

## **Chapter 5**

---

# ***Kenya: From Land and Freedom Army Insurgency to Kenyatta's 'Good Government'***

The fertile central highlands, home of the Gikuyu people, were the coveted prize of colonial settlement in Kenya. That is where the most systematic land expropriation took place, and that is where the revolt of the Land and Freedom Army — dubbed “Mau Mau” by the British colonial authorities — was fought from 1953-56.

At the beginning of the 20th century, a trickle of European settlers, backed by British arms, occupied most of the best land of the central highlands. British colonialism justified the land grab by claiming that the settlers were occupying “empty, unused” land to which the Africans claimed no title. In fact, they were occupying land which the Gikuyu, the largest tribe in Kenya, had temporarily laid aside as fallow land under their system of shifting plot cultivation, as well as broad pasturelands which the Gikuyu clans held in common as a remnant of the village community. Desperate to recruit African

labor to work their large capitalist farms, the settler farmers staked a claim to far more land than they could use.

The British colonial administration imposed a bureaucratic tangle of restrictions against the African peasants, sharply limiting the number of sheep and cattle they were allowed to own as tenant farmers living on settlers' land, prohibiting them from cultivating certain cash crops, and rigging up a pricing and transport structure geared to promote the interests of the settler farmers and smother competition from the African peasants. The African, and especially Gikuyu peasants were crammed into increasingly squalid "native reserves." The hated hut tax, and the pegging of African wages so low that many wageworkers were needed to pay the taxes, spurred the departure of thousands of Gikuyu from their ancestral homes to work on the European farms, concentrated in the Rift valley. By the end of world war 2, 3,000 European settlers owned over 43,000 square kilometers of the most fertile land, while 5.25 million Africans occupied, without ownership rights, less than 135,000 square kilometers of the poorest land. Of the fertile land held by the settlers, only 6% was under cultivation. The population density of the "native reserves" was 260 people per square kilometer, and half the land was unsuitable for cultivation.<sup>1</sup>

### ***Missionaries Preach the Gospel of the Commodity***

Christian missionaries followed hard upon the heels of the settler farmers. Establishing their mission schools — to which they charged a stiff tuition — deep within African territory, they immediately began to take up cudgels against the traditional African social structures. Teaching the concepts of wage labor, money exchange and private profit to their African pupils — concepts thoroughly alien to the vast majority of Africans with their pre-class societies and barter economies — the missionaries railed against the widespread practice of polygamy as blasphemy.

In fact, the missionaries used their moralistic attacks against polygamy as a gun-rest to attack the remnants of communal ownership of the land and productive property. "The missionaries objected not only to polygamy," notes Oginga

Odinga, son of a Luo peasant family, "but also to our custom of having several families make joint payment of dowry [property, generally farm animals, paid by the groom to compensate his bride's family for their loss of her labor power]. This had been one of the Luo society provisions for the sharing out of wealth and family responsibility, but the new religion, for all the sermons about the brotherhood of man, advocated individualism and not egalitarianism."<sup>2</sup> The Catholic church supported the hated hut tax, on the pretext that it would discourage polygamy; in Gikuyu and Luo society, each married woman had her own hut, which she used as a center for cultivating her semi-autonomous garden plot and working up its products. The imposition of the hut tax not only eroded this semi-autonomy of women within the oppressive polygamous family structure, but also destroyed the independence of the many married women whose husbands had taken no other wife; in order to meet the hut tax payments, married women had to give up their own huts and move into their husbands' huts, leading to congestion.

In the 1920's, a number of African Christian churches sprang up in opposition to the European churches, defending African social tradition against European encroachment and pointing to the several old testament heroes who were polygamists, in defense of African polygamy. One radical Gikuyu church denounced the missionaries' attack on polygamy as an attempt to decrease the African population and thus entrench European settler rule. Although all of these African churches steered clear of political action, a number of them came under heavy police repression by the colonial authorities.

The missionaries also attacked the Gikuyu custom of clitoridectomy,\* barring admission to their schools to any girl

\*Gikuyu society, while similar to Luo (the second largest ethnic) society, evidenced a more profound overturn of matriarchy than did Luo society; lineage among the Luo was still reckoned through the mother, whereas lineage among the Gikuyu was reckoned through the father. It can be safely hypothesized that the practice of clitoridectomy arose upon the imposition of patriarchy, as a means of reducing the sexual capacity of women and thus preparing them for the limited sexual activity which the polygamous family structure entails for them.

who had undergone the operation. Here again, the missionary preachings had nothing to do with liberating African women from oppressive, patriarchal structures, but were in fact aimed to liquidate the semicommunal African social structures and thus to free African labor for exploitation on European capitalist farms and urban enterprises. The ritualized clitoridectomy ceremony, by which an age group of pre-pubescent girls was initiated into adulthood — as with the circumcision ceremony, which initiated an age group of pre-pubescent boys into adulthood — was a crucial pivot for the social and civic succession of Gikuyu generations, serving to maintain the social equilibrium. It was for this reason that the missionaries attacked it so tirelessly. Moreover, the hypocrisy of the missionary preachings can be seen from the fact that the Gikuyu and Luo women, active in productive labor and supervising semi-autonomous, productive homesteads, having the right to choose their own husbands and to divorce, and the right to extramarital sexual relations within rigorously prescribed tribal rules, enjoyed at least as much social freedom as did the masses of European women during that historical period.

