

# Printing Propaganda: The Portrayal of Mau Mau Oaths in British Media

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The Mau Mau War of 1952-1960 saw the Mau Mau, primarily made up of Kikuyu, fight against the decaying British Empire for Kenyan independence. Throughout the war, the Mau Mau used a complex system of oaths and oathing ceremonies, often drawing upon pre-established Kikuyu rituals, to foster unity between adherents and the movement. The British media, however, ignored the cultural significance of these practices and used their seemingly alien nature to Western audiences as a critical part of the Empire's broader propaganda strategy, which aimed to show the Mau Mau as a "primitive" terrorist uprising that ultimately justified violent colonial responses.

Long before the Mau Mau war and the British colonization of Kenya at the turn of the twentieth century, oaths and oathing ceremonies were an integral part of Kikuyu lives and society. Regardless of an oath's specific purpose, the practice of oathing was always a serious undertaking. Those who broke from oaths faced punishment not only from their family and the wider community but also divine retribution from the Kikuyu god of creation, Ngai, who may inflict severe injury or death upon them.<sup>1</sup> Historically, the Kikuyu had four main types of

oaths: muuma, koringa, thenge, and gethathi.<sup>2</sup> In particular, the muuma oath, which the first Mau Mau oath would later derive itself from, had long been used in situations relating to land.<sup>3</sup> While colonial forces would later view the emergence of the Mau Mau oath as a direct response to the war beginning in 1952, the radicalization of oathing began roughly thirty years before. Beginning in the 1920s, the Kikuyu Central Association (KCA), which fought against the expansion of colonists onto traditional Kikuyu lands, is thought to have laid the groundwork for radicalized oathing as some traditional Kikuyu practices were incorporated into their work.<sup>4</sup> However, it was not until 1943 that oathing was radicalized on a larger scale and, as a consequence, sowed the seeds of what would later become Mau Mau. In 1943, colonists were planning on forcefully evicting several thousand Kikuyu squatters onto an area of land known as Olenguruone so they could use the White Highlands the Kikuyu occupied.<sup>5</sup> The squatters began to use the muuma oath as a form of resistance, administering the oath to men, women, and children.<sup>6</sup>

This use of the muuma oath would serve as a watershed moment; a traditional practice had been

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1 Caroline Elkins, *Imperial Reckoning: The Untold Story of Britain's Gulag in Kenya* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2005), 27.

2 Mickie Mwanzia Koster, *The Power of the Oath: Mau Mau Nationalism in Kenya, 1952-1960* (New York: University of Rochester Press, 2016), 32.

3 Koster, *The Power of the Oath*, 33.

4 Koster, *The Power of the Oath*, 40.

5 Elkins, *Imperial Reckoning*, 25.

6 Elkins, *Imperial Reckoning*, 25.

transformed into a call for action and uniting force, bringing squatters together under a common goal. Kikuyu leaders and African politicians who had long sought a means of uniting people against the common enemy of colonialism and fighting for the reclamation of traditional lands saw the success of White Highland squatters re-working oaths as a form of resistance and unity for several thousand people as evidence enough that oathing could be a form of even broader solidarity across Kenya for change. By 1950 mass oathing was in practice across Kenya and building up the growing movement of Mau Mau.<sup>7</sup>

With the success of mass oathing realized and spreading, the various Mau Mau oaths and oathing ceremonies began to take form, blending traditional Kikuyu practices with emerging Mau Mau symbolism. Regardless of one's role within Mau Mau, adherents almost always took the first oath, which focused on their symbolic rebirth, in which they left their former selves behind and took up the mantle of the movement, cementing their allegiance through vows.<sup>8</sup> While variations between the nature and process of the first oath exist, the typical ceremony had adherents walk naked through an arch fashioned out of banana leaves, both signifying rebirth and then eating the meat of a slaughtered animal, typically a goat or ram, while answering questions and taking various vows.<sup>9</sup> Drawing upon the severity of betraying oaths in Kikuyu traditions, adherents of the first oath finished the ceremony by swearing that if they failed to kill an enemy of Mau Mau or confessed to taking an oath to a colonist, the oath itself would kill them.<sup>10</sup>

