

## THE MAU MAU EXPERIENCE AND PROSPECTS FOR POST-INSURGENCY DEPOLARIZATION

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In a land that had once been one of the brightest jewels in the crown of the British Empire, the drawn-out, bloody insurgency pitted the government against a largely ethnically-based guerrilla movement. The ongoing fighting threatened the prosperous land with political polarization and disruption, economic havoc, and a legacy of hatred and distrust between ethnic groups that would affect the land's people for generations to come. The government raised a militia force called the Home Guards to protect vulnerable settlements, detained thousands of suspected dissident sympathizers, and employed active counter-insurgency measures in an effort to break the back of the militant guerrillas, while simultaneously hammering out a negotiated settlement with political moderates. The youthful insurgents, who were drawn principally from an ethnic group comprising less than 20% of the country's population, believed they were the protectors of their community's culture, language, and, most importantly, traditional homelands in the face of a concerted challenge from the country's evolving sociological, political, and economic systems. The militants chose to attack police stations and isolated settlements, lay ambushes for government patrols, and sabotage economic targets rather than confront the security forces face to face. As the insurgency dragged on, the security forces found their large, cordon and sweep operations and aerial bombings to be much less effective than small-scale operations mounted by tough jungle fighters.

Sri Lanka in the mid-1980's ? No, the preceding paragraph is a description of the politico-military situation during the State of Emergency in Kenya, sometimes called the Mau Mau Rebellion\*, which lasted from 1952 until 1960. Although the situation in Kenya thirty years ago and that facing Sri Lanka today certainly contain more

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\* The term "Mau Mau" was never widely used by the Africans involved. They referred to it as The Movement, the Society of the Oath, or the Land Freedom Army. Mau Mau is generally agreed to be a name without meaning, but some believe it is an anagram for the Kikuyu phrase "uma uma" ("out, out"), a mistransliteration of the Kikuyu word for "oath" (muma), or numerous other secretive origins.<sup>1</sup> The term Mau Mau will be used herein only because no suitable substitute is available, and is not meant to imply any connotation to the group's nature or character.

differences than similarities (and in no way are the former Mau Mau fighters and Kenyan government meant to be equated with the Tamil militant separatists and Sri Lankan government of today), perhaps some important conclusions can be reached by a closer examination of the Kenyan experience — particularly on the prospects of post-insurgency depolarization of communal bitterness and antagonism.

After a section dealing with the nature of the conflict in Kenya, two opposing views of the Mau Mau will be presented, followed by an analysis of citizenship attitudes and behaviours of former Mau Mau fighters, based on an extensive personal survey sampling conducted by Dr. Joel Barkan in Kenya. Specifically, this study examines post-insurgency attitudes and behaviours of the roughly 90,000 ex-Mau Mau fighters and detainees compared with those attitudes and behaviours of a comparable group of Kenyan men not involved in the Mau Mau movement. Special attention will be given to political participation, efficacy, modernity, and interest in national affairs. Finally, the findings of this analysis will be examined in the context of the possibility of their transferability to the post-insurgency period of Sri Lanka.

## THE NATURE OF THE CONFLICT

**The Setting:** In 1952 the 40,000 white Kenyans of European origin dominated the politics and economy of this prosperous colony. Many of them lived in Nairobi and other major towns, but the 9,000 farmers and ranchers spread over the "White Highlands" and the Rift Valley provided the character and "backbone" of the settler community. The most numerous of the eight million Africans were the million-strong Kikuyu community, many of whom lived in the Kikuyu Reserve in Central Province, in Nairobi, or as squatters on white-run farms.

Many Kikuyu felt they had been cheated out of their best land and their growing population was straining the capacity of the Reserve to support the tribe. Racial discrimination, the attempt of mission churches to halt the practices of female circumcision and polygyny, and a growing awareness of nationalism fostered resistance to the status quo.

