

Moral Ethnicity and Political Tribalism

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Western students of Africa have, until recently, felt defensive about the continent's political ethnicity, anxious to disarm the racist prejudice of our readers. We used to make excuses for Africans: tribalism was not their fault. Now that some European tribes have proved to be more savage than most of Africa's, that timidity is disappearing. But the issue will always be complex. Ethnicity is a world-wide social fact; all human beings make their cultures within communities that define themselves against 'others'. But we do not always politicise culture; and when we do, it may not necessarily be to pursue a reactionary xenophobia. To imagine the existence of a new 'tribe' may be the best way to look outward, to embrace social progress. Students of Africa are now beginning to understand such ambiguity - that while some aspects of ethnicity are indeed inherited and conservative, its meanings are also reinvented every day, to meet new needs. Cultural identity is what people "it rather than what they historically and ineluctably". And 'moral ethnicity' - what I call that contested internal standard of civic virtue against which we measure our personal esteem - is very different from the unprincipled 'political tribalism' with which groups compete for public resources.

There have been five different academic approaches to the politics of African ethnicity since the 1950s. Four have been defensive scholarly imaginations of 'tribe'. These were based, in succession, on the assumptions that tribes were residual categories, fast disappearing; next, that they were a form of social resistance; or that they were an outgrowth, almost an invention, of colonial state power; and finally, that they encouraged 'false consciousness' as an ideological weapon in and a mask for class struggle. Only the most recent perspective has been more positive, seeing ethnicity as an equivalent to nationalism. These different analyses have appeared in sequence, but the many-sided nature and variability of ethnicity has meant that old concepts have kept reappearing; they have therefore overlapped. Each approach is based on different premises about not only the roots of ethnicity but also about the political and economic context of its politicisation. To clarify the discussion I

shall use 'ethnicity' - often 'moral ethnicity' - to describe the common human instinct to create out of the daily habits of social intercourse and material labour a system of moral meaning and ethical reputation within a more or less imagined community. I take 'tribalism' - or 'political tribalism' - to mean the use of ethnic identity in political competition with other groups. Ethnicity is always with us; it makes us moral - and thus social - beings. Tribalism is contingent upon political intention and context. Far from explaining all African conflicts, political tribalism itself always needs to be explained.

The historiography of 'tribe'

1) In the 1950s non-Marxist 'modernisation theory' optimistically assumed that ". Scholars believed that pre-colonial Africa had been a land of tribes, each united by language, modes of subsistence, kinship, political chief ship, cultural practice and religious observance, all of which also separated each tribe from its neighbours, rather as if they were differently coloured billiard balls. These primordial, pre-modern and now reactionary loyalties were believed bound to weaken as Africans acquired larger, 'national' ambitions. Their identities must surely be 'modernised' by exposure to markets, towns, literacy, and bureaucratic values. Territorial nationalist movements were expected to make these budding identities flower. Leaders like Nkrumah had the necessary charisma to attract the loyalty of 'transitionals' as they were called, those who had been 'detrivalised' out of their inherited but now enfeebled small identities, and eager to enter a wider world. Africans *had been* tribesmen and were *becoming* citizens. Cultural assimilation was thought to be a social and political, even cultural, good. The new African states would be, and they would have to be, cultural melting pots.¹

Modernisation theorists thus supposed that ethnicity was strongest amongst those who had changed least. African nationalist politicians took a less neutral view and called it treason; 'tribalist' was a universal political insult. But the assumptions of modernisation theory are now proven to be wrong, much too shallow in their understanding of social identity. Tribalism has often become politically more important, not less; it is an all too modern form of competition. Why this should be so I will discuss later. But modernisa-

¹ See, especially, James Coleman and Carl G. Rosberg (eds.), *Political Parties and National Integration* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1964)

tion is still part of African political rhetoric, not least in a South Africa that has yet to be disabused. The ANC for instance, accuses Inkatha of being a 'tribalist' and for that reason alone an 'anti-nationalist' movement, when the reality appears to be that Zulu supporters of both ANC and Inkatha dispute the ethnicity of what it is to be 'Zulu', not a self-evidently less 'national' debate than any other in South Africa, unless one confuses nation with state.

Some scholars questioned the modernist wisdom even in the 1950s, especially the French sociologist Georges Balandier. He denied that colonial rule was a disinterested modernising mission and that markets always liberated. He doubted that ethnic groups were necessarily and rightly, doomed, as inefficient and unfulfilling forms of human society. His academic invention of ethnicity and tribalism was a stimulatingly subversive mirror to modernisation theory:

2) Balandier explained tribalism as *a mode of resistance to capitalist exploitation and state oppression*.² Colonial conquest and capitalism were, in his view, crude ordeals that promoted an immoral process of class formation rather than the beneficent 'social mobilisation' of modernisation theory. People did not choose to leave traditional society and then to become modern. Rather, white rulers and capitalists twisted their existing social structures into levers of power against them. African life was corrupted rather than modernised. Some Africans defended themselves by reinventing their local societies to regain control over their relations with the wider world, if necessary by shutting it out. Tribe was not an inevitably emptying barrel but a carefully reconstructed refuge, a local moral order, that sheltered one from the disorders caused by racist state power and externally dominated markets.

