

‘THE ROOTING OUT OF MAU MAU FROM THE MINDS OF THE KIKUYU IS A FORMIDABLE TASK’: PROPAGANDA AND THE MAU MAU WAR*

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Abstract

Despite the recent proliferation of scholarship on the Mau Mau rebellion, little attention has been paid to the ‘propaganda war’ it generated. The absence is especially striking given the importance that both the British and Mau Mau fighters attached to success in the battle for the ‘hearts and minds’ of Kenya’s African population. This article analyzes the production of colonial propaganda—and its reception by Africans—in the ‘Emergency’, revealing how its themes and strategies changed over the course of the 1950s. Despite vast resources pumped into this effort, both African and British testimonies reveal that this propaganda had only limited success until government forces gained the upper hand in the military war against Mau Mau in late 1954. After that point, the increased level of control in Central Province enabled officials to finally best the efforts of skilled Mau Mau propagandists.

Key Words

Kenya, colonial administration, media, press, rebellion, violence.

In one lavatory in Machakos [a district to the east of Nairobi]—a backward lavatory in a backward area—I found a pamphlet with quotations from the House of Commons explaining why the West African solution was not suitable for Kenya’s problems. This is like worrying the West Highlands [of Scotland] with the problem of the fiduciary issue.¹

Hugh Fraser—the parliamentary private secretary to Secretary of State for the Colonies Oliver Lyttelton—represented the views of many as he drew attention to a perceived ‘propaganda failure’ in the war against Mau Mau. It was late 1953: in London and Nairobi, British officials and members of the Kenya administration worried that the sort of propaganda implemented in the colony was both insufficient and inappropriate for its audience. They feared that losing the propaganda war might extend the duration of the

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1 National Archives of the United Kingdom, London (TNA) PREM 11/472, ‘Report of visit to Kenya 17th Sept. to 5th Oct. by the Hon. H. C. P. J. Fraser, MBE’, 6 Oct. 1953.

conflict, and on a wider level, damage the reputation of the British in Kenya, and tarnish the empire's image on the world stage.

This article explores and evaluates British efforts to implement propaganda in Kenya during Mau Mau.² At root, this effort was two-fold. First, and most importantly, officials sought to create a variety of materials to shape the 'hearts and minds' of the colony's African population. Second, they attempted to restrict African and Indian-produced materials, and thereby gain control over the narrative of the Mau Mau war. In the course of the 1950s, the themes of colonial propaganda changed on an almost yearly basis. Initially, information officers highlighted Mau Mau brutality, especially following the Lari Massacre of 26 March 1953. With the creation of the Department of Information in January 1954, the approach shifted to presenting the Kikuyu with alternatives to joining or supporting Mau Mau. By 1955, officials had changed tack once again: they sought to obliterate Mau Mau from public discourse in the colony and beyond by avoiding any mention of the movement, and instead drawing attention to the benefits of colonial development programs. Propaganda also varied in content depending on whether its targets were Kikuyu, Embu, or Kamba. But these painstakingly concocted, well-financed propaganda plans were only sporadically effective until Britain gained the upper hand in the military war against Mau Mau in late 1954. Once the colonial government achieved greater control in Central Province, information officers could finally best the highly skilled Mau Mau propagandists they faced.

Mau Mau represented the apex of an 'information war' that had been fought between African intellectuals and newspaper editors, and colonial information staff since 1945. Officials' experiences during this 'golden age' of the African press shaped their activities and policies during the Emergency that followed. In addition—though the evidence is somewhat sparse—a number of soon-to-be Mau Mau propagandists honed their techniques during this period. This article is therefore indebted to scholars' research on the period between 1945 and 1952, which provides important context for what followed. Fay Gadsden (writing under her maiden name, Carter) first outlined the links between the colonial government and press in Kenya during the colonial era, as well as the activities of the African press in the seven years preceding the Emergency.³ More recently, Cristiana Pugliese has carried out detailed research on Kikuyu-language pamphlets and songs before 1952, and Bodil Folke Frederiksen has analyzed the content of a variety of African and Indian newspapers during the same period.⁴ Wangari Muoria-Sal, Frederiksen, John

2 The term 'propaganda' is understood narrowly, and includes more 'standard' forms of publication such as print media, broadcasting, and film. Techniques like psychological warfare are beyond the scope of this analysis.

3 F. Carter, 'The Kenya government and the press, 1906–60', in B. Ogot (ed.), *Hadith 2: Proceedings of the 1968 Conference of the Historical Association of Kenya* (Nairobi, 1970), 243–59; F. Gadsden, 'The African press in Kenya, 1945–1952', *The Journal of African History*, 21:4 (1980), 515–35. The phrase 'golden age' used earlier in the paragraph was coined by Gadsden in this article.

4 C. Pugliese, 'Complementary or contending nationhoods? Kikuyu pamphlets and songs, 1945–52', in E. S. Atieno Odhiambo and J. Lonsdale (eds.), *Mau Mau and Nationhood: Arms, Authority & Narration* (Oxford, 2003), 97–120; B. F. Frederiksen, 'Print, newspapers and audiences in colonial Kenya: African and Indian improvement, protest and connections', *Africa*, 81:1 (2011), 155–72; B. F. Frederiksen, "'The present battle is the brain battle': writing and publishing a Kikuyu newspaper in the pre-Mau Mau period

Lonsdale, and Derek Peterson have studied the life and writings of Henry Muoria, arguably the most significant African voice of the period.⁵

But scholars have remained reticent about pushing their work beyond 1952, with the notable exception of Peterson.⁶ The most significant difficulty in this regard is the dearth of Mau Mau publications. Due to the destruction of documents by the British in the late 1950s and early 1960s—as well as the length of time that has passed—the sorts of ‘tin-trunk’ materials that Karin Barber and her colleagues use to reconstruct Africa’s past in a recent edited volume are largely absent.⁷ It is necessary, therefore, to rely heavily upon African and British testimonies about the content and impact of Mau Mau propaganda.⁸ There is no question, however, that colonial officials believed that they faced skillful adversaries.

There exists, of course, a wide range of scholarship on Mau Mau during the 1950s. But by emphasizing the war’s violence, it has unintentionally obscured the importance of propaganda and information control as an aspect of British colonial policy.⁹ Only one book chapter—by Susan Carruthers—addresses propaganda in the colony, but it is limited to an analysis of the ‘official mind’ of high-ranking figures in London and Nairobi, and drawn entirely from archival documents in Britain.¹⁰ It reveals little, therefore, about the situation ‘on the ground’ in Kenya. This absence is especially notable given that scholarship exists on Kenya’s information systems during the Second World War, as well as on comparable situations in Britain’s other colonies under ‘Emergency’ governance like Malaya.¹¹ Moreover, because Mau Mau had no genuine communist connections, the voluminous research on propaganda, communism, and the Cold War in the 1950s has ignored Kenya, with the exception of one article by A. S. Cleary that demonstrates how Britain, the United States, and the Soviet Union each attempted to use Mau Mau to serve their political agendas.¹²

in Kenya’, in K. Barber (ed.), *Africa’s Hidden Histories: Everyday Literacy and Making the Self* (Bloomington, IN, 2006), 278–313.

- 5 W. Muoria-Sal, B. F. Frederiksen, J. Lonsdale, and D. Peterson, *Writing for Kenya: The Life and Works of Henry Muoria* (Boston, 2009).
- 6 D. Peterson, *Creative Writing: Translation, Bookkeeping, and the Work of Imagination in Colonial Kenya* (Portsmouth, NH, 2004), especially 198–214.
- 7 K. Barber, ‘Introduction: hidden innovators in Africa’, in Barber (ed.), *Africa’s Hidden Histories*, 5.
- 8 Luise White made the first extensive use of the ‘Mau Mau memoirs’ for reconstructing Kenya’s history. L. White, ‘Separating the men from the boys: constructions of gender, sexuality, and terrorism in central Kenya’, *International Journal of African Historical Studies*, 23:1 (1990), 1–25.
- 9 Consider, for instance, D. Anderson, *Histories of the Hanged: The Dirty War in Kenya and the End of Empire* (New York, 2005); and C. Elkins, *Imperial Reckoning: The Untold Story of Britain’s Gulag in Kenya* (New York, 2005).
- 10 S. L. Carruthers, *Winning Hearts and Minds: British Governments, the Media, and Colonial Counter-Insurgency, 1944–1960* (London, 1995), 72–127.
- 11 K. Morris, *British Techniques of Public Relations and Propaganda for Mobilizing East and Central Africa During World War II* (Lewiston, NY, 2000); K. Ramakrishna, *Emergency Propaganda: The Winning of Malayan Hearts and Minds, 1948–1958* (Richmond, UK, 2001); R. Stubbs, *Hearts and Minds in Guerrilla Warfare: The Malayan Emergency, 1948–60* (Oxford, 1989).
- 12 A. S. Cleary, ‘The myth of Mau Mau in its international context’, *African Affairs*, 89:355 (1990), 227–45. On communism and propaganda, see A. Defty, *Britain, America and Anti-Communist Propaganda, 1945–53* (London, 2004) or J. Vaughan, *The Failure of American and British Propaganda in the Arab Middle East, 1945–1957: Unconquerable Minds* (Basingstoke, UK, 2005). More broadly, scholars have addressed the

