

Culture as a “Theatre of Political Confrontation”. Scientific Theories and Practices of Domination in Late Colonial Kenya

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Abstract

Colonial power is often understood to have relied on a conjunction of political domination and scientific legitimation. Kenya’s late colonial era represents a field in which these theoretical perspectives can be tested. In 1952, British authorities proclaimed a state of emergency in order to crush the anti-colonial insurgency led by Kenya Land and Freedom Army, i.e. the Mau Mau movement. Drawing from colonial scientific theories and recently declassified archival material, this article analyses the crucial role played by culturalist and psychologized interpretations of the movement during the first part of counter-insurgency. The contributions of the South-African psychiatrist John C. D. Carothers and the settler paleoanthropologist Louis S. B. Leakey on the cultural and psychic life of the Kikuyu people were crucial to build a depoliticized sociology of the revolt. Yet, the historical process of cooperation between men of science and colonial authorities was complex and multifaceted, rather than linear or mechanical, and it eventually resulted in a misdiagnosis of the historical dynamism at the basis of the Mau Mau anti-colonial insurgency.

La culture comme « théâtre de la confrontation politique ». Théories scientifiques et pratiques de domination à la fin de l’ère coloniale au Kenya.

Résumé

La puissance coloniale est souvent comprise comme résultant d’une conjonction entre domination politique et légitimation scientifique. La fin de l’ère coloniale au Kenya est un champ possible pour éprouver de telles perspectives théoriques. En 1952, l’état d’urgence est proclamé par les autorités britanniques afin d’anéantir l’insurrection anticoloniale menée par la Kenya Land and Freedom Army, autrement appelée le mouvement Mau Mau. En s’appuyant sur les théories scientifiques coloniales et des documents d’archives récemment déclassifiés, cet article analyse le rôle crucial joué par les interprétations culturalistes et psychologisantes de ce mouvement au cours de la première partie de la contre-insurrection. Les contributions du psychiatre sud-africain John C. D. Carothers et du paléoanthropologue et colon Louis S. B. Leakey sur la vie culturelle et psychique du peuple Kikuyu ont été essentielles pour construire une sociologie dépolitisée de la révolte. Mais il reste que ce processus historique de coopération entre hommes de science et autorités coloniales a été bien plus complexe et multiple que linéaire ou mécanique et qu’il a finalement donné lieu à un diagnostic erroné du dynamisme historique à la base de l’insurrection anticoloniale Mau Mau.

Keywords

Colonial domination; epistemic colonialism; history and anthropology; Kenyan emergency; Mau Mau insurgency; politics of knowledge.

Mots-clés

Colonialisme épistémique ; domination coloniale ; état d’urgence au Kenya ; histoire et anthropologie ; insurrection des Mau Mau ; politique du savoir.

In an article published in 1967, entitled *Scientific Colonialism*, the Norwegian sociologist Johan Galtung described a painting which, after Ghana's Independence of 1960, was attached in the ante-room of President Kwame Nkrumah's office:

The painting was enormous, and the main figure was Nkrumah himself, fighting, wrestling with the last chains of colonialism. The chains are yielding, there is thunder and lightning in the air, the earth is shaking. Out of all this, three small figures are fleeing, white men, pallid. One of them is the capitalist, he carries a briefcase. Another is the priest or missionary, he carries the Bible. The third, a lesser figure, carries a book entitled *African Political Systems*: he is the anthropologist, or social scientist in general. If the chains symbolize political colonialism, the fleeing men symbolize economic, cultural and scientific colonialism respectively.¹

The monograph in the hands of the social scientist, the capitalist's briefcase and the missionary's Bible are here represented as the three pillars – material, symbolic, and scientific – of the colonial enterprise. As a project of political domination, colonialism relied on the relentless production of scientific knowledge on colonized subjects. This is why both Gramsci's studies on the concept of hegemony and Foucault's genealogical approach to power/knowledge systems have largely inspired the analysis of postcolonial scholars.² It is only by highlighting the historical connections between the development of human and social sciences on the one hand, and the specificity of each colonizing project on the other hand, that a critical reflection on how science has been given a political role in the colony can take shape.³

COLONIAL SOVEREIGNTY AND ITS SCIENTIFIC LEGITIMATION

If the gross grids of intelligibility were often explicit in colonial governance, equally commanding forms of knowledge production resided in implicit frames, namely, in the unstated dogma of what counted as knowledge itself (Stoler 2008b, 350).

In the colonial situations, administrative authorities sought the cooperation of scientists and experts both to legitimize the social order imposed by the colonial state – providing it with an epistemological basis – and to reproduce that order when it was contested, challenged, destabilized. The anticolonial movement of the Kenya Land and Freedom Army (KLFA)⁴ – commonly known as the Mau Mau movement – developed in the late 1940s among the Kikuyu people as a reaction to the colonial politics of land expropriation and jeopardized severely the legitimacy of British control over the Kenyan territory. The colonial rhetoric surrounding the “bestiality” of the oath-taking ceremonies – utilized by the KLFA as “necessary organizational tools amongst a largely unlettered populace” –⁵ and the violent attacks directed at white settlers and Kikuyu loyalists was based on a savage and backward stereotype of the movement.⁶ Under the pressure of the settler society and colonial police forces, a state of emergency was proclaimed on the 20th of October 1952 by the Governor of Kenya Sir Evelyn Baring in order to reaffirm political control in the colony.⁷

While a first phase of the Emergency was devoted to an effective military warfare against the Mau Mau warriors,⁸ a second phase, called “Rehabilitation”,⁹ was aimed at moving towards a moral correction of those

¹ Galtung, 1967, 13.

² Said, 1978, and Spivak, 1988.

³ Mills, 2002; Cooper, 2004.

⁴ For an account of the KLFA organizational structure, see Kinyatti, 2009, 30-50.

⁵ Lonsdale, 1997, 25.

⁶ Cooper, 1988; Lonsdale, 1990; Berman & Lonsdale, 1992.

⁷ FCO [Foreign and Commonwealth Office] 141/6594, Proclamation n. 38 of 1952, *Declaration of the Emergency*.

⁸ Among the first strategic operations deployed to crush the movement there was the so-called Operation Jock Scott, a mass arrest of about 180 supposed Mau Mau chiefs (Elkins, 2000, 30). The main military operations were conducted in the Aberdares and in the forestry areas surrounding Mount Kenya.

⁹ The final draft of the Rehabilitation program was delivered to Governor Baring in October 1952 (Elkins, 2005, 108).

