Mau Mau as Method

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Abstract: During the period of the Kenya Emergency (1952–1960), an assemblage of anticolonial forces waged war against the British colonial apparatus and its allies. Their notoriety would be crystallized in a single, enigmatic phrase: "Mau Mau." Through considering the character of both contemporary and current framings, this article contends that Mau Mau exists as a historical method in itself, rather than simply as a phenomenon subjected to the analytical frameworks of historians. Mau Mau's mythological dimension—something acknowledged in even its earliest formal studies—has rarely been focused upon in any sustained way that centers its implications for historical methodology. Yet it existed as a signifier set within enormous discursive webs and systems of information that people interfaced with in myriad ways. More concretely, understandings of and debates about Mau Mau drove human action through their articulation in realms such as (counter)insurgency, politics, and popular culture in geographically-disparate regions of the world. Approaching "events" such as Mau Mau in this fashion reveals the layout of these discursive webs and how they formed around flows of imperial capital, anticolonial resistance, and professional networks.

Résumé: Pendant la période de l'Etat d'urgence au Kenya (1952-1960), un ensemble de forces anticoloniales ont mené une guerre contre l'appareil colonial britannique et ses alliés. Leur notoriété sera cristallisée dans une seule expression énigmatique : « Mau Mau ». En se penchant à la fois sur les conceptions historiques de l'époque et sur celles d'aujourd'hui, cet article soutient que les Mau Mau existent en tant que méthode historique en soi, plutôt que comme un simple phénomène soumis aux cadres analytiques des historiens. La dimension mythologique des Mau Mau, reconnue même dans les premières études formelles, a rarement fait l'objet d'une attention soutenue la mettant ainsi au centre de la méthodologie historique. Pourtant, cette dimension avait une réelle signification au sein des très grands réseaux discursifs et des systèmes d'information avec lesquels il était possible d'interagir de multiples façons. Plus concrètement, les questionnements et débats sur les Mau Mau ont guidé les analyses dans des domaines tels que la (contre)insurrection, la politique ou la

culture populaire dans des régions du monde géographiquement distinctes. Aborder des « événements » tels que celui des Mau Mau de cette manière révèle la disposition de ces réseaux discursifs et la manière dont ils se sont formés autour des flux de capitaux impériaux, de la résistance anticoloniale et des réseaux professionnels.

Introduction

During the period of the Kenya Emergency (1952–1960), an assemblage of anticolonial forces waged war against the British colonial apparatus and its allies. Their notoriety would be crystallized in a single, enigmatic phrase: "Mau Mau."[1] Alongside the intensity of the struggle itself, the state's attempt to suppress the movement through the indiscriminate mass detention of hundreds of thousands of Africans and brutal methods for extracting confessions produced a global interest in Mau Mau, giving rise to widespread debates about its nature and significance. But as many scholars have noted, Mau Mau has never been apprehended as only one thing: a colonial crisis, a war, a movement, an African neurosis, and an "unfinished revolution" name only a handful of its iterations. In the specific context of late colonial Kenya, Bruce Berman points out that "what the British called Mau Mau, and by constant repetition imposed on the consciousness of both Kenya and the outside world, was no single thing, but rather a diverse and exceedingly fragmented collection of individuals, organizations and ideas, out of which no dominant concept of a Kikuyu imagined national community emerged."[2]

Yet the stakes of Mau Mau's constitutive contingency far exceeded the dynamics of Kenyan nationalism and Kikuyu identity, the study of which has long dominated work on the subject.[3] The figurations and myths of Mau Mau that emerged both during and in the wake of the Emergency were refracted through ideological landscapes that spanned continents, crossed oceans, and took shape within diverse systems of thought.[4] Most historians have viewed the fragmentation that characterizes discourses about Mau Mau as a problem to be overcome through accessing archival materials detailing the events of the Emergency in Kenya, incorporating hitherto-ignored memoirs or the

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[1] As Dane Kennedy points out about the origin of the name: "The term arose from a linguistic void, its etymology a mystery. A signifier in search of signification, it lay open to whatever meaning anyone wished to attach to it." Dane Kennedy "Constructing the Colonial Myth of Mau Mau," *The International Journal of African Historical Studies* 25–2 (1992), 241.

[2] Berman, Bruce. "Nationalism, Ethnicity, and Modernity: The Paradox of Mau Mau," *Canadian Journal of African Studies* 25–2 (1991), 199–200.

[3] For an authoritative example of such work, see E. S. Atieno Odhiambo and John Lonsdale (eds.), *Mau Mau & Nationhood* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2003).

[4] This article is especially indebted to one of the pioneering works on Mau Mau's mythology: John Lonsdale, "Mau Maus of the Mind: Making Mau Mau and Remaking Kenya," *The Journal of African History* 31–3 (1990).

voicing of as-yet-unheard narratives about the experiences of those who lived through it. All of these are worthwhile projects in themselves, but this general framing has produced a rather blinkered understanding of the history of Mau Mau. It is an understanding rooted in a reading of the movement as a phenomenon specific to Kenya, and its historiography consists in large part of attempts to reconstruct the events of the rebellion and Emergency in the colony (to any number of ends, of course).

When I first began studying Mau Mau as a graduate student, my intent was to conduct a comparative study of educational systems across several African countries during the transition from colonialism to national independence, with a focus on how liberation struggles were narrativized. It was during my first research trip to Kenya that I came to the conclusion that dealing with Mau Mau in such a manner would fail to capture the multidimensional nature of its symbolic life, both within and outside the borders of that country. Indeed, it pushed me to confront the idea that the same could be said of any of the "major events" of decolonization in Africa. Since then, I've encountered something of a common refrain when I first discuss my work with others (especially non-Africanists). After rehearsing a now well-worn elevator pitch about studying the international impact, underpinnings, and ramifications of Mau Mau, I am often met with polite comments about the "focus" or "specialization" the project is viewed as entailing. To me, this is a deep irony—studying Mau Mau in this way is anything *but* a focused experience, anything *but* a specialized analysis of a single historical event in a specific time and place.[5] The constitution and trajectories of its many mythological lives are kaleidoscopic, contingent, contradictory, and often completely incoherent. They ebb and flow with the play of material and ideological struggles, with the rise of movements for justice, and with the attempts to counter them and suppress dissent. They are also inherently bound to the many "ideas of Africa" that sit at the heart of discourses about the continent and its essences.[6]

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[5] The legacy of area studies in the Western academy looms large in such reactions. Despite decades of critique leveled at "methodological nationalism" in historical work, the provincialization of Mau Mau is an effect of the continued propensity in the discipline to link the trope of the African liberation struggle with the condition of the specific postcolony with which it is associated. As Harry Harootunian notes, "What started out as a convenient way to get courses and languages of distantly foreign countries into college and university curricula after the war became, in time, an enormous organization, resembling more a huge holding company with a tight grip on its subsidiaries, monopolizing its product—knowledge of a specific area—and thus controlling its distribution and consumption." Harry Harootunian, *History's Disquiet: Modernity, Cultural Practice, and the Question of Everyday Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 28.

[6] V. Y. Mudimbe, *The Idea of Africa* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994).

Rooted in early modern discourses about the world beyond Europe, ways of thinking the relation between Africa and the West were made manifest through the colonization of the continent. The prevalence of narratives about Mau Mau's primitivity, its barbaric violence, and the many eccentric Africanisms that were viewed as characterizing it must be understood in light of this. In *The Idea of Africa*, V. Y. Mudimbe remarks that "any analysis would sort out the fact that Africa (as well as Asia and Europe) is represented in Western scholarship by 'fantasies' and 'constructs' made up by scholars and writers since Greek times. That such constructions have simplified cultural complexities and made complex the *being* of these continents as objects should be obvious."[7] African fantasies *par excellence*, myths of Mau Mau are precisely the sorts of notions wherein the "being" of Africa is necessarily at stake and mobilized. Moreover, they are as foundational to romantic imaginings of Mau Mau as they are colonialist ones. Recent research exploring contemporary views on the movement in Jamaica, for example, bears this out.[8] This constitutive capaciousness, however, is too often sidelined in work on the subject.

