
BETHWELL A. OGOT

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REVIEW ARTICLE

BRITAIN’S GULAG

BY BETHWELL A. OGOT

Moi University and Maseno University


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GULAG is the Russian acronym for the Chief Administration of Corrective Labour Camps made famous and permanently inscribed into the English vocabulary through the genius of Alexander Solzhenitsyn in his classic, The Gulag Archipelago 1918–1956: An Experiment in Literary Investigation, published in 1974. The author used the testimony of 227 survivors as well as recollections of his own 11 years of labour camps and exiles. The Archipelago of Solzhenitsyn's work is that system of secret police installations, camp prisons, transit centers, communication facilities, transport systems and espionage organizations which, in his view, was a state within a state holding about 15 million people. The book shows how ordinary people, who are referred to by their own names, can be turned into planners and executives of oppression, brutality and torture.

The author of Britain’s Gulag defends her choice of the title by saying that it helps to draw parallels between the cruelty of labour camps in Kenya and in Siberia. Besides archival sources, the bulk of the information came from some 300 survivors who were keen to talk about their experiences in the camps and in the barbed-wire villages. This is history based on the testimony of the small person. Dr. Elkins wanted to recreate the world behind the wire from survivor testimonies which she began collecting from 1998. But oral histories often pose serious methodological problems. How accurate are they? To what extent can one rely on the memories of people who have experienced traumatic events, about fifty years later? Her answer is that these oral testimonies are consistent over time and space. Also, they correlate with what remains in the written record. But consistency can be explained by the fact that dozens of Mau Mau associations, as David Anderson points out, were formed in Kikuyuland throughout the 1960s and many of them are still going strong. The associations have been writing their oral histories and preparing their cases for compensation or reparation, using hindsight. Some of these associations are known to be bogus. Is Caroline Elkins certain that some of the testimonies she collected are not from some of these bogus associations or from informants who were doing it for financial gains? The question of accuracy is also crucial. According to Elkins, Mwea camp, she was informed by the hard-core detainees who were there, was ‘Hell on Earth’, where the no-holds-barred ‘dilution technique’ was used by notorious African rehabilitation assistants such as Isaiah Mwai Mathenge and Jeremiah Kiereini (later Chief Secretary in independent Kenya) (p. 322). Yet, George Kamau, who was detained at Mwea, has
protested after reading *Britain’s Gulag* that they were never beaten or tortured as Elkins has written (*Daily Nation*, 14 April 2005).

Elkins, however, found it difficult to collect information from former loyalists and home guards; and scores of colonial officials, missionaries and European settlers who agreed to talk to her did so on condition of anonymity. But as Anderson, the author of *Histories of the Hanged* in the same British gulag has reminded us,

Mau Mau war has until now been strangely anonymous. The names of the Mau Mau generals have been known, and some of them have even been acclaimed as heroes – Dedan Kimathi, Stanley Mathenge and Waruhiu Itote. But the subalterns of the movement, the food carriers, the couriers, the recruiting sergeants and oath administrators, the treasurers and fundraisers, the assassins and enforcers and the ordinary foot soldiers in the forest, have remained shadowy, and nameless. The records of the Mau Mau trials allow these people to be brought into the story. Their experiences bring us much closer to the violence, enabling us to discern its reasons more clearly. (pp. 7–8)

He is, of course, writing about the forest war.

Elkins, on the other hand, wants to maintain the anonymity in Mau Mau history. Although she knows the names of home guards, prison wardens and officers in charge of detention camps accused of atrocities and systematic torture of the detained, she deliberately settles for the nicknames of the tormentors given by the victims. ‘By the time I cut his balls off he had no ears and his eyeball, the right one, I think, was hanging out of its socket. Too bad, he died before we got much out of him’ (p. 87). This is supposed to be a white settler’s confession about his role in torturing Mau Mau detainees, given as authoritative oral evidence while shielding the identity of the informant. This is dishonest. How can we know whether these words were ever uttered by this apparent sadist?

‘Never knew a Kuke had so many brains until we cracked open a few heads’, a white settler confided in her in return for anonymity (Elkins, p. 193). How do we know whether these are not fabricated confessions intended to paint the British in the worst possible light? Did they not say anything positive about the Kikuyu?

Anderson, on the other hand, tells this story in a different way, lacing the narrative of the war ‘with the testimonies of those who fought on both sides’ (p. 2). And while Elkins asserts that she found documents pertaining to the detention camps were either still classified as confidential or missing from the public archives in Britain and Kenya, Anderson is pleasantly surprised to discover that out of the 1,090 cases of men who went to the gallows as convicted Mau Mau convicts, rich courtroom testimonies of these trials amounting to more than 800 capital cases have survived in the national archives in Nairobi. Trial transcripts, witness statements, confessions and pleas for clemency, appeal papers, scribbled notes by advocates and judges about the proceedings and the accused, and sometimes letters about the background and history of the condemned – were all documented. He also found in these archives – which are supposed to have been destroyed – the names of the witnesses who gave evidence against Mau Mau suspects, details of African and European police officers who conducted interrogations and put together the prosecution papers, and, more important, he found the only available details of those persons taken for execution. Surely if any Mau Mau papers were to be deliberately destroyed, these would have received high priority.

