

‘Truth be Told’: Some Problems with Historical Revisionism in Kenya

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This paper¹ examines contemporary commemorative and historical production processes in Kenya, including activities and discourses related to a Mau Mau veterans’ reparations case against the British government, which is currently being heard in the High Court in London.

Drawing on fieldwork findings and archival research, I will describe some key developments in the years since Marshall Clough published his important chapter in Odhiambo and Lonsdale, *Mau Mau and the Contest for Memory* (2003). Since a Kenyan government ban on the Mau Mau movement was only lifted in 2003, there has been a subsequent surge in public debates about the liberation struggle of the 1950s, commemorative activities and discourses. This paper uses three inter-related case studies focused on: 1) a ‘rewriting Kenya history’ project; 2) efforts to commemorate heroes and heroines; and 3) a new history exhibition at Nairobi National Museum and state-led plans for a travelling exhibition.

Kenya’s new constitution, which citizens voted to accept in a landmark referendum on 4 August 2010, opens with a historically significant statement. The Preamble declares that the constitution recognizes the ‘people of Kenya [as] Honouring (sic) those who heroically struggled to bring freedom and justice to our land...’. (The Proposed Constitution of Kenya, 6th May 2010:5). In making this early allusion to the struggle for independence, the document breaks decisively with the past and four decades of orchestrated silence about the movement known as Mau Mau, and places at the heart of nationhood the question of how its so-called heroes should be remembered in Kenya today.² However, in not naming Mau Mau it is deliberately ambiguous.

The constitution does not specify what the nature of the struggle was, whether there was a single struggle or many, and when it/they took place. But implicit in this short statement is the idea that Kenyans can and should unite around a story of liberation struggle. The new constitution as a whole seeks to unite the nation around a set of core shared values, and

replaces an outmoded constitution dating from 1964. As soon as the referendum result was announced, the Committee of Experts dedicated the victory to ‘liberation heroes’, but expressed this in vague terms that encompassed everyone who ‘sacrificed their lives in the struggle for a new constitutional order.’³ While the draft of the proposed constitution sparked furious public disagreements between the ‘yes’ and ‘no’ camps over a variety of other issues, this particular sentence appears – from the public silence – to have been accepted by all. The draft was warmly endorsed by the leading veterans’ group, the Mau Mau War Veterans’ Association (MMWVA), who regard it as embracing Mau Mau. However, widespread apparent acceptance does not indicate Kenyan unanimity on the complex legacy of Mau Mau, but (I argue) may mask a crisis of collective memory in which memories and histories of liberation struggle, or their absence, are just one component.

It is not the task of the new constitution to explain the various forms which struggle took – not just physical combat but intellectual, political and trades unionist struggles too, as Ogot (2003, 2005) has reminded us.⁴ ‘The problem is that in Kenya we have tended to use participation in Mau Mau as the sole criterion for choosing our heroes’ (*op. cit.* 2003:34). The task of deciding who liberation heroes are, and how they ought to be commemorated, remains tricky and unresolved. A Taskforce on National Heroes and Heroines was appointed in March 2007 and gathered views from Kenyans all over the country, on a wide variety of proposed heroes, but the report it produced five months later has neither been made public nor its recommendations acted upon (Coombes 2011). It concluded, in part:

the struggle for freedom by all Kenyans in their various communities, culminating in the armed struggle known as The Mau Mau War and the final attainment of independence was a macrocosm of national and community heroism. This heroism should be recognized and honoured as one of the central pillars of the Kenyan nation. (Executive Summary, Report of the taskforce, 2007:vii)

Recent state-led initiatives that commemorate Mau Mau and liberation heroes include the commissioning of a statue of freedom fighter Dedan Kimathi, erected in Nairobi city centre on 18 February 2007, and a number of mausoleums built in memory of late political leaders including members of the Kapenguria Six (Coombes 2011).⁵ However, I argue that this flurry of initiatives does not disguise the fact that the state does not seem to know what to say with

any confidence about Mau Mau and liberation struggle, and this sits awkwardly with the upsurge in Mau Mau memorialisation that followed the unbanning of the movement, and the increasing clamour from human rights groups and veterans to restore Mau Mau to its so-called rightful place in the national hall of memory.