In an attempt to explore the possibilities that lie beyond conventional approaches to the study of Mau Mau, this article contends that the broader horizon of discourses about it offers new possibilities for its apprehension—horizons that also entail a rethinking of interdisciplinary methods in approaching it and other "anticolonial events" in the history of decolonization. To this end, I argue that we can deploy Mau Mau *as* a kind of historical method itself rather than just a phenomenon subjected *to* analytical frameworks. Understanding the confluence of influences that produce readings of Mau Mau in a given context grants us novel insights into the intellectual cultures of (anti)colonialisms and decolonization. Because of the proliferation of its myths across time and space, Mau Mau harbors enormous potential as a heuristic for investigating historical, political, and social dynamics far beyond the borders of Kenya. If historical methodology is a means of identifying the schematic or framework adopted in the exploration of some problem in the past, taking Mau Mau as a heuristic method for studying decolonization means understanding the currents of this past in relation to the manifold meanings ascribed to the event of "Mau Mau" itself. It centers our attention not only on the causes, nature, and outcomes of events and social phenomena but also on how they come to be articulated and understood across time and space, including within and through disciplinary frameworks. Mau Mau's status as a canonical event in the history of African

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[7] Mudimbe, *The Idea of Africa*, xv.

[8] As Myles Osborne notes, "Mau Mau pulled at the country's social fabric, intersecting with lower-class black radical protest, Africanism, and the Rastafari, laying bare the divisions that the decolonizing nation faced." Myles Osborne, "'Mau Mau Are Angels… Sent by Haile Selassie': A Kenyan War in Jamaica," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 62–4 (2020), 717.

decolonization (something recognized even contemporarily) means that its mythification was and is situated within broader chains of meaning, causality, and pattern.

This status is why it has functioned so frequently as analogy, trope, inspiration, and warning far beyond the borders of Kenya. The "next Mau Mau" was not only a colonial anxiety imagined to be capable of emerging in colonial spaces the world over but also an object of desire in the consciousness of many of those who aimed to overthrow or root out imperialism in the postwar era.[9] This aspect of how Mau Mau has been apprehended is why arriving at a consensus on what Mau Mau "is" or "was" has been perpetually elusive: expecting coherency of such an entity is akin to demanding only one shape from a kaleidoscope. It also points to the central role of futurity in readings of Mau Mau, regardless of whether this temporal dimension of its myths served as a source of anxiety or longing when considering the nature of the world to come.

Thinking about Mau Mau as a heuristic allows for such complexity (and, indeed, the inaccuracies contained within many readings of the movement) to be valued as an asset rather than an impediment. In *The Practical Past*, Hayden White's final major contribution to historical theory, he argues that the contingency inherent to historic events is a site of immense potential: "In most of these discussions, *that* an event occurred does not have to be established. What is at question is the nature of the event, its relative novelty, the scope and intensity of its impact, and its meaning or what it reveals about the society in which it took place."[10] This goes some way toward what it means to view Mau Mau as a heuristic, insofar as it points us toward readings of it that center contestations of its meaning in the full array of contexts in which they appear. Indeed, what has been too often marginalized in the study of Mau Mau is that its attachment to the things at question here were not and are not confined to Kenya, or indeed Africa, though the meaning of its Kenyanness or Africanity have undoubtedly remained key to understandings of it.

This article traces three interrelated threads. The first section outlines how thinking about Mau Mau as a method is fundamentally distinct from existing historiographical approaches to it by exploring recent historiographical paradigms that have shaped its study, which I separate (roughly and imperfectly) into "colonial," "revolutionary," and "international" ways of approaching the subject. Rather than bolstering one of these approaches (or claiming to have created yet another), the aim of understanding Mau

[9] In the case of the latter, one need look no further than Malcolm X's 1964 pronouncement that "in Mississippi we need a Mau Mau, in Alabama we need a Mau Mau, in Georgia we need a Mau Mau, and right here in Harlem, in New York City, we need a Mau Mau." Lowell Denny, "Malcolm X's Mau Mau Speech, 1964," YouTube video, 25:52, May 29, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gH4F1CdQlF8.

[10] Hayden White, *The Practical Past* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2014).

Mau as a method is to formulate an approach that allows us to account for the analytical conditions that generate readings of it in the first place. The second section contends that the condition of "wildness," which I argue is the essential grounding of myths of Mau Mau, ultimately undergirds discourses about it. A "nightmare" for some and a "dream" for others, the historiographical figure that Hayden White identifies as the "Wild Man" provides key insights into how perspectives on Mau Mau are structured.[11] A dialectical figure, the Wild Man is the antithesis of Western Civilization, and antagonism to (or solidarity with) it illuminates expressions of often submerged, underlying affinities. The final portion of the article contends that the analytical underpinnings of ideas about Mau Mau offer new avenues for rethinking how we have dealt with interdisciplinarity as historians of Africa by centering its trans- and supranational groundings. By understanding the "case of Mau Mau" as a means of historicizing disciplinary formations themselves, we can better grasp how the disciplines functioned in relation to decolonization in Africa, and indeed since.

The Historiographical Conditions of Mau Mau

While an exhaustive historiographical survey of this subject would be prohibitive in this article, it is necessary to expand upon the recent orientations mentioned above, as well as upon how thinking about Mau Mau as a heuristic method is distinct from each. The works surveyed here share currency—they are almost exclusively products of the 21st century, and I take them to be representative of the present landscape of widely circulating approaches to the subject. However, the question of how work on this subject has historically gained this sort of circulation is not one to be easily swept aside. A product of long-standing and deeply entrenched biases in the proliferation of academic research, it should not be lost on the reader that a majority of the work explored in this section have been produced in institutions in the West. I focus my analysis on it not because I take it to be exhaustive of knowledge produced about Mau Mau or ultimately authoritative, but rather because its collective influence has played an outsized role in conditioning scholarly (and often lay) discussions of Mau Mau at the global level. With this said, the approaches under discussion can be understood as follows.

What I call the "colonial" approach focuses on the relationship between Mau Mau and contemporary colonialism in Kenya and, indeed, the British Empire more generally. Among many others, the work of historians such as Caroline Elkins and David Anderson is emblematic of this.[12] The

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[11] Hayden White, "The Forms of Wildness: Archaeology of an Idea," *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), 150–182.

[12] While the work of Elkins in Anderson will be discussed at length in this section, it is worth noting that a large portion of earlier historical work on Mau Mau also centered (post)colonial dynamics in its readings of the movement. Of particular note

"revolutionary" approach attempts to figure Mau Mau as an emblematic (or even paradigmatic) African revolution, and emplots it within broader "revolutionary" traditions. Identified with scholars such as Maina wa Kĩnyattĩ, Mickie Mwanzia Koster, and SM Alam, this work tends toward an identification of component parts of Mau Mau that speaks to its revolutionary bonafides. Lastly, the "international approach" seen in the work of historians such as Gerald Horne and Myles Osborne aims to illuminate how Mau Mau was received, debated, and discussed in national contexts outside of Kenya. Neither perfect nor exhaustive, this separation is not meant to suggest a total siloization of these approaches; they often operate in tandem, although the driving logics of these tendencies and the nature of their archival engagements often harbor key differences. In thinking about Mau Mau as a kind of method, what I am interested in here are the assumptions inherent in each of these approaches with regard to what constitutes an archive "about" Mau Mau and how they contend with its symbolic dimensions.

Rooted in a broader historiography of the end of the British empire and decolonization in its possessions, the "colonial approach" holds that Mau Mau was a discrete phenomenon that occurred in Kenya during the 1950s, that it was constitutively Kikuyu, and that the forms and methods of suppression mobilized by the British in attempting to exterminate it are critically important to understanding it as a whole.[13] Such work has centered on reconstructing the events of the Emergency in order to shed new light on the violent processes that underwrote the end of the British Empire, emphasizing in particular the bankruptcy of its putative liberalism. Some of the most well-known recent historical works examining Mau Mau are illustrative of this: Caroline Elkins' *Britain's Gulag* and David Anderson's *Histories of the*

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here is Bruce Berman and John Lonsdale's two-volume account of the Emergency, the run-up to it, and its aftermath. Bruce Berman and John Lonsdale, *Unhappy Valley: Conflict in Kenya and Africa, Book One: State and Class* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 1992); Bruce Berman and John Lonsdale, *Unhappy Valley: Conflict in Kenya and Africa, Book Two: Violence and Ethnicity* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 1992).