Having hit a historian’s jackpot, one would expect Anderson to write a book on the biographies of the hanged, which is what the title suggests. Instead, Anderson
has placed these first-hand stories of Mau Mau struggle in their social and cultural setting as part of a chronological narrative of the Mau Mau war.

In this larger picture, we see not just the detail of the lives of the executed men, but their relationships to whom they fought against – the struggle with African loyalists, with colonial police, with white settlers and their militia, with the barristers who prosecuted and defended them, and with the judges who ultimately presided over their fate. (p. 8)

The result is a highly perceptive and complex history of the Mau Mau war. In contrast, Elkins’s book is just another inside story of prison, camp life, barbed-wire village, of torture and shooting and starvation, of the vileness of the secret police and the Home Guard and the men who gave them their orders. Indeed, the author is merely concerned with compiling a record of horror, a kind of case for the prosecution. She portrays the Mau Mau war as an unequal conflict between the British colonial forces and their lackeys in Kenya on one side, and Mau Mau fighters on the other side. This is too simple. No wonder the British Human Rights lawyer Martyn Day, who is helping to put together a case for Mau Mau veterans to seek reparations from Britain, plans to use oral evidence from Elkins’s book.

The two books under review reveal the shame of Britain’s dirty methods used to crush uprising in colonial territories. But both authors argue that only the end of the empire in Kenya was brutal. The title of Elkins’s book implies this. She argues that decades had been spent constructing Britain’s imperial image, and that image contrasted sharply with the brutal behaviour of other European empires in Africa such as King Leopold’s bloody rule in the Congo, the German-directed genocide of the Herero in South West Africa (Namibia) and France’s disgrace in Algeria. According to her, Britain had avoided all these in Kenya where the White Man’s Burden was accepted by all in Britain as reformist and where the paramountcy of Native interests had been declared. ‘Britain’, writes Elkins, ‘long regarded as a defender of human rights, is now exposed’ in her book as a nation that contravened international conventions about torture (pp. 305–6). But are there any Kenyans who have ever regarded Britain as a defender of human rights during the colonial period?

Anderson also records that between 1952 and 1956, the Kikuyu districts in Kenya became a police state. ‘This was not how empire was supposed to end. The British retreat from imperial grandeur was supposed to be dignified and orderly’ (p. 5). Where was this imperial grandeur in Kenya?

The problem is that many writers on Kenyan history, especially the history of decolonization, view everything from Central Kenya. Otherwise, they would know that colonial rule in Kenya had always been brutal and dirty methods were always used to crush any rebellion.

The first three British Commissioners/Governors of the East African Protectorate (later Kenya) dealt ruthlessly and deviously with the Nandi resistance and the Maasai Question. From 1895 to 1905 the Nandi, for example, waged a great patriotic war in defence of their land and freedom against the British invasion of their territory. Eleven separate expeditions and patrols were organized between November 1895 and December 1905. A ‘Final solution’ was required. The ultimate orders for the immediate elimination of the Nandi menace came directly from the British cabinet. The British mastered the strongest force to be employed in East Africa until the Mau Mau Emergency. Nandi spears could not be a march for the rifles and machine guns of the British force, which comprised 60 European army officers, 1,500 troops from the 1st and 3rd Kings African Rifles, 200 Indian soldiers, 1,000 Maasai levies, 500 armed porters, 300 Sudanese volunteers,
10 machine gun sections and 2 armoured trains. Over 100,000 Nandis were killed, including Koitalel, the Nandi spiritual leader who was personally assassinated, through trickery, by a British officer Richard Meinertzhagen, a serial psychopath. Only 90 Europeans were killed and 7 wounded. Writing about Pax Britannica, Meinertzhagen himself admitted that ‘The expansion of Europe during the last century has been the story of crime and violence against backward peoples under the cloak of protective civilization’. The Nandi were confined to an illegal ‘Native Reserve’, and 1,250 square miles of the most fertile and productive land was taken away from them and given to white settlers. After 15 January 1906, force was to be used to compel all sections of the Nandi to move into the Reserve; and any Nandi found outside it after that date was to be shot on sight. The blood-stained Meinertzhagen was given the job of implementing the terms. The Land Commission of 1934 was to record that, besides the Maasai, the Nandi had lost the greatest amount of land. This is contrary to what Elkins has claimed: ‘Though all indigenous groups were affected by British colonial rule in Kenya, none experienced a transformation as intense as the Kikuyu because of land alienation’ (p. 12). Meinertzhagen was aware of the implications of their action and sarcastically recorded in his diary:

The Reserve they contemplate is much too small and does not allow for expansion. I fear it is all based on requirements for white settlement and not on the welfare of the Nandi. This is a very short-sighted policy and must lead to grievances. After all it is African land, not ours to dispose of.

