

**Mau-Mau War and the Church in Kirinyaga, Kenya:
Accounting for the tension and conflict (1952-1960)**

*Julius Gathogo*¹

Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies,
Kenyatta University, Mombasa, Kenya

Abstract

The Kenya Land and Freedom Army, otherwise called Mau-Mau, began their freedom war against British colonialism in the late 1940s by first administering a binding oath to its recruits. In turn, the guerrilla war, which was mainly waged by the people of Central and Eastern Kenya, reached its climax in the mid-fifties. The injustices that its leadership cited as justification for their military activities can be explained in various ways: Firstly, the five million Africans who lived in the British colony of Kenya failed to gain any meaningful form of political representation. Secondly, the war was caused by other issues that dominated African politics since 1903 to 1952, such as land alienation, racial discrimination and the low level of African wages, among others. Thirdly, the heavy taxation was used by the European settlers as a weapon to execute their plan. Fourthly, the forced carrying of the *Kipande* – an identity card. During the war, three types of oaths were administered: *umemba* oath for recruitment, the *batuni*-oath for those who were sent to the forest and the *atongoria* oath that was administered to the leaders of the movement at all levels. The tension and conflict between the Anglican Church and the Mau-Mau rebellion were clear in the Kirinyaga County, particularly when the revolutionary rebels began to burn churches, schools and killed church leaders in early 1950s. In view of this, this article sets out to unveil the problem that caused the conflict between the church and Mau-Mau rebels and the way in which it was addressed. The article is based on the premise that the Anglican Church was a “British church” automatically means that mistrust was bound to set in. Hence,

¹ Research Fellow in the Research Institute for Theology and Religion, University of South Africa, Pretoria, South Africa.

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it is critical to address the nature of mistrust between the revolutionary rebels and the church. The materials in this presentation are largely gathered through interviews and archival sources.

Introduction

The revolutionary war which sought Kenya's freedom from the colonial yoke, began in the 1940s, in the then British East Africa or the Kenya colony, as a mere rumour, swiping across central and eastern provinces, about a secret society amongst the Kikuyu, Kenya's largest ethnic nationality, which was slightly higher than one-fifth of the population.² It later came to be known that the magnitude of the revolutionary war was beyond what was being rumoured about. Indeed, due to their secretive operations where oath was administered clandestinely, the "secretive group" had penetrated not only the Kikuyu ethnic group, but also her neighbouring communities, particularly the other ethnic groupings in eastern Kenya such as Meru and Embu. It was officially called the Kenya Land and Freedom Army (KLFA). Typically, it was forcing people (referring to the African population) to swear an oath to take back the land that "the European settlers had stolen". They murdered any African who refused to take part in the binding oath of freedom or was seen as being loyal to the colonialists. As in the early church where adherents operated from house to house, particularly as persecutions were heightened (see the biblical book of Acts), the Mau-Mau oath administrators operated in special homes and kept on changing their ceremonial houses in order to avoid suspicion and possible capture by the security forces.³ Hence, they remained a secret society where an individual oath taker swore never to reveal the secrets of the association no matter the pains thereof. Therefore, the secret society acquired a new name, although no one knew where it came from. It was called "Mau Mau".

² The 2009 census figures give the ethnic composition as follows (out of a total population of 38,6 million): Kikuyu 20%, Luhya 14%, Kalenjin 13%, Luo 10%, Kamba 10%, Kisii 6%, Mijikenda 5%, Meru 4%, Turkana 2.5%, Maasai 2.1%. Around 9% of the population consists of smaller groups numbering below 1% each; non-African groups (Arabs, Indians and Europeans) are estimated to be a total of about 1% (Wikipedia). By 2014, the figures had risen.

³ The three distinguishing marks of the early church were: separation from the world, unconditional love, and childlike obedience to the teachings of Jesus Christ. Considering that the earth was not their home, the early Christians could say without reservation, like Paul, "to live is Christ, and to die is gain" (Phil. 1:21). Justin Martyr explained to the Romans, "Since our thoughts are not fixed on the present, we are not concerned when men put us to death. Death is a debt we must all pay anyway" (see Brockman and Pescantini 1990:10).

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In the present day, Kirinyaga County, just as in the rest of the Mount Kenya region, oath taking as a first step in recruiting Mau-Mau fighters was indeed the order of the day. The oath consisted of the stomach contents of a slaughtered sheep or goat which were mixed with herbs, water and a little of the blood of the animal. The oath commissioner then placed a loop made of grass over the head and hands of the initiate. The mixture described above was then placed in the hand of the initiate and a banana leaf containing the mixture was wrapped round the head of the initiate seven times – a phenomenon that gave it a religious connotation. The initiate repeated the oath as directed by the person administering it. In this, the initiate would swear allegiance to the Mau-Mau cause and that he or she would uphold secrecy, would never betray the movement, would give whatever is demanded of him or her, even if it resulted in death, would kill when necessary and would generally be of assistance to the cause of socio-political freedom (Maceru 02/02/2014).

Mau-Mau oath in Kirinyaga

According to General Matene (1922) (real name was Nyamu wa Muriakori – 01/02/2014), who was among the first Mau-Mau oath administrators in the present day Kirinyaga County, most of the initiates brought to him for compulsory oath taking included Christians, teachers, peasant-farmers, local sub-chiefs and people of all walks of life. Some of the “captured” initiates were not psychologically prepared to undertake the oath but the politics of the day dictated that “every adult African, man or woman, must take the oath of loyalty in the course of freedom, and swear that he or she would do the best he or she could to reclaim the lost lands” (Matene 01/02/2014). Although he was not sent to the forest by the War Council, Samuel Gakuo Maceru recalls taking two out of the three oaths that a Mau-Mau soldier had to take. He took the first oath in the Kiangomo-Kamuiru area of Kirinyaga in 1947 and the second one in Nairobi in 1952. By then he was working as a cleaner with the East African Railways and Harbours. He was later arrested and deported to Mackinnon Road prison, near Mombasa’s coastal city, where he was detained for four years (1953-1957). He remembers being made to swear solemnly during the two oath sessions that he would obey whatever the Mau-Mau War Council told him to do, be it killing or going to the forest to join others to wage guerrilla warfare (Maceru 02/02/2014). Curiously, although the *mundumugo* (the oath administrator) who administered the oath was clothed, his recruits were always naked. Like any other worker who had taken the binding oath, he had to remit his monthly subscription of KES 60 (a huge figure those days as most people earned less than KES 50 per month) that enabled the movement to carry out its military activities. Despite remittances being made on a “voluntary basis”, failure to pay meant that one was not honouring the