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Governor Baring's declaration of 'Emergency' on 20 October 1952 was spurred by the assassination of Senior Chief Waruhiu wa Kung'u of Kiambu two weeks earlier. Loyalists like Waruhiu had been frequent targets for increasingly radical newspaper editors in the colony since the late 1940s. Henry Muoria had carried out a 'smear campaign' directly against Waruhiu in the pages of *Mumenyereri* several years earlier, as well as against Tom Mbotela, the former vice president of the Kenya African Union (KAU) and staunch opponent of Mau Mau, who was killed on 26 September.¹³ From the government's perspective, the killing demonstrated an immediate need to rein in the African press, but perhaps more importantly, revealed the broader inadequacy of information services for the task of handling the increased burden brought by the Emergency. John Reiss – executive officer of the African Information Services (AIS) – only discovered that Waruhiu was dead from a casual conversation with someone who had telephoned him to cancel an appointment. Reiss was in the midst of preparing a colony-wide broadcast without this crucial news, something he believed would have seriously tarnished his organization's reputation.¹⁴

Even the declaration of the Emergency itself showcased the inefficiency of colonial information systems in late 1952. A mix-up about the declaration's timing meant that the government had to commence police operations on the night of 20 October sooner than desired. The initial plan – to begin at midnight – was altered at the last moment when Reuters broke the news of the Emergency at 7 pm.¹⁵ Any sort of organized propaganda dissemination required a greater degree of professionalization, as well as an expansion of existing facilities. Thus the government reluctantly reenergized its information systems – which had lain largely dormant since 1945 – by increasing the resources of the AIS, and then creating the Department of Information in January 1954. Information staff numbers rose from 46 in 1952 to a remarkable 331 by the end of 1954.¹⁶

A central part of improving information services was establishing clear guidelines for communication between the government and the press. The *East African Standard* (EAS) faithfully cooperated with the government throughout the Emergency. East Africa Command records demonstrate that the army considered its editor – Mr. Kinnear – 'completely trustworthy', and recommended providing him with extra information so that he might prevent his journalists from following hunches and potentially revealing critical information by mistake.¹⁷ The settler *Kenya Weekly News* and *Sunday Post* had similar allegiances, although the editor of the former – Mervyn Hill, who had worked at the Kenya

depiction of Mau Mau in print media in Britain and the United States respectively. See J. Lewis, '“Daddy wouldn't buy me a Mau Mau”: the British popular press and the demoralization of empire', in Atieno Odhiambo and Lonsdale (eds.), *Mau Mau and Nationhood*, 227–50; C. M. Shaw, *Colonial Inscriptions: Race, Sex, and Class in Kenya* (Minneapolis, MN, 1995), 149–78.

13 Gadsden, 'African press', 523.

14 Kenya National Archives, Nairobi (KNA) AHC/10/68, Reiss to Chief Native Commissioner, 15 Oct. 1952.

15 TNA CO 1027/31, Haler to Hall, 21 Oct. 1952.

16 TNA CO 1027/54, Department of Information Annual Report, 1954.

17 TNA WO 236/17, 'Short notes on local press', 8 June 1953.

Information Office during the Second World War—had been prosecuted for sedition in 1947.

Improving the government's ability to spread and control information also meant shutting down—or limiting—those avenues where critical commentary appeared. This was especially true of the Indian press. When Major General Hinde arrived in Kenya in 1953, he described the 'constant anti-British propaganda' it produced. The government forced the *East African Tribune* to shut down, and the *Colonial Times* escaped the same fate by learning from its sister paper and taking a more 'pro-Army' line. Hinde believed that it was imperative to encourage 'Asians' to 'regard themselves as citizens of Kenya, not of India/Pakistan', and remind them that the 'British are here to stay, and that they had better base their policies on this fact'.¹⁸ The approach represented a further tightening of legislation that had caused difficulties for Indian editors and printers since 1950, and even earlier in some cases.¹⁹

New 'Emergency Regulations' passed in late 1952 silenced the African press, which had been subject to increasing levels of censorship since the end of the Second World War.²⁰ This sweeping proscription removed the chief venue for African intellectuals to express their ideas. Since 1945, a wide range of African publications had showcased rich and diverse opinion on political and social matters. The most conservative were edited by men like Francis Khamisi, a journalist from Mombasa and editor of KAU's Swahili mouthpiece *Sauti ya Mwafrika*, who used the paper's first-ever front page to show a photograph of Governor Philip Mitchell with a suggestion that Kenyans 'work hard'.²¹ *Sauti* was proscribed in October 1952. Others like Jomo Kenyatta and Henry Muoria were less willing to tow the government line, but were still convinced that constitutional means and public debate would win the day for Kenya's Africans, who had to trust one another and behave honorably to succeed amidst the social instability of the 1940s. Certainly there were others—like Gakaara wa Wanjau and those poorer and more disenfranchised—who went so far as to advocate violence, and discuss the removal of Europeans from the colony. But by conflating men like Khamisi, Muoria, and Kenyatta with men like Gakaara—and censoring them in precisely the same way—the government unconsciously silenced voices that could have provided a counterpoint to Mau Mau's more radical approach. It demonstrated how little officials understood about the roots and organization of Mau Mau, which handicapped them as they tried to respond to its propaganda.

As the government hastily ramped up information services via the AIS in early 1953, information officers were firmly convinced that newspapers and other print publications

18 TNA WO 276/411, Hinde, 'Appreciation of the situation', 5 Mar. 1953.

19 In 1950, the government passed legislation that made a printer responsible for the content of any publication that rolled off his press. It included a stipulation that the government could confiscate printing equipment if it desired, and a number of Indian printers spent time in jail and received heavy fines. This also affected African newspaper editors, because they used Indian printers' facilities almost exclusively to produce their material. Links between African and Indian intellectuals had existed since 1922, and ever since, members of the two communities had frequently worked together. Frederiksen, 'Print, newspapers'.

20 Although African editors had proved adept at sidestepping restrictions before 1952. Many publishers and printers received prison sentences (and fines), but restarted their work as soon as they were released. Others quickly altered the titles of banned newspapers and kept them up and running under new monikers.

21 J. Spencer, *The Kenya African Union* (London, 1985), 128–32.

were the most effective vehicles for spreading information to the African population. First, they could be ‘mulled over at leisure and retained for future reference’, and second, the news contained in one copy of a newspaper would likely reach at least fifty other people, officials believed.²² The flagship AIS production was the Swahili-language *Baraza*, which was started in 1939 and published by the EAS. By circulation, *Baraza* had always far outstripped the African press: in 1950, its weekly total of 28,000 was more than all African newspapers combined, and – due to its association with the EAS – its final product was attractive and clear, and appeared regularly.²³ From the British perspective, publishing in Swahili was advantageous because it meant that more people might understand the news. But Swahili-language publications had always failed to gain traction in the colony, and especially in the largely Kikuyu Central Province. Few Africans spoke Swahili as a first language, and government publications in Swahili tended to lack passion and vibrancy. Newspapers or newsheets in Kikuyu – as well as the Mau Mau publications that followed – were replete with clever turns of phrase, proverbs, and deliberately ambiguous language with multiple meanings. Swahili publications like *Baraza* offered few of these features, which meant that Kikuyu readers – in particular – always felt a certain distance from them. And as Peterson argues, Kikuyu intellectuals viewed Swahili as a ‘political threat’: it minimized Kikuyu distinctiveness, and ‘would cause Kikuyu to meld in with other ... tribes, allowing white settlers to claim that they had only recently settled on the land’.²⁴

In early 1953, officials identified three distinct groups at which they would aim their propaganda: loyalists, ‘waverers’, and confirmed Mau Mau. For loyalists, information was meant to boost morale, promise them that Mau Mau leaders would never return to their communities, and give them confidence in the government’s support. For waverers – perhaps the major focus of information production – material was meant to ‘discredit’ Mau Mau; to inspire confidence that the government would defeat Mau Mau; to demonstrate that the only possible path forward for Kenya was following the government’s lead; and to convince people that loyalists were the ‘future leaders of the tribe’. For Mau Mau itself, the aims were simple: destroy ‘morale’ and show how ‘their people’ felt ‘revulsion’ for them. One guiding principle sat above all: ‘To show that British administration is in the best interests of the inhabitants’, and publicize the benefits of colonial governance.²⁵

Yet this tripartite approach was barely decided upon when the Lari Massacre took place in March 1953. It was a pivotal moment in the conflict: Lari set the tone for colonial propaganda efforts for the remainder of the year, and was one of the government’s most notable successes in this regard. On the night of 26 March, Mau Mau forces descended on the settlement of Lari during the evening, killing 120. Home Guards then killed perhaps 200 more in reprisal, though these deaths were quickly – and successfully – hushed up. The government assigned a mobile cinema van to show actual footage filmed in Lari

22 Colony and Protectorate of Kenya, *Department of Information Annual Report, 1955* (Nairobi, 1956), 8; TNA CO 533/515/9, Leakey(?), ‘Notes on the proposal to start a Kikuyu weekly newspaper’, Aug. 1939.