### ***The Colonial Overturn of Pre-Class Tribal Society***

Taking advantage of the Africans' thirst for lettered education and its own superiority in arms, British colonialism rode roughshod over the pre-class social structures. Abolishing tribal warfare to pave the way for class warfare, British colonialism dissolved the nonprofessional African warrior groups, replacing them with "tribal" police accountable to the colonial authorities. Prison became a part of the Africans' life for the first time in their history. A sweeping, criminal ban was imposed upon witchdoctory, with no distinction made between witchdoctory which helped the people through application of curative herbal medicines, and malicious witchdoctory used to poison fellow Africans, against which the Africans themselves had traditionally imposed capital punishment. Deeply respected African elders were dragged before colonial courts, convicted, and thrown in prison for the crime of possessing traditional ceremonial objects in their huts. A rigorous internal

passport system was imposed, with Africans in the "European" zones required to carry ID cards bearing their fingerprints, and prohibited from travelling freely from one tribal region to another. Petty infractions against colonial law were punished by canings on the buttocks. The traditional transfer of Gikuyu civic authority from the existing, aging council of elders to a new council selected by the next generation group, slated to occur in the mid-1920's, was banned as "seditious" by the colonial authorities.

Having succeeded in shoving aside many of the Gikuyu and Luo head elders, who had been democratically selected for civic leadership by their age group peers, British colonialism proceeded to impose its handpicked puppets and their progeny, after carefully grooming them in its mission schools, as the new chiefs. Their highest mission was to ensure the "orderly" collection of the hut tax and the recruitment of labor for the colonial settler farms.

"It has been said," wrote Jomo Kenyatta dryly,

that the Gikuyu do not respect their chiefs, namely the 'appointed ones.' This is perfectly true, and the reason is not far to seek. The Gikuyu people do not regard those who have been appointed over their heads as the true representatives of the interests of the community. No one knows this better than the chiefs themselves, because many of them are only able to continue in their position through the fact that might is over right. The Gikuyu knows perfectly well that these chiefs are appointed to represent a particular interest, namely, the interest of the British government, and as such they cannot expect popularity from the people they help to oppress and exploit. In the eyes of the Gikuyu people, the submission to a despotic rule of any particular man or a group, white or black, is the greatest humiliation to mankind.<sup>3</sup>

### ***Rise of the Nationalist Movement***

Harry Thuku, a government employed telephone operator, was the founding leader of the Young Gikuyu Association, which quickly expanded into the cross-tribal East African Association. The rise of Kenyan nationalism, placing the return of the expropriated lands at the centerpiece of its

political program, coincided with a movement, particularly strong in the Gikuyu region, to establish African secular schools independent from missionary influence. In 1922, Thuku was arrested and held for deportation by the colonial government. This sparked the first general strike in Kenya's history, as a political protest. Several thousand Africans, mostly Gikuyu, assembled outside the Nairobi jail where Thuku was being held, demanding his release. The police fired on the crowd, killing 21. Thuku was deported, his organization banned.

It re-formed under the name Gikuyu Central Association (GCA) in 1924. Placed under a government restriction confining its members to Gikuyus, the GCA became the locus of the rising movement to Africanize the Christian church so as to preserve traditional social customs, as well as to form independent African schools. It thus combined contradictory elements of radical bourgeois democracy with a striving to return to the traditional, precolonial past. In 1926, Jomo Kenyatta became GCA general secretary and editor of its paper, *Mwigwithania* (*The Unifier* in Gikuyu). The GCA political program included demands for the return of the expropriated lands; compulsory education for African children and more highschoools and opportunities for higher education for Africans overseas; and abolition of the passbook/labor registration system. The original membership fee for taking a GCA oath was as high as 62 shillings 30 cents, "so that young people without land or earnings were disqualified for the most part, and GCA membership was generally found among the older men of the clans."<sup>4</sup>

In the late 1930's, the GCA led a wave of mass peasant resistance against the forced sale ("destocking") of cattle to the government at rockbottom prices. The GCA was banned in 1940, as British imperialism moved to line up its colonies behind its world war effort. After the war, the Kenya African Union (KAU) formed on an all-African basis, with the GCA constituting its "hard core." Led by both radical and moderate nationalist politicians, KAU called for the prohibition of further European settlement in African areas; immediate African occupation of unused land in the "white" area; and majority

political rule. KAU's timid land program reflected the pressure of an aspiring class of African entrepreneurs struggling to establish themselves in businesses in the face of overwhelming competition from British imperialism compounded by a maze of bureaucratic restrictions against African enterprise. These aspiring bourgeois elements tended to place their sectoral demands for nondiscrimination in the business field to the fore, in place of a program for a radical transformation of agrarian relations.

In the postwar economic crisis faced by British imperialism as it became eclipsed by U.S. imperialism, England turned to its colonies for increased production to bolster the sagging pound sterling. In Kenya, the colonial government thus declared a plan for "land consolidation," geared to consolidate the fragmented tribal landholdings into "viable" private plots, which would allow for the selective application of advanced technology to the "native" lands and smooth the way for the rise of a small class of African capitalist farmers to serve as a buffer between the colonial ruling class and the mass of poor peasants. This "land consolidation" scheme systematically avoided the return of the expropriated land to the African tillers; the congested "native reserves," where the peasants had had to abandon their traditional mode of shifting, extensive agriculture without access to the advanced technology necessary to make intensive agriculture viable, were plagued by overgrazing, overplanting, and rampant soil erosion.

The government's "land consolidation" scheme provoked mass opposition among the peasantry. Under the pressure of the aroused peasantry as well as militant returning ex-servicemen and the rising African labor movement, KAU began to radicalize. In its 1951 elections, KAU threw out some of its moderate leaders and changed its constitution to include, for the first time, the demand for independence for Kenya.<sup>6</sup>

### **'Mau Mau' Oathings**

The GCA, acting under its autonomous chain of command, began concripting the support of the Gikuyu masses for the inevitable test of arms ahead. It launched a campaign of compulsory oathings of Gikuyu men, which rapidly encompassed

the vast majority of the Gikuyu population. Administered secretly and in the style of traditional Gikuyu ritual ceremonies, the oath of allegiance carried the pain of death on those who refused to take it. Karari Njama, a Gikuyu schoolteacher, details the 21-point oath — incorporating elements of a political program as well as a code of moral conduct and obligations to the revolutionary movement — which he took in 1952:

1) I shall never reveal this secret of the GCA oath — which is of Gikuyu and Mumbi and which demands land and freedom — to any person who is not a member of our society. If I ever reveal it, may this oath kill me! ([Repeated after each vow while] biting the chest meat of a billy goat held together with the heart and lungs).