Following the first oath, adherents occasionally repeated it at a later time to strengthen their convictions. However, most Mau Mau only took further oaths in particular situations. For instance the *muma wa ngero* oath was only used by forest fighters facing death, and was undertaken before leaving for the forest.<sup>11</sup> *Muma wa ngero* and other 'advanced' oaths often utilized taboos in Kikuyu culture, such as certain sexual practices and interactions with bodily fluids, to create intense and intimate ceremonies that symbolized a deeper bond of unity, trust, and loyalty between those partaking. These qualities were vital for adherents to have, especially when facing dangerous situations where reliance on each other was paramount.<sup>12</sup> For example, many advanced ceremonies used blood, which served as a literal and figurative symbol of life and death, representing the death of an adherent's old self and their new life found in Mau Mau, coupled with the promise of an independent Kenya to come.<sup>13</sup> At times, advanced oath ceremonies occurred in the forest. Ceremonies in the forest were particularly symbolic for the Kikuyu, who believed it had connections with the god Ngai, negative and positive spiritual forces, and served as a place to communicate with one's ancestors.<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, it provided a secluded space from other Mau Mau and, more importantly, colonists, reinforcing the gravity later oaths held.<sup>15</sup>

Regardless of the history of Mau Mau and the practices of oathing, many in the British media were puzzled by the uprising; however, the contextualization provided by several publications produced in the first few years of the war would

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7 Elkins, *Imperial Reckoning*, 25.

8 Koster, *The Power of the Oath*, 63.

9 Elkins, *Imperial Reckoning*, 26.

10 Elkins, *Imperial Reckoning*, 26.

11 Koster, *The Power of the Oath*, 63.

12 Koster, *The Power of the Oath*, 63.

13 Koster, *The Power of the Oath*, 63, 68.

14 Koster, *The Power of the Oath*, 65.

15 Koster, *The Power of the Oath*, 65.

provide a crucial and biased framework through which they would come to understand and characterize Mau Mau and oathing. One of the first works to explore the rise of Mau Mau was *Mau Mau and the Kikuyu* by Kenyan-British archaeologist L. S. B. Leakey, published in 1952; this book provided a conflicting account of the Kikuyu and Mau Mau, as Leakey sought to simultaneously disassociate the “good” Kikuyu from Mau Mau while also acknowledging their heavily intertwined identities. Leakey asserts that Mau Mau spread as they forced Kikuyu loyal to the British to take oaths, weaponizing traditional Kikuyu oathing beliefs to control them through fear.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, Leakey reasoned that Mau Mau held forced oathing ceremonies at night to ensure unwilling participants could not call for help and that this practice was a direct violation of traditional customs, which assert oaths should be administered during the day and voluntarily.<sup>17</sup>

*Mau Mau and the Kikuyu* was complimented three years later by Leakey’s follow-up assessments of the war in *Defeating Mau Mau*, which carried a noticeably sharper tone than that of his previous work, with particular emphasis on the supposed religious aspects of Mau Mau and details of oathing ceremonies. Leakey asserts that Mau Mau had a religious creed that was blasphemous to Christianity and the Church of England by putting Jomo Kenyatta in for Jesus Christ and praising him in propaganda-filled hymns.<sup>18</sup> Speaking of a Hymn book reportedly created by the Kenya Africa Union (KAU), Leakey gives the details of several hymns, including a line from ‘Hymn 2’ which cautions “...go away you Europeans, the time has come to strangle.”<sup>19</sup> Hymns and religious practices such as

these, real or imagined, demonstrate the mystery of Mau Mau to early primary scholarship, even to Leakey, who had grown up in Kenya. The pages devoted to recording the hymns of Mau Mau taken from traditional Christian versions suggest that Leakey, and later others, tried to reason the seemingly sudden power of Mau Mau on Kikuyu as the product of a powerful force. For Leakey this force was channeled through a hybrid Christian-Mau Mau anglophobic religion or at least the perceived notion of it, invested in key figures such as Kenyatta rather than the culmination of half a century of oppression, in any case deflecting away from the responsibility and shortcomings of the Empire was vital.

