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Résumé
Le mythe mau mau : le discours politique kenyan à la recherche de la démocratie. — Quarante ans après que les autorités britanniques du Kenya aient proclamé l'état d'urgence pour écraser les Mau Mau, les réponses concluantes sur la nature de ce qu'avait été ce mouvement restent à venir. Depuis 1961, des débats incessants ont lieu à propos de l'interprétation du mythe mau mau, et plus particulièrement quant la pertinence de ce mythe dans le domaine socio-politique. Le gouvernement, qu'il s'agisse de celui de Kenyatta ou de Moi, disposait du pouvoir de décider quels thèmes mau mau devaient figurer dans le discours politique officiel et la manière dont ils devaient être présentés. Il a donc défini comment l'histoire kenyanne et, plus particulièrement, la mémoire collective du mouvement mau mau ont été reconstruites. Différentes composantes de la société kenyanne sont entrées en conflit à cause d'analyses contradictoires de ce mouvement, manifestant ainsi que la question mau mau était indissociable d'un débat permanent portant sur l'idéologie et le pouvoir au Kenya. Ce débat prit une tournure tellement importante que certains adversaires rejetèrent le mouvement mau mau et tentèrent de le chasser de la mémoire en l'enfermant dans les cachots de l'histoire.

Abstract
Forty years after the British colonial authorities in Kenya declared a state of emergency to crush the Mau Mau, conclusive answers to what was the Mau Mau are still intriguing. Since 1961 there has been an ongoing dispute over the interpretation of the Mau Mau myth, especially in relation to its relevance to the socio-political presence. The government, whether Kenyatta's or Moi's, has had the power at its disposal to determine which themes in the official discourse should be stressed, and in what light should the Mau Mau be perceived. In so doing, it determined the ways in which Kenyan history and specifically the collective memory of the Mau Mau was reconstructed. Various elements within the Kenyan society have clashed over conflicting interpretations of the Mau Mau, thus indicating that the whole issue of the Mau Mau was part of an ongoing political debate over the questions of ideology and power in Kenya. This debate was broadened to such an extent that some of the contestants were unwilling to accept the Mau Mau and tried to lock the memory of it back in the "historical closet".
The Mau Mau Myth
Kenyan Political Discourse in Search of Democracy

Forty years after the British colonial authorities in Kenya declared a state of emergency to crush the Mau Mau, conclusive answers to what was the Mau Mau are still intriguing. Was the Mau Mau a primitive, psychotic, dangerous and evil secret cult, a Kikuyu internal conflict and guerrilla war, or a heroic liberation struggle? The term Mau Mau itself arose from a linguistic void and its etymology is unknown. This is the main and most vivid feature of the Mau Mau which, since 1952, embodies meanings as divergent as the interests of the adversaries themselves.

Since 1961 there has been an ongoing dispute over the interpretation of the Mau Mau myth, especially in relation to its relevance to the socio-political presence. The government, whether Kenyatta’s or Moi’s, has had the power in its disposal to determine which themes in the official discourse will be stressed and in what light will the Mau Mau be perceived. This power determined the ways in which Kenyan history and specifically the collective memory of the Mau Mau was reconstructed. However, this power was partially limited to the ethnic and regional bases of the ruling elite. Various elements within the Kenyan society have clashed over conflicting interpretations of the Mau Mau. The main participants in this contest were Kenyan intellectuals, opposition political figures, the Kikuyu people and government personnel, into which were drawn some aging ex-Mau Mau fighters as well. The historical and fictional writings on the Mau Mau by Kenya’s leading intellectual dissidents

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1. Posing this question concerning the nature of the Mau Mau was taken from an excellent study of the Mau Mau by BERMAN (1991: 181).
2. This dispute is well reflected in the academic research. As an example, see ATIENO-ODHIAMBO (1988), KENNEDY (1992), BUITEMHUIS (1973), LONSDALE (1990), to name only a few.

was a major factor in their detention, trials and exile; thus, indicating that the whole issue of the Mau Mau was part of a political debate over the questions of ideology and power in Kenya, debate which was broadened to such an extent that some of the contestants were unwilling to accept the Mau Mau and tried to lock the memory of it back in the "historical closet". It can be said that, in Kenya, the Mau Mau myth has engendered a multiplicity of interpretations, each vying for broad acceptance. When one achieved ascendancy over the others, it reflected a change in the logos of political power and ideological orientation.

This article will focus on several issues concerning the invocation of the Mau Mau myth and its permanence in Kenyan political discourse since independence. The emphasis will be upon the fight for democracy that has taken place since 1988. The concept of myth as well as the related notion of historical and common memory will be considered within the framework of the various interpretations of the Mau Mau. The main section of this article will address the ongoing contest over the past and will be limited to that between the KANU (Kenya African National Union) ruling party, and both the formal and the informal opposition. The manner with which the myth was manipulated will be traced as well as the motives for those manipulations and their outcome. The analysis will center around the concept of the Mau Mau as both the stage and the language of the political debate in the 1990s. This whole discussion over the use of the Mau Mau will illuminate the political history of Kenya as well as the recent debate for democracy, the election campaigns and the first multi-party elections in Kenya since 1963.

Using parts of Ram's coherent definition of myth (1993: 11), the Mau Mau will be analyzed here as a "... story that narrates the events of the past [...] and is indispensable for the survival of man and society. Myth transmits conceptions which sustain man's existence in the ambiguous world by explaining to him his peculiar and unique reality [...]. Myth locates the present of a community in the historical sequence, and thus provides it with notions to understand reality". Man, Eliade (1958: x) argues, "considers himself the end product of mythical history, that is, of a series of events that took place in illo tempore, the beginning of time". But myth has also an exemplary function as it "conveys exemplary models for human behavior, for all significant human activities and institutions" (Ram 1993: 12). In other words myth provides practical assistance for

4. For a detailed discussion of the role of myth in understanding history and current events, see Smith (1986); Mullins (1972: 510). See also Thompson (1990), Sivan (1988: 10).
coming to grips with reality. In sum, it can be seen as a cognitive-interpreive and operative-behavioral framework for the individual and society in a specific place and time. In this manner, mythical time is reversible in that myth assures man that what he is about to do has already been done. Hence, it helps him overcome doubts as to the worthiness of his actions (ibid.: 9-13). Myth, as a conceptual and operative notion is directly linked with ideology as the theoretical and operational collective framework for action, transformation, historical change and consciousness.

The first version of the Mau Mau myth which is, to a large extent, the most influential is the colonial one. This European myth advanced the notion that the Mau Mau was a Kikuyu revolt. It was viewed as a pathological reaction to the pressures of modernization, and not as a movement that was the outcome of a long series of real and objective political and economic grievances. The second major interpretation that developed around the Mau Mau revolt is generally called the “African Myth”. It was created and advocated by ex-Mau-Mau fighters, African nationalists and historians. This version was basically a strong reaction against the European one, its main elements being the justification of the revolt and the “undoing” of the savage, psychotic and religious-cult images of the Mau Mau. The advocates of this interpretation tried to “rehabilitate” the movement, not in the sense which the colonial rulers gave to this word, but in the real sense of the term. In doing this, they have in turn spawned a new myth, the “African myth of the Mau Mau”. A third interpretation is the “Euro-African myth” that developed between

5. ELIADE (1957: 37). See also ANDERSON (1968); GEERTZ (1973: 104).
7. For a thorough discussion on the term “ideology” and its difference with “myth”, see MULLINS (1972). On the flexibility of myth in this context, see TUDOR (1972: 24); BROWER (1971).
8. The leading works are those of MITCHELL (1954), BROM (1956), LEAKEY (1952).
10. BUITENHUIJS (1973: 46). There are few books that are major within this myth framework. The first one is by J. M. KARIUKI (1964) and was the first to be written by a Kenyan African (who had been detained for belonging to the Mau Mau, though not to the forest fighters) presenting his version of the revolt and the emergency period. The second book, and probably the most important one is ROSBERG & NOTTINGHAM (1966). The authors reject the European myth of the Mau Mau and go into a detailed analysis of the history of Kenya and Kikuyu politics since 1914, and the historical background of the revolt. The third work of importance was written by W. IROTE (ex-General China) (1967), and it presented the first thorough analysis of the revolt from inside. Like ROSBERG & NOTTINGHAM he claims the Mau Mau was a modern nationalist movement. Other books, though not all, lead to the same conclusion: FUREDI (1989), KANOGO (1987), THROUP (1988). When relating to the various memory books written by ex-Mau Mau fighters or supporters, a variety of interpretations of the
1961-63 and had elements from the two previous versions. It saw the Mau Mau as obnoxious, abnormal and shameful. President Kenyatta (1968: 189) expressed this idea in a meeting in Githunguri, in September 1962, saying: "We are determined to have independence in peace, and we shall not allow hooligans to rule Kenya. We must have no hatred towards one another [...] Mau Mau was a disease which had been eradicated, and must never be remembered again". This is obviously a very strong condemnation of the Mau Mau that must be seen in the historical context. In adopting the European myth of the Mau Mau, Kenyatta sought to reassure Britain that Kenya was ready for independence. In all later speeches he did not go as far, and refrained from using the term Mau Mau; instead he talked of the nationalist movement and the struggle for independence, and the entire "episode" was put aside. This marginalization of the Mau Mau was the second characteristic of the Euro-African myth.