[13] By "constitutively Kikuyu," I refer to the now-common reading of Mau Mau as a kind of "civil war within the tribe" that (through alignments and antagonisms toward the colonial administration) exposed older tensions within that community. Although there are many to draw from, a particularly clear example can be seen in John Newsinger's explanation of the revolt as a product of "the increasing differentiation among the Kikuyu peasantry, the mass of whom were sinking deeper into poverty and economic insecurity, while at the same time a 'kulak' gentry class was emerging that supported the Government. By 1953 almost half the population of the Kikuyu reserves was without land. This process of differentiation was to provide the basis for the civil war within the Kikuyu that became an important aspect of the 'Mau Mau' revolt." John Newsinger, Revolt and Repression in Kenya, 1952–1960," *Science & Society* 45–2 (Summer, 1981), 160.

Hanged, for example, both published in 2005.[14] These works came to the forefront of public consciousness due in part to their role in legal actions taken by Mau Mau veterans against the British government, motions that eventually won settlements for some of those tortured and subjected to all sorts of brutality during the Emergency. Most recently, Elkins' *Legacy of Violence: A History of the British Empire* situates Mau Mau within a broader colonial governmentality and professional networks in the British Empire that took shape in the aftermath of the Second World War.[15] Thus, when considering its archival and intellectual assumptions, it is fair to say that such work centers a heuristic of recovery based on sources detailing the events of the Emergency in Kenya and its aftermath.

The colonial approach's view on the archives of Mau Mau works from two fundamental premises: first, that the myths that arose in Kenya's settler community are fundamental untruths that tacitly render the entire mythology of Mau Mau suspect; second, that explorations of it must attend to how it exposed older tensions within the specific African communities directly impacted by the war. It is these elements of the history of Mau Mau that provide us a means of thinking about it in relation to the material processes of decolonization, counter-insurgency, and the production of social death—all of which are areas explored generatively in such scholarship. This orientation indexes the fractiousness of Mau Mau as a condition of the partiality of its assumed archives, themselves a product of purges of colonial documents that sought to cover the British empire's tracks revealing war crimes and atrocities. Because of the purging of great portions of British colonial records detailing operations against Mau Mau, a historiographical common sense has emerged that views the study of it as having arrived at a limit point in terms of archival possibilities. After all, considering the scale of destruction undergone by these records in Kenya at the end of the empire, what paths forward are possible other than continuing to sift through what remains of them?

The awareness of this archival problem shapes how such an approach interacts with myths of Mau Mau. For example, in Elkins' work the forms of detention and suppression utilized by the British colonial apparatus are in large part a concentrated effort to produce socially dead subjects who were either eliminated or conscripted into the labor-intensive schemes of the state. In this reading, the myth of Mau Mau serves as a mechanism for justifying torture and draconian regimes of economic exploitation, while also obscuring the legitimacy of African grievances in the colony. In illuminating the darkest implications of them, this framing necessarily focuses on both the

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[14] David Anderson, *Histories of the Hanged: The Dirty War in Kenya and the End of Empire* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2005); Caroline Elkins, *Britain's Gulag: The Brutal End of Empire in Kenya* (London: Pimlico, 2005).

[15] Caroline Elkins, *Legacy of Violence: A History of the British Empire* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2022).

opportunistic usage of myths of Mau Mau and its existence as a figure haunting the imagination of British liberalism. What this allows us to see is the contemporary impact of *one* of the consequences of Mau Mau's mythological existence: the anxiety-laden emergence of it that drove the extreme violence of the British eliminationist drive toward it within the project of decolonization. This entails understanding Mau Mau as emblematic of a genre of imperial governmentality rooted in the postwar proliferation of "states-of-exception"—thus centering its progression "from a military to a civilian conflict," or from understanding it as simply a colonial War, to viewing it as a violent attempt to restructure Kikuyu society itself.[16] What this approach does not address, however, are the broader contemporary and historiographical implications of Mau Mau's mythification—and in particular, its romantic life in anticolonial constellations of thought.

In a way, the "revolutionary approach" to Mau Mau has attempted to highlight the stakes of precisely this issue. In taking a romantic vision of anticolonial revolution as its *raison-d'être*, it has aimed to identify component parts that locate Mau Mau as truly revolutionary, either in its explicit ideological and political aims or by reading it as an expression of subaltern resistance. This approach represents a stark departure from viewing it as a European myth, positioning it instead as (or within) a kind of anticolonial epic. In doing so, its contours are shaped by what Oyeniyi Okunoye calls "the counterdiscourse which authorizes revisionist histories in the postcolonial world."[17] The common assertion that Mau Mau was the first in a wave of postwar African revolutions, for example, is often found in colloquial discourses about the movement. Though it has garnered less public attention than works such as *Britain's Gulag* or *Histories of the Hanged* (and often finds itself the object of much criticism), work that deploys this framing highlights how the myth of Mau Mau has functioned in ways oppositional to colonial instrumentality.[18] This renders it something of a mirror image to the first

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[16] For more on this framing, see Caroline Elkins, "Detention, Rehabilitation & the Destruction of Kikuyu Society," in *Mau Mau & Nationhood: Arms, Authority & Narration*, eds. E. S. Atieno Odhiambo and John Lonsdale (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2003).

[17] Oyeniyi Okunoye, "Dramatizing Postcoloniality: Nationalism and the Rewriting of History in Ngugi and Mugo's *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi*," *History in Africa* 28 (2001), 225.

[18] Both Koster and Alam's work on Mau Mau have been critiqued for their reliance on extremely thin source bases and reading the movement ahistorically in order to make it function within a sort of "revolutionary paradigm." For more, see Myles Osborne, "The Power of the Oath: Mau Mau Nationalism in Kenya," Review of *The Power of the Oath: Mau Mau Nationalism in Kenya* by Mickie Koster, *African Studies Review* 63–2 (September 2019): E27–E29; Myles Osborne, Little News on Mau Mau," Review of *Rethinking Mau Mau in Colonial Kenya* by S. M. S. Alam, *The Journal of African History*, 50–2 (2009), 316–318; David Sandgren, "Rethinking Mau Mau in Colonial

approach and also points to a shared interest in a heuristic of recovery and archival sources focused on Kenya, albeit with a more transnational view on the appeal of Mau Mau among anticolonial movements abroad.[19]

In their naming of it as a revolution (and, importantly, not shying away from the moniker itself), scholars such as Mickie Koster and S. M. S. Alam tap into (and participate in) a different myth of Mau Mau—one imbricated with nationhood to be sure, but also transnational in its implications. "The Mau Mau revolution," writes Koster, "was a violent African struggle against colonial rule and a precursor for Kenyan independence in 1963."[20] As an early, nationalist iteration in a series of events constituting a greater African Revolution across the continent, Mau Mau's Kenyanness is central to such readings of it. Thus, despite overtures toward transnationalism in its framing, such an approach tends to mesh comfortably with the classic trajectory of African liberation struggles and the postcolonies with which they are sensibly associated, wherein an insurgent uprising forces the question of colonialism into plain view, followed subsequently by the achievement of state sovereignty. The trope of the African national liberation struggle, which manifests here across the continent and regardless of colonizing force, looms large.

Because within this approach it is understood as one event within a longer series, Mau Mau can be abstracted, theorized, and situated in theoretical paradigms of revolution. This aspect of this approach is both what grants it its novelty and its limitations. "For any revolutionary movement to succeed there must be plans both organizational and military," writes Alam, and "Mau Mau was no exception. It was a revolutionary movement against colonial oppression."[21] This framing necessarily entails understanding Mau Mau within broader trajectories of anticolonial resistance, all of which have their narrativization attached to revolutionary credentials in the form of formulaic attributes. The drive to read Mau Mau as revolutionary is attached to its own set of archival logics and political investments. Alam argues that, in the wake of Elkins' and Anderson's texts, "The question now is how to recover the history of Mau Mau in the voice of the history makers themselves."[22] Thus,

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Kenya," Review of *Rethinking Mau Mau in Colonial Kenya* by S. M. S. Alam, *The International Journal of African Historical Studies*, 41–2 (2008), 337–339.

