



## **Kenya's Silence on Colonialism**

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Fearless and barely armed, the Kenya Land and Freedom Army (KLFA) Soldiers from across Kenya met clandestinely in the early 1950's to discuss the many afflictions-past and present- faced under British colonial regime. Hence goes the story from historians and in memoirs written by the freedom fighters themselves who became the revered Mau Mau. But why isn't colonialism a mainstream topic of discussion? I found this a question often asked by most foreigners-from Africa or abroad- who wish to understand Kenyans' dormancy in dealing with the country's past, so crucial in influencing the present running of community and state affairs. One Kenyan scholar I spoke to who asked to remain anonymous said, "history of Kenya has been politicised and to open any part of it is to re-awaken deeply held grievances - the ensuing conversation is generally polarised around politics. There are Kenyans who benefitted under colonialism, others benefitted from the confusion and ignorance of Kenyans at independence and still others benefitted in the years immediately

after independence creating a new set of grievances that had nothing to do with colonialism."

Sixty years following the uprising and fifty years since Kenya's gaining independence, now disputable, self-rule from the whites, the discourse on the Land and Freedom Army remains murky despite thousands of works of literature, films and research papers. Born in 1940, Jane Nyaruai recalls clearly her unaware involvement during the struggle, "my parents were keen on informing me what was happening in our country. With other children, we used to carry bullets from one location to another. We were never told what was in our sacks. My mother would ask us to take maize for grinding. On the way, we would meet other women who would distract us and insist on taking the maize for grinding themselves. Only later on did I learn why. Our parents were protecting us." She adds the reason that such critical history is not everyone's cup of tea is due to greediness and selfishness, "we want to own so much and have people working under us, yet there is no one who wishes to slave under anyone. People are hating each other immensely. And what can now work is doing work together. And if only when one earns a little and share it with others but if when am hungry, will I love you? Will there be any peace?" She notes in deep thought.

To continue with the scholarly discourse, on December 2013, Karatina University in Central Kenya in alliance with the National Museums of Kenya hosted the first ever Mau Mau conference dubbed, *Mau Mau and Other Liberation Movements 50 Years After Independence* (<http://bit.ly/1t7tc70>). Different Kenyan scholars presented astounding research topics. Among the thorny issues overtly downplayed in most mainstream media, film, and literary narratives but examine at the conference includes: the role of women in the struggle for independence; the question of whether Mau Mau was a nationalistic or a peasant farmers' revolt against white land-grabbers ; what happened to land dissemination and distribution following independence; why did it take over forty years for the Kenyan gov-

ernment to formally recognize these freedom fighters; what was the catalyst for former president Mwai Kibaki to lift the bar on the fighters as an outlawed group; and, was the struggle a Kikuyu-only affair? Professor Othieno Nyammjoh, referring to his candid understanding on the subject and quoting from Ngugi wa Thiongo's book *A Grain Of Wheat*,\* categorizes the struggle as instigated by two very varied groups- the homeguard and the fighters, "In *A Grain of Wheat*, Ngugi's 'hero' Mugo is the one who betrayed Dedan Kimathi; but because people do not know this, they fete Mugo at the independence eve celebrations (where the book ends). But the book asks an implicit question: that if we start off by celebrating Mugo (the homeguards), how will we ever go right? On the eve of independence, Odinga turned the Governor away when offered the Prime Ministership, arguing the colonial government had first to free Kenyatta before independence, leaving people like Gichuru and Mboya shocked by Odinga. Immediately into independence, Kenyatta betrayed every aspiration of the nationalists, even going to the extent of detaining ex-MauMaus who had asked where their land was." His analysis then begs us to further explore the conspiratorial question, if giving Kenyan independence was part of the British Regime plan as implied by the 1960 speech by then British Prime Minister Harold MacMillan, the, "Wind Of Change"? As scholars have documented that the British used ethnicity as a divide and rule policy, some scholars believe independence was among the many calculated strategies for them to maintain power- even if it meant sacrificing a few souls while at it. So then, should the June 06 2013 "apology" and the GBP 20 million reparation be a cut and dried deal allowing all Kenyans to collectively forget the torturous physical and mental experiences of colonialism? (see <http://www.bbc.com/news/uk-22790037>) And finally how do we "soberly" teach our children and youth about colonialism? Why did most veterans end up living in despicable conditions in rural and urban slums following independence? I believe these last two questions were not fully explored at the conference. To this, Professor Othieno Nyammjoh proposed "Yes, Kenya's history needs a thorough rewriting if we are to understand "where the rain started beating us"! One of the reasons

