



The Rhetoric of 'Speaking in Tongues' amongst the Mbeere Mau Mau in Colonial Embu

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Abstract

The article aims to understand the Mau Mau secrets that probably prolonged the war from the insurgents' perspectives before a severe blow from pseudo-gangs and home guards. The Mbeere preserved and guarded the secret communication against irresponsible ears for survival. This article builds on previous research on the Mau Mau movement secrecy and survival system that involved evasion, deception, dodging and secret languages of the Mau Mau participants. The article argues that 'guarded words of secrecy' sustained the Mau Mau war of decolonisation longevity over the colonial idea of a quick victory. The control of words for social order in colonial Kenya stretched from the movement's core to the peripheral regions where the Mbeere lived. To earn the movement moments of greatness, words of confidentiality exerted a positive force until oath takers failed to control their vocals to invasive British ears. As counterinsurgency measures, the British Intelligence used the words of secrecy to infiltrate and enforce an array of enforcement measures that ultimately dismantled the Mau Mau movement. The Kikuyu, Embu, Meru, and the 'forgotten' Mbeere insurgents, irrespective of their gender, and those who failed to 'circumcise' their mouth, contributed to the failure of Mau Mau's realisation of the imagined state. The Mbeere, just like any other subaltern group, were subject to the activity of the ruling group. For example, the oath, oath ritual, argots, and the songs they sang originated from the Kikuyu. The historical materials and their representation ignored the Mbeere Mau Mau adherents who subverted the British Intelligence prolonging the war but focused on the lauded communities in Mau Mau historiography.

Keywords: Counterinsurgency, Insurgency, Mbeere, Mau Mau, secret words

INTRODUCTION

The insurrection of domestic insurgency within the United States, a country with top security agencies, has left scholars and, in particular, historians grappling with how insurgencies covertly organise, articulate their goals, and achieve them. This paper will focus on the Mbeere insurgents' words of secrets, which sustained it for over four years despite the British government terming them a disorganised and poorly armed movement. The presence of British troops, the establishment of command structures and additional forces flowing into Kenya from Malaya, Egypt and Britain, did not deter the insurgency intensified planning of planting representatives who determined the policy of the Mau Mau movement. The Mau Mau insurgents mastered secrecy, which was socially and culturally constructed to fit in a given societal framework for social order.

Landlessness, inequalities, taxation injuries inflicted injury and damage to the natives in the Central Province. More so, the implementation of policies was unfair to the Africans. In other words, the settler interests superseded those of the Africans. As Berman (1976;143-175) put it: 'District commissioners (DC) had their ways of doing things . . .' This meant translation of policies in the colony was unrestrained while, intervention from the higher authorities and consideration of African indigenous institutions was lacking. Berman aptly states how the colonial government regarded the African as immature and irresponsible hence the lack of African voice in the political process. The negative perception of Africans was associated with African organised opposition like the Kikuyu Central Association (KCA) and the Kenya African Union (KAU) advocating for fundamental changes in the political, social and economic relationships. Barnett and Njama (1966), argue that African grievances, including the demand to grow cash crops, access to small loans and more schools, wage increment constituted among the grand fundamental demands for change ignored by the colony. Nevertheless, the white settlers' preferential treatment was ongoing, leading to their prosperity, as noted by Throup (1985). Such a division led Kenyans to rise in arms against the colonial state in Kenya through an oath of unity campaign.

To tighten the *modus operandi*, the Mau Mau insurgents encoded information. This encoding of information is not a new phenomenon. It is frequently used by people performing social functions such as intelligence services. However, it is worth noting that, since the Mau Mau argots are no longer in use, the Mau Mau movement veterans did not have a problem sharing them. While researching Mbeere sub-counties, it was noted that if the languages were still fulfilling their functions, sharing such information would run against the fundamental interests of the group. Groups that speak in secret language do so to conceal linguistic knowledge from outsiders. The conviction that the English language was an instrument of western oppression that robbed the Africans' native speech; thus, the Mau Mau movement used Kikuyu as a language of communication. A Gikuyu language was a language of trust and conviction as compared to the colonial language. Barrington (2012) explains that the same approach was also applicable among the *Rastafari*, who developed dread-talk, an ingroup language that described the experiences of *Rastafari* and conveyed the consciousness of its members. There was a language that mapped identity, and a sense of oneness towards the Mau Mau insurgents imagined state.

The Mbeere took the Mau Mau oath secretly like other partakers of oath in Embu District. They promised to uphold the secrecy of the movement, fight for land and self-mastery. Jomo Kenyatta (1938) viewed the Mbeere as a section of Kikuyu. Therefore, the Mbeere, like the Kikuyu, believed that home affairs must not go to the public. In their oath, the Kikuyu oath-takers were warned of loudmouths promising to hold over their tongues. The Mau Mau movement even printed notices to warn Kenyans to curb their tongue seven times before saying a word, as Peterson (2008) highlighted. The Mau Mau announced strategic silence for unprecedented hindrance to the Mau Mau operations and competitive advantage over the British Intelligence and loyalists. British troops with no local experience and limited knowledge of the Mau Mau insurgency were witnessed through indiscriminate confiscation of properties, detention orders and even death sentences. An array of measures implemented proved counter-productive to deter the Mau Mau movement. There is scanty information on why the revolt took so long to conquer despite British complicated armoured cars, Lincoln heavy bombers, over 10,000 troops, 20,000 police force and support from loyalists against poorly armed Mau Mau guerrillas (Clayton, 1976).