In the following discussion I will relate to the flexible nature of the Mau Mau myth by analyzing and comparing the attitude towards the Mau Mau during Kenyatta’s and Moi’s reign. This analysis will be both thematic and chronological. The focus will be on the way different groups of the Kenyan society have harnessed the Mau Mau to further their own political goals, thus turning the Mau Mau into the only form of relatively free political debate. More precisely, I will trace the unique process of one’s creation of his own people’s collective memory and the obliteration of his rivals. I will not relate to the validity of the various interpretations of the myth since there is not one single exclusive historical truth in relation to the Mau Mau.

Kenyatta and the Mau Mau, 1963-1978

President Kenyatta’s attitude towards the Mau Mau was extremely complicated and flexible. Yet, it can be divided chronologically between the first phase of his reign (1961-1970) and the second (1970-1978), and thematically between Kenyatta’s attitude towards the Mau Mau freedom fighters, on the one hand, and the ideology, methods and historical memory of the Mau Mau, on the other. As a pragmatic politician, Kenyatta had to play down the Mau Mau as much as possible because most European settlers’ fears as well as those of the British government were closely linked with their perception of the Mau Mau. What they were afraid of was not so much independent Kenya, but a Mau Mau dom-
inated Kenya (Buijtenhuijs 1973: 55). Not only the European factor had to be appeased but also the Kenyan people who didn’t support the Mau Mau and challenged them on certain issues. To this segment of the Kenyan population one could add the Kikuyu people who did not identify with the Mau Mau fight and ideology and for whom it represented a splitting episode in their history. This ideological pragmatism was expressed in the first years of Kenyatta’s reign in the abandonment of the goals the Mau Mau movement had stood for: mainly the return of land ownership rights and the redistribution of land. African farmers had to pay for the land on the settlement scheme, even if they were ex-forest Mau Mau fighters. This issue has been a major one in the Kenyan political discourse during Kenyatta’s reign, and political leaders close to the Mau Mau ideology regularly complained that: “We were struggling to regain our own lands which were stolen by the British colonial Government. We were not fighting for the right to buy our own land.”

One may say that, up to the late 1960s, Kenyatta, and most of his government (with the exception of the KPU people), had adopted the European interpretation of the Mau Mau myth, whose historical memory has divided both the Kikuyu and the Kenyan society at large, thus turning this memory into an extremely dangerous and sensitive subject. The Mau Mau issue was not raised on a regular basis and was commonly ignored in an attempt to erase it from the collective memory.

Since the late 1960s, there has been a trend to accommodate the Mau Mau into the Kenyan historical memory. Kenyatta began to mention the fighters in a more positive fashion: their struggle was highlighted and their contribution to independence reconstructed. In other words, the Mau Mau was rehabilitated (to use the British expression). Nevertheless, it must be said that this accommodation was done only after reconstructing some of the major original themes—according to the African myth of the Mau Mau—and emphasizing the drive for freedom. In other words, there was an attempt to narrow and marginalize the entire concept of Mau Mau, thus creating a more confined, neutralized and presumably nationally acceptable myth. Without going in depth into the historical context of the 1970s, it is clear that Kenyatta felt strong enough to raise the historical memory of the Mau Mau from oblivion without fearing an explosive reaction. He did it when he needed political support: at the beginning of the 1970s, Kenyatta’s hold in the Kikuyu’s Fort Hall and Nyeri areas was unstable, and he tried, by returning part of the independence glory to the region and its history, to regain the people’s sup-

13. The KPU (Kenya People’s Union) was an opposition political party, of which Oginga Odinga was one of its prominent members.
14. The best example would be KENYATTA’s own monograph (1968) where he describes the Mau Mau in the colonialist manner.
Kenyatta’s manipulations of the Mau Mau historical memory left it as no more than an empty symbol. By doing this he actually repeated his own political maneuvers of the 1960s where he used, or rather abused, the Mau Mau myth to gain his political power. Only this time the logos of the discourse and the historical memory were different.

In the transition period, mainly 1975-76, the people of the Gikikuyu Embu Meru Association (GEMA) dominated by Kikuyu-Kiambu, called for a change in the wording of the Constitution that would have limited the term of the vice-president in power and allowed them to organize a wide base of support for their candidate. The GEMA tried to consolidate Kikuyu support and widen its base in the Fort Hall and Nyeri areas and, in so doing, its representatives called upon “Kikuyu solidarity that dates back to the glorious days of our common struggle”. But the GEMA leaders neglected the splitting features of the Mau Mau and tried to use this memory as a unifying theme in a society that suffered from internal conflicts. On a different occasion the house of the late Mau Mau leading general, Kimathi, was visited, and the GEMA people paid tribute to his courageous leadership. It must be said that these people were seeking support from the Luo and other groups so these acts of “Kikuyu solidarity” can be seen as being part of a much wider public relations effort. They had thus a significant meaning in the ongoing process of reconstructing the historical memory of the Mau Mau up to 1978, and in molding the political debate in the country.

Moi and the Mau Mau, 1978-1992

After succeeding Kenyatta in 1978, President Moi, a Kalenjine, was faced with a divided, yet very powerful, Kikuyu elite. This was compounded by high expectations for prosperity in the western (non Kikuyu) parts of Kenya. The political discourse was overwhelmed by “ethnic arithmetics” as key elements in the power struggle (Widner 1992: 125-127). The coalition around President Moi and his Vice-President, Kibaki (a Kikuyu), was based in part on the expenditure of harambee resources in the Central Province to reassure Kikuyu supporters there (ibid.: 127). For this, Kibaki organized a group of emissaries to assist him in gaining wide support. Among other efforts in the Central Province, he organized harambee for the Dedan Kimathi Institute for Technology in Nyeri

17. CPK Newsletter, Murang’a, July 1975.
18. Harambee is a Kiswahili term relating to the notion of a common effort to achieve a specific goal, and it became a synonym for fund raising functions as well as a way to describe mobilization of funds and labor.
district. While visiting Mount Kenya and Aberder areas, Kibaki and his Kikuyu men made a point not to ignore the uniqueness of the role played by the Kikuyu in the area. They did not “call the devil by its name” but made vividly clear to their audience the full meaning of their words. By doing so the Kikuyu politicians tried to blur the border between the Kikuyu ethno-entity and the Kenyan one. The Kikuyu-nominated Members of Parliament, on behalf of the Moi-Kibaki coalition, often contrasted the policy of the current regime with that of the previous government which had ignored the Mau Mau. This, one should note, happened under the leadership of a non-Kikuyu President seeking support from the widest possible coalition. In this context, Moi’s government was willing to pay the price of using the problematic historical memory of the Mau Mau, although it may not have foreseen the consequences of reopening the political debate centered around the Mau Mau. In his first months in office, Moi won a reputation as a “populist” and a defender of the poor people, the wananchi. As such, he released twenty-six political detainees who had been jailed by Kenyatta, most of them spokesmen for the abused people. The leading figure among them was the Kenyan writer, Ngugi Wa Thiong’o, who had condemned the whole socio-political situation in Kenya. He specifically based his allegations on the “Betrayed Revolution” in reference to the letting down of the goals of the freedom fighters—the struggle against inequality and broken political promises. By associating himself, even temporarily, with these claims, Moi reinstated the issue of the frustrated Mau Mau people in the public historical memory.

