

“Collaborators” or “Resistors,” “Loyalists” versus “Rebels”: Problematizing Colonial Binary Nomenclatures through the Prism of Dedan Kimathi’s Career¹

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Abstract: This paper evaluates the “evolution” of African anti-imperial resistance in African history in general and that of Kenya in particular, in the attempt to reveal hidden or private/public transcripts and inherent power dynamics that fueled political dissent, opposition, and action. James C. Scott informs us that people, generally, and especially where relations of power are concerned, do not usually wear their opinions, emotions, motives or deepest thoughts that shape their behavior on their sleeve. Therefore, throughout history, the vast majority of people, the “dissembled weak,” or “those subject to elaborate and systematic forms of social subordination,” are given to putting up “public performances,” a perfunctory adherence to imposed laws, policies, and the status quo as is required of them. The outcome of this general rule of thumb is a “public transcript” that, “by its accommodationist tone,” provides “convincing evidence for the hegemony of dominant values, for the hegemony of dominant discourse.” Such public transcripts are misleading since they lead observers to “conclude that subordinate groups endorse the terms of their subordination and are willing, even enthusiastic, partners in that subordination.” The implications of Scott’s insightful paradigmatic conceptualization of the internal dynamics of the “arts of resistance” are far-reaching. This radical conceptualization of the concealed roots of external human behavior, and “public performances,” naturally complicates earlier analysis of social categories of African responses to European imperialism thought to be straightforward and concrete or mutually exclusive. It presents a possibility for an analysis and reinterpretation of the deep psychosociological springs and triggers of human behavior, which necessitates a crucial return to this important theme in African history. That is, a more nuanced scrutiny and critical study of the popular mind or populist reason. This paper is such a critical reexamination of problematic social categories and Eurocentric binary nomenclatures.

Keywords: Dedan Kimathi, Kenya, Mau Mau, anti-colonialism, resistance, collaboration, loyalist, rebels, Foucault, James Scott, anti-imperialism, colonialism

¹ As crafted, this journal article complements, picks up from, and continues with, some of the arguments developed in the author’s chapter contribution, “The Unfolding of Britain and Kenya’s Complex Tango: An Uneasy Return to a Critical Past and its Implications.” In *Dedan Kimathi on Trial: Colonial Justice and Popular Memory in Kenya’s Mau Mau Rebellion* Julie MacArthur, ed. Athens: Ohio University Press, 2017. Specifically, see: endnote 8 on pages 287 and 310 of the article.

Introduction

“Hyena Road,” a 2015 film that highlights the role played by Canadian forces in Kandahar Province, was a “running commentary” that aptly captured “the shifting alliances and layers of insurgents, warlords, tribal loyalties and age-old clan feuds,” that make Afghanistan “all but impossible for outsiders to subdue.”² At one point in the movie, Pete Mitchell, a military intelligence officer, makes a hilarious statement that mocks “essentialized categories of rebel or collaborator, traitor or patriot, good or evil.”³ Trying to explain why, when he was secretly spied on, BDK, an ally of the coalition forces, was seen in the company of a team of Taliban, Mitchell quips, “A guy like BDK plays both sides of the fence... Wednesdays/Fridays he is with us; Tuesdays/Thursdays he’s with the Talis and on days off... running narcotics.”

Funny as it may seem, Pete Mitchell’s succinct statement captures the problem of being preoccupied with “neat divisions” or social categories limitations of which are well known, and “have long been recognized,” but, unfortunately, do “not stand up to close historical scrutiny.” Such categories suffer from the “inherent weakness” of simplifying much more complex political and moral debates especially in times of social upheaval.⁴ Within the context of Kenya between 1952 and 1960, during the State of Emergency declared by the British in order to deal with the Kikuyu civil war and anti-imperial rebellion (Mau Mau), Daniel Branch’s work brilliantly deconstructs the “rebel” versus “loyalist” categories. Branch points out the “in-betweens” of such categories and “the plurality in allegiance and modes of thought... demonstrated by constant fluctuations in allegiance...”⁵ However, deconstructing these fossilized categories fails to reveal the subtle inner workings of the art of resistance and its refinement, or increasing sophistication within any or different historical contexts. There is, therefore, a lot more to be said in this important area of African history.

This paper evaluates the “evolution” of African anti-imperial resistance in African history in general and that of Kenya in particular, in the attempt to reveal these inner workings, hidden or private/public transcripts and inherent power dynamics that fueled political dissent, opposition, and action. In Scott’s view, people generally, and especially where relations of power are concerned, do not usually wear their opinions, emotions, motives or deepest thoughts that shape their behavior on their sleeve. Therefore, throughout history, the vast majority of people, the “dissembled weak,” or “those subject to elaborate and systematic forms of social subordination,” are given to putting up “public performances,” a perfunctory adherence to imposed laws, policies, and the status quo as is required of them. The outcome of this general rule of thumb is a “public transcript” that, “by its accommodationist tone,” provides “convincing evidence for the hegemony of dominant values, for the hegemony of dominant discourse.” Such public transcripts are misleading since they lead

² Gold 2016.

³ Branch 2005.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid. See also Branch 2009.

observers to “conclude that subordinate groups endorse the terms of their subordination and are willing, even enthusiastic, partners in that subordination.”⁶ The implications of Scott’s insightful conceptualization of the internal dynamics of the “arts of resistance” are far-reaching. This radical conceptualization of the concealed roots of external human behavior, and “public performances,” complicates earlier analysis of social categories of African responses to European imperialism once thought to be straightforward. It is an interpretation of the deep psychosociological springs and triggers of human behavior that necessitate a revisit of this important theme in African history. That is, a more nuanced scrutiny and critical study of the popular mind or populist reason.