It is ironic that Kenyan human rights groups vigorously opposed to many state policies and practices now appear to be in agreement with the state on the prevailing meta-narrative. Put simply, Mau Mau is popularly depicted as a jolly good thing which has the power to unite all Kenyans in their post-electoral hour of need.⁶ Rebutted equally simply, this will not do because it excludes any mention of loyalists and the thousands if not millions of Kenyans who were neither on one side nor the other (or in the Gikuyu case ‘faced both ways’) in what became a civil war, not a straight fight between the colonial power and nationalist guerrillas.⁷ Some Kenyans now deny that a civil war took place, claiming that the British colonial government deliberately created this idea in order to deceive and divide citizens. Either that, or loyalists are explained away as products of colonialism, forced to do what they did by the imperial power. While some on both sides had little option but to play certain roles, this explanation denies African agency, and fails to provide an inclusive and nuanced account of what happened. Branch (2009), in the first comprehensive scholarly account of ‘loyalism’, argues that there were many different motivations for it, including Mau Mau violence; the term collaboration is inadequate and ‘analytically problematic’ (2009:9); while many Gikuyu were simultaneously Mau Mau and loyalist.

Ambiguity, Ambivalence, and Amnesia

Why the lack of confidence? Because Mau Mau and loyalism, though joined at the hip, remain an embarrassment among Gikuyu and non-Gikuyu alike (e.g. Buijtenhuijs 1973:104; Clough 2003:260; Lonsdale 2003:3; Atieno Odhiambo 1991:301, referring to Mau Mau only). Both are supremely ambiguous, and ambiguity engenders ambivalence. Mau Mau fighters did not win militarily, though they helped to pave the way for independence. Neither did they achieve a ‘political triumph, as a unit’ and therefore, until recently, ‘former activists and guerrillas have been powerless in their desire to steer the country in any direction that could come close to celebrating the “glory of the revolt”’ (Maloba 1993:169). Some Gikuyu have used their

leadership of it to justify their slice of the national cake, and thus the term reminds non-Gikuyu of their (perceived or actual) political and economic domination by former Central Province.⁸ Understandably, many of those who took part in the British-led counterinsurgency campaign do not wish to speak of it.

Yet many Kenyans, no matter what their ethnic roots and political allegiances, sympathise with ex-fighters' repeated public claims that they were betrayed by the post-independence political elite, and left to languish in poverty. These laments, together with constant public reminders of the blood fighters gave to bring freedom, have become a familiar mantra, which began soon after independence (see for example Buijtenhuijs 1973, Chapter 4). It is one of several Kenyan equivalents to South Africa's public trauma narrative (Colvin 2003) which burgeoned after that country's Truth and Reconciliation Commission hearings.⁹

Most importantly, Kenya has not recovered from decades of state suppression of public memories and histories of the liberation struggle. This was initiated by first president Jomo Kenyatta, who sought to bury Mau Mau, supposedly in the interests of national unity. He declared in 1962: 'Mau Mau was a disease which had been eradicated, and must never be remembered again.'¹⁰ It was best not to dwell, post-independence, on the awkward fact that many Kenyans had not supported it.¹¹ Kenyatta himself was not a member of the movement, and did not take part in combat, yet he has become known as 'the father of the nation', an idol struck on an anvil forged by Mau Mau. This gives rise to several contradictions, and complicates the manner in which he is remembered and commemorated today. The way in which he is depicted in NMK's new history exhibition is a case in point; it fudges his relationship with Mau Mau and does not explicitly state what role he played. But when I asked a young museum guide what link there was if any between Mau Mau and Kenyatta, he confidently replied: 'Kenyatta was the leader of Mau Mau.'¹²

Buijtenhuijs has described how selective 'forgetting' of Mau Mau is entangled with the creation of the Kenyatta myth, and suggests that the incompatibility of the Kenyatta and Mau Mau myths 'throw[s] some light on the ambivalent feelings many Kenyans have today about the Mau Mau period' (Buijtenhuijs 1973:59). If Kenyatta was '*the* leader' (his emphasis)

responsible for leading the nation to freedom, yet he denied leading or even endorsing Mau Mau, the role of the movement in bringing *uhuru* cannot be as important as is widely believed. This assertion still rings true.

Clough has described how ‘the struggle to shape Mau Mau memory’ began before independence. Successive governments manipulated and marginalized Mau Mau for their own ends, without ever succeeding in silencing its proponents, until four key events took place: the coming to power of the National Rainbow Coalition (NaRC) government in 2002, headed by a Gikuyu from the Mau Mau heartland of Nyeri in former Central Province (current President Mwai Kibaki, who now leads a different Grand Coalition); the unbanning of Mau Mau in 2003; the launch of a veterans’ claim against Britain in June 2009 for compensation for human rights abuses while in detention; and the Kenya government’s decision to support this suit in spring 2010.¹³ A public outpouring of sentiments about Mau Mau was unleashed.

However, I argue that suppression of public memory continues and paradoxically co-exists with the flowering of Mau Mau memorialisation in present-day Kenya. By this I mean that both state and civil society groups are actively suppressing, whether consciously or not, nuanced, multi-faceted narratives of the struggle for independence in order to serve various political agendas. One should not be deceived by the visible signifiers of Mau Mau commemoration, which appear to indicate a new openness to historical remembrance and the redress of official silencing; they mask the fact that a deeper, possibly more troubling amnesia, continues.