In many respects Balandier was clearly correct; and his approach has been revived by another Frenchman, Jean-Francois Bayart, in his *L'etat en Afrique, la politique du ventre* (1989). Modern tribes can protect against modern state oppression: they constitute what Bayart calls the revenge of African society. This revenge may take the form of 'economic exit'. Small farmers may 'exit' from the formal economy of export crops and state taxes and produce food for local markets instead, or smuggle their cash crops across state boundaries. Ethnicity may in this context become a cloak for trading

² Georges Balandier, *Sociologie actuelle de l'Afrique noire* (Paris, 1955)

Diaspora, even a protection racket, what Italians call *sottogoverno*., that erodes the fiscal and moral basis of the state.

This second approach makes the point that if one analyses the political environment differently - as oppression rather than modernisation - one will also predict a different future for ethnicity. If Africa is a continent of frustrated modernisation, in which increasing numbers of its people feel that, despite seizing the political kingdom, not much has been added to them,³ it may be entirely rational to withdraw from 'national' politics and markets. Ethnicity can be a local triumph over national failure, as might be said of parts of Europe today.

3) But ethnicity can be fostered by successful states, too. In the 1960s, the era of Africa's independence, liberal scholars argued, in solidarity with the new national leaders, that 'tribe', far from enjoying any natural right to local autonomy, was almost entirely *a colonial invention*. Few were so crude as to argue that tribes were created by a deliberate policy of 'divide and rule', although the French in West Africa once followed a 'politique des races' to disarm Muslim unity. More profoundly, modern (colonial) state power seemed to be inherently more divisive than that of Africa's pre-modern kingdoms. Because its power was more centralised, with greater capacity to help or harm, so collective constituencies emerged in order to appropriate its potency for themselves, if necessary at the expense of others. Now, with independence, electoral calculation also rewarded the politicisation of ethnicity. Balandier was turned on his head; tribe was a form of unfair attack rather than moral defence. The argument could be illustrated with evidence from the new social history of colonial rule:

Colonial governments had to police internal boundaries to restrict movement; but in thus stopping tax evasion they also encouraged local loyalties. By supporting client chiefs with the rituals and rules of 'customary' law, they crystallised and thus hallowed ethnic legal traditions. White missionaries similarly invented standard tribal languages out of a mass of sub-ethnic dialects. White employers stereotyped migrant workers by their presumed tribal aptitudes for different sorts of work. Some tribes were thought to be 'martial', and became army or police tribes. Geographical differentiations in soil, rainfall and access to markets dictated that some would become

³ A paraphrase of Kwame Nkrumah that I owe to Professor Bethwell Ogot.

cocoa tribes, or cotton, clerical or mine working tribes. In reaction, Africans made the identities which Europeans had wished upon them live, instead, for themselves. They found that tribes made excellent producer co-operatives or Trades Unions. Scholars who thus traced the modern transformations of ethnicity assumed that social change did not simplify and aggregate - as in the modernisation model - but differentiated and splintered identities, according to a non-Marxist but nonetheless materialist model of change. Tribalism was a tactical instrument; ethnicity was not yet taken to be a good in itself.⁴

This approach suggested that there was a real material base for the post-colonial competitions of political tribalism; it was a means of access to state power as much as withdrawal from it. While for Balandier or Bayart tribes could be modern refuges, so here tribes were modern corporations, economic regions or occupations rather than inherited ethnic cultures. This approach 'explained away' tribalism as a politically creative process to which no blame attached, if still some regret. The next approach held that a minority of Africans, the rich and powerful, were very much to blame:

4) Socialist scholars who believed, with Marxist modernisation theory, that class interest would supersede all other identities, saw ethnicity as a form of popular '*false consciousness*'. And, since tribes obviously bore no structural relation to capitalism, tribalism must be a form of ideological manipulation, part of the hegemonic apparatus that the new African bourgeoisie, now in control of the state, used in their own class interest. This fraudulent ideology of kinship made African rulers and employers appear to be the patrons of their sectional tribal constituencies rather than what they were, the exploiters of workers and peasants as a whole. Tribalism divided the working poor and made some of them proud of some of their exploiters, seen as local heroes who carved for their followers niches of employment and profit within the mercantilist state.⁵

The defect of this analysis was that its theoreticians knew so much better than the people who were most intimately involved, but who had the misfortune not to be academics possessed of a the-

⁴ For differing examples of this approach see, John Iliffe, *A Modern History of Tanganyika* (Cambridge, 1959), cap 10; T.O. Ranger, *The Invention of Tribalism in Zimbabwe* (Gweru, 1985).

