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EXPLANATIONS OF THE MAU MAU REVOLT

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My intention is to suggest an outline of an historical process, specific to the Kikuyu people of Kenya but which is intelligible within the general rubrics of colonial nationalism and peasant revolt. The process is important, but only as a field for the operation of human intention and the organisation of power.

In the 1940s, and as a direct result of the Second War, Kenya was the scene of rising conflict. There was increased white settlement and political ambition, founded upon expanding markets, increased participation in the business of government, and secure access to crop financing through the Land Bank and production boards. African farmers had also done well out of the war, the Kikuyu especially. The Kikuyu were unique in colonial Africa, in being an agricultural people settled on well-watered, fertile land, whose Reserve was at the centre of a communications system designed to benefit white settlers, and on the doorstep of the capital city, Nairobi. They numbered about one million in 1950, about one fifth of Kenya's black population. One third of them lived outside the Reserve, some of them as bachelor migrant workers in the towns, but most of them as squatter families on the farms of the White Highlands. Over three-quarters of squatters' incomes, comparatively high by the standards of the day, was derived from the sales of their own agricultural and animal produce rather than farm wages. Perhaps half of the 'White' farmlands was under black production. Their occupation stood in the path of white ambitions and threatened white security. The third competitor in post-war reconstruction was the colonial government. It saw increased white production as the main safety-valve for black population increase. But it was also convinced that black agriculture had to be saved from soil erosion, at first by physical remedies such as contour terracing, though by 1950 it was moving towards a policy of allowing Africans (but only in the Reserves) to grow high-value cash crops (coffee, tea, pineapples) under the guidance of an expanded agricultural extension service. A corollary was the stabilisation of African urban labour with a family wage. These would be the economic foundations of a 'multi-racial' polity in the long term, of which the outlines could only dimly be seen. Africans were given their first direct, nominated, representative on the Legislative Council in 1946; they were co-opted on to various government boards. For government, the trick was to bring on Africans while not disturbing Europeans and the capital market. But while Europeans began to grow suspicious, Africans became frustrated and alarmed, both Highland squatters, urban workers, and the notables in the Reserve.

The outbreak of the revolt is a controversial matter. Earlier accounts stressed the British declaration of Emergency in October 1952, a pre-emptive strike against the forces of revolution which in fact galvanised them into action once the moderates had been incarcerated. This viewpoint stresses the inchoate nature of 'Mau Mau' prior to that date - if indeed it can be said to have existed at all. More recent work suggests that the Emergency did not so much bring the movement into being as consolidate it about a nerve centre in Nairobi,

which supplied the strong arm in the forests. Prior to that date one has to envisage three 'starting-points', insofar as such can ever be said to exist:

1944 in the White Highlands/Rift Valley: as squatters resisted new labour contracts which reduced their rights to cultivation and grazing while increasing their days of labour service;

1946 in the Kikuyu Reserve, as veteran members of the Kikuyu Central Association (founded 1924) started administering an oath of loyalty (of which there had been two previous versions) designed to secure political control in the new competitions of postwar politics;

1947 in Nairobi, as militant Trade Unionists came to realise the need for more than mere trades unionism in the desperate and violent conditions of the main towns, Nairobi and Mombasa, with real wages dropping sharply in the post-war inflation, and the skills of longer-term migrants being threatened by a large influx of the rural poor.

There are many explanations. I make brief mention of eight. Each makes assumptions about the colonial situation, the nature of Kikuyu society and the quality and ambitions of its leadership.

1. Official/settler/missionary

All later explanations have been a reaction to the contemporary white one, which has in consequence acquired the status of caricature. There were in fact several different white explanations at the time, but they had a core of agreement. They assumed the benevolence of colonialism and the necessary tutelage of settlers, officials and missionaries (although these had had their own violent rows in the past). They admitted that social change was traumatic; but they were increasingly agreed that 'firm measures' had to be taken to combat soil erosion and to recover social control both in the Reserves, where chiefs were (as always) losing authority, and in the towns, where active unionism, 'the guerilla army of the underemployed', was a new and alarming phenomenon. White opinion was divided on the nature of the levers of social control to be employed (whether autocratic or consultative) until the educated African leadership disqualified itself from co-optation by opposition to soil conservation etc. measures which were, to whites, self-evidently beneficial. Autocracy then became a condition for progress and its African opponents became cast as selfish manipulators of mass grievance. They were selfish because as the educated, as traders, clerks and 'politicians', they were naturally opposed to colonial solutions which involved producer co-operatives, communal labour on anti-erosion works and much anxiety over the rapidly growing trend of land purchase by Africans; they also lived, so it was thought, by political levies. Kikuyu society in the mass was thought to be full of hidden depth, easily duped into evil ways but full of enormous potential for industrious wellbeing if only the key could be found - which did not involve, as Kikuyu politicians demanded, the reopening of the issue of white landownership, which was the cornerstone of the government's development policy. Kenyatta, the LSE