23 Gadsden, ‘African press’, 527–8.

24 D. Peterson, ‘Writing in revolution: independent schooling & Mau Mau in Nyeri’, in Atieno Odhiambo and Lonsdale (eds.), *Mau Mau and Nationhood*, 80.

25 TNA CO 1027/40, ‘Information to the Kikuyu, Embu and Meru in Central Province’, 24 Sept. 1953.

after the massacre in the reserves of Central Province.²⁶ The film (called *The Mark of the Mau Mau*) showed ‘burnt corpses, and shots of African children in hospital, ending with a close-up of a child’s burnt face’.²⁷ The film was apparently successful in hardening opposition to Mau Mau in some communities: one official recounted that after the film was shown in Rongai, a large number of Kikuyu came forward to confess that they had taken the Mau Mau oath.²⁸ Showing Africans killing other Africans was a vital part of the government’s effort to depict Mau Mau as a civil conflict, versus any kind of legitimate anticolonial movement brought about by failures of the colonial system (it was no ‘black v. white’ struggle, but a ‘civil war’, noted one official).²⁹

The tone of AIS propaganda instantly shifted to an all-out assault on Mau Mau designed to inspire disgust in the movement, with the three-pronged approach just outlined now quickly forgotten. The majority of propaganda appeared in one-page leaflets, short pamphlets, or booklets. Many included photographs and graphic descriptions of Mau Mau atrocities. One AIS booklet, for example, was simply entitled *Mau Mau*. The cover featured a bright red background, with a hand holding a machete next to a baby’s corpse, severed in two. Written in Swahili, it provided black-and-white photographs of dead women and children. ‘*Kazi ya Mau Mau*’, ran one caption: ‘The Work of Mau Mau’. Other photographs showed amputated feet, bodies with the heads partially severed, and disemboweled cattle. ‘*Hebu, angalia watato hawa wawili! Pengine wakikuwa wako!*’ ran another caption: ‘Here, look at these two children! They could be yours!’ These scenes of chaos stood in stark contrast to another photograph featuring a smiling African soldier in a neat uniform, receiving a rifle for his fight against Mau Mau.³⁰

Mau Mau leaders instantly knew the importance of Lari, and set about combatting colonial propaganda. Karigo Muchai was already engaged in recording evidence of brutalities in Kiambaa in early 1953, and headed directly to Lari when he heard news of the massacre. He viewed the poor treatment of prisoners at the hands of the security forces, and sent information to Nairobi to try to draw attention to these goings-on.³¹ But Karari Njama, Henry Wachanga, and other authors of Mau Mau memoirs conceded that the government had engineered a propaganda coup. Government propaganda about Lari was ‘very effective’, Njama admitted, though both he and Wachanga took pains to reveal the slaughter carried out by the government that day.³² But the Lari episode and the success of government propaganda seemed to shake many of the fighters. Immediately afterwards, a

26 TNA CO 1027/40, ‘Progress report: information drive to the Kikuyu, Meru and Embu’, Oct. 1953.

27 W. Webster, ‘Mumbo-jumbo, magic and modernity: Africa in British cinema, 1946–65’, in L. Grievson and C. MacCabe (eds.), *Film and the End of Empire* (London, 2011), 242.

28 TNA CO 1027/40, ‘Progress report: information drive to the Kikuyu, Meru and Embu’, Oct. 1953.

29 TNA CO 1027/41, ‘Record of a meeting of African information “working party” meeting [sic] held at Government House’, 14 Dec. 1953; Anderson, *Histories*, 177–80; D. Branch, *Defeating Mau Mau, Creating Kenya: Counterinsurgency, Civil War, and Decolonization* (Cambridge, 2009), 55–9; S. L. Carruthers, ‘Two faces of 1950s terrorism’, in J. D. Slocum (ed.), *Terrorism, Media, Liberation* (New Brunswick, NJ, 2005), 77–8.

30 TNA WO 236/17, AIS, *Mau Mau*, 1953.

31 D. Barnett and K. Muchai, *The Hardcore: The Story of Karigo Muchai* (Richmond, BC, 1973), 21–5.

32 D. Barnett and K. Njama, *Mau Mau from Within: Autobiography and Analysis of Kenya’s Peasant Revolt* (London, 1966), 137–8; H. K. Wachanga, *The Swords of Kirinyaga: The Fight for Land and Freedom* (Kampala, 1975), 60.

committee of high-ranking Mau Mau from both the Mount Kenya and Aberdares forests met to discuss whether ‘loyalist women and children should be killed’ in the struggle.³³ Even General Kimbo – a highly skilled operator when it came to instilling fear in the opposition – seemed to change his approach. The following year, he threatened an attack that would make Lari seem insignificant, but tempered his statement by admitting that killing babies or old people was a bad idea.³⁴

It is important, however, to recognize how this sort of propaganda could aid Mau Mau: materials that depicted them as subhuman savages capable of almost any act of depravity meant they could inspire a quite extraordinary level of fear among their opponents (see interview below, for example). Fighters used this to their advantage. Their actions ranged in scale and scope: hamstringing cattle – or cutting ‘steaks’ from live beasts – was common.³⁵ Sometimes, they left threatening notes on dead bodies, or strung dead animals from trees. At other times, they wrote letters to the EAS to try to convince the government that Mau Mau was spreading beyond the Kikuyu.³⁶

In Embu, government propaganda was less extreme than in Kikuyuland. Information officers created two newspapers in 1953 for people living there: *Muembu* and *Kaya ka Embu*. They contained articles that argued robustly that Mau Mau was losing the war, and listed details about terrorists killed, posts attacked, and weapons recovered. They featured interviews with military officials and ‘loyal’ Kikuyu who were apparently prospering under British rule. Frequent letters to the editor encouraged readers to continue purchasing the newspapers, listen to government radio stations, and ignore Mau Mau propaganda.³⁷ In Embu, a major theme in 1953 and especially 1954 was contrasting the ‘light’ of British development – and the benefits of British rule – with the chaos of Mau Mau (for instance, *Serikali Inakusaidia*: ‘The Government Helps You’).³⁸ The Kenya African Primary Examinations (KAPE) were prominent in these publications: people were told how children in Embu were leading the colony with a 68 per cent pass rate, followed by those in Nyeri, Fort Hall, and then Meru.³⁹ But if development was the ‘carrot’ in Embu, the ‘stick’ was never far behind. *Muembu* carried the full text of an interview with General Erskine about ‘collective punishment’, in which he warned that ‘innocent people would recognize it as part of the price to be paid because of the attitude of their neighbours’.⁴⁰

In Kamba areas, however, the ‘stick’ was barely visible. The ‘loyal’ Kamba were considered a priority by the British, because they comprised a large proportion of the colony’s police and soldiers. As I have argued elsewhere, the government undertook an extensive propaganda effort to demonstrate how British rule was benefitting the Kamba.

33 White, ‘Separating the men’, 13.

34 Branch, *Defeating Mau Mau*, 59.

35 See, for example, Wachanga, *Swords*, 83.

36 M. Mathu and D. Barnett, *The Urban Guerrilla: The Story of Mohamed Mathu* (Richmond, BC, 1974), 22.

37 KNA AHC/9/22, *Muembu*, 1953–4, multiple articles; AHC/9/24, *Kaya ka Embu*, 1954–5, multiple articles.

38 The content of the English and Swahili-language booklet *Serikali Inakusaidia* was originally presented as a lecture by a member of the Kenya Forest Department to students at the Jeanes School, Kabete. It is accessible in TNA 1027/40. See also KNA AHC/9/86, *Anti-Mau Mau Pamphlets*, c. 1954.