⁵ Giovanni Arrighi and John Saul, *Essays on the Political Economy of Africa* (New York and London, 1973).

ory of history. Marxists did not therefore need to ask *why* ethnicity should be so effective as a form of false consciousness. They were also naively optimistic about the attractiveness of a worker or peasant class identity to poor Africans. In the 1970s Marxists even dared to hope that a rising class consciousness among the African poor would eradicate ethnicity and so, happily, turn Africa into 'a continent of new Yugoslavs'!⁶

5) Finally, scholars are now beginning to analyse ethnicity positively, as *a form of nationalism*, an intellectually imaginative political project of liberation that makes modern claims on behalf of civil rights, directly comparable with European nationalisms, if also sharing their Janus-faced potential for exclusive, jealous evil. There is a new scholarly appreciation of ethnic nationalism as, in large part, a moral struggle with all the complexities of social change that our previous analyses had barely begun to understand.

In this their latest revision of opinion Africanists have been much influenced by three books in particular: Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities* (1983); Ernest Gellner's *Nations and Nationalism* (1983); and Eric Hobsbawm's *Nations and Nationalism since 1780* (1990). Their insights have recently been applied to Africa by the greatest of Africa's popular historians, Basil Davidson, in his *The Black Man's Burden: Africa and the Curse of the Nation-State* (1992). Six main points are commonly made within this new perspective:

(a) As in pre-industrial Europe, so too in much of pre-colonial Africa - outside its admittedly extensive zones of state-sponsored slave-raiding - ethnicities used to co-exist in a non-competitive manner in decentralised economies where state power was either non-existent or undemanding. Modernisation theory had incorrectly assumed that Africans had lived in tribalisms of mutual isolation. While in central and eastern Europe rulers might speak one language (German), the church another (Latin), traders yet another (Yiddish) and peasants spoke many local dialects of several vernaculars, so too in Africa linguistic and cultural difference operated in complementary rather than in competing spheres of life. Africans used to distinguish between highland farmers, plains pastoralists, fisherfolk, often immigrant specialists in the art of rule (in Muslim areas 'clerical tribes') and so on, all with different skills, each with

⁶ Leroy Vail, 'Introduction' to his edited collection, *The Creation of Tribalism in Southern Africa* (London, 1989), p. 3.

their own 'moral economy' or means of judging civic virtue, that were clothed in ethnic difference. Their relations were generally characterised by the exchange of specialised products, including rulership, rather than by domination. Ethnic groups did not clash like billiard balls; they formed and re-formed by fission and fusion, like slivers of glass in a kaleidoscope. Africa was a continent of parcelled-out sovereignties, if not indeed of stateless societies. This was partly because Africans were rather inefficient at killing each other; spearmen and archers were no match for the fusiliers and artillerymen who built the competitive European state system out of blood and iron.⁷

(b) In a process comparable with the birth of European nationalisms, these permeable ethnicities became more self-conscious and competitive in late nineteenth-century Africa and then in the colonial era. In the last half-century before colonial conquest, the intensification and spread of slave-raiding strengthened dynastic and other group - not necessarily ethnic - consciousness. In the colonial era, ethnic nationalisms then developed as a creative response to industrialisation, urbanisation and the intensification of state power. Ethnic groups became political tribes; had they but been in Europe we would have called them nationalities. Three imported processes were at work:

(i) the labour market became generalised within each European-ruled colony. People competed for the *same* resources of employment, urban shelter and security. Their linguistic and cultural *differences* began to matter for the first time. These were a source of personal advantage or disadvantage according to the relative numbers and skills of people of different ethnic origin at the workplace or in town. In Europe people resolved this conflict by deciding to join the dominant local ethnicity, to 'become French' or to 'become Italian' - more often than they sought recognition by becoming more consciously Breton or Calabrian. Africa, by contrast, has no Prussias but hundreds of Wallonias or Sudetenlands. That Africa took this path of 'sub-nationalism' rather than 'majority-nationalism' was due to the two other processes:

(ii) European conquest states created an entirely novel state power in which some Africans exercised delegated authority over other Africans, such as had rarely existed before. Domination,

⁷ Perhaps the most interesting full-length study in this vein is Jean-Loup Amselle, *Logiques métisses: anthropologie de l'identité en Afrique et ailleurs* (Paris, 1990).

therefore, had not yet been forced to accept rules of accountability. African police and taxation clerks had an unprecedented ability to help their friends and hurt their enemies. In place of a largely stateless and polycentric ethnicity, tribal hierarchies emerged as the props of states. The complementary modes of subsistence of pre-colonial Africa gave way to different levels of power, sharpening consciousness of difference and without the representative institutions of nineteenth century Europe within which ethnic difference might have been negotiated.

