In contrast to the conventional notion that the counter-insurgency was aimed at the Mau Mau militants, Elkins recognizes that the British interned practically the entire Kikuyu population as Mau Mau. Key to this was turning the insurgency inward, into a battle of Kikuyu militants against Kikuyu loyalists, thereby turning Mau Mau insurgency into civil war. The turning point came on the night of 26 March 1953, at Lari, which was the site of two successive massacres, the first by the Mau Mau and the second by homeguards. During this massacre, Anderson describes how the Mau Mau militants herded Kikuyu men, women and children into huts and set them on fire, hacking down with pangas anyone who attempted escape, before throwing them back into the burning huts. The vast majority of the 400 killed at Lari were women and children.

But even more importantly, the Mau Mau started to target, less and less the settlers on the highlands or even less the colonial power itself, but increasingly those they perceived as local beneficiaries of colonial power, turning neighbours and relatives against each other in a rapidly brutalizing civil war. This was not the only massacre; the colonial administration also committed a similar massacre in Hola in 1959 in which 11 detainees were clubbed to death, with 77 having permanent injuries. The submissions of Michael Gerard Sullivan, the colonial officer in charge of Hola camp to the commission investigating the death of the detainees revealed the firm instructions from Compell, the deputy commissioner of prisons, to torture the Mau Mau detainees by denying them drinking water for a number of hours, weeding rice fields with bare hands and use of batons on the non-co-operative ones.

Elkins has indeed demonstrated the injustices meted on the Mau Mau by the colonial police and the loyalist. For example she argues that electric shock was widely used, as well as cigarettes and fire. Bottles (often broken), gun barrels, knives, snakes, vermin, and hot eggs were thrust up men's rectums and women's vaginas. The screening teams whipped, shot, burned and mutilated Mau Mau suspects, ostensibly to gather intelligence for military operations and as court evidence.

Between 150,000 and 320,000 Africans were detained for varying lengths of time in more than 50 detention and work camps. The treatment in the camps, staffed by little trained non-Kikuyu, loyalists and European settlers, was often brutal. The information about what was happening there was carefully controlled and the colonial office and the governor systematically denied reports of mistreatment. Elkins’ extended descriptions of the regime of torture, one is struck by its predominantly sexual nature. Male detainees were often sexually abused ‘through sodomy with foreign objects,
animals, and insects, cavity searches, the imposition of a filthy toilet bucket-system, or forced penetrative sex. Women had ‘various foreign objects thrust into their vaginas, and their breasts squeezed and mutilated with pliers.’ Variations abounded, with sand, pepper, banana leaves, flower bottles (often broken), gun barrels, knives, snakes, vermin, and hot eggs being thrust up men’s rectum and women’s vaginas. A common practice during interrogation was to squeeze testicles with pliers. Josiah Mwangi Kariuki (popularly known as J.M Kariuki) was detained in 14 detention camps between 1953 and 1960. In his book ‘Mau Mau Detainee’, he wrote that his experience at Kwa Nyangwethu detention camp was the worst: Kwa Nyangwethu was, however, particularly bad and was notorious not for mere beatings, but for castration. I have seen with my own eyes that Kongo Chuma whom I first met in Nakuru before he was detained and who is now living at Kianga in Embu district, has been castrated. He had not been like this when he was in Nakuru but when we met in the detention camp at Athi River he told me it has been done to him by the screeners at Kwa Nyangwethu. He also told me that bottles of soda water were opened and pushed into the uterus of some women to make them confess. Kongo said these things were done by the Africans but the European officers knew what was going on.

The Mau Mau fighters were also responsible for unspeakable atrocities. Contrary to African customs and values, they assaulted old people, women and children. The horrors they practiced included decapitation and general mutilation of civilians, torture before murder, bodies bound up in sacks and dropped in wells, burning victims alive, gouging out of eyes and splitting open the stomachs of pregnant women. Mau Mau officially ended with the capture and execution of Dedan Kimathi, the uprising’s most senior leader in October 1956. While the figures are debatable, the Mau Mau are said to have caused the death of at least 14,000 Africans, 29 Asians and 95 Europeans.