There is need to explore and uncover this theme through various transdisciplinary perspectives thus creating and developing a crowd or social psychology of this particular history. This essay takes issue with narrow and superficial interpretations and rigid categories of African responses to European imperialism. In many ways, it exhorts scholars to revisit this historiography with a mind to reconsider earlier interpretations, and specifically to distinguish, compare and contrast, between the prominent role of individual actors who shaped, embodied, and championed the public opinion of their African societies and the latter’s own contribution. Moreover, in addition to Scott’s incisive observation, it is important to evaluate people’s range of available choices, whether rational or not; and their inhibitions and inclinations with regard to how to react to European imperial incursion, on the basis of individual and group agents’ level of reflexivity; as well as their varying levels of practical and discursive consciousness and subsequent well-framed knowledge or the lack thereof.⁷ This approach contradicts the relatively strong argument proposed by Vandervort wherein Robert I. Rotberg and Ali Mazrui “stretched the definition of resistance” by suggesting that resistance was not primarily martial but also political, and that the resistance of the mind was as important as that of the body. This, however, does not discount Vandervort’s concern regarding the risk of exclusive “compartmentalization” with which John Hargreaves took issue. Nonetheless, it is an approach that grants warranted pause to the “resistance of the mind” approach that Rotberg and Mazrui have suggested.⁸

This paper is formulated around two broad but quite specific dichotomies of resistance that are widely accepted and used in African historical scholarship namely, “primary” and “secondary” resistance. This, in the past, has fundamentally meant and required the periodization of African responses and agency vis-à-vis the initial conquest and expansion of Europeans on the continent in the case of the former (from the mid-1880s to about the end of the second decade of the 20th century); and, in case of the latter, African resistance against the established colonial socioeconomic and political order informed by growing political awareness and social consciousness spurred by the ensuing dispossession, exploitation, and oppression as well as increasing African literacy (from the 1920s to independence). In revisiting this prominent theme that is central to the study of

⁶ Scott 2008.

⁷ For more about the individual social basis of action or behavior, see Giddens 1984, Giddens 1991, and Martin et al. 1988.

⁸ Rotberg and Mazrui 1970. Also see Vandervort 1998.

African history, my main aim is to problematize emergent social categories of Africans as strictly either “collaborators” or “resistors” of the imposition of colonial rule or as “loyalists” or “rebel” freedom fighters or radical politicians during the late colonial period.⁹ There is need to go back to early interpretations of African responses to European expansion and imperialism, and indeed, go “behind the official story.”¹⁰ By so doing, I also map out the increasing complexity and evolution of African agency in time. In this regard, I attempt to soften the rather peculiarly certain and clear delineation suggested in African scholarship that is inclined toward periodization of African responses and agency. But, more importantly, the sole focus of this paper is to rethink, in its entirety, African political awareness and participation and social consciousness throughout the 20th century to its present form as political dissent. This is done in two broad sections below that also happen to correspond with the dominant periodization of traditional African scholarship—but only as a matter of convenience and not, therefore, one of necessity.

The first part of the paper consists of a rethink of the initial African response and agency at the dawn of European imperialism. In this first section, I take issue with the rigidity of the “resistance” and “collaboration” social categories. These rather ambiguous categories are associated with scholars’ evaluation of how various African societies initially interacted with various groups of Europeans, and specifically emphasize Africans’ early relations with colonial administrators.¹¹ However, these loose social categories are not necessarily mutually exclusive. After all, “collaboration,” in certain situations, as some scholars have pointed out, was a matter of political expedience and, therefore, a subtle form of resistance. One also does not find any definitive or particular patterns of African societies that resisted or collaborated in terms of political and social structures. There are centralized African societies that collaborated, and there are stateless societies that resisted. Furthermore, neither resistance nor collaboration was “far-sighted or forward-looking” than the other.¹² Moreover, even for societies that resisted, there were periods of peace that were a result of diplomatic treaties—in essence, ergo, instances of what can be viewed as “collaboration.” Conversely, people who could be categorized as “collaborators” eventually turned out to have been some of the most vicious “resistors” in the long-term. As such, care must be taken to avoid rigid and exclusive categorization that tends to distort the quite complex behavior by African leaders,

⁹ Here it is important to point out that even the very use of broad terms such as “society,” “categories,” or “African people” for the period of marking the dawn and gradual establishment of colonialism can be misleading. As Mbwiliza n.d.: 200 argued, such usage “obscures the reality in the discussion of African response to colonialism.” After all, noted Mbwiliza, “it was not whole societies which reacted against colonial conquest ... one way or another.” Rather, “it was groups of people who felt that their interest, either individually or as a group, was threatened at particular points in colonial history.”

¹⁰ Scott 2008: 1.

¹¹ The earliest known study making a distinction between resistance and collaboration was Shepperson and Price 1958. See also van Walraven et al. 2003: 1-40. As Walraven et al. (2003) aptly note, this categorization was unnecessarily influenced and colored by the prevalent European notions emergent during the Second World War.

¹² Hargreaves 1969: 206.

individuals, and groups.¹³

The second section moves beyond the different practical types or forms of early African resistance of the immediate period after the establishment and consolidation of colonial rule. This section employs the Foucauldian analysis of the relations between power, resistance, and government into the much latter political activities and engagements with colonial regimes. In so doing, I argue, as a few scholars of power, authority, resistance, and government legitimacy have done, that African resistance of the latter period (the 1940s leading up to independence) can and should be seen as a form of government in its own right.¹⁴ It is my aim to demonstrate why this observation is plausible when applied to so-called secondary resistance than to the initial primary phase. This argument, in turn, does two things. First, instead of emphasizing and differentiating between the two phases of African resistance, it suggests the continuity, sophistication, and complexity of resistance as it evolves over time. Secondly, it posits that acute political and social awareness and consciousness, and therefore knowledge, are critical to unlocking our understanding of power, government (legitimacy and its contestation), and, by extension, resistance.