oath, hence being killed was one of the penalties that one could be given. In addition to giving money, the working class was made to swear something different in that they had to pledge to also bring a piece of honey (*kithembe kia uki*) to the leaders of their specific locality (Maceru 02/02/2014).

In Kirinyaga, as in the rest of the Mount Kenya region, Home Guards, who were mainly Anglican Christians, would move swiftly to burn the house of a person who had taken the Mau-Mau oath. For instance, in 1954 many houses in the areas of Kamuiru, Kiini, Inoi, Ngariama and Baragwi of the present day Kirinyaga County were burnt down because of a suspicion that the owners took the oath (Maceru 02/02/2014).

It is significant that the requirements of the Mau-Mau oath posed great challenges to people who had converted to Christianity. It became a pungent drug to gulp down, particularly when they were obligated to kill non-Mau-Mau members of society, to steal properties forcefully such as items of food to strengthen their movement. Other requirements included keeping away from European mission schools as opposed to African-instituted schools or even church services for that matter. In some extreme cases, they were required to denounce the Christian faith.⁴ Again, the manner in which it was administered, particularly its rituals, made it seem demonic to most Christians. Worst of all was the demand of the oath administrator to questions such as “Are you a true Kikuyu and so one of us, or are you a European in a black skin?” Those who replied that they are first and foremost Christians were sometimes martyred,⁵ often with great cruelty – because their faith meant more to them than life.⁶

With the rejection of oath administration being the key reason for conflict and tension between the church and the Mau-Mau rebels, a joint decision was made by both Protestants of the mainline churches and the Roman Catholics in the present day Kiambu County, to reject the movement publicly.⁷ Although the meeting was held in Kiambu, other churches within the larger Mount Kenya region were enjoined to make these resolutions. In this Kiambu ecumenical meeting of 1953, it was resolved that the churches were to reject Mau-Mau activities and the resultant Marxists ideologies of class struggle. In addition, the Mau-Mau practices were dismissed as anti-christ and against the government which is “ordained by God” to maintain law and order (cf. Rom 13). The ecumenical meeting also agreed to expel all those who had joined “the bandits.” Interestingly, such people and their

⁴ Richard Frost 1978. *Race against Time: Human Relations and Politics in Kenya before Independence* (London: Transafrica Press), 149.

⁵ A Christian martyr is a Christian who voluntarily suffers death as the penalty for witnessing and refusing to renounce his faith, or a tenet, principle or practice belonging to it.

⁶ Richard Frost 1978. *Race against Time: Human Relations and Politics in Kenya before Independence* (London: Transafrica Press), 15-33.

⁷ Wanyabari O Maloba 1994. *Mau-Mau and Kenya: An Analysis of a Peasant Revolt* (Nairobi: East African Educational Publishers), 71-72.

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families were to be kicked out of the church as a measure of ensuring that they do not infect others with their “discredited ideologies”. Curiously, the church also declared that it was also ready to fight (physically) against the Mau-Mau rebels if the colonial government failed to act against them swiftly.⁸ Certainly, this “refusal” by the church to support the Mau-Mau activities was clearly masterminded by the European missionaries. John Karanja built on this observation when he perceptively noted that the European missionaries did not want their adherents to become involved in political activism of any kind.⁹ Furthermore, missionaries did not approve of their adherents’ participation in revolutionary and/or political movements because these adherents then challenged their claims as spokespersons of the Africans. This is evidenced by factors such as the fact that a Scottish missionary, Dr JW Arthur, was appointed in 1930, as the African representative in the legislative council (parliament).¹⁰ Again, the Mau-Mau movement was critical for missionary enterprises, hence, the European missionaries had to oppose it at all costs. Surely, it threatened their missiological agenda in the Kenyan colony, of which Kirinyaga is a part.

A leading African-Anglican clergy, Obadiah Kariuki, who in 1955 became the first African Assistant Anglican Bishop together with Festo Olang, was confirmed the Bishop of Mount Kenya Anglican Diocese in 1960 and attended the missionary conference of 1953 in Kiambu Town, appeared to contradict the resolutions of the meeting in his later publications. Kariuki thus noted:

... we asked God to protect not only believers, but all people, so that peace could return to our country. As a result of our uncompromising and well-known stand, we were harassed neither by Mau-Mau nor by administration. Both sides came to realize that we were not hypocrites but were in fact true worshippers of Christ. Had we listened to that European official, we could not have survived long. I can now tender my thanks to God for his guidance during this period. I managed to steer those under me through threats from both sides. On the Mau-Mau side they came to realize that we were not passing on messages about them and their movements to government, not that we had any reports of any value concerning their operations ...¹¹

⁸ Wanyabari O Maloba 1994. *Mau-Mau and Kenya*: 71-72.

⁹ JK Karanja 1999. *Founding an African Faith. Kikuyu Anglican Christianity: 1900-1945* (Nairobi: Uzima Press), 179.

¹⁰ Gideon Were and Derek Wilson 1969. *East Africa through a Thousand Years* (Nairobi: Evans Brothers Ltd), 232.

¹¹ Obadiah Kariuki 1985. *A Bishop Facing Mount Kenya* (Nairobi: Uzima Press), 64-65.

