British Attitudes Towards Kenyans before and during the Mau Mau Rebellions

The desire for independence in Kenya really grew out of the Second World War, as it did with so many other British colonies. However British attitudes towards Kenyans were established well before this period, so to properly understand them it is important to understand a wider narrative that begins before the Second World War. Kenya had been settled on the premise of profits for those who operated farming businesses, and this had been extremely successful. The black natives were seen as a cheap, willing and subservient form of manpower which would operate the farms while white settlers ran the business and enjoyed all the trappings of a 'white man's colonial paradise'.\(^1\) White settlers essentially took the best land; while there were in fact laws which were meant to compensate native tribes such as the Kikuyu, settlers often hid behind the myth that Africans had no real notion of land ownership to escape this 'inconvenience'. Kenyans were moved away from fertile lands onto land less and less suitable for farming by the government, essentially meaning that in areas which had been opened for settlement, British expatriates could claim whatever land they wanted with little resistance. The expatriates who went to Kenya were largely upper class, retired career soldiers, gentlemen; the government stipulated that to emigrate to Kenya settlers needed capital. Compared to the 'rank and file' nature of expatriates in Rhodesia or South Africa, early settlers attitudes were rooted in upper class British values of the time.

'Every white man in Nairobi is a politician; and most of them are leaders of parties', wrote Winston Churchill, in 'My African Journey' in 1907.\(^2\) He certainly had a point; the attitudes of the settlers and leadership of Kenya was one which was rooted in the public schools and political elite of Britain. Kenya was settled almost purely on the premise of making rich people richer- land could be acquired for cheaper in Kenya than virtually anywhere else in the British Empire, while peasant labour was supported by a colonial administration which arranged taxes which would drive African men into the labour market.\(^3\) David Anderson


called Kenya a 'sunny land for shady people', which, considering the immediate aims and impact of colonisation, is certainly accurate.

After World War One, the white population in Kenya grew quite rapidly, from around 6,000 in 1917 to around 20,000 in 1936, which further made managing settlement incredibly difficult for the government and civil servants in charge.\(^4\) This rapid growth in population meant that there was real pressure on the colonial administration for an increased political concessions for settlers in the face of growing native discontent over their land ownership.

There were elements of the 'paternalistic colonialism' which is so evident throughout the British Empire. Settlers would feel, that by bringing their superior civilization, religion and commerce with them they were actually helping native populations. This also meant that when it was rejected, settlers found it difficult to accept, something which is important to understand even as late as 1952 and the start of the Mau Mau troubles. However, it becomes increasingly clear that British attitudes to the Kenyan native population became more than simply a paternal indifference or ignorance after 1929 and the great depression. Feeling the need to strengthen their financial position after global economic struggles, bills such as the Marketing of Native Crops Ordinance of 1935 were passed, which limited the licensing of small traders- something which really combated native Kenyans establishing their own businesses as well as boosting the state's fiscal basis as the major buyer and seller of staple foods.\(^5\) More aggressive measures began to be taken which essentially made it harder and harder for Kenyan natives to own and effectively farm land themselves. Kenyans who worked the white settlers lands, known as 'squatters', became increasingly common, with numbers increasing from around 100,000 after World War one to over 250,000 on the highlands alone in 1947.\(^6\) By the 1940s, one in every eight Kikuyu was officially a tenant, or 'squatter', working the land on state owned farms. Anderson acknowledges, however, that the true number may have been far higher - records kept were often underestimates. The Kikuyu squatters who worked on the British lands more often than not had high levels of illiteracy and low levels of Christianity, something for which they were looked down upon by the white settlers. However, there was a clash of attitudes which really did have an

\(^4\) Colonial Policy Committee, Kenya', Public Records Office, 822/1337
\(^5\) Kenyan National Archives, DC/NYI 4/1 'memorandum on Native agricultural development in the Native reserves', 7 July 1937, p8, 36, 40, 45 and 51.
\(^6\) Public Records Office, Colonial Office Records, 822/440
important bearing on the relationship between the British and the Kikuyu. The British saw them simply as hired hands, or workers, but for the Kikuyu it was much more- their long term tenancy on unoccupied areas of land actually allowed them to lay claim to it.\(^7\) Clearly, this is crucial in terms of the Mau Mau rebellions, which have roots in arguments of land ownership.