Following descriptions of Mau Mau supposedly twisting Christian religious traditions, Leakey focuses on how Mau Mau supposedly corrupts traditional Kikuyu oath and oathing practices, once more drawing the power of Mau Mau over adherents to a specific cause. Leakey provides details of the rituals included in the first and second oaths. The first oath has adherents consume sacrificial meat and blood before piercing the eyes of a sacrificial animal. These rituals can be, and according to Leakey, often are combined with the second oath in which adherents swear to kill Europeans, family members, and anyone else against Mau Mau.<sup>20</sup> Following these descriptions, Leakey asserts he can not recount the processes for further oaths or oathing ceremonies because they are too graphic for publication, noting that even if they were published, the book would be banned due to their vile nature.<sup>21</sup> Here, Leakey plays into what would become a crucial part of British media portrayals of oaths, oaths so repulsive that they could not be recounted, but, in the

16 L. S. B. Leakey, *Mau Mau and the Kikuyu* (London: Methuen & Co, 1952), 98.

17 L. S. B. Leakey, *Mau Mau*, 99.

18 L. S. B. Leakey, *Defeating Mau Mau* (1954; repr., London: Methuen & Co, 1955), 47, 57.

19 L.S.B. Leakey, *Defeating Mau Mau*, 62.

20 L.S.B. Leakey, *Defeating Mau Mau*, 80-82.

21 L.S.B. Leakey, *Defeating Mau Mau*, 80, 82.

concealment of their practices, the imagination of media was only enticed to provide the British public speculations on Mau Mau ceremonials and draw conclusions about the “primitive” nature of those engaging in them.

Aside from Leakey’s assessments that Mau Mau’s strength derived from forced oathing and twisted religious practices, the British Government was also trying to make sense of Mau Mau and its seemingly sudden rise. It began to question whether the rebellion of what had once been a seemingly peaceful colony could be traced to a biological factor, which would excuse the Empire of any wrongdoing much as Leakey’s reasoning had. The Government found its answer in the ethnopsychology report *The Psychology of Mau Mau* by J.C. Carothers. This report “logically” removed any blame from the Empire by asserting Mau Mau arose from Kikuyu unable to adapt to European ideas of “civilization.”<sup>22</sup> Carothers reasoned that while many Kikuyu had smoothly adapted to the “civilization” and modern society the Empire had given them, there were “outcasts” who, unable to adapt, were left behind in their own biological inferiority and in order to feel their own sense of belonging partake in awful oaths.<sup>23</sup> These oaths, including a supposed “fourth oath” in which adherents swear to commit fratricide or patricide if asked, due to their atrocious nature, Carothers speculated that hypnosis was used to coerce adherents into carrying out the act.<sup>24</sup>

Further Government reports, such as the 1954 conclusions of the Parliamentary Delegation to Kenya, note Mau Mau could be summed up as “a conspiracy, designed to dominate first the Kikuyu tribe then all other Africans and finally to exterminate or drive out all other races and

seize power in Kenya...Mau Mau intentionally and deliberately seeks to lead the Africans of Kenya back to the bush and savagery, not forward into progress.”<sup>25</sup> Themes of Mau Mau as a set of Kikuyu unable to adapt to a “civilized” world and desiring to lead others into “bush and savagery” removed blame from the Empire, implying that the Empire had done everything it could to “civilize” the Kikuyu and could not be blamed for the biological predisposition of some to be unable to adapt. The report similarly speaks to oathing, noting that a description of various oaths grades and practices can be found in Appendix of the report; however, a footnote reasons, “The descriptions of the practices involved are considered unfit for general publication: copies of Appendix have therefore been printed separately and have been placed in the Libraries of both Houses of Parliament for the information of Members.”<sup>26</sup> This report mirrors the previous reasoning of Leakey and Carothers, helping to mold oathing into something deeply disturbing that even a Government report can not include in complete detail; instead, to read such information, someone would have to seek it out themselves. These initial beliefs that the public must be protected from, yet still shocked and at times entertained by, oathing would persist throughout the war despite its complicated dichotomy.