2) I shall always help any member of our society who is in difficulty or need of help.

3) If I am ever called, during the day or night, to do any work for this society, I shall obey.

4) I shall on no account ever disobey the leaders of this society.

5) If I am ever given firearms or ammunition to hide, I shall do so.

6) I shall always give money or goods to this society whenever called upon to do so.

7) I shall never sell land to a European or an Asian [The Asian immigrant population, numbering around 150,000, served largely as an entrepreneurial middle layer between the colonial settler ruling class and the African working masses].

8) I shall not permit intermarriage between Africans and the white community.

9) I will never go with a prostitute.

10) I shall never cause a girl to become pregnant and leave her unmarried.

11) I will never marry and then seek a divorce.

12) I shall never allow my daughter to remain uncircumcized.

13) I shall never drink European manufactured beer or cigarettes [At the time, there was an African boycott against both, in favor of the corresponding homemade products].

14) I shall never spy on or otherwise sell my people to the government.

15) I shall never help the missionaries in their Christian faith to ruin our traditional and cultural customs.



16) I will never accept the Beecher report [a colonial education policy proposal which would severely restrict African access to secondary schools and universities].

17) I shall never steal any property belonging to a member of our society.

18) I shall obey any strike call, whenever notified.

19) I will never retreat or abandon any of our mentioned demands, but will daily increase more and stronger demands until we achieve our goals.

20) I shall pay 62 shillings 50 cents and a ram as assessed by this society as soon as I am able.\*

21) I shall always follow the leadership of Jomo Kenyatta and Mbiyu Koinange.<sup>7</sup>

The compulsory nature of the oath, and the atmosphere of terror under which it was administered (with GCA cadres, armed with swords, standing guard ready to kill anyone refusing to take the oath), were designed to galvanize instant mass support for the coming anticolonial war. But the serious drawback to this method was that it allowed the GCA leadership to raise the funds needed to purchase arms and supplies *without* a systematic mass political mobilization, and did not allow for the voluntary drawing of distinctions between militant cadre, active sympathizer and passive sympathizer which a rigorous cadre selection process involves. Moreover, the GCA's idealist attempt to conscript the "entire" Gikuyu population into active participation in the struggle made it a simple matter for British colonialism to infiltrate its agents into the movement and thus gather information on its activities.

The colonial authorities, receiving the report that the mass oath-taking campaign was a prelude to a general rising of the Gikuyu, imposed a strict ban and a wave of arrests against the organization of the oaths and other activities of "Mau Mau," an apocryphal name which the GCA and its supporters themselves never used to denote their secret society (the term "Mau Mau" did not even exist in the Gikuyu language). Jomo

\*The oath-taking fees, as with the "old" GCA, were thus quite high; but now they were graduated, ranging from 1,000 shillings for rich oath takers to 10 and 5 shillings for poor men and women oath takers, respectively.<sup>6</sup> The oath, which went through a number of modifications in form and content, was extended to Gikuyu women during the state of emergency.

Kenyatta\* and other KAU/GCA leaders, in their public speaking tours which attracted massive African audiences, would be persistently questioned by the colonial officials in attendance as to their affiliations with "Mau Mau" and asked to denounce that "criminal" organization. Kenyatta, highly adept in the art of circumlocution, would officially dissociate himself from "Mau Mau," but in such a way as to reassure his Gikuyu audiences that both he and they were, in effect, a part of "Mau Mau."

### ***Rumblings of Insurrection, State of Emergency***

If the social program of the independence movement was vague (centered largely around the twin slogan land and freedom), its plans for an armed rising were also ill defined. Groups of militants began to jump the gun in the fall of 1952 and conduct isolated armed assaults, including an occasional attack against a colonial settler farmer family. Most of the violence was directed against Gikuyu collaborators with the colonial authorities, including puppet chiefs.

British colonialism sensationalized these "savagely Mau Mau murders" for all they were worth through its propaganda apparatus, and clamped down a state of emergency on 21 October 1952. A hundred KAU leaders, including Kenyatta, were arrested and placed on trial for subversion. African newspapers, and all public meetings, were banned. African business activities, viewed as providing a vital financial prop for the independence struggle, were suppressed, and most of the Gikuyu independent schools shut down. All Gikuyu were forcibly registered by police authorities, and "communal" peasant labor was conscripted to build guard and police posts to combat "Mau Mau." An increased tax levy was slapped on the Gikuyu to defray the cost of the extra police force.

"The colonial authorities believed that by 'lopping off the head of the Mau Mau' (i.e., by arresting the leaders) the movement would be finished."<sup>8</sup> In fact, the connection of most of the arrested leaders to the revolutionary movement was, at best, weak — as evidenced by the very fact that they gave them-

\*Kenyatta returned to Kenya in 1946 after a several years' stay in England, during which he staunchly supported the Allied war effort in world war 2.

selves up so easily for arrest, and then proceeded to defend themselves in court on the basis that they had "nothing to do" with Mau Mau. Leadership now passed into the hands of militants, many of them illiterate, who stood far closer to the masses. "There were insufficient arms, there was a limited force of trained men, active support from other tribes had still to be consolidated, and plans were in only their early stages, but the preparations for a rising had leaked out, the government had cracked down with unparalleled severity, and there was no turning back."<sup>9</sup> In the face of intensifying white terror by the colonial police and the still more rabid bands of armed settlers sweeping the Gikuyu homelands, masses of Gikuyu peasants, especially the youth, began to drift into the dense forests of mount Kenya and the Aberdares, where they established precarious, mobile settlements. Many of them entered the forests for their personal safety; but the more militant entered the forests with the conscious mission of using them as a rear base from which to launch the war of independence. They formed the core of the Land and Freedom Army (LFA).

