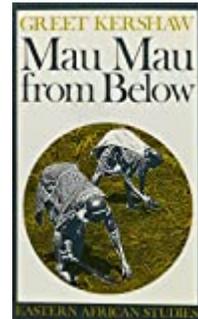




**Greet Kershaw.** *Mau Mau from Below*. Athens: Ohio University Press, 1997. xxx + 354 pp. \$19.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8214-1155-1; \$42.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8214-1154-4.



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## **An Archaeology of Relations in Land and Mau Mau in Kiambu**

Greet Kershaw's long awaited *Mau Mau from Below*, based on fieldwork from 1955-7 and 1962, is important for Mau Mau research because of its depth and detail. A generation of Mau Mau research has taken Marc Bloch's suggestion about cataclysms[1] and tried to understand a society-Kikuyu under colonialism in particular—and then used that understanding to re-examine the event and its larger implications.

From just before the British-declared Emergency in October 1952, Mau Mau was often written about as a single movement, a fracturing tribe engaged in an atavistic revolt against modernizing forces. With the nearing of Kenya's independence this position was subverted with its structure maintained; atavistic forces became heroes, modernizers became oppressors. Later scholars began to pull apart 'the Mau Mau movement,' examining the roles of people with different access to land, the economic and social impacts of land alienation, and later the specific involvement of women. By the early 1990s a wealth of sources on Mau Mau plus other histories dealing with people only peripherally involved in Mau Mau caused rethinking of the idea of 'the movement'; Mau

Mau no longer signified a unified rebellion, but perhaps a "Kikuyu civil war." [2]

Kershaw explains how people in Kiambu came to participate in Mau Mau through a century-and-a-half history of relations involving land. The Emergency, rather than revealing a static-but-threatened structure of society, exposes complex and changing relations among Kikuyu. Seeing land alienation as central to the conflict is nearly as old as Mau Mau; however, Kershaw explores land alienation through the relations between people of different generations, gender, occupation, location, deep into precolonial history and within a framework that considers how Kikuyu, in the long term, have managed such relations.

Although she has not described it so, the book gives a deep history of how Kikuyu social reproduction has been worked by individuals and in turn created different categories of individual over more than a century and through three major ecological and economic catastrophes. Through Kershaw's often dense presentation, Mau Mau itself takes on many forms through time and spatially; it cannot easily be considered 'a movement,' but in

Kiambu it is also not clearly a civil war.

A valuable way to study Mau Mau, or any rebellion or period of resistance, is to separate out the various categories of actors and to determine how they confront changing pressures and obligations through time. By the time of the Emergency the categories women, men, elders, Europeans, Kikuyu, peasants, squatters all are too coarse to explain what people were doing. Kershaw initially found that wealth and poverty to some degree determined participation in Mau Mau. She was soon advised locally that gathering data on individual wealth in land was inadequate, and she shifted her focus to households and *mbari* (descent groups and their land). Kershaw also quickly found that understanding land reorganization in the Emergency required learning about older land tenure practices.

She divides land holding in the mid twentieth century into five categories (plus landless *ahoi*), shows how these categories clarify participation in social and political action, and through genealogies and oral histories shows how these categories developed since the early nineteenth century. People are further divided by the more standard male and female, generation, and so on, and this is shown to in part determine yet further categories, such as skilled laborer, agricultural laborer, female participant in mutual aid association, educated. The breadth of Kershaw's data allow her to draw these subdivided categories of people into the unfolding of the crises of mid century, so that we come to understand the shifting positions of and relations between various individuals at the threshold of Mau Mau. Hence this picture of Mau Mau is from below (p. 7), from a perspective of life and history in these villages.

"Below" can also be read in the sense of archaeological strata, as Kershaw takes us back to the deepest levels in Kiambu to see the relevant categories of the twentieth century develop through the nineteenth. Kikuyu speakers came to the area from Murang'a at the turn of the nineteenth century viewing land as symbolically female, with ownership relations in the idiom of marriage. Through a process involving violence, exchange, and intermarriage with the other people of the area—predominantly Ndorobo—a Kikuyu agricultural community developed. (The notion of a bounded tribe came later as a product of colonial times [pp. 276-77].)