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Bishop Kariuki further explains his viewpoint of the Mau-Mau movement:

In those days, wherever I happened to be, especially at Sunday service, I urged my people to pray for those who had gone to the forests around us to fight, because they were our own flesh and blood and they were undergoing untold suffering. We prayed that the bombs being dropped on them might miss their targets, and that the children might come home alive from the forests. This needed real courage on my part, for there were in my congregation informers and suspicious elements always ready to report to the administration what I had said. Such information provided in this way by informers was often quite untrue.¹²

This contradiction shows that the meeting was largely masterminded by the European missionaries. The fact that the European missionaries masterminded the Kiambu meeting of 1953, which condemned Mau-Mau activities, does not mean that the African Christians in the East African revival movement were comfortable with the revolutionary rebels. In fact, some chose to die as martyrs rather than take the Mau-Mau oath, a pointer that not all Africans were happy with the Mau-Mau activism and methodology of waging “lightening village attacks” and then retreating to the forest. Indeed, an interim report on the African Anglican Church in the Northern Highlands, January 1953, named *Judgment must begin* which was written at Weithaga in the present day Murang’a County, on 10 January 1953, shows the pietistic point of view of the Christian revivalists. According to the article, collected in the *Kenya National Archive*, the Christian community had been judged and purified by the fires of the Mau-Mau movement and the strength it had demonstrated was the backbone of the existence of the Christian faith in the country as well as the basis for its future. It says thus:

Whatever may have been the case in the past, [East African] revival is not now a group or a faction in the church, it is the expression of spiritual life and fellowship of all who remain. It is the effective church. The church has been judged and purged; its members have been decimated, but the faithful remnant, tested and purified in the fire, is a body whose triumphant witness is an inspiration to all Christians and confusion to their enemies. There is here something on which to build;

¹² Obadiah Kariuki 1985. *A Bishop Facing Mount Kenya*, 64.

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something on which God is in fact building now; and in this lies hope for the future.¹³

Furthermore, Rev. Peter G Bostock the then Anglican Archdeacon of Central Kenya in his papers dated 31 July 1954 says thus:

The resistance of keen Kikuyu Christians to Mau-Mau is well known. Many have died for their faith, either because they stubbornly refused to take the oath or to be intimidated, or else because they brought forward information. Many others have suffered ostracism and ridicule; have been attacked and beaten, lost their homes or their crops. Practically all these have been members of the [East African] Revival Movement. That is the key to their courageous faith.¹⁴

Bishop Kariuki later concurred with him when he noted thus:

I am deeply convinced that Christians, especially those who faced death rather than take the oath, contributed to the return of peace to this country: their blood nourished the tree of freedom as much as any other. Many Christians were detained and died in detention camps. Today, we are a free people in the eyes of God because we were not afraid to shed our own blood to bring about change.¹⁵

Undoubtedly, the East African revival movement played a critical role during the emergency period (1952-1960). Their great impact on the martyrdom cannot be gainsaid; for they greatly strengthened the Christian faith during the dark period of Kenya's history.

Mau-Mau command in the then Embu District

The old Embu District is the present day Embu and Kirinyaga Counties. In turn, Embu district was divided into two parts in 1963, ushering in the Embu and Kirinyaga Districts. In 2010, the two districts became counties after the promulgation of the new liberal Kenyan constitution on 27 August 2010. Therefore, Embu and Kirinyaga are part of the 47 counties that constitute Kenya. According to Samuel Gakuo Maceru (1927-), the old Embu District had consisted of four administrative divisions before 1963. That is, Mbeere,

¹³ Mau-Mau Memoranda and the Church (1952-1964) - MSS/129/9, Kenya National Archives, Nairobi.

¹⁴ Papers of Rev. Canon Peter Bostock - CCK/R/1/76, Kenya National Archives

¹⁵ Obadiah Kariuki 1985. *A Bishop Facing Mount Kenya*. 78-79.

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Embu, Gicugu and Ndia each under a District Officer (DO); while the entire district was under a District Commissioner (DC) (Maceru 02/02/2014). Mwea of the present day Kirinyaga County was made a division in 1963 as Kirinyaga was being hived off from Embu District in 1963. Previously, there was Gicugu-Mwea and Ndia-Mwea; and as the oath administration and the recruitment of Mau-Mau fighters was taking place, the organisers used the same colonial divisions to appoint leaders of these respective divisions. In view of this, there were Mau-Mau oath administrators for the divisions of Gicugu-Mwea, Ndia-Mwea and Embu. As platoons increased, the Mau-Mau coordinating teams began right from the sub-location, which was the lowest administrative unit in the colonial set-up, to the district level. At the sub-location level, the government appointed a sub-chief, also called headman, as the chief administrator. Previously, the Mau-Mau leadership had been seen mainly at national level, although later it had organised platoons at district level. It went on to set platoons at divisional level and finally to location level (Maceru 02/02/2014).

According to one of the surviving Mau-Mau generals, General Matene (whose real name was Nyamu wa Muriakori), the Embu district had the Haraka (swift) platoon; their neighbouring Nyeri District (now a county) had the Hekaheka platoon (*Mbutu* or *Mbatuni*). Characteristically, a Mau-Mau platoon had 500 soldiers, and in some cases where a platoon had 2 000 soldiers, a general was assisted by a colonel and a brigadier (Matene 01.02.14).