[19] Mickie Mwanzia Koster, "Malcolm X, the Mau Mau, and Kenya's New Revolutionaries: A Legacy of Transnationalism," *Journal of African American History* 100–2 (Spring 2015), 250–272; Mickie Mwanzia Koster, "'They Were Revolutionaries!': Malcolm X and Jomo Kenyatta's Pan-Africanism, 1960–65," in *Global Africans: Race, Ethnicity, and Shifting Identities*, eds. Toyin Falola and Cacee Hoyer (New York: Routledge, 2017), 164–182.

[20] Koster, "Malcolm X, the Mau Mau, and Kenya's New Revolutionaries," 250.

[21] S. M. Shamsul Alam, *Rethinking Mau Mau in Colonial Kenya* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2007), 98.

[22] Alam, *Rethinking Mau Mau*, 32.

as different as it is from the work of someone like Elkins, Alam's Gramscian analysis of the movement shares assumptions of Kenya as locus and centers a heuristic of recovering the "truth of the matter." The historical common sense this operates within is that when one speaks of Mau Mau, one is necessarily speaking about the Emergency in Kenya and those who lived through it. Further, the revolutionary project here is often attached to the condition of Mau Mau's subalternity and an attempt to make it speak. As Koster writes about the notorious oaths deployed by the movement, "The [Mau Mau] oath continues to represent a source of African subaltern power based on spiritual beliefs; it purposely remains secretive, vague, and feared."[23]

In a tangential way, this aspect of Mau Mau has also informed the historiography of a more recently emerging body of scholarship that has examined its international impacts and trajectories. Both Gerald Horne and Myles Osborne have explored how the reception of Mau Mau in places like the United States and Jamaica was refracted through contextual political, cultural, and economic debates—processes that frequently generated readings that positioned the Mau Mau as a sort of revolutionary force.[24] Reaching far beyond Kenya in geographic scope, Horne and Osborne examine discussions of Mau Mau through rubrics of class, racial identity, or the relations of colonialism. Each has demonstrated that the movement was romanticized by disenfranchised groups in these places, becoming a referent of solidarity for intellectual formations such as Rastafarianism in Jamaica or Black Power in the United States.[25] These works have thus taken up the question of Mau Mau's revolutionary character very differently, as an object of study rather than a mode of emplotment. Put differently, rather than claim Mau Mau was a *true revolution* according to a set of theoretical principles, such work offers theses on the reception of the movement in a given time and place (including instances when it has been read as "revolutionary"). Whereas the revolutionary approach to Mau Mau situates it within "one comprehensive or archetypal story form," the study of how Mau Mau was received by international

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[23] Mickie Mwanzia Koster, *The Power of the Oath: Mau Mau Nationalism in Kenya, 1952–1960* (Rochester: Rochester University Press, 2016), 11.

[24] Osborne, "'Mau Mau Are Angels'"; Gerald Horne, *Mau Mau in Harlem?: The U.S. and the Liberation of Kenya* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2009).

[25] On the other side of the coin, each of these works also demonstrates that moderate or "liberal" elements in these contexts (especially those drawn from the black middle-class) viewed Mau Mau as a threat to racial progress and inexcusably violent. As James Meriwether has also argued, "The Mau Mau insurgency widened the parameters of debate over how to combat white supremacy, and helped foster and distinguish those who favored more militant approaches from the liberal civil rights leadership." James Meriwether, "African Americans and the Mau Mau Rebellion: Militancy, Violence, and the Struggle for Freedom," *Journal of American Ethnic History* 17–4 (Summer, 1998), 64.

audiences shows us how the revolutionary tradition emerges itself.[26] What this international approach has tended to neglect, however, is the fundamental question of how this was possible conceptually at the enormous scale in which we see it manifested. As we will see, thinking about Mau Mau as a heuristic method grants us insight into the deeper mechanics of this phenomenon. Nevertheless, reckoning with constellations of its mythology outside Kenya has remained a marginal project within the historiography of Mau Mau. It is in part the marginality of this approach to Mau Mau that has produced perceptions of historiographical impasse.

Ashes, Fragments, and the History of an Event

The consequences of this sense of impasse are made clear in Caroline Elkins' insightful 2015 article, "Looking Beyond Mau Mau: Archiving Violence in the Era of Decolonization," which aims to take stock of historiographical possibilities in the field. I focus on her thoughts here because her recent works are the most widely known pieces of scholarship in the field for both general scholarly and lay audiences. The opening line of her article speaks to how one of the most influential historians of Mau Mau in recent memory imagines its archives, and indeed those of the end of empire more generally: "When asked to reflect upon the era of British decolonization and the archives that document it, I am drawn to images of ash and fragments, and the ability of post-imperial landscapes and those who till them to conceal as much as they reveal."[27] From the outset, then, the portrait of the archives of decolonization (including those of Mau Mau) is one of destruction, lack, and the inescapability of imperial violence. This is no doubt accurate, and Elkins identifies an important condition of British imperial historiography in arguing that "the vast historiography on the end of the British Empire has been largely devoid of archival skepticism."[28] Certainly, such an oversight is inexcusable in terms of evaluating historical records that detail the British imperial apparatus's management of the Emergency. The idea that the history of decolonization in Africa (or anywhere else for that matter) can be discerned without engaging the conditions that produce archives containing materials about it is, today, not uncommon.[29] Yet this archival skepticism has also produced blind spots in thinking about Mau Mau as a historical phenomenon—in particular, how its status as an "event" of decolonization interfaced with contemporary historical consciousness across the globe.

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[26] Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in 19th-Century Europe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973), 7.

[27] Elkins, "Looking Beyond Mau Mau," 852.

[28] Elkins, "Looking Beyond Mau Mau," 853.

[29] For one of the most influential works on the subject, see Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995).

At the end of her article, Elkins identifies four ways that she sees as providing generative paths forward in historical studies of Mau Mau. The first, "rather self-evident," lies in the fact that the "Migrated Archives offer a large volume of new evidence, though it is highly culled at various points."[30] Further exploring these records has enormous potential in continuing to address gaps in what we know about the facts of the Emergency. The second approach detailed by Elkins entails a more expansive vision of what counts as historical sources and is rooted in a methodology that draws as much from memoirs and autobiography as it does official state archives. Indeed, this remains an area of emerging scholarship with high potential for better understanding the social, political, and cultural implications of late colonial Kenya.

The third way forward offered by Elkins is to take a more robust approach to the relationship between official archives of and about Mau Mau and the character of the state itself—or "interrogating the ways in which the production of the British colonial archive reflected the nature of the colonial state itself."[31] In other words, an approach that might expand our analysis of how the creation of archives is linked to contemporary modes of governmentality. Her final recommendation is to collaborate with disciplines not bound by the empirical "lifeblood" of the historical profession, which on its own is incapable of "resurrecting that which colonial incinerators have left to the historical imagination."[32] In this view, we might fill out the imagination of the historical discipline with scholarship on sources viewed as categorically "unempirical"—literature, the arts, etc.—and thus harboring a greater affinity for imagination.

I do not mean to suggest that Elkins understands these approaches as exhaustive of all possible avenues of study, but attending to their assumptions and understanding of the archives of Mau Mau is useful in providing a good idea of the historiographical state of play (especially insofar as we are discussing Mau Mau's relationship to the end of British empire). A few things seem common to all of them: the study of Mau Mau is a matter of approximating its truth as a phenomenon in Kenyan history, its archives are a source of historiographical constraint rather than expansiveness, and attending to the nature of the colonial state is essential. The question this raises, however, is the extent to which we can separate the inherent empiricism of the historical discipline and the "historical imagination" in our studies of the events of decolonization.

The centrality of mythification to the idea of Mau Mau itself means that the units of empiricism are themselves abstractions, after all, and the consumption of them equally a process that deals in symbols, figures, tropes,

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30 Elkins, "Looking Beyond Mau Mau," 864.
31 Elkins, "Looking Beyond Mau Mau," 866.
32 Elkins, "Looking Beyond Mau Mau," 866.

types, and ideations. For example, in Mau Mau historiography, "the Kikuyu" is both a term of empirical description *and* a category steeped in the semiotics of Africanness. Moreover, this approach recenters a more fundamental question about the relationship in the historiography of Mau Mau: why the "ashes and fragments" housed in the state archives of Great Britain or Kenya remain the assumptive nucleus of what constitutes the archives of Mau Mau. Even when Elkins suggests that we tap into unorthodox source bases in continuing the conversation, it is only due to the natural archival core having been mined, lost, or compromised already. State archives generated by the British colonial apparatus may be those best suited to an empiricist and legalistic exploration of the violence suffered by Kenyans during the Emergency, but (as the international approach to its study has demonstrated) there are other ways to think Mau Mau that offer new means of apprehending the history of decolonization, anticolonial thought, and colonial power. The historiographical impasse seems to be an issue of both archive and object—that is, where we can "find" Mau Mau and what exactly Mau Mau "was."