### ***The Land and Freedom Army Forms***

LFA units conducted a number of attacks on police stations to obtain firearms and ammunition, and launched a series of cattle raids against African collaborators with colonialism and, to a lesser extent, settler farmers — with the threefold aim of obtaining food for their forest camp groups, destroying the property of African traitors, and ejecting the colonial settlers from the country. Patterning their organization after the traditional, decentralized Gikuyu clan structure, the LFA forest fighters grouped themselves according to local territorial/clan units. "Concerned primarily with conditions and events in their home locations, most groups established themselves in adjacent sections of the forest fringe..."<sup>10</sup> — which explains why attacks against settler farmers played a secondary role in the struggle, even though the expropriation of the large settler farms should have been the prime social aim of the revolutionary movement. Contact between the localized forest fighter groups was meager, as was contact between the

forest groups and the Nairobi "passive wing" groups responsible for collecting funds, purchasing (or raiding) and transporting arms and supplies to the forest fighters.

A countervailing trend to the localized autonomy of the LFA groups, also rooted in the traditional Gikuyu social structure, was the unifying trend of military age groups, which cut across and linked the forest groups based on their respective local communities. A "clustering," semi-centralizing process took place, resulting in the establishment of larger camps, improved communication between camps, and a fair degree of coordination of military tactics. This centralizing phase, however, also evidenced the rise of material and social privileges for the military leaders. The second major oath administered by the movement, the warrior's oath, included a pledge that "I will obey the order of my leaders at all times without any argument or complaint and will never fail to give them any money or goods taken in a raid and will never hide any pillages or take them for myself."<sup>11</sup> There was no division between political and military leadership, and the top military leaders were not accountable to their fighters, either in the form of regular elections or of mass discussion and criticism sessions.

When the British airforce began heavily bombing the forests, the forest fighter groups had to break up once again into smaller, semi-autonomous units. The resulting lack of coordinated tactical planning, and rivalry between group leaders based on local clan affiliation, was to plague the LFA until its defeat.

### ***Colonial Counterinsurgency Targets Gikuyu Peasants***

The colonial regime proceeded systematically to deprive the forest fighters of both their food supply and their base of mass support. Peasants living on the forest fringes were evicted from their land, their livestock confiscated, and their crops and huts burned to clear the way for the "free fire zone" cordoning the forest off from the Gikuyu "reserves." Thousands of peasant families were herded into densely packed, heavily militarized "protected villages" and forbidden to cultivate their ancestral lands. Through terroristic means, the colonial authorities organized a "home guard" movement among the

Gikuyu, as a fifth column for their military/police campaign against the LFA. "The government's handling of the Emergency," writes Odinga, "forced a state of civil war on the Gikuyu people.

In the beginning the government had virtually no support among the people, except from chiefs, wealthy landholders, tribal police, shopkeepers, government employees, people who ate crumbs from the settler table,...but from no significant cross-section of the people. The government realized it could never defeat the people until it divided them. The home guard movement was begun to turn men into collaborators, to turn father against son, and to enlist brother to betray brother. Men who did not volunteer for the home guard were immediately suspect to security forces. Men joined to protect members of their immediate family and found themselves helping to betray and kill their own people. The home guard gave information which resulted in the arrest, detention, and even death of many freedom fighters; their information helped to cut the vital supply lines to the fighters in the forest.<sup>12</sup>

The more zealous home guards took advantage of the arms and legal backing they had received from the colonial regime to brand as "Mau Mau" their adversaries in personal disputes, beat them up, and even kill them.<sup>13</sup> The home guard, in league with the missionaries, attempted to exert its moral authority by a campaign of counter-oathing against "Mau Mau," using the Christian bible. On the other hand, the compulsory nature of home guard recruitment mirrored the error which the GCA had made in its initial oathing campaign (see above); it became a simple matter for LFA members and supporters to infiltrate the home guard movement, develop a counterespionage network, and siphon home guard weapons to the forest fighters.

The colonial settler farmers, fearing the end of their 50-year reign, declared "open season" on the Gikuyu. Their armed bands robbed the livestock, food and clothing of "Mau Mau" suspects, and subjected hundreds of Gikuyus to beatings, rapes, killings, and forced confessions through torture, including maiming and castration. Whereas the LFA forest fighters could expect detention, mistreatment and possible hanging if captured by the British armed forces or colonial police, they could expect instant death if captured by the

armed bands of settler youth. "Complete extermination of the Gikuyu tribe like the Indians of North America," was the slogan raised by the settlers — and, again taking their cues from the European settler "cowboys" in North America, "The only good Gikuyu is a dead Gikuyu."

Shortly after the state of emergency was declared, almost 100,000 Gikuyu farmworkers living as "squatters" on settler farms were evicted from the Rift valley and sent back to the "reserve," thus compounding the congestion there. A group of evicted farmworkers were former landholders (and their descendants) from the Tigoni region who had been evicted from their native homes in 1933 to make way for European settlers, according to the terms of a government land "exchange" scheme agreed to by chief Luka, who settled lucratively in Lari as a part of the scheme. Outraged over their second eviction in 20 years, these farmworkers evidently vented their rage against chief Luka, whom they considered the chief traitor who had made the first eviction possible. On 26 March 1953 occurred the notorious "Lari massacre," as chief Luka and his wives were killed and their huts set afire by evicted farmworkers apparently under LFA command.<sup>14</sup> A hundred people in the village, among them children, died in the raging flames, and the colonial government sensationalized the event to whip up hysterical anti-"Mau Mau" agitation among the Gikuyu masses. "I learnt from friends who witnessed," wrote Karari Njama, head historian for the LFA, "that in the morning the government killed ten times as many persons as the ones who had been killed [among chief Luka's family the night before] and set more houses on fire. It was then claimed that the whole action had been committed by Mau Mau..."<sup>15</sup> In reprisal over the Lari massacre, home guards killed hundreds of Gikuyus.