This is how colonial authority was established and the civilizing mission introduced! Similar stories can be told of punitive and brutal manner in which resistance among the Gusii in Western Kenya and the Mijikenda in the coastal region were dealt with by the British colonial authority.

Four years before the Mau Mau Emergency was declared, trouble erupted among the Babukusu in Western Province and the Pokot in the Rift Valley. Elijah Masinde, a Mkusu, launched his radical Dini ya Msambwa, an anti-European and anti-colonial movement, and recruited Lukas Pketch, a Pokot, as his disciple. Masinde went round in Northern Rift Valley and Western Province telling Africans that ‘all Europeans must be expelled from the country and an African king anointed’. Dini ya Msambwa was fiercely anti-colonial and promoted a heady brew of traditional religion and political nationalism. Pketch, born in about 1915, founded his dini (Dini ya Mafuta Pole ya Africa – Religion of Gentle Anointing Oil of Africa) after the colonial government had arrested him twice and warned him against associating with Masinde. On 18 August 1948 he was arrested, and was sentenced to thirty months imprisonment with hard labour together with ten of his followers. He escaped from prison and continued to mobilize the Pokot to drive out the white men. In the eyes of the colonial government, the self-styled

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5 Ibid. 266.
spiritual leader and freedom fighter – a hero among the Pokot people – was just a criminal.

Following his escape from prison camp, Pketch went to Molo, Eldoret, Cherangany and eventually to Mwina area where he and his followers, who now numbered thousands, lived in caves. He succeeded in converting the majority of the Pokot people to the movement without using violence. Indeed, he was against the use of violence to convert anybody.

From Mwina they set out for their last journey which was to take them to Zion on Mount Elgon, through Kolowa. At the last place, Pketch and fifty of his followers were killed on 24 April 1950. This is what colonial historians refer to as ‘Kolowa Affray’ – but it was really a massacre. In retaliation, Pketch’s followers killed three white persons – two police officers and a district officer – and one ‘unnamed’ African policeman. 172 Pokot followers of Pketch were arrested on that day and taken to concentration camps.

Two days later, it was decided to arrest all Pokot men in East and West Pokot for screening and interrogation. They were not taken to court. Instead, they were taken to concentration camps from where they were put to work on roads, water supplies and other public works for two years. For example, they build the Loruk to Kapedo and Salawa to Tot roads in Marakwet.

According to G. H. Heaton, the Commissioner of Prisons in Kenya, in 1950, the colony had enough accommodation for only 4,147 prisoners. However, the average number of prisoners following the Kolowa massacre had risen to about 9,000. To deal with this surplus, the Prison Commissioner explained, the government decided to construct prison camps in different parts of the country. Hence, labour or concentration or detention camps were not started for the Kikuyu only, as some historians claim.

Soon the colonial government decided to extend screening and interrogation to Pokot women. Like their menfolk, they were taken to labour camps where torture and other third-degree methods were used for extracting information and confessions. Like their menfolk, they were kept in these labour camps for two years, after which they were taken to court at Moroto in Uganda. The Pokot were also disarmed and their livestock – their only means of livelihood – were seized. These were times of trouble, as the Pokot say. Most of the Pokots released from labour camps were sent for trial in Uganda where they were normally jailed for two years at Luzira’s Maximum Prison or at Jinja or Mbale prisons in Uganda.

Worse still, the ‘prison graduates’ – men and women – were normally sent on permanent exile to Kenya’s Siberia: Lomech isolation area in northern Kenya. This extremely dry area where life was very difficult was set aside for the isolation of prisoners who were regarded as hardcore. It was a large isolated part of Pokot which was administered from Uganda until the 1980s when it was returned to Kenya. In Lomech – in effect an open jail – the inmates were tortured, starved, beaten, maimed and even killed. Many died from diseases of malnutrition and poverty. Unlike in Mau Mau detention camps, here people were beaten and tortured, not as way of reforming them, but as revenge. And although the exiles were allowed to intermarry, many of their children died in this Kenya’s Siberia, Kenya’s gulag. Many of the Lomech survivors did not return to Kenya, but instead preferred to remain in Uganda.

The colonial government continued to arrest suspected followers of Dini ya Mafuta and send them to labour camps and prisons in Uganda up to 1960. No wonder most survivors from these labour camps and prisons have lost memory or do not want to be reminded of their experiences in the unknown British Gulag.
I have included these two examples, from the Nandi and the Pokot, not in order to belittle the immense contribution of the Mau Mau war to the decolonization of Kenya, but in the strong belief that until the contributions of all Kenyan communities to the struggle for independence are acknowledged, and until Mau Mau is integrated in a genuinely harmonious way into the common historical consciousness of Kenyans, we are likely to view the British gulag as a kind of ethnic cleansing of the Kikuyu, which is what both books tend to do.