By mid-1952, General Ndaya of the Kabonge area of the Ndia division was the overall leader of the Embu's Haraka [swift] platoon. Upon his killing in mid-1953, Odero from Kariti-Sagana was promoted to general by the Mau-Mau War Council. General Odero became the leader of Embu's Haraka platoon until he was shot dead by the government forces at the end of 1953. After Odero's killing, Chui wa Mararo and Kassam Njogu (who was brought from Nairobi by the War Council unlike Chui who came earlier in 1952) were promoted to general. In particular, General Chui wa Mararo took over from General Odero as the leader of Embu platoon. As the Mau-Mau movement grew, Embu's Haraka platoon was subdivided into more platoons. In particular, the Kimuri [flame] platoon (comprising Ndia and Gicugu divisional fighters was created) while the Embu division within the rest of the Embu District retained the title of Haraka platoon. In the new arrangements, General Kassam became the leader of the Gicugu platoon while General Agha Khan (named after Nairobi's Agha Khan Hospital where he had come from) became the leader of the Ndia platoon. General Chui wa Mararo continued to steward the entire Ndia forces as overall commander until he was killed in April 1956. General Agha Khan was shot dead in 1955 by the surrendering Mau-Mau fighters who were now working for the colonial government and removed from his forest camp on a stretcher. It was in 1955

when General Kassam (before he was shot in the left leg, which was subsequently amputated), General Agha Khan and General Mbatia of the Nyeri's Hekaheka platoon "ordained" Matene, of Gitumbi village of Inoi location in Ndia Division, to a General. This came after a Seer had warned them that should they not make Matene a general, they would all perish (Colonel Werehire 01/02/2014).

Some causes of Mau-Mau war

It was partly as a result of the issues that dominated African politics from 1903 to 1952. It is important to note that the forced carrying of the *Kipande* – identity card and passbook – that were introduced after the First World War (1914-1918) without which no African could leave his or her home to seek employment, caused a lot of pain and general tension in the country. Habitually, European settlers would punish "errant" African workers by tearing up the *Kipande*, thereby making it impossible for them to get further employment.¹⁶ In addition, the European settlers punished their labourers with the *kiboko*, that is a whip made of rhinoceros hide. They would flog their African workers from time to time and justify their cruel actions with trivial excuses. As David Anderson avers, "by the early 1920s, the deaths of several African servants from beatings at the hands of their European masters earned Kenya's white settlers an unenviable reputation for brutality".¹⁷

Other issues that dominated African politics from 1903 to 1952 were a concern for land alienation and displacements that made people squatters in their own country, the insensitivity of the European settlers who abused, sacked, beat, insulted and generally harassed their workers with impunity, the low level of African wages, and the view that Europeans were mortal beings just as the Africans, the heavy taxation by European Settler-farmers and the politics of the returnees of the First World War (1914-1918) who saw their being forced to fight in the war as unnecessary and viewed the war as of no benefit to the two fighting "clans" – the Germans and the British. In particular, one, Elijah Kimani Kiongo (1875-1985), was one of the enlisted fighters who travelled to fight Germans in Entebbe-Uganda, Bukoba-Tanzania, Mwanza-Tanzania, Mogadishu-Somalia, Tabora-Tanzania, Pemba Island, Ceylon, Burma, India and other places during the First World War.¹⁸ Like other returnees, he could not understand why the two European clans fought over "trivial issues" and returned with lots of pride for African heritage and its methodology in conflict resolution. Such bold observations inspired the Africans who listened to the narratives of the returnees to start blaming the Europeans for some of their actions in the then Kenyan colony.

¹⁶ David Anderson, *Histories of the Hanged*: 9.

¹⁷ David Anderson, *Histories of the Hanged*: 78.

¹⁸ Julius Gathogo. *Mutira Mission* (Limuru: Zapf Chancery, 2011), 150.

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According to Herbert Peacock, by the time WW1 had ended, it had wrought the greatest destruction the world had ever experienced.¹⁹ It is estimated that approximately 13 million people had perished. For every minute of fighting, four soldiers had been killed and nine wounded. In total, the war left about 10 million widows and orphans and one million dependants without any means of survival.²⁰ In view of this, the returnees such as Kiongo were quick to narrate to those who had remained about the weaknesses of the European architects of the senseless war; and eventually prepared the African populace for a major conflict. Consequently, Africans began to question the policies of the colonial government, principally those that did not favour the black masses.

Another case study is that of Njeru wa Kanyenje, who was forced to fight the Germans in the First World War and eventually returned convinced that it had no relevance to Africa. In particular, the British had told him that the Germans were cannibals, who, if not defeated, would invade Kenya and capture Africans for meat. This propaganda was meant to encourage Africans to see World War I (WW1) as being to their own benefit.²¹ Upon his arrival at the warfront, he discovered that the description of Germans as cannibals was a British propaganda tool meant to garner the support of Africans for what was essentially a European war. In addition, he and his peers found that the Germans were fellow tribesmen with the British, only that they perhaps belonged to a different clan. In view of this, wa Kanyenje concluded that the British administrators must have been liars. Therefore, he felt that the British and the Germans ought to have resolved their tribal disputes at home, in Europe, and should not have involved Africans in the first place.²² He also contended that the European powers could have avoided such an unnecessary war had they paid attention to the African heritage, where “a person is a person because of other persons”; hence, fighting does not pay dividends. That is, they would have sat together and sought consensus on their problems and thereby reconcile, a phenomenon that is well emphasised in the *Ubuntu* (humane) philosophy.²³

Certainly, such observation finds agreement with John Mbiti’s understanding of authentic human nature:

By nature, Africans are neither Angels nor demons; they possess and exercise the potentialities of both angels and demons. They can be kind as the Germans, but they can be murderous as the

¹⁹ Herbert Leonard Peacock, *History of Modern Europe, 1789-1976*. Heinemann Education (November 1977), 291-292.

²⁰ *Ibid*

²¹ Written interview with Jesse Mugambi November 2004.

²² Written interview with Jesse Mugambi, November 2004.

²³ Jesse Mugambi, *From liberation to reconstruction* (Nairobi: EAEP, 1995), 132.