### ***War's Stalemate and 'Operation Anvil'***

After one and a half years of the anticolonial war, British colonialism had failed to gain the upper hand against the LFA in the military contest. The heavy bombing of the forests was psychologically intimidating to the forest fighters, who lacked anti-aircraft weapons, but inflicted extremely few casualties upon them, as the bomber pilots could not see their human

targets. The regular British and irregular settler expeditionary units deployed into the forests to attack the LFA bases, could scarcely make use of their superiority in motor transport, due to the dense vegetation. Lacking knowledge of the forest terrain, they were hounded by wild animals and hard put to avert LFA ambushes.

On 24 April 1954, the colonial regime moved to liquidate the LFA support network in the capital city of Nairobi in one fell swoop. In a campaign dubbed "operation anvil," the colonial police and army rounded up the entire African population of Nairobi, numbering around 100,000 people, and drove them into a huge field. There, 70,000 Gikuyus were selected and screened, and almost 50,000 detained. Families and dependent relatives of the detainees were sent to the Gikuyu reserve.<sup>16</sup> The Nairobi based LFA central committee was thus liquidated, and the entire LFA "passive wing" dealt a serious blow. Nairobi was partitioned into tribal zones, and any African of Gikuyu, Embu or Meru origin (the latter two being in fact a part of the Gikuyu tribe) was virtually guaranteed a "one-way ticket to detention camp."<sup>17</sup> The LFA Nairobi support network quickly regrouped, but never regained its former effectiveness.

### ***LFA's Fatal Weaknesses***

The forest fighters, who numbered some 30,000 at the height of their struggle, now faced the grim specter of the drying up of both their arms and food supplies. The LFA's political and organizational weaknesses began to tell. Desperate to obtain food, clothing and medical supplies, LFA attack groups began plundering the cattle and personal effects of home guards and LFA supporters alike.\* LFA leaders took a flippant attitude about the corrosive effect of this approach on LFA's mass support, contenting themselves with sending letters of apology to their wronged supporters, along with vague promises of due

\*This problem was compounded by the formation of virtual bandit groups among demoralized forest fighters who no longer wanted to confront the British forces. They stole peasants' crops and at times raided the stores and shops of LFA supporters. "These men were referred to by the organized forest guerrillas as *komeraras*, a term normally used of persons or criminals in hiding from the law."<sup>18</sup>

compensation for their lost property after the war. With so much of the LFA's military energy consumed with sheer survival tactics, the social goals of the movement, never clearly formulated to begin with, were lost sight of. Although the struggle contained clear elements of a class war of poor peasants and farm laborers against rich peasants, landlords and capitalist farmers, the LFA's struggle tactics amounted to seizing property from the rural exploiting classes in the form of articles of consumption; no significant means of production were seized during the entire war, nor did the LFA leadership put forward such a perspective.

The aspiring bourgeois character of the LFA leadership began to assert itself, as the LFA land program degenerated into a demand for private landholdings for LFA fighters and, above all, leaders. LFA general and "prime minister"\* Dedan Kimathi ordered the meticulous recording of the name, background, date of entry into the forest, etc. of all the forest fighters, so that "if you die, your heirs would take your share of land and enjoy the freedom you died for..."<sup>20</sup> Kimathi patterned the LFA officer corps structure after that of the British army, and held out the prospect of landed proprietary privileges for LFA officers in the aftermath of the war as a material incentive for their military performance. In an Aug. 1953 speech before LFA commanders, Kimathi declared:

We shall issue ranks, from the lowest to the highest in accordance to individual activities and try to encourage our [rank and file warriors] to seek the next rank. We must make these ranks [of real significance] in the camps. You must see that all the ranks are respected and given some privileges so that they would be admirable... These ranks should show each warrior's keenness and industriousness and must be respected after the war. Many of the best farms are owned by ex-[British] army officers in both world wars... These farms are their gifts as pensions, apart from the high salaries they were given. I would like to see my officers taking over all those farms as their pensions!

\*The GCA/KAU had set up a "shadow government" before the Emergency, structured as an African copy of the colonial government. "...The elected persons were only waiting for the day of taking over the government."<sup>19</sup> Kimathi was elected "prime minister" by the LFA leadership body, the "Kenya parliament," during the course of the war.



(Applause). Though we do not have money to give our fighters, every rank we give out must be accompanied by some money, no matter how little that would be, to indicate that if we had money we would be glad to pay our warriors sufficient salaries and that we lay this debt to the first African government.<sup>21</sup>

Women were not mobilized into active participation in the revolutionary struggle. The young women who accompanied the LFA fighters into the forests served as beasts of burden in the camps, performing the arduous domestic chores; only a tiny number became active fighters. Several young women who first entered the forests delivering supplies to the forest fighters were commandeered by LFA leaders as their domestic servants and objects of pleasure — despite the LFA's initial formal prohibition against sexual intercourse in the camps.<sup>22</sup> At the Aug. 1953 LFA leaders' meeting, a strict sanction against the luring and abduction of women into the forest was passed, but this was sometimes disregarded in practice, especially by isolated "splinter" groups.