Moreover, certain players are intent on yoking Mau Mau heroes to earlier anti-colonial resisters from different ethnic communities who allegedly initiated nationalist struggle in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This historical revisionism is justified (say its proponents, not that they admit to revisionism) by the urgent need to ‘unite’ Kenyans from different ethnic groups in the wake of the violence that tore Kenya apart following contested elections in December 2007. At one level, this effort is wholly understandable – why not strive, in a troubled and divided nation, to ‘get one’s history wrong in order to get one’s national identity right?’ (Mazrui 2005:39, citing French philosopher Ernest Renan). But

Ranger has warned against making simplistic links between the apparent continuities of violent primary resistance and modern mass nationalism; the former may simply have ‘shaped the environment in which later politics developed’ (Ranger 1968:631). There is also evidence (e.g. from my informants, who include Mau Mau veterans) that ordinary Kenyan citizens are deeply troubled by revisionism, and simply want to be told the truth. It is a supreme irony that the post-independence myth of ‘we all fought for freedom’, promoted by the political elite of the 1960s and 70s, has come full circle and taken on a new life in very different hands.

Orchestrated amnesia does not simply apply to the struggle for independence. It continues to cloak myriad subjects such as Moi’s tyrannical rule and legacy, political assassinations, detention and torture during the Kenyatta and Moi eras, land grabbing by elites, corruption on a lavish scale, and so on. Many Kenyans recognize this; it is the subject of almost daily debate in the media, especially during the post-electoral crisis of 2007/08 when Kenyans asked themselves how they had come to ‘forget’ so much of their past, a past that had returned to haunt them.¹⁴

The Rewriting History Project

Kenyan historians, and visiting historians of Kenya, were embarrassed by a challenge thrown down by two Mau Mau veterans who turned up in June 2008 at a Historical Association of Kenya (HAK) conference at Egerton University.¹⁵ They were given a slot at the end of the conference to make a presentation. Peter Kamau Gachue and Winston Kimani introduced themselves as respectively secretary and chief executive officer of the Mau Mau War Veterans’ Association, the group that has brought a lawsuit (via the Kenya Human Rights Commission, KHRC) against the British government. The two were accompanied by a young man from the National Research Council of Science and Technology, who said it was planning to incorporate veterans’ stories into school textbooks, and had received government funding to do so. Kimani announced: ‘I salute you in the name of Mau Mau. We have come here to establish partnership with the Historical Association.’ Everyone in the room held their breath and sat very still; it was a daunting proposition.

The nature of the proposed partnership soon became clear. The veterans demanded that the historians must write the ‘true’ and ‘proper’ history of Kenya, by which they meant the story of Mau Mau, from the Association’s point of view, using veterans’ oral testimonies as the core source material. Too many histories had been written by foreigners, they said, or by Kenyan scholars like Ochieng’ whose heretical views they rejected (Clough 2003:260; Atieno Odhiambo 1991). Apart from Caroline Elkins’s *Britain’s Gulag* (2005), which was warmly endorsed and the author referred to as ‘Caroline’, these other histories were derided because they had not been produced or informed by the veterans themselves. They had visited four public universities in an effort to consult with historians and enlist their help, and had formed a committee that would recommend to the government that Kenya’s history should be rewritten. ‘We challenge you to ensure that the history of Kenya is written now and not tomorrow,’ said Kimani. ‘There is no question of waiting, because the elders are soon to die.’ This reflects a common desire to privilege memory over history in the belief that it is intrinsically authentic and true (Hodgkin and Radstone 2003:2), a theme that dominates contemporary memorialisation initiatives. They had ‘volunteered’ in the struggle, they said; now it was the turn of Kenyan historians to ‘volunteer’ to write the history. The historians present neither agreed nor disagreed, but I later learned that certain scholars including the then HAK chairman, Prof. Peter Ndege, had agreed to work with the veterans. Kimani emphasised the need to link different periods of struggle:

The old people who fought in the 1950s, they started in 1855 during the time of Waiyaki ... and for Koitalel, Mekatilili of the coast, Muindi Mbingu, and many others. They organised a revolution to remove the colonial government from Kenya and in their own way they did it. If they had kept quiet we would still be slaves of the British ... many of our tribes resisted the colonialists in different parts of Kenya. (Author’s notes)