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Germans; Africans can be as generous as Americans, but they can be as greedy as the Americans; they can be as friendly as the Russians, but they can be as cruel as the Russians; they can be as honest as English, but they can be equally hypocritical. In their human nature Africans are Germans, Swiss, Chinese, Indians or English – they are men *[sic]*.²⁴

Out of the 150 000 people who were recruited in Kenya to fight in WW1, nearly 24 000 lost their lives, a situation that made the returnees wonder: what did our colleagues die for?²⁵ Interestingly, the returnees of the Second World War (1939-1945) also saw the European wars as mere “inter-clan” disputes that could have been solved in a better way. To them, it was irresponsible to include Africans in a domestic dispute solely meant for “others”.²⁶ By such views, Africans began to demystify the superiority of European science and education – and could now express their dissatisfactions openly. In both cases, the returnees of WW1 and WW2 reportedly came back with great pride for Africa, its religious heritage and identity. Coincidentally, they were all willing to preach about the goodness of African religion vis-à-vis other religions that had subjected them to participate in the “Europeans’ clan-rivalries” yet they had nothing to do with it.²⁷

In the view of the author, the immediate cause of the Mau-Mau war (1947-1960) was the colour bar – as the Kenyan apartheid was called. Zablon Nthamburi explains the segregated environment that obtained during the colonial era:

I remember growing up as a small child in one of the small towns in Kenya. There was a “whites only” restaurant in town with the inscription “Africans and dogs are not welcome”. From the very beginning, you were made to understand that you are not fully human. You were classified with the dogs, and that is the treatment you got.²⁸

For Nthamburi’s and his contemporaries, colonialism became a stigma that African people could not forget. This colour bar was experienced in all the

²⁴ John Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (Nairobi: EAEP, 1969), 210.

²⁵ JK Karanja 1999. *Founding an African Faith*: 88-89.

²⁶ In my interviews with Mrs Eunice Marigu Nyaga on 5 July 2005, it came out clearly that Timothy Kanyua Mugambi, the father of renowned scholar in religion and philosophy, Prof. Jesse Mugambi was one of the returnees of WW2 who affirmed the equality of humanity through the war. In particular, any human being can be shot dead and can make poor decisions as in the case of this particular war - among other ‘discoveries’. Timothy Mugambi thus left for Ceylon (Sri Lanka) and Burma, India in 1941.

²⁷ Written interview with Jesse Mugambi November 2004.

²⁸ Zablon Nthamburi, *The Church at Crossroads* (Nairobi: Uzima, 1991), 5.

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vicissitudes of life – a trajectory that demeaned Africans by relegating them permanently to the periphery, a position they were not willing to accept.

The “distorted” missionary-oriented education

In their final year in primary school Africans used to sit for the Kenya African Primary Education (KAPE) examination. Undoubtedly, this was the lowest standard of examination (education for that matter) offered in the Kenyan colony. In the order of quality, there were three classifications, namely European Education, Asian Education and African Education, hence KAPE. In this scenario, Asian Education was seen to be superior to African Education just as the European Education was seen as superior to the Asian Education.²⁹ In the job market the same scenario was upheld. In the Anglican Church leadership, positions were also largely reserved for the European missionaries. In cases where Africans as leaders were placed in the lower ranks on the ecclesiastical ladder, they were “trained” to, despise their own African indigenous activities as lacking in substance; hence, they were collectively seen as representing the mind of the “coloniser.” In such environments, where tension and conflict clouded the day, Kenya was a volcano, which was ready to erupt.

Before the advent of African-instituted schools in 1940s, education was offered solely by the European missionaries and, particularly, the Church Missionary Society [CMS]. The Roman Catholics also offered western education in their schools but, unlike the Anglicans who had schools in almost every village, their churches were fewer and scattered across the present day Kirinyaga County and in the former Embu District (which currently constitutes both the Embu and Kirinyaga counties). Largely, mission education was seen as distorted because the education system was tailor-made, meant to help the learner to merely know how to read the Bible. Basically, it was meant to help the learner-built ground for abandoning the African religion for the new Christian religion. In some cases, it could also help one to acquire a job as a clerk in the emerging industries and European shops and farms. In general, the mode and content of teaching were highly distorted as it encouraged one to despise his or her own culture. This compares well with the Bantu or Native Education (Act No. 47 of 1953)³⁰

²⁹ Julius Gathogo, *Mutira mission*, 74-75.

³⁰ Its main aim was to prevent Africans from receiving an education that would lead them to aspire to positions they would not be allowed to hold in society. Instead, Africans were to receive an education designed to provide them with skills to serve their own people in the Bantustan ‘homelands’ or to work in manual labor jobs under white control. This legislation was condemned and rejected as inferior from the time of its introduction. This cornerstone of apartheid ideology-in-practice wreaked havoc on the education of black people in South Africa, and deprived and disadvantaged millions for decades. Its devastating personal, political and economic effects continue to be felt and wrestled with today (Wikipedia).

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during the apartheid regime in South Africa (1910-1994), when black schoolchildren were taught that South Africa began to have people in 1652 after Jan Van Riebeck³¹ from Holland visited the Cape of Good Hope (now Cape Town city). In view of this, Jesse Mugambi says, thus:

I come from the Southern slopes of Mount Kenya, and during the colonial period we were taught that Dr. Krapf [the first CMS missionary] “discovered” Mount Kenya in 1844. Indeed, he might have been the first European to see the snow-capped peak of this great mountain on the equator. He was a German missionary sponsored by the English Church Missionary Society. However, he certainly was not the first *human being* to see that mountain – millions of Africans had seen the mountain before him, and almost took it for granted in the same way that human beings everywhere tend to take their immediate environment for granted. He therefore did not discover it.³²

Church and government seen as siblings

Another cause of tension between the church and the Mau-Mau warriors is the fact that both the colonial government and the CMS were seen to be working in cohorts in all social discourses. In his article *The quest for religious freedom in Kenya (1887-1963)*, Julius Gathogo cites the case of CMS Mutira Mission where the assistant chief, Ndegwa wa Kimere, supported the missionary work in order to protect his job.³³ This came after he witnessed the sacking of his immediate predecessor, Munge wa Ndaruru, through the influence of the local Anglican priest, the Rev. Brandon Laight, the pioneer European missionary in the locality. Laight served in the Mutira mission from 1912 to 1919. He was the one who recommended Ndegwa wa Kimere to the local DC. Such gestures ironically poisoned the African populace who saw both (missionary and the coloniser) as two sides of the same coin. Similarly, Mugambi’s experiences with the missionary enterprise reveals similar patterns. He observes:

During that period, 1952 until 1962, the missionary agencies fully supported the colonial regime. In school and at the church they (as citizens of the empire) taught us to be docile subjects of Her Majesty the Queen. Yet they expected us to respect them. Rather than winning respect, they instilled fear in us.