graduate, with an English wife he had left behind and deserted for a chief's daughter, the man with friends in Moscow, the spellbinding orator, became the arch-schemer in the minds of a political administration which was increasingly uncertain of its way. The administration's uncertainty derived from the puzzle over who should be its African allies. The educated progressives were obviously the men of the future, but they seemed to be too powerful to be led. The older chiefs and Christian gentry, the collaborating class of the inter-war era, were just as keen to engross their holdings at the expense of the mass of the peasantry as any wily trader-politician. Moreover, the old chiefs were reluctant to push their people too hard on contour-terracing labour. The administration recruited increasingly from its own junior ranks, promoting clerks and agricultural instructors to chiefships. In its perplexities the government was withdrawing into itself and casting the blame for failure upon others. 'Mau Mau' was the screen on which it projected its anger and fears - an all-encompassing conspiracy of disobedience to the laws of improvement, which intimidated more moderate politicians, bewitched the masses and began, before the Emergency, to employ selective terror against the most upright chiefs and the staunchest of the Kikuyu Christians. Nevertheless, the novels of Robert Ruark should not be taken as a faithful guide to the official mind. Their stridency is a product of the brutalities of the Emergency years when 'Mau Mau' had narrowed down to the forest fighters. That the British counter-revolution to Mau Mau included the most vigorous programme of agrarian reform in colonial Africa is a much better indication of the complexity of the official view. Mau Mau's barbarity was a necessary attribute of a political movement which had to be destroyed.

2. Liberal nationalist historiography

The standard view was presented by Rosberg and Nottingham (1966). Their book was very much a product of its time. The 'colonial' view has been that Mau Mau represented the resentful agony of a backward society caught up in too rapid modernisation. Rosberg and Nottingham nailed this as 'myth'. It could be said that they invented a counter-myth, of Mau Mau as the militant wing of modernizing nationalism. The radicals were simply those who were fired by nationalists' institution-building but frustrated by colonial immobility. The opposition between moderates and militants was a matter more of tactics than fundamental society strategy. Africans, on this view, were divided more by region and tribe than by class position. The Kikuyu dominated politics because they had been the most mobilised by economic and educational change; they also had the strongest grievance in their 'stolen lands'. Their natural, highly competitive and decentralised egalitarianism had been accentuated in by white settlement. Generational conflict had become sharper, social competitiveness had generally turned in upon itself. But political violence did not really gather force until after the British declaration of Emergency, which removed the men of moderation from the scene and induced a mood of defensive despair. Mau Mau was a resistance movement of an ambitious tribe under siege.

3. Radical nationalist historiography

This tradition of explanation also first appeared in 1966, with

Barnett and Njama's book, an edited autobiography of a Mau Mau leader in the forests. It has been followed by Kaggia's autobiography (1955) and two Kikuyu historians, Kinyatti and Ng'anga (both 1977). All these argued not that the educated moderates were removed from leadership but that they actively betrayed a movement which they had helped to set in motion but whose social radicalism they increasingly feared. They wrote in a context not of triumphant nationalism but of a cynical neo-colonialism in which the post-independence elite exploited the sufferings of the poor whose sacrifices had broken the colonial-settler alliance. The underlying assumption of this historiographical tradition was that Kikuyu society was becoming increasingly class-divided, the main index of class formation being educational privilege. This division gave to the British the levers of political and economic co-optation in their efforts to make African nationalism safe for continued settler - and, by extension, capitalist - domination.