Elkins explains the origins of Mau Mau as a conflict between anti-colonial nationalists and colonial collaborators. This simplistic account was part of the Mau Mau war propaganda which she has imbibed rather uncritically. Anderson, on the other hand, demonstrates in his book that the reality on the ground was more complicated. By 1950, three political blocks had emerged among the Kikuyu influenced by the redistributive powers of the state. Two of the three groups were the conservative block, represented by the chiefs, headmen and senior Christian elders, most of whom were prominent landowners and businessmen, and the moderate nationalists who had emerged from the first batch of educated ‘mission boys’ and who were westernized in attitudes and style of life and who preferred urban life and saw the old conservative chiefs as a barrier to progress. Political struggle between the two groups therefore ensued: Kenyatta epitomized the moderate group. Similar social differentiations were taking place in other parts of Kenya, especially Western Kenya. By the 1950s these moderate nationalists, who used the Kikuyu Central Association as their vehicle, were inclined towards national politics, and the building of pan-ethnic political alliances, as a means to fostering greater credibility in the struggle for representation. The third group was that of the militant nationalists whose politics would give shape to Mau Mau by the early 1950s. Their strategy was to mobilize cultural nationalism in defence of the interests of those being excluded by social and economic changes within Kikuyu society. Their interests coalesced around the question of landlessness. Their leaders such as Fred Kubai, Bildad Kaggia and James Beauttah were often from less well-established families, with less land and fewer resources. They attacked the conservatives as corrupt betrayers of Kikuyu values and social norms and then attacked the moderates whose reforms failed to address their basic concern over the distribution of land and the level of African wages. They decided to tackle the popular grievances of the Kikuyu through direct action, using any means, including violence and murders. They were supported by the landless, the urban workers and the unemployed. These earlier struggles among the Kikuyu would play an important role in defining the positions people adopted in the Mau Mau war, why the conservatives became home guards, why Kenyatta never joined Mau Mau and why the militant nationalists abandoned the pan-ethnic agenda of the Kenya African Union and instead concentrated on Kikuyu nationalism.

When Governor Baring declared a State of Emergency on 20 October 1952, the different Kikuyu groups still held widely different views on how the struggle against colonial rule should be conducted. Anderson argues, correctly in my view, that in lumping all these Kikuyu politicians together (Kenyatta as leader of KAU together with Kaggia and Kubai who were the real leaders of Mau Mau, for example), the British misread the lessons of Kenya’s recent history and misunderstood the critical internal dynamics of Kikuyu politics. It is revealing to note that Elkins would still prefer to lump all the Kikuyu politicians together in her gulag, despite massive evidence to the contrary.

This business of lumping all Kikuyu together partly explains why the colonial government, the white settlers and Mau Mau activists failed to realize that there were two wars going on simultaneously. As Anderson explains, besides the
Mau Mau war, there was another war in the Kikuyu reserves, in the labour lines where African families resided on the white farms, and in the squalid African estates of Nairobi:

it was a war fought between and among Kikuyu communities; and it was a bitter and, as time went on, increasingly vengeful struggle in which the seemingly random violence had no pattern that Europeans could easily comprehend. Yet just as Mau Mau violence against Europeans had its reason and logic, so too did the struggle among the Kikuyu themselves. (p. 118)

It is in this context that the role of the Home Guard and loyalists should be discussed. Africans loyal to the government were ultimately to play the crucial role in the defeat of Mau Mau, in the administration of emergency villages, in the closer administration in the city of Nairobi, and in the Kenyatta regime. Elkins dismisses them simply as imperialist lackeys, while Anderson attempts a bold analysis of the loyalist crowd. He argues that ‘The creation of the Kikuyu Home Guard turned the “civil disturbance” (as the British termed the Mau Mau war) into a civil war’ (p. 24). The civil war is seen in the tragedy at Lari or on the streets of Eastlands in Nairobi. In the reserves, too, the bitterness of local divisions became the focal point of the war, as Kikuyu turned against Kikuyu. The Home Guard formed the internal resistance to Mau Mau – the deciding factor in the long fight against Mau Mau in the Kikuyu reserves. Mau Mau called them collaborators, quislings, traitors; and Ngugi wa Thiongo in his novel Petals of Blood referred to them as ‘the running dogs’ of British imperialism.

But a balanced history of the Mau Mau war must seriously address this issue of loyalists. By March 1954, there were 25,600 Kikuyu Home Guards, a total that exceeded the strength of the rebel army in the forest which was estimated to be about 20,000. Land consolidation and other concurrent agrarian reforms guaranteed the long-term ascendancy of the loyalists and their supporters. They were also rewarded with trading licences, tax exemptions and the right to vote.