Mau Mau as Both a Fragmenting and Controlling Device

Between 1980 and 1990, President Moi implemented major changes in policy which may be summarized as the shift from Kenyatta’s politics of exchange, known as harambee, to Moi’s politics of control, known as Nyayo (ibid.: 130). The year 1982 can be seen as a turning point in Moi’s regime. During this year there were a shift to a one-party state (de jure), an attempted coup d’État and the reinstatement of the detention laws, suspended in 1978. After the attempted coup, the Office of the President introduced a series of restrictions to try and curtail underground societies and associations: the ability to speak freely using ethnic terms and emphasizing solidarity on common historical-ethnic grounds was restricted; ethnic organizations were banned and the entire issue of ethnicity

19. Kibaki was one of the leading politicians to help establish this institution in 1971. He was the head figure in the main harambee gatherings.
21. Wananchi, in Kiswahili, refers to the common people.
was seen as seditious. Troubled with the attempted coup and attentive to the effectiveness of the "divide and rule" strategy for controlling the opposition, Moi began to sow the seeds of division among Kikuyu representatives in the cabinet, as had Kenyatta before him. This policy of fragmentation included the use of the Mau Mau myth as a dividing factor among Kikuyu political figures and Kikuyu people in the various areas of the country. Moi in fact revived the splitting features already present in Kikuyu society during the days of the Mau Mau.

In December 1982, Moi launched an overall attack on the powerful Kikuyu politician, Charles Njonjo, formally Moi's strongest ally, which ended in Njonjo's expulsion from the government and the party in the summer of 1983. Moi then nominated a former Mau Mau central committee member, Kariuki Chotara, into a puppet position, and through Chotara channeled harambee funds to previously neglected areas and formerly unsupported causes: land to ex-freedom fighters, school fees to family members of the forest fighters as well as other projects. These funds were meant to deepen the divisions within the Kikuyu people but, more important, to strengthen the position of President Moi as a national figure. In doing so Moi played the role of a traditional Mzee taking care of his people and paying respect to their forgotten glorious history.

In 1985 the Mau Mau myth was once again invoked in the inner Kikuyu struggles inflamed by the President and his allies. In a campaign to reduce Kibaki's power in Nyeri, a few Kikuyu politicians joined forces to secure the nomination of Elijah Mwangale at the vice-presidency and strengthen their own power in the Central Province. In an unofficial visit to Kibaki's constituency, leading Kikuyu politicians from other areas, together with Mwangale (a Baluya), managed to gather some of the most important Kikuyu politicians. This was done with the assistance of Chotara Kariuki. These gatherings were possible only because Chotara used his old ties and friends from the Mau Mau, among them Samuel Thiberi and Waweru Kanja. The legitimacy of Mwangale was explained to Kikuyu politicians on the basis of his allies' role within the Mau Mau, and it stood in contrast to Kibaki's distance from this important part of their past. Here again the ties with ex-Mau Mau fighters were used as a stage to legitimize a current political act and, at the same time, to denounce a

24. Mzee, in Kiswahili, is the founding father, the head of the family unit. Kenyatta was considered the Mzee of Kenya, and was usually addressed by this title.
25. For this political struggle in the Kikuyu, as well as the use of the Mau Mau ties, see Widner (1992: 149), though he doesn't give the Mau Mau ties this kind of power as given in this article.
previously accepted one. Kibaki’s harsh response to this gathering and others like it was unusual. In a big rally in Karatina town—a center of ex-Mau Mau residence—he accused the organizers of being “political tourists” who come from other districts to stir up local animosities. In addition he said that: “those politicians were traveling Nyeri’s roads at night in pick-ups full of fat rams, to give to their local godfathers” so as to convince people of their strength (ibid.: 153, 155). These harsh statements turned sharp-tongued politicians against him. At the next gathering in the area, just before the elections for local and national posts in KANU were held, Ngumbu Njururi, a local MP, challenged the Vice-President. In his speech he blamed Kibaki of falsely accusing local politicians saying that those he called “Godfathers” hosting “political tourists” were ex-Mau Mau leaders headed by the one-time Mau Mau leader, Waweru Kanja (ibid.). By saying this Njururi, a newcomer to parliamentary politics, based his criticism on the common historical vision of the Mau Mau in Nyeri district, and on the sacred bondship between the Kikuyu and the Mau Mau. From his point of view, this contest for political power was founded on the assumption that the use of Kanja’s name would provide him with a strong tactic and a practical advantage against the other contestants. The Mau Mau was the language of the political debate about power which otherwise was hardly possible. Furthermore, it is clear that, in this battle against the Vice-President Kibaki, Njururi himself was backed by strong non-Kikuyu politicians, maybe even the President. In this way they gave their recognition to Njururi’s usage and definition of the Mau Mau historical memory and to the fact that it was used as the frame for the political debate.

As previously stated, the Mau Mau myth had a dual practical purpose—providing exemplary models of behavior, on the one hand, and a clear explanation of reality, society, its past and present, on the other. That is to say, the interpretation of the Mau Mau led to the mobilization of the very Kikuyu people who otherwise would have rallied around a different political leader (Sivan 1988: 10). In trying to legitimate Kanja or to delegitimize Kibaki or Njonjo, the appeal to the common past was influential. Both functions of the myth were achieved in these cases not through a rational discourse, but rather through an appeal to the emotive, non-rational layers of the Kikuyu human experience (ibid.).

26. It is important to note that not all Kikuyu claiming to be Mau Mau men were actually part of the fighting forces during the struggle. Yet, as Mau Mau became a vehicle for power its boarders were stretched and many non-fighters integrated themselves within the movement. To my knowledge no “loyalists” claimed to be Mau Mau fighters but many non-soldiers have done so.
Mau Mau and MwaKenya

During the 1980s several attempts were made to voice opposing political ideologies and to condemn political restrictions, the denial of democracy and corruption. The leading figures in this enterprise were Kenyan intellectuals, in local universities and in exile, among whom were Koigi Wa Wamwere and the author Ngugi Wa Thiong'o. Both men founded associations to express their sentiments and advance ideas oppositional to the government; above all the call for a radical redistribution of land. Of these associations, the MwaKenya received the most attention and yet was the least understood. Although not being a formal organization, its ideas, according to government criteria, were radical. Among these were demands for a multi-party democratic political system, the withdrawal of foreign military facilities and a Marxist-type renovation of the country’s economic and political structures and activities. Its members were bound by loyalty oaths similar to the loyalty ceremonies of the Mau Mau. However, its basis of operation was mainly in London and its leading figures were from a completely different socio-economic background than that of the Mau Mau people. Nevertheless, the ideas of the movement found a strong base of support among the Kikuyu farmers and were transmitted individually and communally between the farmers in the Central Province. Some of these farmers, mainly in Narok and Nyeri districts, were supporters of and participants in the Mau Mau revolt, and considered their identification with MwaKenya as reviving the days of struggle and hope. Their main concern was the land issue. The Mau Mau notion of the “oppressed bond”—fighting the oppressors—was revitalized through MwaKenya logos, and this in turn alerted Moi’s government, which consequently imprisoned over a hundred people on charges of being members of MwaKenya. Although MwaKenya was not a full-fledged organization in shape, hierarchy and ideology, it attracted much of the government’s attention. This was compounded by the fact that, by repeatedly condemning MwaKenya’s ideas, the government in effect publicized them. The political opposition reused the Mau Mau historical memory as its language to carry its ideas on a common and known ground. The Moi government’s fear of MwaKenya can be compared to the British colonial government’s fear of the Mau Mau. In both cases the authorities were challenged by the binding powers of oaths and cere-

27. There is a reason to suppose that Thiongo’s London-based organization, Umoja, and other Kenyan exile organizations had a strong connection to MwaKenya or even were part of the movement itself. See Widner (1992: 177-178).
28. Interview with two Kikuyu men (who asked to remain anonymous) working in an international company based in Nairobi, April 1992. They did not claim to be members of MwaKenya but insisted on explaining the meaning of its ideas, as Kikuyu, to an outsider.
monies, coupled with demands for land redistribution and for change in the political system.