4. High politics among the Kikuyu

Two American scholars, Spencer (1977) and Glough (1978), free from nationalist triumphalism and radical anger, began to give some historical depth to the radical analysis of political competition between the Kikuyu leadership, but without its teleological hindsight. Rather, the competition was between 'ins' and 'outs', between chiefs and senior mission teachers who satisfied personal ambition and hoped to promote general social improvement through a critical accommodation with the colonial administration, and those of their colleagues who were like them in every way save in their exclusion from the narrow ranks of the collaborative establishment. 'Politics' was initiated by that establishment. After the Second War, the educated moderates did not so much betray the wider enthusiasms which they had evoked but, rather, retreated from the frustrations of political failure into individually profitable accommodations with colonial reality. The movement which they created became a hollow shell, available to be taken over by their permanent opposition, men who were driven to ever greater extremes more by the need to keep up with their followers than by their own radical vision of the future.

All these interpretations had in common an attempt to see Mau Mau as a whole. They gave priority to political leadership and intention. More recent work has assumed that social processes were at least as causatively significant as political leadership. It has also investigated the three separate regional bases of Kikuyu politics and has been uncertain how they became, or even whether they became linked by organisation and strategy.

5. Social differentiation in the Kikuyu Reserve

This was first investigated by Sorrenson (1967), who has been followed by Ng'anga (1977) and Njonjo (1977). Sorrenson argued that the main conflict was between the big men of Kikuyu lineage groups and their clients. The former repudiated the land rights of the latter, as land values in the Reserve rose not only due to the constrictions imposed by land alienation to whites but also because of the rising opportunities of the produce market, especially in Nairobi and among the labour forces on white plantations. Bundles of rights to land became forcibly simplified, lineage membership became more narrowly defined. Sorrenson reached the cautious and by no means unqualified

conclusion that, in the Reserve, Mau Mau gathered together the resentments of the dispossessed against the expropriators, the gentry. The corollary was that any political movement originated by the gentry for constitutional redress was likely to pass out of their control and turn against them. The weakness of his argument was the lack of detailed, oral, social and political data, lineage by lineage. To some extent this deficiency was made good by Njonjo's researches.

There have been two variations on this general theme:

a) Greet Kershaw's material, gathered in the 1950s but as yet unpublished, suggests very strongly that there was not so much a clear process of social differentiation as generalised uncertainty over rights to land where Kikuyu land law, premised on the availability of land as the reward of political allegiance, ceased to have any relevance. The implication of her argument is that the British declaration of Emergency both unified Kikuyu political opinion where there was no unity before, and created conditions of social panic and opportunist murder rather than social revolution. Her data is by far the most detailed that we possess, and her argument is the one on which I mainly build in my own explanation, below.

b) David Throup (also unpublished) argues that the most important process after the Second War was not so much land concentration as agrarian police action, as the gentry-chief enforced the colonial government's corvée-labour solution to soil erosion. The mass of the peasantry, peasant women especially, had to do two days' work per week on the hillside terraces. It was hard and unproductive labour for them. But the rural roads which they also constructed were of direct benefit to the gentry with a surplus to sell.

Throup's emphasis on what I have elsewhere called 'the second colonial occupation' provides three important insights. It links the preoccupations of the colonial state with mass rural unrest in the Reserves. It shows how rural resentment at agrarian rules provided the urban militants with a ready-made constituency when they invaded the moderate politicians' rural base in 1947. And it provides the most concrete linkage between the Kikuyu gentry and the workings of the colonial state.

6. Peasant resistance in the White Highlands

Kikuyu tenant farmers had been under pressure from their white landlords in the late 1920s. In the depression of the 1930s and, still more, during the Second War, they had regained a great deal of freedom to enlarge their own domestic production. At the end of the war the white settlers' district councils moved decisively to impose new, more restrictive labour contracts as the settlers' greater capitalisation freed them from their former dependence upon their black tenants. Squatter communities reacted with oaths of solidarity to resist the new contracts, with arson, cattle-maiming and machine-breaking. To the squatters their white landlords were guilty of breaking what they saw as the moral community between big men and clients. They had supposed that they were the joint heirs to the Highlands. Now white farmers were repudiating their squatter rights in much the same way as

the Kikuyu gentry had earlier repudiated their lineage rights in the Reserves. If the squatter resistance movement was Mau Mau, it was for several years highly successful. Right up until 1952 most squatters seem to have retained their customary rights to cultivation and grazing in despite of the new contracts. Their labour was too valuable to be repudiated by their employers; they also moved from farm to farm (or from manor to manor), exploiting the differences between Europeans who were at different stages of the intensification of production, and who had different combinations of agriculture and pastoralism, with different tolerances of squatter livestock. Mau Mau was first given its name in court proceedings in the Highlands.