(iii) In the non-Muslim areas of Africa, European rule and Christian evangelisation introduced literacy. This was a crucial cultural innovation. Guided by African intellectuals, white missionaries not only created standardised vernaculars, they gave them sacred texts, tribal Bibles that focused historical imaginations on a story of a chosen people struggling to be free, whose leaders called on Pharaoh to 'Let My People Go', but who then had 'No Easy Walk to Freedom' in their exodus through the wilderness, to quote the works of successive leaders of the ANC, Albert Luthuli and Nelson Mandela. Among the Kikuyu of Kenya, the first generation of Christians invented their tribe as a 'father' - when previously there had been several Kikuyu myths of origin - to whom they owed the duty to return, taking as their text the Gospel parable of the Prodigal Son. This Judaeo-Christianisation of popular consciousness is the key difference between contemporary Africa and Europe. In Europe, state education has supplanted church schools and secularised aspirations within state-national languages. In colonial Africa missionary schools promoted local tongues rather than a *lingua franca*. No colony had a national language policy, only one that, in effect, separated elite speakers of the European language of conquest from the mass of divided vernacular speakers.

(c) Those three processes are now widely acknowledged. I would add a fourth, more domestic development that appeared in response to them. It is the transition from 'moral economy' to 'moral ethnicity'. All ethnicities, and not only in Africa, have at their core a moral economy that allocates 'reputation' to the means by which people pursue their self-interest. Reputation's criteria are historically negotiated but appear to be immemorially 'given'. No pre-colonial African society was communalistic in its own day, for instance, but all were technically so simple that any individual accumulation of wealth ineluctably incurred social obligations

which had to be constantly repaid. Rich and poor had duties to each other; patronage had to earn its service. Reputation measured the quality of each. But then the penetration of colonial capitalism forced people to debate such formerly implicit moral economies within increasingly explicit 'moral ethnicities.' As their previously 'reputable' forms of inequality became subverted or distorted (as Balandier argued) people naturally questioned them. Big men might become official chiefs and thus careless of their clients; but weaker members of society, poor men and women generally, might also acquire unprecedented bargaining power by engaging in wage-work elsewhere or by going to school. These new social competitions fostered new arguments about what forms of achievement made one a good member of the local community. Competition in community service harked back to the social morality of an imaginatively more virtuous, and thus communalistic, past. Moreover, this civic virtue was now debated within the standardised biblical vernaculars that began to constitute ethnic groups: in all these ways, ethnicity acquired patriotism, a distinctively modern consciousness.⁸

Contrary therefore to the expectations of modernisation theory, Africans experienced the very reverse of 'detrribalisation'. In pre-colonial times they will certainly have thought in ethnic terms, but not all the time; they lived in much smaller communities than those defined by the shifting boundaries of language and material culture. And, because their transactions with members of other ethnic groups were relatively equal, they only rarely reinforced their bargains by banding together politically as tribes. But in colonial times ethnic consciousness could harden even without increased external competition, by means of this civic argument about how reputation could be sustained within a changing society.

(d) This concept of moral ethnicity now helps us to understand what Marxist scholars once merely condemned as 'false consciousness', the role of ethnicity in class-formation. Class formation anywhere, we can now see, is a process that can be intellectually grasped (and morally judged) only by reference to some former moral economy that (we must imagine) once governed the politics of known reputation. Both the social-climbing African bourgeoisie

⁸ This paragraph summarises the theme of my 'The Moral Economy of Mau Mau', pp. 265-504 in Bruce Berman and John Lonsdale, *Unhappy Valley: conflict in Kenya and Africa* (London, 1992).

and the poor who struggled to keep up appearances fought to retain their honour, to be judged as neither hard-faced exploiters on the one hand nor idle wasters on the other. African class struggle was a series of struggles not to be seen as a socially separated - and thus amoral - sectional interest but to remain respected members of a normative community, now ethnically constituted. Far from being a 'false consciousness', ethnicity is the sternest measure of moral agency.

(e) Moral ethnicity has no necessary connection with political tribalism. All ethnic groups have renewable traditions of how their members should treat honourably with strangers. But the effects of colonial rule, discussed above, linked the internal debate on civic virtue to the other new question of how to represent one's community in the external, unequal, arena of state power. Just as moral ethnicity was socially constructed in debate about honour - between, say, unlettered polygynous elders in round huts and monogamous teachers in square houses, between 'red' and 'school' people as they say in South Africa⁹ - so, too, there has been dispute as to who can best 'speak for the tribe' in the political arena where large constituencies count. It is such a dispute that is at the heart of the violence in Natal, where Zulu are killing fellow Zulu because they disagree about what being Zulu means and who, therefore, is best qualified to represent Zulu interests to others. Forty years ago, in the conflict known as 'Mau Mau', Kikuyu similarly fought Kikuyu in Kenya, to establish who best amongst them could expel the British.

Thus far in my argument, ethnicities have been assumed to be invented as cockpits of debate, even to the point of internecine violence. And this, again, makes them familiar, not unusual. All European nations have, after all, had their civil wars, where Englishmen have killed Englishmen, Frenchmen have killed Frenchmen, Germans have killed Germans, and so on, in the course of their disagreements over how best ethnic virtue can be expressed in governance.