Moi’s regime, as well as the supporters of MwaKenya, played in the same arena of Kenyan historical memory, and both drew on the same features of the Mau Mau but from opposite sides of the barricade. The hysterical reaction of Moi’s government to the ideas of MwaKenya are a clear indication of the continuing existence, among the Kenyan ruling classes, of the “European Myth” of the Mau Mau as a “liberation revolt”, while it is equally clear that this interpretation also remains powerful among certain parts of the Kikuyu.30

Unity and Freedom: Reshaping the Mau Mau

The above discussion notwithstanding, the fact remains that the issue of the Mau Mau was mostly ignored and omitted from the public political discourse. In most cases the Mau Mau was only intentionally retrieved on Independence Day and on Kenyatta’s Day.31 On these occasions, the Mau Mau struggle was always upheld as part of the revived Kenyan history. In President Moi’s speeches new political and ideological ideas were generally invoked, and the Mau Mau revolt always interpreted as a struggle for unity and freedom—the two major political themes in Moi’s ideology that received ample attention. In linking the current ideology of unity and freedom with the Mau Mau, Moi attempted to show that the present regime was following the basic policies of the struggle for independence. Thus, one can see the appeal to the Mau Mau as an attempt to regain Kikuyu support for Moi’s regime which was facing a crisis in the Central Province. These two themes were given a completely new meaning by President Moi, and were placed within the general policy of “Nyayoism”—“do what the office of the President tells you to do, and there is no place for divisions because the President is the provider of unity and freedom”.32 On all other occasions, the Mau Mau historical memory was invoked in connection with opposition ideologies. It can be

30. It must be said that not only Kikuyu people were charged with membership in the movement. The most vocal non-Kikuyu was Yusuf Hassan from the Somali areas who established a London-based organization called UKenya, and who was considered one of the leading figures in MwaKenya. For more information, see WIDNER (1992: 178).

31. The issue of a myth receiving special attention during holidays, festivals and memorial days is analyzed in details in SIVAN (1988: 131-132). One of the most interesting facts about Kenya is that Kenyatta’s Day is celebrated the same day the British Colonial regime declared a state of emergency to crush the Mau Mau—October 20th.

32. I have asked several Kenyans to explain what they thought was “Nyayoism” and that was their answer (Interviews with P. Mbayaji, F. Mmbone, and others, Aug. 1992, Nairobi).
said that Moi has used the Mau Mau historical memory in a nationalistic perspective, hence marginalizing the tribalist-ethnic features of this memory and rejecting old loyalties or group identities. In this way Moi had the Mau Mau myth shaped and reshaped in a reconstructing process in accordance with his premises and values, and in response to his particular conception of the political situation at hand.

The late 1980s in Kenya were characterized by the process of centralization which solidified the presidential control over the party, the administrative bodies, the army and the judicial system. There were no avenues for the expression of demands or dissent. The opposition operated mainly through organizations such as the Law Society of Kenya and the various churches. Under the direct control of the President, the party took disciplinary action against members of Parliament and many prominent MPs were expelled. Among them were a few Kikuyu, such as Josephat Karanja, Kenneth Matiba and Charles Rubia. Matiba and Rubia were also detained. Moi threatened to expel more MPs and emphasized the need for unity within the ruling power and the country. As the President put it: “The jigger has been removed but many little eggs remain in the wound and they must be killed.” The party was intolerant of those criticizing government policies and actions. It expanded its ability to interfere in the decision-making processes of other representative organizations, and for this took over various police functions. Within this political framework no free political debate was possible, and any mention of the Mau Mau in the context of raising demands for the needy and the poor, or as a reminder of the desire for real freedom, was harshly condemned by government personnel.

The Rise of an Opposition

The end of 1989 and the beginning of 1990 saw the rise of a strong political opposition to Moi’s regime. Dissent was voiced by various circles: the intellectual community, members of the Law Society of Kenya, the Central Province farmers unions, and the Church of the Province of Kenya. All their claims were centered around specific issues, usually focusing on economic change, election procedures and the very right to express demands. Yet there was no organized group calling for an overall change in the country. The first attempt to organize an opposition group was led by Charles Rubia and Kenneth Matiba, in May

34. One exception is Bishop Henry Okullu of the Church of the Province of Kenya who, since the mid 1980s, demanded a more open political system and advocated pluralism in all aspects of life. Officially the CPK did not stand behind those demands, though most of its leading clergy were supporting them.
1990. Their first move was to call a joint press conference and urge the legalization of the opposition parties in Kenya. These voices once again raised themes from the historical narrative of the liberation period and specifically from the Mau Mau days. Both Matiba and Rubia fought for a larger political space, partly using the Mau Mau as a language frame for those demands. Yet, neither one had direct contact with the freedom fighting process nor were they identified as Mau Mau people or supporters. Both men were successful businessmen coming from the Central Province and well placed in the political and bureaucratic system of Kenya since the late 1950s. This call for change was backed up by the American ambassador's requirement that the political system of Kenya be modified. Moi saw a link between the two statements, condemning them both.

The Matiba-Rubia group applied for a license to hold a public rally in Kamakunji grounds in Nairobi. The request was turned down but the movement for a multi-party system could not be stopped. The opposition and the expression of the public dissatisfaction was once again in the hands of the wananchi, whose methods to express despair over the existing situation varied and were extremely creative.

Since opposition parties and gatherings were illegal, in order to evade persecution, songs, prayers and Kenyatta's old speeches were used. Songs praising Matiba and Rubia were played on the matatu drivers' radios, together with other new songs calling for return of the glorious days of the past. Some of the songs criticized government actions against poor wananchi comparing them—symbolically—to the past days of the colonial rule. Most of these songs were in Kikuyu, and were composed and played by the Kikuyu people. Many of the lyrics had double meanings, including non-explicit references to the Mau Mau struggle, and were best understood by Kikuyu-speaking people. Referring to this issue Mr N. Biwot (a Kalenjine), the Minister of Energy said in Parliament:

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35. Choosing Kamakunji grounds for their political rally had deeper meanings than just a large open stadium—these grounds were used by Kenyan nationalists during the struggle for independence. It was precisely for this reason that they, as well as president Moi, centered around that area. Just after their first public speech the President held a meeting in Kamakunji and said: "This is a place for hot politics" (Weekly Review, May 18, 1990).

36. In May 1990, the same month the Matiba-Rubia group came out publicly demanding political pluralism, Moi issued an order to remove all Kenyatta's portraits from public places. The explanation was that the public was confused as to "who was the President" when both pictures were on. The order was received with great anger in the Central Province and elsewhere and contributed to the general feeling of discontent. The newspapers of the time are full of cynical remarks about the order and the explanation to it. See for example Finance, N°16, June 1990.

37. Matatu: A small bus, and the most common means of transport used in Kenya.

38. The report on the songs and the following debate were well reported in the daily news. See Daily Nation, July 6, and July 7, 1990; Standard, July 8, 1990; Weekly Review, July 6, 1990. The five most popular compositions in Kikuyu were:
“One of those songs had the wordings, and I quote: ‘There is a smell of blood in the air and the river should go where it belongs’”. He went on to explain: “That, in Kikuyu terminology, means that the leadership should go back to where it was”. The government launched a campaign against the matatu drivers and their music, calling them “dissident and subversive elements of society”. The use of Kenyatta’s speeches by opposition groups is an extremely important issue for this debate since, as has been discussed above, Kenyatta can hardly be seen as enhancing the African myth of the Mau Mau. Nevertheless, after twelve years of Moi’s rule the very mention of Kenyatta, together with the terms “national movement” or “the struggle for freedom”, were enough to generate repression. In addition, these terms had the power to unite the opposition under the umbrella of their common historical memory and also to cause panic in the government, which, as a result, banned the broadcasting of Kenyatta’s speeches, trying thus to stop the political debate they enhanced. It must be stressed that, in 1990, neither these speeches nor the public Kikuyu political discourse included specific reference to the Mau Mau. Nevertheless, together with songs specifically commemorating the event, they revived the notion of a glorious Kikuyu past. Therefore, without explicitly mentioning the Mau Mau it was common knowledge, within parts of the Kikuyu population, that the aim of the quoted speeches and of the songs was to strengthen their community in the ongoing power struggle for change. In this process, elements of strength and dignity were retrieved from the Mau Mau and made relevant to the present situation, while the language, symbols and signs used in the Mau Mau received new and more suited meanings for the political struggle. Thus, this struggle for freedom from outside domination became a symbol of that for internal freedom.