Besides the arguments above, this paper's ultimate contribution to historiography is two-fold. It attempts to soften the accentuated differences between so-called "loyalists" and "rebels" in the context of the tumultuous decade of the 1950s in Kenya. This is done in light of the political career of Kenya's militant freedom fighter Dedan Kimathi and his legacy. Secondly, and by the same token, the paper outlines a special, refined, and complex, but seldom discussed form of resistance that political and social theorists refer to as "protogovernmentalization." This refers to the process through which existing forms of government are addressed by the governed. According to social and political theorists, this process is rooted on what people know (knowledge). This then, I posit, is the major distinguishing factor between early or primary resistance and its later secondary form.¹⁵ While existing in an unbroken continuum, strictly in terms of fervor and sentiment, what African individuals and communities contextually knew about their impending relationship with Europe in Africa at the onset of colonialism was very different from what they would come to experience and know later following the initial and eventual everyday witness and experience of colonial reality characterized, as it was, by systematic economic exploitation and unrelenting oppression.

¹³ Hargreaves 1969, Ranger 1969, and Steinhart 1977.

¹⁴ Clegg 2000: 81, 83, 90. According to Foucauldian analysis of the relation between power, resistance, and government, power or legitimacy and resistance seem inescapably and dialectically linked.

¹⁵ To be sure, the idea of there being a "connexion" between earlier manifestations of anti-colonialism at the onset of colonial rule and later modern political and violent (secondary) resistance is not new or free of controversy. This is one of the crucial points made by Ranger (1968) on this subject. This doesn't, in any way, necessarily suggest an ineluctable teleology but, rather, increasing political consciousness and a sophisticated understanding and appreciation of the stakes of European colonialism in Africa as argued by Glassman 1995. Furthermore, it does not overplay the rather tenuous argument advanced by Ranger among "others that direct links could be established between resistance movements of the nineteenth century and the nationalist movements which took control of independent Africa in the 1960s," Vandervort 1998: xiii.

Part I: Rethinking African Response and Agency at the Dawn of Colonialism

As social categories, collaborators and resisters have existed for as long as there have been dominant nations and powers lording it over lesser political entities in the world. At the end of such episodes, dominated societies reflect on the experience and develop these rigid categories that tend not to permit anything between. A closer examination, though, proves that such dichotomies are not as straightforward as such collective soul-searching might want. It is even more complicated for historians examining why certain sections of society or individuals decide to side with a conquering or dominant power or oppose it, and rather unfortunate when this dichotomy is applied as is indiscriminately. As working concepts, however, resistance and collaboration have a place in historical analysis. However, as an approach of studying responses to foreign control, it ought not to lead to generalizations as tempting as they might be. Indeed, such historical questions deal with a delicate and intricate behavioral aspect of human nature that is difficult to pin down. They deal with a complex variety of issues as well as socio-economic and political transitions; various coping mechanisms to navigate change; social control and reactions to it that might be well thought out or spontaneous; and, subsequently, human agency. All these are elusive issues especially considering the whole gamut of possibilities regarding motivating factors behind the decisions taken. At the risk of oversimplification, and like flogging a dead horse, as it were, this paper deals with African response to the imposition of colonial rule. It deviates from past analyses that tend to straitjacket responses in this dichotomy to either the resort of arms or absence thereof. As a philosophical contribution to the longstanding historical question of collaboration and resistance in Africa at the end of the 19th and early 20th centuries, it makes no reference to specific examples—a few of these, however, have been used as illustrations where necessary.

This section interrogates the two concepts, specifically examining the colonial response options or choices available at the individual level as opposed to group response.¹⁶ It uses the fictional lead character in Chinua Achebe's classic novel *Things Fall Apart*, Okonkwo; and parallels with a real life historical character among the Abagusii people in colonial Kenya, Otenyo, to argue that resistance to or collaboration with colonial powers was never a moot question. Moreover, I argue that collaboration in certain circumstances was just as crucial, with regard to retention of sovereignty and independence, as the taking up of arms—resistance. Here, it is important to reiterate the argument that Steinhart makes: the two responses—resistance and collaboration—are “descriptive of a homogeneous pattern of responses” that “operated in a subtle, sometimes violent,

¹⁶ It is vital that a contradistinction not only be made between collaboration and resistance broadly speaking but also a difference be drawn (between the two categories) in terms of the level or extent of individual roles. The intensity of individual commitment or involvement in either, or lack thereof, are dependent, one must assume, on any number of overarching variables—fear, courage, individual interests, double-speak or the need for survival; temperament and personality; acuteness of perception, awareness; assessment of threats and opportunities; and reasoning and subsequent cognition. In other words, asking the question of what is at work at the level of individuals who collaborate or resist and whether, even though individuals may be categorized in one or the other, they share the same end goals.

and often devious manner to admit to the local political arena a host of new, external, and imperial political forces.” Steinhart further points out, and aptly so, that both responses did serve to preserve the sphere of independent political action for the Africans.¹⁷

Lastly, the paper also attempts to shed light on the spontaneous nature of armed resistance using Okonkwo and Otenyo as points of reference.