During 1952 rumours of a surge of Mau Mau oath-taking ceremonies, reports of arson and cattle maiming, and the murder of a number of

loyal Kikuyu leaders prompted the government to declare a State of Emergency in order to deal with the Mau Mau movement. Several scholars aver that the true reason for the declaration of the Emergency was a desire of the settler community to be able to employ harsh methods to nip the Kenyan nationalist movement in the bud.<sup>2</sup> Venys claims that crimes against persons actually dropped significantly from 1951 to 1952 and that the threat from the Mau Mau was exaggerated by the settlers for their own aims.<sup>3</sup> On October 20, 1952, the State of Emergency was officially declared.

**The Participants:** In many respects the Emergency was a Kikuyu civil war, dividing the members of the ethnic group between Mau Mau and Loyalists. This division was often reinforced by class, education, and economic cleavages within the Kikuyu.<sup>4</sup> At the onset of the Emergency it is fairly certain that a majority of Kikuyus supported the Mau Mau, but as their situation became more desperate and their terror less discriminate, many came into the government's fold. The Lari Massacre of March 1953, in which 84 Kikuyu Loyalists were killed by Mau Mau, turned many former sympathizers away from their cause. The Loyalists were organized into a Home Guard that reached a peak strength of over 20,000, while there were probably never more than 15,000 Mau Mau fighters at any one time, although their "Passive Wing" likely had several times that many members. The extent to which the Emergency was a Kikuyu civil war can clearly be seen in the casualty figures. There were a total of 10,527 Mau Mau, 534 Home Guard, and 1,826 Loyalist Kikuyu civilian deaths compared to the deaths of 63 European soldiers and police and 32 European civilians.<sup>5</sup>

The other African ethnic groups were much less affected by the Emergency than were the Kikuyus. Although a number of Luo, Kamba, Luhya, and Masai joined the Mau Mau, they were primarily recruited in Nairobi rather than in their traditional areas. The government employed a large number of Turkana and Somali peoples as police and prison warders. The government would often locate detention camps outside Kikuyu areas and then spread rumours of Mau Mau atrocities and offer rewards for captured or killed escapees.<sup>6</sup>

The white Kenyan settlers seemed to be feared by the Mau Mau and detested by the British colonial administrators. The settler-organized Kenyan Police Reserve and the 450-man Kenya Regiment were often accused of atrocities and of mishandling Mau Mau suspects and Kikuyu civilians alike. One settler proposed shooting 50,000 Kikuyu for the demonstration effect. The British military

commander, General Erskine, wrote to his wife about the European Kenyans, "I hate the guts of them all, they are all middle-class sluts. I never want to see another (white) Kenya man or woman and I dislike them all with few exceptions."<sup>8</sup> British troop strength peaked at 7,109 in 1954.<sup>9</sup>

**Military Operations:** Although over 15,000 people were killed and millions of dollars worth of property destroyed, the Mau Mau Rebellion cannot be classed as among the largest or most important conflicts of the century. In fact, the Mau Mau's most impressive military victory, the raid on the Naivasha Police Station, was undertaken by a large group of Mau Mau armed with a total of five firearms. What is most striking about this war is the amount of communal/ethnic hatred and bitterness generated by the conflict. The image of a settler family hacked to death and mutilated in their farmhouse, 84 Kikuyu Loyalists (mainly women and children) burned alive in their homes in the Lari Massacre, tens of thousands of Kikuyu thrown into detention camps where many were tortured and abused, the horror engendered by the rumours of the Mau Mau oath-taking ceremonies, and the beating to death of eleven Mau Mau prisoners by their warders at Hola Camp illustrates the ruthlessness and the viciousness of this ethnic-based insurgency. The antagonism and communal polarization caused by the Mau Mau Rebellion seemed likely to be irreconcilable.

The goals of the Security Forces during the Emergency were to secure settler and Loyalist areas, isolate the Mau Mau politically and militarily, and finally destroy the insurgents' operating cells. The objectives of the vastly out-gunned Mau Mau consisted of eliminating Loyalist opposition, raiding for supplies and weapons, and eventually making living in Kenya so costly for the Europeans that they would be forced to leave.

