



The Agrarian Origins of Mau Mau: A Structural Account

Citation

Bates, Robert H. 1987. The agrarian origins of Mau Mau: a structural account. *Agricultural History* 61, no. 1: 1-28.

Published Version

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/3743915>

Permanent link

<http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:HUL.InstRepos:3710306>

Terms of Use

This article was downloaded from Harvard University's DASH repository, and is made available under the terms and conditions applicable to Other Posted Material, as set forth at <http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:HUL.InstRepos:dash.current.terms-of-use#LAA>

Share Your Story

The Harvard community has made this article openly available.
Please share how this access benefits you. [Submit a story](#).

[Accessibility](#)

The Agrarian Origins of Mau Mau: A Structural Account

ROBERT H. BATES

Unlike most African nations, Kenya came to independence as a result of armed conflict. The insurrection was known as the Mau Mau rebellion. If a date is to be placed on the beginning of Mau Mau, it should probably be 1944, when political leaders in the Central Province began to organize a clandestine movement. The organizational device was an oath which bound those who pledged it to the support of the movement. If a date is to be placed on the outbreak of violence, it should probably be October 7, 1952. On that day, members of the movement assassinated Senior Chief Waruhiu as he returned from an official visit to the central offices of the government in Nairobi. In response, the Governor of Kenya declared a state of emergency, banned the major African political organizations, and detained their leaders. Calling in British military from the Middle East, the government rapidly occupied the territories controlled by the Mau Mau rebellion and began to hunt their armed units down. The campaign lasted four years; the state of emergency several years longer. By 1956, over 12,000 Africans had been detained and over 4,000 killed or wounded.

ROBERT H. BATES is Professor of Political Science, Duke University. Research on this article was completed while he was a Fellow at the Institute for Development Studies of the University of Nairobi; the Institute of Development Studies of the University of Sussex; and the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences at Stanford, California. During the period in which this work was completed, his research was supported by the California Institute of Technology, the Institute of Development Studies, the Center for Advanced Study, the Social Science Research Council, the National Science Foundation [Grants No. SE 582-16870 and BNS 801 1495], the Exxon Corporation, the Haynes Foundation, Duke University, and the Guggenheim Foundation. None is responsible for the contents of this article. He wishes to acknowledge the generous criticisms of John Lonsdale, Greet Kershaw, Michael Redley, Stanley Engerman, Joel Silbey, Allan Bogue, George Tsebelis, Barry Weingast, and two anonymous referees. All disented vigorously from points in this article, and none is responsible for its contents.

2 agricultural history

This article analyzes the origins of the Mau Mau rebellion. It focuses on the agrarian origins of the economic grievances that made rural dwellers available to those who sought to mobilize them into a political rebellion. The focus is narrow. The article omits from consideration the urban wing of the Mau Mau revolt and cultural issues which politically alienated rural Kenyans from the colonial order. By focusing on the "demand for rebellion," it also omits from consideration the supply of political organization: the dynamics which led elite level politicians to seek to organize a rural political base. Those concerned with the urban, cultural, or political dynamics of the revolt are referred to sources listed in the notes to this article.¹

As noted by John Spencer, the Mau Mau rebellion spread geographically in a "V." The "apex" lay in Nairobi. The left arm extended northward into the White Settler farming areas of the Rift Valley Province; the right arm into Kiambu, Fort Hall and Nyeri Districts—the districts which together formed the Kikuyu reserve (see map). Dividing the two arms were the Aberdare (or more properly the Nyandarua) mountains, in which the armed forces of Mau Mau took refuge and from which they launched many of their attacks on the settlement below.

Spencer's image of the configuration of the revolt, with its Rift Valley and Central Province wings and Nairobi apogee, suggests what other sources tend to confirm: that the Mau Mau rebellion was overwhelmingly a Kikuyu rebellion. The rebellion possessed two key rural foci: the Kikuyu who worked in the commercial farms of the White Highlands and the Kikuyu who remained behind in the reserves. A central thesis of this article is that common forces tied together the two wings of the rebellion; both the "squatter wing" and the wing in the "reserves" responded to dynamics whose origins lay in Kikuyu tribal society.

Mau Mau has generated an enormous literature; one bibliography alone notes over 200 secondary sources.² The magnitude of this literature suggests the magnitude of the passions that spawned the rebellion. This article seeks to cut through the passion and the turmoil of the events surrounding the rebellion and to highlight the simple underlying structure which generated the grievances which fueled the revolt.

We therefore begin with a "model" of Kikuyu society. From our under-

1. The best analysis is contained in the superb work of John Spencer, *The KAU: The Kenyan African Union* (London: KPI, 1985). Much of the preceding exposition is from Spencer's book. See, however, the critical review by David Throup, "Moderates, Militants and Mau Mau: African Politics in Kenya, 1944–1952," unpublished. Also invaluable to all discussions of Mau Mau is M.P.K. Sorrenson, *Land Reform in Kikuyu Country* (London: Oxford University Press, 1967), a work which has strongly influenced my own.

2. Marshall S. Clough and Kernell A. Jackson, Jr. *Mau Mau Syllabus: Parts I and II* (Standard, CA: Mimeographed, 1975).

4 agricultural history

standing of Kikuyu society, we account for the subsequent population of the white highlands with cattle-owning squatters.³ We then “shock” the model by altering one of its fundamental parameters: the ratio of people to land. We thereby derive the conditions that led to the massive political and legal struggles that generated the eastern wing of the Mau Mau movement.

For the purposes of this analysis, the most parsimonious “model” of Kikuyu society which serves our purposes would include social values, institutional rules, and economic endowments.⁴

The key cultural values that are relevant to this analysis were the desire to accumulate resources that were highly valued but scarce and the tendency to evaluate personal happiness in terms of future, long-distant states. The critical institutions included the *mbari*, or kin-based units for the acquisition, development, and holding of land; bridewealth, by which cattle and livestock were exchanged for marriage partners; polygamy; and a system of age grade councils, which led to the control of property and authority by those who were geneologically senior. The economic features include that the economic environment of the Kikuyu was agrarian; that it contained two major economic activities—arable and livestock production; and that these activities required different proportions of land and labor. Initially, labor was relatively scarce and land abundant.

Taken together, these features formed a “system” of tribal life, one which helps explain the peopling of the White Highlands with Kikuyu squatters and one which, when subject to fundamental changes, provoked feelings of grievance and outrage and generated demands for political action.

3. At a later point in this paper we will examine white farming in the highlands and discuss the problem of the squatters there. It is relevant here to note that the Carter Commission determined in 1933 that there were a total of 150,000 squatters and that 110,000 of them were Kikuyu. A survey of squatters in 1947 placed their number at 202,944, more than half of whom were Kikuyu. In that year, more than one sixth of the Kikuyu population were squatters. See Colony and Protectorate of Kenya, *A Discussion of the Problems of the Squatter* (Nairobi: Government Printer, 1947), 3–4.

4. This discussion is largely drawn from H.E. Lambert, *Kikuyu Social and Political Institutions* (London: Oxford University Press, 1956); H.E. Lambert, *The Systems of Land Tenure in the Kikuyu Land Unit* (Cape Town: The University of Cape Town, 1950); M.W.H. Beech, “The Kikuyu System of Land Tenure,” *Journal of the African Society* 17 (1917); Apollo Njonjo, “The Africanization of the ‘White Highlands’: A Study in Agrarian Class Struggles in Kenya, 1950–1974,” (Ph.D. dissertation, Princeton University, 1974); Sorrenson, *Land Reform*; J. Middleton, *The Central Tribes of the North-Eastern Bantu* (London: International African Institute, 1953); L.S.B. Leakey, *The Southern Kikuyu Before 1903*, Vols. I–III (London: Academic Press, 1977); Greet Kershaw, “The Land is the People: A Study of Kikuyu Social Organization in Historical Perspective,” (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Chicago, December 1972); and Godfrey Muriuki, *A History of the Kikuyu, 1500–1900* (Nairobi: Oxford University Press, 1974). A very fine discussion also contained in David Throup, “The Construction and Destruction of the Kenyatta State,” unpublished.