Kikuyus alleged to be members of the movement.¹⁰ The term “Rehabilitation” refers to the set of measures alternative to the use of physical force that was deployed by colonial administrators to “redeem” the Kikuyu people from the Mau Mau “infection”.¹¹ Initially thought as a program of civic and liberal reform,¹² this rehabilitative phase had a twofold objective: its scope was to eradicate from the minds of the Kikuyus the idea that the Mau Mau revolt was a legitimate form of political opposition, and to foster their transition to Western modernity.¹³

The counter-insurgency theories and practices deployed by the British colonial administration during the state of Emergency to tackle the revolt were structured on the idea that the Mau Mau movement was the outcome of the “evil savagery” of some members of the Kikuyu people, rather than “a political response to the violent system of colonial sovereignty, race labour and the forced dispossession of Kikuyu land”.¹⁴ The social construction of the movement as the manifestation of a psychic or cultural perversion constituted the legitimizing ground of counter-insurgency theories and practices: if the causes of the anti-colonial unrest were to be found neither in the socioeconomic conditions created by colonialism, nor in the lack of African political representation in the Kenya Legislative Council, but in Kikuyu cultural *kosmos* or in their psychic life, the repressive measures of counter-insurgency could be justified as parts of a wider “civilizing mission” in East Africa.¹⁵

One of the elements that greatly contributed to the official construction of the evil, backward and atavistic image of the Mau Mau movement was the ritual oath. What will become known as the Mau Mau oath was indeed a complex rite of passage, assembled with practices of the Kikuyu initiation ceremonies, Christian symbolical elements and anticolonial political claims.¹⁶ In the mid-1940s the Kikuyu Central Association (KCA) introduced a loyalty oath, aimed at recruiting new potentially influential men in the movement; the necessity to extend the KCA’s member base resulted in a urban mass-oathing campaign in the cities of Kiambu and Nairobi, which then spread into the Kikuyu reserves.¹⁷

At the end of the decade, the loyalty oath was replaced by more militant forms of initiation. A new oath of unity, or the first Mau Mau oath, was then introduced; it contained clauses of solidarity, obedience, secrecy, and it was administered even by force or trickery to unwilling Kikuyus.¹⁸ In July 1952 the political manipulation of oathing symbols found its higher stage in the introduction of the *Batuni* (“Platoon”) oath, explicitly meant to be administered to “young men of fighting age who were expected to take up arms and fight against the British colonial government”.¹⁹ This high-grade ritual practice of affiliation resulted in a definitive fragmentation of the Kikuyu society: indeed, whoever had taken the oath now found himself irretrievably separated not just from the British settlers and colonizers, but also from those loyalist Kikuyus who had chosen to side with the colonial government.²⁰ Furthermore, the militants’ affiliation to the

¹⁰ Bagallay, 2011. Huw Bennett divides British military campaign in Kenya into four phases: a first phase going from the declaration of the Emergency to the appointment of Sir George Erskine as General Office Commanding-in-Chief (October 1952-June 1953), a second phase characterized by Erskine’s warfare plan (June 1953-April 1954), a third phase starting with Operation Anvil and marked by mass screening programs and the villagization of almost the entire Kikuyu people (April 1954-January 1955), and a last phase devoted to defeating the remaining groups of militants in the forests (Bennett, 2007a, 638-9).

¹¹ Carothers, 1954, 20. See also FCO 141/6608, *Rehabilitation*.

¹² The man who was firstly appointed to structure the program of Rehabilitation for the Mau Mau suspects was the Head of the Community Development Department Thomas Askwith, a liberal administrator who empathized with Kikuyu grievances on socio-economic inequalities (Elkins, 2005, 108). He went in Malaya to study closely the local rehabilitation system, and to apply Malayan counter-insurgency strategies in Kenyan Rehabilitation (Klose, 2013, 111); he was convinced by the Malayan experience that Rehabilitation would have failed had it not been intended as a project of political and economic reform, “re-settlement” and “re-employment” (Askwith, 1995, 100).

¹³ Elkins, 2005, 260.

¹⁴ Morton, 2012, 115.

¹⁵ Alam, 2007, 16.

¹⁶ Barnett & Njama, 1970, 60. For an account of the continuities and discontinuities between late-nineteenth and twentieth century oaths, and the reconfiguration of the oaths during Mau Mau, see Appendix VIII of Kershaw’s work (Kershaw, 1997, 311-20).

¹⁷ Green, 1990, 75-6; see also Grobb-Fitzgibbon, 2011, 213-6. For an official account of the oath’s history, see FCO 141/5879, *The Oath of Mau Mau*.

¹⁸ Berman & Lonsdale, 1992, 429. “Many people took the oath in fear, not in faith”, notes David Anderson in his work on the use of death penalty during the Emergency (Anderson, 2006, 42).

¹⁹ Maloba, 1993, 68. See also FCO 141/5879, 7th October 1953, Special Branch, *Interim Report on the Kikuyu and the Militant Mau Mau, with particular reference to Nairobi City*.

²⁰ Cooper, 1988, 19. For an account of the Mau Mau Emergency as a civil war within the Kikuyu people, see Branch, 2009.

movement was not uniform, but it was characterized by different degrees of participation, to which corresponded different ritual forms.²¹

The techniques adopted to enforce the more advanced oaths were characterized by several elements of violent religiosity, alongside with traditional elements of the Kikuyu cosmology – such as the banana-frond arch, sorghum leaves, sugar canes.²² Many settlers in the colony believed that, by October 1952, almost 80% of the Kikuyu population had taken at least the first oath.²³ This vast scale diffusion of the oath, together with its obscene and violent symbolism, rendered it an ideal target of the colonial counter-insurgency campaign. Though Kikuyu grievances on land-related issues – the political claim at the heart of the movement –²⁴ polarized British people, Mau Mau started to be seen as a “completely horrible, obscene and regressive” movement when the colonial description of the oath as a violent ritual procedure became widespread.²⁵ Scientific analysis and anthropological interpretations could accomplish the tasks of blurring the structural inequalities at the core of the Mau Mau uprising, and showing colonial rulers the way to turn militants and sympathizers of the movement into docile subjects.

The relocation of the causes of anti-colonial unrests from the *arbitrary* space of colonial economic policies to an apparently more *objective* space, constituted by the bodies, cultures²⁶ and minds of the colonized people through the performativity of scientific knowledge, was a technique extensively used by Western bureaucracies to re-craft colonial domination.²⁷ However, according to the historical specificity of every colonial situation, the possibility to reproduce the relations of political control depended on a fluid combination of two different sets of factors: the manipulation and control of knowledge – the relentless re-creation of colonial hegemony –²⁸ on the one hand, the recourse to violence and coercion on the other hand. Among historians and anthropologists of the colonial period, there are those who reflect on how colonial states relied extensively on a mere display of military and police forces, on violence and coercion – a situation of “dominance without hegemony” –,²⁹ and those who rather investigate the ways in which colonial rulers produced new knowledge, or reorganized that which pre-existed, to legitimize colonial social orders on the other hand.³⁰

In order to re-interpret the Weberian idea of the “monopoly on the *legitimate* use of force” in the historical process of colonial statecraft, it is necessary to focus on how colonial rulers struggled to legitimize their techniques of domination when sovereignty was contested.³¹ And yet one could also consider that, following Mbembe, colonial spaces represented sites where sovereignty consisted “fundamentally in the exercise of power outside the law (*ab legibus solutus*)”, and where “the violence of the state of exception” was deemed “to operate in the service of ‘civilization’”.³² More generally, colonial domination’s claims to legitimacy

²¹ See FCO 141/5888, 24th May 1954, *Report on the Sociological Causes Underlying Mau Mau and Some Proposal on the Means of Ending It*, Appendix VI, *Mau Mau Oath Ceremonies*.