39 KNA AHC/9/22, ‘KAPE examinations, 1953’, Mar. 1953.

40 KNA AHC/9/22, ‘General Erskine gives radio interview’, 17 Apr. 1954.

Few threats – like those made in Kikuyuland or Embu – were visible.⁴¹ By 1954, a quarter of the colony's radio broadcasts were in the Kamba language, which officials believed would allow them to reach 400,000 (roughly half) of the ethnic group.⁴² Again, the KAPE played an important role: one handout demonstrated how between 1952 and 1953 the pass rate of Kamba children had increased by 46 per cent, while the Kikuyu had declined by 18 per cent.⁴³

One of the most important government initiatives was to draw attention to the capture or killing of prominent Mau Mau (or African) figures. The day after the capture of Waruhiu Itote – known as 'General China' in the forests – the Royal Air Force dropped between 100,000 and 500,000 leaflets bearing the news over the Kikuyu reserves and forests of central Kenya.⁴⁴ Similarly, when Mau Mau's overall leader Dedan Kimathi was captured, planes dropped 100,000 leaflets over the forests featuring the well-known photograph of Kimathi lying on his back – hands shackled – and distributed another 20,000 in towns.⁴⁵

It is important, however, to exercise caution when considering the impact of propaganda materials such as these leaflets, and not permit their large numbers to imply effectiveness. Officials, indeed, believed that there was great danger in drawing attention to prominent figures like Itote and Kimathi; and in this context, no one was more significant than Jomo Kenyatta. Hinde had identified publicizing the proceedings of Kenyatta's trial 'to our advantage' as one of the central aims of his strategy.⁴⁶ But officials were divided as to whether advertising Kenyatta's imprisonment was beneficial. On one level, it showed that the British had full power over Kenyatta; yet one British Council representative, Richard Frost – who later penned a biography of the colony's former governor, Philip Mitchell – worried that a series of leaflets airdropped into the Kikuyu reserves about Kenyatta would more likely arouse sympathy.⁴⁷ This sort of publicity also served to keep Kenyatta in the public eye, and thus from 1954, the rare mentions of Kenya's future first president were typically in reference to his position in permanent exile in northern Kenya.⁴⁸

All officials were terrified of missteps, and many feared that propaganda schemes might not just *fail*, but actively *damage* chances for success in the ongoing struggle. The district commissioner of Fort Hall, John Pinney, for instance, believed that the well-publicized penalty of death for convicted Mau Mau meant that people would not admit to taking the oath under any circumstances.⁴⁹ Similarly, when Itote was captured and 'paraded' through

41 M. Osborne, *Ethnicity and Empire in Kenya: Loyalty and Martial Race among the Kamba, c. 1800 to the Present* (New York, 2014), 213–4.

42 KNA CS/1/14/84, 'Minutes of a meeting of the Machakos African District Council', 10–12 Feb. 1954.

43 TNA WO 236/17, Press Office Handout 1295, 'Kenya Emergency report by the War Council', broadcast 20 Oct. 1954.

44 P. Maina, *Six Mau Mau Generals* (Nairobi, 1977), 84, 147.

45 R. Edgerton, *Mau Mau: An African Crucible* (New York, 1989), 104. The situation was identical after General Kaleba's capture. TNA CO 1027/54, 'Kaleba', Oct. 1954.

46 TNA WO 276/411, Hinde, 'Appreciation of the situation', 5 Mar. 1953.

47 TNA BW 95/2, Frost, 'Some reflections on the effect of the emergency on Nyanza Province', 30 Jan. 1953.

48 'Future of Jomo Kenyatta: dwelling area to be restricted', *Times* (London), 8 Sept. 1954.

49 TNA WO 32/15834, Appendix E: Pinney to PC [Provincial Commissioner] Central Province, 7 Dec. 1953.

the trouble spot of Mathira in 1954, it had a ‘devastating effect on loyalist morale’ because it seemed that one of the most notorious Mau Mau leaders had been not only spared the gallows, but forgiven for his crimes and become a government ally.⁵⁰ Similar missteps occurred with ‘sky-shouting’, a technique in which a recorded message was broadcast on loudspeaker from an airplane. Njama described it as ‘monotonous’, and – perhaps revealing the greatest fears of government propagandists – wrote that constant exhortations that Mau Mau surrender proved ‘that the Government had been unable to defeat us . . . We held that if we did not surrender, then the Government would definitely surrender’.⁵¹

PROPAGANDA FAILURES AND THE CREATION OF THE DEPARTMENT OF INFORMATION

Officials viewed their experiments in 1953 as failures. At the end of the year, Fraser described colonial propaganda as featuring an ‘absence of theme’, and stated that the ‘machine lacks flexibility and intelligent anticipation’.⁵² Fraser’s statement highlighted the contradictory position in which information officers found themselves: they believed it vital to have formal, uniform policies, but came to realize that this rigid approach disadvantaged them against their opponents. For Mau Mau propagandists had learned much from – and built upon – the experience and advice of newspaper editors since 1945. In some cases, the editors were directly involved in producing Mau Mau propaganda: Henry Muoria’s experiences with his ‘Gikuyu National Bi-Weekly’ *Mumenyereri* were useful when it came to assisting Kinuthia Mugia with his Mau Mau hymn book.⁵³ Officials had struggled to compete with the ‘hybrid, porous, and responsive character’ of the African press before 1952, and faced the same challenges in responding to Mau Mau.⁵⁴

Alarm at the success of Mau Mau propaganda was most clearly expressed by Louis Leakey. As Bruce Berman and John Lonsdale note, government officials in both Britain and Kenya generally deferred to ‘Leakey’s intellectual authority regarding all matters about the Kikuyu, and Mau Mau in particular’.⁵⁵ Leakey strongly believed in the power of Mau Mau propaganda, devoting the longest chapter in his *Defeating Mau Mau* (1954) to analyzing it. Leakey seemed almost at a loss to understand how Mau Mau propaganda was so successful. He focused, in particular, on the way authors used hymns to win and maintain followers, an approach he considered far more effective than government newspapers. Leakey seemed to concede a grudging admiration to

50 H. Bennett, *Fighting the Mau Mau: The British Army and Counter-Insurgency in the Kenya Emergency* (Cambridge, 2013), 136.

51 Barnett and Njama, *Mau Mau from Within*, 343–4. In Ngugi wa Thiong’o and Micere Mugo’s famous play, the protagonist refers to sky-shouting while ‘chuckling scornfully’. N. Thiong’o and M. Mugo, *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* (London, 1977), 55.

52 TNA PREM 11/472, ‘Report of visit to Kenya 17th Sept. to 5th Oct. by the Hon. H. C. P. J. Fraser, MBE’, 6 Oct. 1953.

53 Frederiksen, ‘Present battle’, 287; L. S. B. Leakey, *Defeating Mau Mau* (London, 1954), 55.

54 Barber, ‘Introduction’, 16.

55 B. Berman and J. Lonsdale, ‘Louis Leakey’s Mau Mau: a study in knowledge’, *History and Anthropology*, 5:2 (1991), 144.

Mau Mau propagandists: many of their productions were ‘so cleverly worded’, he noted, that their intent could not be proved in court.⁵⁶

C. J. M. Alport – a member of a parliamentary delegation sent to Kenya in early 1954 – raised similar concerns. Alport was at pains to explain why the delegation’s final report was critical of the information services in the colony. He believed that the problem stemmed from a fundamental disconnect: European-style propaganda could neither change nor shape the minds of Africans, whereas ‘African media’ would be more successful as it ‘appealed traditionally’ to African ways of thought and action. Alport believed that using song in government propaganda might present a solution.⁵⁷ Frost confirmed Alport’s fear: his own tour of Kikuyuland convinced him that in Fort Hall at least, the government was losing the propaganda battle. Despite British efforts to distribute information widely, the men and women Frost interviewed described to him how they ‘deplore[d] the lack of Government propaganda’, while Mau Mau’s efforts were ‘brilliant in ... psychology and efficient in ... distribution’.⁵⁸