(f) But the final stage of this thesis on the modern invention of Africa's tribes introduces the real tragedy, the point at which principled political argument becomes translated into unprincipled

⁹ See, especially, Philip Mayer, *Townsmen or Tribesmen* (Cape Town, 1961).

faction. In the competitive state arena, where power has no indigenous roots of accountability, its conduct no precedent and its reward, therefore, no limits, electoral success needs what Indians call a 'vote-bank' that unquestioningly accept the shifting bargains that successful high-politics requires, not worrying too much about abandoned principles. Politicians who may have won power in a contest of civic virtue within their ethnic constituency can hold on to it only if they suppress the multi-vocal debates of moral ethnicity that would otherwise carry on behind their backs - in their tribe's collective best interest, of course, but also at the cost of pandering to inter-tribal suspicion at the individual level as well.

Nor is this a peculiarly African tragedy. It is the central problem of multi-cultural politics everywhere. Nations, as Ernest Renan once said, are, or should be, daily plebiscites. The same goes for modern ethnicity. International relations, on the other hand, are negotiated by governments that claim to speak with a single voice. And the same goes for political tribalism, too. It thrives by silencing the quarrelsome civic virtues of invented moral ethnicity that first gave it birth. Yet among the most interesting defenders of human rights are those who now argue that human rights are themselves culturally, socially, defined. This being so, cultural difference must itself be a right, indeed the most fundamental one of all, since it is the crucible in which all other rights are created. In any non-totalitarian multi-cultural state, therefore, individual citizens may arguably have the right to be publicly recognised as members of particular culture-bearing groups - or ethnicities - perhaps most obviously in the field of state education. If their particularity is denied in the otherwise self-evidently liberal name of universal equality they may in fact feel themselves oppressed. Cultural assimilation is no longer unquestionably a cultural good, as it was in the days when modernisation theory held sway. Moral ethnicity may have to be recognised as a good in itself; it may be the precondition for allowing equality of both personal esteem and legal status for members of ethnic minorities.¹⁰ But how to prevent such recognition of moral ethnicity from degenerating into political tribalism is an unsolved problem, one indeed that has scarcely begun to be addressed, either in New York, London, Solingen and Sarajevo or in Monrovia, Nairobi, Soweto and Mogadishu. But forty years ago the Mau Mau forest fighters in Kenya did explore some of the ground, as puzzled

¹⁰ For a recent statement of the problem see, Charles Taylor, *Multiculturalism and 'The Politics of Recognition'* (Princeton, 1992)

and divided as we are today. The contrast between ethnicity and tribalism is not by any means a new issue nor a merely academic affair.

A forest debate

The Mau Mau insurgents engaged in intense but unresolved debate on the sources and accountability of political power. To listen in on their argument under the dripping forest canopy of the Nyandarwa mountains in the mid-1950s is to discover the universal in the parochial. The dispute between the guerrilla leader, Dedan Kimathi, and the man whose position he had usurped, Stanley Mathenge, stands representative of the gulf that has riven Kenya's - and Africa's - politics ever since. It stemmed from the root opposition between society and the state, so much greater in Africa than in much of the rest of the world. Kimathi's followers called themselves the Kenya Parliament; Mathenge's the Kenya *riigi*. The Parliament's view of power approximated to that of the state; the *riigi* demanded its social accountability. The disputants were not divided by ethnicity although the culture of identity coloured their views. All of them were Kikuyu; indeed, most were from the northernmost Kikuyu district, Nyeri. Nevertheless, their debate raised the painful question how far the core civic virtue of their moral ethnicity, the bedrock of neighbourly social order, might become political tribalism - clan-nishness in this instance - at the moment when state power, or power to challenge the state, became the point at issue. The dispute came to a head after nearly three years of hard-fought and costly guerrilla war.

The guerrilla critics of the Parliament men (and all its leaders *were* men) accused them, above all, of suffering from the fault of literacy, a label that covered many different failings in leadership. The opposition leader Stanley Mathenge was unlettered, and the only commander to have refused commissioned rank. Most of his followers were unlettered too, although one of them, Kahinga Wachanga, was among the best educated men in the forest. The crux of their opposition to Kimathi may be seen in the name they took for themselves: 'Kenya *riigi*', after the door that protects a household. This self-description is nowhere explained in their memoirs; but that it was carefully chosen is plain enough when their complaints against Kimathi are considered against what we know of Kikuyu political thought. Being a stateless people and preoccupied therefore with reputation rather than institutions, their

thought is perhaps better called moral thought. The aspects most relevant to the conflict between Parliament and *riigi* had been summed up by no less an authority than Jomo Kenyatta twenty years earlier when, in *Facing Mount Kenya*, he quoted the axioms, 'A man is judged by his household'; 'a good leader begins in his own homestead'; and, as the father of a growing and, ideally, polygynous family, 'what he can do in the family group he is expected to do on a larger scale in the interests of the community as a whole.'¹¹ But Kenyatta did not go as far as he might; he did not explore the contradiction at the heart of Kikuyu thought that made the power of its civic virtue so very parochial. He failed to mention the proverb that set the limits on household authority: 'nobody else can close the door of another man's hut'; each household head must be his own master, accountable to his own dependants first.¹² Mathenge, it seems, remembered this; Kimathi, like Kenyatta, forgot.