The veterans said that the government had ‘agreed to meet the cost of writing history’, and promised them four million Kenya shillings (Ksh., c£31,386, a lot of money in local terms) to open an office at the Kenya National Archives (KNA) and collect data. Now they wanted the historians to raise another 100 million Ksh. I later learned that an office had been given to this group at the KNA in downtown Nairobi, in December 2006. It is still there, but veterans describe it as the ‘coordinating office’ for all the veterans’ groups, which are by no means united. The idea for the rewriting history project was reportedly first hatched in 2004, and a

working committee established that included representatives from the KNA, NMK, the Ministry of Information, and the universities of Nairobi and Moi. My contacts confirm that the project was initiated by the MMWVA, which ‘pushed’ the other partners into collaboration. This and my other examples illustrate how, in common with several other African postcolonies, official patriotic history-making continues to be driven by former combatants (e.g. Schmidt 2010; Munochiveyi 2010; Ranger 2004). Several meetings were held, funding was approved, and everything seemed to be going smoothly until a ‘splinter group of the [MMWVA] stormed into the Research Council’s offices questioning the legality of the group that was spearheading the project. This was the end of the project’ (pers. comm. with Kenyan contact).¹⁶ The conflict caused NMK to back off; it was impossible, I was told, for NMK to determine the legitimacy of the different players, and without this it could not continue to support the project.

My source gave six reasons why it was felt necessary to rewrite Kenyan history:

lack of authentic history books written by the freedom fighters; lack of objectively written history books for the school curriculum; many history books are written by foreigners with a bias towards their original homes in Britain or USA; record the history of Kenya from the surviving freedom fighters; collect materials for presenting the history of Kenya to the public (there are very few materials available in its museums) ... There was a general feeling that the history of Kenya has not been narrated comprehensively from the local people’s point of view to give the true picture of people’s experiences. (Anon. Pers. comm. with Kenyan contact August 2010)

The government-backed heroes project, whose taskforce and secretariat were hosted by NMK, also reportedly agreed to support this initiative, but this never happened, it seems because internal warring between veterans scared other players off. At no time does it seem to have occurred to the high-level state players that their plan to support a monolithic and highly partisan history could be problematic, or that the history of Kenya is not the same as the history of Mau Mau. The two continue to be elided in public discourse and media coverage.

To give you a flavour of the rhetoric, often promoted jointly by Mau Mau historian Maina wa Kinyatti and veterans’ (MMWVA) spokesman Gitu Kahengeri, the latter declared in a 2009

newspaper article: ‘Were it not for the sweat that ran down our foreheads and bare backs, the blood that flowed from our wounds and the friends we buried, our children would perhaps still be suffering under an unjust system’ (*Sunday Nation* 25 January 2009). This is a vivid example of the prevalent trauma narrative. This type of public expression, in both print and broadcast media, which reached a zenith after the launch of the Mau Mau case against Britain (June 2009) and continues unabated, is far more influential than any history book, which is why I place emphasis on it as a key form of contemporary memorialisation. There is no single-volume comprehensive history of Kenya, and even if there were most citizens could not afford to buy it. Local historians have also tended to produce histories of their own ethnic communities, which does not help to paint a broader pan-ethnic picture. Emotive stories circulating in the mass media play, in their constant re-telling, a vital role in reinforcing a meta-narrative of pain, trauma and betrayal, which privileges Mau Mau over all other players in and victims of that conflict, and results in alienating non-supporters and their descendants. Most importantly they elide this relatively short period of history (1940s-early 60s) with longer-term national history, the outcome being that Kenyans (including a few scholars) have come to understand ‘rewriting history’ to *mean* the rewriting of the Mau Mau story from a veterans’ point of view. This has become received wisdom, which few are brave enough to challenge.

Heroes and Heroines: A Century of Independence Struggle?

The idea that early leaders of localized anti-colonial revolts equally contributed to Kenya’s liberation, and should be eulogized alongside Mau Mau fighters, has been vigorously promoted by the KHRC and recently taken up with enthusiasm by the state. It is an important element of the KHRC’s ‘Mau Mau reparations campaign’ against Britain, which involved a ‘seven-week media blitz’ in February-March 2009.¹⁷ I asked George Morara, programme officer for research, monitoring and documentation, and a leading player in the Mau Mau lawsuit, what their aim was in linking heroes from different periods:

What KHRC is doing is looking at Mau Mau as a continuation of Kenya’s historical struggles. We are not looking at it in isolation but as part of a long history of resistance and communities in Kenya seeking to assert their independence, especially from colonization. It

is coming from the Mau Mau veterans: they all say the first rebel was a woman, Mekatilili. (G. Morara, interview August 2009)

I witnessed him publicly making the Mau Mau-Mekatilili connection in August 2009, at an annual cultural festival in Malindi town, organized by Malindi District Cultural Association (MADCA), which works to commemorate Mekatilili. With the placard ‘Mau Mau recognizes Mekatilili’ among those waved by marchers, Morara addressed a crowd outside Malindi Museum. He referred to the Mau Mau case, saying different ethnic groups had coalesced around it because the injustice meted out during the colonial era had applied to all. ‘Every community struggled in its own way for independence, but at independence only one community came first. We want to change that mentality’. He told his enthusiastic audience that Mekatilili was the first rebel in Kenya.¹⁸

