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IF YOU CAN'T BEAT THEM, JOIN THEM: GOVERNMENT CLEANSINGS OF WITCHES AND MAU MAU IN 1950s KENYA

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I

During the mid-1950s British administrators in the Machakos District of Kenya enlisted categories of Kamba occult "experts"—"witchdoctors" and "cleansers"—to cleanse local "witches" and migrants from Nairobi who were believed to have taken the Mau Mau oath. A compendium of colonial documents concerning the "cleansing" campaigns illustrates how and why the socio-historical context of Mau Mau-era Machakos drove the colonial administration to break with its longstanding *de facto* policy of not officially combating supernatural challenges to state authority with supernatural means. The overwhelming disorder wrought by Mau Mau motivated state officials to break with precedent and to identify and employ Kamba "experts" to cleanse Mau Mau adherents and witches.[1]

The widespread and politicized nature of the violence occurring during Mau Mau, and its perceived linkages to the supernatural, precipitated the state's shift to the employment of Kamba experts to combat "witchcraft" and Mau Mau oathing. An anthro-historical approach to understanding Mau Mau in Machakos shows that, while the cleansings constituted a group of "critical moments" at which British colonial officials could argue that they had dealt with supernatural challenges to state authority by rendering them "knowable," the cleansings also demonstrated the

[1]Generally speaking, from the colonial era to the present day, people in Kenya have broadly explained "witchcraft" as an embodied power or a bought substance, each of which is used to do malevolent "magic" in order to harm the person, psyche, property, or kin of another. In Kikamba, "black" magic or magic-for-harm is referred to as "*uoi.*"

degree to which state authority became situated in Kamba colonial officials and the extent to which the implementation and interpretation of British colonial cleansing policies depended on these local authorities.[2]

II

From October 1952 to December 1959 Kenya was officially under a State of Emergency resulting from a violent, anti-colonial insurgency conducted by (largely) Kikuyu guerrilla fighters. The term Mau Mau came to refer to the insurgent movement itself, to the guerrilla fighters and the rebellion's more passive adherents, and also to the oaths of allegiance that fighters and adherents took, or were forced to take. The Mau Mau rebellion arose from decades of consistently increasing levels of socio-economic insecurity and political marginalization experienced by the substantive numbers of Kikuyu squatters in the White Highlands and Kikuyu slum-dwellers in Nairobi, and came to involve members of other tribes.[3] Mau Mau violence first flared on settler farms in the White Highlands in 1952, and the colonial government moved to squash the spotty insurgency, which quickly "transformed into a formidable guerrilla force."[4] Despite the massive expenditures of force and intensified administration on the ground, the colonial state's efforts to put down Mau Mau were unsuccessful and talks surrounding the end of the rebellion resulted in Kenya's independence in 1963.

Yet, in addition to expressing grievances over the depredations and deprivations of colonial rule, the Mau Mau rebellion can also be understood as constituting a key juncture at which violence related to supernatural beliefs and practices challenged the ability of the colonial state to maintain law and order. Rather than treating the rebellion as a situation rooted in more tangible, socio-economic and political concerns, the reme-

[2]Lynn M. Thomas, *Politics of the Womb: Women, Reproduction, and the State in Kenya* (Berkeley, 2003), 6.

[3]See Tabitha Kanogo, *Squatters and the Roots of Mau Mau, 1905-1963* (Nairobi, 1987); Frederick Cooper, "Mau Mau and the Discourse of Decolonization," *JAH* 29(1988), 313-20; David Anderson, *Histories of the Hanged: the Dirty War in Kenya and the End of Empire* (New York, 2005); Caroline Elkins, *Imperial Reckoning: the Untold Story of Britain's Gulag in Kenya* (New York, 2005).

[4]John Lonsdale, "Mau Maus of the Mind: Making Mau Mau and Remaking Kenya," *JAH* 31(1990), 393-421. Bruce Berman explains the state's response to the insurgency: "[w]ith metropolitan political and military backing, the colonial state moved to crush the radical challenge through massive force and the imposition of an extraordinary degree of direct administrative control. At the same time, the Provincial Administration became once more the dominant and most important element of the state apparatus." Berman, *Control and Crisis in Colonial Kenya: the Dialectic of Domination* (Nairobi, 1992), 347.