The article is built on the ongoing PhD thesis, titled 'At the Periphery in Mau Mau Discourse: A case of the Mbeere of Embu County, Kenya: 1952-2014.' This study was informed by the post-colonial perspectives (subaltern studies theory), which critically examined the post-colonial experience of Third World societies. In this article, dominant groups (Kikuyu and Embu) have the mandate to establish their worldview as universal and shape the subordinate groups' interests and needs (Mbeere). The research conducted archival research, then field research in Embu County-Kenya. The researcher conducted 59 qualitative interviews on three groups. The first groups included scholars knowledgeable of the Mbeere history. Secondly, interviews with Mbeere ex-freedom fighters and the Embu who fought with Mbeere at Kyeni due to forceful oath-taking. These interviews supplemented archival research and provided insights on Kenya's war of resistance and understanding individual roles and attitudes in Kenya's History. Finally, the colonial authority represented the Mbeere as loyalists, a category that has had profound effects on their memorialisation. Therefore, the articles aim to respond to; what evidence shows the contribution of the Mbeere in the Mau Mau struggle? After data analysis, words of secrecy/secret words in the Mau Mau movement emerged as a broader pattern that prolonged the insurgency and evidence of participation. The researcher corroborated the findings with other field research carried out in 2015 at Londiani, Kianjokoma in Embu, Othaya in Nyeri, Maua in Meru and the Nakuru District Ex-freedom fighters Organisation (NDEFFO) in Njoro. The study also drew examples from various discourses on the Mau Mau movement, which capture broader trends uncovered in the research.

The article begins by examining personalities who played a critical role in the progression of insurgencies for unity. Confronted with the effects of loudmouths, crafted ways of enhancing social order in central Kenya through oath and treachery, they devised words into a call for unity. By speaking unknowable matters, they showed commitment to struggle through identity creation to distinguish between friend and foe in the spread of Mau Mau consciousness through a secret communication that was foreign to outsiders. They came with secrets like fleas, symbolic words, forest signals, and terminologies that worked effectively for the Mau Mau. The last sections show how British Intelligence infiltrated and manipulated wavering central Kenya residents and its profound effects on the insurgency.

Intelligence and Dynamics of African Sacred personages

As John Mbiti (1989) explains, there is a strong bond among the living in the African context. It is the 'We' that gives meaning, not the 'I'. Individuals do not exist alone but corporately. In such a society, people share information and ideas. The Embu and the Mbeere were predominant ethnicities that occupied colonial Embu. Before the colonial encounter, these two ethnicities engaged in a moral economy of obligation towards the less-well-off in the time of need (Haugerud, 1997). They even shared intelligence in times of crisis to subdue the enemy. When the European traders in 1905 sought concession from Sir Charles Elliot to occupy Embu and exploit its natural resources, the Mbeere did not resist as some Mbeere men had gathered intelligence on European weaponry's power Mwaruvie (2011) noted. The Mbeere shared intelligence gathered with Embu elders who rendered it useless and rejected provided countermeasures. Downplaying the Mbeere intelligence, the Embu were later subdued in the Embu expedition and suffered immensely. It shows that communication in traditional African societies occupied a fundamental place, and sharing intelligence or secrets was vital for social existence.

In the history of insurgency and counterinsurgency and this case of guerrilla warfare, the prophet or prophetesses shape the movement's ethos. They offer visions for moral

authority and symbolise hope, security and prosperity within ranks as they engage in specific rituals which enhance militaristic self-expression (Julie, 2020). However, the initiation process is imbued with impenetrability and concealment. As Mugo wa Malindi recollected in oral testimony in some cases, the initiates are beaten and warned of revealing the process. When the state of mass hysteria is created, two worlds are created, the ordinary world for those yet to know the secrets and those who know secrets. In most cases, the internal enemy (loyalists) is created who must be compelled to join the insurgency and fight the authoritarian regime, as noted in a Focus Group Discussion held at Kombo Munyiri on January 31, 2020. Buijtenhuijs (1972) explains how the colonial government hoped to outwit the prophets using a counterinsurgencies narrative. Although the missionaries' teachings had succeeded halfway in discrediting the local God (Ngai), there was diversity in thinking. However, this does not mean spiritual leaders were not powerful. As clearly illustrated by British Field Intelligence Officer Major Frank Kitson, although ignorant of supernatural situations in the Mau Mau era, the witch doctors could speak the thoughts of Chege, his translator and ex-Mau Mau beyond his imagination. It shows that they wielded supernatural powers that moved the Mau Mau movement (Kitson, 1960). The counterinsurgency narrative presented the Mau Mau prophets as false prophets or imposters who violated the oath they administered, but the indoctrination was already done.