Elkins explains that the British mounted two parallel responses to the Mau Mau rebellion – the forest war and the lengthier campaign directed against a much larger civilian Kikuyu population who were believed to have taken the Mau Mau oath. The battles for the civilian war were fought in the vast system of detention camps established in different parts of the country where some 80,000 Kikuyu insurgents were held and in about 800 enclosed emergency villages scattered throughout the countryside, surrounded by spiked trenches, barbed wire and watch towers and heavily patrolled by armed guards, which were detention camps in all but name. Putting the two together, it means that the British had actually detained some 1.5 million people, or nearly the entire Kikuyu population. Elkins’s book is on this civilian war. And her conclusion is that the assault against Mau Mau civilian population – orchestrated and executed by Governor Baring, with the approval of the Colonial Office – was far more significant in scope and impact than the military campaign against the guerrillas. This is definitely a fair assessment.

She records in detail the screening experiences of detainees which give similar recollections of torture methods used to extract confessions. The extreme violence against Mau Mau suspects during screening spilt over into the evolving Pipeline of detention camps established from the end of 1953. A rehabilitation campaign aimed at winning the hearts and minds of the Kikuyu was launched similar to the one that had been introduced by General Templer in Malaya to lure the communist insurgents back to capitalism. Work camps were established outside the Kikuyu districts designed for the 30,000 Mau Mau suspects considered by the screening teams as unfit for return to the reserves.
But much of this is not new. One therefore wonders why Elkins thinks she is telling an untold story. As Anderson points out in his book, Kenya’s many critics made sure that the excesses of the security forces were well publicized whenever they came to light. ‘Indeed, what is astonishing about Kenya’s dirty war is not that it remained secret at the time but that it was so well known and so thoroughly documented’, he states (p. 309). Throughout the war, many examples of beatings, torture and murder by the security forces came to light. Scandals in the camps were regularly exposed by members of the opposition Labour Party in Britain and by the churches. In 1956, the Movement for Colonial Freedom sponsored the publication of The Truth about Kenya, written by Eileen Fletcher, a Quaker social worker who had been employed from December 1954 as a Rehabilitation Officer in Kenya working in Athi River and Kisumu camps, among others. She detailed the conditions in the camps, highlighting the indiscriminate nature of the detention orders, the brutality of the treatment meted out to inmates, the gross fact that among the detainees were children, including girls as young as twelve years of age incarcerated with the Mau Mau hardcore. Captain Ernest Law, an ex-soldier working as a warder at Kamiti was another ‘insider’ who wrote an account graphically describing how on several occasions, he witnessed prisoners being beaten senseless.

Several narratives of detention during the Mau Mau war have been published: Kenyatta’s Suffering without Bitterness (1968), J. M. Kariuki’s Mau Mau Detainee (1963), Bildad Kaggia’s Roots of Freedom, Waruhiu Itote’s Mau Mau General, Gakaara wa Wanjau’s Mau Mau Author in Detention (1988), Karigo Muchai’s Hardcore, Guco Gikayo’s We Fought for Freedom (1979), Wambui Waiyaki Otieno’s Mau Mau Daughter: A Life History (1998). All these works, and many others, stress the brutality and humiliation that characterized their experience of detention.

Recently Marshall Clough has studied the Mau Mau memoirs as a genre. Violence, deprivation and depersonalization, he concluded, characterize these autobiographical accounts. Drawing parallels with political prisoners in Soviet Russia, Clough, in his Memoirs, describes the complex of more than fifty British camps scattered throughout the country as resembling ‘a Kenyan gulag’. Where then is the untold story that Elkins is talking about?

The two books under review, and other studies on Mau Mau, refer to camps set aside by the British for non-Kikuyu Mau Mau suspects, particularly Kamba and Maasai. But they never tell us what went on in those camps. We know from the Nairobi archives that a special screening camp set up at the beginning of 1954 found that of the 25,000 Kamba living in Nairobi, 8,000 were recorded by the screening teams as suspects who had taken several Mau Mau oaths, and 17 of them were involved in the forest fight. What happened to them? In Machakos district, the Kamba had formed a resistance organization comprising 3,000 members and by the end of 1954, 170 of them had been arrested for complicity in Mau Mau. In Narok district it was found in June 1954 that 350 Maasai had joined Mau Mau; and some Luo and Gusii from Nyanza had taken the oaths and were in support of the rebels. By mid-July 1954, 4 Luos had been convicted of Mau Mau offences. And a scrutiny of the lists of those detained in the over 100 camps in the country reveal that a good number of them came from non-Kikuyu ethnic groups. We need a study of the detained similar to Anderson’s of the hanged.