²² Blunt, 2013, 168.

²³ Lonsdale, 1990, 396.

²⁴ The attempt to look at the distribution of land as a key factor both in the emergence of the Mau Mau movement and in the fracturing of the Kikuyu society is at the heart of Kershaw’s historical and anthropological analysis, focused on the relationship between Kikuyu “landed”, “poor landed”, “landless”, British settlers, and the colonial government (Kershaw, 1997, 213).

²⁵ Worsley, 1957, 15.

²⁶ “Culture in Kenya, even during colonial times, has always been an important theatre of political confrontation” writes Ngugi wa Thiongo in his *Moving the Centre: The Struggle for Cultural Freedoms* (1993, 88).

²⁷ Among the sciences which served political purposes in the colonial enterprise, anthropology occupied a privileged place. As Mudimbe highlights, “the discourse on ‘savages’ is, for the first time, a discourse in which an explicit political power presumes the authority of a scientific knowledge and vice versa. Colonialism becomes its project and can be thought of as a duplication and a fulfilment of the power of Western discourses on human varieties” (Mudimbe, 1988, 29). It can be argued that recourse to social anthropology represented “a feature of twentieth-century colonial warfare” (Branch, 2009, 41).

²⁸ For a problematization of the concept of colonial hegemony, see Bayart, 2007.

²⁹ In relation to South-Asian colonialism, Guha notes that while the metropolitan state “was hegemonic in character with his claim to dominance based on a power relation in which the moment of persuasion outweighed that of coercion”, the colonial state was “non-hegemonic, with persuasion outweighed by coercion in its structure of dominance”; this character of the colonial state is defined as “*dominance without hegemony*” (Guha, 1997, xiii, emphasis of the author).

³⁰ Cohn, 1996.

³¹ Weber, 1946, 1. For an analysis of the multiple processes of legitimation undertaken by authoritarian regimes to enforce practices of domination, see Hibou, 2017.

³² Mbembe, 2003, 23-4.

depended mostly on specific but often incomplete processes of production³³ – and from this incompleteness emerges colonial sovereignty’s *absolute* side – of both knowledge and social forms: production of overseas territories as geographical areas to conquer and exploit, production of the difference between colonizers and colonized as a gap to be bridged in the path of “civilization”,³⁴ “accelerated” formation of social classes,³⁵ fabrication and fixation of racial types and ethnic groups in time and space on the basis of a-historical conceptions of local cultures.³⁶ The constant dialogue between administrative authorities and figures from the world of professional, semi-professional or amateurish science – whether they were directly commissioned by the state, or they produced *usable* knowledge at their own initiative – often fuelled these processes; it therefore needs to be analysed in its full historical significance.

The legitimization of counter-insurgency practices through the deployment of scientific analysis – supporting the need for coercive intervention against anti-colonial movements – was by no means a linear and smooth operation. The attempts to give legitimacy to the coercive and violent measures adopted in times of social and political crisis were often a source of consistent administrative anxiety³⁷ and nervousness.³⁸ In this context, the rationality of the colonial enterprise (or, in other words, the construction of colonial sovereignty through the work of reason and knowledge) becomes a political aspiration – ever present but seldom fully achieved – more than a subtle and effective political technology. Moreover, the results of these epistemic operations, aimed at reorganizing the field of knowledge on social issues with the aim of serving political purposes, did not always provide the expected results.

The last years of British domination of Kenya represent a historical field in which these theoretical instruments can be tested. Firstly, with the proclamation of the state of emergency, colonial administrators were partially relieved of the burden of legitimizing the use of force to defeat the insurgency. While British military intervention in the first phase of the Mau Mau war was justified by the declaration of the Emergency, the detention and “rehabilitation” of those Kikuyus held in prisons and detention camps because of their alleged affiliation to the movement still represented a political conundrum for colonial administrators. If the militants fighting in the forest were approximately 20,000, the government believed that, by the start of the Emergency, at least 80% of the Kikuyu men and women had taken the Mau Mau oath.³⁹ Colonial rulers were thus fighting a military war against a relatively small number of Mau Mau fighters, but they had to re-establish “control over the entire oath-taking population”.⁴⁰

The problem arose to create a system to filter prisoners and detainees, in order to individuate those who could be released in the Reserves without any risk of future insubordination, those who could enter the Pipeline system⁴¹ with the scope of being “redeemed” from the Mau Mau affiliation, and those who needed to be held in detention for the forthcoming years. Different labels were created to identify every class of detainees, on the basis of the “present and probable future attitude of the individual concerned, and not solely in his past acts alleged or proved”;⁴² screening operations were conducted both to verify if the individual was effectively an oath-taking militant, and to assess the risks of future activities against the colonial government. “Screening categories” started to be attached to every suspect: “Class A1 (*Very Black*)”, for those who “appear to be

³³ For states are “storm-tossed relationships of power derived from the productive logic of any given social organization and the conflicts of interest that threaten to disorganize it” (Berman & Lonsdale, 1992, 5).

³⁴ Mudimbe, 1988, 14.

³⁵ During Kenyan Emergency, “accelerated class formation” was intended as “counter-insurgency tactic” (Branch & Cheeseman, 2006, 19).

³⁶ Hibou, 2017, 77. See also Pels, 1997.

³⁷ It is the historian and anthropologist of colonial Indonesia, Ann Laura Stoler, who refers to the “epistemic anxiety” which accompanied the operations of knowledge production and re-organization in times of political instability; they can be clearly detected in colonial archives, which “record anxious efforts to ‘catch up’ with what was emergent and ‘becoming’ in new colonial situations” (Stoler, 2008a, 4).

³⁸ Nancy Rose Hunt discusses the two “modes of presence” of the Belgian colonial state, having simultaneously a “biopolitical face”, which promoted and produced “life and health”, and a “nervous” one, which “policed and securitized as it sought to contain menacing form of [...] rebellion” (Hunt, 2015, 168).

³⁹ Furedi, 1974, 495; Buijtenhuijs, 1982, 36; Lonsdale, 1990, 396.

⁴⁰ Elkins, 2003, 192.

⁴¹ The “Pipeline” system was a complex architecture of transit, screening and detention camps scattered all over the Kenya territory, referred to by Kenyan essayist and playwright Ngugi wa Thiong’o as “the official euphemism for the chain of concentration camps all the detainees had to pass through” (Thiong’o, 2002, 56).