The younger generation within insurgencies initiated a more radical approach for the expulsion of settlers. Generally, the trend was promising for the insurgency as most youths joined the military wing in Mount Kenya and Aberdare ranges while the colonial government appeared wavering on counterinsurgency measures. Major Frank Kitson (1960:37) observes, 'I settled down to interrogate the prisoners, but with no background information to work on, we had little chance of getting anything useful.' Inadequate intelligence was missing, and tactics proved counter-productive. However, the rapid expansion of the Mau Mau movement contributed to many leakages of its secrets. Without concealment of secrecy, the insurgents began hurting each other. Rather than focusing on external pressure for positive action, internal pressure in the movement was more conflictive. Secondly, the arrest of prominent KAU leaders, reinforcement of the security forces, harsh legislation towards the Central Province residents created confusion as most of the Kikuyu, Embu, Meru and Mbeere in the reserves concentrated on rebuilding their lives. Thirdly, the capture of general China (Waruhiu Itote), a source of inspiration, was a big blow to the Mau Mau fighters (Itungati) in Mount Kenya (Charters, 2009). His confession to the Special Branch officers was the first breakthrough of intelligence on how guerrillas relied on reserves for livelihood. Barnett and Njama (1966) concluded that equally important, Kenya Parliament attempted to outwit British Intelligence at their own game through strategic communication. 'Speaking in tongues' (*Kwaria thiani*) to counter infiltration began in the 1950s and heightened onwards to put off ill-intentioned listeners or irresponsible ears.

Strategic communication in the Oath and Network Building

Berman and Lonsdale (1992) emphasise that the inability of the colonial administration to effect meaningful change was a firm conviction to a militaristic approach to drive Europeans out of Kenya. The Mau Mau thrived on secrecy and fear. The placement of God is strategic, and therefore, any ceremonial activity is spiritual. Elders recite spiritual songs to show the seriousness of the action (Kenyatta, 1938). The prophetic narratives from the Kikuyu prophet made sense to the ceremonial elders as insiders. The same applies to the Mau Mau oath. Matters spoken made sense to insiders, a secret they vowed to protect. The insiders even bind themselves by swearing to keep secrets made in the oath. Announcing a 'prohibition' attracted a curse (*Kirumi*). To the Mau

Mau insurgents exposing secrets attracted death. Just like in the Malgache uprising in Mozambique, pre-colonial religious practices were a source of inspiration. They practised traditional rituals, swearing allegiance to God and invoking ancestors for protection (Weigert, 1996). Titus Ngochi, during an FGD held at Kombo Munyiri sub-location on January 31, 2020, observed that the Mau Mau movement fighters were determined to keep their operation secretive. As people took the oath, they remained silent and warned of harsh consequences attributed to divulging the secrets of the oath. Members enshrined their commitment verbally, swearing, *ndikumbura thiri cia gikundi* "I will never divulge the secrets of the group." It is worth noting that anything bound by oath was believed to have some power in many societies. Certain utterances like 'I now pronounce you husband and wife,' or 'If I do contrary to this oath may it kill me,' and other such parts of speech have power because the society has conferred power on formulaic utterances. The curse, usually the product of contravening what one saw, uttered in swearing statements and practised, was a strategy that worked well for many insurgencies in Africa, as explained by (Muchiri, 1978). It created a social order and social control. Insiders did not imagine being affected by misfortunes that stretched even to family members. Nevertheless, the oath of unity mostly taken in central Province did not equip the Kikuyu, Embu, Meru and Mbeere to endure hardships rather than unite them as the house of Gikuyu and Mumbi. When the Mau Mau war became tough, every gender opted to side with the government to save their skin.

The Mau Mau insurgents referred to the movement in different names, sometimes *uiguano wa muingi* (the unity of the community), *muigwithania* (The unifier) or Movement of the Oath (Barnett and Njama, 1966; Kariuki, 1964). Their songs, prayers, and oath invoked the movement to conceal its identity from an outsider. The same applies to the *ma or muma* (oath), which they also referred to in different names. Such communication offered new converts hope on their secrecy as the language of trust distinguished a friend an enemy. The new converts could operate without fearing neighbours as it distinguished the insiders and outsiders. Wallace argues that the formulators of the coded language were regarded as persons of great wisdom, knowledge and authority; therefore, blind obedience was probable (Antony, 1961). The codes remained intact, but when infiltration was suspected, modification occurred.