The LFA's backward practice in relation to women was consistent with its reactionary, Gikuyu traditionalist program on the woman question (see GCA oath above, point 12). The LFA failed to advance a revolutionary democratic program for the emancipation of women, in opposition to the pseudo-democracy of the missionaries and the colonial regime. Not only were the masses of African women thus stifled from making their full contribution to the revolutionary movement, but they even became prey to serving as tools for British espionage and counter-agitation against the LFA. Some of the young women abducted by LFA leaders in the forest had been recruited by the British intelligence service, in collaboration with the home guard, to supply information on the whereabouts of the LFA camps and the battle plans of the fighters. And when, in early 1955, a British offer of "amnesty" to the forest fighters in exchange for their surrender led to an extended truce period, during which the forest fighters were relatively free to return peacefully to their home villages, the colonial regime was able to lean on the Gikuyu women to demoralize the forest fighters:

...One of our fighters from the [camp] where I was staying told me on his return from the reserve that he had to fight his own mother, aged over 60, who hugged...him, crying and cursing [at] him not to return to the forest again. He added that the women had started trapping our fighters inside houses where they were entertained with food while other women went to call home guards, who only forced our fighters to surrender at the points of their guns. The women's trick became known to our fighters who learned to enter the village with great awareness of many friendly traps conducted by wife or mother or even the children.<sup>23</sup>

### ***The Tribal Question***

British colonialism used tribalism as its prime ideological weapon in rallying support to its side among the African peoples of Kenya. In a relentless, anti-Gikuyu propaganda barrage, "Mau Mau" was depicted as a Gikuyu tribal movement whose aim was to dominate and oppress the non-Gikuyu tribal groupings. The colonial government managed to recruit over 75% of its 100,000-man military force from the African population.\*

The claim by British colonial authorities and historians that "Mau Mau" was a Gikuyu tribal movement rather than an all-African national movement, contains an element of truth. As we have seen, the LFA's ideology contained contradictory elements of radical democracy and reactionary Gikuyu traditionalism. Ideologically, the forest fighters relied not on secular political education, but on ritual Gikuyu prayers adapted, along with aspects of Christian teachings, to the contemporary conditions of the anticolonial struggle. Traditional Gikuyu seer-magicians were relied on for military and tactical advice. While a handful of fighters from other tribes, such as the Luo, joined the LFA forest groups, the LFA did not make a

\*The government force comprised "over 30,000 Home Guards (Gikuyu), 10,000 regular police, 8,000 Kenya Police Reserve, plus 4,000 tribal police. The rest were regular soldiers in East Africa (King's African Rifles), the Kenya Regiment and the British troops (four battalions). The government had drawn its African forces from [the non-Gikuyu tribes]. Most of these, soldiers who had either been badly trained or had not been trained at all, insulted, scorned and despised the whole Gikuyu tribe..."<sup>24</sup>

systematic attempt to transform the movement into a genuinely pan-African one and to extend the anticolonial combat front throughout Kenya. As the forest fighters became demoralized and increasingly torn by internal tensions along clan and subclan lines towards the end of the war, the pan-African component of their movement diminished still more.

At no time, however, did the LFA degenerate into tribal chauvinism and claim that the Gikuyu were ordained to play the politically dominant role in an independent Kenya. Moreover, that the Gikuyu central highlands would be the main theater of the anticolonial war, had been objectively determined by the massive scope and intensity of the settlers' expropriation of Gikuyu land and the resulting, uncontrollable population pressure of the Gikuyu peasants against the meager land which they were allotted. Even had a revolutionary Marxist party existed to take the leadership of the anticolonial war and pursue the program of national liberation in all its social as well as political aspects, it is clear that the Gikuyu would have done the bulk of the fighting.

### ***Psychological Warfare***

Mass psychological warfare was a crucial weapon of British colonialism in scoring its victory over the LFA. Over the airwaves, in the "popular" press, and from the pulpit, a ferocious barrage of counterrevolutionary propaganda was hurled upon the African masses, depicting "Mau Mau" as a "savage, atavistic" band of "criminal murderers." Missionaries, once again guaranteed practically a monopoly over the educational system thanks to the colonial regime's shutdown of most independent Gikuyu schools, inveighed against "Mau Mau" for having revolted against God. Anti-"Mau Mau" propaganda was the only commodity which the colonial regime was dispensing in abundance to the African masses, and practically free of charge. Thousands of slain LFA guerrillas were placed on display in their home villages, for purposes of intimidation.

The LFA, for its part, failed to recover from the government's banning of all African newspapers, and proved unable to establish a clandestine propaganda apparatus to

rally public opinion against the colonial regime. "I remember to have shed tears," wrote Karari Njama — with two years of highschool education the most highly educated of the LFA leaders and one of the most politically progressive — "at the regret of my inability to transmit my thoughts to the public; in spite of how hard I shouted, my voice could only be heard a few yards from me in that dense forest."<sup>25</sup>

### ***Labor Movement Disconnected from Anti-Colonial Revolt***

Yet another fatal weakness of the LFA was its inability to connect the anticolonial struggle with the rising African labor movement in the cities. After declaring the state of emergency, the colonial government, which had refused to legally recognize the militant East African Trades Union Congress because it had associated with KAU, banned all labor organizations except the reformist, conciliationist Kenya Federation of Labor (KFL). The KFL was thus left an open field in the legal arena to pour ice water on the militancy of the workers and make sure that their demands remained strictly economic and did not pass over into a political challenge to colonial rule. Tom Mboya, a KFL leader,\* related his fireman's service in containing the dockworkers' strike in the crucial port city of Mombasa in March 1955:

The workers were demanding increased wages and the expulsion of some supervisors. I could see the strike was following the pattern of strikes since 1947 — with rioting soon starting because of the ineffectiveness of consultation and negotiating machinery. When Jim Berry and I arrived in Mombasa, the workers had just thrown out the leader of the Dock Workers

\*"During the Emergency the KFL felt its main task was to survive," writes Mboya. "If we had precipitated a situation in which it could have been proscribed, there would have been no voice [of class collaboration] at all left in the country... As it was, I think we would have been proscribed but for the fact that we had international support from the ICFTU [International Confederation of Free Trade Unions, then a tool of U.S. imperialism]. This is what created the deep attachment to the ICFTU, because our survival at that time depended on the Kenya government's fear that the international labor movement might come in and exert international pressure if we were proscribed."<sup>26</sup>

Union (which had been formed in 1954). The police were moving in the tough General Service Unit, and the army was being brought down the next day. We asked the provincial commissioner not to bring down the army, but to let us try to reason with the strikers.