People had cleared and were cultivating much land when they suffered the Kirika famine of 1835. The death toll meant that individual and *mbari* land holdings grew in proportion to the numbers of people, which increased

emphasis on relations with *ahoi*. *Ahoi* would farm the land of another, and could, through marriage, purchase, or lending, become landed themselves, linking, entering, or beginning new *mbari*. The disasters of the late nineteenth century again created a situation of greater land holding for individuals and *mbari*. But new factors—production for the caravan trade and more recently exaggerated differentiation of wealth—led to different outcomes. Polygyny increased, as land holders wished to increase production for their own and their sons' benefit. *Ahoi*, once a potentially powerful position, found a new tributary form, and land was by this time a far more technical issue in Kiambu.

Although Kershaw's detailed presentation at times reads like a series of statements of sociological facts and data over time, this proves deceptive and the effectiveness of her narrative subtle. The earliest Europeans of the Imperial British East Africa Company entered Kiambu through the ongoing trade in commodities. Wealthy landholders saw the Protectorate government as protection for the trade from disruptive forces of raiding. With land pressures at the turn of the century, many people went to work on European farms, essentially as *ahoi*. Many saw their departure as fission, not unlike that from Murang'a which led to Kiambu's settlement a century earlier (an analogy which would cause problems with their return during the Emergency).

Kershaw's precolonial history so successfully draws out the complexities of changing relations involving land that European rejection of that history reads dramatically across the grain, for example, in narratives of alienation (pp. 85-87), and Ainsworth's pronouncements that Kikuyu can learn better land use through restriction to smaller areas—a third of the way through the book (pp. 111-12, n7). This is startling because land alienation is well explored in other literature. Kershaw again gives the sensation of seeing land alienation from a long-term local perspective when discussing the Kenya Land Commission report (Appendix V), once more revealing her presentation as more than dry data, but affective and locally nuanced.

Whether or not Mau Mau can profitably be understood as a Kikuyu civil war is not explicitly argued by Kershaw. But the complicated picture she paints makes that supposition problematic for Kiambu. Local violence, the crescendo of which came with the Marige massacre of 1953, was largely between Kikuyu. But landed and landless were not opposite camps; they were closely linked by residence, kinship, and fear (p. 104). And the Kikuyu

Association “cannot be adequately described as a party of chiefs ... Other land owners, not chiefs, far outnumbered chiefs. Antagonism to chiefs was often to the person more than the institution, which has shown great resilience. Though headmen and chiefs were killed during Mau Mau, so were teachers. Whether they were killed because they were chiefs or teachers, cannot be established” (pp. 203, n14).

This agrees with Lonsdale’s findings about the ambiguities of political choice and the importance of personal reputation over structural position.[3] Kershaw does establish that the spiral of poverty, leaving landless and land poor with no hope that their children would fare any better, created desperation. The brutal Marige massacre of April 1953, which unfolded partly in relation to recurring land cases that date to the earliest occupation of Kiambu, effectively ended Mau Mau participation for most people in Kiambu. The explosion of Mau Mau oath-taking since the declaration of the Emergency—when women’s oaths tripled and men’s exceeded all previous—came to a near halt. Whereas rejections of the ideology of landed elders’ resistance in the 1930s (Chapter Six) points toward a civil war, recollection of these forms of resistance after Marige suggests otherwise.

Kershaw’s methods and thus her data are to be taken seriously. She collected information from over 1700 women and men at 569 households. Her residence in those villages and her abilities with Kikuyu language are obvious assets to her analysis. Her familiarity with this material, however, evidently leads to some problems in presentation. The necessary glossary threw me early (p. 13) as I searched for the plural *athuri*, not knowing the singular. Oral histories are at times presented as summaries, agglomerations of statements by unknown numbers of people in unstated contexts (e.g., pp. 272-73; and see p. 5 regarding the “collective nature” of information).