Oath administration was unique among the Kikuyu as well as the Mbeere. Charles Leakey (1954) also confirms diversity in words as well as procedures of oath administration. Secret codes used remained similar, but some secret codes were unique to specific geographical locations in some cases. For example, in Mbeere, the Mbeere Mau Mau scouts, as recollected by Muturi Ndaru in an FGD held at Mwanyare on February 3, 2020, in the Mau Mau movement, the scout helped the Mau Mau fighters whenever the security officers appeared. He was always on the lookout, and whenever Home Guards or security forces appeared, he would use a secret warning: "*Runji nirwaucura*" (the river is full). Once they heard this, genuine members decoded the message that the enemy was nearby. In the FGDs held at Mwanyare and Kombo Munyiri sub-location on January 31 & February 2, 2020, the participants also narrated how communication was secretive in Mbeere; for instance, a man used to climb a tower and blow the horn as one in the process of chasing birds from destroying the millet crop. Once the horn was blown, the Mau Mau movement fighters would know that the food was ready and, on its way and would prepare to receive it. It shows that people who had a similar agenda and lived in the same area with common interests were likely to develop unique secret words only recognisable in a smaller circle.

Identity through 'fleas'

To recognise those who had not taken the oath in Mbeere, they used secret words with hidden meanings. For example, when the Mbeere gathered in a house, the house owner would say, 'this house has lice/fleas' after which they would scratch themselves as narrated in an FGD held at Kombo Munyiri and Mwanyare sub-location on January 31 & February 2, 2020;

A person who has taken an oath is known through secret language. To identify those who had not been oathed. We would say there are fleas(thua) here. We could scratch ourselves and identify the one who was not one of us.

Also, Peterson (2000) uses a similar example that elucidates the insiders excluding others in their 'adult conversation.' He states how those who had not taken the oath were called fleas; therefore, outsiders were known through communication. Furthermore, such words for strategic communication were well guarded, as a slight mistake would bring them (users) to detention. Thus, Peterson explains that the person who had not taken the oath was left alone. In a focus group discussion held in Londiani on September June 9, 2015, respondents narrated how the term flea was used in oath administration; "We got to a house, with scouts outside, asked if there were fleas/lice. If you responded contrary to the expected response, the punishment was inevitable, smeared saliva on the face and then given a seat, after that forcefully oathed."

As noted earlier, the creators of the secret words/codes for communication possessed wisdom and knowledge. Fleas are tiny insects that jump anyhow, pierce and suck. Those who had not taken the oath were perceived as bloodsuckers. The only remedy to remove the 'flea' was to oath it for conformity. By oathing, it stopped insidious biting that affected or irritated the progression of the Mau Mau movement.

The coded speech in the Mbeere region affected many who had not taken the oath;

We would ask if one wanted to go, would they take the upper route or the lower one? They would say that they want to take the lower road since it had no sun, but the upper route had sun. Thus, we would secretly communicate until we acquainted with each other, as noted in oral evidence.

Those who could not understand these carefully coded words were in trouble as they faced isolation and were marked. Chrispin Mate, in an oral interview held at Kathimari-Nguthi sublocation on February 10, 2020 refused the Mau Mau oath because no explanation for joining the movement was offered. One night at about 9 pm, they were waylaid together with his wife and then instructed to enter an erected structure (arch) with charms. Mate recalls forcefully going through the arch naked. Then he saw the act as not correct. He dragged his wife's hand, collected their clothes and ran out. The Mau Mau indoctrination was not as intense in Mbeere as compared to Murang'a or Nairobi. Secondly, the Mbeere Division was dangerous ground for the Mau Mau movement as the Home Guards and farm guards were always in control. The tide turned against the Mau Mau movement with the advent of reliable chiefs like Mwandiko wa Ngira, who had a record of active resistance to the movement, a fact that was well known to the residents. Also, some headmen were in a state of fear because the colonial government was using the trial and error method in detaining headmen suspected of supporting the movement. Mate and his wife were not harmed but forced to keep vigil armed with arrows and bows. It was a rare occasion as any man or woman who arrived on the arena was oathed or faced death as recorded in FGDs. Mate also confirms he was not a loudmouth and promised never to reveal what happened that

night. He, however, notes he was disconnected from others who smirked at them, and nobody wanted to associate with them.

Symbolic greetings

Insurgency greetings were also crafted, and as evidence of the Mbeere participation in the movement, it was revealed that the greetings were distinct;

When we met, we would greet each other like this (demonstrating licking the soil). The one who did not do that was not a Mau Mau adherent. You would meet people and, without talking, perform the ritual. If one just greeted us usually, we would know he/she was not a Mau Mau insurgent: an FGD held at Kombo Munyiri and Mwanyare sublocation on January 31 & February 2, 2020.

The soil was at the centre of the Mau Mau oathing process. According to Wanyumbari (1993), oathing ceremonies utilised blood and meat. The initiates would take the oath while holding moistened soil against their stomach with the right hand. It symbolised that the person was ready to do anything in their powers to protect the land. In as much the Mau Mau movement oathing changed from place to place, the centrality of holding the soil was standard. Another type of handshake applicable in the Mbeere region was expounded in the FGD at Kathimari and corroborated by Julieta and Muthingi Mugwate in oral interviews. As illustrated in Mbeere, the secret handshake involved bringing together the palms, but the thumb would be pulled outwards. Those who had not taken the oath could not decode the message and were easily identified.