On the official level, warnings were sent to all Kenyans to refrain from participating in illegal political meetings. On July 4, 1991, three days before the proposed rally in Nairobi, police arrested and detained Rubia Matiba, several lawyers and other political leaders. The crackdown on these opposition figures—the advocates of a multi-party Kenya—provoked large-scale violence all over the country. The riots began on July 7,

Muoroto done by Mr Johana Wanyeki; Nituhoye Ngai (“Let us pray to God”) by Timona Mburu; Mahoya Ma Bururi (“Prayers for the Country”) by Joseph Kamaru; Mathina Ma Matiba (“Tribulations of Matiba”) by Thomas Kimani, and “Who Killed Mr Ouko” by Sam Muraya. The words of the songs were not published but I have obtained some of the major ones translated and explained to me by Mr Njuguna from the CPK (Murung’a town, July 1990), and by Mrs Kamau (Murung’a, August 1991) (both private translations were confiscated by the government in November 1992).

and lasted about five days. The centers of violence were in and around Nairobi, and in the main towns of the Central Province: Nyeri, Murang'a, Thika, and others. However, the Kikuyu people were not the only ones to protest: the Luo community, still inflamed over the assassination of Dr Robert Ouko, joined as well. The town of Kisumu was a center of Luo violence; demonstrations were held over the issues at hand, relating them to the late Dr Ouko. Students from all university campuses demonstrated in favor of a multi-party system, and were active in both enhancing the issue and “taking it to the streets”. According to government sources, twenty-seven people were killed during the Saba-Saba events (as they were later known), while unofficial estimates claim them to have been over one hundred fatalities and hundreds of injured (not to mention the burned houses and stolen property). In these riots, there was a high degree of confusion, and grass-root feelings of discontent were sometimes mixed with self-serving political interests. The riots were well documented and broadcasted world-wide, giving rise to demands for genuine political change in the country.

There is no evidence that the riots were inspired wholly by the ideology or the people of the Mau Mau. However, parts of the Mau Mau “African Myth”—primarily those concerning the distribution of power and the demand for a free political system—were used to incite people to action. In some cases these themes had their roots in the Mau Mau days, especially with regard to the Kikuyu business community, the transportation sector, the Central Province farmers and part of the Church of the Province of Kenya (clergy and laymen). Indeed, if the Mau Mau was not explicitly mentioned it was because there was no need for it. Hints, innuendoes and the mere invocation of certain terms were enough to supply a frame of reference for action and to generate feelings of unity, at least to a certain extent.

41. On these events, see Weekly Review, July 8, July 14, and July 20, 1990; Daily Nation, July 7; Standard, July 8, 1990.
42. Dr Robert Ouko, Kenya Foreign Minister, was one of the leading politicians and a prominent Luo figure. His body was found in his home district in February 1990. The alleged assassination caused waves of protest and violence in Western Kenya and in most university campuses in the country. The funeral services turned into great anti-government demonstrations and the public demand for inquiry was integrated into that for freedom of speech and political pluralism. Dr Ouko’s burial ceremonies turned to be the stage and the tool for expressing political demands opposing the government stand, especially by Luo people, though not only by them. For more details, see Weekly Review, Sept. 21, February 23, March 2, 1990 (these news magazines were dealing almost exclusively with the “Ouko” issue).
44. For the opposition point of view, see Kihoro (1992: 6-8).
The Religious Dimension

In contrast to the more verbal discourse discussed so far, the religious sect “The Tent of the Living God” revived different aspects of the Mau Mau in an intriguing way. This sect was active mainly among the Kikuyu people in the Central Province. It was drawn into the center of the political discourse in the beginning of 1990, precisely when the voices of opposition were on the rise. The sect was legally registered and had led an inconspicuous existence since 1965. Nevertheless, in the eyes of many Kenyans, it was no ordinary traditional denomination. What was unique about it was its reverting to Kikuyu traditional worship and sporting “dreadlock” hairstyles that were reminiscent of those made famous by the Mau Mau fighters. In its prayers the sect referred to famous leaders of the Mau Mau, such as Dedan Kimathi and Stanley Mathenga, and regarded them as prophets to be honored and worshipped. These unique features were considered by some to be sinister and dangerous, and the Kenyan government saw a direct link between this cult and the mystic-religious elements of the Mau Mau as presented in the European myth. Therefore, memories, ideology and themes raised by the cult were potentially explosive—especially when they were related to the issues of freedom of speech and political pluralism. According to the government, this threat was further highlighted by the attention the cult received in the national press and in the ongoing political discourse. In this light one can fully grasp why the KANU government’s reaction and the British were similar in essence.

Mau Mau: A Stage for a New Political Discourse

It was Nelson Mandela’s official visit to Kenya, in July 1990, that caused the issue in Kenya’s public political discourse to resurface. Upon his arrival, the President of the African National Congress declared that the Mau Mau has been a major inspiration for his personal and national struggle; he said: “In my twenty-seven years of imprisonment, I always saw the image of fighters such as Kimathi, China, and others as candles in my long and hard war against injustice”; and he added: “It is an honor for any freedom fighter to pay respect to such heroes”. Mandela’s speech was cited in all Kenyan newspapers and magazines and provoked many

45. For further readings on the Tent of the Living God, see Weekly Review, March 9, 1990.
46. A Member of Parliament, Joash Wa Mang’oli, condemned all prayers in Kikuyu and accused them of being seditious acts. This is a good example of the resentment felt against these prayers (Weekly Review, July 20, 1990).
responses from both the government and the opposition. For example, Ngugi Wa Thiong’o stated (1990: 11-12):

“The most compelling thing about Mandela is how he endured those years of solidarity confinement and other tortures without even surrendering to the racist vampires. In him people see the infinite capacity of the human spirit to resist and to conquer. Hurrah for spirit of resistance! Do we not for the same reason identify in literature with characters like Prometheus? And in history with people like Kwame Nkrumah, Ho Chi Minh [...], Kenyan freedom fighter Dedan Kimathi [...]? All these figures are heroic because they reflect more intensely in their individual souls the souls of the community. Their uniqueness is the uniqueness of the historical moment. They are torches that blaze out new paths. Such a torch has been set alight by the fire of the masses and every time it seems to fade the great ones turn to their people for more energy”.

However, not only the opposition reacted to Mandela’s words, Kanu leaders were as well taken by surprised by Mandela’s analogy with the Mau Mau. This revival of the Mau Mau heroism was considered a weapon against their own ideology. In turn, it was, as shown from Ngugi’s words, integrated into the opposition political discourse, a discourse already embedded with slogans, words and images dating back to the Mau Mau.

Leading non-Kikuyu figures, such as Oginga Odinga, Masinde Muliru, Martin Shikuku and George Anyona, have also opposed Moi’s government. The central figure among them was Odinga, who based his opposition on KPU supporters, some of whom were ex-Mau Mau fighters.48 Odinga’s attempt, in 1990, to register an opposition party—the National Democratic Party (NDP)—did not succeed, and this failure elicited strong reactions from prominent lawyers demanding the fundamental right to freedom of association for the NDP. When their claim was dismissed, Odinga’s group backed Matiba’s demand for a multi-party Kenya. This association, to be known as the Forum for the Restoration of Democracy (FORD), emphasized the fact that they were not a party. In their public statements they called for democracy; they highlighted the elements of heroic struggle, the myth of David vs Goliath and the oppressed vs oppressor and, when appealing to Kenya’s past, they downplayed the ethnic (Kikuyu) character of the Mau Mau revolt emphasizing instead its nationalistic features. In so doing, they counterbalanced the complete identification of the Mau Mau with Kikuyu identity and returned the

48. In the KPU, with Odinga, there were few prominent ex-Mau Mau freedom generals, the most famous being Kagia and Oneko. This party was associated with ideas of radical change, land distribution and a general socialist ideology. The fact that a prominent Luo and a well-known Kikuyu were in it together underlined the ideology of the movement on the account of ethnic politics. The fact that he was an ex-KPU member was stressed in the press during the struggle for political pluralism, thus emphasizing the Kikuyu-Luo bond when dealing with socio-political questions. On this issue, see Weekly Review, June 1, 1990.
myth of the Mau Mau to the center of the Kenyan historical memory and identity. Also, when the issue of the Mau Mau was raised by Odinga it had a unique significance because Odinga, as a Luo, was never part of the Mau Mau, therefore he was not expected to raise or praise this historical memory. Nevertheless, he has, on various occasions, mentioned the Kikuyu freedom fighters as "heroes of the Nation". Throughout his book, Odinga leaves no doubt that he values the Mau Mau as a positive factor in the struggle for independence. He even went as far as to endorse the "African myth" of the Mau Mau. According to him: "Mau Mau represented an all-Kenya nationalism with advanced and clearly stated political aims", and the "Emergency was a time of revolutionary war" (Odinga 1967: 119, 121). Between 1990 and 1991, Odinga took the notions of the Mau Mau a step further announcing that he and his supporters were mainly concerned over issues dealing with land and a new distribution of wealth and power. Both issues were central in the political agenda of the opposition.49 Since an opposition discourse was officially not allowed, the Mau Mau was used as the logos for political criticism. When challenged by Kikuyu on ethnic grounds, he hinted that their own President, Kenyatta, has treated the Kikuyu worse than a non-Kikuyu may have. Hence, a common ethnic ground was not an automatic guarantee for mobilization, progress and unity.50