5 Agrarian Origins of Mau Mau

Endowments, Values, and Institutions. Initially, land was abundant and people scarce. Given the values of the Kikuyu, then, a major social aspiration was to accumulate dependents by forming a large family with many children. As stated by one of the most articulate students of the Kikuyu, and their most prominent leader, Jomo Kenyatta:

It is the common ambition of every Gikuyu young man to own a hut or huts, which means implicitly to have a wife or wives. The establishment of a homestead gives a man special status in the community; he is referred to as *muthuri* (or elder), . . . Thus it is the desire of every Gikuyu to work hard and accumulate property which will enable him to build a homestead of his own. There is a proverb in Gikuyu which says . . . the quality of a man is justified by his homestead.⁵

So, too, for the women:

When a woman reaches the stage of motherhood she is highly respected, not only by her children, but by all members of the community. Her name becomes sacred and she is addressed by her neighbors and their children as "mother of so-and-so."⁶

Adding to the desire for many dependents was a deep, indeed religious conviction. For the Kikuyu, like many people, believed that the soul outlived the body; and, by their beliefs, descendents were necessary to ensure that the soul found care, welcome, and rest from ceaseless wanderings:

There is no doubt [of the importance of the] perpetuation of the family or kinship group . . . For the extinction of a kinship group means cutting off the ancestral spirits from visiting the earth, because there is no one left to communicate with them. And so when a man has more than one wife and many children, his soul rests in peace with the feeling that, after death, it will not be wandering in the wilderness or lose contact with the earth, for there will always be someone to hold communion with . . .⁷

For purposes of this analysis, the critical social unit of the Kikuyu was the *mbari*. An *mbari* was a collection of households who traced their relationship through a single prominent individual, the founder. Sociologically, the *mbari* was the unit of reputation; the most cherished social

5. Jomo Kenyatta, *Facing Mount Kenya: The Tribal Life of the Kikuyu* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1953), 76.

6. *Ibid.*, 9–10.

7. *Ibid.* 13–14.

6 agricultural history

objectives, outlined above, could be attained by founding an *mbari*. The geneological growth of the *mbari* augmented the fame and standing of its founder and the prospects of a peaceful afterlife.⁸

The establishment of an *mbari* required entrepreneurship and wealth. A founder had first to secede from an existing lineage and claim land whereon to establish his own kin group. Such acts were costly, for in some cases adjacent land was owned by a neighboring tribe and had to be acquired. And even where Kikuyu were the first to colonize, their settlements tended to lie at high elevations and to receive abundant rainfall; as a consequence, the land often had to be cleared of dense forest. Because the settlements lay at the periphery of the established regions of the tribe, they had to be protected against animals, cattle raiders, and hostile neighbors. The creation of new settlements therefore required the use of much labor. But labor was scarce.

There were several ways of acquiring this much needed resource. One was by offering the use of land. This option was most attractive to those who possessed livestock, for herding was a relatively land intensive activity. Entrepreneurs therefore struck bargains with the owners of livestock, offering them access to new lands. Labor was also acquired through the manipulation of family relationships, and in particular through marriage. Once again, this time because of the institution of bridewealth, the keepers of livestock played a central role in entrepreneurial expansion. For given the institution of bridewealth, the entrepreneurs could exchange daughters for cattle, and these cattle could then subsequently be exchanged for marriage partners for sons. In this way, an entrepreneur could amass a kinship group of sufficient size successfully to secede from established groups and to venture forth into new lands, there to be known by the name of its founder.

Tribal councils formed a second critical institution of Kikuyu society. There were a series of councils. Some councils governed grazing; others, marriage relations; others, the affairs of particular shrines or locations. The councils were loosely ranked, the higher the council the greater the significance of its jurisdiction. Offenses against ritual and capital cases which crossed family lines, for example, were heard by the highest councils. A necessary—though not sufficient—condition for admission to the “next” council was the movement of one’s children through the stages of life. (See chart 1). A person aspiring to influence in tribal affairs therefore needed to have children. But, more to the point, the amount of influence a person had was a function of the number and age distribution of his

8. As with most discussions of the *mbari*, this discussion is of the simple form. Complex and compound forms are analyzed by Greet Kershaw, forthcoming.

7 Agrarian Origins of Mau Mau

Chart 1. Kikuyu Social and Political Councils

<i>Ethnic Group</i>			<i>Genealogical Stages</i>
<i>Metume of Murang'a Kagwithia</i>	<i>Karura of Kiambu Kagwithia</i>	<i>Gaki of Nyeri Kagwithia</i>	
Ita	Ita	Ita	Transition to Manhood Warrior Councils
Kivindi	Kivindi	Kivindi	Transition from Warrior to Family Head
Muranja	Kamatimu	Kamatimu	Adult lodge, First Grade (first child approaching initiation)
Nburi Imwe	Muthigi	Metalthi	Second Grade (first child initiated)
Njomo	Bururi	Kinene	Third Grade

Source: B. E. Kipkorir, "The Traditional Background to the Modern Kenyan African Elite: Kenya c. 1890–1930." Paper presented at the Third International Congress of Africanists, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia (December 9–19, 1973).

children. Having a large number of dependents of varying ages increased that person's chances of possessing, quite literally, "friends in court," for the children of our elder would be "seeded," as it were, throughout the various tribal councils.

It is here that polygamy, the last of the key social institutions, plays its role. By marrying a succession of wives and by breeding abundantly, a big man could amass a family of sufficient size and age structure to dominate the councils of his tribal segment. The accumulation of wealth, preferably in the form of livestock, thus formed a prelude to the accumulation of dependents and the amassing of social standing and political power.

Although lacking kings or chiefs, and although governed by citizens' councils, the Kikuyu were thus not an egalitarian society. Rather, power and wealth were concentrated among the elders.

The Kikuyu tribal system was thus based on kinship. Political power and scarce resources were allocated by family relationships. In the sense of Sahlin, it operated as a segmentary lineage system; the perpetuation and stability of social relations and the attainment of personal goals required the secession of subgroups, expansion out of settled lands, and the settlement of new territories. The keepers of livestock provided a key element in this expansion.⁹

In the early twentieth century the tribal system of Kikuyu was subject to

9. Marshall D. Sahlin, "The Segmentary Lineage: An Organization of Predatory Expansion," *American Anthropologist* 63 (1961): 322–45.

8 agricultural history

a major exogenous shock. The British Colonial occupation closed the land frontier. The British alienated the lands to the North—Nyeri, Nanyuki, Laikipia becoming part of the White Highlands—and the lands to the South—Thika, Nairobi, and parts of Kiambu (see map). Establishing ranches, plantations and mixed farms, the colonists alienated lands over which Kikuyu settlers had established *mbari* land rights; at least as important, they also extinguished the possibility of acquiring new land rights. Reproduction continued; families expanded; the search continued for reputation, power and prominence in the councils of the tribe. But because of the imposition of constraints on land acquisition, there was a shift in the proportions of the fundamental factors of production in the agrarian economy—land and labor. People became relatively abundant and land became relatively scarce. This shift was to give rise to fundamental political changes and to the major tensions which sparked the Mau Mau rebellion.

To the north of the Kikuyu reserves and to the west in the Rift Valley the colonial incursion led to the alienation of land from native tenure and to the establishment of what became known as the White Highlands.

