

# The Machete Massacre (Daily Mail 21/1/2005) Right of Reply

by John Bellasis

Christopher Hudson of the Daily Mail wrote an article promoting a book by Caroline Elkins called “The Brutal End of Empire in Kenya”. He states that, “Only by racking up 600 hours of interviews with Kikuyu and colonial survivors has (she) been able to patch together what really happened... in the 1950s.” It is 50 years since the Mau Mau terrorists rebelled in Kenya. Some of the young Mau Mau hotheads who were the victims of the backlash by the other peoples of Kenya, mainly Wakamba askaris (police) and white farmers, would be those most likely to take advantage of the intervening years. The Kikuyu elders, who suffered most dreadfully, physically and emotionally, at the hands of the Mau Mau, are not around to verify the literature of the period, the most authoritative of which was the “Corfield Report” of 1960.

Mr Hudson equates the struggle against the Mau Mau to that of the Nazi concentration camps and the Stalinist gulags. The Nazis wanted to exterminate the Jews and other elements of society. Stalin wanted to eliminate political opposition. In Kenya, the boot was on the other foot. Those being interned had already demonstrated their intent to exterminate whites and it was not just a question of detaining without trial for there was a dire need to undo the most dreadful oath of allegiance you can imagine. Some Kikuyu people refused to take the oath and were slaughtered in ways that were more awful than anything that happened to the perpetrators, if caught. Others who took the oath committed suicide because of the nature of the oath and of what they were required to do. Those who accepted the oath were killing machines and the only solution was to expunge the oath. If this task was given to anyone who was not trained for the job (and it is doubtful that anyone was qualified at that time), then the result would likely be the final solution.

It would not be possible to convey in an article the full horror of the most extreme oathing ceremonies and it would not be possible to convey the unjustified terror brought about by Jomo Kenyatta and other leaders of the Kikuyu Central Association (KCA) against his own people as well as the whites. The KCA was founded in 1920 and in 1928 Jomo Kenyatta was its General Secretary. Its stated aim then was “to get back the land”. The early settlers, such as my father, did not seize the land. They bought the land from the British Government, which appropriated 110 square miles around Nairobi for the developing needs of Kenya at that time (Corfield Report) out of a total 2,816 square miles occupied by the Kikuyu tribe (Fr C. Cagnolo’s “The Akikuyu”, 1933).

Kenyatta is described by Hudson as “a brake on Mau Mau militancy”. Kenyatta lived abroad spending some time in Moscow in the early 30s and then in England until 1946. It was after he returned to Kenya that the KCA spawned the militant arm of the Mau Mau, which swore all its members (two-thirds of the Kikuyu tribe and threatening other tribes) “to drive all Europeans from Kenya” including “killing the European owner” of the farm on which they worked.

My father obtained 500 acres in 1918 after fighting in the First World War and defeating the Germans in Tanganyika. He gave about 100 acres to the White Father mission and built a church, presbytery, school and clinic on that site. He planted about 300 acres under coffee and left 100 acres or so for cattle (dairy) pasture and he called his farm Rioki. He built a dam and a coffee factory just as depicted in the film, *Out of Africa*.

The farm was at 6,000 feet above sea level, situated on the southern edge of the Kikuyu Reserve in the District of Kiambu. 100 miles to the north of the Reserve you could see Mount Kenya on clear days and the Aberdare Mountains to the left of it. To the South on very clear days, you could see Mount Kilimanjaro (300 miles away) and the Ngong Hills to the right of that behind Nairobi (20 miles away). The luscious green of the coffee trees contrasted beautifully with the red murrum soil. The garden contained kikuyu (or couch) grass lawns, an exquisite rose bed, jacaranda trees, and various sights of imported elegance.

The Kikuyu people who were close to us were not just friendly, they were like family. Whilst there was an element of colonialism in our relationship with the blacks which many find irksome, there was something else in the relationship akin to a marriage. You would not have understood, or even recognised, the friendship, if you had not witnessed the whole relationship. The caring and protection afforded to the workers on Rioki far exceeded the care and protection of their own communities.

