The Mau-Mau Uprising 1954

**THE EMERGENCE OF THE MODERN EAST AFRICAN NATIONS 1900 - 1963**

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Mau-Mau was an underground political movement (uprising) organized by the people of Kenya against colonial rule from 1951-60 under leaders such as Jomo Kenyata, Dedan Kimathi, Waruhiu Itote popularly known as General China and Tom Mboya etc. The movement was precipitated by the returning African soldiers after the Second World War who were politically aware. It was an attempt by the Africans to change the system of economic and social injustice which had become a marked feature in Kenya. They were all directed towards achieving their independence.

The Mau-Mau uprising presents an example of African efforts to fight for their rights after realizing that were oppressed in their own country. It is also an indication that Africans were politically aware and determined to shape their destiny.

**Objectives**

At the end of the topic students should be able to:

1. Explain the background of the Mau-Mau uprising
2. Explain the causes of the uprising
3. Describe the course or stages of the uprising
4. State reasons why the rising took long to end (1951-1960)
5. Explain why the uprising was suppressed
6. Explain government measures to contain the uprising
THE MAU-MAU REBELLION 1951 - 60
This was a Kenyan underground political movement that aimed at saving Kenya from British colonial rule. Mau-Mau is an abbreviation which stands for "Mzungu Arudi Ulaya, Mwafirika Apane Uhuru" (meaning let the white man go back to Europe and the Africans regain Independence)
It was a rebellion organized by the people of Kenya against colonial administration from 1951-60 under leaders such as Jomo Kenyatta, Dedan Kimathi, Waruhiu Itote popularly known as General China.

Mau Mau was an underground movement comprising of extreme African Nationalists with in the newly formed Kenya African Union and the
second world war ex-service men. The movement was originally dominated by the Kikuyu but were later joined by other tribes. Ritual oathing was a crucial component of Mau Mau participation, as they called on the old God - Ngai - to witness the oath that people would swear to be united in their fight against the colonial enemy, and would take back the land that the white man had stolen. Jacob Njangi, a former fighter, explained:

"We used to drink the oath. We swore we would not let white men rule us forever. We would fight them even down to our last man, so that man could live in freedom."

The oaths were a cultural symbol of the solidarity that bound Kikuyu men, women and children together in their opposition to the colonial government. But they were also feared, as the taboos that traditionally surrounded the breaking of oaths were still very much current. Those who took the Mau Mau oaths were taught that their violation would be instantly lethal, and in practise it was indeed so: not because of the wrath of Ngai, but because of bloody reprisals by the Mau Mau themselves, for whom refusing to take the oath was the same as siding with the colonial regime.

Nonetheless, the British were scared by the oath, for they knew full well that for the Kikuyu (or any other Kenyan, in fact), an oath was a deadly serious matter, and could never be broken. As a result, the British made taking the Mau Mau oath a capital offence. Between 1953 and 1956 more than 1,000 Africans were publicly hanged for alleged Mau Mau crimes - in Britain, public hangings had been outlawed for over a century.

The British also screened Mau Mau suspects and forced them to take a 'cleansing oath', a strange instance of colonialism 'gone native'. Concocted by the anthropologist Louis Leakey and rich Kikuyu landowners who stood to lose their British-granted privileges if independence came to be, the Kikuyu were to swear upon *githathi* (sacred stones) for a reversal of the Mau Mau oath. Many, of course, refused, so alternative means had to be found to 'convince' people to abandon their oaths. John Nottingham, a district officer in the colonial service from 1952 to 1961, explains, "The way that it worked out was that if you beat them up enough then they would confess an oath. So what you do is beat them up and then you give them a bit of paper and a piece of blunt pencil and say, 'Confess! I took it! I took it! I took it! You are now a human being again."

Ironically, this was probably the first time that any of the suspects had ever been called 'human beings' by the *wazungu*.