There are three different interpretations of the squatter movement.

a) Furedi (1974) clearly sees the squatters as 'middle peasants', defending viable family smallholdings with the aid of a working network of natural leaders, the farm foremen, dairy clerks and independent squatter produce traders who had contacts all over the farm districts, focused upon markets and independent churches. His implicit comparison is with Captain Swing, 'the last peasants' revolt' in early nineteenth-century England.

b) Manogo (1980) prefers to see the squatter communities as more egalitarian and secretive, coming together in ignorance of their 'leaders' whom indeed they saw as potential quislings. Furedi saw the leaders as the oath administrators, Kanogo saw them as amongst the first to be murdered. Both used much the same oral material, and their divergence of interpretation is not easily explained.

c) Tamarkin (1976), in his study of the Highland market town of Nakuru, also questioned Furedi's thesis that the squatter resistance movement was controlled by its natural leaders. For in the town, the most successful members of Kikuyu society were ex-squatters who had become urban traders. They were too solid to be radical, and too vulnerable to white retaliation. But their moderate politics was outflanked and then spurned by the unemployed youths whom they had first introduced to political organisation as guards and errand-boys.

There is, then, perhaps a growing consensus that Mau Mau in the White Highlands, is to be understood in the context of political movements which outstrip the intentions of their originators, as popular perceptions of the possible and desirable overtake established perception.

The problem which faces historians who perceive Mau Mau primarily as a squatter resistance movement is how, if at all, it was connected with the more central political direction which was located elsewhere, whether among the moderate nationalist gentry in the Reserves, or among the militant trade unionists in Nairobi, who were their increasingly impatient rivals.

Most of the answer seems to lie in the history of the Olenguruone settlement scheme for 'surplus' farm squatters which the colonial government established on the western forest fringe of the Highlands during the war. All interpretations are on this point agreed. The

Colonial Office had insisted that this safety-valve be opened before any moves were made to restrict squatter rights. But both the Colonial Office and the colonial government were agreed that the settlement should be used as a pilot scheme for the greater official control over African land husbandry which was seen to be more generally necessary. Olenguruone became the site of a bitter clash between its Kikuyu tenants who insisted that the land was theirs by right of compensation for the land they had lost thirty years earlier to white colonisation, and the government which insisted that they were there as tenants of the state and subject to its agrarian rules of good husbandry. These determined oppositions were carried to the point of a mass oath of solidarity among the Kikuyu settlers and their subsequent mass eviction by government in 1948. The refugees dispersed, some to white farms, but most to the towns or as unwelcome clients on the land of distant relatives back in the Reserves.

Fund-raising for litigation and the interest of the vernacular press made Olenguruone a common cause for all the various strands of Kikuyu politics, but only for as long as it was an external grievance. The Kikuyu political notables in the Reserve were descended from those dominant families whose tenantry the squatters had once been. They were willing therefore to give them all support short of that which actually counted, absorbing them back on to the land from which they had been squeezed out a generation earlier.

7. Urban violence especially in Nairobi, 'the county town of Kikuyuland'.

The Kikuyu formed over half Nairobi's black population. Many more commuted thither daily, as workers, market gardeners and stallholders. The Kikuyu fed black Nairobi, they owned much of its lodging, controlled its retail-trade, transport, short-term credit, and prostitution; they had a good hold on the skilled and clerical occupations, they ran the trade unions. It was in Nairobi that politics acquired much of its violence; but it was in Nairobi's competitive ethnic political economy that divisions between Africans ensured that militant politics would be confined largely to the Kikuyu. One has to look at two contexts. The first, trade unionism, has been investigated by Stichter (1975) and Spencer (1977). Here, Kikuyu unionists found themselves fighting a rearguard action between their own, home-grown general unionism, and the officially sponsored industrial-craft unionism to which non-Kikuyu leaders tended to be co-opted. Membership drives overflowed from the shopfloor into the African residential locations, enforced by strong-arm visitors at dead of night. The second context, the retail trade in goods and services, has scarcely begun to be investigated and it will be very difficult to elucidate. The starting point might be the fact that moderate politicians and shopkeepers from non-Kikuyu peoples were the first victims of political terror in the early 1950s and in the first months of the Emergency. The defence of established commercial territory and organised crime were closely linked, and African Nairobi was virtually a no-go area for the security forces from October 1952 until April 1953.

Nairobi was the arena in which establishment politics was most decisively overturned by militant action. When the urban militants were invited by the rural gentry, Kenyatta among them, to assist in the general process of political mobilisation they proceeded to over-

turn its strategic premise, changing it from a weapon of political control to a lever for direct action.