³¹ See Alex Guma, 1981, 1986. *In the Fog of the Season's End* (London: Heinemann).

³² Jesse Mugambi, *From liberation to reconstruction*, 108.

³³ Julius Gathogo, *The Quest for Religious Freedom in Kenya (1887-1963)*, *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae*, XXXIV (1), (July 2008), 67-92.

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While accepting the Gospel, we rejected its ideological misappropriation by the missionary establishments. Thus, long before I began to study theology I knew and understood the difference between oppression and liberation.³⁴

Some Africans rejected Christianity, as propagated by Church Mission Society (CMS) after they identified the missionary enterprise with the colonial invasion. Consequently, they did not find any evidence to suggest that the objectives of the CMS were any different from those of the colonial administration.³⁵ Zablon Nthamburi captures this thought well when he states:

It may be remarked that missionary activity [referring to Anglican Christianity], which went concurrently with the expansion of European hegemony in Africa, supplemented the colonial policy. The Gikúyú have a saying, "*Gutiri Muthungu na Mubia*," meaning that there was no marked difference between a colonial administrator and a missionary. The missionaries felt more secure within the administration of their own colonial powers. In fact, they were happy to create an African middle class, which would fit the world of European. From such a middle class would be found a people who were suitable for a ministry. Such people would emulate the European missionary in every way by even adopting European way of life.³⁶

The fact that the Christian religion was introduced by the Europeans made the church of 1940s, 1950s and 1960s to be seen as a tool of colonial administration by the Mau-Mau revolutionary rebels. Indeed, as Kingsley Martin contends, the Mau-Mau war, to an extent, became a civil war mainly fought between those who were determined to maintain the ancient religion of Mount Kenya (*Karing'a* or culture-oriented Kikuyu) and the few who had embraced Christianity (*Kirore* or fingerprint Kikuyu) and were seen to be Western minded.³⁷

³⁴ E-mail interview 12/10/2004.

³⁵ For details, see Julius Gathogo, *Liberation and Reconstruction in the Works of J.N.K Mugambi* (Pietermaritzburg: Unpublished PhD Thesis, 2007), 23.

³⁶ Zablon Nthamburi, *The Church at Crossroads* (Nairobi: Uzima, 1991), 39.

³⁷ Kingsley Martin cited in Richard Frost 1978. *Race against Time: Human Relations and Politics in Kenya before Independence* (London: Transafrica Press), 141.

Reaction and counter-reaction

Imitating the missionaries' Holy Eucharist?

To some Christians and the European missionaries in the 1950s and 1960s, the Mau-Mau oath was a resurrected rite from the ancient past. It was a powerful oath and was the antichrist. The power the oath had over the mind of the oath-taker was amazing. The political leader, Jomo Kenyatta, did not approve of the extreme aspects of the Mau-Mau uprising although he later became the nation's first president and forbade the restoration of any Mau-Mau activity. Characteristically, the Mau-Mau fighters followed the Maoist textbook with regard to revolution.³⁸ They tried to force all Kikuyu people to take the oath and they killed dozens of their own ethnic members who refused to take the oath. This included mainly the Christians who refused to take the oath for religious reasons. How can we take another oath, yet Jesus did it for both Jews and Gentiles? Is the taking of an oath not a poor imitation of taking part in the Holy Eucharist, hence, blasphemy? Some of the Christians who were later martyred would wonder. As will be demonstrated, Reuben Kinyua Kaara (1912-1953) became one of the most celebrated Christian martyrs in the Mutira mission of Kirinyaga after his brutal murder by the Mau-Mau revolutionary rebels in 1953. As Gathogo noted, his rejection of the oath, conducted in 1940s and 1950s, was on the basis that "Africans need independence and not the oath" and that "the way to independence was not necessarily violence".³⁹ Again, as a Christian, he did not see the need for another oath as Jesus' crucifixion, death and resurrection were "enough universal oaths". How can you "swear to shed blood, even if it is for a just cause, when Jesus did it for all humanity?" he would wonder, as he spoke to his close confidants. Reuben's approach to the ongoing contestation was in working harmony with that of Chief Stephen Ngigi Machere who belonged to the group that held the view that rather than fight (Mau-Mau versus government), "let's dialogue". In their meetings, Dauti Kamwana, Chief Waruhiu of the present day Kiambu County and Jomo Kenyatta, among others, would attend.⁴⁰

In the battle of the Embu Catholic church of 1954, instructions were clearly given from the Mau-Mau War Council headquarters in Nairobi that "as you look for guns, don't, for heaven's sake, attack the European missionary priests unless they prepare for a combat" (Matene 01/02/2014). Having taken the oath that they would always obey their leaders, they had to stick to their vows, hence, no attacks against the Embu Catholic priest and/or

³⁸ For details, see Raymond Lotta (Ed) 1994. *Maoist Economics and the Revolutionary Road to Communism: The Shanghai Textbook* (Shanghai: Banner Press).

³⁹ Julius Gathogo, *Mutira mission*, 166.

⁴⁰ Julius Gathogo, *Mutira mission*, 166.