While the likes of Leakey and Government documentation set the stage for initial beliefs around Mau Mau, the colonial Government in Kenya needed to ensure that the British press, and indeed the world, were representing them and their frightened white settlers properly, the colonial Government needed to ensure Mau Mau was not given an ounce of credibility in the

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22 J. C. Carothers, *The Psychology of Mau Mau* (Nairobi: Government Printer, 1954), 15.

23 J.C. Carothers, *The Psychology of Mau Mau*, 18.

24 J.C. Carothers, *The Psychology of Mau Mau*, 17-18.

25 Parliamentary Delegation to Kenya, “Report to the Secretary of State for the Colonies” (London: Her Majesty’s Stationery Office, January 1954).

26 Parliamentary Delegation to Kenya, “Report to the Secretary.”

international press and portrayed as mindless terrorism; not a movement for land reclamation.<sup>27</sup> This was ultimately accomplished through the direct curation of propaganda. Just a month after the war began in October 1952, the Governor of Kenya, Evelyn Baring, requested a “psychological war expert” to curate propaganda that could be distributed across the world.<sup>28</sup> Though Brigadier William Gibson was eventually chosen for the role, the propaganda office initially struggled, receiving complaints from London about relaying too much negative news with insufficient focus on the progress of ‘winning hearts and minds.’<sup>29</sup> With the office struggling to understand their main objectives in propaganda construction and Gibson confused by his elusive role of “psychological war expert,” the office shifted tactics after several months and created the ‘Propaganda Working Party’ composed of various experts.<sup>30</sup> Under this new direction, the office worked to show Mau Mau as a civil war within the Kikuyu because they could not conform to “civilization,” working off the ethnopsychology work of Carothers.<sup>31</sup> This portrayal of the conflict removed blame from the colonists and sharpened their image as savior-like figures, as Carothers work had already demonstrated, who had done their best to bring the Kikuyu into the modern age, but they once more could not be blamed for the “natural” predisposition within some Kikuyu to not respond to “modern civilization.” With the office’s new framework and with a public relations expert at the ready, they relayed news from Kenya to London journalists

throughout the rest of the war.<sup>32</sup>

While colonial propaganda straight from Governor Baring’s ‘Propaganda Working Party’ assisted British media in cultivating manipulative coverage of the war, the media’s coverage of the war had always been driven by principles of showing Mau Mau as a terrorist organization that was plunging Kenya into disarray, crucially, only the Empire could and should manage through any means necessary. This rhetoric had been cultivated from the war’s inception not only through the works of Leakey and Carothers but also through a direct relationship between the British Government and media. As the war began, the Government recognized the need to utilize media to its advantage to ensure everyday Britons cared for a war that, for most, was a remote conflict that had little to no impact on their day-to-day lives, the Parliamentary Delegation to Kenya even noted: “[o]ne of the most important weapons available to the Government... is an alert and flexible information and propaganda organisation.”<sup>33</sup> To ensure media outlets trusted them the Government sent graphic details of supposed oaths to media editors shortly after the war began that were strictly for personal and journalistic reference rather than publication.<sup>34</sup> Despite Government leaks and reports and later news from the functioning ‘Propaganda Working Party,’ the British press, interestingly, struggled in their initial press coverage of the war. Early coverage tended to either play down Mau Mau as settlers’ overreactions in response to their dislike of the KAU or over-

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27 Wunyabari Maloba, “The Media and Mau Mau: Kenyan Nationalism and Colonial Propaganda,” in *Africa’s Media Image*, ed. Beverly G. Hawk (New York: Praeger, 1992), 56.

28 Susan L. Carruthers, *Winning Hearts and Minds: British Government, the Media and Colonial Counter-Insurgency 1944-1960* (London: Leicester University Press, 1995), 151.

29 Carruthers, *Winning Hearts and Minds*, 151-152.

30 Carruthers, *Winning Hearts and Minds*, 155.

31 Carruthers, *Winning Hearts and Minds*, 157.

32 Rosalind Coffey, *The British Press, Public Opinion and the End of Empire in Africa: “the Wind of Change”, 1957-60* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022), 97.

