

'Truth be Told': Some Problems with Historical Revisionism in Kenya

Lotte Hughes¹

¹The Open University, The Ferguson Centre for African and Asian Studies, Milton Keynes, UK

lotilda@hotmail.com

Historical revisionism is equally appealing to state and non-state actors during periods of intense socio-political change, especially following civil conflict, when the need for unification is paramount. This applies to Kenya as it struggles to come to terms with the post-electoral crisis of 2007/08. Redressing orchestrated amnesia about Mau Mau and the struggle for independence is another important element, amnesia instituted by first president Jomo Kenyatta, ostensibly in the interests of national unity. Since Mau Mau was unbanned in 2003, and a lawsuit was brought by veterans with the support of a Kenyan human rights group and British lawyers against the British government in 2009, there has been an upsurge in public memorialisation of and debate about the liberation movement in Kenya. It examines how ex-combatants are driving initiatives to rewrite national history, which link to efforts to commemorate heroes and broaden official definitions of heroism to include a wide range of ethnic communities and rebel leaders from different periods of anti-colonial resistance. These themes are reflected in new history exhibitions developed by National Museums of Kenya, and in the local media, which has done more to popularise these histories and commemorative initiatives than any scholarly texts. This article draws on research interviews and the literature on resistance, social memory and patriotic nationalism to problematise and analyse these developments, within the context of constitutional change, and the struggle for independence more broadly. However, these debates and commemoration efforts tend to exclude non-Mau Mau - former 'loyalists' and the many Kenyans who were neither on one side nor the other in what became a civil conflict, as well as an independence struggle.

This paper explores, in part, how engagements between Mau Mau veterans and their supporters (both Kenyan and external) can sabotage the production of more nuanced interpretations of history, memory and nationhood, and the production of knowledge in contemporary Kenya