great skill an analysis of 13 memoirs related to the Mau Mau struggle providing a

range of personal stories, from political activists, supporters in detention camps to the fighters in both the forests and Nairobi. Their stories are woven within the historical framework of the Emergency and the experience of Mau Mau survivors in the post-independence period.

One of the handicaps in studying the Mau Mau insurgency is the dearth of documentary evidence from the insurgent side. This in itself is not exceptional in comparison with other similar conflicts given the secret nature of the organizations, but it is especially true when the insurgents are defeated and do not eventually form a national government, as they did in Algeria and Palestine. The very low literacy rate among Mau Mau fighters accentuates the problem when looking at Kenya. Although rumors of "jeeploads of documents" recovered by the security forces during the conflict may have a Pavlovian effect on historians, very few Mau Mau written records are available in either private collections, the Kenya National Archives or the Public Record Office, Kew. As a result, Mau Mau memoirs play a critical role in our understanding of the activities and the motivations of Mau Mau members. Still, the task is complicated. The disjointed nature of the Mau Mau command structure, the scattered geography and the semi-independent nature of many of the active gangs with strong local rather than regional allegiances makes a single picture of Mau Mau almost impossible to construct. Marshall Clough has done a great service to Mau Mau scholarship providing careful analysis of each memoir, pointing out the consistencies and contradictions, and how each was a product of a specific background and experience. The war in the forest was different from the fight in Nairobi or the native reserves, and different again from what those suffered in the detention camps and rehabilitation "pipeline."

Clough puts his finger on the difficulty of categorizing the struggle in Kenya and the reason why Mau Mau remains a contentious issue after almost 50 years: "Mau Mau has been described as a nationalist revolt, an anti-colonial war, a resistance movement, a class struggle, a peasant uprising, a movement of cultural renewal, an ethnic revolt, and a civil war. The memoirs indicate it was all of these."

Since the 1960s the publishing of Mau Mau memoirs has also played an important part in the ongoing debate over the legacy of Mau Mau and its place in Kenyan history. At times new memoirs mirrored the changing public perception and at other times instigating a reassessment. The first group of memoirs, including Watuhiu Itote (a.k.a. "General China," the commander of Mau Mau forces in the Mount Kenya area), Karari Njama and J.M. Kariuki, refuted the original British version of events that depicted Mau Mau as an atavistic regression. According to Clough these first memoirs argued the case for Mau Mau as a predictable and understandable revolt against a repressive colonial regime, that played an important role in establishing Kenyan independence. Others followed, including Kahinga Wachanga, Mohamed Mathu and Gikoyo Wamweya, adding more details to our knowledge about life in the forests and Nairobi, and fueling the debate about the meaning of Mau Mau and its motivations. Several memoirists and editors of the late 1970s and early 1980s took up the earlier nationalist interpretation and transformed it into a class struggle along Marxist lines (Gakaara wa Wanjau, Maina wa Kinyatti and

Ngugi wa Thiong'o) elevating forest leader Dedan Kimathi at the expense of Jomo Kenyatta.

There are, of course, limitations on the value of the available Mau Mau memoirs, as Clough readily admits. As a group they tend to focus on their own role in the Emergency, often ignoring the larger picture. There is also a general tendency to exaggerate the effectiveness of insurgent operations and use their memoir to settle old personal scores between forest rivals or skirt blame for Mau Mau's military defeat. In a movement at times badly divided between literate and illiterate fighters, the memoirs add to the historical weight in favor of the literate interpretation of events. This is inevitable but remains a problem in the historiography of the period. Another even larger gap is the scarcity of memoirs from the loyalist side both in terms of Kikuyu who chose to fight Mau Mau as chiefs, headmen or Home Guard in the reserves or non-Kikuyu who fought as part of the Kenya Police or military forces.

Despite these limitations, Clough has used his extensive knowledge of the Emergency and those who have written in its wake to create a volume of far greater value than the sum of its parts. It will doubtless become one of the standard texts for use by both veteran scholars of the period and those reading about Mau Mau for the first time.

Randall W. Heather
Mercy College, Dobbs Ferry, NY