⁴² FCO 141/6168, 3rd December 1954, Ministry of Defence, *Screening Categories*, p. 1. See also FCO 141/6521, *Inquiry Into Screening Camps and Interrogation Centres Under the Control of the Provincial Administration*; see also Berman & Lonsdale, 1991, 192; Elkins, 2000.

wholly committed to Mau Mau and would, if released, assume positions of leadership in the Mau Mau organisation”; “Class A2 (*Black*)”, or “persons who appear to be wholly committed to Mau Mau and would, if released, choose to associate themselves with the Mau Mau organisation”; “Class B (*Grey*)”, individuals “who have divided loyalties and would, if released, probably come under the Mau Mau influence”; “Class C (*Grey*)”, for “who have deliberately decided against Mau Mau and would, if released, resist and oppose Mau Mau”; “Class U”, individuals “about whom there is not sufficient information to decide upon classification as above”; and, ultimately, the “*Whites*”, representing “those who [...] have been found suitable for return to their districts of origin for a Restriction Order or release at the discretion of their District Commissioner”.⁴³ The entirely political need to create a classification system to ‘read’ the Kikuyu people during the Emergency, thus rationalizing rehabilitative and custodial measures, had to be vested by a more objective discourse. For this purpose, bureaucrats in Nairobi started to search for authoritative figures in the field of colonial science who could give a theoretical frame and an epistemological legitimacy to counter-insurgency programs.

If one could reasonably say that colonial political enterprises of the twentieth century, especially in times of political and social turbulence, constantly sought the cooperation of scientists and experts, it is quite difficult to estimate to what extent the knowledge they produced actually contributed to restore colonial order of things. During Kenyan Emergency, British administrators saw in the settler paleoanthropologist Louis S. B. Leakey and in the psychiatrist John C. D. Carothers two potentially useful allies in the struggle to defeat the Mau Mau. Their interpretations of the insurgency and their analysis of the Kikuyu mind and culture shaped the political and ideological construction of the movement; they also influenced colonial governmental policies dealing with those Kikuyus suspected to be sympathetic to the May Mau cause.

Before moving to analyse the political roles Leakey and Carothers played in the Emergency, it is important to distinguish between the different types of involvement they had with the colonial government of Nairobi. In fact, while Carothers was directly asked to adapt his previous analysis on a generally defined “African mind”⁴⁴ to explain the Mau Mau unrest in terms of a collective psychosis, Leakey instead voluntarily offered the ethnographic data he produced to colonial authorities – with whom he had been in contact since the late 1930s –,⁴⁵ in order to “provide material that will help to defeat Mau Mau, heal the mental wounds that have been inflicted upon all races in Kenya, and prevent similar outbreaks in the future”.⁴⁶ Therefore, if Carothers’ work can be seen as a clear example of explicit counter-insurgency research, Leakey fits more accurately into what Robert Buijtenhuijs defined as the category of “counter-insurgency volunteers”.⁴⁷

COLONIAL PSYCHIATRY AND THE PATHOLOGIZING NARRATIVE OF THE MAU MAU REVOLT

For a social elite, the members of subaltern groups always have something of a barbaric or pathological nature about them (Gramsci 1996: Q25§1).

John C. D. Carothers was born in 1903 in Simonstown, South Africa. When he was still a child he moved to England for his primary studies, and in 1921 he enrolled at the Faculty of Medicine at the University of London. Eight years later he applied for a position as a District Medical Officer in Kenya, where he stayed for nine years. In 1938, he was appointed as senior medical officer at the Mathari mental hospital after the forced resignation of Dr. James Cobb. Yet, his appointment was meant to be temporary, since he lacked an extended formation in psychiatry. The outbreak of the Second World War prevented his return to England and the completion of his studies. During the war he served as Psychiatric Consultant to the East African Command, and in 1946 he came back to the United Kingdom for a six-month internship at the Maudsley Hospital of London. When he returned to the Mathari hospital, he became a neurology and psychiatry specialist, publishing articles for academic journals about his clinical activities. He then retired in 1951 and

⁴³ FCO 141/6178, 3rd December 1954, Ministry of Defence, *Screening Categories*, pp. 2-3. See also Elkins, 2005, 109.

⁴⁴ Carothers, 1953.

⁴⁵ Berman & Lonsdale, 1991, 175-6.

⁴⁶ Leakey, 1954, 5.

⁴⁷ Buijtenhuijs, 1971, 330.

moved to Portsmouth; one year later he was commissioned by the World Health Organization (WHO) to prepare a report on his clinical activities in Africa.⁴⁸

The monograph, titled *The African Mind in Health and Disease. A Study in Ethnopsychiatry*, was printed in 1953; its object was to analyse the “mentality” of a generic African man, an operation legitimized by the fact that “African mentality [...] is, for certain reasons, more uniform than that of literate cultures, such as that of Europe”.⁴⁹ The importance of the cultural paradigm in Carothers’ analytical framework can be observed from its very title: it has been one of the first study of colonial ethnopsychiatry⁵⁰ to reach a wide audience. In addition to that, it was Carothers himself who highlighted the “crying need, before it is too late, for detailed ethnographic surveys, such as those conducted by the International African Institute”.⁵¹ The goal of his research was to investigate which attributes of the “African mentality” were linked to alleged racial determinants, environmental factors, and cultural spheres. Building on anatomo-pathological, psychological and anthropological literature of that period, Carothers came to the conclusion that “African adult psychology can be described as ‘monodeic’ and the African attitude to life as ‘all or none’”.⁵² This was not just a reassertion of the European man’s inherent moral and cultural superiority over the colonized populations, in accordance with an attitude widespread among the settler society; with his first work, Carothers attempted to give epistemic consistency to those racially based prejudices. African alleged inferiority was inscribed in different theoretical regimes: from culture to “race”, from brain morphometry to morality and intellect.

Surely, *The African Mind* did not attract the amount of criticism from the metropolitan community of anthropologists one could have expected, especially in view of Carothers’ dubious allegations on African psychology and his often-blurred distinction between the concept of race and that of culture. For instance, the monograph received enthusiastic comments from Margaret Mead, who was among its references.⁵³ Though, there were also anthropologists who were far from satisfied with how Carothers had manipulated ethnographic data in his work.

In a review appeared in *Man* in February 1954, Melville J. Herskovits lamented that a study where “anthropological materials [are] used with an obvious lack of competence [...] must not only be of concern to anthropologists, but must also give them concern”.⁵⁴ He then went on rejecting the generalizations proposed by Carothers about African cultural systems; where his “ethnographic generalizations do have validity, they tend to hold only for Eastern Africa”.⁵⁵ Herskovits also blamed the WHO for not having submitted the manuscript to the scrutiny of experts in all the fields involved in the study before approving its publication. The reasons of this accusation were expressed in the last, striking statement of the review, where Herskovits noted: “For where, as in Africa, stakes are high and tempers are short, anything this side of the best scientific knowledge will accelerate existing tensions and make their resolution the more difficult”.⁵⁶

The WHO’s carelessness was the target of another firm critique of Carothers’ book. In fact, in 1954 as well, Jules Henry, an anthropologist of the University of Chicago, embarked in the “painful task” of commenting on the *African Mind* in a review published in *American Anthropologist*.⁵⁷ Here he defined Carothers as a “racial determinist”, notwithstanding his “insistence on the importance of cultural factors”; not to mention the incoherencies and contradictions characterizing the whole text, for instance when Carothers “accepts [...] psychological findings that ‘prove’ the Negro inherently less intelligent than Europeans while appearing to reject such findings”.⁵⁸ Finally, according to Henry’s opinion, although WHO-sponsored publications

⁴⁸ McCulloch, 1996, 50-1.