These failures necessitated a fundamental shift in colonial propaganda methods in the colony. The new Department of Information (DOI) was charged with leading this transformation. The DOI had physical branches in each province, and was responsible for all aspects of information, including propaganda production, public relations, and the press. The DOI was within the portfolio of the chief secretary – the colony’s top minister – and its director and his senior staff enjoyed ‘day to day’ access not just to the chief secretary and other ministers, but also the governor of the colony.⁵⁹ The DOI’s mandate was two-fold: within the colony, it was meant to ‘ensure that the people of Kenya of all races are kept fully informed of Government’s plans, policies and achievements ... [and] give such help in the introduction and fulfillment of the Government’s plans as can be afforded by publicity methods available to the Department’. But the second part of its mission – the new, ‘external’ aspect – was to ensure that the benefits of British colonialism were widely publicized, much of which was achieved through providing suitable statistics, photographs, and information to reporters, lecturers, and authors interested in Kenya.⁶⁰

The new, professionalized DOI was heavily involved in researching the effectiveness of its programs. Agents were aware that they possessed no foolproof ‘measuring rod’ in this regard, but there were some clues.⁶¹ For example, the 75 branches of newly created broadcasting clubs (see below) produced a ‘vast correspondence’ that enabled information officers to know precisely what listeners desired. They were assiduous in reading listeners’ letters, and shaping programs to suit them. Screening of suspected Mau Mau also provided an excellent opportunity to ask about the degree to which people heard and read their efforts. One report in late 1953 seemed to suggest that *any* suspected Mau Mau interrogated by the Special Branch were asked three questions about propaganda: ‘a) Have you

56 Leakey, *Defeating Mau Mau*, 53–76.

57 C. J. M. Alport, ‘Kenya’s answer to the Mau Mau challenge’, *African Affairs*, 53:212 (1954), 245.

58 TNA BW 95/2, Frost, ‘Some reflections on the effect of the Emergency on Nyanza Province’, 30 Jan. 1953.

59 KNA MU/3/37, Colonial Office, *Conference of Information Officers, Volume II: Programme and Papers*, ‘Note by Kenya’, 1956.

60 Kenya, *Department of Information*, 1955, 1.

61 *Ibid.*

ever heard a Kikuyu broadcast[?] b) Have you read any papers or pamphlets produced by the African Information Services[?] c) Do you think the Security Forces are defeating Mau Mau[?]'.⁶² The DOI appeared quietly confident in its broadcasting and film shows in particular. When African researchers were sent anonymously into film audiences, their conversations revealed that people were generally impressed and enjoyed the displays.⁶³ Officials were sure that if the 'popularity' of their programs meant anything, then there was 'no doubt' that they were influencing African minds.⁶⁴

As the DOI established itself, propaganda began to shift from the extreme assault on Mau Mau to a more moderate approach that sought to present options for the Kikuyu population. This was a recognition – also brought to military operations by Erskine around the same time – that it was essential to clearly separate insurgents and loyalists, rather than equating the bulk of the Kikuyu population with Mau Mau.⁶⁵ This approach was reflected in a series of leaflets that appeared in mid-1954. They juxtaposed Mau Mau against British-supported 'progress'. One suggested that Britain had brought education to Kenya while Mau Mau was trying to 'stop' it. Similarly, another stated that Mau Mau was trying to 'destroy' schools, whereas the government built them. A third cited government-run classes for sewing and homecraft, which it contrasted to Mau Mau's desire to have Kenyans live in 'skins'. All were written in Kikuyu and had the phrase 'Peace is Best' centered at the top. Perhaps the most compelling was a fourth, which showed an African man standing at a signpost (see Fig. 1). The signpost has two directions labeled on it: one marked '*Thirikari*' (Government), and the other 'Mau Mau'. The '*Thirikari*' sign points toward a clean, neat church, with a cow and calf outside, children holding hands, and a tractor in a field. The four words below the drawing are: peace, wealth, hospitals, development. The 'Mau Mau' sign points toward the shell of a burning building, with several corpses lying outside. It reads: death, war, destruction, hunger.

Many of these leaflets were airdropped over Kikuyuland, but officials were concerned that this was an ineffective way of spreading information. When thousands were dispersed following Itote's capture, Njama described the technique as a plain 'propaganda trick'.⁶⁶ The Special Branch policeman Ian Henderson also viewed the practice as pointless.⁶⁷ Mau Mau fighters explained how they could utilize the leaflets to their own advantage: when lost in the forest, Kiboi Muriithi used one to discover the date, and then created a calendar to keep track of the passage of time.⁶⁸ Njama went so far as to argue that leaflets featuring the names of Kimathi or his second-in-command, Stanley Mathenge, succeeded in achieving little more than spreading their fame throughout the colony: 'the two persons became famous all over the country through the press and broadcasting informations [*sic*] which aimed at spoiling their names'.⁶⁹ The pamphlets could make those isolated

62 TNA CO 1027/40, 'Progress report: information drive to the Kikuyu, Meru and Embu', Oct. 1953.

63 Colony and Protectorate of Kenya, *Department of Information Annual Report, 1956* (Nairobi, 1957), 6.

64 Kenya, *Department of Information, 1955*, 1.

65 Bennett, *Fighting*, 128.

66 Barnett and Njama, *Mau Mau from Within*, 344.

67 I. Henderson with P. Goodhart, *The Hunt for Kimathi* (London, 1958), 38.

68 K. Muriithi with P. Ndoria, *War in the Forest: The Personal Story of J. Kiboi Muriithi* (Nairobi, 1971), 106.

69 Barnett and Njama, *Mau Mau from Within*, 129.

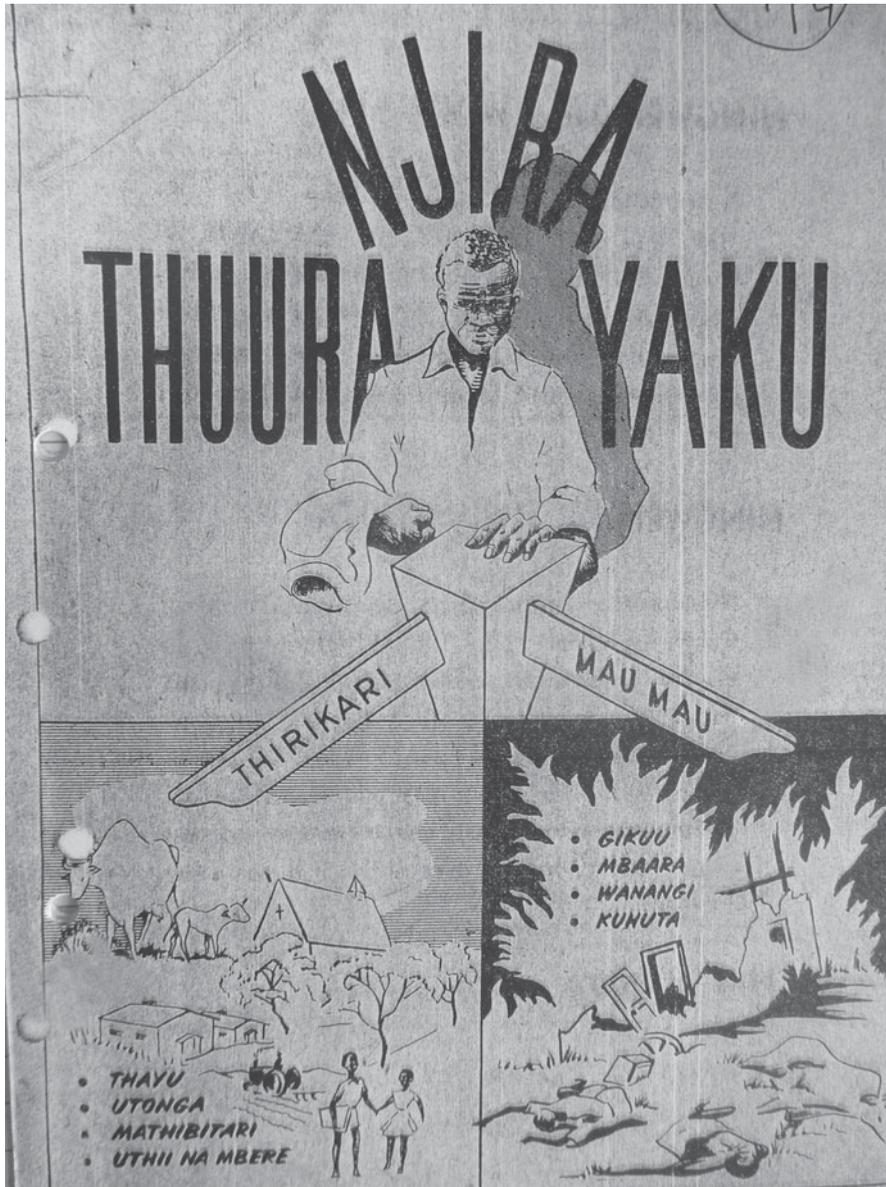


Fig. 1. Image from an anti-Mau Mau pamphlet (1954) that asks readers to choose between the 'government' path of peace and progress, and the 'Mau Mau' path of death and destruction. KNA AHC/9/86. Reproduced with permission from the Kenya National Archives.

in the forests assume that the struggle was continuing: for surely, fighters reasoned, the government would not disperse such material if it was close to victory.⁷⁰

⁷⁰ This sentiment appears in Godwin Wachira's novel, though he also writes that the 'solitude' of the forests could make Mau Mau fighters believe the words they heard from sky-shouting. G. Wachira, *Ordeal in the Forest* (Nairobi, 1968), 196.