On the contrary, there were in fact (as already mentioned) earlier anti-colonial rebels, such as Koitalel and Waiyaki, and leaders of remarkable non-violent resistance in the 1900s (who are, significantly, *not* referred to in the official heroes project and do not feature as resisters in the NMK history exhibition) such as Parsaloi Ole Gilisho, a Maasai who instigated legal proceedings against the colonial government in 1912 for the return of alienated land (Hughes 2006). What is difficult to prove is whether this push is in fact ‘coming from the veterans’, or being driven by other civil society groups and/or state actors, as demonstrated by the Malindi example. The idea certainly has an earlier provenance. Ngugi was Thiongo may not have invented it, but he definitely helped popularize the idea when he directly linked Koitalel’s anti-colonial resistance (1895-1905) with Kimathi’s struggle in the 1950s, and claimed that Koitalel and Mekatilili had attempted to unite different ethnic communities. As for Kimathi, he ‘attempted a grand political alliance of Kenyan people to oust the imperialist enemy’ (Ngugi 1981:64-51; Clough 2003:259) – a claim many scholars would contest.

Then in 2006 the Kenya National Commission on Human Rights (KNCHR, distinct from the non-governmental KHRC), also began promoting this idea in relation to plans for a travelling history exhibition. These are only now coming to fruition under different leadership: Caroline Elkins, the Kenya Oral History Centre (KOHK) and NMK, though they all took part in early

planning meetings with KNCHR.¹⁹ As KNCHR's former chairperson Maina Kiai explained to me:

Our interest was for something that could rally Kenyans to a shared history and sense of Kenyanness by highlighting the contributions of as many Kenyan communities who resisted colonial rule and/or fought for independence ... NMK started to work with us, and then disappeared. It became clear that for it to work they needed to take leadership in the project as they had the expertise way more than we did. (M. Kiai, pers. comm. February 2010)²⁰

In a letter copied to the NMK director-general and others, the then Vice-President Moody Awori told Kiai in June 2006:

I could not agree with you more in your sentiments that it is time we utilized the National Museums of Kenya through the Ministry of National Heritage and the Kenya National Commission on Human Rights to weld together the diverse cultures of our people which have created a strong nation. We wish our people to be proud to be part of it. *We must remove the perception that it is only the Mau Mau rebellion that fought for independence* (my emphasis). (Letter dated 28 June 2006, Dr A.A. Moody Awori, Office of the Vice-President and Ministry of Home Affairs, to Maina Kiai, KNCHR)

This returns us to the post-1963 mantra that 'we all fought for freedom'. But now it has a new twist: KHRC is employing a human rights/transitional justice argument to make this case in the twenty-first century. In bringing the Mau Mau claim against Britain, KHRC decided to make the historical legacy of Mau Mau and recognition of a broader range of Kenyan heroes central to its larger mission. Furthermore, it is using the lawsuit to push for state reform, challenge impunity and address numerous other human rights abuses that were perpetrated in both the colonial and postcolonial periods. It states:

The KHRC believes that the legacy of the Mau Mau is inextricably linked to the reform of the Kenyan state. In particular, the KHRC believes that the Mau Mau Reparations and Recognition Campaign will play a key role in addressing the long standing problems of impunity for past abuses, developing a basis for implanting the tools and instruments of transitional justice in Kenya, and buoying the efforts to litigate against the atrocities committed in the name of colonialism. It is not credible, nor is it defensible, to argue that

the post-colonial Kenyan state can be reformed without a proper accounting for colonial atrocities, the most poignant of which involved the Mau Mau.²¹

While lawyers bringing the case privately concede that ‘loyalists were also guilty of appalling abuses’ (pers. comm. with Martyn Day 17 June 2010), there is no room in KHRC’s analysis for atrocities committed by ‘loyalists’ against Mau Mau, and vice versa.²² The campaign has received intense publicity in Kenya, as well as worldwide coverage via the internet and other media. KHRC’s message is therefore likely to have had a far greater impact on Kenyan (and non-Kenyan) perceptions of the liberation struggle, and how it ‘should’ be remembered and commemorated, than any scholarly book.