After my first read I was unsure whether Kershaw’s fieldwork began in 1955 or in 1956; she notes 1955 (p. xv), but reference to her early data in the text is consistently to 1956 (e.g., pp. 186, 193, 264). Likewise the exact conditions of her fieldwork and linguistic competency are unclear. While these are clearly presented in an earlier journal publication[4], more explicit discussion in this major analysis would have been appropriate.

Different, but related, there are obvious sensitive issues of privacy and informant protection, but I found no discussion of whether Kershaw’s rare field records will remain private or become an accessible archive in the future. Nevertheless, her fieldwork was rigorous, her use

of unpublished materials strong. Her closeness to the documents comes out in several places when she notes that records which were available or at least existed in 1956 had been destroyed by 1962 (e.g., pp. 115, n44; 265-66). A similar phenomenon existed with changes in access to some oral information (e.g., pp. 17-18, 264-65). Both these and several persuasive discussions of ideology in Kikuyu passing of history speak to questions raised in other literature about Mau Mau historiography in Kenya.[5]

‘Archaeology’ is a useful analogy to summarize the value of this book. Archaeologists struggle to balance excavation and survey, a vertical/horizontal distinction which has ramifications for the return of evidence. *Mau Mau from Below* is a form of excavation. Most of Kershaw’s fieldwork was carried out in four villages in Kiambu (discussed with the names of the main two), from 1955-57 as an aid worker and anthropologist and for subsequent field research for her doctorate in 1962. Her access to other areas, including gathering information in Nairobi, was restricted.

Kershaw develops a picture of this one district, as if one stood in Kiambu for 150 years, observing and speaking with those coming and going. John Lonsdale made a similar comment on the manuscript in 1992.[6] Kershaw is not interested in extrapolating to write definitively about ‘the Kikuyu’ or ‘Kiambu,’ and concern about the localized nature of her evidence caused her to delay publishing (pp. 1-3). Kershaw does situate her work in relation to existing literature, often in footnotes and appendices, and the forward by John Lonsdale (pp. xvi-xxx) helps to contextualize the study.

If this were a book about four villages in another rebellion about which little had been written, criticism of Kershaw’s deep-but-local focus would be more severe; but we have other excellent studies which help to create a broader view of Mau Mau and the colonial years in Kenya. Yet this raises implications for how the book can be taught. It will not summarize the state of the field. However, the book is dynamite for a seminar which reads other works on Mau Mau that generalize from different information and different research methods, and as such it will add greatly to teaching eastern African history.

A similar case can easily be made for the chapters on precolonial Kiambu. The material in Appendix IX, “Notes on Mau Mau,” the discussion of collaboration there (pp. 324-25) and of resistance in the main text (e.g., Chapter Six) are quite interesting and could complicate studies of resistance and rebellion elsewhere. In sum, just as a re-

gional archaeology must come to terms with the detailed evidence from an intensive excavation, so it is that *Mau Mau from Below* will assume an important position in histories of Mau Mau and decolonization in Kenya.

Notes:

[1]. Bloch, Marc. *The Historian's Craft* (New York, 1953), 74-5.

[2]. Lonsdale, John. "The moral economy of the Mau Mau: the problem," in Bruce Berman and John Lonsdale, *Unhappy Valley, Book Two, Violence and Ethnicity* (Athens, OH, 1992), 295. Presley, Cora Ann. *Kikuyu Women, The Mau Mau Rebellion, and Social Change in Kenya* (Boulder, CO, 1992), 126. Cooper, Frederick. *Decolonization and African Society: The Labor Question in French and British Africa* (Cambridge, 1996), 349.

[3]. Lonsdale, op cit., 295, 426.

[4]. Kershaw, Greet. "Mau Mau from below: fieldwork and experience, 1955-57 and 1962." *Canadian Journal of African Studies* 25 (1991), 274-97.

[5]. For example: Buijtenhuis, Robert. *Mau Mau Twenty Years After: The Myth and Survivors* (The Hague, 1973), especially chapter two; Atieno-Odhiambo, E. "The production of history in Kenya: the Mau Mau debate." *Canadian Journal of African Studies* 25 (1991), 302-3.

[6]. Lonsdale, op cit., 300-302.

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