To establish the root causes of Mau Mau, the colonial administration appointed the Corfield Tribunal, which relied extensively on psychologist JC Carothers and in their report recorded 11,503 Mau Mau dead. It was understandable that the number was under-estimated to disguise the ferocity of the colonial office response to Mau Mau. A thousand were hanged upon being convicted by courts, while more were killed by troops in the forest. There were also extra-judicial executions by the colonial police and homeguard units. Moreover, the beating and torture of Kikuyu suspects was commonplace, and the security forces murdered hundreds. The Mau Mau war did not only mark the end of the African resistance against colonial rule, but it was the climax of colonial atrocities on Africans suspected to be members of Mau Mau.

In 1999, a few former fighters calling themselves the Mau Mau Original Group announced that they would attempt a £5 billion claim against the UK, on behalf of hundreds of thousands of Kenyans for ill-treatment they said they suffered during the rebellion. In November 2002, the Mau Mau Trust - a welfare group for former members of the movement - announced it would attempt to sue the British government for widespread human rights violations committed against its members. With the assistance of the Kenya Human Rights Commission, in 2011, the Mau Mau group succeeded in suing the British after a British court ruled that the Kenyans could sue the British government for their torture.

After the Mau Mau War, the colonial government not only relaxed the ban on the formation of African political parties, but also attempted to increase African representation in the colonial administration. The colonial administration permitted the re-establishment of African district-based political parties and/or associations and disallowed national organizations.

President Jomo Kenyatta’s Era

On 12 December 1963, Kenya got independence from British rule with Jomo Kenyatta as the Prime Minister. A year later, Kenya became a Republic with Jomo Kenyatta as the President and Jaramogi Oginga Odinga as the Vice President. Within a short period into independence, gradually returned to the ways of the colonial master. The government and the ruling political party, Kenya African National Union (KANU), not only retained repressive colonial laws, but also became increasingly intolerant of political dissent and opposition. Political assassinations and arbitrary detentions were turned into potent tools for silencing dissenting voices and ultimately for dismantling opposition political parties. For the larger part of Kenyatta’s reign Kenya was a de facto one-party state.

Official amnesia

The attainment of Kenya’s political independence on the 12 December 1963, with Jomo Kenyatta as the first Prime Minister, marked the culmination of 68 years of anti-colonial struggles waged by Kenyan Africans to free themselves from British domination, oppression and exploitation. However, in his independence speech, Jomo Kenyatta did not suggest any substantial change in the colonial structures. The colonial state would remain intact - despite the fact that the fight for national independence had been dominated by demands for social justice, egalitarian reforms, participatory democracy, prosecution of those who had committed mass killings and other forms of crimes during the war of independence, and the abolition of the colonial state and its oppressive institutions.

Also, in his independence speech, Jomo Kenyatta never mentioned the heroism of the Mau Mau movement. No Mau Mau freedom songs were sung, no KLFA leaders was allowed to speak during the historic day. Instead, Kenyatta asked the people to forget the past - to forgive and forget the atrocities committed against them by the British and their Kenyan supporters during the war of independence. He became no radical on nationalization of foreign-held assets including
land and often remarked: “I regard titles as a private property and they must be respected… I would not like to feel that my shamba (smallholding) or house belongs to the government. Titles must be respected and the right of the individual safeguarded”. In this way, the Kenyatta administration provided a relief to the settler community that their land will not be taken away from them without compensation.