Burning Witchcraft in Mau Mau-era Machakos. Photo courtesy of J.C. Nottingham.

dying of which would necessitate the relinquishment of a significant degree of colonial privilege and power, many colonial authorities preferred to read Mau Mau abstractly as primarily a supernatural situation, in which atavistic "black magic" or "witchcraft" beliefs and practices were an engine and means of anti-colonial resistance.[5] This reading of Mau Mau as a supernatural phenomenon is reflected in the character of colonial administrative policies and practices instituted to "rehabilitate" and "cleanse" known or suspected Mau Mau adherents.

As part of the administration's efforts to combat Mau Mau, the British colonial government instituted "de-oathing" campaigns in areas surrounding Nairobi in order to "cleanse" black Kenyans known or supposed to have taken the Mau Mau oath. These de-oathing campaigns were part of the colonial government's broader strategy of eradication and rehabilitation, which entailed tactics such as interning black Kenyans in labor camps and removing them to "safe" villages established by the state.

[5]For analyses of this discourse see Carl G. Rosberg and John Nottingham, *The Myth of Mau: Nationalism in Kenya* (New York, 1966); O. W. Furley, "Historiography of Mau Mau," *Hadith* 4(1971), 105-31.

Although Kikuyu people bore the brunt of these tactics, other ethnic groups from provinces in proximity to the capitol were also targeted. For instance, known or suspected Kamba Mau Mau from Machakos District underwent de-oathing ceremonies similar to those carried out in Kikuyu areas.

In Machakos District, Mau Mau de-oathing campaigns gave rise to another set of state-sponsored cleansing campaigns—the cleansing of alleged Kamba witches and witchdoctors. These "witch-cleansings," held in market towns across the district by witchdoctors and specialist oath administrators working under the auspices of the colonial government, typically combined mass burnings of witchcraft paraphernalia and public oathing ceremonies which cleansed witches of their malevolent powers and deeds. Members of the colonial administration in Machakos District organized these witch cleansings because they were concerned that Kamba witches were both lending supernatural and material support to Kamba Mau Mau adherents and were taking advantage of the instability of the period to practice witchcraft more widely and fiercely.

III

The colonial state viewed groups who were situated near Nairobi or who had substantial numbers of their members working in the capital and regularly returning to rural *mashamba* as potential (whether willing or forced) Mau Mau participants. Kamba people, especially those regularly traveling the easy labor lines between Machakos District and Nairobi, were regarded as vulnerable to Mau Mau influences and activities. By 1953 colonial authorities were expressing significant concerns about Mau Mau in regard to Kamba people and places. Colonial documents evidenced a special concern with Mau Mau and Kamba youth in Nairobi, one going as far as to say that the city was to "this District [Machakos] what the forests have been to Kikuyuland," meaning a central site of Mau Mau recruitment, activities, and sanctuary.[6]

Colonial officials' depictions of the sorts of threats to law and order posed by Kamba youth living and laboring in Nairobi and its environs are best encapsulated in a Ministry of African Affairs file entitled "Akamba in Nairobi," the contents of which were produced by and circulated among the Provincial Commissioners, District Commissioners, and District Officers from Kamba locations and to the Secretary for African Affairs. Memos and correspondence cast urban Kamba youth as Mau Mau-supporting "spivs," or "gangsters" at the worst, or highly vulnerable to Mau

[6]KNA DC/MKS.1/1/32.

Mau "contamination" because of their low standard of living and the influences of their equally debased urban Kikuyu counterparts at the best.[7] Indeed, the Officer-in-Charge of Nairobi Extra-Provincial District described the Kamba "as the tribe most liable to contamination at the present time [who] should be placed at the head of the danger list."[8]

Colonial officials read their task regarding Kamba and Mau Mau as multi-fold, the most important task being to discipline and "rehabilitate" known or suspected Kamba Mau Mau and their supporters. To facilitate this task, officials suggested augmenting the number of Kamba involved in local administration and increasing the level of participation on-the-ground of existing Kamba (and British) authorities. The 1953 Machakos Annual Report noted, for example, that the value of closer administration "cannot be overemphasised." It also foregrounded the necessity of keeping local officials "loyal" and noted, " . . . in Mbitini, Mukaa, and Lower Kilungu, one Headman and three Asili took the Mau Mau oath without much force or persuasion being needed; it is only where the lower ranks of the Administration have been contaminated that we have had Mau Mau troubles."[9] Indeed, a range of sources indicates that an extensive program of coercive and disciplinary measures—of which cleansings were one element—was implemented to deal with Mau Mau among the Kamba.[10]