⁴⁹ Carothers, 1953, 7-8.

⁵⁰ For a recognition of the historical trajectories of colonial ethnopsychiatry, see Beneduce, 2007. For a survey of the academic literature regarding the connections between psychiatry and colonial power, see Keller, 2001.

⁵¹ Carothers, 1953, 8.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 107.

⁵³ McCulloch, 1996, 62-3.

⁵⁴ Herskovits, 1954, 30.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 31.

⁵⁷ Henry, 1954, 929.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 930.

contained a flyleaf attributing the responsibility for their content to the authors only, the organization could not “escape responsibility so easy”.⁵⁹

Despite these criticisms, no Western academic was able to place Carothers’ study in colonial ethnopsychiatry into its proper context of production. The main critiques to Carothers’ approach moving in this direction came from the African continent. Thomas Adeoye Lambo, a Nigerian psychiatrist, defined the “picture of the African personality” given by Carothers as an “illogical blend of low intellect and immoral qualities, tainted with primitive passions and perversities”.⁶⁰ In 1958 Jack Simons, a South African academic and activist, doing what his European colleagues had failed to do, placed Carothers’ analysis in its proper social background, made up by the social and racial stereotypes circulating among settlers and colonial officials. In his article published in *The British Journal of Psychiatry*, Simons argued that Carothers’ representation of African mentality, far from representing a scientific “truth”, was instead the by-product of a “colonial-type society”, where “stereotypes are used to support the assumption of intrinsic superiority in the White groups, and so justify racial discrimination and privilege”.⁶¹ Few years later, Frantz Fanon, in the last chapter of his *Wretched of the Earth*, criticized Carothers’ overtly racist comparison between the normal African and the “lobotomized European”, which could be understood only in the light of the colonizers’ dehumanizing attitudes towards colonial subjects.⁶²

On the other hand, colonial administrators quickly realized the potential that Carothers’ theoretic proposal could have had in the Emergency. In October 1953 he received a letter by a member of the Nairobi local government, where he was asked to write a report on the Mau Mau movement and its origins, stating that “if the peculiarities of African psychology really play an important part in the origin and continuance of Mau Mau and in preventing its solution, then it would seem that some special knowledge of African psychology could hardly fall to help in solving the problem”.⁶³ Carothers accepted this task, and in 1954 he completed his second monograph, called *The Psychology of Mau Mau*. Edited and published in Nairobi by the Government Printer,⁶⁴ this thirty-five-page essay consisted of an inter-disciplinary analysis of the causes underlying the outbreak of the Mau Mau revolt, to be used by colonial authorities. Its structure is very simple: the first chapter is devoted to an overview of the author’s previous studies on “African mentality” and their potential application to the Kikuyu case. The second chapter is dedicated to an interpretation of the Kikuyu people’s transition to modernity, alongside with its conflictual aspects. The last two chapters are about the most significant profiles of the Mau Mau insurgency, its political and symbolic techniques, and some “recommendations” on the practical “remedies” to be undertaken in order to rehabilitate the militants.⁶⁵ The use of medical and psychiatric formulas to diagnose indigenous hostile attitudes towards European settlers in Kenya had a threefold aim. First, it was a tactic for “othering” the large part of the Kikuyu society who had taken the oath.⁶⁶ Second, it identified the causes for the outbreak of the revolt not in the social and cultural shocks caused by colonization, but in the mind of the colonized. Third, it consequently depoliticized their political claims, and proved the necessity of individuating the strategies apt to “heal” their “mental wounds”.⁶⁷

The last part of Carothers’ report is a fitting example of counter-insurgency research. The South African psychiatrist did not confine himself to developing a psycho-pathological aetiology of the movement. “These people will never be quite the same as they were before. But they might be better”;⁶⁸ with this consideration in mind, he proposed specific strategies to be implemented during the rehabilitative phase of the Emergency. Among these strategies was *villagization*, a geopolitical tactic adopted by British authorities with the scope

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 931.

⁶⁰ Lambo, 1955, 244. See also Gibson & Beneduce, 2017, 107-8.

⁶¹ Simons, 1958, 381-2.

⁶² Fanon, 1963, 301. See also Menozzi, 2014.

⁶³ FCO 141/5887, 28th October 1953, *Mau Mau and Its Psychological Background*.

⁶⁴ *The Official Gazette of the Colony and Protectorate of Kenya*, vol. LVI n. 62, 23rd November 1954, 1258.

⁶⁵ Carothers, 1954, 20-1.

⁶⁶ Mahone, 2007, 42.

⁶⁷ Leakey, 1954, v.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

of fragmenting as far as possible Kikuyus' living units, so as to gain a greater control and to cut every possible contact with the militants. Far from having been firstly experimented in Kenya, this practice was part of that "continuity in theory and policies in dealing with peasant rebellions [...]. From Malaya to Kenya to Vietnam etc., the use of 'villagization' [...] as well as 'rehabilitation' and various forms of psychological warfare is linked to the emergence of an Anglo-American counter-insurgency community of administrators and scholars".⁶⁹

Both Carothers' endorsement of the practice of villagization, and the epistemic backing he provided to the Rehabilitation program, are signs of an explicit subordination of science to colonial purposes of political domination. Therefore, in this context, Carothers was asked by colonial authorities to play the part of the "clinician of the social and of the political": he developed theories useful for interpreting the causes of the so-called "infection" of the Mau Mau, and proposed strategies for its treatment, with the aim of "cleansing" the Mau Mau "uncleanness" from Kikuyu imaginary.⁷⁰ This work represents an example of the political necessity to filter the colonial project through a scientific discourse, "as if the theory had to colonize the whole of African society, past, present and future".⁷¹ It had the twofold scope of justifying "colonial domination in both its brutal and more paternalistic forms", and dismissing "any sign of insubordination, indocility or even outright anticolonial rebellion [...] as related to the anthropological or psychological failings of the colonized, not to the actions of the colonizers".⁷²

By delegating the scientific translation of a prefabricated, pejorative and de-historicized representation of the indigenous psychic life – rooted in a racist attitude widespread among settlers and officials – to a colonial psychiatrist, British colonial government attempted to construct the Mau Mau movement as the aftermath of a pathological decline of the Kikuyu psychology, embodied by the figure of the oath-taking militant. However, in the years after Carothers' first WHO-sponsored study, his figure as a recognized expert on African mentality – built more via his clinical practice rather than years of professional studies – started to be criticized in academic circles. The idea of structuring the Rehabilitation on the basis of a set of cleansing practices for the rehabilitation of those Kikuyus "infected" by the Mau Mau "virus" was phased out. This gave way to a new approach to counter-insurgency, based on an increasing recourse to violence and coercion to crush the members of the movement.⁷³

BETWEEN ETHNOGRAPHIC PRACTICES AND COLONIAL POLICIES

Science depoliticized, science in the service of man, is often inexistent in the colonies (Fanon 1965: 116).