The declaration of the State of Emergency caught many of the Kenyan nationalist leaders, both Kikuyu and non-Kikuyu, by surprise. Among those rounded up in Nairobi on the first day of the Emergency were Jomo Kenyatta and most of the rest of the "establishment" nationalist leadership. The initial stage of the Emergency was characterized by a British troop build-up and fairly frequent Mau Mau attacks on isolated settler farms, police stations, and Home Guard posts.

By the summer of 1953 the strength of the Security Forces reached the point that allowed them to take the offensive. All Kikuyu

squatters of the white farms were repatriated to the Kikuyu Reserve (where many went straight from the transport trucks to guerrilla bases). The guerrilla strongholds of Mount Kenya and the thick forests of the Aberdare Range were declared "free fire" zones, as was a mile strip surrounding these sanctuaries. The Kikuyu were forced into protected villages from their scattered farmsteads, where they could be "protected" and controlled more readily.

In the spring of 1954 "Operation Anvil" screened thousands of Kikuyu residents of Nairobi which effectively cut off the last major source of supplies, ammunition, and medicine for the Mau Mau fighters in the bush. Tens of thousands of suspects were sent to detention camps to eliminate a source of manpower and support for the guerrillas. By the end of the Emergency over 76,000 people had passed through these camps.<sup>10</sup>

The end of 1954 saw the Mau Mau effectively isolated in the Aberdares and near Mount Kenya, venturing out only when in need of food and ammunition. The Security Forces began using massive "search and destroy" sweeps through the forests, which the Mau Mau managed to avoid with little trouble. In fact, in "Operation First Flute," of February/April 1955, wild animals crazed by the aerial bombing caused more casualties among the troops than did the Mau Mau.<sup>11</sup> Realizing that their forest-craft was far inferior to that of the guerrillas, the Security Forces eventually shifted to small-scale tactics and employed groups of ex-Mau Mau combatants in units called "pseudo-gangs" to hunt down their former comrades. Effective resistance came to an end on October 21, 1956, with the capture of Dedan Kimathi, the Mau Mau leader in the Aberdares, although scattered pockets of hard-core fighters remained in the forest up to (and some after) independence in 1963.

## TWO PERSPECTIVES OF THE MAU MAU

**Murdering Savages:** A number of scholars, such as Dr. L. S. B. Leakey and Fred Majdalaney, civilian government officials, and military personnel took the position that the Mau Mau movement was primarily an atavistic throwback to tribalistic paganism and savagery. They stressed the largely tribal nature of the movement and focused on the religious/mystical aspects of Mau Mau-ism, particularly on the horrific Mau Mau oath-taking ceremonies.

Leakey perhaps best illustrates this perspective of the Mau Mau when he states, "when to this religious aspect of the movement the great power exercised by the magical and mystical acts that accompany the actual oath-taking are added, it is not difficult to see how it became possible to make so many normally peace-loving Kikuyus into the fanatical, murdering maniacs that they have become under Mau Mau."<sup>12</sup>

The two successive Governors of Kenya during the Emergency, Sir Philip Mitchell and Sir Evelyn Baring, also took this view. Mitchell considered the Mau Mau "only one of these cults" and Baring called it "a secret cult almost wholly confined to the Kikuyu, designed to drive out the Europeans and turn Kenya into a land of 'magic and murder'."<sup>13</sup>

Majdalaney claims that Mau Mau was not a national liberation movement, but a completely tribal manifestation aimed at domination within the Kikuyu community and among the various African ethnic groups in and around Kenya.<sup>14</sup> Leakey supports this view with his reports of thousands of Mau Mau recruits being drawn from Kikuyu in what was then Tanganyika.<sup>15</sup>

It was tales of the Mau Mau oathing ceremonies, however, which did most to reinforce this "Murdering Savage" view of the Mau Mau and added greatly to the ethnic enmity and polarization of the time. One writer describes the oathing ceremony at some length and in gory detail as follows :