The remainder of this article argues that understanding Mau Mau as a method provides us with the means to write *histories* of the "event of Mau Mau" rather than *a history* of the movement or war itself. "Though it has occupied the attention of many scholars," notes Osborne, "they have tended to treat it in isolation, perhaps an accidental product of its rich but narrow historiography."[33] And Evan Mwangi points out that "contemporary artists and citizens deploy references to Mau Mau outside of its historical context to address, in highly emotive language, contemporary problems in Kenya, such as runaway corruption and police brutality."[34] In such framings, deployments of Mau Mau are not assessed for their accuracy or theoretical rigor but how they allow us to see the ways in which historical consciousness draws from what White called the "practical past." Such an approach inverts the orthodox relation to the fact that Mau Mau's mythologies offer us a thicket of contradictions and inconsistencies, finding richness in partiality and value in fragmentation.

The Methodology of Mau Mau

Centering the fragmentary nature of Mau Mau entails a sustained focus on the formation and consequences of different manifestations of historical consciousness. Mau Mau worked on the imaginations of people the world over, interfacing not only with their material or political circumstances but also foundational elements of scholarly and popular thought. Imaginings of Mau Mau were necessarily articulated with conceptions of other events,

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[33] Osborne, "Mau Mau Are Angels," 717.
[34] Evan Mwangi, "The Incomplete Rebellion: Mau Mau Movement in Twenty-First-Century Kenyan Popular Culture," *Africa Today* 57–2 (Winter 2010), 87.

processes, and experiences. For example, this is what allowed for Mau Mau to be agreed upon by various contemporary powers as a manifestation of "terrorism" (one of the most common ways the movement was described in the international arena).[35] And it is equally what allowed Mau Mau to stand as a harbinger of liberation for people throughout the colonized world. Neither of these categories are specific ones that pertain only to Kenya, or even Africa; they are by definition supranational, transcontinental, and dialectical. By focusing on how attitudes toward Mau Mau were refracted through the lenses of race and class in the West, the work of Horne and Osborne shows us one way of understanding how these connections were worked out. What has remained submerged (even within this "international approach") is how Mau Mau took form more abstractly within systems of thought, and how this in turn gave shape to the contemporary historical consciousness that affected both colonial and anticolonial discourses and experiences.

As both conceptual pole and historiographical frame, the condition of wildness grants us an entry point into beginning to pursue this thread more robustly. In an often-overlooked 1972 article "The Forms of Wildness: Archaeology of an Idea," Hayden White argues,

> The notion of 'wildness' (or, in its Latinate form, 'savagery') belongs to a set of culturally self-authenticating devices which includes, among many others, the ideas of 'madness' and 'heresy' as well. These terms are used not merely to designate a specific condition or state of being but also to confirm the value of their dialectical antitheses 'civilization,' 'sanity,' and 'orthodoxy,' respectively. Thus, they do not so much refer to a specific thing, place, or condition as dictate a particular attitude governing a relationship between a lived reality and some area of problematical existence that cannot be accommodated easily to conventional conceptions of the normal or familiar.[36]

This space of "problematical existence" goes some way toward expressing the broadest implications of understanding Mau Mau as a heuristic method. Because it was an event discussed the world over, tracing the contours of how different people rendered its significance through the dialectic of Wildness and Civilization grants us insight into the historical consciousness of decolonization. Among others, Luise White has pointed to

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[35] In a 1966 address given in Mozambique, the Portuguese dictator António Salazar argued that "It would be a grave risk for the world to give way to the conviction that terrorism is invincible; and it was precisely for this reason that England beat and liquidated it in Kenya and Malaysia." Salazar, *Discursos e Notas Políticas*, 1106. (*Seria grave risco para o mundo deixar arreigar-se a convicção de que o terrorismo é invencível; e foi certamente por isto que a Inglaterra tão bem o bateu e liqui dou no Quénia e na Malásia.*)

[36] White, *Tropics of Discourse*, 151.

the importance of attending to this feature of discourses about Mau Mau: "The key concept in the official studies of Mau Mau was dissolution—the dissolution of order, of Christianity, of personality."[37] This notion gained its general currency across the continent, and indeed beyond it, through the idea that Mau Mau was an entity capable of "spreading to" or "emerging in" other locales.[38] Contemporary actors outside of Kenya (and, indeed, within it as well) who imagined the presence or possibility of new Mau Maus can be understood as having worked from either an anxiety preoccupied with local manifestations of Wild Men or a historical imagination expressing a solidarity toward such a figure.

Implicitly or explicitly, the dread of new Mau Maus we find in colonial discourse always positions them as the antithesis of civilization and order. In his article on Mau Mau and colonial consciousness, John Lonsdale contends that, "In the several Mau Maus of their minds whites negotiated fresh African stereotypes, to bring new order out of confusion."[39] Here, Lonsdale draws our attention to the fact that the figures of Mau Mau that emerged in Kenya during the Emergency were a means of providing order and self-validation in an incomprehensible situation—precisely one of the functions White outlines above. More concretely, the problem of Mau Mau (and all Wild Men) is the problem of what it means to embody an anticivilizational ethos, whether by ascription or choice. That this was attached to Eurocentric ideas about what constitutes civilization is obvious. But as White points out elsewhere in his article, the figure of the Wild Man produces claims of similitude along with those of difference. Consciously aligning oneself with "wildness" is a decision, and through it we see a means of understanding oneself as being against the imperial order, a despotic Civilization, or Babylon. Such connections are grounded in analyses rooted in frameworks of coloniality, historical consciousness, and divine destiny, respectively. In this view, Mau Mau's "spread" was not a source of anxiety but celebration—not a problem to be contained but the embodiment of a righteous force that marked the beginning of the emergence of an altogether new world.

Taking Mau Mau as method permits a more robust understanding of the forms of improvisation, imagination, and sense of historicity that sat at the heart of imagining new worlds in the postwar period in Africa and elsewhere. So too does it offer us a way into following webs of association, analogy, and figuration within contemporary forms of historical

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[37] Luise White, "Separating the Men from the Boys: Constructions of Gender, Sexuality, and Terrorism in Central Kenya, 1939–1959," *The International Journal of African Historical Studies* 23–1 (1990), 15.

[38] For a broader perspective on this phenomenon, see Sloan Mahone, "The Psychology of Rebellion: Colonial Medical Responses to Dissent in British East Africa," *The Journal of African History* 47–2 (2006), 241–258.

[39] Lonsdale, "Mau Maus of the Mind," 404.

consciousness. In part, this is possible because of Mau Mau's embeddedness in much deeper narrative structures. With its exotic rituals, the wild appearances of militants, and accounts of its extreme violence, the tropes that emerged around Mau Mau (whether hostile, tragic, or revolutionary) had at their core ideas of Africa. Because the being of Africa is always about both the West and contestations of its dominance—to borrow Mudimbe's framing—the analogy of Mau Mau to different struggles necessarily entailed commentary on Western civilization and (in the postwar era) Euro-American hegemony. This is in part why the question of its location became prominent in contemporary discourses: the latent possibility of Mau Maus in Jamaica, West and South Africa, the United States, and indeed post-independence Kenya. Mau Mau as method goes beyond understanding how it was "received" in any of these places, however, pointing instead toward the identification of foundational elements that conditioned the content and possibilities of receptions themselves. If the idea of Africa was constitutive to any discussion about Mau Mau, its being (disorderly, powerful, transgressive) was thus capable of manifesting anywhere such a discussion could be found. We know this not only from contemporary discourses themselves that operated by this logic, but also the political and military consequences they produced. The discourses that led to these were a means of identifying different elements in contestation with each other, more or less aligned with a world-system driven by the dictates of capital and characterized by what Siba Grovogui identifies as a global division between "sovereigns, quasi-sovereigns, and Africans"[40]—that is, the international construction of juridical sovereignty around the figure of the Sovereign Human and against the figure of the African, with many shades of gray in between. This legalistic division gave substance to the dialectic of civilization and savagery, marking out boundaries between Rational and Wild Men well into the postwar era. So too did it accord with the fundamental basis of colonialism, wherein backwardness and primitivity constituted the rationale for the many civilizing missions of the West.