In Kenya as well as other areas of Africa such as Rhodesia and South Africa, growing congregations of unwanted native labour force on British settler land became known as 'black spots'. They would be populated by people who were looking for a 'squatter' working contract, or sometimes by those who were looking to escape the harsh terms that were often offered. While South Africa and Rhodesia it ushered in racial segregation policies from government, in Kenya it is quite conspicuous by the absence of one. This is not to say that there was not an inherent racism in Kenya at this time: a definitive racial hierarchy was clear from the offset- white settlers were the most important, followed by Asians, and at the bottom of the pile the black native Kenyans who worked the land. However while there was this racial hierarchy present in Kenya, it is also clear that racism was just not as prevalent as in other African nations, such as Rhodesia whereby racism was institutional and brutally practiced.\(^8\)

One of the best settler accounts regarding this period of change for both the native and settler populations is 'Out of Africa', written by Isak Dinesen, a pen name, used by the Danish author Baroness Karen von Blixen-Finecke. This book, published in 1937, clearly shows how life was from a settler perspective in the Kenyan highlands during the 1930s, specifically dealing with the struggles after the Great Depression. While it serves only as one individuals view on settling Kenya, as a firsthand account it does show how attitudes towards Kikuyu were mixed - Karen Blixen certainly develops friendships with them and would have been regarded as a far more liberal settler than most.\(^9\)

\(^7\) Information in part of 'Operation Anvil-round up of suspects' Public Records Office, DO35/5352

There was great opposition to the 'black spots', on the basis that they were taking up valuable farmland. The government, looking to move the native populations to lowlands or areas less valuable for farming, introduced a law in 1935 which meant that African squatters could only afford a small number of livestock on their land.\(^{10}\) With ownership of livestock a sign of wealth and status, many Kenyans opted to move to the lowlands so they could keep their goats or cattle. This in fact triggered an exodus of labour, leaving settlers to fight over what quickly became scarce workers. This is a really important point in terms of British attitudes as the inability of the white settlers to maintain wartime production and profit levels led to them blaming it on the native black population as opposed to their mismanagement and greed.

Kikuyu were however, becoming more and more politically aware. Archdeacon Owen's "Piny Owacho" (Voice of the People) movement and the "Young Kikuyu Association" which actually advocated civil disobedience as early as 1921.\(^{11}\) A lack of native political representation made it increasingly frustrating for ambitious Kenyans to have their voice heard. The governing bodies of Kenya were almost exclusively white, particularly the higher echelons of the representative chambers. Their attitude to Kenyans pushing for representation was never more than dismissive to Kenyan political ambition, never more so than with the Kenya African Union and the Kikuyu Central Association, serious and organised political groups that formed in 1925 and 1942 respectively.

With the settlers in a position of financial and political dominance, they were keen to see all arable land put to good use- their political leader, Cavendish Bentinck, delivered a report from the Agricultural Production and Settlement Board to the Colonial Government that recommended the 'closer settlement' of the highland area.\(^{12}\) This further antagonised the Kikuyu in the highlands, but the British attitude of expecting compliance from their subjects meant that they glossed over complaints registered by the Kikuyu Central Association and

\(^{10}\) The Hut and Poll Tax was introduced in 1932 and was revised in 1935 to include heavy taxes on the ownership of livestock

\(^{11}\) Report of the East Africa Commission, Public Records Office, CAB 24/173

the Kenya African Union. By now both these political bodies were widely followed by Kikuyu, but still overlooked by the colonial government as 'playing at politics'.

Despite a climate of changing approaches to Kenyans, and specifically squatters, the Second World War had a significant bearing on British attitudes, as well as the desire for Kenyan independence from British Colonial Rule. Firstly, evidence shows that the British that remained in Kenya did very well during and after the war. Early on in the war, Kenya was required to produce far greater levels of foods, particularly after the Japanese invasion of the Philippines. This meant that more money for the settler population, who invested in more land and more farming to reap the benefits. Meanwhile, the Kenya administration fell from over 350 people to just 112, meaning that settlers but particularly civil servants enjoyed more power, more responsibility, owned more land and had more opportunities from profits. We can tell that more land was owned from the statesman’s yearbooks, which were essentially records which logged data on the Colonial Administrations which ran Kenya, and are a really useful resource for data on the service. However, this land was largely in the fertile highlands of Kenya, with a large native Kenyan population. While this mean available labour for settlers, it also meant that they had to be removed from land suitable for farming.