Along with Carothers, another figure whose analysis contributed to the efforts to forge the scientific nature of Kenyan Rehabilitation was the paleoanthropologist settler Louis S. B. Leakey. Born in 1903 in Kenya from British parents, Leakey could hardly be considered a trained ethnographer and anthropologist. Initially educated in archaeology and physical anthropology at the University of Cambridge, he worked for nearly a decade on the dating of East African fossils. As the son of the representative of native interests in the Kenya Legislative Council, Reverend Harry Leakey, Louis developed a critical stand towards the lack of understanding of the indigenous society so frequently shown by British administrators on the field. These ideas gave rise to a book on the conditions experienced by the local peoples in the colony, titled *Kenya: Contrasts and Problems*, where Leakey noted how "most of the misunderstandings in Kenya are due to the failure of the Europeans to realize the native point of view".⁷⁴ Although he was a paleoanthropologist, without professional grounding in social anthropology, between the 1920s and the 1930s Leakey attempted to enhance the ethnographic competences he had acquired during his PhD in African Prehistory at Cambridge.

⁶⁹ Berman, 1976, 173.

⁷⁰ Gibson & Beneduce, 2017, 109.

⁷¹ McCulloch, 1996, 61.

⁷² Gibson & Beneduce, 2017, 105.

⁷³ Bennett, 2007b.

⁷⁴ Leakey, 1936, viii.

In that period, he expressed concerns about the pseudo-scientific research of the physician and amateur psychologist H. L. Gordon and the medical pathologist F. W. Vint, on “whether or not natives of the [Kenya] Colony possessed the same mental capacities as the white man”, based on cranial morphometry, and presented at the British Eugenics Society in 1933.⁷⁵

However, the approach to the anthropological knowledge and to the practice of ethnography he had been trained in at Cambridge were being eclipsed by a paradigm shift that introduced a more structured idea of fieldwork, based on extended participant observation and more detailed criteria for the production of ethnographic data.⁷⁶ Leakey’s knowledge of the Kikuyu language, his collaboration with Kikuyu elders, and the claim to be “more a Kikuyu than an Englishman”⁷⁷ did not constitute, in the words of Bronislaw Malinowski, qualifications strong enough for him to be entitled to “do competent scientific work in social anthropology”.⁷⁸ That same lack of anthropological formation, though, did not prevent Malinowski from accepting Jomo Kenyatta as a student of a three-year post-graduate program in social anthropology at the London School of Economics. He even advised Kenyatta to publish his work on the social life of the Kikuyu, titled *Facing Mount Kenya* (1938), to which he wrote an enthusiastic introduction, acclaiming the monograph as “a first-hand account of a representative African culture” and “an invaluable document in the principles underlying culture contact and change”.⁷⁹

In the late 1930s, despite the harsh judgement on his professional authority by one of the leading anthropologists of the time, Leakey was struggling to complete and publish his own extensive ethnographic study on the Kikuyu people in the period prior to the perturbative effects introduced by British colonialism in Kenya. However, the publication of this work was delayed, especially due to its length of “some 1400 pages of print”,⁸⁰ and it would be delayed until 1977, when *The Southern Kikuyu before 1903* was published posthumously.⁸¹ In the meanwhile, Leakey was carrying out intelligence works for the colonial government, reporting information on the political activities of the Kikuyu Central Association. In the early 1950s, copies of his still unpublished ethnography on the Kikuyus were circulating among administrative districts of the colony.⁸² It is perhaps in this phase that in Kenyan administrative circles commenced to circulate the idea that the help of an ethnographic authority and expert of the Kikuyu people could be instrumental to find effective political solutions for maintaining the colonial order of things. The government thus started to assemble its corpus of “anthro-administrative knowledge”⁸³ on the Mau Mau through the help of Leakey.

Governor Evelyn Baring declared the state of emergency during the night between the 20th and the 21st of October 1952. Two months later, Leakey managed to publish a book containing his interpretation of the Mau Mau revolt: *Mau Mau and the Kikuyu*, printed for the first time in December 1952, had been written in the hope that “a brief summary of some of the more important Kikuyu customs, and a discussion of their breakdown under the impact of European civilization”, might aid the understanding of the social and cultural causes underlying the revolt, and change the course of future events in colonial Kenya.⁸⁴ Although Leakey did not write this book acting on instructions from colonial or metropolitan administrators, he nevertheless saw in the Kenyan colonial government an audience which could rehabilitate his figure as a man of knowledge. Similarly, British authorities in Nairobi embraced Leakey’s intellectual and political construction of the Mau Mau as a potentially profitable instrument in the war against their common enemies, the Mau

⁷⁵ Gordon, cit. in Tilley, 2011, 235.

⁷⁶ Berman & Lonsdale, 1991, 158. Leakey’s ethnographic formation was mostly due to the teaching of A. C. Haddon, a Cambridge zoologist who turned to anthropology and participated to the Torres 1898 expedition (Erisken & Nielsen, 2001, 26, 57).

⁷⁷ Leakey, 1936, vii.

⁷⁸ Malinowski, cit. in Berman & Lonsdale, 1991, 160.

⁷⁹ Malinowski, 1961 [1938], xiv. See also Berman, 1996.

⁸⁰ Leakey, 1952, vii.

⁸¹ Clark, 1989, 381.

⁸² Berman & Lonsdale, 1991, 179-80.

⁸³ Luongo, 2011, 13.

⁸⁴ Leakey, 1952, vii.

Mau fighters.⁸⁵ This hope for mutual legitimation represented a common ground between ethnography and colonial politics during the Emergency.

In *Mau Mau and the Kikuyu*, Leakey analysed how the colonization process, having disrupted an allegedly pre-existing indigenous social order, had raised several political issues. If the grievances expressed by the first Kikuyu association were perceived by the author as legitimate, the violent and extremist nature of the Mau Mau revolt – following Leakey’s interpretation – was not to be intended as endemic to the indigenous socio-cultural cosmology. Instead, the alacrity of the “speed of progress” had left a large part of the Kikuyu people at the mercy of an “unscrupulous few”, who had pushed them to take the ritual oath and fight against the British presence in Kenya.⁸⁶ Mau Mau was then seen as a disease which penetrated Kenyan society in a specific phase of its history, an abrupt deviation from the path towards an African modernity. This first anthropological account of the relationships between the Kikuyu culture and the outbreak of the Mau Mau rebellion was among the references of Carothers’ book *The Psychology of Mau Mau*.⁸⁷

The idea that the lowest degrees of Mau Mau affiliation could be psychologically eradicated played a crucial role throughout the first steps of the Emergency.⁸⁸ Both Carothers and Leakey believed that the binding power of the oath could be removed through a confession made by the initiate, which was followed by a “traditional cleansing ceremony [...] to rid his mind and body of the oath’s polluting vestiges”.⁸⁹ The symbolic and political force of the Mau Mau oath, which instilled in the militants the truth of the colonized – the idea of the Mau Mau movement as a persistent political opposition against the foreign oppressor – had to be replaced by another performative act, conveying the truth of the colonizer, in whose eyes the affiliation to the movement was a form of a somehow curable disease.