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his assistants were reported. In this battle, they burned the church but made sure that no one was killed or hurt. According to General Matene who participated in this battle, they only got one gun from the Catholic Father. Of critical importance is to appreciate that, unlike in the case of the Anglican Church, the rebels were not too hostile to the Catholic Church as it was seen to harbour few (if any) loyalists. According to Ngari wa Kiige (01/02/2014) and Isabella Wanjiku Githaiga (21/11/2011) who both defected from the Anglican church to the Catholic church for this reason, the Catholic church had its schools and churches running almost normally during the emergency period (1952-60). The Catholic institutions thus offered a relief to the locals despite being fewer then and were open to people of all shades, especially in Kerugoya Town (Wanjiku 21/11/2011). However, the Mau-Mau rebels would attack African collaborators and the White settler-farmers whenever a chance availed itself; nevertheless they did not attack the European missionaries. The reason for this was probably that they wanted to ensure that the world press did not write against Mau-Mau rebels or sympathise with the colonial government in case an “innocent” man of the cloth was killed. In such a scenario, they feared the intervention of other western nations who would be called upon to help the British “deal” with the “Emergency” – as in the case of Adolf Hitler - when various nations teamed up against Germany during the Second World War (1939-1945).

The detaining and sacking of chiefs

As the tension and conflict brought about by the Mau-Mau insurgencies reached its zenith, a phenomenon where they forced teachers, church elders and local government administrators to take the oath, the government dismissed most of the chiefs and sub-chiefs (also called headmen). In this, the Ndia Division bore the blunter. In his confidential “Handover Report of (2 July) 1956 for Ndia” to the incoming DO [E. D. Gordon], the outgoing DO, Major Wainwright, said:

Mau-Mau broke out into active opposition to [the] Government in Ndia considerably later than in other Kikuyu districts – it must be appreciated that the Wandia are Kikuyu entirely and closely related to the Kikuyu of Mathira. Hence, when open violence broke out, it was more brutal and vicious than in Gichugu and Embu Divisions. When I took the Division in August 1954 the “war” was at its height and the Mau-Mau had virtually gained control of the whole population with the exception of a very small nucleus of loyal Tribal Police and Embu Guard. There were large armed Mau-Mau gangs all over the Division, varying in strength from 90 under “General”

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Ndaya to 20 under minor “Brigadiers” ... 75% of the Headmen were detained for their support of Mau-Mau ... It is still very difficult to find Headmen in Kiine when others fall by the wayside, and there are still several in Mutira who are not fit for their jobs, partly due to Chief Stephen [Ngigi Macere’s] partiality for having weak men under him who will bow to his will in everything.⁴¹

In particular, Chief Justin King’uru Karoki was sacked in late 1952 and Stephen Ngigi Macere, the then headmaster of Mutira Primary School, replaced him because Karoki was seen as being friendly to the Mau-Mau course. His assistants, the sub-chiefs Joel Kibucwa and Kibuci wa Gutu, among others, faced the same fate.⁴² However, Samuel Maceru (02/02/2014) pointed out that sub-chief Kibuci wa Gutu, in particular, had taken the Mau-Mau oath even though he was working with the government. There were also Anglican lay preachers who had been forced to take the oath or who voluntarily did so owing to the dangers of not complying with the societal dictates of the time. According to Maceru (02/02/2014), Stephano Kabange and Timotheo Kabui from Kiratina-Kamuiru area were some of them.

Nevertheless, by sacking and detaining chiefs, the government was demonstrating its state of desperation particularly with regard to addressing the insurgencies; hence, it was revealed as the biblically divided house that must necessarily crumble in order to make room for a stable house. It could also be the case of Abraham Lincoln’s scenario where he asserted that “a house divided against itself cannot stand”, which he echoed from Jesus Christ in Matthew 12:22-28. Was the colonial administration on the verge of collapse? Certainly, as Lincoln noted in his well-quoted campaign speeches made during the struggle to emancipate African-Americans in the 1860s, no government can endure permanently in a situation where half of its citizens are slaves while the other half are free. Hence, the case of sacking and detaining some of its most faithful workers for allegedly failing to stop the Mau-Mau peasant revolution is the most irresponsible thing the government did. Clearly, the panacea for the government was to address the concerns of the Mau-Mau movement from the onset.

⁴¹ Major Wainwright “Handover Report of [2nd July] 1956 for Ndia,” the DO, Ndia - Materials gathered from the Kenya National Archives, Nairobi.

⁴² Justin King’uru’s sons: David Murage and Samuel Mwai(27:03:2014), however, contends that chiefs and sub-chiefs were retired in the public interest in 1952 after the Mau-Mau war reached its zenith as most of them were seen as elderly and “not able” to match with the changing times when young men were giving the government a run for its money. As such a new youthful team of chiefs and sub-chiefs was appointed in order to meet the challenge.

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The killing of a pastor's child

Steve van Nattan cites the case of a pastor from the African Inland Mission (now called African Inland Church) who was shepherding a local African church in Kijabe mission station, of the present day Kiambu County of Kenya, along with his wife.⁴³ One Sunday morning, the couple and their baby were ambushed in the forest by Mau-Mau rebels as they were heading to church. In a succession of events, two Mau-Mau soldiers grabbed their baby and held it by the head and feet, and another Mau-Mau chopped the baby in half while the parents watched. Did such tragedies dampen the spirit of the Christians during the time of war? In the case of the Kijabe priest, he and his wife were walking to church, and the pastor preached his sermon for the morning. The Christians were electrified by this man's zeal in Christ. The next Sunday the church was packed and there was only standing room and room out onto the hillside. Soon the church had to start meeting outdoors and use amplifiers because of the church's growth. Such scenarios characterised the order of the day in the present day Kirinyaga County and the rest of Mount Kenya region. In turn, the British soldiers would use a Bren machine gun which was mounted in a custom shoulder stock. Characteristically, a Bren gun is made to be fired while laying down. It has two bi-pod legs attached to the front of the machine gun which take 80% of the recoil. It was used by the British Army of 1930 to 1991. In the 1950s the Bren gun took a 7.62 by 51mm cartridge, which was greatly downsized later.⁴⁴

