

## MAU MAU: WAS IT A NATIONALIST OR TRIBAL MOVEMENT?

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During the last quarter of the century, there has been a tremendous increase in the study of African politics by western and eastern scholars. The 1960s saw an equally growing body of African scholars who devoted their energies to political developments in Africa. This interest was not unconnected with the use of African nationalism and the subsequent independence of many African countries from the late 1950s to the mid 1960s. Such interest in Africa was motivated by academic as well as non academic reasons. For the academics, Africa and its people became testing grounds of the many theories and concepts which had developed as a result of the expansion of the Social Sciences in general and of political Science in particular. There was a need to test whether African nationalist movements as well as African leaders conformed to the prevailing "development" theories and concepts which had been developed in North America and Europe. Both the eastern and the western scholars took pains to identify characteristics in the nationalist movements which conformed to the prevailing assumptions of this ideology.

This article sets out to examine the falsity or validity of the western concept of African nationalism. The political historiography of Africa reveals two widely spread but unfortunately false assumptions. The first assumption is that the African nationalist movements were mass movements. The second assumption which actually rises from the first was that such movements which qualified for the title of "nationalist" covered the whole territory, that is the future nation. Consequently the assumption that party politics was a mass movement has led to the popularization of the concept of a mass party as the instrument which won back African independence.

Yet only a cursory analysis of the membership and voting returns of many political parties in Africa with the possible exception of TANU in Tanzania and PAIG in GUINEA, shows that there were hardly any mass parties in Africa in the late 1950s and early 1960s, i.e. on the eve of the independence of many African countries. Later on the parties acquired the mantle of "massness" partly due to improved organization but also due to fear of reprisals and victimization, political surveillance and preventive detention. But recent studies of Nkrumah's CPP, have amply demonstrated how exaggerated was the party's mass appeal and we need therefore to treat cautiously even the massness of later years of other parties.

A further examination of the current political historiography reveals

that because of the assumption that a nationalist movement embraces the whole population as well as the whole territory, scholars both African and non-African tend to deny early political movements, the status of political parties or even the claim to the status of being nationalist in outlook. How did this ideological approach to the study of African politics arise? It seems that this approach and attitude were the products of two unrelated factors. The first was the *unhistorical* and *unexamined* belief that a nationalist movement must be territory wide. It followed therefore that any movement which did not conform to this assumption could not be described as nationalist.

The same argument was applied to political movement especially those of the 1920s and 1930s. Another explanation for the growth of this kind of attitude towards African politics which owes its popularization to political scientists, was the generally non-empirical nature of political science as an academic discipline. This is why there are volumes of literature on Africa which assume that nationalist movements are nationwide both in terms of territory and membership or composition. This as we know is false not only in Africa but also in the context of European history. Any student of 19th century European history knows that the two dominant nationalist movements, that is the German and the Italian were neither nationwide nor were they joined by the masses.

In view of these facts why is it that the European or the American scholar has applied a different set of criteria and concepts to the study of Africa? In answer to this question, one suspects that racism and paternalism have been motivating influences. The reason why I say this is that whereas the white scholar is prepared to accept Prussian or Croatian or Turkish Cypriot political movements as nationalist, even though they were neither territorial wide nor mass movements, there is reluctance to accord similar status to African movements. To him these are tribes and not nations and the people are tribesmen. What then determines whether people are a nation or tribe? Is it their numbers or their culture or their dependent status? If it is a question of numbers, then the Scots, the Norwegians, the Luxemburghs, etc., no more qualify as nations than the Yoruba, the Ibo, the Bakongo: If it is culture, who determines the standard of a people's culture?

When we turn to the African scholar, we find that he has a problem arising out of the colonial impact. Because he was originally described as a tribesman, the African today goes to great lengths to demonstrate how untribal or detribalized he is. By that he implies he is a nationalist because he has risen from the low level of a tribe. This whole outlook colours his view of African politics and makes the same untenable assumption that for a political movement to be "nationalist" it must cover the whole territory and be embraced by all the people.