IV

Mau Mau oathing was mysterious (and threatening) to colonial authorities, and they struggled with defining its origins, elements, and meanings. It was neither patently clear nor easily agreed on which categories of persons administered the oath; who exactly had taken the oath; what precisely oathing entailed; and, finally, if the oath was unitary or if different oaths corresponded to varying levels of Mau Mau participation. What Mau Mau scholarship has resolved in the intervening five decades since the rebellion is that there were "multiple Mau Maus," and this conclusion suggests that Mau Mau oaths likely varied along ethnic lines as well.[11]

[7]See "Akamba in Nairobi," KNA MAA 7/112.
[8]Ibid. The Nairobi Extra-Provincial District was an area specially demarcated during Mau Mau and encompassed market centers on Nairobi's far reaches and the edges of Kambaland.
[9]KNA DC/MKS/1/1/31.
[10]See, KNA DC/MKS/1/1/31 and KNA DC/MKS/1/1/32.
[11]The term "Mau Mau" is itself obscure, although John Lonsdale has cogently suggested that it derived from the Kikuyu phrase, "*kiama kia mau mau*," or "council of greedy eaters," used by Kikuyu squatters in the late 1940s to describe the Kikuyu political leadership and later adopted into broad use during the 1950s conflict. See Lonsdale, "The Moral Economy of Mau Mau: the Problem" in *Unhappy Valley, Conflict in Kenya and Africa, Book Two: Violence and Ethnicity* (Oxford, 1992), 265-303, 426.

Unfortunately, oral evidence about Mau Mau oathing and cleansing among the Kamba does not shed light on the specifics of Mau Mau oathing among the Kamba.[12] For example, as one Kamba informant who described himself as having been "forced" to take the Mau Mau oath explained, he could not talk about the specifics of Mau Mau oathing practices because the oath entailed swearing on pain of death not to disclose specifics of it and the "cleansing" ceremony he had undergone did not negate this promise. He concluded simply: "I went through oath and there are some things I can't talk about."[13] Archival and oral evidence does reveal, however, the ways in which Mau Mau "cleansing" procedures in Ukambani were ethnically specific. The state enlisted Kamba ritual "experts" and drew on pre-existing Kamba oathing and cleansing protocols, adapting them to the particular context of Mau Mau.

Despite their attention to ethnic particularities, the Machakos cleansings had their roots squarely in the program originally developed to cleanse Mau Mau in Kikuyuland. Indeed, the general notion that Mau Mau adherents could be "de-oathed" was by turns the brainchild of Louis Leakey, the renowned white Kenyan (or "white Kikuyu") anthropologist, and the British "ethnopsychiatrist" J.C. Carothers. Their ideas were reflected in the papers of the Rehabilitation Advisory Committee, a group to which both men belonged, most notably the committee's 1954 secret dossier, *Report on the Sociological Causes Underlying Mau Mau with Some Proposals on the Means of Ending It.*[14]

The report referenced elements of dominant colonial discourses about Mau Mau, reading the conflict as an aberration of Kikuyu tradition, a psychological and affective disturbance, and a pagan retrogression. In turn it recommended a tripartite remedy of screening/confession/cleansing at the local level. Although by the mid-1950s Mau Mau "de-oathing" was falling out of favor among colonial officials in Kikuyu areas, such was not the case in Machakos, where colonial authorities saw a strong connection between Mau Mau and witchcraft. Screening and cleansing of known or suspected Kamba Mau Mau persisted and gave rise to similar treatment of local "witches."

[12]KNA DC/MKS/1/1/31.

[13]"Kamba Oral Evidence," a collection of 30 taped interviews of Kamba men and women between the ages of 65 and 100 from seven locations in Ukambani, which I recorded in 2004. Hereafter KOE.

[14]KNA VP/2/2/21, "Report on the Sociological Causes Underlying Mau Mau with Some Proposals on the Means of Ending It." See also L.S.B. Leakey, *Defeating Mau Mau* (London, 1954); J. C. Carothers, *The Psychology of Mau Mau* (Nairobi, 1954); and Jack McCollough, *Colonial Psychiatry and the African Mind* (Cambridge, 1995).