The usage of KLFA to refer to Mau Mau is rather problematic in literature. KLFA is not simply another name for Mau Mau: it was the name that Dedan Kimathi used for a coordinating body which he tried to set up for Mau Mau. It was also the name of another militant group that sprang up briefly in the spring of 1960; the group was broken up during a brief operation from 26 March to 30 April. The attainment of political independence shadowed several tensions and cleavages which occupied the new ruling elites prior to and immediately after independence. For example, the radicals represented by Oginga Odinga and Bildad Kaggia who favoured nationalization of foreign owned corporations, seizing of white settler farms without compensation and following more proEastern foreign policy. Odinga persuasively argued that “I understand that in communist countries the emphasis was on food for all. If that was what communism meant then there was nothing wrong with that”. He as his supporters opted to look to Soviet Union, China and their allies for backing. On the other hand, conservatives led by Jomo Kenyatta and Tom Mbaya - the nationalists who espoused a constitutionalist and reformist approach and were after independence concerned with the maintenance of the colonial legacy. As the struggle raged for control of the state, decisions based on short term expediency were interspersed with fundamental directional choices.

Kenya soon returned to a command and control leadership model strikingly similar to that of the colonial era. Decisions about development, money and military protection drove foreign relations, domestic policy and land policy, which in turn drove greater centralization and a conservative social and political model that combined individual accumulation with a partisan and interventionist state. The struggle for power saw the abandonment of the Majimbo Constitution, which conceded much autonomy to the regions for a de facto one party state. The dissolution of the Kenya African Democratic Union (KADU) was a critical moment, setting the stage for three decades of singleparty dictatorship and prioritisation of the maintenance of public order by the Kenyatta administration.

Dealing with Mau Mau

Jomo Kenyatta took over power in a country which was already polarized by the Mau Mau issue over land and more importantly “ownership of the fight for independence”. The reason for this was the expectation that those who fought for Uhuru (independence) should exclusively eat the fruits of independence. This debate thrived even in the context of the revelations that Kenya had many powerful voices in the anti-colonial movement. Indeed Bethwell Ogot has demonstrated the roles and responsibilities of all the communities in Kenya, in anti-colonial movements. Therefore the first issue which Jomo Kenyatta had to deal with was the Mau Mau – a movement whose main agenda revolved around land and the colonial land alienation among the Kikuyu, which had created a special group of Kikuyu without land. Before independence, Kenyatta had pardoned the remaining Mau Mau detainees in prison and issued an amnesty for Mau Mau fighters to leave the forest and surrender their weapons. More than 2,000 did so in the first weeks after independence far more than the British had expected. But after the amnesty for Mau Mau expired in January 1964, the government started treating the remnants as criminals.

By early 1965, most of the remaining Mau Mau hard-core fighters had been captured and killed by the new independent government. The Mau Mau who made good their threat to return to the forest under the slogan of ‘Not yet Uhuru,’ Baimungi, were quickly executed. Kenyatta’s message in the 1960s was clear – there would be nothing for free. In the 1970s, it was politically prudent to be called Mau Mau. Although on paper, Kenya acknowledged the role Mau Mau had played in the struggle for independence; his government persistently downgraded its importance and did nothing to reward those who had suffered. Despite President Kenyatta’s promise in 1964 that the land confiscated during the Emergency would be returned, nothing happened.

The British removed and hid most records of the war on the eve of independence to protect loyalists from reprisals and themselves from demands for compensation for atrocities. Ex-Mau Mau were given no preferential treatment in access to land and jobs.

The ex-Mau Mau fighters were thus shortchanged after independence. Even when the settlement schemes were initiated between 1963 and 1967, the Maasai who suffered the most got nothing and the Kalenjin received small areas around So- tik and Nandi. The squatters were not any better in their continued demand for cultivatable land across the highlands. Those living in the former White Highlands were evicted. In the majority of the settlement schemes in Nakuru and Nyandarua, the existing squatters were simply removed by force, with new claimants chosen to occupy the plots. The situation of the landless did not improve with the sale of larger farms under the ‘willing buyer, willing seller’ model. A decade after the implementation, one sixth of the settler lands were found to have been sold intact to the emerging African elite comprising Kenyatta, his wife, children and close associates. These elites did not even need much money to buy settler farms, as they were also able to raise loans from government bodies such as the Agricultural Finance Corporation (AFC) and the Land and Agriculture Bank.

Source: Report Of The Truth, Justice And Reconciliation Commission (Vol. IIA)