Sitting as an expression of the Mau Mau identity

Whenever women met, they sat down and stretched out their legs straight and did not crouch or put one leg over the other. The researcher observed the same at Laare-Maua on July 9, 2015, as shown in **Figures 1.1** and **1.2** for Mwanyare. If a woman sat with legs crouched, she was easily identifiable as not a Mau Mau movement member.



Figure 1: A Mau Mau meeting held by the researcher in Maua-Lare on July 8, 2015. The Mau Mau women seated in a coded form



Figure 1: Mau Mau veterans in an FGD held at Mwanyare on February 3, 2020. Women seated, stretching their legs, a form of Mau Mau coded language

Mau Mau Signals and Terminologies in the Forest

The Mau Mau freedom fighters viewed the forest as a sacred and clean space. When a group of recruits entered the forest, they destroyed *vipande* (government-issued identity cards). First, the card was associated with unclean British state power, secondly, seen as a form of surveillance. They lacked proper identification documents by destroying the identity cards but replaced them with new identity cards with a letterhead of the Kenya Land Freedom Army (Peterson, 2000). It was a form of the new citizen who was free from British bureaucracy or surveillance. They also adopted ranks similar to the British, a sign of sovereignty and new citizen of imagined Kenya. In Mbeere, Kathagu wa Titima, who hailed from Mavuria was identified as General Wakimere. Kathagu wa Titima, in an oral interview held at Kombo-Munyiri Sub-location on August 11, 2020 explained how he was a marked man, but argued the pseudo name was effective because when the colonial forces captured him, he informed them he hailed from Nyeri; before they realised, he hailed from Mbeere. It bought him time to craft a story to salvage himself. When some residents from the Mbeere region were brought to identify him, they did not know him since they came from Evurore and Siakago.

Kithinji (2005; 222-223) explains how General Baimungi used argots or what he refers to as slang to rebuild moral orders;

The Mau Mau had decided to attack Kimitu Prison and set free their colleagues held there. At each meeting to discuss the assault, general Baimungi-their leader emphasised that it would occur on December 9. He suspected that someone among his people was police informer. During their last meeting, he had held to the light a piece of paper written simple 9.

They attacked on sixth and took off with twenty of their men.

The police informer had informed the prison warders to expect the attack on December 9. However, according to Kithinji (2005), nine and six were interchangeable in Mau Mau slang. Therefore, if they talked of six, they meant nine and vice versa. Surprisingly similar coded messages were used in Nairobi, as expounded by Mukami Kimathi. While escaping from police inspection at Muthaiga Police station, Mukami Kimathi ran to Muthaiga Club where she knew a cook who was a Mau Mau movement member tasked with intelligence gathering then passing the same to Kimathi in the

forests. Mukami went straight to the kitchen and shouted to the cook *Mariboti na ndubia* (latest report and a cup of sugarless tea) (Wairimu, 2017). However, this language was only known to those within the group, as the others could not comprehend it.

Karari Njama, general secretary of Kenya Parliament, was visiting different camps in the forest and realised how the insurgents (*Itungati*) communicated using signals unfamiliar to himself, indicating how the forest was appropriated as the infrastructure of (re)making language. A language that determined whether one was a friend or a foe as written by Barnett and Njama, 1966; 164);

I asked Githae to teach me the signals and terminology they were using . . . Githae, a section leader, noted, 'If you meet a green branch planted in the middle of a path, that means do not pass there; there is danger ahead. . . We whistle like a nigh-bird which says, "kuri heho-I ndirara Ku?" (It is cold, where shall I sleep)?" When you come to the sight of the guards, they would shout to you, "Number!" [in English]. If you replied "Seven," they would know that you are an enemy because people would only reply in Kikuyu, "Mugwanja," (seven).

In the forests, the Mau Mau movement kept record books, and Karari Njama taught them how to write using forest terminologies and code words. Record-keeping was for posterity and public memory (Barnett and Njama, 1966). Nevertheless, outside the forest, record books were written formally, and insurgents could be identified easily. For example, in Embu District, the attack of Chief Fausto's Camp led to the unfolding of drama as the chief called a meeting and threatened the local population that he owned a book of all the Mau Mau movement supporters in the Kathanjuri location. Entirely unaware that some of his guards belonged to the Mau Mau movement as narrated by Jackson Ileri at Karungu-Kyeni Central on February 12, 2020;

It was the guards at the chief's camp who ganged up against Fausto and Samuel. The camp had been surrounded by a trench with sharp sticks at the bottom to protect the chief, with a special place for people to enter (drawbridge which would be lowered allowing people to enter and leave). Njeru wa Muoyo was the corporal as he was from the army. He would keep surveillance on the camp with his askaris. However, Njeru and the *askaris* had also taken the oath, yet they were guarding the camp. One day they ganged up and planned and ensured that the entry to the camp was open. Njeru wa Mbathane was killed as he went on top of the tree trying to shoot and raise the alarm. Fausto and Samuel were also killed at the camp. After Fausto was killed, there was heavy rain that night.