There were around 10,000 people assembled on the Tononoka football ground. It was one of the ugliest [sic] scenes I have ever faced in my life... The atmosphere was extremely tense. There had just been some rioting, and at first it was very difficult to reason with the crowd. We hoped to get them to agree to go back to work while a tribunal was set up to look into their grievances.

...Just as we were about to reach an agreement, the employers sent in leaflets containing an ultimatum that the strikers would be dismissed if they did not return to work. That broke up the meeting.

We went to the employer and to the government and said we were not prepared to take any further part unless the ultimatum was withdrawn. The next day it was withdrawn, and I talked to the strikers again quietly. On the third day they agreed to go back to work, and hearings before the tribunal started. It was the first tribunal ever appointed under the Trade Disputes Arbitration Ordinance...<sup>27</sup>

The negotiations netted the dockworkers a 33% wage hike and a raise in the monthly minimum wage from 5 pounds to 7 pounds. "The Mombasa strike underlined a lesson I had already learned," wrote Mboya: "that calling a strike is easy, but stopping it and getting things back to normal and then negotiating and winning something out of the dispute is the biggest test."<sup>28</sup>

### ***British Colonialism Wins***

By the end of 1955, the British colonial forces were clearly winning the war against the LFA. The LFA, foundering above all on its own internal contradictions, was demoralized by the defection of a growing number of its captured leaders and cadres who, under threat of execution, gave extensive information to the British intelligence service, and/or returned to the forest camps urging their former comrades to surrender. British counterinsurgency specialists under brigadier general

Kitson organized Mau Mau “pseudo gangs” among turncoat LFA fighters, who re-entered the forest to launch devastating attacks against their former comrades. LFA leader Dedan Kimathi was captured and hanged.

The war ended in 1956, but the state of emergency and the detention of tens of thousands of “Mau Mau” members and suspects continued for some years afterwards. The total death toll suffered by the LFA fighters was over 22,000 — around 1,000 of them and their supporters hanged — with over 80,000 Gikuyus placed in concentration camps. Among the African, mostly Gikuyu masses, the war claimed some 150,000 lives, “taking into account death by starvation or diseases in the unsanitary villages which...swept thousands of children and old aged persons.”<sup>29</sup> On the other side, the LFA killed around 2,000 people, among them 32 European civilians and 63 members of the security forces.<sup>30</sup>

British colonialism, having won a financially costly victory, now proceeded to ram through its “land consolidation” scheme, whose initial announcement had precipitated the anti-colonial upheaval. While the LFA fighters and their descendants were economically disenfranchised, a small, landed African bourgeoisie was cultivated, laying a solid economic basis for grooming a “new, young” group of African bourgeois politicians from the “loyalists” (to the colonial regime) during the emergency, and their sons.

...When the doors of the prisons and the camps were opened seven, eight and nine years after the imposition of Emergency rule, men who had once owned land and had been prosperous farmers were destitute. Freedom fighters had lost their land to collaborators and ‘good boys.’ The acute [class] division running through the Gikuyu, Meru and Embu tribe was thus carried through to the time of peace. Reprisals did not end with the men and women in the camps, but their children suffered too. It was the children of detainees or dead freedom fighters who could not pay school fees and were excluded from the classrooms; it was the sons of the loyalists, not the freedom fighters, who got employment, or were taken into the administration, the army or the police force, and had opportunities for higher education. The two sides of the Emergency persisted into later years; freedom fighters were unemployed and landless; and the loyalists had

entrenched themselves and had become the dependable middle group that the government had aimed to create.<sup>31</sup>

### ***Kenyatta Gets the Nod***

In 1961, after considerable government stonewalling, Jomo Kenyatta was released from his nine-year detention. Kenyatta, who had not once declared his solidarity with the LFA fighters (despite the fact that his name figured prominently in most of the forest fighters' prayers), emerged from detention as a horsetrading, bourgeois politician. Claiming to "stand above" the political party disputes between radical and moderate African nationalists, Kenyatta conciliated with British imperialism on every key question, and set up an unprincipled coalition government which smoothed the way to independence in 1963, maintaining capitalist property relations intact.

A nagging obstacle to this peaceful transition was the revived struggle of the remnants of the LFA in the early 1960's. In a dispute over the fruits of a capitalist independence, reminiscent of the tragicomic aftermath of the aborted Mexican revolution, almost every surviving forest fighter demanded a plot of land from the government, expecting to receive land free as a reward for their struggle. Some demanded responsible positions in the government or in a Gikuyu area, insisting on replacing those Gikuyu civil servants who had served the colonial regime.

When Kenyatta, working to accommodate both the European settler farmers and the rising African bourgeoisie, refused to meet these demands, a number of LFA groups returned to the forests and began military operations anew. Tom Mboya, now Kenya's minister of labor and a "moderate" leader of KANU (Kenya African National Union), which was to become the government party, toured the Gikuyu areas and warned that another state of emergency might have to be imposed if the LFA did not desist. When LFA activities continued nonetheless, Mboya declared in Oct. 1963, two months before independence, that the LFA was "a society dangerous to the good government of Kenya." The African members of the coalition government made the motion for a new order

banning the LFA.<sup>32</sup> After independence, the police in the Meru district launched an energetic campaign to liquidate the remaining forest fighter groups. Two LFA leaders, and a number of guerrillas, were killed.