V

Kamba cosmology entails a complex and varied system of oaths, and the basic Kamba oath, *kithitu*, can be applied to a range of situations. Archival evidence suggests that colonial authorities read *kithitu* as broadly applied and applicable in the context of 1950s Machakos. Informant commentary indicates that Mau Mau oaths and Kamba oaths to cleanse Mau Mau were taken seriously by ordinary Kamba people, and that they read government-sponsored cleansing oaths as authentic and efficacious. Describing *kithitu*'s multiple meanings and tracing the terms used to discuss Mau Mau oathing and de-oathing and witchcraft cleansing in 1950s Machakos reveals commonalities in perspectives, procedures, practices, and expertise applied to the problems of Mau Mau and witchcraft.

The term *kithitu* carries a variety of resonances. First, *kithitu* is the oath itself; the actual words spoken, the promises made. *Kithitu* also refers to the substances and articles employed in the ceremony in which the oath is spoken. And *kithitu* is the (lethal) power that renders the oath efficacious.[15] *Kithitu* is processual, and it is accurate to say that "*Kithitu* is at the same time the generic name for oathing and the active factor of the oath."[16] The act of engaging in *kithitu* is called kuusya *kithitu*, referring to the ingestion of *kithitu* substances contained in a *kithitu* object such as a pot or calabash. *Kithitu* ceremonies are managed by specialists called *mu'unde wa kuuysa kithitu*, a term broadly translatable as "man of eating *kithitu*."[17]

Kithitu has a number of functions and is invoked in a number of politico-juridical settings. It is used to cleanse people following social transgressions. *Kithitu* is also used to settle disputes between individuals. Furthermore, it has been intertwined with institutions of Kamba governance. For example, in the precolonial and colonial eras, *kithitu* was used by *nzama*—councils of Kamba elders—in deciding conflicts between individ-

[15]For general information on *kithitu* see Hitoshi Udea, "Kithitu among the Kamba of Kenya: the Case Study of Kilonzo's Kithitu." (n.d.) Institute of African Studies, University of Nairobi, Research Seminar. KNA Mss. 83-821 390 EUD; David N. Kimilu, *Mukamba wa Wo* (Nairobi, 1962); and Kivuto Ndeti, *Elements of Akamba Life* (Nairobi, 1972). For information on the continued salience of *kithitu* in Kamba politics see François Grignon, "The Kithitu Oath in Ukambani Politics: a Moral Contract in Kenyan Politics." Paper presented at the ASA-UK Bi-annual Meeting, London, School for Oriental and African Studies. 14-16 September, 1998; and Katherine Luongo, "A Self-Evident Death? Reading Water and Witchcraft in the News of a Kenya MP's Death" *Journal of the University of Michigan International Institute* (March 2005).

[16]Grignon, "Kithitu Oath," 5. See also John Middleton and Greet Kershaw, *Central Tribes of the North-Eastern Bantu* (London, 1965), 76.

[17]KOE.

uals or parties. As Hitoshi Udea argues, *kithitu* has been historically ". . . connected with law, morals, values, legal procedure, clan conferences (*mbai*), political power and so on."[18] In all instances, the role of *kithitu* is to guarantee the oath-taker's incontrovertible fidelity to the promises that a particular context has demanded.

Kithitu works as a guarantor because of its killing capacity. Depending on the sort of *kithitu* taken, to contravene *kithitu* is certainly to invite one's own death, and in some instances, the death of one's kin and affines as well.[19] Further, through the act of kuusya *kithitu*, *kithitu* becomes embodied. The embodied nature of *kithitu* makes it impossible for the oath-taker to escape from the promise made over *kithitu* and from *kithitu*'s killing capacity, which has become part of the oath-taker's body through the ingestion of *kithitu* substances.[20]

The various types of *kithitu* are generally differentiated by their modifiers. For example, they are often referred to as the "*kithitu cha* . . ." or "*kithitu* of" the situation which the *kithitu* is intended to sanctify, rectify, etc. Informants name both the Mau Mau oath and the oath to cleanse Mau Mau as *kithitu cha Mau Mau*. They also refer to the oaths administered during the Machakos witch cleansings as *kithitu* cha Mau Mau. But in other instances, particular forms of *kithitu* are called by entirely different terms, for example, *ng'ondu*, the anti-witchcraft form of *kithitu*. Informants alternately cite the *ng'ondu* oath as a type of Mau Mau oath, as an oath used to cleanse Mau Mau and, of course, as an oath used to cleanse witches.[21]

Most broadly, such an overlap in terminology reflects *kithitu*'s meanings and applications. It can also be read to indicate an intersection in the conceptual, procedural, and practical elements of Mau Mau oathing, Mau Mau oath-cleansing, and witchcraft cleansing oaths. First, such an overlap suggests how violence and separation were conceived of as central, common threads underlying the narratives of Mau Mau and witchcraft. In addition to doing material and spiritual harm, both the violence of Mau Mau and the violence of witchcraft caused significant divisions within communities.[22] Violence rendered those involved in Mau Mau and/or

[18]Udea, "Kithitu," 3.