The process of settlement. The impetus for settlement in the highlands of Kenya was the construction of the railway from the coast to Uganda. To facilitate military access to the interior, and thereby to establish control over the upper reaches of the Nile, the British constructed a railway from Mombasa. As with many military investments, the railway proved expensive. The charge laid upon the governors of Kenya by their superiors in Whitehall was to make the railway pay.¹⁰

Local officials therefore alienated land rights along the railway to concessionaires, who would then develop the properties, sell them to settlers, and thereby generate revenues, in part from the land sales themselves and in part from the increase in rail traffic. Mosley presents data underscoring the magnitude of some of these concessions (table 1).

As any student of Kenya will recognize, his list contains the names of the most active “boosters” and “developers” in the colony: Grogan, Delamere, Coles, and others.

The early concessionaires dominated the politics of the colony and their objective was clear: to bully the government into adopting policies which would enhance the value of their lands. They therefore demanded the creation of infrastructure that would attract further settlement, preferably by prosperous and high class immigrants. As their program promised

10. See E.A. Brett, *Colonization and Underdevelopment in East Africa: The Politics of Economic Change, 1919–1939* (New York: NOK Publishers, 1973); M.F. Hill, *Permanent Way*, Vol. I (Nairobi: East African Railways and Harbours, 1949); M.P.K. Sorrenson, *Origins of European Settlement in Kenya* (Nairobi: Oxford University Press, 1967).

9 Agrarian Origins of Mau Mau

Table 1. Holdings of Concessionaires

East African Estates	350,000 acres
East African Syndicate	310,000 acres
E.S. Grogan and F.R. Lingham	132,000 acres
London and South African Agency	128,000 acres
Lord Delamere	109,562 acres
Scottish Mission	64,000 acres

Source: Paul Mosley, *The Settler Economies: Studies in the Economic History of Kenya and Southern Rhodesia, 1900–1963* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 15.

to generate rail traffic, it was favored by the colonial office in London and its appointees in the government offices of Nairobi.¹¹

In their efforts to recruit immigrants, the concessionaires also pressured the government into a policy of zoning. The adoption of a policy of exclusionary land rights implied the extinction of the ability of Africans to claim property rights over land in areas outside of the reserves.

In the early twentieth century, then, there existed, virtually side by side, two farming systems: that of the new European settlers and that of the indigenous community. The most striking difference between them were the factor proportions which characterized their use of farm inputs. The average size of the settler farm in 1905 was 5,488 acres;¹² that of the Kikuyu could not conceivably have exceeded 40 acres.¹³

Many have interpreted this configuration of land rights and settlement patterns in terms of racial segregation. In looking beneath the racial appearances, one can readily see the weakness of such an interpretation. The restriction of land rights did *not* affect composition but rather class relations.

The initial juxtaposition of contrasting production functions in roughly equivalent ecological settings generated economic forces which led to their convergence. The settlers possessed abundant land and little labor; the Africans possessed abundant labor and lacked land. Rather than promoting racial exclusion, the result was that the settlers bid for labor and promoted the movement of Africans into the White Highlands but in the

11. The best treatments of settler politics are by Redley and Mosley. See Michael Redley, "The Politics of a Predicament: The White Community in Kenya, 1918–1932," (Ph.D. dissertation, Cambridge University, October 1976) and Paul Mosley, *The Settler Economies: Studies in the Economic History of Kenya and Southern Rhodesia, 1900–1963* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

12. Mosley, *The Settler Economies*, 15.

13. See the data reported in Kenya Colony and Protectorate, *Reports on the Committee on Native Land Tenure in Kikuyu Province* (Nairobi: Government Printer, 1929 and 1930) and *The Kikuyu Lands* (Nairobi: Government Printer, 1945).

10 agricultural history

status not of land owners but rather of workers. And, as one would expect from our "model" of tribal society, those whom they attracted were that segment of the Kikuyu who most needed a low ratio of people to land: the keepers of livestock who ever moved to the spatial periphery of the Kikuyu's agrarian society.

As noted by Wambaa, the settlers actively engaged in the recruitment of labor:

[The recruiter] was often the headman of a particular Rift Valley estate, and he would come to the Reserve to meet the local chief and elders. He would then narrate the advantages of the going to the Rift Valley, mentioning that in his area [they] could have as many sheep, cattle and goats as they liked; that there was water nearby and that *posho* [ground maize meal] would be free for the first three months. In addition, he would tell them that they could get transport and sleeping kit and be given barrels . . . to carry their things in; they could even bring their beehives if they wanted.¹⁴

The Africans in the reserves behaved as one might expect. Some initially responded. When they did so, they minimized the costs of entering the market by going to the farms most proximate to their initial locations.¹⁵ Others then followed; they minimized the costs of entering the market by going to areas where friends and relatives had preceded them, receiving from them food, shelter, and information about jobs. As narrated by Wambaa:

When the Kikuyu went up on their own initiative, they would usually get off the train at Elementiata, and there other people would tell them where things were best at the moment . . . [The rich men looking for additional grazing] would usually go to the area called Ndimu, where Delamere's squatters were, or up near Egerton College or the area called Buane, somewhere towards Nakuru from Njoro. The poorer squatters . . . would go more towards Landiani, Molo and around Rongai where they would get cultivation.¹⁶

As is already suggested in these quotations, and as is confirmed in many other sources, a primary attraction of moving to the White Highlands was

14. R.M. Wamba and K. King, "The Political Economy of the Rift Valley: A Squatter Perspective," in *Hadith 5: Economic and Social History of East Africa*, ed. Bethwell A. Ogot (Nairobi: Kenya Literature Bureau, 1976), 200.

15. See the data contained in J.H. Martin, "The Problem of the Squatter: Economic Survey of Resident Labour in Kenya," 24 February 1947, which shows the Kikuyu concentrating in Naivasha, Nakuru, and the Aberdares; the Kalenjin in Uasin Gishu; and the Abaluhya in Trans Nzoia.

16. Wambaa and King, "The Political Economy," 201.

the availability of land on which to graze cattle and livestock. As we have seen, in the densely settled Kikuyu homelands, the locus of herding perpetually drifted toward the extensive land use margin. Given the economic pressures which operated on the cattle herding portion of the Kikuyu agrarian economy, it is unsurprising then that the estate managers in the highlands targeted their bids on this particular social category.

The result was the creation in the White Highlands of a characteristic form of farm organization and labor contract. Commonly, there was a central area of production managed by the estate foreman (often an African, often highly educated and, by local standards, prosperous), occupying often no more than 20 percent of the total acreage of the farm. Lying about the central estate were the farming and grazing areas occupied by Africans. The labor contracts which tied African labor to European land specified the number of days in which they had to work on the central estate, the number of cattle and livestock which the African laborer could graze, and the areas which they could use for their houses and gardens. In many cases they specified as well that any surplus production from the Africans' farms was to be sold through the estate management.

Numerous sources testify that the production of the Kikuyu squatters in the "White" Highlands represented a major portion of the output of the colonists' farms in the 1920s and 1930s. The settlers insisted that they monopolize the sale of the produce; they successfully pressured the government into banning sales through Indian commercial traders. In this period, then, they secured a major portion of their incomes from the sale rather than the production of produce, production being left in large part in the hands of the African cultivators.

Thus far the image conveyed is one in which political power was used by the colonizers to assign property rights to the colonial settlers but then to let market forces determine the subsequent allocation of resources. The narrative of Wambaa and the interviews by Furedi reveal that the early African squatters did explore and exploit market alternatives, shifting from farm to farm and region to region to secure the best terms available within the existing framework of property rights.¹⁷ Subsequently all this changed.

The political transformation of the settler economy. The military imperatives of World War II precipitated the change. The colonial state conveyed economic power to the settlers in exchange for political service. Political directives from London and Cairo directed the government of

17. Wambaa and King, "The Political Economy"; F. Furedi, "The Kikuyu Squatters in the Rift Valley: 1918–1929" in *Hadith 5: Economic and Social History of East Africa*, ed. Bethwell A. Ogot (Nairobi: Kenya Literature Bureau, 1976) and "The Social Composition of the Mau Mau Movement in the White Highlands," *Journal of Peasant Studies* 1,4 (1974): 486–507.