In *Things Fall Apart*, a classical monument to African responses to European imperialism and colonization, Achebe casts Okonkwo as a victim of change. In a sense, this is how scholars ought to view African responses to European incursion, conquest, and colonialism. Achebe’s main character grapples with a sweeping change that seems beyond his perception or comprehension. He is the proverbial deer in the middle of the road that’s blinded by the full headlights of change wrought by European incursion into Africa’s heartland. This was the case for most African leaders and societies at the dawn of colonialism, even in the extraordinarily rare and impressive exhibition of sophisticated high level diplomacy and burgeoning understanding (born out of palpable fear) excelled by the three Bechuana Kings—Khama, Sebele, and Bathoen.¹⁸ But in the fictional narrative, Okonkwo neither enjoys the opportunity to engage in high diplomatic politics nor is he able to navigate the unfolding colonial modernity. While resistant and anti-colonial to the core, he struggles with tapping into his own individual agency or, as an aspiring traditional leader, to implicate and organize others in his village to resist the new foreign administrators and missionaries. The mere fact that Okonkwo takes his own life at the end of Achebe’s novel demonstrates that he was no longer in control and that he was unable to stop the white strangers singlehandedly. At the same time, his suicide also means that he had given up the desire to rise to the highest station in Umuofia society that he had envisioned. The kind of change taking place was beyond his control—things were falling apart all around him. It is also quite clear that Okonkwo lacked a proper appreciation and understanding of the unprecedented phenomenon—European religious and political incursion. But the Tswana chiefs too could be said to have been equally blind to the impending sweeping social, economic, and political change. However, unlike them, Okonkwo never attempted to either understand or interrogate and systematically challenge the deep changes

¹⁷ Steinhart 1977.

¹⁸ These three African chiefs put up a remarkable diplomatic resistance that takes them to London where they, in spite of their shock of experiencing the European “other,” are able to navigate modernity and high diplomatic politics including machinations of a metropolitan government in expansionist competition with other European powers; a tussle between the former and a fanatically, if not violently, avaricious British privateer imperialist embodied by Cecil Rhodes; and lastly, the rivalry between humanitarians like the London Missionary Society and capital imperialists; and press-wars. The three are successful in preventing Bechuanaland from being swallowed by either the Cape colony or Rhodesia under the hands of Cecil Rhodes’ British South Africa Company even though they did not fully understand what was happening to them—as King Khama states: “We hear of annexation; we hear of things we do not understand. We are afraid changes of this kind may mean much. We want to understand them” Parsons 1998: 80. It is unfortunate that these three have come to be viewed as having “collaborated” with the British. As Steinhart 1977: vii, viii and 256-260, notes, “collaboration” in the African context should not be misconstrued to mean “moral corruption,” submission, defeat or resignation, but rather, an understanding reached between African leaders and the colonial powers.

that were taking place. Okonkwo and his real-life counterpart, Otenyo (discussed below) are, arguably, the embodiment of early African (primary) resistance.¹⁹ That is, their resistance rather rash and characterized by innocent naiveté as opposed to one anchored in any deep understanding or knowledge of the stakes and implications of colonialism. Neither understands what is coming at him, and their societies—and Africa by extension.²⁰ In the case of Okonkwo, Achebe intends the reader to perceive this by “exiling” him to Mbanta, his mother’s home for seven years. These years of absence wrought so much change in his village that he barely recognized Umuofia upon his return. As if that was not enough, he had lost his place in society there, further demonstrating his lack of (personal) control and agency. Indeed, as soon as he left his village, Achebe writes, someone else had risen and filled it. Like the old tip of a lizard’s tail that has absolutely no control over its growing replacement, Okonkwo had been ejected not only physically but in social standing as well. Although he could, and indeed, had wanted to rebuild his life afresh—by showing off his wealth in initiating his sons into the Ozo society, time worked against him. For instance, “the church had come and led many stray,” Achebe writes, and this had the effect of rendering this traditional honor irrelevant. Such markers of respect no longer had a place in Umuofia society—thanks to the white man’s religion. In fact, the anklet of title in Umuofia is derided by one of the African court officials who remarks, “Who is the chief among you? We see that every pauper wears the anklet of title in Umuofia. Does it cost as much as ten cowries?” In addition, the fact that elders of the clan were incarcerated, vilified, and humiliated by the new authorities, only emphasizes the extent to which, not just how Okonkwo had lost all control, but, also, the extent to which society was now rudderless. Okonkwo was behind time, and the effort to initiate his two sons into Ozo society, as he had planned, proved impossible. As Achebe points out, had “the initiation rite” been “performed” only a year before the end of his exile, then, perhaps, his anticipated reentry into Umuofia would have had the effect that he desired. Unfortunately for him, that was not feasible. His society and, indeed, his people’s culture were unraveling at the onslaught of a new religion and government. All that was left for him to do was to grieve deeply. This was a not just “personal grief” since he was mourning for the clan, which he saw breaking up and falling apart.

The accidental killing of Ezeudu’s son at his funeral at his hands is highly symbolic of this disassembling and loss of personal agency and control. Okonkwo’s gun had exploded, and the boy lay at the center of the crowd in a pool of blood—a piece of iron having pierced his heart. This incident is similar to the other almost tragi-comedic moment when his second wife, Ekwefi, mocks his rusty gun: she had murmured something about guns that never shot at which Okonkwo “ran madly ... for the loaded gun.” Running out again, he aimed at her and pressed the trigger—there was a loud report accompanied by the wail of his wives and children, but he had actually

¹⁹ Maxon 1989: 38.