However World War Two bought the advent of more mechanised farming, meaning that great deals of labour were actually unwanted or unnecessary for the settlers and the state. The East African Standard, the first Kenyan white settler newspaper, characterised the squatters as trouble;

13 Security Service files, Public Records Office, KV 2/2541
"[they are] an insidious drug, easily acquired but sorely difficult to do away with... thoroughly uneconomic and not in keeping with modern needs of farming".  

Political and constitutional advantages essentially meant that the control exercised by white settlers after the war grew, along with the white proportion of land ownership. This increase in land ownership meant that native populations were further marginalised, forced to farm bad land for themselves while their colonial masters used the best land to extract the best profits. By 1948 there were 40,000 settlers of European decent, although there was a shift in their distribution within Kenya. The influx over the war years had not actually become farmers, but instead lived in the towns and cities; only 35% were involved in farming while the rest largely took up professions in the towns and cities. In many ways this meant that the leadership paid less attention to the discontent in the country, instead focusing on the cities while settlers and district officials ran the farming regions.

There were signs as early as 1944 that even the British felt they were being too greedy in the amount of land that they owned Cavendish- Bentick, described by Kirk-Green as one of the one of the most intelligent and influential of settler politicians in Kenya, was effectively gagged when he raised this issue. The demands of the white population essentially were prioritised above those of Black African natives, meaning that there were rumblings of discontent during and shortly after World War II. However, this discontent was effectively dispersed by conciliatory rhetoric from colonial administration, which was seemingly trusted by a subservient black population.

Even as late as 1947, an attempts to speak up for a more multi-racial approach to leadership were shot down by the legislative council- this is despite a growing militant rhetoric from the Kenya African Union and the Kikuyu Central Association. By 1948, at least, it is clear that the British knew of this militant threat (although it was not yet known as the Mau Mau), so it is clear to see that there was quite a severe display of complacency in regards to the very real political threat. This is made all the more strange given how closely the security

16 *East African Standard*, 13 Feb 1932, p13
17 Cabinet Minutes, 30th October 1951, Public Records Office, CAB 195/10
18 Mitchell to Creasy, 30 December 1944, in Public Records Office CO533/536/38598
19 KAU and the Mau Mau, Public Records Office, KV 2/2542
service was following many perceived 'threats', including Jomo Kenyatta, not just in the lead up to the Mau Mau troubles but well before this. Public Record Office files and Hansard records both indicate how both the British Government in Whitehall and the Kenyan Administration were closely watching Kenyatta and his associate with specific interest, given his leadership of the Kenyan African Union from 1947 onwards.

In the summer of 1952 Governor Sir Phillip Mitchell left office, and was replaced by Acting Governor Henry Potter. Potter immediately recognised the rapid a violent escalation of the Mau Mau attacks, largely confined to but certainly not exclusive to white settlers. However politicians in London still had a strange attitude of ignorance towards the gathering storm. Evelyn Barring, who took over from Potter on 30th September 1952 arrived with little knowledge of the troubles which were at breaking point. It was only on the 3rd December, when a white woman was stabbed to death on the streets of Nairobi that there was a political understanding of the gravity of the situation. Following the assassination of Chief Waruhiu, a close native supporter of the British and an important tribal leader on the 9th of October, a state of emergency was declared. However this state of emergency was expected to be over with quickly, with neither politicians in Britian or Kenya thinking that the rebellions were a long term thing. It is clear that the existing attitudes believing in a subservient Kikuyu population meant that they expected the rebellions to be localised and unimportant. As much is stated in government dispatches of the time; on the 13th of October Barring said:

’Kenyatta and his henchmen should be removed swiftly..... this will stop the threat of this trouble spreading and other tribe getting involved in this localised problem.’

However, Barring’s report to the cabinet also belies a great fear of reprisals against the Europeans, and a lack of understanding of the membership of the Mau Mau. He writes:

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20 Public Records Office, KV 2/2535


22 Public Records Office, CAB/129/55, Barring report to the Cabinet, p111
'while the majority of the Mau Mau members are those who have been forced to join.... reprisals against Europeans will happen if we do not act now.'