The nauseous and emetic extremes of what was provided for these rituals can largely be left to the imagination; it will be enough to say that the ingredients were provided at times by menstruation, at others by masturbation, and included the putrefying flesh taken from graves and the still warm brains of men, women, and children just killed. Copulation with sheep, donkeys, bitches, and goats was a commonplace ceremonial preliminary to the sipping or nibbling seven times of the ritual mixtures and morsels which strove only to surpass one another in foulness and of which menstrual blood seemed to be the basic indispensable ingredient. One oath, which initiates took in batches of seven, began with each man having to copulate seven times with a bitch tied by its neck to a tree. When the seventh had completed his obligation the animal was ceremonially beaten to death

with seven tremendous blows of a club, the oath administrator intoning at each blow one of the seven clauses of the oath.<sup>16</sup> This was what was implied by the Mau Mau oath, and it is difficult even at this distance of time to regard it airily as just a somewhat extreme manifestation of African Nationalism.<sup>17</sup>

It is doubtful that many subscribers to the "Murdering Savage" perspective would give the former Mau Mau fighters much of a chance of becoming efficacious, participating, modern citizens of Kenya. Leakey felt that a strong dose of Christianity might save a few, but generally they were seen as being beyond help.

**Freedom Fighters:** Another view of the Mau Mau comes from leftist scholars such as Venys and Barnett, from former Mau Mau members Itote and Kariuki, and from political scientists like Rosberg and Nottingham who focus on the historical development of Kenyan nationalism. This group stresses the importance of the land issue, racial and economic discrimination, and African and Kenyan nationalism as the salient motivational forces behind the Mau Mau movement.

Waruhiu Itote, the "General China" who commanded the Mau Mau fighters on Mount Kenya, cites as his political awakening the experiences he had fighting in Burma in the Second World War and talking with Indian nationalists and black Americans in India. He states very unambiguously that, "our aim was the return of our land and the achievement of freedom from foreign rule."<sup>18</sup>

Rosberg and Nottingham view the Mau Mau movement as the culmination of the long history of anti-colonial struggles, dating back to 1922 and beyond. Josiah Kariuki also stresses the rational political goals of the movement, even as practiced by detainees and prisoners. Gertzel emphasizes the political nature of the struggle in addition to the traditional homelands issue.

Few would argue that the Mau Mau were soundly defeated militarily. Their political goals, some claim, were obtained at the Lancaster House Conference of 1960 when majority-rule independence was agreed upon. Few Mau Mau would reap the benefits of independence, as most of the top government posts went to people other than the Mau Mau activists. Conventional wisdom often places the ex-Mau Mau on the outskirts of Nairobi — swilling Tusker Lager with a small knot of embittered comrades, talking about the good old days with the Land Freedom Army.

This conception of the Mau Mau having been somehow "shut out" of their rightful place in the post-insurgency period has entered the realm of Kenyan folk mythology :

"When a wart-hog gives birth to its young, it behaves in the following strange way. It charges furiously with all its force, using its tough head like a battering ram against a fig tree. The fruits of the tree are thus knocked down and provide food for its newborn young while the poor mother lies for several hours unconscious in its travail, in some cases unable ever to rise again. This is what the fighters for freedom did for our people and the generation yet unborn."<sup>19</sup>

"General China" reinforces this image of the embittered former guerrilla by claiming, "some of those who now enjoy the fruits of independence, who sit in places made available to them partly through the blood and sweat of those who fought, look down upon the fighters as fools," and "many former Freedom Fighters remain disappointed by the efforts of the Government to help them, and others deplore the attempts to make everyone's contribution to independence appear of equal weight and importance."<sup>20</sup>

Venys also feels that the former fighters and detainees were left out of the post-insurgency political process, as he states that even after the parliamentary elections of 1963, besides Jomo Kenyatta, only five former Mau Mau activists had reached any position of national political prominence.<sup>21</sup>

Few adherents to either the "Murdering Savage" or "Freedom Fighter" viewpoints would consider the ex-Mau Mau as the prototype for the New Kenyan Man, properly endowed with the spirit of Harambee and the qualities valued in citizens of modern states. Either as a rather backward tribalist or an embittered ex-Freedom Fighter or detainee, the former Mau Mau was likely to be something less than the model citizen. Was this actually the case? What has happened to those now-aging former members of the Mau Mau movement?