President Kibaki and other senior members of government have also publicly endorsed the idea that earlier leaders of localized resistance are liberation heroes. The first Mashujaa (Heroes) Day was held in Nairobi in October 2010, which saw the state honour scores of heroes and heroines past and present, including many newly-decorated living citizens. It was presided over by Kibaki and Prime Minister Raila Odinga. Press coverage included this telling line: ‘It was the day Kenya’s past, present and future formed a confluence of emotions – a river that flowed flawlessly reminding all and sundry where the freedom narrative began and where the liberators wanted the nation to be’.²³

Exhibiting History at National Museums of Kenya²⁴

A scanty exhibit on Mau Mau was removed from Nairobi National Museum on the orders of then President Moi in the mid-1990s (Karega-Munene 2011). After its removal there was a long period of historical silence at the museum and its provincial satellite museums. NMK has never covered history *per se*; it employs no professional historians and did not previously have any specific historical collections. Staff had struggled since July 2005, when plans for a history gallery were first mooted, to assemble a collection of artefacts for this space. NMK’s main foci, following a colonial model heavily influenced by a natural history society and later by the Leakey family, have hitherto been palaeontology, archaeology and the natural world. Understandably, therefore, NMK is both nervous about and ill-equipped to tackle socio-political history, preferring to stick with ‘noncontroversial subjects’ (Karega-Munene 2009:80).

These deficiencies became acutely apparent when plans were laid to create a history exhibition as part of an eight million Euro European Union-funded Museum in Change programme (2005-2007), which gave Nairobi National Museum, NMK's flagship, a makeover. Local historians were invited to offer ideas and help write a script for 'The Story of Kenya' storyline, and attended a series of brainstorming workshops. I was among the foreign historians of Kenya to be asked to comment, confidentially, on the draft storyline. It was problematic in many ways. By January 2007, there were still problems with it, but by and large (to focus only on resistance and nationalism) it was fairly nuanced. The Kenyatta problem was fudged, and his political activities (and those of some fellow KAU members) differentiated from those who chose armed struggle as the route to liberation. Correctly, it described the KAU 'moderates' as being trumped by the 'militants' – the former believed 'in gradual constitutionalism as a vehicle for change' while 'the radicals wanted independence *now*' (Exhibition Script 2007:14). More problematically, it crudely compared 'collaborators' (such as Lenana and Mumias) with primary 'resisters' (Mekatilili, Koitalel and Waiyaki), and barely mentioned loyalism in a section on independence struggle.²⁵ This crude binary opposition is in the final exhibition, which ducks the loyalism problem in a section on Armed Struggle. These omissions, and some outright errors of fact, detract from more nuanced treatments such as the well-written exhibit on trades unions and struggle; from observation, however, this is ignored by parties of schoolchildren who are whisked past at great speed by teachers. The key message that liberation came about in two ways - driven by military action as well as by political parties and trades union mobilization – tends therefore to be lost. The exhibition is rife with other internal contradictions, while a video showing interviews with Mau Mau veterans only features Gikuyu, undermining claims that this was a multi-ethnic movement.²⁶ The exhibition opened without fanfare on 12 November 2010, towards the end of NMK's hundredth centennial year, three years behind schedule.

In contrast, the storyline of the proposed travelling exhibition ('Resistance and Nationalism: Kenya, 1895-1963') has a cut-off date at independence, leaving modern history untouched, and is devoted to nationalist resistance. It covers a range of resistance by different ethnic groups, and draws a clear line between the leaders of earlier revolts and Mau Mau, but Mau

Mau and other Gikuyu-led initiatives are still noticeably dominant. Promisingly, it plans ‘thinking in nuanced ways about resistance and collaboration. Christian Loyalists who tried to remain neutral. Problematizing the definition of loyalism and its relationship to churches/Christianity’ (Resistance and Nationalism storyline:26). I took part in a lively discussion at NMK in July 2010, during a planning workshop attended by local historians and chaired by Caroline Elkins, where it was agreed to deal with contentious subjects by giving two sides of every story and allowing museum visitors to make up their own minds. From our discussions, Elkins now agrees with NMK’s expressed desire to broaden the story of Mau Mau to include resistance leaders and ethnic groups other than Gikuyu, although her best-known work (2005) describes Mau Mau as an almost exclusively Gikuyu movement, as do most other scholars.²⁷

Conclusion

The question ‘who owns the birth of the nation?’ (Werbner 1998:100) has resurfaced nearly fifty years after independence at a major constitutional juncture, to become ‘who owns the *rebirth* of the nation?’ The new constitution has been hailed, in a country where a staggering 65 per cent of citizens profess to be ‘born again’, as a chance for Kenya to be reborn.²⁸ The referendum process as a whole sharply reminded citizens not only of the issues that divide and unite them, but also of the spoils that may be up for grabs – such as the possibility of redistributed land, and compensation for historical injustices. Appropriation of the liberation struggle, therefore, is about much more than appropriation of heroism, or an attempt to unify citizens. For the Kenya government, it is an opportunity to re-emphasize ‘the sacrifice of life in the cause of the nation-state’, leaving the date and type of sacrifice open – a political device that allows the state to reassert ownership of the ‘memorial complex’ (Werbner 1998:72), in the guise of a unifying statement.