In October 1991, President Moi deployed security forces to prevent FORD from holding a pro-democratic rally in Nairobi. In November, the leaders of FORD called upon Kenyans to oppose "slavery and dictatorship"51 and to attend a meeting in Nairobi, to be held on November 19. Most of FORD leaders were arrested and the riot-police was sent to disperse thousands of supporters that turned up for the rally. In their response to the government’s action, FORD had recourse to the historical memory of the Mau Mau. The cover story in the Law Society of Kenya magazine, Law, brought up two citations from the Mau Mau period.52 The first was a description of Kenyatta’s arrest and trial, and the second the British attempt to break the spirit of the struggle. It stated: "The government undoubtedly succeeded in its immediate objective. Nairobi was cleaned out. But it also arrested and detained thousands of harmless people".53 The article also dealt with the harsh measures taken by the government against the opposition which were presented in an ambiguous language, equating the current government with the British, and the

52 This magazine is considered to be the "mouth" of the opposition, especially of FORD. One of the leading members of the LSK, Paul Muite, was as well a prominent member of the magazine’s board, like Gitobu Imanyara and others.
opposition with the Mau Mau fighters. This example clearly emphasizes the nationalist elements of the revolt but more so the fact that the usage of the Mau Mau was the only available way to voice opposing ideas.

Pressures on President Moi to liberalize the political system by repealing Section 2(A) of the Constitution was backed by the Paris Club. In order to preempt adverse action by the Paris Club, the President declared that a multi-party system would be introduced “soon”, but set no timetable. The Paris Club deferred consideration of Kenya’s request for financial support for six months pending the introduction of economic and political reforms. A week later, on December 10, 1991, the National Assembly passed the constitutional amendment repealing Section 2(A), thereby effectively ending KANU’s legal monopoly of political power. The first party to be registered was FORD, with Odinga and Matiba as the leading figures. In spite of the political change, FORD members were still restricted—some were arrested and their political actions limited.

The most open and free political debate in Kenya took place during 1992, a year which saw the rise of six opposition parties, each vying for popular support. In the political discourse of the year, the Mau Mau myth was invoked by all candidates from all parties. There is no doubt that the memory of the Mau Mau still lingers in the minds of all Kenyans. Nevertheless, its more contradictory features (i.e. political assassinations, forced oathing) were usually used by the government on occasions of economic and political discontent. The government threatened to reinstate the laws of emergency if the situation deteriorated, saying it would not be willing to return to the “dark days” of the struggle.

Immediately after legalizing the opposition parties, the government called for unity in Kenya. One of the means employed was to stress those notions of unity in the historical memory of the Mau Mau, as opposed to the contention and pluralism presented by opposition leaders. In fact, the President’s men were the first to use the Mau Mau legacy as a vehicle for opposing political pluralism. Only later did they realize the explosive potential of this memory for their case. KANU representatives, Kikuyu as well as non-Kikuyu, advocated the notion of the Mau Mau as a war to keep Kenya strong, free and united. In their efforts to stress the need to crush pluralism, they used ex-Mau Mau fighters who were asked to emphasize the quest for unity—a binding motto in

54. Section 2(A) of the Kenyan Constitution was the legal base for the country one-party political system. The Paris Club was the Donors Consultative Group that met in Paris to consider Kenya’s request for financial aid.

55. In addition, the President dismissed and arrested close political allies who had been linked to the Ouko murder.

Kenyan history dating back to the days of the forest fighting. By publicly mentioning Mau Mau fighters in KANU's propaganda, the party hoped to influence Kenyans to support KANU, and thus gain a stronghold among the Kikuyu. To pursue this, KANU organized several Mau Mau rallies in the Central Province thus turning the Mau Mau into an actual stage to propagate the government's ideas. The first official Mau Mau rally in 1992 was organized in February at Murang'a and was attended by Mau Mau veterans brought to the area by KANU organized transportation. In a spirited campaign for KANU, a parade of four generals, a captain and soldiers vowed to defend the independence they fought for by supporting KANU during the coming multi-party elections. The meeting was addressed by KANU officials, mainly Kikuyu, among them J. Kamotho, Murang'a KANU branch chairman, Dr Gikonyo Kiano and an ex-freedom fighter, Waira Kamau. Kamotho took the opportunity to censure those who defected KANU to the opposition, and said: "Even in the glorious days, defectors were persecuted and low valued". Kamotho gave the veterans a go-ahead to hold Mau Mau public rallies in other areas and pledged that the KANU government would look into their problems. In most of the KANU organized rallies this pattern of "bused" fighters and supporters repeated itself, but the Mau Mau fighters did not address the crowd and their presence was of a more passive nature.

The idea behind these KANU-Mau Mau rallies was to set a direct connection between the struggle for freedom and the establishment of KANU. Moreover, KANU struggled to emphasize the Mau Mau as a symbol for freedom thus binding it directly to the government's role as its guard. This link was further used to advance the idea that KANU had not changed since its formation, meaning that: "if you once supported it you should always support it". These efforts to tie the Mau Mau struggle for independence with KANU was further developed by Mr Clement Gachanja, Nairobi KANU branch chairman. In his speeches, he said that he, as a Kikuyu, knows that the Mau Mau fighters vowed never to defect KANU. Moreover, he said that part of the revolt's legacy was the fighters' loyalty to KANU as the first independent party in Kenya. Gachanja's ideas were criticized by other MPs, by the Kikuyu and others as well. The criticism was based on the mere fact that KANU did not exist when the Mau Mau did, therefore making this vow impossible. These propaganda rallies did not deceive the people of the Central Province. The Kikuyu in the Central Province and elsewhere did not need the aging fighters to

state their position publicly—their political affiliation was common knowledge. Nevertheless, these gatherings, and especially Kamotho's promise, should be viewed in the light of another meeting of ex-Mau Mau in Nakuru during the same month. At this rally, about 1,000 ex-Mau Mau fighters demanded to be given land as compensation for their fighting and for their role in bringing Kenyan independence. The demonstrators expressed their continuing frustration, alleging that their past is mentioned and colored with heroism only when their votes and support are needed. In addition they protested against the prevailing trend to either demonize their past or to omit it completely from Kenyan history.  

This meeting was one in a series of non-official ex-Mau Mau fighters' meetings that took place all over the country.

Although the idea of ex-Mau Mau rallies was a government initiative, the government withdrew its support from the rallies. Few days after the large Nakuru rally another one was supposed to take place in the same town; it received a license and the organizers set out to publicize it in the media, but a few days before it should have taken place the license was withdrawn. However, the ex-Mau Mau fighters came to the meeting, mainly because they were not informed of its cancellation. They strongly voiced their frustration, one of them saying: "This group intended to elect district leaders and make our stand in the current political situation known [...] All the issues we wanted to debate are in the interest of the country."  

This incident and similar ones received news coverage, causing much anger among the opposition, Kikuyu and non-Kikuyu. The ability to hold public meetings and express dissent was still limited. It is clear that the government was not inclined to approve such meetings owing to their oppositional purpose. Yet such meetings, whether licensed or not, still took place. The fear of allowing the ex-Mau Mau people to express their ideas has been a clear indication that the government was incapable of dealing with certain aspects of the Mau Mau. Furthermore, the government realized that the Mau Mau was used as a general framework to express dissent and political frustration. In July 1992, a group calling itself the Mau Mau War Council demanded that the government should pay compensation to the fighters and their relatives. They threatened that should their demands be turned down, they would block the coming elections with a court injunction. The Council claimed that the British

64. It is clear that no government, regardless of its ethnic base, could fulfill the main demands of the Mau Mau fighters concerning land distribution. These claims were and will always be the central political issue, and any government will regard them as problematic.
money was corruptibly distributed to the wrong people, leaving the real fighters for independence and land out of the political bargaining process. In this case the Mau Mau myth was harnessed as a means to discredit the regime and its ideology. At the same time it was used to legitimize the opposition.