Generous funding meant that the DOI could also afford to develop broadcasting technology for propaganda purposes. But the origins of Emergency broadcasting in the colony came slightly earlier, in late 1953, with the African Broadcasting Service (ABS). The ABS produced programs mostly in Swahili and Kikuyu, and *Habari za Radio* broadcast 35 hours per week from Nairobi, and another six from Mombasa.⁷¹ This was a marked improvement even since 1951, when government programs ran for only nine hours per week: six were transmitted from Nairobi and three from Mombasa, and listeners had to change wavelengths on their sets throughout the day in order to listen continuously.⁷² ABS created Mount Kenya Radio (MKR), which was very much a product of the Emergency. An employee had driven up to Nyeri with ‘one microphone, one tape-recorder and one gramophone turntable’, and MKR programs emanated from a one-level building ‘flanked by two four-ton, 90-foot gumpoles’ which served as aerials. Several young Kikuyu men were apparently responsible for the planning and broadcasting of their own programs, opening each one with the same cry: ‘This is the Mount Kenya Station of the African Broadcasting Service, Nyeri, Kenya. Calling all Kikuyus!’⁷³ Officials believed that MKR reached between 100,000 and 130,000 listeners in Kikuyuland.

The DOI built upon these inauspicious beginnings, creating a wide-ranging series of programs, from news (always the most popular type), to music, a ‘women’s page’, various readings from books, and other programs for children.⁷⁴ One of the most important aims of broadcasting was sharing messages from high-ranking British officials. Thus when Erskine took charge of British forces in mid-1953, he recorded a broadcast less than 24 hours after his arrival in Kenya, in which he powerfully stated that he would restore order forthwith.⁷⁵ In 1955, guests ranging from the archbishop of Canterbury to the colony’s police commissioner, Richard Catling, all participated in radio broadcasts. In order to ensure its message was widely heard, the DOI provided free or cheap wireless sets throughout the colony. They were typically distributed in marketplaces or schools, but also detention camps.⁷⁶ Actual numbers of sets are difficult to come by. One of the few hard statistics is from late 1953, at which point the government had placed 1,000 free sets in public places, and Africans had bought another approximately 5,000.⁷⁷

But such facilities and financial backing did not mean that propaganda was effective, or that it went uncontested by Mau Mau. Propaganda is discussed to at least some degree in all memoirs written by Mau Mau authors, and their texts clearly demonstrate its centrality

71 KNA AHC/10/68, ‘Notes on the use of vernaculars’, 16 Sept. 1953; TNA CO 1027/40, ‘Memorandum on the work of the Information Services in Kenya’, 8 Sept. 1953.

72 KNA AHC/10/12, ‘Memorandum on the use of broadcasting to Africans in Kenya’, 18 May 1951.

73 KNA AHC/8/14, Laycock, ‘New Kenya radio’, 12 Jan. 1955.

74 Kenya, *Department of Information*, 1955, 7.

75 TNA WO 236/17, ‘Broadcast by c-in-c [commander-in-chief]’, 8 June 1953.

76 This article does not address propaganda in the colony’s detention camps, because the topic has already received scholarly attention. Caroline Elkins has outlined a variety of techniques that camp employees used, and Derek Peterson has described the range of responses exhibited by Mau Mau detainees who sought to maintain social identity, especially through use of the written word. Elkins, *Imperial Reckoning*; D. Peterson, ‘The intellectual lives of Mau Mau detainees’, *The Journal of African History*, 49:1 (2008), 73–91.

77 TNA MSS/4/156, ‘Some notes on the work of the African Information Services and the Press Office’, Nov. 1953.

in the conflict.⁷⁸ These testimonies reveal that until late 1954, Mau Mau had success in competing with government efforts. Mau Mau authors are often quick to dismiss British propaganda; thus Mohamed Mathu mentions the ‘usual propaganda about the high motives of Government’ almost in passing, and Itote that ‘Few Africans believed [it].’⁷⁹ At the heart of Mau Mau’s efforts was keeping men in the forest informed about what was going on beyond its borders. Kimathi achieved this during the conflict’s early years through a network of runners who brought information to him. He also ordered certain fighters to listen to radio broadcasts, and stole wireless sets from the reserves whenever possible. Thus in May 1954, Kimathi seemed to know about the film *Simba*, made in Kenya that year and released early in 1955.⁸⁰

Kimathi in particular was fully aware that Mau Mau was engaged in a struggle for public support, and that defeating government efforts in this regard would be an immense challenge. ‘We shall utilize propaganda in our fights because the Whiteman feeds on it’, he told his followers in one speech.⁸¹ One of the express purposes of Mau Mau’s Kenya Defence Council – formed in 1953 – was to act as a propaganda unit. On Christmas Day 1953, Kimathi stated that each Mau Mau unit should contain a ‘propaganda machine’, to both counteract British efforts and implement Mau Mau’s own propaganda (Itote had similar aims in the Mount Kenya forests).⁸² Fred Majdalany – a staunchly anti-Mau Mau journalist, who published a popular account of the conflict in 1962 – grudgingly noted Kimathi’s ‘skill in self promotion’ in this regard.⁸³ When Kimathi discovered that the colonial government did not have a photograph of him, for example, he sent along a blurred black-and-white portrait.⁸⁴

Kimathi was an avid writer, like many Mau Mau leaders, and won respect among his charges for this skill.⁸⁵ He wrote to chiefs in the colony, other Mau Mau fighters, British officials, and sympathetic men and women in positions of power in other parts of the world (including Georgi Malenkov, who temporarily led the Soviet Union after Joseph Stalin’s death). In some of his letters, Kimathi threatened ‘collaborators’; in others, he cajoled and persuaded, for instance begging Kamba Chief Philip Kioko not to be ‘taken in’ by government propaganda.⁸⁶ And Mau Mau leaders searched for and documented evidence of abuses carried out by the security forces. Kimathi’s secretary Karari Njama was tasked with these investigations. After gathering information, he would send his discoveries

78 Following one raid near Embakasi, Mohamed Mathu headed directly to Nairobi to read all the morning papers and their accounts of his group’s actions. Mathu and Barnett, *Urban Guerrilla*, 48–52.

79 Mathu and Barnett, *Urban Guerrilla*, 77; W. Itote, *Mau Mau in Action* (Nairobi, 1979), 177.

80 M. Kinyatti (ed.), *Kenya’s Freedom Struggle: The Dedan Kimathi Papers* (London, 1987), 80–1, 94. It is important to exercise caution in utilizing the letters in this collection as some have questioned the veracity of Kinyatti’s translations.

81 Wachanga, *Swords*, 168.

82 Barnett and Njama, *Mau Mau from Within*, 357; Kinyatti (ed.), *Kenya’s Freedom Struggle*, 29; W. Itote, *‘Mau Mau’ General* (Nairobi, 1967), 296.