By their choice of name therefore, the unlettered men of the *riigi* declared that the root of their dissatisfaction with mission-schooled Mau Mau leaders lay in the question of authority. The forest-fighters needed authority; they were obsessed with what appear to be the inappropriate hierarchies of rank, field-marshal, general, colonel and so on that are essential for large military formations but an encumbrance, one might think, on small, mobile sections of men with their own sources of recruits and supply, isolated by poor communications and needing an autonomy of decision to address the particular tactical problems presented by the parochial politics of their rural home areas. But this was a more broadly political war. Mau Mau fought locality by locality, but to challenge a wider, colonial, power. Independent gangs on foot had a tactical advantage over brigaded British battalions in lorries but lost all hope of concerted influence. It was to bridge this gap between fragmented guerrilla tactics and united political strategy that Mau Mau leaders multiplied their ranks; but that was a symbolic answer rather than a working solution. The division between *riigi* and Parliament shows the extent to which the answer failed to solve the problem of the local - or social - accountability of a wider political power, to satisfy the canons of moral ethnicity.

Both Kimathi's men in the Parliament and Mathenge's colleagues in the *riigi* agreed that political authority must rest on the civic

¹¹ J. Kenyatta, *Facing Mount Kenya*, (London, 1938) pp. 76, 175, 315.

¹² G. Barra (ed), *1000 Kikuyu proverbs*, (Nairobi, 1939) no. 782.

virtue of personal achievement. Kikuyu agrarian achievement, as in pre-industrial societies around the world, had little option but to be publicly accountable. Each household head might be responsible for closing his own door; but the hut that it protected will have been built with the help of his clan and age mates; and for the productive and reproductive labour of the wife whom his hut sheltered he will have compensated her father's clan. All forest fighters agreed with Kenyatta, and with countless elders before him, on this private foundation of civic virtue. But they disagreed on what constituted achievement and on the scope of the power that it authorised.

The *riigi* leaders had no quarrel with Kimathi's chief secretary, Karari Njama, when he maintained that 'activities proved abilities'. They protested only when he interpreted that proverbial wisdom to mean that 'it would be as difficult for the illiterate people to lead the educated persons as it is for the blind to lead one with eyes.'¹³ The *riigi* developed five lines of attack on the authority of the literates. In their view the educated lacked courage, were uncertain of their ethnic identity, flouted the rules of reputation and had no respect for labour or for a political morality grounded in religion. It was a formidable list of complaints; all raised the issue of the leaders' accountability to some criterion of moral ethnicity.¹⁴ The debate completed the destruction of Mau Mau's already fragile cohesion, just as it has helped to destroy the legitimacy of Africa's states.

The first *riigi* complaint has been echoed often enough by Kenya's 'radical' historians: that the educated had deserted the insurgent cause at the first sign of danger. It was closely linked to the second, on which radical scholars are silent, that the lettered did not love the Kikuyu traditions for which the *riigi* group claimed to fight.¹⁵ But Mathenge and his lieutenant, Kahi-Itina, had a third, still graver reservation: that even those few literates who had entered the forest nonetheless flouted the only valid test of accountability for power.

¹³ D.B. Barnett and K. Njama, *Mau Mau from Within*, (London, 1967) pp. 395, 398. It is unfortunate that Karari Njama, the Parliament's secretary, is the only source of any discursive depth for the division between Parliament and *riigi* but his credibility is enhanced by his final decision to desert the increasingly autocratic Kimathi for the popular but, in Njama's view, indolent and ineffective Mathenge (pp. 480-1).

¹⁴ Also integral to the *riigi* critique was a dispute about proper gender relations that I have discussed elsewhere. But for many of his (male) opponents Kimathi's chief fault lay in his exploitation of women.

¹⁵ See complaints by Mathenge and two other *riigi* leaders, Generals Kimbo and Kahi-Itina, in *Ibid.*, pp. 336, 397, 471.

This was set by the small community that alone could swear to one's reputation, one's clan, neighbours or insurgent band. Mathenge, who hailed from the same locality, accused Karari Njama of coming home only 'as a visitor' - an ignorant outsider and more seriously, therefore, of unknowable integrity, potentially amoral. The very breadth of his political responsibilities as Parliament's secretary took him from those who knew him best and made it impossible for them to trust him. Mathenge rejected Njama's attempted rejoinder, which was that Kimathi deserved praise for his unselfish 'management' of his subordinates' affairs. This was too much of an argument of state for Mathenge, and entirely missed the point of his criticism. Kimathi, far from being unselfish, was in his view appropriating other men's rights to organise their home, to close their own *riigi*. 'I should know', he said, reminding Njama of that cardinal principle of Kikuyu politics, 'that home is the starting point'; you could not 'find [the] feathers [of success] along other men's paths.'