Embu District Intelligence Report for the week ending November 12, 1953, was corroborated by Jackson Ileri's testimony on the attack of chief Fausto. On a subsequent attack, eight guns with ammunition were stolen after the gang managed to enter the chief's office, which doubled as his home. They left with him and four books that contained Kyeni people names who had taken the oath and were contributing money to support the movement. Chief Fausto and Samuel were murdered on the night of November 08, 1953, on Sunday at Home Camp at Kathanjuri as written in the Embu District Intelligence Committee summaries, 1953 Jan 01 - 1954 Dec 31 (TNA/FCO 141/5766). Lack of mastery of coded language among somehow irresponsible the Mau Mau record keeper in Kyeni posed a danger to Mau Mau movement's adherents. The record book that was supposed to be a memory bank, hope for the future was to be

used as an arrest or murder list, but the 'chief guards' acted swiftly to conceal their identity from an irresponsible reader.

Pseudos and Home Guards Impact on the Insurgency Imagined State

Speaking in tongues did not deter the movement from listening ears that were ready to betray the movement. The oath was not all-inclusive, especially to mission adherents who departed from the Kikuyu traditions. Also, some took the oath of unity as demanded, fearing destruction but non-committal to the movement course. Shortly before the State of Emergency declaration, the colonial government initiated a curfew on the Natives to assert self-legitimation. Restrictions of movements came into force at the beginning of the State of Emergency, and public meetings were only permitted to those who held loyalty certificates were allowed to attend as written in the Press office, Department of information (September 4, 1958). Press office Handout No. 609: Relaxations in Central Province Emergency Restrictions. *Emergency* (KNA/BB/12/24). State of emergency regulations were put in place, curtailing the rights of the Africans.

Moreover, detention orders were enacted, and the governor had the power to arrest and detain any person considered a threat to public order. The governor also delegated powers to police officers above the rank of assistant inspector to arrest without a warrant of arrest provided he had enough grounds to justify the detention (KNA/BB/12/24). Edgerton argues that the colonial government put anyone it wished into a concentration camp, and evidence of wrongdoing was not required (Edgerton, 1989). African privacy was also interfered with when senior police officers were given the power to search any premise without a warrant and the mandate to stop and search any vehicle or individual in the public space. Africans were also compelled to give information by force, and governor Baring instituted a clause on power to obtain information. Any person who failed to produce information pursuant of the request duly made under the regulation was guilty of an offence (KNA/BB/12/24). Some of the Mau Mau adherents did not have the nerves to undergo such extreme measures of the colonial government because the oath did not convert or create a strong bond of trust.

Throughout 1952, the emergency regulations facilitated the military strategy, which divided the central Province further. Through the operation John Scott (1952), the first arrests targeted the Kenya African Union leaders. Wairimu (2017) argues that the famous massive arrest of the core leadership of Kenya African Union (KAU) marked the beginning of massive oathing, and Kimathi expanded Mau Mau movement membership through a colossal recruitment drive. The Mau Mau oath administrators conducted oathing even among those who could not fight, such as older men and women who could support the Mau Mau movement with resources and information. After the emergency declaration, Elkins (2005) notes that the Mau Mau movement was unprepared, hence quick to recruit anyone, even the children and the elderly. This approach had a profound effect on the Mau Mau movement. It also became clear in oral testimonies in Embu County that although Kimathi was the central leader, there were different cells. General Kubukubu was the leader of the Embu. However, because the Mbeere were few, they could not create their cell. Most of their connections came from Nairobi and Embu, unlike others who took directions from Aberdares and Mount Kenya. There was an indication of different oaths in the Mbeere region where the Kikuyu enjoined the Mbeere in Mau Mau through diplomacy, unlike the Embu, who forcefully loathed them. Therefore, in the Mbeere region, most of the Mbeere were oathed without clear guidelines of the Mau Mau needs and objectives.

Secondly, Adriano Thiga Mukinyango, in an interview at Kathimari-Nguthi sublocation, February 10, 2020, recollected how oathing administrators targeted

women and even children. He noted, “We gave the oath to women, but we never gave it to pregnant or menstruating women.” An FGD conducted at Mwanyare, February 3, 2020 also concurred with Thiga that pregnant and menstruating women were never oathed as it was believed it could cause miscarriage or harm them. As the oath was taken by many, it lost its meaning. Its binding effect was dwindling. The Kikuyu and the Mbeere did not trust women and children in keeping secrets. Kikuyu proverbs emphasise “*Muici na Kihii akenaga o kiarua*,” meaning anyone who goes to steal with a lad is relieved when the lad is circumcised. On women, the proverbs stated, “*Muicii na mutumia akenaga o akua*” meaning one who steals with women gets relieved only with the death of the woman.” The proverb highlights the belief that men cannot trust women, and if she knows the secret, you live in fear until she dies. So, women were portrayed as unreliable, unlike uncircumcised boys who can outlive their statures, unlike women who can never stop being women. It also shows the depiction of a woman, whether circumcised or not, remained in the same stature as women, unreliable and untrustworthy. As the war progressed, despite the beliefs, the women duties were over and beyond domestic chores, to even intelligence gathering, ammunition concealment and transfer (Muraya, 2015). In the forests, women engaged in everyday tasks such as cooking, fetching firewoods and water.