This leads me to the question posed in the title of this article. Was Mau Mau a tribal or nationalist movement? For those who subscribe to

the view, a false one, that a nationalist movement must be a mass movement, embracing the whole territory, Mau Mau was a tribal movement. They point to its base and its leadership and the territorial extent of Kenya it covered.

It should be clear to the reader that I regard such an interpretation as false. A movement should be judged by its ideology and not by who is in it. After all political consciousness and the ability to articulate issues do not and cannot reach the same level of maturity at the same time and everywhere in a single territory. This can be demonstrated by the question of land in colonial Kenya. Whereas the Maasai and the Kalenjin lost more land to the white man than the Kikuyu, the Kikuyu behaved as if they had lost most land. The reason was simply that the Kikuyu became more politically conscious of the injustices of colonial rule than some of their neighbours at a much earlier date. When they therefore protested against the alienation of African lands to the settlers, they were voicing a grievance which was generally of concern even to the less articulate peoples of Kenya. That is; though Kikuyu, they were voicing national issues.

Because of the belief that a nationalist movement must be a mass movement, the historians of Tanzania are at pains to portray the Tanganyika African Association, a Civil Servant Organisation as a mass organisation. Yet by its very nature, the TAA was concerned with elitist issues, which affected a small section of the population. That is the civil servants. To say this is not to deny it the status of a nationalist movement. Nationalism does not always pursue the same issues or issues which are universally supported by the population. Movements sometimes have limited objectives and many political parties during the struggle for independence were one issue, organisations. Their political platforms widened only after they had settled in the seats of power. Similarly many nationalists did not always speak with one voice, as the examples of Angola and Zimbabwe demonstrate today. Yet we cannot say that X is more nationalist than Y. Such a categorization will only reflect our ideological biases.

All this points to one obvious conclusion, that is, that nationalism means and it has always meant what the writers have chosen it to mean. Yet for an African scholar to ignore earlier political movement which came before the formation of the post-war parties is to narrow one's base of study unnecessarily. Similarly to deny leaders of such movements the status of nationalist is to perpetuate an unfounded myth that nationalist movements in history have always been territorial wide. Whether such organizations embraced the whole population or not, what we have to look for are the sentiments or ideals they expressed. The dominant political sentiments or the Mau Mau movement, were questions which concerned all Kenyans. That was the question of independence. To deny Mau Mau the status of a nationalist movement would be to imply that a nationalist movement must

be territory wide and be supported by all the people at the same time. But to argue this would be to commit a historical falsehood.

Another controversial aspect of Mau Mau, is its contribution to the winning of independence. There are two extreme views in the growing historiography of Kenya. One is that Mau Mau alone and its followers were responsible for the achievement of independence. The other view is that Mau Mau's contribution was marginal. It was rather the rise of the new political elite after the banning of KAU which brought about Kenya's independence. My view is that the success of the independence movement in any country comes as a result of the convergence of various forces. This was also true in Kenya. The post KAU nationalist leaders of the 1950s and early 1960s were no doubt a very important force.

Equally important was the presence in the Colonial Office from the late 1950s of a Colonial Secretary who recognized the wind of change "blowing across Africa" and believed in the inevitability of African independence. When the history of the decolonization of Zambia and Kenya is written, the name of Ian Macleod should never be forgotten. His brief tenure of the Colonial Office saw the dismantling of the Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland and also the acceptance, perhaps for the first time in its history, of the fact that Kenya would no longer be a white man's country.

The third force was the Mau Mau movement. Mau Mau was crucial because it broke the back-bone of the settlers by dividing their ranks. This division between the Blundells, Bruce Mackenzies, etc., on the one hand and the Group Capt. Briggs, etc., on the other, was one of the most decisive moments in the history of Colonial Kenya. Mau Mau contributed in no small measure to this political process. Furthermore, Mau Mau focussed world attention on Kenya for more than any number of political party manifestoes would have done. We do not want to exaggerate the role of international opinion in the decolonization of Africa. But by internationalizing the question of Kenya's independence, the British lost the war though they won the battle in the forests. For this reason, history cannot ignore the contribution of those numerous semi-illiterate men in the forests to the winning of Kenya's independence.