33 Parliamentary Delegation to Kenya, “Report to the Secretary.”

34 Coffey, *The British Press*, 97.

exaggerate Mau Mau's actions, making the colonial Government look weak and underprepared.<sup>35</sup>

However, the press soon found its footing, reporting regularly on an aspect of Mau Mau that was mysterious and endlessly eye-catching to readers, listeners, and viewers of the media: oath-taking. The use of oaths as evidence of Mau Mau's "primitive" ways was an effective means of degrading Mau Mau into a racist archetype of "savagery" that had existed for over a century; even British soldiers on the ground in Kenya were regularly given details of oaths as a way to dehumanize the adherents they were hunting for.<sup>36</sup> Reports of oath-taking would become a sure success, especially when mediums such as newspapers declined to print the "true" unimaginable Mau Mau oath rituals; their discretion was perhaps unintentionally more effective as readers were left to fill in the blanks with their own horrifying imaginings.<sup>37</sup> At times media coverage speculated on or provided supposed details of advanced oaths, focusing primarily on alleged sexual practices; whether these speculations and details of oath-taking were grounded in truth was of little importance as, from the start, media worked to put Britons on the side of the Empire, oath-taking and its more "questionable" rituals simply proved one of the most effective, eye-catching, and for media outlets money-making examples of Mau Mau's "savagery."<sup>38</sup> Aside from the alleged practices of advanced oaths, mediums such as newspapers often provided readers with images of ritual tools such as oath-taking arches, emphasizing how sacred objects, though they may not hold meaning for a British reader,

were binding forces for Mau Mau, even holding potential connections to black magic.<sup>39</sup> Coupled with alleged oath-taking descriptions and images of oath-taking tools, graphic reports of murdered white settlers and the violence inflicted against them before and after death helped to draw connections for Britons between the seemingly removed world of oath-taking and the lives of their fellow Britons settled in Kenya and living in fear, helping those primarily unaffected by the war feel a sense of emotional connection.<sup>40</sup>

Within the outputs of the British media, cultural and political contexts surrounding the Kikuyu, Mau Mau, and the history of Kenya as a part of the Empire were largely absent, which left significant space for Britons to misunderstand the traditional origins and rituals of oath-taking, let alone understand what Mau Mau was fighting for.<sup>41</sup> The lack of context was once more an integral part of reducing Mau Mau down to an archetype, a strange uprising devoid of credibility and purpose. Aside from the salacious coverage of oath-taking, mediums such as newsreels routinely showed British soldiers rounding up Mau Mau adherents and being able to distinguish adherents from loyal Kikuyu by look alone, the press demonstrated that even within the chaos of oaths and horror of murdered white settlers the Empire, as ever, was in control.<sup>42</sup> This strategy of control amidst chaos was vital as the mid 20th century saw the collapse of various colonies and empires; the British media was ultimately trying to demonstrate, under the careful watch of the Government, that the Empire was still strong and able to suppress Mau Mau, a minor hiccup of strange

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35 Carruthers, *Winning Hearts and Minds*, 145.

36 Maloba, "The Media and Mau Mau," 59.

37 Wunyabari O. Maloba, *Mau Mau and Kenya: An Analysis of a Peasant Revolt* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), 101.

38 Maloba, *Mau Mau and Kenya*, 104, 113.

39 Joanna Lewis, "'Daddy Wouldn't Buy Me a Mau Mau': The British Popular Press & the Demoralization of Empire," in *The Rise and Fall of Modern Empires, Volume IV: Reactions to Colonialism*, ed. Martin Shipway (New York: Routledge, 2016), 231.

40 Maloba, *Mau Mau and Kenya*, 107, 108.

41 Melissa Tully, "All's Well in the Colony: Newspaper Coverage of the Mau Mau Movement, 1952-56," in *Narrating War and Peace in Africa*, ed. Tonyin Falola and Hetty ter Haar (New York: University of Rochester Press, 2010), 62.