### ***Suppression of Somali Insurgents in the Northeast***

British officers continued to hold the commanding posts in the "Kenyan" army and police after independence. They directed a systematic campaign of repression against an armed insurgency among Somali pastoral nomads in the 60% Somali populated northeast region, who wanted to secede from Kenya and fuse with independent Somalia.

Having created the conditions which made revolt inevitable [including nurturing hopes for possible separation and recoupling with Somalia], the British now provided the military means for its suppression: not only the logistics, the weapons, the ammunition, the spares, and the strategy but also officers to supplement the handful of trained Kenyans. They adapted to the conditions of the northern frontier district techniques of counterinsurgency already tested in places like Malaya. They exploited the Somali's dependence on his animals, on the exiguous sources of water, and on his communal ties — in short, the whole fabric of his existence. Military units controlled access to the few important watering places. The authorities seized cattle and camels as collective punishment of the clans for acts attributed to any member. And they restricted the normal movement of the nomads, forcing them to bunch up near well guarded population centers.<sup>33</sup>

Between 1963-67, the Kenyan government claimed that its armed forces killed over 2,000 Somali partisans.

### ***Settler Farmer Bourgeoisie Retrenches***

To smooth the way for independence, England loaned Kenya \$36 million to buy "back" land from settler farmers. The settlers were compensated at the inflated, 1959 land prices, which were five to ten times higher than the prices they had paid for the land. Property rights and "due" compensation of the settler landowners were principles enshrined in the bill of rights, and the compensation of the settlers in cash and not in bonds



was a principle enshrined in the constitution.<sup>34</sup> Many settler farmers, having sold their land to the government at highly inflated prices, proceeded to buy "new" land with loan aid from the government. Of the total land transfers that followed independence, Europeans acquired 54% of the land areas, Africans 39%, and Asians 7%.<sup>35</sup>

African peasants, meanwhile, were resettled onto one-eighth of the land owned by European settlers. Kenyatta's government imposed a land policy which militated against farm production cooperatives: requiring a 50% down payment on the purchase price, extending loans at high interest rates, and permitting no moratorium on debt payments. And, since African peasants "squatting" on European farms were required to have lived there at least four years to establish legal residence, European farmowners launched a mass eviction of those African peasants who had falsely assumed that independence would mean African land rights. The police enforced the eviction of the peasant "squatters" and the destruction of their crops. The land onto which the peasants were resettled was fragmented and unproductive. The only Africans who benefited from the brisk exchange of land titles were the *nouveaux riches* African capitalist farmers and absentee landlords. Kenyatta himself acquired a large farm.

Bildad Kaggia, junior minister for education and one of the KAU leaders detained along with Kenyatta upon the imposition of the Emergency in 1952, sharply exposed and denounced this agrarian policy, calling for the nationalization of the large settler farms and their conversion to state farms, along with vigorous promotion of the cooperative movement. He was driven out of the government by Kenyatta in 1964. Having given up their political command of the state, the European settler farmowners who remained in Kenya discovered, to their pleasant surprise, that they were prospering economically after independence, even more than under colonial rule.

## **Ch. 5: Kenya: From Land and Freedom Army Insurgency to Kenyatta's 'Good Government'**

1. W.E.B. DuBois, *The World and Africa*, New York: International Publishers, 1965, p. 283.
2. Oginga Odinga, *Not Yet Uhuru: The Autobiography of Oginga Odinga*, New York: Hill and Wang, 1967, pp. 64-5.
3. Jomo Kenyatta, *Facing Mount Kenya: The Tribal Life of the Gikuyu*, London: Secker and Warburg, 1953, p. 196.
4. Odinga, *op. cit.*, pp. 96-7.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 111.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 114.
7. Karari Njama and Donald Barnett, *Mau Mau from Within: Autobiography and Analysis of Kenya's Peasant Revolt*, New York and London: Monthly Review Press, 1966, pp. 118-19.
8. Ladislav Venyš, *A History of the Mau Mau Movement in Kenya*, Prague: Charles University, 1970, p. 41.
9. Odinga, *op. cit.*, p. 113.
10. Njama and Barnett, *op. cit.*, p. 153.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 132.
12. Odinga, *op. cit.*, p. 125.
13. Venyš, *op. cit.*, p. 72.
14. Bethwell Ogot, "Revolt of the Elders: An Anatomy of the Loyalist Crowd in the Mau Mau Uprising 1952-56," Nairobi, 1971. Published in *Politics and Nationalism in Colonial Kenya*, B. Ogot, ed., Nairobi: East African Publishing House, 1972, p. 139.
15. Njama and Barnett, *op. cit.*, p. 137.
16. *Ibid.*, pp. 331-2.
17. Tom Mboya, *Freedom and After*, Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1963, p. 32.
18. Njama and Barnett, *op. cit.*, p. 213.

19. *Ibid.*, p. 124.
20. *Ibid.*, p. 247.
21. *Ibid.*, p. 249.
22. *Ibid.*, pp. 242-4.
23. *Ibid.*, pp. 435-6.
24. *Ibid.*, p. 437.
25. *Ibid.*, p. 438.
26. Mboya, *op. cit.*, p. 199.
27. *Ibid.*, pp. 32-3.
28. *Ibid.*, p. 34.
29. Njama and Barnett, *op. cit.*, pp. 439-40.
30. Ogot, *op. cit.*
31. Odinga, *op. cit.*, p. 126.
32. Venyš, *op. cit.*, pp. 90-1.
33. Tom Farer, *War Clouds on the Horn of Africa: The Widening Storm*, second revised edition, Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 1979, p. 96.
34. Odinga, *op. cit.*, pp. 257-9.
35. *Ibid.*, p. 261.