²⁰ Ibid: 38, 40. For both Otenyo and Moraa—the instigator of the spearing of Geoffrey A. S. Northcote—the assistant district commissioner was the administration. They believed that “with his death the British presence would vanish,” which is what Okonkwo thought. Indeed, many people in Kitutu where the incident happened in January 1908 believed that “his elimination would end the alien occupation of Gusiiland.”

missed her. Achebe embellishes this event by saying that Okonkwo, the renowned wrestling hero of several villages that he was, had thrown down the gun and “jumped into the barn.” One can only envision a masculine hero coward, unable to muster a piece of foreign technology recoiling from what would have been a moment of stupidity and unmanaged anger with more than a tinge fear. Was this inbred anger a loss of control in and of itself? Does it discount and cloud his latent anti-colonial sentiment?

Worse still, to dwell a while longer on Okonkwo’s dismal qualifications as a potentially efficient armed resistor, his gun had not even killed a rat, Achebe derides. How then could the men of Umuofia expect to fight the white stranger—with machetes? Indeed, the author, with the benefit of hindsight, mocks early African resistance by underlining the fact that this lack of skill only consigned them to a certain tragic heroism. One then, while appreciating this early African demonstration of courage and defense of honor, must also question the wisdom of such action. When Okonkwo accidentally kills Ezeudu, he is ejected from society, which is one in a series of events that show the obvious loss of control. When all is taken into account, this victimhood of fate does not imply that he necessarily lacked agency: he, like everyone else who leaves him to deal with the consequences of rising to defend his people and culture, had a choice to wait, learn and fight another day.²¹ This agency is, however, misdirected and misused. But then, again, he was trapped by his people’s past—he was a victim of Umuofia’s longstanding tradition of fearlessness in the face of challenges. Otenyo of the Abagusii of Bogeka also exemplifies this kind of tragic-heroism at the level of individual acts of resistance, which is, to some degree, also reflected in some of the successful organized military resistance in Africa.²²

The Abagusii of Bogeka had resisted the establishment of control and refused to comply with the British colonial order spearheaded by officers like Geoffrey Northcote: they had refused to pay a fine levied for killing two Luo or return cattle allegedly stolen from their neighbors.²³

On 11 January 1908, Northcote set out to settle a case in which Otenyo had swindled money from Swahili and Somali traders. When he arrived in Otenyo’s homestead, everyone took off, and after waiting a good while for them, Northcote decided to take two of Otenyo’s cows. Meanwhile, Moraa, an Abagusii prophetess of great influence, incited the young men telling them that “they were just like women; did they not care that their cattle were being taken away?” On hearing this, “Otenyo, whose cattle had been taken... picked up his spear and went off along the route Northcote was following,” intercepted him, and managed to strike him with a spear on the back.²⁴ As Maxon noted, “the spearing of Northcote was not the result of a long-term and well-laid plan,” which served to limit armed resistance to Bogeka. The spontaneity of this action is similar

²¹ Ranger 1969 points out that even though Africans could not avoid the imposition of colonial rule, they were not simply objects or victims of processes set in motion outside Africa and sustained only by white initiative.

²² For example, Samori Toure who resisted the French between 1882 and 1898 would be deported and eventually die in exile whereas Koitalel arap Samoei was murdered by Colonel Meinertzhagen.

²³ Maxon 1989: 38.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

to Okonkwo's rash decision to kill the two agents who suddenly show up at a Umofia meeting. Like Okonkwo, Otenyo is unable to instigate any action from his listeners and decides to take individual initiative. But unlike in the novel, Otenyo's action does stir the Kitutu Abagusii in that it touches off a desire among "the fighting men of Bogeka" to "finish the job" started by Otenyo.²⁵ This spontaneous "uprising," however, did not lead to an attack on the colonial camp in Kisii Town by the Kitutu but, rather, isolated incidents in which people perceived to abet colonial rule were killed.

Granted, the question of resistance and collaboration in the African context is intriguing and complex.²⁶ It is one in which the historian actually lacks the so-called "benefit of hindsight" as it involves analysis of psychological motives post factum. It is difficult, as it is, to understand the contemporary process of rational decision making in policy studies let alone in the distant past. Part of the problem also lies in borrowing a dichotomy or terms from European history that are not readily applicable in understanding early responses to colonialism.²⁷ Here the key lies in drawing parallels between collaborating and resisting societies—that is, seeing both as different sides of the same coin. This is as opposed to the natural temptation to compare African societies that either collaborated or resisted. While such an approach may have had a place in early studies, there is need to adjust the paradigm or framework of analyzing African response to European imperialism (even further than when the social categories came into use).²⁸

On the basis of the foregoing reflection on this question—hardly inadequate given the structural limitation of this paper—the following suggestions and recommendations should guide any future interest in this area: focus should be on individual cases studies—that is, exhaustive micro-histories focusing on specific case studies or better still, individual antagonists, leaders or otherwise. Clearly, such an overarching typology of African response has outlived its usefulness and attention and should, perhaps, turn toward the nature of response in terms of whether it was spontaneous or organized, and/or what its objectives were. This can offer a more expansive and rich diversity of unique African responses even within these broad social categories. Studied on a case by case merit, the texture and disparities of African responses will be found to be, in the order give, deep and as numerous as were so-called "collaborators" and "resistors" in the continent. There is also need to further examine the consequences of African agency as opposed to making arguments to the effect that Africans were not victims of fate. Lastly, violent encounters between Africans and militarily superior European powers need to be closely scrutinized. Here, the

²⁵ Ibid: 39.

²⁶ But Comaroff 1985: 195, does point to how scholars should treat, specifically, the important subject of resistance. That is, resistance "is typically neither an all-or-nothing phenomenon nor an act in and of itself." Rather, "it is frequently part and parcel of practices of subjective and collective construction." Put differently, its innate elements and dynamics have to be understood through certain practical expressions of defiance at both the individual and collective level.