42 Carruthers, *Winning Hearts and Minds*, 167.

“uncivilized” people and oaths who were a small part of the primarily loyal Kikuyu.<sup>43</sup> The lack of context in Mau Mau coverage can also be attributed to the power of the Government; throughout the war, they not only kept a watchful eye on media but also chastised those who went against portraying an image of the Empire in a favorable light even in the name of fair journalism, for instance they went so far as to censure the *Observer* for a 1958 article about a letter the paper had received from Mau Mau detainees held at Lokitaung prison, in which they detailed abuses, the paper was later sued by Lokitaung’s camp commandant Charles Ryland for 2000 in damages.<sup>44</sup>

Though the war ended in 1960 and British media moved on from the production of Government supplemented propaganda, leaving manipulative headlines of oathing and ceremonies to shape the quietly unfolding history of Mau Mau by themselves, the Government produced a final critical report, “Historical Survey of the Origins and Growth of Mau Mau” in the May of 1960. This report aimed to summarize the war by understanding where Mau Mau had arisen from and their functions, including oathing. The impacts of initial beliefs surrounding Mau Mau from almost a decade before ring throughout the report as it explicitly thanks the insights of Leakey.<sup>45</sup> Throughout, the report’s characterizations of oathing are reminiscent of Government propaganda pumped out from newspapers, radios, and newsreels only a few years prior, with descriptions of a forest oath which has participants swear to drink the liquid from the eyeballs of the enemies they killed and later oaths requiring participants to drink a

“Kaberichia cocktail” which included menstrual blood, sheep’s blood, and semen.<sup>46</sup> Similar to initial understandings of Mau Mau made six years before by Carothers, the report parrots beliefs that advanced oathing ceremonies that include rituals such as the “Kaberichia cocktail,” divorce outcasted Kikuyu from their communities, thus ultimately leading to the creation of movements such as Mau Mau which the report characterizes as “...primitive beasts who had...[forsaken] all mortal codes in order to achieve the subjugation of the Kikuyu tribe and the ultimate massacre of the European population.”<sup>47</sup> Ultimately, the report reaffirmed the British’s narrative that Mau Mau was not the result of the Empire’s wrongdoing but rather some form of psychological difference or a small group of poor, disgruntled farmers. By continuously denying Mau Mau any legitimacy before, during, and after the war and focusing solely on their real and imagined terror, the British wrote the war on their terms.<sup>48</sup> The media during the war had been fed leaks by the Government at home in London and abroad in Kenya; sharp and exciting bits of information that were always selected to hold the public’s attention, engage their emotions with a remote war, and on occasion provide a touch of sensationalized drama.<sup>49</sup>

During the Mau Mau war of 1952-1960, Mau Mau adherents, many of whom were Kikuyu, used oaths and oathing ceremonies built upon pre-established Kikuyu beliefs to unite adherents to the movement. The British Empire, however, saw these ceremonials as another symptom of Mau Mau’s terrorism and Kenya’s broader inability to govern herself. Aided by the perceptions of Kenyan-British archeologist L. S. B. Leakey, ethnopsychologist J.C.

43 Tully, “All’s Well in the Colony,” 70.

44 Coffey, *The British Press*, 97.

45 Colony & Protectorate of Kenya, “Historical Survey of the Origins and Growth of Mau Mau” (London: Her Majesty’s Stationery Office, May 1960).

46 Colony & Protectorate of Kenya, “Historical Survey of the Origins.”

47 Colony & Protectorate of Kenya, “Historical Survey of the Origins.”

48 Maloba, “The Media and Mau Mau,” 60.

49 Lewis, “Daddy Wouldn’t Buy Me,” 484.

Carothers, the colonial Governments 'Propaganda Working Party' and direct leaks from the British Government, the British media portrayed oathing as evidence of Mau Mau's terror, mystery and "savagery" in provocative and manipulative coverage that drew everyday Britons into a seemingly remote war. This coverage ensured that Mau Mau was devoid of legitimacy and a product of ill-adapting Kikuyu unable to cope with the "civilization" the Empire brought and leaning upon lurid oaths and violence to find a sense of meaning. Despite the war's end, Kenya's independence, and the inevitable decline of the Empire, the ideas propagated by newsreels, radio, and newspapers filled with propaganda still echo into the 21st century, lingering in the analysis of Mau Mau and Kenya's nationhood.

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