The Mau Mau operation was guided by Oath. The fighters bound their core membership with a sacred oath of secrecy. Violation of the oath meant an automatic death to the offender. The blacks aimed at sending away the whites and achieving their independence. They were so committed to this fundamental cause that each member took the traditional oath. To this oath, one was obliged to shed his or her blood for the sake of others and above all the future prosperity of all.

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**CAUSES OF THE MAU-MAU REBELLION**

- It was due to unemployment of the ex-soldiers who had been promised jobs after the World War II, but instead were made porters on European-estates. Similarly, people were retrenched, traders pushed out to business by Asian retail trade monopoly and European settlers. Therefore by 1952 the young energetic African went to the forests of Abadare and Mountain Kenya Rift Valley and waged a violent offensive against the British hoping for a change.
- Africans wanted their land especially the Kikuyu who had been displaced from the fertile Kenya highlands. The European had used the support of the colonial government to take away land including the ancestral land to which they attached great value. Many were pushed into reserves and camps were they suffered from congestion, starvation and diseases like typhoid, cholera.
- It was a reaction against the Kipande system. This was a method of identity cards imposed on Africans to restrict them from unnecessary movements. The kipande system required moving with a 'PASS' which was big a metallic card carried in the neck of the African.
- The introduction of racial discrimination in Kenya. This was discrimination according to colour. The Europeans equated the black colour with low intelligence, uncivilized, barbaric and a backward race. All the best hotels, restaurants, schools, recreational centres and most fertile soils in Kenya were reserved for the whites only.
- Africans were fed up of heavy and harsh taxation by the Europeans. Failure to pay tax was punishable by taking away the land or even imprisonment. So the Africans were forced to go and work under harsh condition and for long hours, yet poorly paid. This forced them to join the uprising.
- The dominance of the economy by the Asian and white settlers. The Africans were not allowed to take part in meaningful business, were not given positive consideration in awarding jobs. The whites upheld the view that blacks were only fit to work as Shamba boys on the colonial farms or maids in the European and Asian homes. To this end, the Africans revolted so as to change the situation for the better.
They also wanted to be exposed to the social services e.g. education. The white settlers feared the educated Africans for losing their white color jobs in the government as well as losing unskilled African labour on their farms. In this respect they discouraged African education. In so doing, they worked to frustrate the African efforts to set up schools even the few educated Africans were not employed in the civil service. So these unemployed Africans fought for the preservation of their right as an educated class.

Africans feared a gradual destruction of their culture by the whites e.g. the missionaries were totally against the circumcision of women among the Kikuyu and the traditional view of twins.

Africans wanted a fair share in the administration of their country (Parliament). For a long time many Kenyans were excluded from decision making and political participation the whites and Asians in the Legislative Council did not represent their interests.

The return of Jomo Kenyatta in the 1950s’ after his studies in Europe, he came back with a wider vision in politics after participating in various conferences(Manchester conference of 1945) therefore this made enabled him convince the Kenyans about their rights and they therefore united and rebelled.

The role of educated Kenyans; this group of people by nature of their education became aware of their rights as citizens of Kenya and it is along that they started campaigns of educating the people about their place in society. This prompted them to rebel against the whites.

The colonial policy discouraged Africans from growing cash crops like coffee, tea, cotton, pyrethrum for fear of competition with the Africans. They feared that they would grow rich and challenge the colonial administration. This led to too much poverty so they joined the rebellion hoping to find a solution.

Forced labour on white man’s plantations led to Mau Mau: Africans were obliged by colonial law to offer labour on the plantation this was to be done forcefully with out offering any payments. This kind of new slavery inspired the occurrence of the Mau Mau rebellion as the first violent revolt against the British after World War II.

Influence of the Second World War many Kenyans who participated in this war discovered the weakness of the white man and the loopholes in their systems of administration. These included General China, Didan Kimathi among others. These people had acquired good military skills, enjoyed high standards of living, realized that some Africans were braver then some whites. These joined together with the unemployed Kenyans with a hope of gaining their Independence.