It was on the same grounds that Kahiu-Itina, General 'Hot Hips', rejected Njama's plea that he owed it to his electors to attend sessions of Parliament; after all, as he pointed out, the *itungati* band (as Mau Mau called themselves) who had elected him 'were still living with him and '... they knew very well whether he led them well or not.'¹⁶ The localities to whom the *riigi* leaders answered had sharp eyes for virtue; the Parliament's supine assent to what in Kahiu-Itina's eyes was Kimathi's autocracy suggested that power, by contrast, could be blind to vice. The Kenya *riigi* was proud not to be packed with Kimathi's 'yes yes men',¹⁷ just as the task of the domestic *riigi* was to defend not only the household's physical safety but also its moral autonomy. Ironically, this same insistence on the authenticity of face-to-face, parochial, civic virtue had been one of the main objections that Kikuyu 'loyalists' had earlier raised against Mau Mau's claims to collective power: there was no known way to test the secret movement's reputation and thus its authority.¹⁸

As recorded by Njama, the Parliament men rebutted these first three points of the *riigi* case against them line by line. First, not all

¹⁶ Ibid., pp. 394-6, 399, 453, 481.

¹⁷ Ibid., pp. 401, 471 *Itungati* had in former times been a rearguard of experienced warriors; the term also carries connotations of dependent service.

¹⁸ J. Lonsdale, 'The Moral Economy of Mau Mau', in B. Berman and J. Lonsdale, *Unhappy Valley: conflict in Kenya and Africa* (London, 1992) pp. 436-7.

literates were cowards, and that jibe in any case misread the nature of modern power, in which the pen was mightier than the sword. Even unlettered fighters agreed, singing that had Kikuyu not been educated 'Then neither the European Nor the Asian [would] lose sleep Worrying about how to satisfy their needs. . . The need for a spear is gone, Replaced by the need for a pen. For our enemies of today Fight with words.' Njama also denied that one had to be conservative to preserve one's ethnic identity. Mau Mau must be free to choose the best and discard the worst of both their own and the white men's culture. 'Every generation makes its own customs, invents its songs and dances, makes its rules and regulations, which all die a natural death with that generation', Njama observed with historical justification as well as polemical force.¹⁹ He could have said, just as truly, that modern Kikuyu probably had a more coherent view of tradition than their ancestors did, precisely because the first generation of 'readers', fearful of ostracism, had been so anxious to record custom (and in a standardised language) rather than betray it, Kenyatta chief among them with his patriotic ethnography, *Facing Mount Kenya*. Literacy had, as I have argued more generally, helped to convert individual aspirations for civic virtue into a sense of moral ethnicity for the Kikuyu as a whole; literacy had enabled the Kikuyu to imagine themselves as an ethnic group.

But the heart of the forest dispute lay in the literates' response to the *riigi* thesis that power must rest on personal reputation within the small moral community. Kimathi and Njama countered that their unlettered opponents, far from being concerned for the accountability of power, were themselves selfish, clannish intriguers who fanned parochial envy for lack of personal merit. Statesmanship, they self-righteously insisted, was an acquired skill and hard work, not a favour. A true leader was 'a man of good ideas'. Personality was not enough; that died with the man; but his ideas - and therefore his political purpose and its adherents - outlived a leader's death.²⁰ The dangers of reputation, on the other hand, were all too well illustrated, Njama thought, by General Kahu-Itina's wretched career. At the start of the war he had been a martinet who imposed the strictest camp discipline, with officers separated from other ranks, men from women and a woman to tend every camp fire; by late 1954 he had sunk so low as to be one of the instigators of

¹⁹ Barnett and Njama, *Mau Mau from Within*, pp. 239, 337.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 396, 451, 445.

the *riigi* opposition to Kimathi, hating literates and abandoning most of his leader's privileges, living at the level of his men 'so as to preach equality in order to gain popularity by criticising the other leaders.' Rank thus had a twofold virtue in Njama's eyes; it preserved unity between leaders and, therefore, obedience among subordinates. Mere 'popularity', the politics of reputation, courted anarchy. Mathenge's leadership qualities were positively dangerous; he was, Njama noted with contempt, 'very popular, inactive and incapable'.²¹ Accountability, it seemed to Njama, ought to be rendered to one's peers before it was owed to one's followers. Had he been arguing in a still wider, pan-ethnic arena, one can imagine him condemning political tribalism.

Njama's views allowed Parliament men to call for nomination rather than elections to fill vacancies, on the grounds that electoral success 'depended on either popularity or deceitful propaganda and not on merit.' It was the sort of argument that would later underwrite the party-state's struggle for mastery over post-colonial society. It took one of the *riigi* generals, Kimbo, to put the case for multi-party democracy - long before that had been heard of as the catchword of Africa's renewal. When Njama tried to persuade him that it was better to criticise Parliament from within than to join the external opposition, Kimbo replied that that was naive. For criticism created enmity and a critic within his own party had nobody to defend him (and no chance, therefore, of pressing his criticism); 'but an enemy from another party would be defended by his party.'²² Mau Mau was thus divided by that central issue in all multi-cultural politics - not just in Africa - whether equal citizenship is best preserved by institutions that obey the superior claims of public neutrality or, rather, that recognise the cultural particularities within which people are formed as social beings; even within this parochial forest arena, that was what fired the argument between Parliament and *riigi*.