*why that re-writing is not 'urgent' is because it will expose the turncoats who captured power at independence, like Jomo Kenyatta." To a greater extent most queries above were thoroughly discussed at the conference. In her paper, "The Impact of Nandi Resistance: 50 Years after Independence," Dr. Prisca Tanui says that during the colonial period the Nandi lost large tracts of land near the railway and some members of the Talai Clan were kicked out and forced to occupy Kapsisiywa, "a region not economically viable" as other parts of Nandi were taken over by the colonial administrators. In the Kavirondo Region, in Western Kenya different groups responded variedly to British encroachment as discussed by Dr. Paul A. Opondo, a lecturer at Moi University. Some groups collaborated while some outrightly rejected the imposition brought upon them. For most young people, this colonial history is often forgotten or lodged in the subconscious as the painful, horrendous accounts so often muddled and riddled with ethnic turmoil, poverty, corruption, police impunity, injustices, poor living conditions and ruling class setting the priorities and perspectives of the nation. As the first president so candidly declared when he came to power, "Where there has been racial hatred, it must be ended. Where there has been tribal animosity, it will be finished. Let us 'NOT' dwell upon the bitterness of the past. I would rather look to the future, to the "GOOD" new Kenya, not to the bad old days. If we create this sense of national direction and identity, we shall have gone a long way to solving our economic problems."\** Does forgetting right a wrong? Can forgiving the most recent "bad" past where a few people took charge of 70 percent of land from communities in Kenya's coastal area of Lamu, for example, enhance the country's economy or quell animosity?

Irrespective of continuing oppression of poor people, pervasive corruption and lack of critical perspectives on colonialism, one Nyeri youth group is hopeful that Kenya is becoming a better developed country. One said the Thika Superhighway is a project he is proud of. The group had an afternoon off to relearn this history. The nine youth of the Thuguma- Nyeri County's Children and Youth Empow-

erment Centre (CYEC) visited the Nyeri Museum - a former colonial court- in Central Kenya where there is an ongoing exhibition of the struggle for independence. The walls are full of historical portraits consisting of Tom Mboya, Pio Gama Pinto, the "Kapenguria six" (the arrest, trial and imprisonment of Jomo Kenyatta and others in 1952 during Mau Mau), women queuing for permits, women voting, women protesting including Wangari Maathai, Mau Mau fighters, Port Florence (Present day Kisumu), Home Guards among other regalia. This group of nine youth was excited. It is their first time to visit this Museum. Seventeen-year-old Sammy Muraya says, "I am looking at some regalia the Mau Mau used and how hardworking they were. I could also defend my country." Tom Mboya's work and project of taking young people to study abroad resonated especially with one young man. As 19 year old Wilson Ekeno says, "I am looking at Tom Mboya who was a trade unionist. I understand his history well, he was a workers' leader. I feel we had good leaders whom I can emulate."

In retrospect of the Karatina University conference last year, the role of women was presented by a few scholars including Prof. Catherine Ndug'o, Director of African Studies at Kenyatta University, who spoke on, "The Unsung Heroines: Women's Role in the Mau Mau Liberation Struggle." She argues women have remained "unsung warriors" who played a pivotal role in bringing down an oppressive regime and "little is written in recognition and memory" of these bold souls. Additionally, In her paper "The role of Women in Kenya's Liberation Struggle: The Literary Perspective," Muthoni Gachari, a senior lecturer at Daystar University, also makes a few recommendations. She encourages us "to correct the 'wrong' perspective given in our history books, recognition of women liberation heroines and establishment of structures that directly address contribution of women in all aspects of Kenya's development."