Colonial administrators in charge of the Rehabilitation program started to turn these ideas into practice some months before the proclamation of the Emergency. A counter-oathing campaign was launched by the government in April 1952 in the areas surrounding Nairobi and the White Highlands; this ethnographically inspired part of the counter-insurgency was informed by Leakey’s construction of the Mau Mau movement which, according to Berman and Lonsdale, “far from being detached impersonal ‘science’, was, rather, expertly polemical; an expression of his deep partisan involvement”.⁹⁰ In the next year, these ideas would be supported by Carothers’ psychopathological aetiology of the movement.⁹¹ Performed with the collaboration of Her Majesty’s “witch doctors”, de-oathing ceremonies were supposed to have the effect of making an initiated member expel the Mau Mau evil, thus rescinding his affiliation to the movement.⁹² The campaign intensified in the months following the declaration of the Emergency, but the increase in Mau Mau activities throughout 1953 convinced colonial officials of its inefficiency; subsequently, counter-oathing measures were suspended.⁹³

Notwithstanding that the intellectually misguided campaign of ritual counter-oathing failed, and Her Majesty’s witch doctors became “embarrassing figures of fun”,⁹⁴ the idea of eventually redeeming oathed Mau Mau members was not abandoned by the government of Nairobi. In February 1954 a “Sociological Committee” was formed, with Thomas Askwith, the then Commissioner for Community Development and Rehabilitation, as chairman; it was asked to conduct inquiries into the “sociological causes of Mau Mau”, the term sociological “being taken to embrace economic, psychological, political, and religious causes in their widest sense”.⁹⁵ The Committee met for the first time on the 3rd of February in Askwith’s office in Nairobi,

⁸⁵ Leakey’s conception of the Mau Mau movement, in the words of Berman and Lonsdale, was “socially constructed not only intellectually but politically” (Berman & Lonsdale, 1991, 195).

⁸⁶ Leakey, 1952, 85.

⁸⁷ Carothers, 1954, 12.

⁸⁸ Anderson, 2006, 46-7.

⁸⁹ Elkins, 2005, 107.

⁹⁰ Berman & Lonsdale, 1991, 195.

⁹¹ FCO 141/5887, October 1953, *Mau Mau and Its Psychological Background*.

⁹² Luongo, 2006.

⁹³ Branch, 2009, 44.

⁹⁴ Berman & Lonsdale, 1991, 191.

⁹⁵ FCO 141/5887, *Inquiry into the Causes and Methods of Mau Mau*.

and the meeting was attended by Askwith himself, S. H. Fazan, former Secretary of the Land Commission, Louis Leakey, William Kirkaldy-Willis, a physician and orthopaedic surgeon specialized in disabling spinal tuberculosis who in 1953 co-authored an introduction to the Kikuyu grammar, his Kenyan colleague Arthur Mbutia, David Waruhiu, the son of Senior Chief Waruhiu (murdered on the 9th of October 1952 by a Mau Mau commando), and Dedan Githige, Askwith's assistant. Curiously enough, none of them was a sociologist. Harold E. Lambert, a Kenya government's amateur anthropologist, and the Kenyan political activist Harry Thuku, who had spent nine years in jail as a member of the KCA before starting to cooperate with the colonial government, were also invited, but were unable to be present.⁹⁶ One of the main issues raised by the participants at the meeting was again the possibility of cleansing, upon which they concluded that "no cleansing could be effective without full and free confession".⁹⁷ After the cleansing – to be performed in churches or "in accordance with the Kikuyu custom" – an "alternative allegiance" had to be found.⁹⁸ "There were certain types of uncleanness" though, suggested Leakey, "for which no cleansing was possible"; the African members of the meeting did not agree with this position, believing instead that cleansing was always possible, although sometimes could be refused by individuals "who repeatedly performed bestial acts", and whose behaviour "indicated" that they were "unfit for society" and "had therefore to be cast out or killed".⁹⁹

These ideas were reaffirmed in the second book on the anticolonial insurgency written by Leakey. Published in November 1954, *Defeating Mau Mau* was an attempt to characterize the movement as a "perverse religion", whose effects could be eradicated from the Kikuyu mentality through specific therapeutic practices. Since the oath rendered those who had taken it "depraved", "unclean", "abnormal" and "unnatural", Leakey raised the question of "whether such persons can ever be *rehabilitated*; by cleansing ceremonies, by psychotherapy, by religion, or any other means".¹⁰⁰ The answer was positive in the case of those who had taken the first, the second, and "possibly" the third oath: "full and free confession followed either by a traditional *cleansing ceremony*, or by a genuine *return to Christianity*" resulted, following Leakey, in a "complete freedom from the supernatural fear that was engendered by the oath".¹⁰¹ Though, "as regards the more advanced and more bestial and foul oaths" the author did not "see much chance of success"; more likely, colonial authorities should "face the necessity of segregating such people for the rest of their lives, so that the evil they have done and the knowledge of it eventually dies with them".¹⁰² These conclusions were also echoed by Carothers, when he tried to answer the question of "how redeemable are these People from these oaths": "there are patterns of behaviour for which no cleansing oath is possible and [...] the rituals employed in the fourth Mau Mau oath go far beyond all possibility of cleansing".¹⁰³

Leakey and Carothers agreed on several of the aspects addressed during those meetings held to produce a government-sponsored sociology of the rebellion. The South-African psychologist participated to four of them, and the discussion table of the Sociological Committee may have represented a laboratory where some of the ideas that would be part of Leakey's late-1954 monograph have been tested.¹⁰⁴ Already a year earlier, though, his counter-oathing proposal had turned out to be an embarrassing failure for the colonial government. The idea of manipulating Kikuyu symbolical and cultural elements to eradicate Mau Mau influence over Kikuyu minds and souls had been gradually abandoned. The emphasis then shifted to the allegedly liberating practice of the confession, now believed to be "the only effective process" through which a Mau Mau supporter could "be made a respectable citizen again"; the psychic process triggered by it found "its parallel in the Catholic confessional and in psycho-analysis".¹⁰⁵ In this context, confessional practices

⁹⁶ FCO 141/5887, *Minutes of the First Meeting of the Committee to Enquire into the Sociological Causes and Remedies for Mau Mau*, pp. 1-2.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁰ Leakey, 1954, 84-5, emphasis added.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, emphasis added.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*

¹⁰³ Carothers, 1954, 19.

¹⁰⁴ FCO 141/5888, *Report*, p. 12.