What constituted civilization in the Kenya of the Emergency could be conveyed in coded or explicit language, but it was usually conveyed as a matter of race. "Race," Lonsdale points out, "was the most obvious boundary under threat and was simplest defended by hardening the polemical frontier between white civilisation and black savagery."[41] And while this frontier may have begun rhetorically, its consequences were material. The example of Mau-Mau-as-terrorism is illustrative of this. In this formulation, the alleged hyper-specific Africanisms of Mau Mau often grated against its

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[40] Siba N'Zatioula Grovogui, *Sovereigns, Quasi Sovereigns, and Africans: Race and Self-Determination in International Law* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996).

[41] Lonsdale, "Mau Maus of the Mind," 404.

articulation to a category that was concurrently used to describe any number of movements in Europe and elsewhere. It was also a category that such movements and their sympathizers used to distinguish what they were doing from the Mau Mau—or, in Grovogui's terms, to claim the mantle of sovereignty and create a conceptual distance between themselves and the African condition.[42] It is a space in which one is invited to both analogize and distinguish in kind—a matter, in other words, of expressing consonance and dissonance.

In many such discourses, the tensions and contradictions produced through these constellations of thought usually went unreckoned with and unresolved. The case of Ireland is illustrative as an example of the sort of "quasi-sovereign" status theorized by Grovogui. Contemporary debates that analogized or distinguished between Mau Mau and violent expressions of Irish Republican sentiment show us how deploying it as a method allows for new ways of thinking about long-overlooked affinities. An opinion piece from May 1953 in *The Catholic Standard*, for example, reads:

> Those writers to the press and others who conclude that because the Mau Mau are opposed to the British regime in Kenya that they are necessarily a kind of African movement comparable to the I.R.A. in the struggle for Irish independence should read the latest accounts of what is happening to Catholic missionaries, including such men as Father Patrick McGill, and African laity such as the leading Kikuyu member of the legion of Mary, whose mutilated body was recovered recently from a river in the territory now terrorised by this anti-Christian movement.[43]

Here, articulated with Irish Catholicism, it is the reducibility of Mau Mau to its essence as an "anti-Christian" movement that makes its analogy to the I.R.A. impossible. That this is also a matter of its anti-civilizational ethos is subtextual here, but explicit in similar contemporary analyses. Other times, however, these tensions were resolved by imagining politics anew. Thus, it was possible for an anonymous pro-I.R.A. source in 1969 to describe what they were facing as "settler-talk, the talk of the Rhodesians, or of Kenyan whites in the face of the Mau Mau. Such elocution was marked out of date when the United Irishmen had their say in the North nearly two centuries ago."[44] What is important is not whether this analogy is a good one, but that it demonstrates

[42] In 1958, for example, Colin Legum wrote about the rebellion in Cyprus that "the authorities, both military and civil, accept that EOKA cannot be crushed like Mau Mau. One reason for this is that EOKA is *not just a terrorist organisation*; it is also *a militant political movement* supported by highly sophisticated professional and business people as well as by workers and peasants." Colin Legum, "War in Soft Shoes Against EOKA," *The Observer*, 23 November 1958, 8.

[43] "The Mau-Mau 'Patriots' [opinion]," *The Catholic Standard*, 22 May 1953.

[44] Anonymous, "Settler Talk," *Belfast Telegraph*, 22 February 1969.

how Mau Mau can be deployed as a method for identifying different manifestations of historical consciousness. In the quotes above, we might describe these different forms as, on the one hand, a romantic affinity with Christian Civilization or the West and, on the other, an equally-romantic affinity with anticolonial nationalism.

Thinking Mau Mau as method thus entails a reevaluation of how historians have traditionally interfaced with the archive and what constitutes the historical evidence of a given event. The analogical function of Mau Mau in contemporary discourses about colonialism or decolonization provides an opportunity to enter through the tangential spaces opened up by contextual readings of Mau Mau. In *For the Record: On Sexuality and the Colonial Archive in India*, Anjali Arondekar offers a recasting of the relationship between archival materials and the heuristic of sexuality in Indian historiography (especially as it pertains to colonial discourses). She views this as situated in the broader project of rethinking the relationship between archival objects and the narration of history. "The archival responsibility of this book," writes Arondekar, "is to propose a different kind of archival romance, one that supplements the narrative of retrieval with a radically different script of historical continuation. The critical challenge is to imagine a practice of archival reading that incites relationships between the seductions of recovery and the occlusions such retrieval mandates."[45] In other words, for Arondekar, the focus on "finding" sexuality in the archives of colonial India is an approach that presupposes a specific sort of (queer) subjectivity, one that conditions historical work to be invested in an equally specific sort of narrative recuperation. The space between the "seductions of recovery" and the "occlusions" this hails into existence allows us to ask new types of historical questions, ones that decenter the completeness or representativeness of an archival body as an indicator of its value.[46]

This has a clear resonance for thinking about Mau Mau as a heuristic method. Its ambiguous nature allows us to understand the movement's situatedness within grammars of violence that produce concepts like "terrorism," insofar as the point is not to determine whether Mau Mau was actually a "terrorist group" or not, but rather to understand how the analogy provides insight into the ways in which a broader concept operated contextually and conditioned claims of distinction or similitude. Such an approach points to "the idea of an archive that is more fractious than cumulative, more a space of catachresis than catharsis."[47] In other words, we might think about fractiousness not as a weakness in our historical understanding of Mau Mau

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[45] Anjali Arondekar, *For the Record: On Sexuality and the Colonial Archive in India* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009), 1.

[46] Or, to ask the question more pointedly, "can an empty archive also be full?" Arondekar, *For the Record*, 1.

[47] Arondekar, *For the Record*, 1.

but as a source of expansiveness and possibility. This goes some way toward addressing the historiographical omissions that overlook marginalized perspectives on Mau Mau not only in Kenya but outside of it. As Osborne writes of many of the Jamaican subjects of his study, "Their writings, where they exist, rarely achieved what Achille Mbembe calls the required 'status' for archival reception, their words and actions deemed too insignificant and difficult to decipher to merit attention."[48] In general, the archival status of sources "about" Mau Mau has been overdetermined by the question of influence over the movement itself or the British response to it. This focus is, of course, commonsensical. But to think of it as the foundational anchor for studying the history of Mau Mau obscures different avenues that point us in generative directions that require more robust engagement with the nature of historical events themselves.

For example, we might think about how Mau Mau was articulated with the investment on the part of Western powers in maintaining a common privileged position in the political economy of the African Continent in the postwar era. This fundamental structural alignment has long nagged at normative distinctions drawn between liberal imperialism (like that of the British) and other variants positioned in competition with it. And yet, with the event of Mau Mau, we can see a closing of the ranks on the part of all European actors with interests on the continent. For the Portuguese dictator Antonio Salazar, it was "among the most significant explosions of anti-white racism that has recently aggravated many situations, depriving countries of capable elites and throwing the natural leaders out in the eager pursuit of 'Africanization'"—a phenomenon to which he tied his regime's own fate.[49] Mau Mau's wildness made it antithetical to Western domination of all sorts and positioned it as an oppositional pole that allowed for continued fretting over the "collapse of Western civilization" even during a period when such language was viewed as being *passé*. This is one factor that produced strange bedfellows amongst colonial powers during this period; how it is that Salazar's *Estado Novo* had allies among self-proclaimed liberals and progressives in Britain, for example? The identification of affinities is an effect of structural factors, both in the material and ideational sense. As a method, Mau Mau can do the work of pointing toward these sorts of affinities, ones that may even be much more fundamental than something like the "liberal tradition," of which so much has been made in examining British imperial ideology.