12 agricultural history

Kenya to provision the military in North Africa and the Middle East, to replace the raw materials (in particular, hard fibers) lost to the Japanese in South East Asia, and to feed the cities in the war zones to the North. The government's needs for agricultural products were great; its ability to produce them was small. Not only did the bureaucrats lack the skills, information, and techniques to manage agricultural production; but also the war effort led to a reduction in the size of the administrative bureaucracy, as public servants were redeployed to military assignments. The farm settlers, in effect, were deputized and delegated the power to devise mechanisms for securing production targets.¹⁸

The settlers took advantage of the need for their services by exchanging production for sale to the state at controlled prices; they thereby transferred to the state much of the risk of commercial farming.¹⁹ The exchange required the formation of new institutions. The result was the political transformation of the settler economy. The small group of just over 2,000 farm families secured the power to form agencies to monitor, police, and control their own economic conduct.

The terms of the exchange were embedded in the Increased Production of Crops Ordinance and the Defense (Control of Maize) Regulations of 1942 with their two basic provisions: the so-called "guaranteed minimum return" and "maize control." By the former, the farmers submitted to the state inspectorate a farm production plan with target acreages of specific ("controlled," in the language of the ordinance) crops and an outline of intended production practices. When approved by an oversight committee, the production plan became a contract: the government guaranteed

18. Some of the best materials on this period are contained in Mosley, *The Settler Economies*; Redley, "The Politics;" John Lonsdale, "The Depression and the Second World War in the Transformation of Kenya," in *Africa and the Second World War*, eds. R. Rathbone and D. Killingray (London: Macmillan, forthcoming); C. C. Wrigley, "Kenya: The Patterns of Economic Life, 1906–1945," in *History of East Africa*, vol. II, ed. V. Harden and E.M. Chilver (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965); and Ian Spencer, "Settler Dominance, Agricultural Production and the Second World War in Kenya," *The Journal of African History* 21: 3 (1980): 497–514. See also the discussions in Colony and Protectorate of Kenya, *Report of the Board Under the Chairmanship of Sir William Ibbotson* (Nairobi: Government Printer, 1952); Masao Yoshida, *Agricultural Marketing Institutions in East Africa* (Tokyo: Institute of Developing Economies, 1984); and Elspeth Huxley, *No Easy Way* (Nairobi: Kenya Farmers' Association, 1957).

19. My own work and the work of others has interpreted the formation of the Maize Marketing Board as a form of production cartel which set prices against consumers. Certainly, the "pooling" arrangements prepared during the depression were intended to do this; they were defeated, however, by other economic interests (see Redley, "The Politics" and Mosley, *The Settler Economies*). And the evidence suggests that after the war the Maize Marketing Board operated so as to set prices against consumers. But the data suggest that during the war the Board was employed to purchase maize cheaply, by comparison with world market prices (Mosley, *The Settler Economies*, 94–95). During the war, then, price stabilization by the Board enhanced the expected price received by farmers not by raising money prices but rather by reducing price uncertainty.

13 Agrarian Origins of Mau Mau

to purchase the pledged quantity of production at specified prices, thereby locking in a specified level of revenues for the farmer. In the event of natural disaster, the government guaranteed the farmer a rate of return commensurate with his production program. With the government guarantee, the approved production program also became the basis for farm credit. On the basis of this guarantee, a farmer could secure from other state agencies farm inputs on credit, again at controlled prices; he could also employ the guarantee as collateral for private loans.

The contract between the farmers and the state was vulnerable to two major forms of evasion. One arose at the level of produce marketing. The state advanced credit for the purchase of farm inputs in exchange for a promise to provide specified quantities of output at the end of the production cycle. In exchange for lower risk, the state offered controlled prices. The danger was that individual farmers would take the credit but then dispose of the crop to independent agencies which offered prices higher than the state was willing to pay. To secure the benefits of risk reduction, the farmers therefore sought the second major provision of the Increased Production of Crops ordinance: controlled marketing. Their own private organization, the Kenya Farmers Association (KFA), became the registered agents of the state, with the power to act as monopsonists. Independent agents were banned from the market in favor of a single buying organization.

Not only was there danger of evasion at the level of marketing; there was also danger at the level of production. A farmer might submit farm plans which, when approved, would entitle him to draw farm inputs on credit from the state bureaucracy or to secure private loans, and then not perform. He might dispose of the inputs on black markets. Or he might follow careless production practices and attribute them to drought, hail storms or the depredations of pests or wild animals. State bureaucrats could not acquire information about intentions; less costly to acquire was information concerning reputations. These reputations were built within the community of settler farmers. And the bureaucracy therefore delegated to the community the power to approve, or to deny approval to, the farm production plans which formed the basic element of the contract between the farmers and the state.

Two thousand farmers was too great a number to place on one committee. Rather, the farmers in each administrative district formed their own agricultural committees. They vetted each other's farm plans. They inspected each other's farms. And should a farmer claim that his loss of crop was due to an act of God and ask for a payout despite his nonperformance, this committee of "friends and neighbors" would make detailed investigations of his claim. The committees were intensely political, pre-

14 agricultural history

cisely in that they sought to curtail the incentives for individual farmers to act in ways that would undermine the benefits available to settler farmers as a whole: the ability to do business in an uncertain environment, but one where the risks were shared with the state.

It is currently fashionable to see the European farmer as the colonial vanguard of capitalism. What is misleading in this vision of the settler is the implication that the settler was a rugged individualist or a risk-taking entrepreneur. The historical role of the settlers may indeed have been to accelerate the growth of capitalism in Kenya. But they achieved this goal in ways one would not expect. They devised risk-minimizing communities. They forged ways of putting into the public domain economic decisions which, under capitalism, are classically private. The settlers, in short, traded service to an embattled state for the granting of the power to organize their collective interests. They seized the public power to regulate their private affairs. As Redley argues:

Delegated government authority was the key to the political independence of the white farmers. Local government, crop conferences, advisory boards, and "compulsory cooperation" were the interests by which the owner-occupier as landowner and producer developed the forms of pressure group politics and commercial organization appropriate to the defense of his interests.²⁰

Economic transformation. Within the context of these political institutions a second transformation took place. It was economic, and it led to fundamental changes in patterns of production and land use.²¹

The settlers sought public policies which would increase land prices; many sought the profits to be secured from subdivision. Toward the end of World War II, they found a government concerned to promote the peaceful demobilization of its armed forces. They were able to convince the government to assist demobilized officers to purchase land in Kenya.

The political leader of the settlers, Cavendish Bentinck, served as Chairman of the Agricultural Production and Settlement Board. When post-war development plans were being considered by the government, his Board submitted a detailed and fully costed project for the "closer settlement" of

20. Redley, "The Politics," 211. Redley is here referring to the early 1930s, though he argues that the same pattern applied in the war years as well.

21. The war years and immediate post-war period are marked by a lack of data. The deployment of public officials to the war effort led to the retrenchment of services, including the collection of data on agricultural production and land use. The argument advanced in this section must therefore remain tentative. It represents a reconstruction of a casual sequence which can not on the basis of existing sources be directly observed. The best discussion of post war policy is contained in David W. Throup, "The Governorship of Sir Philip Mitchell in Kenya, 1944-52," (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Cambridge, 1983.)

the highlands. The government was to aid in the purchase of lands for ex-servicemen, loan them funds for developing their farms, and contribute to their training at the newly opened Egerton School of Agriculture in the Rift Valley.²² The government adopted the plan and placed it among its highest priority projects for the postwar period. One result was an intensification of land use in the highlands. Another was the growth of pressures for the clearance of the squatter population. Subdivisions, when sold, were to be sold unencumbered with tenants; and the new farmers often sought to grow crops in lands which otherwise would have been used by the squatters for the herding of livestock.