²⁷ See footnote 11.

²⁸ It is important to note here that as early as the late 1960s, as Walraven et. al 2003: 2, point out, "historians ... accepted that the construction of this history around the two antipoles 'resistance' – 'collaboration' grossly simplified its actual complexities."

aim would be to argue that these were, indeed, wars as opposed to rebellions or revolts. Another potential focus of research interest would be looking at “human rights” issues and war crimes committed under the provisions of international and humanitarian law (of war) at the time. This, then, are the parameters that should guide future debate on this problem in African history.

Part II: Power versus Resistance: Late African Resistance as a form of Government

Granted, there may be no end in sight regarding various intellectual controversies about Mau Mau and especially concerning whether it was a national anti-colonial movement or simply a Gikuyu civil war. Inadvertently, with regard to the former, *Mau Mau Crucible of War* heeded staid intellectual counsel and well-considered caution against narrow focus on Mau Mau as the sole criterion for revolutionary struggle, and Central Kenya as the sole site of nationalist thought.²⁹ In so doing, full and due cognizance was given to multifarious anti-colonial movements and personalities, especially hitherto, nameless and faceless unsung heroines and heroes actively involved in the multiple fights for freedom who do not happen to fit within the dominant single nationalist story or metanarrative that is, for the moment, the approved triumphalist version.³⁰

Moreover, this does not necessarily refer to infinitely important anti-colonial movements that prefigured the Mau Mau rebellion, such as Elijah Masinde’s “Dini ya Msambwa,” its “Kolloa Affray” corollary among the Pokot and Piny Owacho among others that sought to, or were acutely inclined to redefine and reconfigure the colonial state through violence, but also postcolonial critical publics that have continued the legacy of political dissidence and resistance, exhibiting the same mentalité of struggle that inspired such anticolonial movements. There is, therefore, an unbroken lineage of grievance in that the social and cultural mentalité of struggle in colonial Kenya that reached a high-water mark during the Mau Mau war, continues to resonate in contemporary Kenya in the ongoing demand for a decent standard of living and social justice for all. It is in this way that *Mau Mau Crucible of War* attempts to ameliorate “a second death” (of other colonial movements and freedom fighters) and begins to compound Kenyans’ collective memory, and their history, by extension. But with respect to whether or not Mau Mau was a Gikuyu civil war that pitted so-called “loyalists” against “rebels,” there is more that needs to be done to bust this belabored, a little hackneyed, and rather simplistic analytical binary.³¹

Busting the Eurocentric and Colonial Binary Nomenclature: A Conclusion

From the foregoing, the superficial differentiation of the Gikuyu at the height of the Emergency is more highly nuanced than is appreciated. The fact that the line between “rebels” and “loyalists”

²⁹ See MacArthur 2017.

³⁰ Lonsdale 2013: 239 and Githuku 2016: 10.

³¹ Branch 2009.

was, and is still blurred, and more often than not, reflected colonial impositions rather than discrete categories for immediate purposes of dealing with the 1950s violence in Central Kenya, cannot be overemphasized.³² This colonial binary nomenclature was as useful in separating wheat from chaff as the Mau Mau degree of adherence screening pipeline that relied on a white-grey-black classification system. As such, this *modus operandi* was more utilitarian and administrative than it was analytical, hence the need for it to be problematized. In the volatile political environment of the period, choosing sides was much more nuanced and characterized by a complex “mosaic of undecided loyalties,” rather than being simply pro- or anti-British colonial rule.³³ The benefit of setting aside this convenient “analytical” dichotomy is threefold and, of necessity, impinges on our (re)evaluation of, not just emerging details of the Kimathi trial, but also his historical significance, and as a focal point of nationalism and nation and state building in Kenya.

To begin with, abandoning this readily available analytical prism that lends itself so easily to an understanding of Gikuyu politics, allows us to appreciate what was at the core of the political crisis. That is, the fact that the conflict was an imperial crisis of legitimacy in which colonial structures of domination—that contributed to relations of domination, which disadvantaged African subjects—were in question.³⁴ It also helps us to unmask the real nature of politics in Kenya, as it was then, which is very much the same way it is today. Regardless of whatever “side” one found herself or himself on in the conflict, and even farther around the colony, she or he, in the deepest of thought, argued the same issues but went about securing them through different routes.³⁵ Thirdly, and following from the first two points, it allows us to apply Foucauldian analysis of resistance (to the Mau Mau movement) that appreciates it not merely as a vitalist principle, but as a rationality of power that was used by a section of ordinary everyday people subject to British imperial power when colonial authorities failed to align their projects with those of the governing.³⁶

³² See MacArthur 2017. Based on my preliminary observations formed over time through talking to people informally and formally while conducting research in Lari and Nyeri—regions that were a hotbed of Mau Mau activity—it is rather tenuous to whittle down the complexity of Gikuyu politics of the 1950s there, and in Central Kenya in general, to this basic analytical binary. People in Nyeri and Lari, and elsewhere, were aloft, walking a very tight rope between the two broad “sides.” It is, therefore, not surprising to find some that would be categorized as “loyalists” but who, today, are all praise of Kimathi as a hero and what they see as their own ability to beguile British colonialists, “on whose side they were” while being true African nationalists at the same time. This complexity of categorization coupled with the slippery road that is memory, remembrance, and how people choose to remember proves the elasticity and plasticity of using this colonial binary nomenclature of “rebels” and “loyalists” without question. My theoretical intervention is provisional and hypothetical pending historical examination of the porosity between these two categories. Further, points made are informed by informal discussions with a few people who might have been labeled “loyalists” but who, surprisingly, had also taken the first few Mau Mau oaths. I hereby propose that these cases were not isolated but rather quite widespread. It is not surprising that Lonsdale (2017), in his contribution to the *Dedan Kimathi on Trial* volume, observes that senior white colonial administrators warned junior officials to tread with care since loyalists could change sides. Also, under amnesty and surrender terms, Mau Mau adherents were known to switch sides. This theoretical intervention seeks to broadly explain the dynamics involved in this interesting phenomenon.