Although the British empire was in retreat in India, Pakistan, Malaya, Ghana, Sierra Leon and Nigeria, because Asian and African nationalisms were on the

7 Quoted in Anderson, Histories of the Hanged, 315.
March, white nationalism was in the ascendancy in South Africa since 1948, in Rhodesia and Nyasaland where a federation under white control was being planned, and the whites in Kenya were still nursing hopes of a white dominion. Armed rebellions became necessary in these white-dominated areas. The important question which is never asked in Kenya is: why did the Kikuyu decide to go it alone? A pan-ethnic political organization, the Kenya African Union (KAU), already existed led by Kenyatta and dominated by the Kikuyu radical nationalists based in Nairobi. Why did not KAU form a pan-ethnic military wing similar to Umkhonto we Sizwe (the armed wing of the African National Congress in South Africa) or to the Southern Peoples Liberation Movement/Southern Peoples Liberation Army in Sudan? In both cases the movements were able to coalesce around national objectives and they became melting pots for all ethnic differences and contradictions. Why then did the Kikuyu reject the pan-ethnic agenda at this critical time in Kenya's history? This question is not discussed in either book. Instead, we read that radical Kikuyu leaders appealed to ethnic solidarity and introduced political assassination as a tool for settling political disputes, instead of dialogue. Thus the Kikuyu, their oaths and violence, alienated all non-Kikuyu. The fate of Tom Mbotela discussed in Anderson's book symbolizes the beginning of the death of nationalist politics in Kenya. A member of the Executive Committee of the KAU and a senior official on Nairobi's African Advisory Council, he condemned both the ethnic particularism of Kikuyu radicalism as well as their belief in violence and political murders, arguing that oaths of all kinds were divisive to the nationalist cause. On 26 November 1952, Mbotela paid for his principles with his life. He was stabbed and hacked down in a Nairobi street. The same fate was to befall Pio Gama Pinto and Tom Mboya in the 1960s. In the words of Anderson,

it was an undignified end for a brave and resolute nationalist. More than any other African politician of his generation, Mbotela had stood firm for constitutional methods and moderate views ... His murder was symbolic of the death of moderation in African politics. (p. 191)

Why did the Kikuyu expect other Kenyans to accept African violence and domination while rejecting white domination? The words of Nelson Mandela during the Rivonia trial in July 1963 are relevant here. He said he had fought against both white domination and black domination, and it was a principle he was ready to die for. Many non-Kikuyu Kenyan leaders were prepared to fight against both white and black domination, and many, like Mbotela, paid with their lives. So that when Anderson argues that the Mau Mau history is about the loss of an empire, and the making of a nation, serious doubts are raised about the latter, as Kenyatta was later to discover.

The question of human rights features prominently in the two books. According to Elkins 'Mau Mau became for many whites in Kenya, and for many Kikuyu loyalists as well, what the Armenians had been to the Turks, the Hutu to the Tutsi, the Bengalis to the Pakistanis, and the Jews to the Nazis' (p. 49). Mau Mau adherents had to be eliminated, and she therefore describes it as a case of incipient genocide. But was there any planned reduction of their numbers by indiscriminate killing or genocide? Is this identification of Mau Mau with accepted cases of genocide justified? She answers positively because torture was widely used to extract confession: electric shock, cigarettes, fire, broken bottles, gun barrels, knives, snakes, vermin, hot eggs and beatings. She explains that although colonial government treated Mau Mau detainees as prisoners of war, the detention of Mau Mau suspects without trial and their torture was defended under the State of Emergency regulations. Anderson, however, explains that the reason for the latter
was that the British refused to admit that this was a war; they would not even formally concede that it was a rebellion, fearing that to do so might imply that the Mau Mau fighters had rights under international conventions governing the treatment of war prisoners. Mau Mau was therefore treated as a civil disturbance. Throughout the Mau Mau trials, Anderson adds, the British were determined not to allow politics to enter the courtroom. The movement they belonged to and the cause they fought for were ignored because the accused were not to be treated as political prisoners. It prevented discussion of political motives, rights or grievances.

As Mark Danner has revealed in his book, *Torture and Truth: America, Abu Ghraib and the War on Terror* (2005), moral corruption begins with misuse of language. Abominable acts can be made defensible if you call them by another name. Keeping cells lit 24 hours a day is called ‘sleep deprivation’ at Guantanamo and ‘sleep adjustment’ at Abu Ghraib, as if it were therapeutic and not mental torture. Beatings are called ‘enhanced interrogation techniques’ and is lavished on guests classified as ‘high value detainees’ (hardcore). In the same way, a new method for breaking hardcore Mau Mau suspects using unbridled brute force was called by the colonial authorities the dilution technique and camps practicing dilution were accordingly renamed filter camps, the colonial government’s code name for those places using officially sanctioned violence.

But as Anderson has cautioned, this was Kenya’s dirty war: trigger-happy settlers vs. murderous actions of Mau Mau fighters, who, contrary to African customs and values, assaulted old people, women and children. The horrors they practiced included the following: decapitation and general mutilation of civilians, torture before murder, bodies bound up in sacks and dropped in wells, burning the victims alive, gouging out of eyes, splitting open the stomachs of pregnant women. No war can justify such gruesome actions. In man’s inhumanity to man, there is no race distinction. The Africans were practicing it on themselves. There was no reason and no restraint on both sides, although Elkins sees no atrocities on the part of Mau Mau. ‘Raking up the past’ must include discussing Mau Mau atrocities openly as violations of human rights which call for apology and forgiveness. While we condemn the racism and injustice that produced Mau Mau in the first place, we must also condemn black violence and domination, if there is to be reconciliation.