Not only were the squatters threatened by subdivision and the reduction of farm sizes. They were also threatened by a transformation of production practices. In particular, they found themselves victimized by efforts on the part of the farm owners to raise the reliability and level of farm profits by introducing "mixed farming."

Mixed farming involved the introduction of a new production activity—dairying. The depression had spurred a demand for diversification as farmers confronted a paucity of economic options following the collapse of grain prices. The pressures for diversification had abetted during the World War II, particularly given the government's guarantee of suitable returns to grain production. But the growth of Nairobi and Mombasa during World War II had created a market for milk and dairy products. And the prolonged monocropping of grains during the war had led to a growing concern with soil depletion. Mixed farming was seen as an appropriate response. Symptomatic was that Egerton, Kenya's new agricultural college, strongly stressed the virtues of mixed farming, making its adoption a hallmark of professionalization in the post-war farming community.

The conversion to farming proved expensive. Land had to be withdrawn from arable production and placed under pasturage. Given the tendency of indigenous grasses of low nutritional value to invade the new pastures, the pasture lands required extensive and costly care. In support of the new dairy activity, investments had also to be made in fencing, water supplies, and cooling equipment. Off the farm, investments were made in creameries, refrigerated transport for road and rail, and distributional networks for retailing the highly perishable dairy products within the urban markets.²³

22. See M. McWilliam, "Economic Policy and the Kenya Settlers, 1945–1948" in *Essays in Imperial Government*, eds. Kenneth Robinson and Frederick Madden (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1963).

23. R. B. Ogendo, "Kenya Dairy Industry, Part I," *Journal of Eastern African Research and Development* 2 (1971): 161–65. The pace of the transformation is suggested by the dates of the establishment of the creameries. Three had been established by the depression. No more were founded until after World War II with two more being established by 1949 and another in 1951.

16 agricultural history

The introduction of mixed farming required, in short, the creation of a dairy industry—a set of interdependent investments in the production, processing and marketing of dairy products. Those who had invested their capital in the industry sought to protect it. And a principal source of vulnerability was at the farm site.

The eviction of squatters. Kenya had long had cattle; pastoral production formed a major component of all local farming systems. The milk yields from local cattle were low, however. And given the expenses of commercial dairying, higher milk yields were required to render the investments profitable. To upgrade production levels, commercial farmers therefore imported high yielding cattle from Europe.

While the milk yields from local cattle were too low to generate revenues sufficient to cover the costs of commercial dairying, the local cattle were hardy. In particular, they were resistant to local diseases. This was not true of the more productive varieties imported from abroad. The result was the creation of a production externality between the herders of local cattle and the commercial dairy farmers, and the politicization of economic relationships in highland agriculture.

Ticks constitute the major vector for many of the most serious cattle diseases in East Africa. Local cattle had evolved a significant degree of resistance to tick-borne diseases. Exotics had not. Should a tick feed off local cattle and so contract the disease, and then subsequently feast off an exotic, the exotic, perfected in an alien environment, would be defenseless against infection. The implication was clear: Where farmers were investing heavily in dairying, local cattle had to be cleared from the land.

It would not suffice, however, for an individual farmer to implement such a clearance. For cattle are mobile and can cross farm boundaries. And while investing in fencing could reduce such incursions, the fences placed no barriers on the movement of ticks. An individual farmer was therefore unable to protect his dairy investment. He had, perforce, to coordinate his conduct with that of his neighbors.

Political struggle. The right to herd cattle was, of course, a major element in the squatter's labor contract. The transformation of farming in the highlands and the rise of the dairy industry therefore gave rise to a political struggle within the settler community aimed at altering the nature of the contract that bound labor to land in the highlands agriculture.

The Resident Labour Ordinance of 1937 empowered the District Councils to limit the number of squatter stock and the size of their gardens and to prescribe the number of days the squatter must work on the owner's farm. The District Councils were representative bodies and in the Rift Valley were dominated by farmers. What made their problem difficult was that preferences among the farm owners were not uniform. Many farmers

17 Agrarian Origins of Mau Mau

still monocropped grain; this was particularly true among the poorer farmers who would not afford the heavy investments required to transform their farm operations. Some farmers produced labor intensive crops, sisal in the lower elevation and pyrethrum at higher altitudes. They feared the loss of labor power that might result were they constrained in the contracts which they could offer. The result was intense political controversy among the settlers.²⁴

From 1946 to 1954, the cultivation of grass leys rose from 860 to 9,480 hectares. The conversion of land to leys spread first in the areas closest to the Nairobi market: Nakuru, Molo, Elburgon, Njoro, Rongai and Kinagop.²⁵ It is therefore unsurprising that the District Councils in the southern highlands were the first to form majorities in favor of restricting native livestock, nor that the Kikuyu squatters, who were as we have seen concentrated in these regions, were among the first to be faced with the alternative of disposing of their livestock and signing on as hired hands or of quitting the highlands and returning to the reserves.

In some cases the squatters petitioned against the rulings of the local councils. Thus the telegram from Nahasham Njoroje, 16 June 1946, beginning: "We Kikuyu squatters numbering 63 men and our families request you kind intervening in our troubles . . . [at] Springfield farm, Nakuru."²⁶

Thus too the letter written on behalf of squatters in Naivasha to the "Honorable Chief Native Commissioner", 1 November 1945: "We squatters with honour and hope [are] writing to you and kindly beg you to listen to our troubles."²⁷

In other cases the squatters resisted. Thus the minutes by the District Commissioner, Naivasha, who noted that:

The . . . District Council in 1946 enforced a new order [which] meant a reduction in the . . . livestock which had been enjoyed by many Resi-

24. See, for example, the petitions of farmers seeking to be exempted from the reduction of squatter cattle in file Lab 25/5/4, Kenya National Archives. Note also the minutes of the District Commissioner, Trans Nzoia, to the Executive Council, 17 June 1949:

The position, roughly, is this. The Sergoit ward wants to be exempted from the Rules and the Soy-Houey's Bridge Ward wants the time allowed in the Rules to be extended. In both areas too many farmers . . . are feeling the pinch regarding labour. Council will not allow any exemptions and therefore it must . . . face a serious split [Lab 25/5/4].

25. See the discussion in R. S. Odingo, *The Kenya Highlands: Land Use and Agricultural Development* (Nairobi: East African Publishing House, 1971), 59. It should be stressed that an important source of materials is Anthony Clayton and Donald C. Savage, *Government and Labour in Kenya, 1895–1963* (London: Frank Cass, 1974).

26. File Lab 25/5/4, Kenya National Archives.

27. Ibid.

18 agricultural history

dent Laborers in the Naivasha area for years past. Although the matter had been very thoroughly discussed for several years before and although every effort was made to explain the new rules to the local Kikuyu, the fact was that when steps were taken to enforce the rules, large numbers of Kikuyu . . . laborers refused to accept the reduction or to sign contracts. A complete deadlock continued for some months.²⁸

In the last instance the squatters organized. Thus the District Commissioner in Nakuru in 1949 noted the spread of "squatter unrest" and the "numerous meetings" which were "due to resentment against the local regulations applying to the . . . numbers of stock which might be held by squatters."²⁹ Commenting that soon the "novelty [would wear] off,"³⁰ the government was forced the next year to reevaluate the complacency of its position. "In the political sphere," the Provincial Commissioner for the Rift Valley wrote in 1950, "one of the most disturbing events was the discovery at Naivasha of a secret society known as Mau Mau."³¹ Among the places it had spread were the areas where the new farming system had been introduced into the White Highlands: Naivasha, Njoro, and Elburgon.