83 F. Majdalany, *State of Emergency: The Full Story of Mau Mau* (London, 1962), 158.

84 Anderson, *Histories*, 278–9.

85 Wachanga, *Swords*, 26.

86 Kinyatti (ed.), *Kenya’s Freedom Struggle*. The letter to Kioko appears on p. 63.

to Mau Mau's Central Province Committee in Nairobi, where others would try to publicize them in the world's press.⁸⁷

But the importance of writing ran deeper still, as Peterson shows. Record keeping, the writing of Mau Mau's history, and the creation of a bureaucratic apparatus permitted Mau Mau to 'imagine a sovereign state' that stood in opposition to the colonial government in Kenya.⁸⁸ An essential part of this project was memorializing the struggle of the forest fighters, so that future generations would always remember the sacrifices their ancestors had made.⁸⁹ Thus Kimathi was quick to respond to government efforts to disparage the names of dead fighters. Information officials commonly memorialized the dead in critical texts, in an attempt to remove sympathy from Mau Mau by citing the 'atrocities' carried out by dead 'terrorists'. The announcements were usually one page, and pasted on fences or noticeboards at police and Home Guard posts throughout the colony, and at some points even airdropped into the reserves.⁹⁰ Thus when the King's African Rifles killed General Matenjagwo in late 1953, the press officer in Nairobi – Alastair Matheson – wrote a damning 'grave stone' for the dead leader.⁹¹ Kimathi responded by writing a eulogy for the deceased general. The text was distributed throughout the fighting units, and read: '[Matenjagwo] was a first class guerrilla fighter ... His main goal was the liberation of Kenya.'⁹²

Mau Mau also contested colonial propaganda and information by responding to – and sometimes aping – specific efforts, especially with regard to British royalty. Government propagandists sought to inculcate loyalty to the Crown by producing films, documents, and posters that depicted the royal family (including 21,000 posters of the Queen in 1953).⁹³ Mau Mau responded directly: on the day of Queen Elizabeth's coronation – 7 February 1953 – they crowned a 'Mau Mau Queen' (a recognition that later earned her a decade's detention).⁹⁴ On the same day, fighters increased the rate and severity of their attacks, and buried coins on which the Queen's head was imprinted upside down in the ground. In 1954, Mau Mau even burnt down Treetops Hotel, where Princess Elizabeth was staying when she became Queen in 1952. Some fighters focused their attention on 'loyal' Africans who had received government awards, and attacked them: officials began delaying the announcement of such commendations to protect those they sought to honor.⁹⁵ Others responded to the evictions of Kikuyu from Central Province by typing up similar notices and giving them to European settlers.⁹⁶

87 Barnett and Njama, *Mau Mau from Within*, 273.

88 Peterson, 'Writing in revolution'.

89 See, for instance, the carefully organized 'Book of forest history', which recorded happenings in the forests in 1953 and 1954. Bodleian Library of Commonwealth and African Studies at Rhodes House, Mss. Afr. s. 1534, 'A book of forest history or war in the forest and attacks here and there', c. 1954.

90 Officers sometimes wrote less formal memorials too. See, for example, Peter Hewitt's on General Ngome: P. Hewitt, *Kenya Cowboy: A Police Officer's Account of the Mau Mau Emergency* (3rd edn, Johannesburg, 2008), 188–91.

91 KNA AHC/8/8, Matheson to Director of Information, 9 Jan. 1954.

92 Kinyatti (ed.), *Kenya's Freedom Struggle*, 106–8.

93 TNA MSS/4/156, 'Some notes on the work of the African Information Services and the Press Office', Nov. 1953.

94 Edgerton, *Crucible*, 84.

95 KNA CS/2/1/516, ACS to Clinton-Wells, 1 Apr. 1953.

96 Barnett and Njama, *Mau Mau from Within*, 276–7.

'FORGETTING' MAU MAU

Since early 1954, the government had steadily isolated Mau Mau in central Kenya's forests. It created a 'mile strip' around the Aberdares (designating it a 'Prohibited Area'), and increased the level of 'villagization' for the reserve inhabitants. Security forces stepped up their operations, inflicting a number of telling defeats. By mid-1955, Mau Mau was struggling to maintain its numbers in the forests, and fighters were cut off from the bulk of the population in the reserves. These factors severely limited Mau Mau's ability to spread propaganda, and meant that government propaganda was now largely uncontested. Information officers turned their attention to 'forgetting' Mau Mau, and on a wider level, promoting the image of Britain's 'responsible trusteeship' in Kenya.

Within the colony, publications aimed at Africans practically ceased to mention Mau Mau. The formal editorial policy of *Agikuyu* – launched in early 1955 – is representative of this trend. Its purpose was to help Kikuyu, Embu, and Meru to 'rebuild their lives'. It focused on development in the colony, and the ways Kikuyu could create successful futures with the colony's 'troubles' now over. At the same time, *Pamoja* – an expensive, illustrated magazine – was comprised almost entirely of 'feature articles' designed to 'present the Government's achievements', and included strictly vetted articles by African writers.⁹⁷ This was a shift from the approach since 1952 that had largely silenced African voices, and more closely recalled earlier notions of 'responsible authorship'. Similarly, *Matemo* contained many articles seemingly written by Europeans. It mirrored overseas British publicity that focused exclusively on the development projects Britain was undertaking in Africa, and thus contained pieces about trade, water supplies, and transportation. Its more in-depth articles addressed wider happenings in the British Empire, and finally provided a forum for 'responsible' debate on topics such as constitutional development in Kenya that the proscription of newspapers like *Sauti* had prevented.⁹⁸ With the armed conflict largely at an end, many of the newsheets (including *Uhoro wa Nyeri* and *Kaya ka Embu*) were quickly wrapped up.

The activities of the DOI peaked in 1955, certainly with regard to the number of publications produced. That year alone, it published 'regular newspapers and magazines' in 15 languages, which constituted 17 million pages of material. Its range included such staples as *Baraza* and *Pamoja*, but also a series of monthly papers in the Swahili, Kikuyu, Luo, and Kamba languages aimed specifically at members of the women's group *Maendeleo ya Wanawake*. Another paper called *Muthigani* was produced for the Kikuyu Guard; and others were provided with technical and editorial assistance as well as funding (such as the weekly *Kihoto* and monthly *Wathiomo Mukinyu*). Leaflets, posters, and pamphlets reflected these varied approaches, and together constituted another 16.5 million pages of DOI production. The department also oversaw 16 district

97 Kenya, *Department of Information*, 1955, 8.

98 KNA AHC/9/26, *Matemo*, multiple articles, 1957–8.

newssheets – which together totaled another 1.5 million pages over the course of the year – which complemented the themes of its own materials.⁹⁹

Films also fell within the DOI's remit, though their involvement in the propaganda campaign was somewhat limited. Most Africans living in rural areas never visited cinemas, and therefore viewed films via mobile cinema vans. Mobile cinema was expensive: each van cost approximately £2,500, and seven operated in the colony by 1955 (bolstered by a similar number of 'information vans', without the moving picture facilities). Many officials believed that films had the potential to 'divert' the attention of Africans from political pursuits, but the actual film screenings themselves had the added advantage of providing the opportunity for collecting intelligence. In the early years of the Emergency, films simply continued themes from the previous decade: they were about the battles of the Second World War, or topics like paying taxes or the dangers of tuberculosis. The complexity of making and screening films meant that few directly 'anti-Mau Mau' films were ever made, though officials did produce a small number about surrender offers. In many parts of central Kenya, in fact, mobile cinema and information vans were noticeably absent for much of the Emergency.¹⁰⁰ A moderate expansion of film activity did occur by 1956, however, when the DOI made 37 films for display. Reflecting the new focus of propaganda, they included 19 about news and current events, and 18 development 'features'. Visits to the colony by important persons – such as the archbishop of Canterbury – were also covered.¹⁰¹

Meanwhile, both Kimathi and Mathenge continued to draw attention to the violent methods the British were using to prosecute the war. Kimathi raised this topic with the British Member of Parliament Fenner Brockway in 1954, and cited the issue of 'killing for cash' that had come up the previous year.¹⁰² Mathenge had similar aims: the police captured a series of documents belonging to him in late 1955, which contained a letter to the Kenya Committee (at 86 Rochester Row, London) citing the 'genocide destruction' of Africans. Mathenge showed extraordinary foresight when he warned that the 'British Empire will be blamed by the world.'¹⁰³ There is even evidence that Mau Mau attempted to copy the British by using more modern technologies in their propaganda. In Fort Hall, security forces discovered a 'Mau Mau cameraman', along with five film

99 Kenya, *Department of Information*, 1955, 8–9; TNA CO 1027/40, 'Memorandum on the work of the Information Services in Kenya', 8 Sept. 1953. See also KNA DC/MKS/8/5, 'Vernacular newspaper list', 10 May 1954.

100 C. Ambler, 'Projecting the modern colonial state: mobile cinema in Kenya', in Greiveson and MacCabe (eds.), *Film and the End of Empire*, 211–15.

101 Kenya, *Department of Information*, 1956, 6.

102 Barnett and Njama, *Mau Mau from Within*, 357–8; Kinyatti (ed.), *Kenya's Freedom Struggle*, 19. The 'killing for cash' scandal concerned allegations that British soldiers were paid bonuses for killing Mau Mau fighters, and that killing competitions between regiments were encouraged. A court of inquiry chaired by Lieutenant General Sir Kenneth McLean found little evidence of inappropriate conduct. Bennett, *Fighting*, 118–23.