In order to reestablish colonial domination in Kenya, the colonial government was willing to pervert judicial processes in order to create one of the most restrictive police states in the history of the British Empire, and Anderson has provided a nuanced study of this. However, it is evident from his study of the hanged that a more comprehensive history of the judiciary during the Emergency is needed. Such a history would include the defence of the rights of the individual to a fair trial by Attorney-General Whyatt (1953–4), and the attempts by several judges to maintain the legal standards in opposition to Governor Baring and the provincial administration who felt that adherence to the law imposed too many restrictions on urgent security issues. The history should also include the sterling contributions of defence lawyers such as Fitz de Souza, A. R. Kapila and C. M. G. Argwings-Kodhek who – for paltry fees that barely covered their costs – accepted paupers briefs, and in remote Emergency Assize Courts created in April 1953, where public executions were carried out, they fought a gallant running battle with officialdom. They were subjected to the spiteful petty interference of police and European district officers. It was Argwings-Kodhek who was most frequently the victim of the indignities imposed by a callous and disregarding administration. He took so many of these paupers’ briefs that Kenya settlers called him ‘the Mau Mau lawyer’.
Anderson’s book is on state execution which in the colonial context was generally used sparingly. Not so in Kenya. In all, over the course of the Emergency, 1,090 Kikuyu went to the gallows for Mau Mau crimes. ‘In no other place, and at no other time in the history of British imperialism, was state execution used on such a scale as this’, writes Anderson (p. 7). The book aims at finding out how this could have happened, in a colonial territory, and at a time when the British parliament was contemplating the abolition of hanging. His answer, which he develops in the rest of the book, is that this happened because in the 1950s, British justice in Kenya was a blunt, brutal and unsophisticated instrument of oppression. But as I have demonstrated above, it was not any less brutal and blunt during the early decades.

Anderson calls the 1,090 men who went to the gallows as convicted Mau Mau terrorists 'unacknowledged martyrs of the rebel cause' (p. 7). But is it fair to group together as martyrs criminals who were hired by Mau Mau leaders to carry out assassinations with freedom fighters such as Karani Karanja, China's brigadier? The most eminent of the ‘hanged’, of course, was Dedan Kimathi, an Anglican schoolboy, who had practiced Kikuyu religion in the forest and listened to the advice of seers, but who went to his death as a Catholic on the morning of 18 February 1957, thanks to Father Marino, a priest from the Nyeri Catholic mission, who had visited him many times in prison. He sent a letter to the Father asking him to ensure that his son got education and also that his wife would be near the Sisters of the Mission and near the Church. Kimathi the Mau Mau fighter was, in death, advocating reconciliation with the Church which had conducted a kind of twentieth-century Inquisition where the Fathers preached with the gun in one hand and a bible in the other, demanding confessions of all Mau Mau sins. Today we have the practical manifestations of this spirit of reconciliation at the Peace Museum in Nyeri town and a Peace Garden in Othaya town. There is also the Lari Memorial Peace Museum established by some of the survivors of the Lari massacre where, in March 1953, over 400 Africans, mainly women and children, were killed in one night, and the freedom fighters. The two groups have resolved to forget the bitterness that came with the struggle for independence and have instead opted to promote peace, reconciliation and forgiveness. This appears to be the way forward towards healing the deep wounds created by the Mau Mau war within Kikuyu society.

But at the national level, two issues have to be resolved: the role of Kenyatta in the Mau Mau war and how to memorialize Mau Mau. The two books have endorsed the now accepted fact that Kenyatta was never a member of Mau Mau, nor was he the Machiavellian, fire-eating, satanic figure the white settlers had imagined him to be. He was instead a mission-educated gentleman who had preached moderate reform and was a constitutional nationalist both before and after the Mau Mau war. At Lokitaung, he refused to join the National Democratic Party led by Kaggia whose ideology was anti-European and anti-loyalist. He had married a European woman and the daughter of a chief, and because of that, when he was in prison, he was always on the side of the conservatives and the government. His own son, Peter Muigai Kenyatta, had joined the screening team at Athi River camp after his confessions, and eventually travelled throughout the Pipeline, interrogating and brutalizing detainees, demanding their confessions. He regularly visited his father to inform him of his screening activities. The former detainees were later to realize how grossly they had miscalculated both father and son. As Elkins has emphasized ‘Lokitaung seemed to render transparent Kenyatta’s true political leaning, which were scarcely in line with Mau Mau doctrine’ (p. 197). He wanted a piece of the colonial pie and to be accepted like the rest of the African colonial elite, and he sought the social and economic privileges that went along
with that acceptance. Was he a traitor, as Kaggia claimed, a loyalist or a Liberal constitutionalist? All along the British knew that Kenyatta was not a militant. That is why they separated him from his colleagues in prison, in order to protect him from possible attack. It is therefore not correct to say, as Elkins asserts, that eventually, ‘the British decided to re-invent Kenyatta, a process that transformed him ... into a conservative, civilized man who embraced enemies of the past’. Rather it was the African politicians like Oginga Odinga who reinvented Kenyatta and transformed him into a militant, radical leader of their imagination. And when Kenyatta returned to his home in Gatundu on 14 August 1961, they soon discovered, much to their chagrin, that the old constitutionalist nationalist had not changed much.