When cleared from the highlands, the squatters returned to the reserves. There increases in population and the spread of arable production left little room for herding and livestock. Moreover, as will be seen, changes in Kikuyu society had led to the extinction of their claims to landrights in the reserves.³²

There thus existed within Kikuyu society those who specialized in the herding of livestock. They had spread out from the tribal heartland in search of grazing land; and they had been incorporated into production practices in the White Highlands. Economic changes in the highlands led to a transformation in property rights. The owners of land and capital in the highlands were able to use their political power to impose upon the squatters the costs of this change without economic compensation. And, as will be seen, those who dominated the councils of the tribe in the reserves refused to share the burden of these costs by reincorporating the

28. District Commissioner, Naivasha, to Office of the Member for Agriculture and Natural Resources, Nairobi, 26 May 1950, entitled "The Coordination of Policy Regarding Resident Labour," p. 7. Lab 25/5/4, Kenya National Archives.

29. Nakuru District, *Annual Report for 1949*, 5.

30. *Ibid.*

31. Rift Valley Province, *Annual Report 1950*, 1.

32. Amplifying the pressures for change in relations between those who owned land and capital and those who supplied labor, it should be noted, were political fears among the settler farmers. The Labour Party had come to power in the post war period; Labour favored the conversion of use rights into ownership rights in a variety of economic settings; and the settlers therefore sought pre-emptively to abrogate forms of tenancy which the government might choose to convert into rights of ownership.

19 Agrarian Origins of Mau Mau

returned squatters into the economic life of the reserves or by conferring upon them land, property, or access to agrarian incomes.³³ Rather than using political power to “socialize” the costs of change, agrarian elites in the highlands and the reserves used it to “privatize” these costs—to concentrate them on a particular segment of Kikuyu rural society. Caught by economic changes and political forces which concentrated their costs upon them, the squatters responded readily to those who sought converts to the cause of political rebellion.

Because of the colonial incursion, there took place in the reserves a radical shift in one of the basic parameters of rural society: The factor proportionality in agriculture. With the appropriation of land on every border of the Kikuyu reserve by the colonial settlers and the prodigious natality of the Kikuyu, no longer were people relatively scarce and land relatively abundant. Abruptly, quite the opposite proportionality prevailed.

The result was the rise of a profound political struggle within the Kikuyu nation. For incentives had been created to transform property rights, particularly with respect to land. But, as argued most persuasively, perhaps, by Gluckman, property rights do not represent rights over material objects; rather, they represent rights with respect to people.³⁴ A person's rights in property represent the power to limit the ability of other persons to enjoy the benefits to be secured from the use and enjoyment of a material good. The corollary is clear: to alter property rights is to redefine social relationships. Hitherto, families had been defined inclusively; the larger the family, the more powerful and prestigious the family head and the more certain his soul of repose. But now, with old lands crowded and new lands no longer available, the incentives were to exclude: to restrictively define kin relations and thereby to circumscribe who was or was not entitled to claims to land.

Adding to the pressure more clearly to define rights to land was the land's growing value, not only because of its increased relative scarcity but also because of the rising profitability of agricultural production. The Kikuyu lay near Nairobi. They could profitably provision it with eggs, poultry pigs, goats, milk, fruit, and fresh vegetables. Nairobi provided an insatiable market for wood, either for building or for charcoal. The Kikuyu also stood to profit from the production of export crops, notably wattle and tea. In order to secure the profits to be made from such activities, however,

33. See the notes and minutes in File Lab 25/5/4, Kenya Natural Archives. See also the materials in R. A. Bullock, *Ndeiya: Kikuyu Frontier* (Waterloo, Ontario: University of Waterloo, 1975).

34. See, for example, Max Gluckman, *The Judicial Process among the Barotse of Northern Rhodesia* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1955).

20 agricultural history

entrepreneurs had first to secure rights over land; only then could they be certain of the returns to their investment and their labor.

The result was rising volumes of litigation, as those who sought to secure land and the gains to be reaped from its commercial use sought to demarcate their rights and to exclude the claims of others. A variety of traditional principles validated land claims; they were pressed into service but they often conflicted. Land could rightfully be appropriated by first clearance, first settlement or purchase. Land rights could also derive from inheritance. The legitimacy of claims based upon inheritance depended on the relative standing given the initial act of appropriation; and these acts, and the claims of inheritance based upon them, often had taken place in the distant past. Given the increased desire to establish land rights, and given conflicting recollections of the historical record and conflicting versions of the primacy of means of establishing land claims, it was inevitable that litigation over land rights would rise within the reserves. Rise they did, and they fragmented families and lineages. As Kershaw describes the situation:

Inside the *Kikuyu* area a struggle was taking place, fought with great bitterness to maximize the rights to land while at the same time minimize the number of people who had rights to it. This conflict was fought through the use of past history and the rights which were associated with the growth of membership of the local group . . . [A] people for whom a line of descent, traced with precision to delineate legal access to land had always been of minor importance went in search of its lineages to fight for survival, claiming precise and invariable traditional rights . . .³⁵

The conflicts took place within the councils of the tribe. Families who saw their land claims as being based upon village law pushed their cases through the councils specializing in village disputes; those who saw their strongest claims as arising from marriage lay their claims before the councils which dealt with that subject. The councils, as we have seen, were dominated by those who had been wealthy enough to finance the accumulation of dependents and thus power. It was they, ironically, who now

35. Kershaw, "The Land is the People," p. 19. Important work on this subject has also been done by Michael Cowen. See, for example, M. P. Cowen and K. Kinyanjui, "Some Problems of Capital and Class in Kenya," Occasional Paper No. 26, Institute for Development Studies, University of Nairobi, 1977 and M. P. Cowen and F. Murage, "Notes on Agricultural Labour in a Kenya Location," in *Development Trends in Kenya*, Proceedings of a Seminar Held in the Centre of African Studies of the University of Edinburgh, 28th and 29th April, 1972, pp. 35-59. See also Kitching, *Class and Economic Change*, and N. Humphrey, "The Relationship of Population to the Land in South Nyeri," in Colony and Protectorate of Kenya, *The Kikuyu Lands* (Nairobi: Government Printer, 1945).

used their elite standing to restrict the scope of families—to delimit and clarify the claims of land based upon family membership.

One of the clearest targets of the legal reform were the *ahoi*. As they often were herders, the *ahoi* had had little reason to seek permanent land rights; and one of their primary attractions to *mbari* heads had been the manner in which the offer of a tenancy to *ahoi* could generate an increase in the size of an *mbari* by increasing the local holdings of cattle. With increased land scarcity, the costs of accumulating dependents rose and the danger of land scarcity increased the possibility that tenancy rights would convert into permanent claims on land. The result was that *mbari* heads entered the legal system and litigated so as to carefully differentiate between ownership and tenancy, thereby extinguishing possible land claims by the *ahoi*.

One of the major groups to lose out from the codification of tenancy rights was the livestock herders who had been driven off the White Highlands. Upon their return to the reserves, they—and their families—discovered that those who could exercise power in the councils of the tribe had eradicated their prospects for claiming land. The impact was not confined to this group alone. The losers also included all those who traced their relationship to land owning families through marriage by females descended from *ahoi*. A line was drawn between *ene*, members of the *mbari* by descent, and affines, those who were members by marriage. Those incorporated into the family through the abundant bride wealth generated by the stock of the *ahoi* now found themselves deprived of land.

Distributional consequences. Shifts in the relative abundance of land and labor, then, precipitated a struggle over family law. This struggle took place within a context—the colonial context—which helped to determine the distributional consequences. The colonial context generated an array of economic and political attributes which influenced both the benefits to be secured from land litigation and the costs of processing claims. The result was that land cases were more frequently won by certain social categories. The inequality which had characterized Kikuyu society assumed the character of class divisions within the commercial agricultural economy and the colonial state.