The revealing of secrets by General China and other informers provided colonial forces breakthrough in the Mau Mau movement organisation and operations. Rather than jail apprehended Mau Mau, colonial officials tried to win their hearts and minds. Through action and thinking, British Field Intelligence Assistants (FIAs) got hold of critical intelligence. In some cases, the apprehended could be released and join the insurgents as pseudo-gangs to gather accurate information. The informer was rewarded when the British Intelligence realised precise information. Major Kitson (1960) gives an example of an informer named James. Due to his usefulness, he lived as one of their team and taught others Mau Mau slangs, handshake and signs (Kitson, 1960). The intelligence group tried to understand why people like James joined the insurgency, but it was roughly understood they did that to secure basic social security (Krawchuk, 2006). This strategic approach motivated them, and they could not regret shifting their allegiances.

The Special Branch thoroughly investigated any criminal activities with the help of local administrations and FIAs. They ensured the suspects were apprehended regardless of the locality, as explained in FGDs held at Kombo Munyiri and Mwanyare sub-location on January 31 & February 2, 2020. The British Intelligence pursued suspects as far as the Mbeere region demonstrating how the Special Branch and Intelligence officers were evolving to suppress the insurgency despite limited intelligence resources. The colonial government saw everybody as a source of information and therefore inflicted pain to generate intelligence. For example, the emergency policies in Central Province ensured strict control over the population, which involved punishing those co-operating with the Mau Mau movements and rewards for loyal services to enhance informers. As recorded in Mau Mau Unrest; Emergency Organisation and Directives, 1952-4 (TNA/FCO 141/5672) on Emergency Directives No. 1.’ from Major General Hinde, dated April 13, 1953;

“There will be a greater flow of information on the activities and plans of Mau Mau as confidence is restored, both in the settled areas and in the Kikuyu reserves. . . But the main task lies in building up confidence in our strength and our good intentions towards the African and the future while emphasising his responsibilities for the present.”

Indeed, a telegram from the governor to the secretary of state, dated August 25, 1955 stated; But now villagers are co-operating as never

before with the government. They are making confessions and producing Mau Mau money, weapons, pieces of home-made guns, ammunition and corpses of Mau Mau victims; they also give a great deal of information, and they – particularly the women – turn out to chase terrorists. . . Emergency Organisation (TNA/ FCO 141/6615).

The colonial government viewed the Embu residents in two spectra through a divide and rule strategy, the 'good' Mbeere and 'bad' Embu. The 'bad Embu' was slammed with a collective fine of two hundred head of stock imposed when the attack happened in the Mbeere territory on the premise they had known an attack was imminent as written on Embu District Annual report, 1954 (KNA/DC/EBU/1/13). The colonial administration heightened the hatred between the two communities. As noted in oral testimonies and from Kimathi's diary, the colonial government would attack Natives and then implicate the Embu Mau Mau movement supporters. Yet from colonial records, Embu District Intelligence Committee summaries, Intelligence, 1954 Jan 01 - 1954 Dec 31(TNA/FCO 141/5767), it was not clear who carried out the operation;

If, as is possible, this was Embu Division Forest gang under Kassam or Kubukubu making its circuitous way from Mathira area south Nyeri back to its traditional haunts. This massacre has the dual effect of punishing the Mbeere for their activity against the Embu early in the year and also registering on the local population, a sensational success, as an immediate reaction to government inferences on operation Wedgewood that Mau Mau was deemed to defeat.

The collective fines were a heavy burden to the Embu because the British government had imposed separate collective fines on them after the burning schools' incidence and the destruction of bridges. In addition, in one area of the Embu division, the colonial government prohibited the planting and growing of sugarcane, citing the Embu as drunkards completely disrupting their livelihood as recorded in Embu District Annual report, 1954 (KNA/DC/EBU/1/13).

Through intense surveillance in villagised settlements, the British government thwarted the Mau Mau movement's operations. The villagisation programme was a military strategy that entailed forceful removal of civilians and relocation of Embu District civilians to safe villages surrounded by moats. Trenches surrounded the moated villages, 50 miles long, 10 feet deep and 16 feet wide and heavily guarded (Nicholls, 2017). The Home Guards shot anybody who tried to leave without permission. Therefore, under the emergency powers, many Africans became victims of "trying to escape." The Embu Intelligence Committee meeting on May 5, 1954, stated that villagisation led to improvement in the collection of information necessary for the destruction of the insurgents (TNA/FCO 141/5767). The Mbeere region did not face absolute villagisation, as argued by Wairimu (2017). In Mbeere, the villages were at Gachoka, Rianjeru, Kiambere and Kavindori, solely for the suspected Mau Mau movement followers. A refugee camp was also constructed near the Ena tobacco factory (TNA/FCO 141/5767). Jackson Ireri, a Muemba recollected in an interview held at Karungu-Kyeni Central on February 12, 2020, used to teach in Mbeere during the emergency period, corroborated the testimonies offered by the Mbeere when describing how the situation had been in Embu;