Kenyatta was faced with two major problems: first, he had to reconcile the loyalists and the rebels; second, he had to allay the fears of the non-Kikuyu people of Kenya, who, on the whole, had not been involved in the Mau Mau war, but who were deeply suspicious of the Kikuyu oligarchy taking over the country.

His solution to the first problem was simple: ‘forgive and forget’, and bury the past. Mau Mau was a thing best forgotten. The freedom fighters expected to be rewarded for their victory – with land and property, pledging to fight if Kenya’s new government betrayed their cause. Many former hardcore detainees joined together to form the Land and Freedom Army, administering once again an oath of unity. But Kenyatta rejected such demands. He told the veterans and former detainees again and again that ‘nothing is free’. If they wanted their land back, Kenyatta insisted, they would have to purchase it like everyone else. He denounced those demanding compensation and recognition, warning a crowd in Kiambu, ‘We are determined to have independence in peace, and we shall not allow hooligans to rule Kenya. We must not have hatred towards one another. Mau Mau was a disease which had been eradicated, and never to be remembered again’. He proceeded to detain some of the ‘hooligans’ who refused to heed his advice.

During Kenyatta’s regime, there was a deafening silence about Mau Mau. The public memories of detention camps, of massacres, of punishments and of dispossession were suppressed under him. But how can we understand the full enormity of what we are being asked to forget and forgive, unless we ‘rake up’ the past? Is it not a betrayal of the memories of thousands of fellow human beings, on both sides of the conflict, who suffered and died? How can we hope to understand the present which already in Kenya is the prisoner of the past? Do we not have a responsibility to the dead, and to history?

For Kenyatta and Daniel arap Moi who followed in his footsteps, Mau Mau remained buried – it was a moment in Kenya’s past that would divide more than it would unite. No official reconciliation was attempted and no compensation of victims discussed.

However, with the arrival of the National Rainbow Coalition government in December 2002, official attitudes to the memory of Mau Mau changed. The order that had remained in place since 1952 banning Mau Mau as an illegal organization was rescinded, and it was announced that the government would inaugurate a proper search for Kimathi’s remains so that he could be given a proper burial in a Heroes’ Acre that the government was to set aside as a national site of commemoration. Now that Mau Mau is a legal organization, what are its objectives in an independent Kenya? What are its relations to political parties? Is the registration of Mau Mau movement likely to unite or divide Kenyans as Kenyatta had feared? There seems to be total silence on the part of the government.

Jomo Kenyatta, Suffering without Bitterness (Nairobi, 1968), 189.
But will the remains of loyalists such as Harry Thuku and Chief Njiri be buried in Heroes’ Acre, alongside Kimathi? Heroes’ Acre could present an opportunity to deepen the divisions, or to try to heal them. The advocates of Heroes’ Acre want to create a memorial to the ‘freedom fighters’, most obviously those who led the fight in the forest. But this begs the important question: who is a freedom fighter? Who is a hero or heroine? Must one have been in the forest to be a hero? This leads to the second problem Kenyatta had to contend with: what to do with the non-Kikuyu Kenyans.

Kenyatta realized that any recognition of Mau Mau as a nationalist movement would leave out all of Kenya’s other ethnic groups when it came to sharing the fruits of independence. His solution was again simple: he decided to erase Mau Mau from the public’s memory and replace it with the politically correct and widely embracing message, ‘We all fought for independence’. On the first Kenyatta Day, which is supposed to commemorate the sufferings and sacrifices made by freedom fighters, he declared:

Let this be the day on which all of us commit ourselves to erase from our minds all the hatreds and the difficulties of those years which now belong to history. Let us agree that we shall never refer to the past. Let us, instead, unite, in all our utterances and activities, in concern for the reconstruction of our country and the vitality of Kenya’s future.

In other words, there would be no day of reckoning for the crimes committed during the Mau Mau, no memorializing of those Mau Mau men and women who had fought in the forests and died in the camps and emergency villages, for we all fought for independence. To Kenyatta, national unity was more important than legitimizing the Mau Mau movement. He hoped to create a common national consciousness based on a historical myth which sacrificed the past. The result was that he failed in both: he neither created a national consciousness nor did he create a common historical memory. In practice, the fruits of independence were going to be divided up between Kenyatta’s emerging oligarchy, the Kikuyu loyalists and the settlers who remained in Kenya. ‘We all fought for independence’.