## DATA ANALYSIS

Professor Joel Barkan conducted an extensive survey of attitudes and behaviours of a large number of Kenyans in 1974. Using Barkan's

data, we will compare those respondents who indicated that they had been members of Mau Mau with those male respondents of the same age group who had not been members. There were forty-four respondents who had been Mau Mau (hereafter this group is referred to as Mau Mau) and 1188 male respondents who had not been members (this group will be called NON). Thirty members of the Mau Mau group were Kikuyu, with the remainder consisting of members of the Luo, Luhya, and Kamba tribes. Although the survey was not constructed with this specific research question in mind, a sufficient number of pertinent questions were included to make this a valuable investigative tool for our purposes.

**Educational and Economic Status:** The Mau Mau are less well educated than the NON, but have virtually the same average economic standing, indicating that they may be "hustlers" (in the good sense of the term) or self-made men. Average number of years of education for the Mau Mau is 4½, while the NON average nearly 6 years of schooling. The economic standing is the same for both groups — averaging 2.2 on a scale where 2 = Middle Level Family and 3 = Poor Family.

**Political Participation:** The Mau Mau report a much higher frequency of political participation than the NON. When asked about the frequency of their political participation, 53% answered "Many Times," 33% answered "Several Times," none responded "1 or 2 Times," and 14% replied "Never." This is a much higher rate of participation than the NON, who answered 38% "Many Times," 22% "Several Times," 16% "1 or 2 Times," and 24% "Never." Furthermore, when asked if they had voted in the last (1969) election, 100% of the Mau Mau said they had, as compared to only 88% of the NON.

**Interest in Politics and National Affairs:** Again, the Mau Mau show consistently higher rates of interest in politics and national events than the NON. When asked the question, "Which kind of news interests you most?" fully 73% of the Mau Mau answered "National News." while only 47% of the NON answered that way. It is interesting to note that only 5% of the Mau Mau answered "World News," while 22% of the NON did. When asked, "How interested are you in political affairs?" the Mau Mau answered 32% "Very Much," 68% "Somewhat," and 0% "Not At All." This shows much more interest than was apparent in the NON group, which responded 27% "Very Much," 36% "Somewhat," and 37% "Not At All."

It is also clear that the State of Emergency was an important influence in sparking political interest of the Mau Mau, as 50% of the Mau Mau answered "What events started your political interest?" replied, "The Emergency," while only 10% of the NON answered in this fashion.

**Personal and Political Efficacy:** The Mau Mau feel more efficacious — personally and vis-a-vis the government — than do the NON, as is indicated by the fact that 54% of the Mau Mau disagree with the statement, "People like me have no say in the government," as compared to 37% of the NON who responded affirmatively to that question. 91% of the Mau Mau believe that "Anyone willing to work can be a success," while only 78% of the NON agree with this statement.

**Modernity:** Barkan included Alex Inkeles's OM-12 index of modernity in his survey (except for a question concerning involvement in political organizations, which was not deemed relevant to Kenya at the time of the survey). In keeping with the other findings, the Mau Mau scored "more modern" than did the NON on 8 of the 11 questions. Although the difference between the two groups was not extreme, the consistently higher modernity scores of the Mau Mau indicate they have a world view that differs to some degree from that of the NON group.

## CONCLUSION

Adherents to the rival perspectives of the nature and character of the Mau Mau movement probably would expect a significant difference in the attitudes and behaviours of ex-Mau Mau when compared to a similar group which had not been Mau Mau activists. The most striking and conclusive results of our analysis of Barkan's survey data are the constant direction of the differences between the groups. In short, the analysis reveals that the Mau Mau are substantially more interested in political and national events, participate more in political affairs, feel more efficacious, and are more "modern" than non-Mau Mau. These results clearly invalidate the "Murdering Savage" viewpoint, and seem to indicate that the bitterness and dissatisfaction perceived by proponents of the "Freedom Fighter" viewpoint was a transitory phenomenon.