The official and non-official ex-Mau Mau rallies provoked much criticism, both by Kikuyu within and without the government and by non-Kikuyu. Gachanja once again emerged as the leading Kikuyu to criticize the Mau Mau ideology as disseminated in those rallies. In several statements, from June to September 1992, he said that the ex-Mau Mau fighters were betraying their own revolution; in a long speech he emphasized the elements of unity advanced by the Mau Mau in their fight, as well as their loyalty to the country and its leadership: "Anyone who respected the late President Kenyatta should also respect President Moi [...] During the struggle for Uhure, Kenyatta vowed to remain in Kanu and all Kikuyu recognized he should remain in Kanu". In addition, Gachanja told of a curse that would befall the Kikuyu were they to withhold support to Kanu during the forthcoming elections. This threat can be directly connected to the Mau Mau historical memory. The oath ceremonies and the threat of curse were a central tenet of the Mau Mau, since they were basic tools for mobilizing mass support. Gachanja's use of the Mau Mau should be understood within the general political context. The Kikuyu MPs were under a bitter attack on their loyalty to Kenya both as individuals and as part of the larger Kikuyu community, and, in order to counter this accusation, they elaborated on their community's constructive role in the Mau Mau and in the building of independent Kenya. It is clear that the use of the Mau Mau historical memory was part of a two-side battle: first, against the opposition within the Kikuyu community, where Gachanja brought up the themes of loyalty and curse; and second, against the opposition of non-Kikuyu politicians against the Kikuyu. The different aspects of the Mau Mau used by the Kikuyu MPs in this struggle are unique examples of the ongoing reconstruction process of the myth.

The issue of the Mau Mau was raised again from a new direction in March 1992. One of the central issues on the political agenda of Kenya was the demand to release political prisoners. It was raised by the opposition, both official and non-official, such as the LSK and the CPK. The group voicing it most loudly was that of the mothers and relatives of detainees, and it turned out to be the most vocal non-official opposition

67. The leading politicians questioning the Kikuyu's loyalty were William Ole Ntimama and Burudi Nabwera. See Standard, June 30, 1992.
against Moi’s regime. The mothers’ demand was only part of their criticism of the government, which, in effect, was much broader.

They went on a hunger strike at the center of Nairobi near the Anglican Church Cathedral (belonging to the CPK). The place of strike, later to be known as “Freedom Corner”, attracted thousands of supporters, day and night. The mothers claimed that their sons had been arrested because they called for the Constitution to be changed. However, this demand was broadened to include free and fair elections and an accountable democratic Kenyan government that will represent the wananchi.68 Some of the mothers compared their sons to the Kikuyu prisoners during the emergency period, they prayed for their fight to end in a glorious victory, as did the fight of the Mau Mau detainees.69 The press covered the police treatment of the mothers in extremely critical terms. Several articles claimed that the brutal acts against the mothers can only be compared to the dark days of the emergency: “Never, even in the over half-a-century history of colonialism, known for its acts of brutality and atrocities, had women suffered under such might of batons and machine guns as happened on March 3, at Uhuru Park’s ‘Freedom Corner’”.70 The mothers’ resistance can only be compared to the spirit of the women fighting in the forests and in other parts of the country under the tyrannical British rule.71 When explaining the sources of her resilience, a detainee’s mother claimed that this was her second struggle for independence—the first being the Mau Mau, in which she and her people were victorious and this is what has given her confidence and power in this second struggle.72 She added: “There is a common Kikuyu adage, which says: Muingatwo na Kihoto ndacokaga no muingatwo na njuguma niaco-kaga ['If you defeat a person through reasoning, he never returns, but whoever is defeated through violence makes another attempt'], and added: “This is what the landless people during our struggle said, and that is with me all the time”.73 In their struggle for the release of their sons, these mothers also called up the historical memory of the Mau Mau, drawing a parallel between the resistance of their sons and that of the Mau Mau freedom fighters.

As stated, several opposing political parties were established in the country. The second largest party, the Democratic Party (DP), was founded by Mwai Kibaki, a Kanu politician of repute, former Vice-President and Minister of Education. Kibaki was joined by John Keen and

69. Finance, March 15, 1992, especially the interview with Mrs Ruth Wi.
73. Interview with Mrs Thungu, March 1992, Kamiti, Nairobi.
several other ex-KANU officials. The DP tried to portray itself as strong and united. This was in contrast both to FORD, which was weakened by internal conflicts, and to KANU, which was loosing power. A Kikuyu from Nyeri, Kibaki, appealed in his speeches to all Kenyans, and especially to the Kikuyu. In examining his statements concerning the Mau Mau, one can grasp the inherent conflict of Kenya’s Kikuyu opposition.

Kibaki and his close family were part of those Kikuyu who did not play an active part in the Mau Mau revolt and were thus considered by some to be part of the loyalists. After independence, Kibaki followed Kenyatta’s policy toward the Mau Mau. During most of his years in the government, he did not take special interest in the fate of the Mau Mau fighters, though he was not one of those condemning the fight. In 1992, in several public speeches, Kibaki once again raised his “special feelings towards the Mau Mau freedom fighters”, saying they were in many ways his inspirers. In response, some ex-freedom fighters accused him of lying and demanded of him not to try and gain political power at their expense.

The dialogue between ex-Mau Mau fighters and Kibaki as the head of the DP is an important and revealing example both of the ongoing struggle for the inheritance of the Mau Mau mantle and of the current political potency of this symbolic legacy. At a large KANU political rally in Nairobi, the ex-Mau Mau fighters accused the DP of being “a party of former colonial homeguards”. Moreover, the speakers at the rally, who included the widow of the late Field Marshall Dedan Kimathi, accused Kibaki of opposing government attempts to better the lot of former freedom fighters. Some speakers praised President Moi and argued that he has set aside land to settle ex-Mau Mau fighters.

In addition, this example highlights the fragility of the Mau Mau historical memory in Kenyan society in general, and among the Kikuyu in particular. As a Kikuyu, Kibaki attempted to broaden his electoral base in the Central Province by using the Mau Mau historical memory, in spite of the fact that he was never an integral part of the Mau Mau. Although it damaged his image, he had initially been convinced that the political potency of this memory would further enhance his candidancy.

The more interesting aspect of this myth game lies with the ex-Mau

74. Still in 1971, Mwai Kibaki played a central role in the inauguration and financing of the Dedan Kimathi Institute for Technology in Nyeri district. Then Minister for Finance and Economic Development, he launched a program to raise money for this institution by selling badges bearing the picture of Dedan Kimathi. According to Kibaki, the picture selected was the last of Kimathi after he had been captured. See Daily Nation, Jan. 8, 1971, May 5, 1972.
75. Kibaki’s speech at Murang’a town, Oct. 1992
77. This and all subsequent quotations in this paragraph are from: Muthui Mwai, “Ex-freedom Fighters Attack Kibaki”, Daily Nation, July 19, 1992, pp. 1, 2 col. 3.
Mau fighters themselves, who, though they were present at an organized rally by Kanu, accused Kibaki of being in a party of traitors for over thirty years. The particular framing of this accusation implied also a clear dissatisfaction with Kanu among certain ex-Mau Mau fighters. By their equivocal statements, these ex-fighters left themselves a wide political arena to play in. This argument is backed by Maina Wa Kinyatti (a leading intellectual) in his analysis of Kanu’s use of the ex-Mau Mau fighters. He said: “Ask the Kanu secretary-general, Joseph Kamotho, what he thinks about Mau Mau and he will tell you they are people that he buys out to sing about how Kikuyu are bound by an oath never to leave Kanu”.

Neither sides were deceived, each trying to gain the most out of the common memory of the Mau Mau. In this rally, as in many others, the ex-Mau Mau fighters explicitly demanded the improvement of their lives and requisition of land, but they did not commit their loyalty to a specific party. Yet, they have used the functional dimension of the Mau Mau historical memory as a pillar of their demands. In these rallies each contestant tried to manipulate a different aspect of the myth in order to justify their diverging positions.

At the same time the ex-Mau Mau people were using their past to gain as much as they could without stating clearly their political stand. Their statements were either very vague or else carried a double meaning.

When analysing the various ex-Mau Mau fighters’ gatherings, few interesting points arise. Bringing the actual living fighters to various political meetings did not only mean that the memories and symbols were alive but that the voice should be given to the people. This process was not always a planned one, especially when the fighters did not accept the role given to them on the “Mau Mau stage” and rather played an independent script pushing their own agenda. Moreover, that stage had a diversifying effect on the political discourse carried out by the opposition voices, since it was almost uncontrollable. The government as well as the various opposition parties realized that the Mau Mau issue had a “boomerang” effect.

As the election date had not yet been set by the President, the campaign was extremely tense. Apart from mutual accusations between the opposition parties, one of the consequences was a split within FORD, which resulted in the creation of two new parties: one headed by Odinga.