The colonial incursion generated new forms of economic opportunities. There arose a demand for such commodities as English potatoes for consumption in Nairobi; wheat, for sale to the large European farms or directly to millers; and wattle, the wood of which was used in the construction of fences, burned by railways, or transformed into charcoal, and whose bark was processed for export on the world market. As we have noted, those who invested in the production of such commodities wanted,

22 agricultural history

and demanded, secure land rights. They therefore took the lead in securing the transformation of family law.³⁶

The colonial incursion produced as well a change in the market for labor. There arose a demand for persons trained in the speaking and writing of English. Educated labor could command a substantial wage premium. Persons proficient in English could get jobs as translators or clerks in the bureaucracy; foremen in the industries and commercial farms; or salesmen and assistants in the new commercial establishments. As Cowen, Kitching and others have noted, there was no clear separation between these two educateds, earning money in commerce, industry and the public service, and those who invested heavily in the production of agricultural commodities.³⁷ The funds generated off the farm were often invested on it. In particular, those earning incomes from wages and salaries were better able to invest in the costs of litigation necessary to clarify land rights and thereby enhance the expected value of the streams of income being generated by the rise of commercial agriculture. Certain social categories, then—rural entrepreneurs and the educated, sometimes called the *athomi* (those who can read)—stood specially to benefit from the redefinition of kinship entitlements to property. As Cowen has phrased it:

It was the *athomi*, who by resurrecting the depth and width of the lineage from the original claims to land . . . pitted sub-clan against sub-clan. From the base of a resurrected sub-clan, each *muthomi* [a spokesman for an *mbari*] set litigation in motion, made the legal contribution towards the case, and planted wattle to secure claims to “disputed” land. The *athomi* were cast as the defenders of the sub-clan interests to land and were rewarded with land accordingly.³⁸

Not only did the educateds stand to gain the most from such litigation; but also, within the context of the colonial order, they confronted the lowest costs of pushing legal claims. The educated spoke the language of the colonizers; the colonizers were dependent upon them for insight into local law and custom. The land litigation was pressed through the tribal

36. Michael P. Cowen, “Capital and Household Production: The Case of Wattle in Kenya’s Central Province, 1903–1964,” (Ph.D. diss., University of Cambridge, 1978). See also Kitching, *Class and Economic Change* and Sharon Stichter, *Migrant Labour in Kenya: Capitalism and African Response, 1895–1975* (Harlow, Essex, U.K.: Longman, 1982).

37. See the sources synthesized in the review essay, Paul Collier and Deepak Lal, *Poverty and Growth in Kenya*, World Bank Staff Working Paper No. 389, May 1980.

38. Cowen, “Capital and Household Production,” 74. See also G. C. Mutiso, *Kenya: Politics, Policy and Society* (Nairobi: East African Literature Bureau, 1975), 68.

councils, which conducted their affairs in Kikuyu. It drew upon the knowledge of geneologies, which fell within the province of the elder traditionalists rather than the young educateds. Nonetheless, in dealing with clerks, record keepers, registrars, and other elements of the colonial bureaucracy, those who were educated and spoke English were better able to assert their claims than were those who lacked literacy in English.

Within the context of colonial institutions, then, certain social categories found it to their advantage to be especially active in seeking the transformation of family law and specifically advantaged in securing that transformation. The resultant redefinition of the legal environment of this agrarian economy resulted in an unequal apportionment of land endowments. Strengthening the bias in the allocation of land was that the pursuit of self-interest took place within a social context. A rich landowner may have possessed a special private interest in clarifying land rights, but the validity of his individual claims rested upon the overall structure of law. The result of the inherently social setting of his action was that the interests of a specific litigant were mixed with those of other persons. Some litigants appear to have responded by acting as entrepreneurs. They formed companies to champion particular cases, allocating the benefits from the cases in proportion to the willingness of others to bear the costs. Family heads with land claims, in effect, became shareholders in court cases. As stated by Cowen and Murage:

Upon defending successfully the *mbari* land the *mthomi* was given land by the *mbari* . . . in recognition of his services. The converse also held. Those clan members without the ability to make financial contributions to the spate of land cases lost land in the rearrangement of land fragments that often followed the re-adjustment of . . . boundaries, pursuant upon the various judgments that were reached by the courts.³⁹

The polarization of rural society in the Kikuyu reserves was noted by the colonial administrators of the time. In 1941, for example, the District

39. Cowen and Murage, "Notes on Agriculture Labour," 52. In a personal communication with the author a noted anthropologist who had conducted extensive fieldwork in Kiambu cautions against so stark an interpretation, arguing that participation in land litigation affected land rights only at the margin. Anyone who helped win a case, the anthropologist noted, was not "sent home empty." But in no case known to the anthropologist was a person given land in ownership which that person did not have other rights to as well. And in no case was a person deprived of land for failure to help push a successful land case; rather, the land they were apportioned following litigation was likely to be of a lower quality than that of those who contributed to the costs of the case. Moreover, no one on the winning side was likely to forget that a member of the family who should have helped had refused to pay for their share of the costs of defending the family's inheritance. The costs of nonparticipation were likely to be inflicted in ways other than depriving that person of land. Personal communication, May 10, 1986.

24 agricultural history

Commission at Kiambu reported that "hundreds, possibly even thousands of acres have changed hands . . . during the past ten or fifteen years, and most of it has gone into the hands of a very few people, including chiefs, tribunal elders, and the educated minority."⁴⁰

A statistical portrayal of these arguments, albeit a thin one, is offered in data collected in Kiambu in the early 1950s by Sluiter. Her data document a close relationship between education, income and the holding of land. Over 40 percent of those with more than a form II education reside in the top income group; over 40 percent of the illiterates reside in the bottom income grouping (table 2). Moreover, three quarters of the top income group own plots of seven acres or more; over 70 percent of the lowest income group own plots of less than two acres (table 3).⁴¹

The transformation to Mau Mau. The course of political events which led to demands for constitutional progress in Kenya have been amply described elsewhere.⁴² Politicians at the national level sought to accelerate the decolonization of Kenya by searching for political issues which would mobilize popular support and raise the costs of continued foreign occupation. As the stridency of their demands increased, the politicians sought to expand their base of support. They began to include those who would take radical action to overturn the colonial order. When they sought such militants in the countryside, they tapped the reservoir of those who had lost out in the transformation of property rights in the reserves.

The Mau Mau wing of the nationalist revolt specialized in assassination. Near the end of 1953, the District Commissioner of Kiambu "admitted that half the murders in the district during the past year had been due to land cases."⁴³ The Mau Mau wing of the nationalist movement recruited by oathing; the more militant the convert, the greater the number of oaths taken. As seen in Sluiter's data (table 4), 74 percent of the richest members of her sample took no oath, whereas 20 percent of the poorest took more than one and over 60 percent took one or more. Of those taking more than one oath, 59 percent were drawn from the poorest segment of her sample.

The Mau Mau wing of the nationalist movement suffered detention and jail. As seen in Sluiter's data (table 5), over ninety percent of those from the highest income category were not detained; nearly 30 percent of those from the lowest income category were. Of those who were detained, over one half came from the very poorest segment of society.

40. Quoted in M. P. K. Sorreson, *Land Reform in the Kikuyu Country* (London: Oxford University Press, 1967), 5. See also Colony and Protectorate of Kenya, *Report on Native Tribunals* by Arthur Phillips (Nairobi: Government Printer, 1946).

41. Sluiter, "Confidential Report."

42. See, for example, Rosberg and Nottingham, *The Myth of "Mau Mau."*

43. Sorrenson, *Land Reform*, 10.

25 Agrarian Origins of Mau Mau

Table 2. Income and Education Income

	<i>Low</i>	<i>Medium</i>	<i>Upper</i>	<i>High</i>
Education				
Illiterate	129	128	45	8
Standard 1–6	36	36	20	8
Forms I & II	31	35	13	15
Higher	—	1	4	4

Source: Greet Sluiter, "Confidential Report on Migrant Labour and Connected Matters in Four Villages in the Kiambu Reserve of Kenya," Department of Social Services, Training and Research of the Christian Council of Kenya, Mimeo, n.d., Kenya National Archives.