[19]KOE. See also Charles Dundas, "Native Laws of Some Bantu Tribes of East Africa," *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 51(1921), 229-31; J. H. Blackwood Murphy, "The Kitui Akamba: Further Investigations on Certain Matters" *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 56(1926), 195-206; and Ndeti, *Elements*, 124-26.

[20]Onesmus Mutungi, *The Legal Aspects of Witchcraft in East Africa* (Nairobi, 1977), 78. Mutungi highlights the supernatural power with which *kithitu* is believed to be imbued.

[21]KOE.

[22]For a discussion of community divisions in the Kikuyu context see Daniel Branch, "Loyalism during the Mau Mau Rebellion in Kenya, 1952-60" (D.Phil., Oxford, 2005).

witchcraft activities literal and figurative outsiders whose membership in recognized communities, whether the local community of the village or the colonial community of "loyal" subjects in need of being restored through cleansing.[23] Because both Mau Mau and witchcraft wrought violence and separation and could be employed to reinforce each other, they could be cleansed by overlapping oathing practices and ritual experts.

Second, this overlap foregrounds themes of secrecy and ambiguity common to stories of Mau Mau and witchcraft. Despite years of anthro-administrative inquiry, Kamba witchcraft was still in many ways obscure to British colonial authorities during the 1950s, due in large part to Kamba people's attitudes towards witchcraft as a power and a substance necessarily shot through with secrecy. As noted above, colonial discourse about Mau Mau among Kikuyu drew strong connections between Mau Mau and the subversion of "traditional" religion, and "black" magic or witchcraft, but also concentrated on the killing capacity of Kikuyu Mau Mau oaths.[24] It is not surprising then that British colonial authorities would perceive relations between Kamba Mau Mau and Kamba witchcraft, read Kamba Mau Mau oaths as a corrupted *kithitu*, and agree to the use of *kithitu* and *ng'ondu* to deal with the intertwined problems of Mau Mau and witchcraft in Machakos.

Third, such an overlap connotes commonalities in the ways in which colonial authorities aimed to deal with Mau Mau and witchcraft. Known or suspected Mau Mau and witches were collected by the same sorts of authorities and in similar manners during the mid-1950s. Once brought to administrative centers, alleged Mau Mau and witches were interviewed by colonial authorities in an effort to determine the scope of their activities. Similar Mau Mau and witchcraft cleansing procedures were carried out by specially appointed "experts" in oath administration, recognized as such both by colonial authorities and by ordinary Kamba.

Written sources situate *kithitu* within a "system of confessions and free pardons for those who had merely taken the [Mau Mau] oath."[25] Oral sources, in contrast, describe a comprehensive, complex, and coercive program in which Kamba migrants were routinely stopped as they crossed

[23]KNA VP/2/2/21. See also, Leakey, *Defeating Mau Mau,* and Carothers, *Psychology*. For discussions of witches as members of a "category of dangerous persons" requiring social (re)integration see Suzette Heald, "Witches and Thieves: Deviant Motivations in Gisu Society," *Man* 24(1986), 124-44, and idem., *Controlling Anger: the Anthropology of Gisu Violence* (Oxford, 1998).

[24]For a nuanced fictional treatment of discourse of colonial magico-religious discourse surrounding Mau Mau and oathing,see, M.G. Vassanji, *The In-between World of Vikram Lall* (New York, 2003).

[25]J.C. Nottingham, "Sorcery among the Akamba of Kenya," *Journal of African Administration* 11(1959), 2-14.

into Ukambani, and in which men and women were collected by local Kamba authorities and brought to administrative centers, where they were subjected to intensive interviewing before being required to undergo *kithitu*.[26] Reflecting further these opposing perspectives on confession vs. coercion, each set of sources suggests how Mau Mau and its cleansing gave rise to the Machakos witch cleansings.