An example of this, alluded to above, is the contemporary currency of the idea of Christian Civilization in the postwar era. Affinities with this concept were expressed across Europe, Africa, and the Western hemisphere—but regardless of their context or normative political categorization, they were

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[48] Osborne, "Mau Mau Are Angels," 716.
[49] António Oliveira Salazar, *Discursos e Notas Políticas, Vol. 6, 1959 a 1966* (Coimbra, Portugal: Coimbra Editora, 1967), 1103.

ubiquitously anti-Mau Mau. Mudimbe argues that, "There is no homology between the Christian universe and this concrete space which is 'Christian Europe.' The Christian universe would rather declare a manner of privilege that is historically exceptional."[50] The idea of a Christian Civilization is not so much a geographic or theological concept, then, as it is a form of historical consciousness. It is a consciousness characterized by rationality, self-referential legibility to the West, and a certain kind of order. Or, as he puts it, the realm "where sense and desire are colonized by truth."[51] Refracting Mau Mau through this consciousness means thinking about its dialectical situatedness—the antagonist of the Christian universe, for example, or an eruption of barbarism in the face of civilization. Writing histories of the event of Mau Mau, however, equally means avoiding presupposing a romantic version of its form or seeking to identify the formal components that make it "revolutionary," a "peasant insurgency," or other such things. Following Arondekar, thinking Mau Mau as method means addressing the question of how to understand its relationship to different sorts of archives "without fetishizing its historical formation, without relinquishing its epistemological possibilities, and without commodifying its political contexts."[52] One fruitful avenue for this, I believe, lies in understanding Mau Mau's location within and across disciplinary sets of knowledge and (post)imperial frameworks.

Mau Mau and the Supranational

Mau Mau was and is conceptual. The inescapability of this has been the driving force behind any historical study seeking to reckon with its mythi-fication, whether on the part of white settlers in Kenya or Rastafarian theologians and intellectuals in Kingston. Of course, some part of its instability as a signifier is a product of colonial propaganda and the ways in which information about the Kenyan Mau Mau was given form through political calculation and marketing the British Empire as a liberal force.[53] But an equally important aspect of its instability is that representations of it were shaped by a complex of disciplinary formations and supranational intellectual framings, which hopped fairly easily across any imagined boundary between professional and popular discourses. Nor were the sorts of anthropological tropes and exotic Africanisms that characterized so much of Mau Mau's representation confined to the Anglophone world, still today the default locus of scholarship on the subject. One reason for this is the fact that Western academic discourses have never been siloed,

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[50] Mudimbe, *Idea of Africa*, 11.
[51] Mudimbe, *Idea of Africa*, 11.
[52] Arondekar, *For the Record*, 2.
[53] For more on the role of colonial propaganda, see Myles Osborne, "'The Rooting Out of Mau Mau from the Minds of the Kikuyu is a Formidable Task': Propaganda and the Mau Mau War," *The Journal of African History* 56 (2015).

and certainly not in the ways historians have classically imagined imperial frameworks—that is, as having "overlaps" or "exchanges" rather than being part of broader intellectual systems. Knowledge about, and discussions of, Mau Mau show us both the limits of such assumptions and point toward a new means of apprehending such systems. The final section of this article explores two elements that are indispensable to such an approach: first, the necessity of thinking simultaneously within and beyond the framework of the (inter)national; second, the ways in which the historicization of the disciplines is useful in pursuing this task. In other words, the supranationality of Mau Mau is a matter not only of contemporary politics but also of formations of knowledge. While work that has examined the international legacies of Mau Mau has furthered our understanding of the former, thinking Mau Mau as method means understanding the conditions of possibility and underlying affinities that authorize each of these constellations.

In "Mau Maus of the Mind," Lonsdale argues that, "We must know how Mau Mau was intellectually constructed before we can decide what it was and how it may have changed history. Behind the surface solidarities of war, myths of Mau Mau were more disputed than has been thought, with Africans as divided as whites."[54] Despite his commitment to the possibility of its ultimately having a stable meaning ("before we can decide what it was"), Lonsdale's broader point that understanding its "intellectual construction" is essential in apprehending the phenomenon historically is useful in thinking about Mau Mau as method. Though he does not pursue it, his conceptualization of this line of inquiry attests to the need to situate such disputes within broader constellations of thought that are not easily (or even possibly) captured within a single imperial framework. Like the myths of Mau Mau that traversed borders, oceans, and normative political divisions, its disciplinary manifestations and consequences were also global in scope.

Mau Mau as method allows us a means of illuminating transnational dimensions of contemporary constellations of thought, networks, and processes of borrowing that have hitherto remained obscure. This complicates the historiography of Mau Mau in a number of ways. Foremost amongst these is the importance of attending to it across linguistic boundaries, especially those that serve as the *linguas francas* of international scholarly networks, powerful intelligence communities, and the connective tissue of anticolonial solidarities. Neither the disciplines nor the (anti)imperial imagination were monolingual enterprises, and imperial and anticolonial solidarities were not siloed to nearly the extent that something like the classic historiographical divisions of Anglophone, Francophone, Arabophone, and Lusophone Africa would imply. Acknowledging this fact is important not only in creating a more robust historiographical conversation about decolonization in Africa but also

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[54] Lonsdale, "Mau Maus of the Mind," 395.

in acknowledging the current stakes of understanding how solidarities and affinities are expressed around different movements, ideas, and international political protests.[55]

Laura Doyle's recent study of "inter-imperiality," which she describes as a "feminist-intersectional and political-philosophical concept for analysis of longue-duree politics as they have co-constituted world history and humans memory," is illustrative of the potential here.[56] Doyle offers a means by which we can apprehend how the "highly dynamic presence of the past infuses memories, places, arts, and bodies as well as states, economies, and institutions, with volatile effects."[57] Such a past was not tethered to geography in any straightforward manner. This framing points to some of the key ways that Mau Mau's international trajectories are given shape, rather than just "how it was received" in different places. First, the contours of the many international lives of Mau Mau depend fundamentally on the situatedness of their emergence in given places, moments, and political economies. Second, understandings of Mau Mau are given expression within specific political and philosophical frameworks, and attending to their foundational logics is crucial. Finally, the existence of discourses about and deploying Mau Mau in a given time and place can be understood as informational nodes that shed light on both shifts in longer processes and the ways in which an understanding of world historicality is created.

Contemporary debates about Mau Mau in South Africa provide us with a useful illustration. In July of 1954, Mr. G. Mohotlong wrote to the newspaper *Fighting Talk* incensed by the previous issue in which the Mau Mau had been analogized to the self-consciously nonviolent South African Defiance Campaign (SADC). In the previous issue, the Mau Mau as a whole were described as "resistors," and General China in particular had been labeled an "African leader." These were the same terms the SADC used to label their own membership, and Mohotlong was appalled by the idea that an equivalence would be drawn between the two movements. "It was most unfortunate," writes Mohotlong, "that your London correspondent in his last article described the Mau Mau terrorists as 'African resistors' and General China as an 'African leader.'"[58] The real "African leader" in Kenya, he goes on to argue, was of course Jomo Kenyatta, a legitimate politician of the constitutional path who had been unjustly framed by the British government. Mohotlong continued: "We have all spent years trying to refute the Government propaganda that the Defiance Campaign is the same thing as the Mau Mau.

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[55] In recent years, the global resonance of the Movement for Black Lives (as well as how the international political right has coalesced around a shared set of critiques) is perhaps one of the most pressing examples of this.

[56] Laura Doyle, *Inter-Imperiality: Vying Empires, Gendered Labor, and the Literary Arts of Alliance* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2020), 5.

[57] Doyle, *Inter-Imperiality*, 251.

[58] G. Mohotlong, "A Letter to the Editor," *Fighting Talk* 10–6, July 1954, 2.

We have also spent years trying to restrain the African hotheads who say that our resistors should become a Mau Mau."[59] Here, through rejecting the analogy of Mau Mau, Mohotlong provides us with a South African microcosm of the Human-Wild Man dialectic. Mau Mau serves as exactly the figure of barbarism that the SADC has "spent years trying to refute." Moreover, the orientation he does lay claim to is essentially a constellation of ideas we might conventionally describe as "liberalism," which, I would argue, can be read as an attempt to express an even more fundamental affinity with civilization itself. Put another way, it is less the liberalism that is important here than the alliance with civilization.