Chi-Square: 52.506, $P=0.0001$. Gamma: 0.241, with an asymptotic standard error of 0.061. Somer's D (columns, given rows): 0.167, asymptotic standard error of 0.044.

Note: The mid-points for the four categories are: Low: Ksh. 222; Medium: Ksh. 483; Upper: Ksh. 987; High: Ksh. 2,000.

Table 3. Average Land Endowments by Income Average Land Holdings (acres)

<i>Average Income</i>	<i><0.5</i>	<i>0.5–3.9</i>	<i>3.9–6.9</i>	<i>6.9–13.9</i>	<i>13.9–25</i>	<i>>25</i>
Low	173	68	2	1	0	0
Medium	59	106	53	20	4	0
Upper	4	31	23	36	10	2
High	2	1	7	17	11	5

Source: Sluiter, "Confidential Report."

Chi-square: 423.569, $df=15$, $p=0.0001$. Gamma: 0.806, asymptotic standard error of 0.021. Somer's D (columns, given rows): 0.639, asymptotic standard error of 0.023.

This essay has focused on the agrarian origins of the Mau Mau revolt. It has looked at the source of the grievances which enabled aspirant politicians to draw rural dwellers into organized protest against the colonial order. Technical change in settler agriculture led to a restructuring of the terms by which labor was bound to land. In the reserves, shifts in the relative abundance of land as opposed to labor led to a revaluation of two factor inputs, creating incentives massively to "disinvest" in ties with other human beings the more securely to vest land entitlements. The politicization of these economic changes resulted from the institutional settings within which they took place.⁴⁴ Labor contracts were negotiated collectively in the highlands, preventing farm owners from offering those terms and conditions most suited to their enterprises and farm laborers

44. See Bethwell A. Ogot, "Revolt of the Elders: An Anatomy of the Loyalist Crowd in the Mau Mau Uprising, 1952–1956." Presidential Address to the Historical Association of Kenya, Annual Congress, August 1971, in *Hadith 4: Politics and Nationalism in Colonial Kenya*, ed. Bethwell A. Ogot (Nairobi: East African Publishing House, 1972).

26 agricultural history

Table 4. Average Income and Oath Taking Among Males

<i>Average Income (Shillings per year)</i>	<i>No Oath</i>	<i>One Oath</i>	<i>More than One Oath</i>
Low	57	82	35
Medium	77	101	13
Upper	31	44	10
High	25	8	1

Source: Sluiter, "Confidential Report."

Chi-square: 33.547, *df*=6, *p*=0.0001. Gamma: -0.232, asymptotic standard error of 0.064.

Somer's D (columns, given rows): -0.139, asymptotic error 0.039.

Table 5. Detention History by Income

<i>Average Income (Shillings per year)</i>	<i>Not Detained</i>	<i>Has Been Detained</i>	<i>Still Detained</i>
Low	139	35	22
Medium	169	19	12
Upper	76	9	2
High	30	0	1

Source: Sluiter, "Confidential Report."

Chi-square: 22.866, *df*=6, *p*=0.0008. Gamma: -0.395, asymptotic standard error of 0.080.

Somer's D (columns, given rows): -0.128, asymptotic standard error of 0.027.

from evoking competitive bids as a defense against attempts to clear them from the land. And the legal context of family ties rendered specific claims to entitlements socially binding, as rules and precedents were devised to adjudicate specific claims. In the struggle to vest property rights, there were no private acts.

Mau Mau has been studied extensively. Our interpretation both criticizes and complements previous works. It dissents from the nationalist interpretation by revealing that the struggle was not between whites and blacks, even on the highlands, where it would most appear to have been.⁴⁵ The Europeans did not want a *white* highlands. They wanted high land values; when importing labor augmented such values, they brought in more blacks and when land values could be raised by clearing the land of blacks and their cattle, then blacks were chased away. Moreover, the colonial settlers did not form a uniform bloc, as the language of white against black would imply. The struggle between owners and farmers followed a struggle between dairy farmer and grain grower, for example.

45. See, for example, Carl Rosberg, Jr. and John Nottingham, *The Myth of "Mau Mau": Nationalism in Kenya* (New York: Praeger, 1966).

Our interpretation dissents as well from that of the *depedencias*.⁴⁶ For while the struggle set laborer against foreign owner of capital in the highlands, that was but one wing of the rebellion. In the reserves, the battle was being fought within the ranks of the exploited; clearly, internal differentiation had emerged, and the evidence abounds that active agents in the struggle were indigenous accumulators.

What, then, of the class interpretation of Mau Mau? Clearly the evidence presented in this essay strongly supports such an interpretation. But it also queries it in several significant respects. It is astonishing, but true: Kitching and others write of the “accumulators” as a socially isolated category—as a category largely divorced from its ethnographic setting.⁴⁷ In contradistinction to such a position, I have tried to show how the “laws of motion,” which led to revolution, were set in place by Kikuyu institutions. Political struggles between economic categories fueled the Mau Mau rebellion; they did in fact resemble class war. But the origins of such economic categories lay in the ethnographic structure within and about which economic change took place.

Our argument supports far more the position of Meillassoux and others who examine the coupling of capitalism with “pre-capitalist” societies than it does the work of those who search for an indigenous bourgeoisie, while paying scant attention to the specific sociological features within which classes arise.⁴⁸ In concluding, it is useful to illustrate the significance of this difference in perspective.

In analyzing Kikuyu society, we noted the similarity it bore to a predatory lineage system, as described by Sahlins. Such systems exist, anthropologists theorize, in poor societies where the ecological setting makes for a relatively uniform but highly uncertain range of opportunities. In such a setting, lineages spread out and colonize diverse “niches.” As analyzed by Sahlins, these niches tend to be ecological—areas of better than average grazing, for example—but viewed in a broader framework, they could be economic (e.g., a line of trade) or political (a colonizable bureaucracy, for example). Under the initial conditions of Sahlins’s model, it makes sense for an individual to maintain a highly ramified kinship network. For the acknowledgement of a wide range of kin facilitates access to a wide range of opportunities. The web of kinship serves, like a diversified portfolio, as a form of insurance.

But let the initial conditions alter. Say that an activity—or niche—becomes especially attractive, that it comes to offer a stream of income

46. See, for example, Barnett and Njama, *Mau Mau from Within*.

47. Kitching, *Class and Economic Change*.

48. See, for example, Claude Meillassoux, *Maidens, Meal and Money: Capitalism and the Domestic Community* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

28 agricultural history

which is more lucrative or more certain than that offered by others. Under such circumstances, persons may want to concentrate their holdings in this one, high-yielding asset. Rather than dispersing their holdings by acknowledging a wide range of kinship obligations, they may prefer to concentrate them and to divest themselves of unwanted "hangers on."

Our analysis suggests that such a transition happened in Kenya. It has also happened elsewhere. Kinship and lineage systems have been transformed from systems of access to systems of accumulation, in which property and wealth are closely held by subsets of family members. The result is the economic ascendancy of some lineage segments and the subordination of others. In Europe, most dramatically, people who in former times would have been treated as kin instead came to be treated as vassals. Their former kin, in turn, became aristocrats.

While Kitching and others see in the transformation of rural society which led to Mau Mau the formation of an indigenous bourgeoisie, we instead see the formation of a different class. What was emerging from the combination of an agrarian economic base and a lineage-based social context was not a bourgeoisie but rather a group more akin to an incipient aristocracy—managers not of private corporations but rather of family estates.⁴⁹ Paying attention to the sociological basis of the process of class formation thus leads to a strikingly different interpretation of the historical record. In this sense, theory counts.

49. The way in which state power was used to incorporate landed lineage segments into stable classes in Kenya is beautifully described in David Throup, "The Construction and Destruction of the Kenyatta State."