

Adventists and Mau Mau in Kenya

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The Adventist Church in Kenya survived numerous trials during the Mau Mau uprising (1952-1960).

Background

The Mau Mau movement of Kenya was a nationalist, armed peasant revolt against the British colonial state, its policies, and its local supporters. The overwhelming majority of the Mau Mau fighters and their supporters, who formed the “passive wing,” came from the Kikuyu ethnic group in Central Province¹ together with a number of other communities notably the Meru and Embu.

The period between 1951 to 1956 witnessed an emergence of an armed political movement in Kenya, Mau Mau. The movement was opposed to colonialism and the European settlement of Kenya. The major grievances included African land rights and lack of progress towards independence. Tired of their grievances and concerns being ignored, they adopted more radical means of action. They took bizarre oathing rituals binding them to carry out acts of violence, sabotage, or murder against Europeans and their sympathizers. There was already a huge buildup of resentment caused by European appropriation of land, outright (official) racism, unpaid or underpaid labor, heavy taxation, racially skewed distribution of resources, brutal laws and equally brutal law enforcement, unemployment, and the general lack of opportunities for the African. All these seemed to justify the radical methods adopted to disrupt the colonial state.

Acts of violence began in 1951, and it became clear that a secret society named Mau Mau was behind attacks on European interests. In October the following year, 1952, a state of emergency was declared, and Jomo Kenyatta, an anti-colonial activist, was arrested. He was sentenced to seven years in prison.

The Adventist Church and Mau Mau

The Central Kenya Mission was established at Karura in what was formerly Kikuyu in 1933. A European settler sold a portion of his land to establish that mission. W.W. Armstrong moved there as the first missionary, and he was accompanied by three Luo evangelists. Most notable among them was Jeremiah Oigo, who opened up the

work in Ukambani.² The Mission at Karura was right on the edge of the Kikuyu reserve. In fact, just across the fence was the Gachie market that was part of the territory of Senior Chief Waruhiu wa Kungu. It was the assassination of this chief by Mau Mau rebels at Gachie on October 7, 1952, that forced the British colonials to declare the emergency later that month.³

The impact of the Mau Mau activities on the Adventist Church was profound. Writing in the *Adventist Review* in June 1953, EAU President Ernest D. Hanson related harrowing experiences the church members had gone through. One Adventist pastor in Central Kenya had the windows and doors of his house torn down and his furniture taken, forcing him to flee for his life. In March of that year, the boys' dormitory at Chebwai Mission was burned to the ground although there was no loss of life. He stated that Adventist Kikuyu attending Adventist schools dared not return home for the holidays, choosing instead to remain at the school until the new term began.

Hostilities against Adventists continued. Going to church had virtually ceased, and even baptisms had to stop. It was too risky to have converts publicly declare their support for the Church and its teachings. Some Kikuyu Adventist women endured suffering at the hands of Mau Mau leaders. Most religious gatherings were secretly conducted at night to avert the wrath and terror of Mau Mau adherents.⁴

The Adventist Church was not alone in facing the tribulations occasioned by the Mau Mau. Other denominations also were affected. In the Fort Hall District, for instance, where some 90 percent of Kikuyus are believed to have taken the Mau Mau oath, the effective membership of the African Anglican Church was reduced from about 12,000 to about 1,000, and some churches that used to have Sunday congregations of 200 were reduced to eight, and those that had 500 were reduced to twenty.⁵

Impact of the VOP

All public gatherings of whatever nature were banned, and movement was severely restricted. Evangelism work came to a virtual standstill. To counter this, the president of the Central Kenya Mission, R. J. Wieland, made preparations for Voice of Prophecy (VOP) Bible correspondence lessons to be distributed in the Kikuyu language. Wieland then sought for permission from the government to have them distributed among the Kikuyu. He first prepared lessons that were translated to the Kikuyu language by Andrew Ayub Gathemia, and Fredrick Kimani Wangai later joined the two.⁶ He also made arrangements for the VOP broadcasts in Kikuyu and Kiswahili languages to air once every two weeks.⁷

During the state of emergency, public preaching was impossible. During that time, the Voice of Prophecy Bible lessons saturated the whole region of Central Kenya with the Gospel. Central Kenya then covered the Kikuyu, Embu, and Meru ethnic groups. Mau Mau leaders sought to recruit all Kikuyu adults into the movement, and anyone who refused was regarded as an agent of the colonial government and was thus killed. Christianity was considered a "white man's ploy" used to subdue Africans to submit to colonial authority.⁸

By 1955, it was reported that two Adventist members had been killed by the Mau Mau.⁹ At the same time, the correspondence Bible school and VOP enrollment climbed. By 1955, missionary Ben Wheeler and his wife had enrolled over 500 Kikuyu people on the VOP, including Jomo Kenyatta's daughter Margaret Kenyatta.¹⁰

Despite the difficulties, the Church continued to thrive, particularly in the Kikuyu heartland of Kagwathi in Murang'a and Karatina, the epicenter of the Mau Mau uprising.

Conclusion

The planting of the Adventist Church in Central Kenya faced a tough political atmosphere through the onset of the Mau Mau uprising, and the subsequent declaration of the state of emergency slowed down the work of planting churches given the fact that movement throughout the country was restricted. By the time the rebellion was quashed in 1955, some 11,000 rebels had been killed and a total of 80,000 Kikuyu men, women, and children had been detained in detention camps in terrible conditions. Some 100 Europeans lost their lives together with 2,000 Africans perceived to be their sympathizers. Dozens of Seventh-day Adventists lost their lives.

Initially, the leadership of the Church was occupied by European missionaries – however, the outbreak of Mau Mau hampered evangelistic activities of the Adventist Church in the region.¹¹ The Mau Mau uprising necessitated the transfer of Church leadership from Europeans to Africans. It is also important to underscore the role played by literature disseminated through the Voice of Prophecy program. One of these was the monthly paper *Sikiliza*, the Kiswahili translation of *Signs of the Times*. Produced by the Advent Press in Gendia (now the Africa Herald Publishing House), it had a wide circulation around this period and greatly helped the spiritual development of the Church. The Press also began producing Lesson Quarterlies from 1955, and this added to the spiritual nourishment of the Kikuyu people. It is true to note that, at that time, the written word reached people and places that human agents could not physically reach.

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NOTES

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6. Esther Ng'ang'a, "History of Adventism in Central Kenya, 1933-1989," unpublished manuscript, 2012, in the authors' private collection.
7. Ernest D. Hanson, "Emergency in Kenya," *ARH*, June 11, 1953, 24.
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9. W. P. Bradley, "The Gospel Meets the Mau Mau," *ARH*, April 28, 1955, 23.
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