³³ See Lonsdale 2017: 269.

³⁴ Haugaard 2000: 68.

³⁵ Lonsdale 1992: 468.

³⁶ Clegg 2000: 90-91.

In this sense, I posit that Kimathi, as a historical subject of great contemporary interest, may yet still emerge as “a privileged identity” around which flagging nationalism could, once again, revolve. This, then, might force the hand of the powers that be to rally people behind him as a symbol around which to build the nation and state. So, the stone which the builders rejected could yet become the head stone of the postcolonial state. The remainder of this rumination is a rough estimation of the real Kimathi stripped of the inherent contradictions and ambiguities that beset his image. This is in a bid to come to a better appreciation of this somewhat tragic folk-hero and hitherto misunderstood rebel commander. In so doing, I seek to soften the multi-variate ascriptions that he embodied and, by explaining why he is a variable “floating signifier” open to multiple interpretations, render them quiescent.³⁷ But first is a brief look at the problematic loyalists-rebels binary and the subterranean politics of Kenya that operate as a rather weak undercurrent to the dominant high politics characterized as it is by the echo and auction chamber of tribalism.

Be it as it may, what gave rise to the terrors of Mau Mau was moral ethnicity which created, broadly speaking, two distinct and opposed communities within the Gikuyu body politic as a result of class closure and overbearing state power, especially as exercised by colonial chiefs in Central Kenya.³⁸ But, as stated above, it should not be assumed that these two sides were as obvious as day and night. First of all, as Daniel Branch points out, the divisions between loyalists on the one hand, and Mau Mau rebels on the other, were sharpened in the course of the war and, were, as such, not necessarily its catalyst. Decisions to join one side or another of the war owed less to ideological preference than the shock of events.³⁹ But, looking at the general populace, in Central Kenya and elsewhere, these deeply and actively embroiled groups of the conflict aside, sympathies and choosing sides was not a clear process, or even a widely open and available option between strictly two opposed sides. At any rate, there are those amid the population for whom British colonial authority was never in doubt even before the war. They believed in the legitimacy of the colonial institutional, legal and policy architecture, and the right of those elevated to authority within it to issue commands.⁴⁰ When the war broke, there was no choosing sides for such people; and the conflict situation does not, of necessity then, justify or earn them the situational label “loyalists.” They were “lawful” instead.

But lawfulness also needs qualification and further interrogation as it can just be perceived outwardly and hence only perfunctorily. Power relations, systematic subordination, and domination

³⁷ See MacArthur’s introduction, “The Trial of Dedan Kimathi,” and Simon Gikandi, “The Floating Signifier,” in *Dedan Kimathi on Trial*.

³⁸ Lonsdale 1992: 466.

³⁹ Branch 2009: xvi. As Lonsdale (2017) observes in “Mau Mau’s Debates on Trial,” increasing social differentiation as “big men” both black and white preferred property to clients in Central Kenya was humiliating for some; and the Emergency or Mau Mau war served to sharpen the emerging inter-ethnic divergence—something that British counter-measures took advantage of—thus splitting the Gikuyu even more. As such, the deep social divisions already in existence—owing to land congestion due to in-migration of Gikuyu squatters back into Central Kenya and the subsequent shattering of householder autonomy, complicated by divisive struggle for rural capitalism—did not form a line of battle but rather, a patchwork logic of violence unrolled.

⁴⁰ Haugaard 2000: 69.

are characterized by a very subtle kind of resistance. Attendant to power relations are public transcripts and convincing performances of deference, consent and humility as one of the key survival skills of subordinate groups. As such, in Kenya's colonial context, "loyalism" did not necessarily imply blind subordination or being pro-British rule as opposed to wanting self-rule and "wiathi" (self-mastery). Labeling such lawful accommodationists as "loyalist" concludes that such "subordinate" sections of Gikuyu wholly endorsed the terms of their subordination and were willing, even enthusiastic, partners in that subordination. But such people may have been compelled to deceive colonial authority or conform to it for their own safety and comfort. They thus produced a public transcript, and more or less credible performance of obedience, in close conformity with how their dominant British overseers would have things appear. Nonetheless, such public displays of "loyalty" might have very well coexisted with hidden transcripts of contempt, indignation, and the strong but discrete desire for revenge and longing for a day of triumph, when the colonial order would be turned upside down. Thus, in a sense, some servile imperial subjects, while knowing the truth about their painful experience of colonial power and rule, were unwilling, unable or lacked the courage to openly declare it in the face of power. Open protest, insubordination, indignant and fiery speeches, and violent actions of revenge were played out only in the realm of imagination by such lawful people.⁴¹ Nevertheless, it cannot be discounted that there were others yet who had not the slightest idea about, or awareness of, existing structures of domination and their concomitant relations of subservience and domination. Hardly did they stir or scarcely start to act as reflexive agents in power relations.⁴²