How can these findings be explained? Clayton suggests one possible explanation — the experience of the detention camps. He forwards the position that, “the bizarre mixture of crude adult training educational experience and perhaps a useful rural craft training, together with a community pride born of suffering may have provided many detainees with a wider sense of citizenship and a new individual self-respect.”<sup>22</sup>

Barkan's data offers us an interesting clue as to why Mau Mau seem to be supportive of the national “establishment” even though few of them have attained high positions in the national government or administration. Their lower than average educational levels may have made it difficult for them to compete on the national scene, but they seem to have done very well on the local level — something which is rarely touched upon in the literature. Barkan identifies “local notables” as a part of his survey, and finds that about 10% of all respondents can be so classified. However, of the ex-Mau Mau group, over one-third were found to be “local notables,” a significant difference indicating a large leadership role in the community. Thus, the former Mau Mau insurgents, who were largely “shut out” of the fruits of independence at the national level, are today supportive of the Kenyan polity and have risen, in many cases, to the status of local notables.

The Kenyan experience has shown that the lasting impact of even a bloody, drawn-out insurgency based on ethnic lines need not necessarily be ossified, communal polarization. This bodes well for the future of such countries as Sri Lanka, especially if a resolution to the separatist conflict is found in the short to mid-term future, and is constructed so as to permit Tamil militants a hand in some aspect of the Sri Lankan political system.

As many Tamil militants joined the insurgent ranks when they were of school age, they may have permanently disrupted the typical socio-educational development that proved so formative to previous generations of Sri Lankan Tamils. Yet, the new-found power and status they may be perceived to have garnered by their experience as insurgents will make it difficult for them to restart their normal socio-educational process in the post-insurgency period. They may, however, find participation in regional administrative and governmental bodies more well-suited to their political horizons (and personal abilities) than the national-level political and economic participation of their fathers and grandfathers. Given a chance, both Kenyan “murdering

savages” and Sri Lankan “terrorists” may become — if not able for a variety of reasons to compete on the national level — solid, participative citizens and perhaps even local notables.

The lessons of the Kenyan experience are two-fold. First, ethnic conflict, no matter how bloody, base, and cruel, need not preclude future ethnic rapprochement. Secondly, “hard-core” militants, if given the opportunity, may re-enter the country’s political mainstream — particularly at least sub-national levels. A genuine devolution of administrative and political power, such as those discussed by the Sri Lankan government and Tamil groups, may be just the ticket to speed ethnic reconciliation and depolarization in Sri Lanka’s post-insurgency period.

NOTES

1. Donald Barnett and Karari Njama, *Mau Mau From Within*, (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1966), p. 53.
2. Josiah Kariuki, *"Mau Mau" Detainee*, (London: Oxford University Press, 1963), p. xvi.
3. Ladislav Venys, *A History of the Mau Mau Movement in Kenya*, (Prague: Charles University Press, 1970), p. 50.
4. Cherry Gertzel, *The Politics of Independent Kenya 1963-68*, (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1970), p. 17.
5. Fred Majdalaney, *State of Emergency*, (London: Longmans, 1962), p. 221.
6. Kariuki, *op. cit.*, p. 46.
7. Anthony Clayton, *Counter-Insurgency in Kenya 1952-60*, (Nairobi: Transafrica Publishers Ltd., 1976), p. 51.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 11.
9. Venys, *op. cit.*, p. 66.
10. Clayton, *op. cit.*, p. 17.
11. Majdalaney, *op. cit.*, p. 212.
12. L. S. B. Leakey, *Defeating Mau Mau*, (London: Methuen and Company, Ltd., 1954), p. 52.
13. Carl Rosberg and John Nottingham, *The Myth of "Mau Mau": Nationalism in Kenya*, (New York: Frederick Praeger, Publishers, 1966), p. 279.
14. Majdalaney, *op. cit.*, p. 70.
15. Leakey, *op. cit.*, p. 14.
16. Majdalaney, *op. cit.*, p. 166.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 168.
18. Waruhiu Itote, *"Mau Mau" General*, (Nairobi: East Africa Publishing House, 1976), p. 141.
19. Kariuki, *op. cit.*, p. 39.
20. Itote, *op. cit.*, pp. 270, 272.
21. Venys, *op. cit.*, p. 91.
22. Clayton, *op. cit.*, p. 62.

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