

Highlighting Perspective: Who were the Mau Mau?

The two sources below present very different understandings of the Mau Mau. The first source, an excerpt from *The New York Times* considers the Mau Mau as an unjustified, violent terrorist group. It offers a Western, pro-colonialism perspective. In contrast, the second source, an excerpt from Koigi Wa Wamwere's autobiography, is written by a Kenyan political activist and commentator concerning his uncle's involvement in the Mau Mau rebellion.

Source: "The Mau Mau Rebellion," *The New York Times*, September 18, 1952, p. 28

We live in a tortured period of history when strange and primitive forces are coming into their own again. Our civilization often seems but a veneer covering dark abysses. Now and then the surface is pierced and we see frightening things . . . If we who comfortably read this newspaper over breakfast table here were living in East Africa these thoughts could have a terrifying meaning. Little items have been appearing in recent weeks, coming from Nairobi, the capital of the British Crown Colony of Kenya. One day it is about Christian missionaries fleeing for their lives. Another is about men being struck down on lonely farms or roads in the night. . . It is the Mau Mau which is causing all this trouble and anxiety — not very serious trouble, but there are alarming signs of a concerted and organized effort at terrorism, which is linked to political, social and racial aspirations. The Mau Mau is a secret society formed from the Kikuyu tribe whose millions or so members live in the fertile highlands around Nairobi . . . It is inevitable in our time that the white missionary should be tied to a hated imperialism. In turning on the missionary the rebellion soul rejects the Christianity which the missionary brought. In Africa this does not seem to mean falling back on atheism or agnosticism; it means a return to paganism — to the "leopard man," to ritual murders, to primitive magic and terror. That is how the Mau Mau works.

Comprehension Questions:

1. Based on this excerpt, who are the Mau Mau?
2. Based on this excerpt, what are the Mau Mau fighting for?
3. How would this portrayal impact how others (e.g., Kenyans as well as the international community) perceive the Mau Mau rebellion?

Source: *I Refuse to Die, My Journey for Freedom* by Koigi Wa Wamwere, New York: Seven Stories Press, 2003, pp. 99-100

For Africans, land meant more than food and a house. It was their permanent residence before, during and after life. To fight for land and freedom, Mau Mau was trying to secure their eternal existence. Refusing to understand this, the British subjected them to a great misrepresentation. They called the *itoi* (rebels), *imaramari* (terrorists), *washenzi* (primitive people), as we well as

atavistic, cannibalistic and beastly. In the minds of the British, Mungai [my father's younger brother] and his comrades were not fighting for freedom. Africans knew of no freedom. They were fighting to return to a past of primitiveness, darkness, death and evil. The British accused Mungai and his comrades of foolishly sacrificing their lives for death . . . Mungai went to the forest not to lose his own life, but to protect African life from being snuffed out by British colonialism. He went to the forest not because he loved going for days without food as a guerilla, but because he wanted to recapture stolen lands and end hunger for himself and other Kenyans. . . Like other young men, Mungai was married and wanted to have a family but he did not want to be a father whom white people called mboi, a boy, and humiliated before his own children. He did not want to be a father and a husband who begged the white man for the food of his family. He died for the security of his wife and children against colonial rape and assault. He went to the forest to fight for human rights of his people . . . The Second World War had taught Africans two lessons: With guns, they could kill white people. If the German Hitler could be fought, so could the British Hitler. After the war, British soldiers had come to Kenya to be rewarded with land. African soldiers had returned home, not to be given land, but for the lucky ones to be hired as laborers of those who fought with them in the same trenches in Europe and Burma. This was the injustice that had driven Mungai and the Mau Mau to the forests.

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4. What misconceptions of *The New York Times'* excerpt does this excerpt seek to address?

Discussion Questions:

1. Why does the Western media label the Mau Mau as terrorists? What makes someone or some group affiliated with terrorism? How can this be a problematic label, especially in the case of the Mau Mau rebellion?
2. The vast majority of deaths throughout the Mau Mau rebellion were Mau Mau fighters or people considered to be affiliated with the Mau Mau. The British justified their deaths, and the concentration camps they established for the Mau Mau, by arguing the Mau Mau were dangerous and a threat to general safety. Do you think this is a valid reason? At what point does a state have to concede power to a different group of people?