¹⁰⁵ FCO 141/5888, 24th May 1954, *Report*, Introduction.

were conceived as techniques aimed at reconfiguring the relations between colonial subjects and the perceived legitimacy of the anticolonial insurgency or, in other words, to “restore *colonial* authority in the Kikuyu mind”;¹⁰⁶ the strategies used against the militants had the double function to sanction their insubordination, and to produce new disciplined and “readable” subjects through screening operations and the mechanism of confession.¹⁰⁷

Psychological and physical violence began to be increasingly used to induce confessions, so to accelerate the transition of detainees through the Pipeline system, as requested by metropolitan authorities.¹⁰⁸ As an official investigation into screening practices and interrogations carried out in 1955 clearly shows, violence was a “systemic and integral part of the screening process”.¹⁰⁹ The degree of psychological fear induced to obtain a confession, though, could “cause some confusion, if not bewilderment, in the minds of many illiterate and pagan tribesmen”; this was due to the fact that “it was much easier to ‘break-down’ an educated individual than an illiterate, primitive one”, as an experienced Screening Officer of the time assured Vincent Glenday, the officer who chaired the inquiry.¹¹⁰

In 1957, with colonial authorities still struggling to obtain the confessions of tens of thousands of prisoners, Askwith was stripped of his responsibilities, and T. J. F. Gavaghan was tasked with reviewing rehabilitation policies, in order to speed up the release process. The use of violence was systematized with the formulation of the “dilution technique”, designed to force the most “uncooperative” and “hard-core” detainees to confess.¹¹¹ The idea of winning the war against the Mau Mau through the “anthro-administrative”¹¹² practice of counter-oathing proposed by Leakey, and Carothers’ psychological treatment of Kikuyu mental wounds, ceased to be politically viable. In its last years, the British colonial state in Kenya ceased to craft its scientific legitimation; the recourse to force was gradually institutionalized, thus becoming a predominant counter-insurgency strategy.

CONCLUSION: THE FRAGILITY OF COLONIAL DOMINATION¹¹³

Racially differentiated groups no longer shared the same present. The dominant groups could enlist the irresistible momentum of history on their side and treat their apparently anachronistic subordinates as if they belonged to the past and had no future (Gilroy 2000: 57).

Both the aetiologies of the Mau Mau movement and the strategies for its defeat proposed by Leakey and Carothers, rather than being the result of detached and neutral observations, were instead deeply involved in the colonial political dialectic between insurgency and counter-insurgency.¹¹⁴ An analysis of the politics of scientific production in the historical phase of the Kenyan Emergency brings forth the nexus between the men of science and local administrators in the colonial situation. Expert and scientific interpretations of the movement, whether “psychologized”¹¹⁵ or anthropological, once placed in the historical context of their production, fully reveal their epistemic and political potential. Taken together, these theories were commissioned or used by British authorities to reorganize the field of knowledge about the Kikuyu people, in order to dispose of objective and authoritative material through which the practices of colonial domination could be legitimized.

¹⁰⁶ Berman & Lonsdale, 1991, 191, emphasis in the original.

¹⁰⁷ For an analysis of the political and epistemic role of confessional practices in colonial situations, see Renault, 2015, and Lorenzini & Tazzioli, 2018.

¹⁰⁸ Berman, 1990, 360.

¹⁰⁹ Anderson, 2012, 707.

¹¹⁰ FCO 141/6521, July 1955, *Inquiry into Screening Camps and Interrogation Centres Under the Control of Provincial Administration*, p. 2. See also Duffy, 2015, 511-2.

¹¹¹ Elkins, 2005, 320.

¹¹² Luongo, 2011, 13.

¹¹³ “Colonial ‘domination’ is”, writes Berman, “a much more complex and fragile relationship than is commonly recognized, resting as much on a material foundation of accumulation and class collaboration as the imposition of superior coercive force” (Berman, 1990, 9).

¹¹⁴ Hasian, 2013.

¹¹⁵ Mahone, 2006, 258.

As Fanon has highlighted, it is crucial to consider that “the colonization, having been built on military conquest and the police system, sought a justification for its existence and the legitimization of its persistence in its works”.¹¹⁶ British counter-insurgency war against Mau Mau could not be presented as a mere set of military and psychological tactics deployed to reassert colonial control over the Kenyan territory. It had to be patiently produced as a struggle for the modernization of the African people, an attempt to “rehabilitate” local cultural systems affected by irrational turmoils, and to treat the Mau Mau insurgency as a deviant manifestation of the Kikuyu psychic life. Authoritative interpretations of the movement and scientific proposals for its possible remedies were meant to serve this political purpose. Efforts were made by colonial rulers to manipulate the field of knowledge in order to invent a social and political grammar, suitable to read the anti-colonial insurgency in symptomatic terms. Despite these efforts, and the charge of administrative anxiety and bureaucratic nervousness arising therefrom, the hoped-for legitimating effects were obtained only to a small extent. This was primarily for two reasons: the precarious – and not fully acknowledged – status of the scientific production applied to Kenyan counter-insurgency, and the fragile historical imagination which fuelled it.

In the first place, both Carothers and Leakey’s authoritative statuses in the disciplinary field in which their analysis were situated – ethnopsychiatry and social anthropology respectively – were of dubious foundations. Neither of them possessed extended theoretical and academic training in these disciplines, and their authority was grounded in on-field experiences, whether they were clinical or ethnographic: this attracted the often very critical attention of Carothers and Leakey’s colleagues, both African and metropolitan. The highly experimental nature of this colonial scientific enterprise evokes the idea of colonial Africa as a “living laboratory”, “a space of knowledge production touted for its rigorous and robust truth claims”, but at the same time “a site in which manipulation might be manageable”.¹¹⁷ In this sense, scientific practices sometimes assumed a controversial nature, thus “revealing the fault lines and unfulfilled ambitions of empire”.¹¹⁸

Secondly, the ideological construction of the Mau Mau movement as an ensemble of foul, deranged or depraved individuals, rather than a collective response to the structures of political and economic domination – of which the colonial state, the settler community and even African loyalists were different but related manifestations – represented a common starting point of these analyses. This conceptual artefact was fuelled by a colonial political imagination which proved to be unfit to comprehend the historicity of the people it pretended to govern. In the words of Carothers, the Mau Mau represented “a type of evil thing” which was not “unique to Africa but occurred in a parallel fashion in *medieval* Europe among anxious and unhappy people”.¹¹⁹ Therefore, it could have been eradicated only if colonial rulers had managed to bring Africans out of their contemporary Dark Ages. These ideas, though, did not stand the test of history, for, as Wole Soyinka has vividly stated in his Nobel Lecture in 1986, “[...] distorted, opportunistic renderings of history have been cleansed and restored to truthful reality, because the traducers of the history of others have discovered that the further they advanced, the more their very progress was checked and vitiated by the lacunae they had purposefully inserted in the history of others”.¹²⁰

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¹¹⁶ Fanon, 1965, 22.

¹¹⁷ Tilley, 2011, 12.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 3

¹¹⁹ FCO 141/5888, *Report*, Appendix VI, emphasis added.

¹²⁰ Soyinka, 1986, 9. The Nigerian playwright and essayist addressed this topic in his Nobel Lecture of 1986 (titled *The Past Must Address Its Present*). The talk begins with the author recalling his disquiet when, in July 1959, he was about to act on the stage of the Royal Court Theatre of London a play called *Eleven Men Dead at Hola Camp*, a largely improvised performance on the beating to death of eleven detainees at the hands of camp officials at the Hola Camp on 3 March 1959.

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