There was much fear during that period. People would rarely walk at night. After the colonial government shifted natives to villages, places like here (Kanthanjuri) used to be occupied by the Mau Mau Movement fighters. Before 1952, people lived on farms. It was after

this that the government mobilised all natives into the villages. After this, even while going to farms, Home Guards would accompany them because if they came alone, the Mau Mau movement fighters would attack them. There was a village at Kathanjuri, Kathunguri, Gakwegori, Kiaragana, Muvu and Kiangungi. At Kanyuambora, there was no village, but people moved to live near churches. At Ishiara, people did not move from the farms since the Mau Mau movement's presence was not much.

The Kaagari and Kyeni location residents welcomed the implementation of the villagisation policy due to the hardship they underwent with collective punishment, which dismantled their livelihood. With its implementation in the two areas, no resistance was reported. The government considered this an internal solution to the Mau Mau movement problem; evidently, it was bearing fruits. From April 29 to May 1, 1954, nine Mau Mau movement fighters were killed; two in Njukini Forest, two in Kieni Location, one in Kagaari location, and one near Kangaru School and Ngariama location an indication that state of normalcy was realised (TNA/FCO 141/5767).

The colonial government witnessed positive progress since implementing the villagisation policy, signalling a change of heart. However, this did not mean that the movement's progress and attacks had stopped. Notably, the colonial administrators reported stock theft as Mau Mau movement fighters tried to obtain food; there was also forceful oathing, and people continued admitting to having taken the oath. In addition, the Mbeere in Kyeni location continued to be targeted by the Mau Mau freedom fighters and Mbeere old man and child abducted in June 1954, near the Embu-Mbeere border (TNA/FCO 141/5767).

As the colonial government tightened its security control, communities in Embu district were oscillating between loyalism to the government and being Mau Mau movement sympathisers. They were waiting to see which side to join. On the other hand, the morale of loyalists was high due to the increased number of British officers, which came with satisfaction and continuous flow of information, enabling the security forces to pursue the Mau Mau movement fighters into the forests. The emergency period with all restrictions, trenches, booby traps, the barbed wire did not deter the Mau Mau insurgents. It shows that the Mau Mau organisation was very organised. It then raises pertinent questions on the point of entry of pseudo-gangs. It also indicates that the Mau Mau war was complicated. It was hard to decipher who was fighting who amongst the insurgents because European pseudo-gang native language skills were not enough to infiltrate the Mau Mau movement from an intelligence standpoint. Major Kitson (1960) explained that concealing the identity through blacking could not guarantee his squad to get valuable intelligence.

CONCLUSION

The Mau Mau movement hoped to unite the occupants of the Kikuyu Land Unit, including the peripheral communities like the Mbeere, through the oath for moral order. However, not all occupants of the Kikuyu Land Unit shared the same dreams of an imagined state. To uphold the vision, the Mau Mau movement's insurgents creatively adopted strategic communication through signals, new orthographies, argots which ensured secret communication. The words of secrecy enhanced communication, inspired confidence among the Mau Mau insurgents as it showed patriotism, commitment and discipline within the Mau Mau movement. The linguistic division did not disfavour the Mbeere at the periphery of the Mau Mau movement. Indeed, the Mbeere committed themselves through oath and 'disciplined' their tongue for the

progression of the war of resistance. Oathing among the Mbeere was not a new phenomenon; it existed in the pre-colonial period. When the Kikuyu spearheaded it for solidarity, the Mbeere had no option but to join the bandwagon and learn the coded language as a sign of political commitment. The Mbeere understood the repercussions of transgressing the words uttered, which shows the Mbeere took the oath and exploited careful silence never to reveal the secrets of the movement to the British. The alliance of the Mbeere for decolonisation can be attested in words of secrecy transmitted. They portray the Mbeere insurgent consciousness on a common lineage evoked in the history of Mumbi and Gikuyu. They also imply territoriality (the nation of Kirinyaga), showing common heritage and habitat and sometimes transcending the borders to other areas like Ngong (where the house of Mumbi was available for interaction). To reinforce solidarity (*ngwataniro*), the Mbeere also crafted a language of inclusion, a distinctive one which informed the Mau Mau insurgent hiding in the Mbeere region, a language of trust developed for the progression of the insurgency. An illustration of the autonomy of subaltern consciousness that is dependent on the self as a practice of anti-colonial feelings. Moreover, the military strategies employed by the colonial government targeted certain localities and therefore, as long as the Mbeere Division was within the Kikuyu Land Unit, they were not immune to fear of more pain. The coded language distinguished between a friend and an enemy and ensured the progression of the Mau Mau war longer than anticipated by the colonisers. The informers and loyalists allowed the British Intelligence to infiltrate the Mau Mau movement as the oath of unity was not binding anymore.

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