However, it is doubtful whether the majority of ordinary citizens care as much as government, ethnic activists and human rights groups about forging a unifying national narrative that privileges freedom fighters and earlier resisters over other types of contribution to *uhuru*; they have more pressing worries. ‘Guerrilla nationalism’ (Munochiveyi 2010) does not speak to everyone, particularly devout Christians. Moreover, it is highly speculative of the Heroes

Taskforce to state in its unpublished report that its recommendations ‘arise from the public’s view that Mau Mau was a nation-wide liberation struggle in which all Kenyan nationalities participated. Indeed, the public pointed out that the Mau Mau war was the climax of many other forms of liberation struggles mounted by Kenyans across the country over a long period’ (Report of the taskforce:34). This ‘public’ sounds suspiciously like certain lobbyists, rather than a fully representative groundswell of popular opinion. The Mau Mau reparations case, and the way in which KHRC has framed it, has left its mark narratively on all discussions of this kind, in ways that may be problematical for years to come.²⁹

Strong-minded individuals drive or have driven several of the initiatives I have described. This may prove problematical; for example, Caroline Elkins’s simultaneous involvement in the Mau Mau lawsuit and travelling history exhibition development is potentially so. With the very best of intentions (helping NMK to present history, supporting local academics, securing external funding, giving Harvard students hands-on research experience), she is thereby welding the two processes together.³⁰ The KHRC *et al.* are making strenuous efforts to portray the movement as pan-ethnic and pan-Kenyan, while simultaneously favouring Elkins’s narrower version of history; passionately written, it has clear appeal. Though she now supports this idea, she described Mau Mau throughout her 2005 book as a Gikuyu movement, and this book became (from personal observation) the ‘bible’ for the permanent history exhibition developers. However, once NMK incorporates the ‘all-inclusive nationalist resistance’ story into the travelling exhibition, it will become concretized and official. Another founding myth will have become history.

Although the representation of liberation struggle as one long seamless march towards nationalist victory is attractive and emotive, is it true *as history*? While presented as inclusive, it excludes a great deal. For one, ‘there is obviously a danger in the nationalist historiography which sees an exclusive line of ancestry running from one episode of violent resistance to another, excluding the accommodators and the pioneers of modern political organization’ (Ranger 1968:636). For another, in its promotion of this idea the state (together with human rights groups, acting from the best of intentions) have ‘become the agent of nostalgia, for the sake of nation-building’ (Werbner 1998:1). The coming out of Mau Mau since 2003 and the

information subsequently produced masquerades as knowledge, excavated from a repressed subaltern past. But in privileging a narrow set of histories/memories over many others it remains one-sided and deeply unsatisfactory.

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¹ This paper is a shorter version of an article to be published in July 2011 in *African Studies* 70 (2), a special issue, guest edited by this author, on heritage, history and memory in East and southern Africa.

² The British called it Mau Mau. Members of the movement preferred the name Land Freedom Army. Many explanations have been given for the meaning of the words Mau Mau; see e.g., Edgerton (1990):56-57.

³ 'Experts dedicate new law to liberation heroes', *Daily Nation*, Nairobi, 5 August 2010. The Committee of Experts is the main technical organ in the constitutional review process.

⁴ 'Must one have been in the forest to be a hero?' asked Ogot in 2005:505.

⁵ The Kapenguria Six were Jomo Kenyatta, Paul Ngei, Bildad Kaggia, Achieng' Oneko, Fred Kubai and Kung'u Karumba, tried together on charges of managing Mau Mau. After a highly flawed trial, they were found guilty and jailed (though Oneko was reprieved, he was nonetheless imprisoned). None of them took part in the struggle militarily, yet Oneko, Kaggia and Ngei are described as 'the militant leaders of Mau Mau' in the new NMK history exhibition. More properly, they were part of the militant wing of the KAU.

⁶ A reference to the crisis that followed the disputed December 2007 elections. All Kenyans do not agree that Mau Mau is unifying, but few voice this publicly. Descendants of loyalists and devout Christians who refused to take the oath have begun to speak out, e.g. Muchiri Karanja, 'Villagers want Mau Mau veterans to apologise for brutal killings', *Sunday Nation*, Nairobi, 13 December 2009; Mwaura Ndung'u, 'The massacre (58 years ago today) that still divides Lari', *Saturday Nation*, 26 March 2011.

⁷ I borrow this phrase from David Anderson, pers. comm. He, Daniel Branch and others argue that the majority of Gikuyu 'faced both ways' during the State of Emergency because they had to, and it is unwise to put any figure on Mau Mau or 'loyalist' support. My thanks to David for this clarification.