I was born in Nairobi (as were all five children in our family) and I was six when the State of Emergency was declared. I was washed every night by a black girl, Victoria. Our cook, Juma, made us exquisite meals. Mundia was the headman on the farm and Kingeri was an assistant; just a few names of many who were an

integral part of my early years. The family breakfast was always my favourite. We children would roam freely, occasionally visiting the Native shambas on the other side of the dam. That is, until some attitudes became a little strained and we were confined to our garden; and we would hide, unfairly to our parents, unaware of the looming threat. Bars were put on the windows and a black night watchman patrolled with an Alsatian. My father formed a small band of loyal Kikuyus to defend the farm and he arranged a system of signals with neighbouring farms using sirens and torches.

In 1952, we were nearly slaughtered in our beds. We had just returned from our annual holiday at Jardini on the coast. The girls were dressed in their school uniform and suddenly, my mother announced that we were returning to the coast. Whilst we were waiting for train tickets, we watched from the windows of a hotel opposite the Stanley Hotel as hundreds of black Africans were herded into trucks by other black African askaris. We learnt later that Juma's wife (women played a significant role as men in the Mau Mau subversion) was on some sort of Mau Mau committee or council and had ordered Juma to kill us. He had the best advantage for the job because he was the only one with keys to the house. He was the most trusted servant and had been with my father for more than thirty years. He could not go through with the task and hanged himself from a tree in the garden.

From 1950, the Mau Mau increased its criminal activities and those who suffered the greatest were the Kikuyu people. There were many who had grown up with the indoctrination of the KCA through the Kikuyu Independent Schools Association and rumours were spread that further Kikuyu land would be taken by Nairobi as it acquired City status. The strategy of Kenyatta was more like that of the Nazi SS; that is, long-term indoctrination for ultimate domination. It was bold and it benefited from a fundamental difference in culture between the European and the African. The British Government was sensitive to the issues of individual freedom of speech and human rights. The African was tribal and the interests of the whole community were paramount and ignored the rights or preferences of the individual. The Government thought that it could observe the growing restlessness and could control what it saw. But the true movement was unseen in the dense forests of Mount Kenya and, although Kenyatta once publicly disowned the Mau Mau to the satisfaction of Europeans, his body language in that speech said the opposite to his people.

I would not be encouraged to say that the Mau Mau lost its battle. Most European settlers that I know of, left Kenya. Some went south to Rhodesia and South Africa. Some went to Australia and some to Argentina; a few to North America. Many went to the British Isles, several to Scotland. Many Asian businessmen also left with their families, many to Britain. Jomo Kenyatta became the first President of independent Kenya. It is no wonder that some people may seek to lay blame for the treatment of the Mau Mau on the whites in Kenya since the Mau Mau was never completely expunged.

The British Government lost the plot in Africa and the consequence of that is self-evident today. African society is out of control and AIDS is destroying millions of people. Governments are dependent upon aid to the extent that they positively discourage development (read Paul Theroux's "Dark Star Safari", 2002). The countryside is mismanaged, water sources are not developed, goats uproot the vegetation and the people starve. Violence is rampant and the machete is still the preferred tool to resolve political differences.

What happened to the farm? It was sold in 1965, to a co-operative of 3,000 Kikuyus for two-thirds of its market value. When my brother visited Rioki in 1982, the farm was productive and the school was thriving. If it had not been for the Mau Mau, I believe that the success of my father's venture, and others, would have been replicated elsewhere in Kenya and Kenya could have been a model for all of Africa. Racial tolerance could have been more successful in Kenya than anywhere else on earth. There are many instances where there existed a close bond and inter-dependence between an indigenous African and an early European settler. The joint struggle to cultivate a wild country in a dangerous environment was immortalised in Robert Ruark's book "Uhuru", 1962. It is possible for such a level of trust to be fostered anywhere on a global scale and can only be sustained by mutual respect and mutual effort. In order for this to happen, it is important that history and cultures are remembered to learn from the mistakes and build on the successes. I believe that the strongest cultural themes throughout Africa are: strength in numbers, and survival of the fittest. The African nations, and all others in their support, need to focus on these two themes over the next fifty years, but through shared effort and not with the combative machete.