The disciplines have historically served the function of rendering coherent for the Western tradition cultural worlds not easily reconcilable with it. More pointedly, during the period of the Mau Mau Emergency, disciplinary knowledge was instrumental in both imperial governance and in theorizing a decolonized world imagined to be drawing ever closer. For the British, this decolonization was to be a controlled one, and the Western academy played a key role in attempting to theorize how such a process could occur. As an anti-civilizational force, Mau Mau was staked out as something fundamentally irreconcilable with such a future. Recent attention toward interdisciplinary methods in the historical discipline has shifted attention to the ways in which our studies of the African past are enriched by drawing on long-siloed bodies of scholarship and the possibilities inherent in expanding the conventional ways historians think about what constitutes a properly historical source. But thinking about Mau Mau as method invokes a different sort of interdisciplinarity, a form that seeks less to draw sources and methods from other disciplines than to consider the very grounds of disciplinarity itself and the role it has played in the formulation of historical phenomena. This is a project with a long life in African studies.[60] The central role played by (among other fields) anthropology, psychology, and literature in shaping understandings of Mau Mau suggests that its existence as a historical phenomenon cannot be comprehended without an expansive understanding of its constitutive interdisciplinarity. This fact requires a historical approach that pushes far beyond "disciplinary inclusiveness." Rather, it means understanding the "case of Mau Mau" as an object subjected to different sets of disciplinary logics over time.

In the postwar era, the populations that would become either actually involved or linked conceptually to Mau Mau in Kenya were figures rooted in older, anthropological understandings of the relationship between "tribe" and psychic health. Few things were more emblematic of this than the idea of the "detribalized African," the (usually young and male) *lumpen*

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[59] Mohotlong, "A Letter to the Editor," 2.
[60] Indispensable here is Robert H. Bates, V. Y. Mudimbe, and Jean F. O'Barr, *Africa and the Disciplines: The Contributions of Research in Africa to the Social Sciences and Humanities* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993).

communities that lived on the edges of the European zones of cities such as Nairobi. As Lonsdale argues, "'Detribalised' and 'semi-educated,' they were failures in themselves and a reproach to whites, as well as a threat […] On entering Kenya, therefore, settlers also entered a nineteenth-century South African debate on how to construct political security and morality on shifting sands."[61] Interesting here for our purposes is the fact that the figure of the "detribalized African" was a continental phenomenon, with white settlers in Kenya entering a "South African debate" rooted in what are described as long-standing discussions about conducting imperial race relations. In doing so, Lonsdale points out that disciplinary problems traveled within the broad context of colonial governmentality —the "detribalized African" (as well as the "retribalization" theorized in the work of scholars such as Abner Cohen) was essentially analogical, and the case of Mau Mau was a very important example of its effects.[62] A staple of both academic and popular discourse, detribalization was essentially a euphemism for a supranational phenomenon, which described a structural position capable of being found in just about any city in colonial Africa with a significant white population. Set loose from a tribal structure with an imagined internal rationality, the detribalized man was always a latent Mau Mau in Western thought—regardless of one's "liberal" or "conservative" pretensions. Lonsdale summarizes this division by arguing that conservatives "thought order lay in 'adaptation,' propping up reformed tribal authorities against the gale in segregated local governments; [liberals] trusted in assimilation to replace external controls with the self-disciplines of educated Africans, westernized men."[63] What such a division obscures, however, is the fact that each of these operated in relation to wildness as a condition, however differently they might do so. The liberal deployment of the "detribalized African" only psychologized the phenomenon. Or, to borrow Hayden White's framing, wildness and barbarism came to be used "primarily to designate areas of the individual's psychological landscape, not whole cultures or species of humanity."[64]

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[61] Lonsdale, "Mau Maus of the Mind," 401.

[62] For Cohen, "retribalization" was the process of constituting ethnic social identities in spaces removed from the "natural" loci of a given ethnic group. While his work focuses primarily on the Hausa, we should recall the centrality of such a dynamic with regard to Mau Mau. The colonial authorities' focus on "detribalized" but nonetheless "Kikuyu" social formations in urban spaces, such as Nairobi, is a prime example, as is the idea that Mau Mau was "bastardizing" existing Kikuyu traditions and rituals. Abner Cohen, *Custom and Politics in Urban Africa: A Study of Hausa Migrants in Yoruba Towns* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969).

[63] Lonsdale, "Mau Maus of the Mind," 401–402.

[64] White, *Tropics of Discourse*, 179.

The psychologization of Mau Mau (that is, its diagnosis as a specific form of psychosis) was expressed within the broader disciplinary construction of the "African mind" and provides us with an example of how Mau Mau can serve as a method for historicizing knowledge formations. Though contested within and across Western intellectual circuits, such an entity figured the peoples of "Black Africa" writ-large by its very definition. Despite the case of Mau Mau seeing its earliest theorizations in Kenya, this is why such ideas never remained confined to it. J. C. Carother's 1955 report *The Psychology of Mau Mau* is a case in point.[65] Building from the anthropological trope of the "African in transition" (itself tied up with the figure of the "detribalized African"), Carothers' report lays out an account of the psychological stresses exerted upon the African mind by "modernity." For him, the phenomenon of Mau Mau was thus not strictly a product of a specific (read: Kikuyu) "tribe" but a generalizable continental condition. The production of these sorts of sweeping figures through the "case of Mau Mau" rendered them generally useful for colonial governmentality rather than applicable only to their context of origin. It is for this reason that one can find references deploying the analogy of Mau Mau to addressing the problems of detribalization and African psychic stress in the face of modernity in places across the continent, and indeed beyond it.

Disciplinary discourses that linked the notions of detribalization and the African psyche to Mau Mau are only one site that expands our conceptualization of what a more robust approach to interdisciplinarity in the history of decolonization might look like. The core of it is an attention to how scholarly and popular knowledges interact, and how the historical event itself informs this. Borrowing methodologically, or in terms of source bases, is only one component of what this requires. What the dialectic between disciplinary knowledge and social understandings ultimately produces are generic formations—figures and tropes that operate generally within the historical imagination. In this way, the disciplines served as an integral part of producing the narratives that drove the intellectual cultures of decolonization. Mau Mau was rendered through them in any number of ways, but always as something that could be situated in broader explanatory structures. Scholarly and popular theorizations of Mau Mau generated understandings of it abroad that could be specifically focused on Kenya, extremely general, or somewhere in between. Taking Mau Mau as a method thus allows us to engage in the broader project of "recovering consciousness and memory, probing the classification and collection of colonial knowledge, and destabilizing colonial boundaries and control."[66] Such colonial knowledge and boundaries must include the disciplines themselves. As a method, Mau

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[65] Colony and Protectorate of Kenya. *The Psychology of Mau Mau.* Dr. J. C. Carothers (Nairobi: Government Printer, 1955).

[66] Elkins, "Looking Beyond Mau Mau," 866–867.

Mau offers both new ways of apprehending its classic archives and points us toward different ones.

Conclusion

This article has argued that thinking Mau Mau as method entails breaking away from existing archival assumptions and lines of inquiry. Mau Mau as method means examining how its very status as a historical event emerged through constellations of thought, not all of which described it in ways that have hitherto been viewed as "historically accurate" and thus worthy of pursuit. Taken in both its particularity and general utility, thinking Mau Mau as method is a means of yielding new work, capable of probing what Achille Mbembe calls the Event of decolonization. "Decolonization itself," he writes, "as an act of refusal turned into an assertion, an act of rebellion turned into an act of refoundation, as sign and Event, was imagined as a kind of relation to the future."[67] This article suggests that Mau Mau can be used as a heuristic of the historic Event of decolonization itself—a means by which we might apprehend contestations over the future world. If we are to push beyond both an archival logic of lack and a blinkered understanding of what Mau Mau "was," we must turn to precisely such a methodology. In a way, the turn toward more expansive understandings of Mau Mau in recent years is a reactivation of older threads in its study. Returning to such aspects of the study of Mau Mau (and, indeed, moving well beyond them) harbors great potential to grant us novel insights into not only the historical dynamics of African decolonization in the postwar era, but also the contestations of meaning that shape readings of movements for justice, forms of historical consciousness, and visions of future worlds today.

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[67] Achille Mbembe, *Out of the Dark Night: Essays on Decolonization* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2021).

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