One still has to uncover the linkages, the sense of strategic direction, in these three different strands of politics. To look for unswerving intention and absolute control would be to chase a mirage, to expect Mau Mau to be quite unlike any other political movement in history. It would be to fall into the trap of the colonial interpretation and the radical nationalist one as well. What one can reasonably expect is both more modest and more difficult to analyse: a growing sense of the unity of the political field on which these various conflicts were enacted. So, and this is where my own ideas begin to take off from earlier investigations, I am looking for two keys to a process. These seem to be provided by:

i) a concept of political periodisation; and ii) a concept of cultural boundary-laying, which defines the issues and the competitors. These come to tie the different strands, not into a unified movement, but into a unified field of competition. The competitors can be defined as follows:

- defensive 'middle' and poor peasants in the Reserves and White Highlands;
- aggressive traders and trade unionists in the towns;
- dominant elites in the Reserve, gentry, chiefs, senior mission teachers.

The first resisted the interventions of state and white settlers; the second were attempting, with increasing desperation, to gain more purchase on the workings of the state, if needs be by overturning its rules of collaborative access; the third were attempting to use their already established position to moderate the procedures of the state on the first two, so as to preserve their own dominance.

This search brings me to:

8. The growth of Kikuyu ethnicity

This is implicit in but not positively explored by Buijtenhuijs (1971). Being in French, this work has had none of the influence which its open-minded rigour deserves. But it is by standing on the shoulders of Buijtjenhuijs and Kershaw (also Dutch by birth) that I think one can most profitably peer further. Buijtenhuijs took as his central problem the 'three Mau Maus', much as I have myself outlined them, and their presumed linkage.

He found the answer both in their link through conflict between political elites (the particular interest of Spencer), those who strove for 'political control', and those who countered them with 'direct action' by making the oath of political allegiance cheap and open to all, including women; and in a 'culturalist' explanation, the very interpretation favoured by the colonial government at the time and, for that reason, outlawed as a legitimate sphere of investigation by subsequent non-colonial scholars anxious not to be branded as apologists of colonialism.

Buijtenhuijs came to grips with the question of what it meant to be a Kikuyu peasant rather than just any peasant. He rejected the imputa-

tion of savage atavism which the colonial perspective attached to Kikuyu-ness but nonetheless, and rightly, insisted that men and women can act only within their own traditions, which provide them with an 'economy of effort' in organisation and explanation, however 'radical' their intentions may be. He emphasised three Kikuyu institutions in particular (which had not been ignored by Rosberg and Nottingham, either):

a) generational conflict, both at the level of the household and the lineage settlement;
b) disputes within and between lineages over rights of access to land;
c) the importance to the Kikuyu of fee-payment and oaths in legal disputes and in the passage of individual men through successive statuses in life in company with their age-mates; Kikuyu life was strikingly formalised.

What Buijtenhuijs did not quite do was to set these traditional institutions and disputes into a chronology of change and growing definition, a chronology which came to crystallise not only the Kikuyu as a tribe but also the political constituencies which came to fight for its control.

To carry the argument this stage further, one needs to explore four, interlinked, historical contexts. I will give here only an outline scheme:

1) The changing relationship between the colonial state (understood as both a set of politico-economic relationships and as a governing, largely bureaucratic set of institutions) and the dominant classes, white and black, which composed the political nation. In the Kenya case one needs to watch the relationshp between the growth of private proprietary power, among settlers and African notables, and the growth of state intervention to make this growing power tolerable: a combination of contradictory constraints upon fresh openings for the mass of peasantry.

2) The changing relationship between mass peasant discontent and organised political opinion (eventually competitive African nationalism), within the context of the question posed by Eric Wolf: to whom can rural populations turn for alternative patrons when faced by the 'double squeeze' between state and notables outlined above. In the Kenya case, and in all colonial situations, the alternative patrons, the 'politicians' were those based in new, often informal institutions which linked the state as a whole and the separate rural worlds, mission schools, district councils, officially tolerated traders' associations, tribal welfare associations, etc. That is, even the alternative patrons were to be found only in the advancing edge of class-formation - a very complex phenomenon which is explored further in (4) below.

3) The experience of regionally and culturally specific peasantries in socio-economic change - the particular perspective of Buijtenhuijs - but which needs a periodization best provided, I think, by:

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