The next issue between the educated and unlettered seemed to focus on the range of power rather than the sources of its authority but, on closer examination, also centred on accountability. A question that was often asked in the forest was who, after Mau Mau's victory, would allocate the Rift Valley land currently owned by white settlers and never, prior to British rule, colonised by Kikuyu?

²¹ Ibid., pp. 165, 299-300, 397-9, 443.

²² Ibid., pp 415, 401.

To general applause, Kimathi declared in August 1953 that white farmland would be issued to his officers in lieu of pension, after Mau Mau had won the day for an African government. But within the year General Kimbo had emerged as advocate for the view that the first claim on Rift Valley land should lie with fighters who had, like him, worked on white farms as 'squatters', some of them for two generations. Their labour, what the novelist Ngugi has called 'holy sweat', gave them property right, another central premise of the Kikuyu moral economy of possessive individualism and, by extension, their political thought. Kikuyu squatters, *athikwota* as they were known, did not want anyone from the Kikuyu reserve - which would have included Kenyatta - 'becoming their master who would divide unto them their lands.'²³ Rift Valley Kikuyu suspicion of their educated cousins in the reserve was a large element in the *riigi* opposition. Labour did not trust literacy; if this was class struggle it was based on the contradictions of accountability as much as on different forms of access to the means of production. Subsequent history was to show that the squatters had good reason for suspicion; at independence they were forced to share the inheritance of the Rift Valley with many competitors, Kikuyu and others, who had never put a hoe to its soil.

The final issue between Parliament and *riigi* was more complex and less easily articulated, perhaps because it was bound up with religion, the deepest of all sources of moral authority. Kahiua-Itina accused educated men of being dominated in their thought by white missionaries who hated everything Kikuyu. They therefore felt free to use their uneducated followers as 'merely stone walls' within which to protect their plans and on which to build a future from which their protectors would be excluded. Again, accountability and its absence were at the root of what might otherwise be called class conflict. In late 1954 Njama was disturbed by the spread of a still more insubordinate teaching that he blamed on *komerera* (i.e., opportunist bandit rather than principled guerrilla) leaders, but could as well have come from people who were soon to declare themselves as *riigi*. The idea was getting about that to perform domestic service for leaders, the ordinary household chores of soldiering, was 'slavery'. Leaders, it was said, 'never collected firewood or made their own fires, yet they were the most famous fighters. . . the true liberty was equality of all persons in which one was

²³ Barnett and Njama, *Mau Mau from Within*, pp. 374, 402.

free from anyone's rule.' Njama decided that this doctrine was too dangerous to ignore. It carried the moral obligation to close one's own *riigi* to dangerous extremes. He had to refute this anarchic extremism in Kikuyu political thought if the leaders were not to be 'abandoned by the *itungati*.'

Njama chose to attack subversion at its root, by means of theological argument. He 'tried to prove' to a leading leveller (who had nonetheless taken the title Lord Gicambira) 'that there was no equality of persons on this earth'. The dissidents responded with the hitherto inconceivable claim that 'man was the master of this earth and he could make changes to suit his desires'. The account of this religious strife is all too brief but, within days, Njama was fortified in his beliefs by surviving a British bombing raid through the power of prayer, holding his ground while the levellers, lacking his faith, had run away to save their skins.²⁴

This episode may be taken as a parable of the fragility of the African state, probing perhaps deeper than is possible under the conventional canons of political science. While the Lord Gicambira's egalitarianism could be found in the beliefs of both the classical Kikuyu religion that the *riigi* defended and, much more clearly, in the colonial Christianity that the *riigi* attacked as the source of Parliament's arrogance, in practice both these Kikuyu faiths were agreed that differentiation in wealth and power was the natural pillar of social order. For both ancestral religion and Kikuyu Christianity taught a theology of abundance in which wealth proved God's blessing and poverty was the price of delinquency.²⁵ So, while the egalitarianism of the levellers was dangerous to the authority that illiterate elders and literate officials both wielded, it was an internal opposition common to all theories of power. What was new was the dissidents' humanism: 'man was the master of this earth'. Neither Kikuyu old believers nor Christians could allow that heresy. It destroyed any theology of inequality and all possibility, therefore, of the accountability of power, that which makes inequality socially responsible and thus justifiable in practice. So it broke up the basis of moral ethnicity, too. This most radical attack on Mau Mau's hierarchy, far more dangerous than the clannishness - or political tribalism - of household authority, demonstrated, all too

²⁴ Ibid., pp. 397-8, 406-9.

²⁵ I discuss this issue more fully in 'The moral economy of Mau Mau'.

starkly, how, in crisis, a popular revulsion against unaccountable power may also destroy the very ethnic basis of civil society.

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