⁸ Gikuyu/Agikuyu is the correct spelling of the ethnic group and its language, but Kikuyu will be used when quoting other authors. The Gikuyu, Aembu and Ameru peoples are closely related, and constituted the majority of Mau Mau fighters and supporters. Some Kamba, Maasai and members of other communities were also involved.

⁹ A Kenyan Truth, Justice and Reconciliation Commission (TJRC) was established in 2009, but soon became mired in controversy when chairman Bethuel Kiplagat was accused of being unfit for office. He resigned in November 2010.

¹⁰ Quoted for example in Clough (2003):255.

¹¹ 'There were millions of Africans who were wholly uninvolved with Mau Mau', writes Elkins (2005:361). Branch refers to many citizens having been anti- or non-nationalist (e.g. 2009:221).

¹² Informal conversation in the History of Kenya exhibition, Nairobi National Museum, March 2011. The guide, a university history student, was explaining the exhibits to Kenyan schoolchildren, who constitute the majority of museum visitors.

¹³ The case was issued in London on 23 June 2009, and resumed in the High Court on 7 April 2011. Brought by the KHRC and the Mau Mau War Veterans' Association, through UK lawyers Leigh Day, it seeks compensation and an apology for injuries sustained by four elderly claimants while in detention. Historians Caroline Elkins and David Anderson are providing expert evidence. The British government claims that any liability was transferred to the Kenyan government at independence.

¹⁴ Some groups have made commendable attempts to raise awareness and challenge historical amnesia, notably: the KHRC, the Goethe Institut and other organisers of the '(Re)-membering Kenya' series of public debates in Nairobi in 2008-9 that brought together scholars and citizens to discuss issues arising from the post-elections crisis, organisers of the Amnesia art exhibition project (see www.goethe.de), and an aborted Kenyan Historical Reconciliation Project that I and Karega-Munene contributed to. Public hearings before the TJRC also play a key role in these processes. The history exhibition at Nairobi National Museum also has a small display of photographs entitled 'Dark Moments in Our Country's Political History', about political assassinations. However, it provides no analysis or explanation, simply stating that the killings of Pio Gama Pinto, Tom Mboya, J. M. Kariuki *et al.* 'are still riddled in mystery'.

¹⁵ I attended this conference, and took notes on the presentation. All quotes are from these notes.

¹⁶ I cannot reveal my source for reasons of confidentiality.

¹⁷ 'Kenya: Campaigning for Mau Mau – Continuing Resistance'. KHRC Press Release dated 6 March 2009, viewed online at <http://allafrica.com/stories/printable/200903091175.html>. Accessed 24 July 2010.

See for example 'Support the Mau Mau reparations campaign', Pambazuka News, 5 March 2009. Among the four campaign objectives listed is 'energise ongoing efforts for recognition of Kenyan heroes and heroines'. <http://www.pambazuka.org/en/category/features/54582>

¹⁸ My notes on a speech by George Morara, 18 August 2009, Malindi.

¹⁹ KNCHR website. I was invited to take part in a planning workshop for this proposed exhibition at Nairobi National Museum, July 2010.

²⁰ Maina Kiai was in March 2011 appointed UN Special Rapporteur on the Rights to Freedom of Peaceful Assembly and of Association.

²¹ KHRC. 'Support the Mau Mau reparations campaign', Pambazuka News, *op. cit.*

²² Barrister Daniel Leader of Leigh Day confirmed this view, in a telephone conversation on 18 January 2011.

'We publicly accept that loyalists were guilty of abuses, that is part of the case.' Abuses such as castrations were, he said, 'undertaken by Home Guard, but they were being supervised by colonial officers'.

²³ Martin Mutua, 'The day of Kenya's heroes', The Standard Online, 21 October 2010. Accessed same day, www.standardmedia.co.ke/print/phb?id=2000020717&cid=4

²⁴ This is not the place to describe in full how NMK developed these two exhibitions, and to provide a detailed analysis of the permanent exhibition. See my chapter in Coombes, Hughes, Munene, forthcoming volume.

²⁵ Olonana is the correct name for the Maasai prophet, Lenana the anglicised form.

²⁶ 'Mau Mau: the unsung heroes'. Produced by NMK 2010.

²⁷ Elkins also wrote that Mau Mau was 'composed almost entirely of Kikuyu' in an article in *The Standard*, 'Britain has moral duty to allow Mau Mau case to proceed', 27 June 2009.

²⁸ Ben Knighton estimates this based on figures in Barratt, Kurian and Johnson (2001). Pers. comm. Sept. 2010.

²⁹ I support the case in principle. My critique, however, focuses on the ways in which it is being used to skew historical analysis and public debate.

³⁰ Alan Powell, 'Documenting a colonial past: Kenyan project records recent history before it's lost', Harvard Gazette Online. 2 September 2010. <http://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2010/09/documenting-a-colonial-past/> Accessed 8 September 2010.