Although acutely aware of socioeconomic and political repression, lacking sufficient self-cognizance to exercise agency, and without a coherent framing account of themselves or their surroundings, they must have seen as particular misfortunes what others saw as systematic colonial oppression.⁴³ Not only did they suffer political apathy and crippling lethargy but also remained powerless because they were confused or were unaware of the social organization of power, of informal conduits as well as formal protocols, the style and substance of power, and its shared culture embedded in a distinct social organization. Furthermore, it is not that they did not have a precise understanding of the rules of the game so much as they did not recognize what game was in play, let alone know the rules. They might as well have been playing another game altogether.⁴⁴ Most likely, they obliviously played the game of everyday precarious survival the only way they knew how. Others yet, a vast many who formed an eager horde of spectators of the unfolding spectacle of the 1950s, and who threatened to leap over the barriers and invade the pitch, were coaxed by the colonial counter-Mau Mau strategy and complete blueprint for winning the war consisting of

⁴¹ Scott 2008: 1-9. Weighing in on this point, Lonsdale, in an email of 23 March 2016, resourcefully pointed out that "loyalists had no particular love for the Brits but they had a clear idea of how to work colonial rule to their self-mastered advantage."

⁴² Clegg 2000: 83.

⁴³ Ibid: 83, 86.

⁴⁴ Ibid: 87-88.

social welfare and development trade-offs. This blueprint to alleviate hardship and stem revolution included a coordinated policy of social development, the imperative of which was to relieve African poverty as part and parcel of the training process of citizenship. The strategy consisted of a raft of various services and measures such as juvenile and adult education, unemployment relief, housing programs, increased wages, social security, and most importantly, expanded opportunities to acquire land.⁴⁵ Lastly, there were other sections of society and communities that were—in addition to the intervention in the shape of these measures—simply neither here nor there because of “unintentional effects” of administrative outflanking or were simply cowed by imperial coercion.⁴⁶

With regard to the nature of politics, the central fact of colonial and postcolonial Kenyan politics was, and still is, the struggle for everyday bread and butter among ordinary people.⁴⁷ The subterranean undercurrent of Kenya’s dominant albeit superficial high politics remains the deep politics of moral ethnicity. Kenyans, as Lonsdale aptly noted, all want the same thing and argue the same issues regardless of their ethnic group.⁴⁸ What everyday Kenyans wish is to align their own projects with that of the governing. In a nutshell, Kenyans have a keen regard for personal autonomies which, under the law, give citizenship a chance of self-mastery.⁴⁹ Not necessarily the “good life” per se, but instead, they demand basic material security and substantive uplift, daily amenities and efficiencies availed by modernity, including tapped clean water, three square meals, decent housing, good education, health, roads and electricity, as well as civil liberties and civic responsibility. And in the absence of self-mastery measured by the production and delivery of such signifiers of progress, civic rights and civic responsibility, and communal rights, and civil liberty by the state, people might not, and will neither render to it loyalty and obedience, nor even recognize it as legitimate.⁵⁰ This then was the crux of the communitarian aspirations to popular statehood in the 1950s, as it still is the goal of critical publics in the postcolonial state.⁵¹

This is what also set Kimathi apart.

Although he might not, and could not have hypothesized on the issue with the sophistication and flourish of an expert intellectual, Kimathi understood only too well, and better than most of his fellow peasants and contemporaries, the manner in which colonial structures of domination and relations of domination enshrining colonial capitalism, altered and broke down the relationship between people and food, which was enshrined in systems of power, property, and law in African societies.⁵² Unlike the passive, unlettered and/or apathetic people, he saw socioeconomic

⁴⁵ Elkins 2005: 108.

⁴⁶ Haugaard 2000: 68.

⁴⁷ Githuku 2016: 283.

⁴⁸ Lonsdale 1992: 466, 468.

⁴⁹ *Ibid*: 468.

⁵⁰ Githuku 2016: 476, 482.

⁵¹ Clegg 2000: 81.

⁵² Githuku 2016: 133.

hardships and political oppression for what they were. Not chance misfortunes but, rather, as a result of systematic colonial oppression. Furthermore, unlike most Africans who had long suffered indignities, felt denigrated, exploited, and impoverished by the colonial system but had concealed their pain and secret fantasies of revenge masked by public transcripts of subordination, portrayal of deference and consent, Kimathi acted on shared grievances and experiences of hardship.⁵³ This, perhaps, explains why the posthumous veneration of Kimathi has never broached public debate or objection even from the ranks of so-called “loyalists.” What is more is that some “loyalists” might have actually secretly admired Kimathi as a hero for courageously playing out the kind of protest, insubordination, indignation, and violent actions of revenge that safely existed only in the realm of their imagination. Moreover, this is really what sets Kimathi apart. Not simply because he courageously took up arms to challenge the colonial order and, as a result, became a martyr; but rather, because he exhibited crucial resistance consciousness without which no (personal or individual and group) resistance is possible.⁵⁴ A historical, psychoanalytical and pathological analysis of Kimathi or, by extension, the fictional Achebe character of Okonkwo or Otenyo as resistant subjects, illustrates the danger of assuming operational security categories of government authorities in their attempt to deal with dissent. Moreover, as with the fictional film example of BDK in “Hyena Road,” there are a myriad of factors that motivate individual and group choices in the face of difficult choices. Readily available and neat divisions do not only fail to stand up to historical and contemporary scrutiny but also act as convenient and superficial and, therefore, flawed official, rationale in times of societal crisis. It is hoped that this paper, and its forerunner, “The Unfolding of Britain and Kenya’s Complex Tango” (2017) ignites more scrutiny into the nuts and bolts of choices made in times of social crisis.

⁵³ Scott 2008: 8-9.

⁵⁴ Clegg 2000: 85.

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