Burning of schools

At Kangai, Mwea, in the Southern part of Mutira mission centre, the first church was burnt down by Mau-Mau youths in 1954, thereby forcing the worshippers to retreat to their respective houses for worship, as in the case of the early church. Only in June 1964 the *Ascension of Our Lord Church*, Kangai, re-emerged and finally dedicated by the then Rural Dean, Rev Esborn Ngaruiya (later Assistant Bishop of Mt. Kenya South) in 1968.⁴⁵ Other churches and schools that were burnt down by the Mau-Mau as they protested their being insulted and/or mocked via the pulpit by church leaders included Kathuuri Primary School and the pioneer African-Anglican clergy's

⁴³ Steve Nattan, He shall give his angels: A Tale of God's protection during the Mau-Mau days in Kenya, *Blessed Quietness Journal*, Texas Hill, <http://www.blessedquietness.com/yam/balaam.htm> (accessed March 21, 2014).

⁴⁴ See Caroline Elkins 2005. *Britain's Gulag: The Brutal End of Empire in Kenya* (London: Jonathan Cape).

⁴⁵ Julius Gathogo 2012. Some Challenges in Founding an African Faith: Sampling Mutira Mission, Kenya, 1907-2012, *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae* Volume 38. No. 2. (December 2012), 81-99.

house (Rev. Johana Njumbi) in 1953. The Mutitu chief's camp, then under Stephen Ngigi Macere, was also attacked and guns stolen in 1953.

Other “Enemy” Churches of Mau-Mau?

Certainly, the above historical analysis may appear to give the impression that the CMS (read Anglican) is the only “enemy” church there was for Mau-Mau rebels. That indeed is not the correct position as the Catholics, the African Inland churches, the Methodist mission and the Scottish missions were equally viewed with suspicion. In an interview with the elderly Mau-Mau General Matene (01/02/2014), a list of the leading collaborators or enemies of the Mau-Mau struggle for freedom was displayed to me and my research assistants on 1 February 2014. Surprisingly, some of the characters whom the Mau-Mau veterans blacklisted included Rev. Canon Samuel Nguru of Kiambu Anglican Church, Rev. Canon Johana Njumbi of Kirinyaga Anglican church; the Rev. William Njoroge of the Presbyterian church, the Rev. Charles Muhoro of the Anglican church; the Rev. Wanyoike Kamawe of the Presbyterian church; Chief Josiah Njonjo of the Anglican church; Chief Magugu Waweru of the Presbyterian church; Chief Eliud Mugo of the Anglican church; Chief Richard Githae of Kirinyaga Anglican church; Mr JS. Gichoya of the Anglican church; Mr Perminus Kiritu of Nyeri Presbyterian church; and Philip wa Gathaiya of Inoi-Kirinyaga Anglican church then called CMS, among others. From, this sampling, it is clear that the Anglican was (and still is) the dominant church in the present day Kirinyaga County; hence, most of the church leaders who worked hard to suppress the Mau-Mau rebels were Anglican adherents – both lay and ordained. In Kirinyaga County, as is constituted today, the Anglican Church played the role of devil's advocate by working hard to demonise the Mau-Mau rebels. As a result, the membership of the Anglican Church during the emergency period declined considerably as people joined African Independent Pentecostal Church of Africa (AIPCA) and the Roman Catholic Church. The reason for this was that the AIPCA was favoured for its soft approach towards the African culture; and the Roman Catholic Church attracted defectors from the Anglican Church for its seemingly neutral stand. As William B. Anderson says, the Roman Catholic Church was there to spread the gospel, treat the injuries of anyone who got injured and educated children for all those who were willing to enrol in their schools.⁴⁶ In other words, the Catholics did not bar children from families that circumcise female children from attending school nor sons and daughters of Mau-Mau rebels or

⁴⁶ William B. Anderson 1977. *The Church in East Africa: 1840-1974* (Tanzania: Central Tanganyika Press).

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sympathisers. There was an open policy that resonated well with the people of the present day Kirinyaga County and the entire Mount Kenya region.

Conclusion

From the outset on, the article set out to unveil the cause of conflict between the church and Mau-Mau rebels and how it was addressed. Subsequently, it has demonstrated that the Anglican Church, unlike the Roman Catholic Church, which was scattered in the present day Kirinyaga County and had lesser following, had a heavier presence and influence at the time. It had more schools, dispensaries and church buildings. As the African church leaders preached in the Anglican churches, they would mock and insult the Mau-Mau activities, hence, the killing of targeted individuals, the burning of Anglican schools and individual houses, and the general tension that visited the area. Although the Roman Catholic Fathers were, at times, blamed for piercing Mau-Mau suspects on death row with sharp objects, all over their bodies, if they rejected final baptismal rites plus betraying those who confessed having taken the Mau-Mau oath to them, the Catholics, in general, were largely seen as neutral. Reportedly, their dispensaries and schools attended to everyone without social, gender, racial or denominational bias. Hence, some Anglicans defected to the Catholic Church. The article has also established that the starting point in recruiting the Mau-Mau members was the oath, which was sometimes administered forcefully. The nature of its administration was such that it more or less mocked the administration of the Holy Eucharist as was done in the Church, hence, some evangelical Christians chose to die rather than take the oath. The tension and conflict between the church, the Anglican church in particular, reached its zenith on 20 October 1952 when the national leaders such as Jomo Kenyatta, Kung'u wa Karumba, Fred Kubai, Paul Ngei, Ochieng' Oneko and Bildad Mwaganu Kagia were arrested; while at the same time the state of emergency was declared by the governor, Sir Evelyn Baring (1903–1973). The tension between the Mau-Mau and the church cascaded downwards on 10 January 1960 when the state of emergency was lifted by the colonial government though the national leaders remained in jail. Nevertheless, the ushering in of political independence in 1963 largely improved their relations as the Kenyatta regime (1963–78) stressed national unity.

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