79. Another rally, with similar statements was held in Kenyatta Stadium, Nairobi, Sept. 12, 1992. See Standard, Sept. 13, 1992.
81. The issue was raised in Parliament, and several MPs questioned the purpose of these rallies and the aim of raising the Mau Mau again. On these debates, see Daily Nation, July 22, 1992.
(FORD) and the other by Matiba (FORD-Asilli). A few months before the elections, six major parties were in existence. The Kikuyu’s vote was divided among four different parties, each claiming to represent the Kikuyu, and each putting forward a different Kikuyu presidential candidate. Some critics have argued that the opposition arguments were encouraged by Moi and KANU in order to eliminate the threat of a united Kikuyu-Luo front. Moreover, it was said that this policy of “divide and rule” was directly taken by Moi from the days of the Mau Mau. At that time the British pursued this policy in order to crush the opposition voices.\(^{82}\) As mentioned, Matiba was cautious in using the historical memory of the Mau Mau. Yet, after the split in FORD the battle was for the Kikuyu’s vote, and he used the myth in an indirect way. Although he was a leading politician in the struggle for a multi-party system and a Kikuyu, Matiba could not claim a connection to the Mau Mau or even to the national movement. Instead, he utilized Kikuyu slogans calling for a united front to lead the country into a better future. These slogans had, to a certain extent, a similar effect on the Kikuyu, when ken to them in their own language, as those uttered by the Mau Mau leaders during the oathing period and later in the fighting phase.\(^{83}\)

The issue of detention was raised several times, always causing the memory of the Mau Mau detainees to be revived. Having analyzed previously the political detainees issue, it is now time to look into it from a different angle. In modern African history, detention and imprisonment of a national figure have always played a major role in one’s qualification for leadership. This was true in the case of most anti-colonial leaders such as Kwame Nkrumah, Senghor, Azikiwe and Jomo Kenyatta. The latter, accused of being a Mau Mau leader, was imprisoned for seven years. This, in spite of his disassociation from it, made him part of the legacy of struggle that was connected in many ways to the Mau Mau. Both Matiba and Odinga have stressed their detention past trying on the symbolic level to place themselves in the same position as the leading fighters for freedom and independence. This was done without mentioning either the Mau Mau or their struggle specifically. By doing so they broadened the issue of detention and placed the argument in the context of the entire freedom fighting process. In a country such as Kenya, this analogy was extremely loaded. Not only was it contradictory within the Kikuyu historical memory but also with the Kenyan one in general. In addition, the fact that the President was, in many ways, an outsider to the struggle, makes the issue of detention even more frag-

When challenging Matiba and Odinga, Kibaki claimed that the mere fact that they were detained did not automatically make them fit for presidency. After realizing that his own recourse to the Mau Mau myth had backfired on him, Kibaki tried to take on a more nationalist stand. Yet, he still used Kikuyu symbolic language, but in a broader way. An interesting issue was that when the opposition passed scrutiny on Moi’s past it emphasized the fact that he was never a part of the national movement. This implied that he was not entitled to use the slogans—such as freedom and unity—that were the motto of those days. In so doing, the opposition was using parts of the fighters slogans as portrayed in the African myth of the Mau Mau to discredit Moi’s ideology.

In this study I have tried to establish that the Mau Mau is a significant theme in the current Kenyan political discourse. I have focused on the process of myth (re)construction and invocation, and highlighted the different meanings of the Mau Mau for the various groups that call on it. The process of symbolic manipulation, which the struggle for cooptation of the historical memory of the Mau Mau evoked, was not limited to the official political elites. It also included non-official participants in the political discourse who mainly used a symbolic logos. Thus all contestants turned the issue of the Mau Mau into an ongoing debate over the question of ideology in Kenya. Ngugi Wa Thiong’o (1993: 96-97) referred to this issue by stating:

“It is precisely because history is the result of struggle and tells of change that it is perceived as a threat by all the ruling strata in all the oppressive exploitative systems. Tyrants and their tyrannical systems are terrified at the sound of the wheels of history. History is subversive. And it is because it is actually subversive of the existing tyrannical system that there have been attempts to arrest it. But how can one arrest the wheels of history? So they try to rewrite history, make up official history [...] then maybe they and the people will not hear the real call of history, will not hear the real lesson of history”.

The articulation of the Mau Mau myth was a central means to legitimize or delegitimize the present state of affairs. Under Kenyatta’s and Moi’s regimes the memory of the Mau Mau had its unique rules. It had

84. Moi’s credibility as presidential candidate was challenged on the basis of his role in the struggle for independence not only by politicians. As the various letters received by the editors of the daily papers and magazines indicate, this debate has been extremely popular. For examples, see *Society*, N° 44, Dec. 1992, pp. 6-8; *Finance*, March 15, 1992, p. 8.
the ability to shape the social and political identity of the Kenyan people as a whole, and of the Kikuyu in particular.

Moreover, I have claimed that the Mau Mau was used both as the stage and the language of a political debate in Kenya since independence, and more so in the 1990s. Between 1990 and 1992, the debate over the political character of Kenya was at its height, leading to an open election campaign. In this struggle for democracy, just as in every national or liberation struggle, there was a need for a discourse, and this need was filled by the Mau Mau myth. Moreover, the Mau Mau historical memory has been a usable past in Kenya which, as most African countries are, is a state without nationhood. The Mau Mau had its own reversible mythical time, that is to say, the propagators of the myth sought to induce Kenyan people to relive it in accordance with the propagators' own conception of the Mau Mau. The Mau Mau was used as a vision of the past becoming a constitutive device for the (re)creation of identities in the present.

It seems that since Kenya became independent, the character of the Mau Mau as one featuring diversity and being concerned mainly with the internal structure of the society is back. Once placed again on the stage by various politicians, Mau Mau memories took an independent route, thus becoming an autonomous discourse about inequality, abuse of power, unfulfilled promises and the drive for freedom and democracy. Therefore it is not surprising that after using the historical memory of the Mau Mau, Kenyatta, Moi and some of the opposition leaders preferred to put this skeleton back into the national closet.

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ABSTRACT

Forty years after the British colonial authorities in Kenya declared a state of emergency to crush the Mau Mau, conclusive answers to what was the Mau Mau are still intriguing. Since 1961 there has been an ongoing dispute over the interpretation of the Mau Mau myth, especially in relation to its relevance to the socio-political presence. The government, whether Kenyatta’s or Moi’s, has had the power at its disposal to determine which themes in the official discourse should be stressed, and in what light should the Mau Mau be perceived. In so doing, it determined the ways in which Kenyan history and specifically the collective memory of the Mau Mau was reconstructed. Various elements within the Kenyan society have clashed over conflicting interpretations of the Mau Mau, thus indicating that the whole issue of the Mau Mau was part of an ongoing political debate over the questions of ideology and power in Kenya. This debate was broadened to such an extent that some of the contestants were unwilling to accept the Mau Mau and tried to lock the memory of it back in the “historical closet”.

SUMMARY

Le mythe mau mau : le discours politique kenyan à la recherche de la démocratie. — Quarante ans après que les autorités britanniques du Kenya aient proclamé l’état d’urgence pour écraser les Mau Mau, les réponses concluantes sur la nature de ce qu’avait été ce mouvement restent à venir. Depuis 1961, des débats incessants ont lieu à propos de l’interprétation du mythe mau mau, et plus particulièrement quant la pertinence de ce mythe dans le domaine socio-politique. Le gouvernement, qu’il s’agisse de celui de Kenyatta ou de Moi, disposait du pouvoir de décider quels thèmes mau mau devaient figurer dans le discours politique officiel et la manière dont ils devaient être présentés. Il a donc défini comment l’histoire kényane et, plus particulièrement, la mémoire collective du mouvement mau mau ont été reconstruites. Différentes composantes de la société kényane sont entrées en conflit à cause d’analyses contradictoires de ce mouvement, manifestant ainsi que la question mau mau était indissociable d’un débat permanent portant sur l’idéologie et le pouvoir au Kenya. Ce débat prit une tournure tellement importante que certains adversaires rejettèrent le mouvement mau mau et tentèrent de le chasser de la mémoire en l’enfermant dans les cachots de l’histoire.

Key words/Mots-clés: Kenya/Kenya, Kikuyu/Kikuyu, Mau Mau/Mau Mau, political discourse/discours politique, political manipulation/manipulation politique, common memory/mémoire collective, political change/changement politique.