103 TNA WO 276/376, 'Translation of Stanley Methenge's [*sic*] documents captured by police on 30-11-55', 30 Dec. 1955. This was particularly true following Britain paying compensation for systematic abuses during Mau Mau in mid-2013. See articles by David Anderson, Huw Bennett, Caroline Elkins, and Stephen Howe in the *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 39:5 (2011).

reels he had made showing General Matenjagwo's men.¹⁰⁴ Njama also recounted giving Kimathi a camera – though without film – in 1954.¹⁰⁵

Yet in his memoir, Njama ultimately admits that the British were 'bright in exposing their opponents [*sic*] mistakes', and he makes perhaps his most telling statement when narrating how the fortunes of war had turned inexorably away from his side: 'I remember to have shed tears [*sic*] at the regret of my inability to transmit my thoughts to the public', he wrote, 'my voice could only be heard a few yards from me in that dense forest'. One group of villagers explained to Njama that they 'had been defeated by the Government propaganda and its punishments'.¹⁰⁶ Another fighter remembered that when he was captured, a girl asked him whether he ate raw meat, as that was what she understood Mau Mau did.¹⁰⁷ One man I interviewed in 2005 told me that he was under three months' house arrest following his release from detention in 1962. He recalled: 'Whenever I came outside, school children would run away. Mothers too used to run away ... I was feared because the name "Mau Mau" had been associated with me, and [they believed] Mau Mau were very bad people.'¹⁰⁸

As the insurgency waned, the DOI became increasingly involved in producing propaganda about the benefits of British rule in Kenya for an international audience. It sent material to British Information Services offices in New York, New Delhi, and Johannesburg for publication, and had close contacts in Australia, Pakistan, and Ceylon (Sri Lanka). It even published a *Students' Newsletter* for Kenyan students studying abroad, and sent photographs depicting Kenya in a positive light to people ranging from the Danish minister for foreign affairs to the East African Tourist Travel Association.¹⁰⁹ The DOI invited a large number of observers (from journalists to representatives of the United Nations) to visit Kenya in 1958, and supported directors who wanted to make 'reasonable' feature films about the colony (including *Safari*, *Simba*, and *Something of Value*).¹¹⁰ Each visit included tours of Kikuyuland and development projects in the colony, and BBC's *Panorama* made a documentary about rehabilitation and the 'rapidly improving conditions' in the colony's detention camps. Kenya's newly created Ministry of Tourism published 100,000 copies of *Kenya: Land of Sunshine*, and *Kenya Today* reached as far away as Borneo and Hong Kong.¹¹¹

This effort to 'forget' Mau Mau also meant combatting foreign broadcasting that sought to keep Mau Mau as a topic of public discourse in Kenya, and to use the movement to criticize Britain. This had first occurred in 1954 via Cairo Radio (though the Swahili All-India Radio also had a presence), which broadcast directly to East Africa in both Swahili and Arabic. Its Kenyan broadcasts aimed to raise discord regarding Mau Mau (usually in

104 Bennett, *Fighting*, 231.

105 Barnett and Njama, *Mau Mau from Within*, 386–8.

106 *Ibid.* 138, 438, 470.

107 Muriithi with Ndoria, *War in the Forest*, 111.

108 Interview (anonymous), Mulala Location, 3 Aug. 2005.

109 Kenya, *Department of Information*, 1955, 2–3.

110 Carruthers, 'Two faces', 86. See also D. Anderson, 'Mau Mau at the movies: contemporary recollections of an anti-colonial war', *South African Historical Journal*, 48:1 (2003), 71–89.

111 Colony and Protectorate of Kenya, *Department of Information Annual Report*, 1958 (Nairobi, 1959), 1–2.

the Swahili broadcasts), and foment discontent at the coast (in Arabic).¹¹² At various points, officials considered jamming Cairo Radio's signal, although this was ultimately dismissed as impractical. Instead, officials decided that providing better programming in East Africa was a more efficient way to minimize Cairo Radio's impact. The DOI therefore scheduled its broadcasts to cover precisely the same hours as the Egyptian station was on air, and then increased the quantity of its programming. By 1955 – with the DOI funded to the tune of £250,000 per year (from £33,150 in 1952) – its broadcasting section could afford to produce 100 hours per week of programs that ran until 9:15pm each evening (not including another 39 hours from MKR and 15 from the coastal station at Mombasa, *Sauti ya Mvita*).¹¹³

But by the end of the decade, Cairo Radio was a lower priority than Moscow Radio. The first broadcasts from Moscow Radio were received in East Africa in both English and French on 19 April 1958, and others soon appeared in Swahili. Officials dutifully transcribed them, and were grateful that they came on air around 10 am each day, when more 'educated' Africans were at work. Moscow Radio's programs frequently discussed Mau Mau. One talk – by E. Gusarov, called 'Political Development in Kenya' – described Mau Mau as a 'nation-wide movement', which aimed to return stolen land to Africans. For Gusarov, Mau Mau was a part of the KAU, and therefore a genuine political movement. Aware that the detention camp scandals were Britain's weakness from a publicity standpoint, Gusarov drew attention to them: 'Hundreds of thousands of Africans were sent to concentration camps'.¹¹⁴ But the focus on Mau Mau was only part of a broader approach to programming that sought to draw Africans into debates over decolonization and the Cold War. Moscow Radio took on topics of world interest, such as a visit by General Nasser to Moscow, and the (excellent) facilities for workers in Russia. Other programs such as 'The Colour Problem' lauded African heroes like Kwame Nkrumah, or discussed prominent works by Africans including Ousmane Sembene.¹¹⁵

The DOI responded to Moscow Radio by further increasing its own programming. In 1958, it produced and broadcast more than 170 hours of material each week. The expansion at the coast was especially striking: that year, *Sauti ya Mvita* broadcast more than 53 hours, an almost four-fold increase since 1955. It seems that the effort here was successful: during the year, 15,700 listeners wrote letters commenting on and debating issues raised in the station's programs.¹¹⁶ In the House of Commons, Undersecretary of State for the Colonies John Profumo confidently announced that he was entirely satisfied

112 KNA AHC/10/66, Governor to Chief Secretary, 22 Nov. 1954; 'Record of a meeting at Secretariat', 3 Dec. 1954. See also James Brennan, 'Radio Cairo and the decolonization of East Africa, 1953–64', in Christopher Lee (ed.), *Making a World After Empire: The Bandung Moment and its Political Afterlives* (Athens, OH, 2010), 173–95.

113 F. D. Corfield, *Historical Survey of the Origins and Growth of Mau Mau* (London, 1960), 193; Kenya, *Department of Information*, 1955, 6–7.

114 TNA CO 1027/238, 'Broadcasts from Russia', April–May 1958.

115 TNA CO 1027/238, 'Summary of world broadcasts, Part I: the USSR', 14 Nov. and 22 Dec. 1958.

116 Kenya, *Department of Information*, 1958, 5–6.

with British efforts in countering Moscow Radio, due to the ‘greatest possible’ assistance that local broadcasting in the colonies had received in the late 1950s.¹¹⁷

CONCLUSION

In 1966, three of the ‘Kapenguria Six’ – Bildad Kaggia, Fred Kubai, and Achieng’ Oneko, along with Joseph Murumbi, then Kenya’s vice president – wrote a preface to Njama’s *Mau Mau from Within*. It is difficult to imagine a group of men with more moral authority. They demanded a rehabilitation of Mau Mau’s memory; for, as they wrote, ‘the very name “Mau Mau” is an illustration of how successful propaganda can damn an entire movement’.¹¹⁸ But though their words reflected the reality of the 1960s, they did not fit Kenya before 1955. Certainly, government propaganda had sporadic success, for example following the Lari Massacre of March 1953; but Mau Mau propagandists fought hard and with significant results against their opponents. Officials struggled: despite vast resources, they were caught between wanting to establish uniform, consistent policies, and recognizing that Africans seemed to respond better to the malleable, easily adapted approach of the underfinanced Mau Mau. But once Britain brought the insurgency under control by late 1954, information officials gained an uncontested arena in which to press home their advantage.

Ultimately, the DOI’s expansion and the imposition of restrictive press legislation during the Emergency had a lasting effect on press freedoms in Kenya. In 1960, the government passed a new law (replacing the Books and Newspapers Ordinance of 1906) requiring that any newspaper provide a registration bond of £500 in order to operate. The result was that the *East African Standard* (later renamed *The Standard*) and the *Nation* came to dominate Kenyan news as the colony neared independence, a dominance that still exists today. For much of the following half-century, the government exerted powerful influence over the news and views that appeared in their pages.¹¹⁹

117 Parliamentary Debates, Commons, vol. 589, cols. 1–18, 10 June 1958.

118 Barnett and Njama, *Mau Mau from Within*, 9–11.

119 Gadsden, ‘African press’, 532.