An effort to better understand the Mau Mau was being made, however. Records show how reports in to the activities of the Mau Mau were being commissioned, seriously investigating the location, strength and ambitions of the movement. They essentially confirm that the government was struggling to identify just who the Mau Mau were; there is no doubt that they were sure it was confined to the Kikuyu tribe, but were fearful that it could spread. Accusation levelled at the Mau Mau at the start of the war centred around their tribal savagery, and the British eventually decided that they were a Communist insurgent threat. This view, based upon the left wing views and communist affiliations held by some members of the Kenyan African Union is an excellent example of how the British really did not know how to react to a threat they were struggling to identify and define. This climate of uncertainly as to just who the enemy was is central to the fear that was experienced by the government and the settler population in Kenya, but also a sense of frustration from the military and policing forces, as well as the Colonial Office in London. The Mau Mau were portrayed in popular media- such as newspapers and even film 'Mau Mau' as bloodthirsty savages who were nothing more than mindless terrorists. While the extreme views shown in popular media may have been exaggerated to an extent, it is clear that the shock at the brazen attacks by the Mau Mau meant that both settlers and government being happy to fight fire with fire. The attitude towards the Kikuyu was one of anger; there was a very clear view that the investment and civilisation that Europeans had bought to Kenya was a benefit to the tribe and this was subsequently being thrown back. Contemporary descriptions described the Mau Mau's aims as 'perverted tribalism', looking to take Kenya back to the dark days before colonial rule. It is perhaps most telling that when the British were attempting to explain the causes of the Mau Mau, the tribunal took only very limited

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23 Public Records Office, CAB/129/55, Barring report to the Cabinet
24 Public Records Office, CO 822/ 436 and CO 822/ 444 both debate the strength and activities of the Mau Mau
25 Africa: the next ten years, Public Records Office CAB 129/98 hold a report on the suspected communist affiliation of the Mau Mau, but many reports and dispatches mention it., for example CO 822/438, 822 439 and the police commissioner’s report 822/447
27 Security in the Colonies, Public Records Office, CAB 129/76
statements from politicians and none from agricultural experts who had first hand seen the effects of forcing the Kikuyu off their land. Instead they relied upon a psychologist to understand the 'African mind', J.C.Carothers, who eventually came to describe the Mau Mau as 'an irrational force of evil, dominated by bestial impulses and influenced by world communism' to the Corfield Report 28 A lot can be understood from this; the British government really did feel that the problem was the creation of Africans as opposed to their mismanagement and antagonising of the native population over 40 years.

British attitudes towards native Kenyans and specifically to the Kikuyu did not start in 1952, and were only fundamentally changed when the scope of the rebellions were fully realised. Even then, the changes in attitude were only driven by fear at the brutal reprisals taken by the Mau Mau. The upper class settlement of Kenya, were responsible for the racially tiered system of organisation that Kenya operated on, and were also at fault for expecting the subservience of the Kikuyu. Years of conciliatory rhetoric but little positive action from the colonial government shows that complacency was not confined just to the settlers who populated Kenya, it was also the administrations which also felt that the Kikuyu would have no ambitions of their selves. There was ignorance of the native cultures, which ultimately is represented in the lack of understanding of Kikuyu longing for land ownership. The lack of attention paid to settlers who lived amongst the Kikuyu was a great mistake, as was the 'paternalistic colonialism' approach to understanding the Kenyan subjects. Likewise the systematic stonewalling of those with liberal views towards a multiracial leadership or governmental style was a grave mistake and one which rankled with increasingly ambitious, able and supported Kenyan political parties.

The attitudes of the British government and of the settlers underpin the events which unfolded before and during the Mau Mau rebellions. To properly understand the British actions throughout the Mau Mau conflict, it is vital to also comprehend how settlers and government treated and thought about native Kenyans, and particularly the Kikuyu. The wealth of information is far from complete—particularly as the Colonial Administration had a habit of destroying information over 6 years old while it was in power. However, correspondence between the colonial office and government, as well as reports, personal correspondence, dispatches and settler accounts all provide valuable information to help complete the picture of life in Kenya leading up to the emergency and eventual independence. The picture that has emerged is one of the British settlers and administration as a selfish and paternalistic unit which was insensitive to the worries of native populations; and it is very difficult with hindsight to be anything but quite damning of the bad relationships which they allowed to develop. However, when looking at in comparison to other colonial administrations during the time period of 1910-1950, it must be recognised that it seemed less brutal, and it is certainly a paradox that close personal relationships were enjoyed with the Kikuyu by both district officers and some settlers. Ultimately, the Mau Mau conflict was one which would unearth grievances on both sides, leading to a bloody war and a legacy which still gives rise to strong attitudes on both sides.
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