Anthony Maina speaks to CYEC at Nyeri Museum. Photo: Sam Kairu.

Anthony Maina, the Assistant Curator of Nyeri Museum, talked about the vital role played by women before and during the struggle for the country's independence. "The women were preparing and giving the freedom fighters food, they were used to pass information as they were not easily suspected as being part of the Land and Freedom Army, there were also women who were fighters. I can remember one by the name Field Marshal Muthoni Kirima who is still alive here in Nyeri. The first Kenyan President Jomo Kenyatta had to send for her when the country was granted self-rule as she was still hiding in the forest and did not believe the war was over." The group of nine from CYEC visiting the Nyeri Museum had much to say about the contributions of women prior to Kenya's independence. "I love history and I am excited to learn about Wangari Maathai and Wanjiku Florence who also fought for our Independence," says twenty-year-old Esther Ndegwa. Fifteen-year-old Agnes Wanjiru says she's learnt much more than she had already known. "I did not know

Wangari Maathai was involved in the Mau Mau and I feel good because now I understand what I did not." While eighteen-year-old Jackson Olemereu acknowledges women's involvement in the struggle for independence is news to him. He said, "one thing I have learnt is that when the Mau Mau were fighting, it is not only the men who were fighting, I see women also contributed; fighting in the forest, taking food and clothing to the fighters and I have also learnt that it is not only the Mau Mau who fought for our independence, but also that Kenyans contributed wherever they were."

On the issue of reparation for the Mau Mau veterans, mixed responses from the CYEC group came to play. Muraya says, "to be tortured and oppressed is an awful thing. I will feel bad if I am oppressed and even if I am paid, the pain will never go away. I will not even want to be paid." Wanjiru opts for the remedy of putting the oppressor behind bars. Meanwhile Olemereu says he would want the compensation, "because even if he is jailed, I will not gain anything, but if he pays me, I can start my life afresh." While nineteen-year-old Ekeno sees compensation unnecessary, "This issue of being oppressed and paid should not exist; the oppressor can get used to violating you and might later torment you much more knowing they will be able to pay you off."

As the visit to the Nyeri museum with the group of nine from CYEC comes to an end, one daring youth, sixteen-year-old Beatrice Wanjiru, has a short message to President Uhuru Kenyatta and his government. "I want him to help all the poor people and those who are not able-bodied."

Conclusively, as the Jubilee government preaches a nationalistic agenda, it is becoming increasingly critical to correct our wider understanding of Kenyan history by openly talking about the impact of colonialism and neo-colonialism and adds 74 year old Nyaruai, do something about it: "If it is possible, I would like the people with huge farms to just have a look and even if it means giving out ... There are people with 20,000 or 30,000, or 400,000 acres worth of

land. I wish they can stop loving themselves this much because eventually we will leave all this wealth on earth. If only they can only share even an acre each so that the people who are so troubled by poverty and lack food to eat, if they are given soil, they can at least work on it for food for themselves and their children. And even get a place to be buried. I have heard the public grave yards are filling up ... will we now get buried where we live?"

A conversation around struggle for independence and all the queries aforementioned here and all these questions by scholars and young generations of Kenyans should generate a nation-wide discussion if societal cohesion is to be expected. My anonymous scholar is optimistic, "I have no doubt that history will one day become popular discourse. What is missing is the environment that does not stifle the expression of differing perspectives and that enables Kenyans to deal with the realities that are unearthed," she concludes.



Jane Nyaruai, participated in the struggle for Kenyan independence as a child. She demonstrates the needle-pricking practiced by the homeguards to coerce the people into admitting taking the Mau Mau oath.



Mau Mau female veterans at an event to remember veterans of the Mau Mau in April 2014. Photo: Wangui Kimari.