VI

Colonial descriptions of the Machakos witch cleansings offer a straightforward and orderly narrative in which close to 1,000 seemingly self-identified Kamba "witches" responded to state officials' requests that they surrender their witchcraft paraphernalia for public burning and publicly renounce the practice of witchcraft—a pair of practices that British colonial authorities imagined would "cleanse" the witches and witchdoctors of prior bad acts. In return, the "witches" could expect amnesty from the government and a clean slate from their neighbors.[27]

An anthro-historical approach to colonial sources about the Machakos cleansings disrupts the state's easily-bounded story of the cleansings, hinting instead how the cleansings were as much about the *absence* of colonial control as they were about its presence. Such an approach integrates various sources and strategies for reading. First, doing "anthropology in the archives" involves both strategies of reading archival sources "against the grain" and "with the grain." Strategies of reading against the grain examine how the structuring of narratives in an archival text speaks to the social conditions—the historical context—of the period in which the text was written. Strategies of reading with the grain also entail teasing out the "fictive" elements of an archival text.[28] Reading with attention to the literary conventions, considerations, and concerns of the time and genre of document enables the scholar to identify various reoccurring narrative strands in these tales as "fictive," not in the sense of "made-up" or untrue, but as containing tacitly agreed-on conventions for telling particular kinds of stories.

Applying strategies of reading "against the grain" and "with the grain" to documents generated by the colonial authorities also enables the histo-

[26]KOE.
[27]KNA BB.PC/EST/12/15, Witchcraft, General, 30 October 1954–11 July 1961.
[28]Natalie Zemon Davis, *Fiction in the Archives: Pardon Tales and Their Tellers in Sixteenth Century France* (Stanford, 1987). See also the special volume of *History of the Human Sciences* on archives, especially, Thomas Osborne, "The Ordinariness of the Archive," 51-64; and Patrick Joyce, "The Politics of the Liberal Archive," *History of the Human Sciences* 12(1999), 35-49.

rian to identify "culturally reasonable conjectures."[29] Reading an archival text against the grain, with the historical context in mind, reveals the author's "culturally reasonable conjectures," moments at which seemingly necessary information is absent from the text's narrative because the author knows his audience will be able to fill in the blanks with the cultural knowledge of the time. These conjectures tell the researcher that which was so obvious to colonial writers and readers that it could be left unsaid. But reading the same text with the grain," uncovers a second element of "culturally reasonable conjecture" that encompasses the notion of acceptable assumptions. Unsubstantiated assumptions appear in archival texts because the author knew what sort of ideas were so taken for granted that he need not defend or detail them. Overall, the author knew what sort of assumptions his audience was equipped to expect and ready to assimilate.[30]

Fully engaging the archive and its documents therefore demands a true effort at a critical "archeology" that stretches beyond a bare textual reading to one that recognizes the "content in the form."[31] An anthro-historical approach to colonial sources about cleansings in Mau Mau-era Machakos reveals that these accounts also tell a broader story of shifts in the assignment of authority, the devolution of administration, the systemization of inquiry, and the designation of expertise.

The 1954 Machakos Annual Report noted, perhaps somewhat hyperbolically, that Mau Mau had "crept in not along modern politico-nationalistic channels, but through the dark sewers of sorcery and magic in the South . . ."[32] Such fears linking Mau Mau and witchcraft originated with black Kenyan members of the administration, such as chiefs and headmen, who brought their concerns to British administrators. British authorities took these fears seriously because of the Emergency period's emphasis on closer administration and because of the Kamba reputation for witchcraft.[33] The exigencies of the Emergency era had necessitated the implementation of closer administration policies in the colony's districts. These policies resulted in the devolution of powers formerly ascribed to

[29]Ann Laura Stoler, "'In Cold Blood:' Hierarchies of Credibility and the Politics of Colonial Narratives," *Representations* 37(1992), 151-89.
[30]Ann Laura Stoler, *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power: Race and the Intimate in Colonial Rule* (Berkeley, 2002). See also Jane Sherron De Hart, "Oral Sources and Contemporary History: Dispelling Old Assumptions," *Journal of American History* 80(1993), 582-95; and Mark Dressman, "Theory into Practice?: Reading against the Grain of Good Practice Narratives" *Language Arts* 78(2002), 50-58.
[31]Stoler, *Carnal Knowledge*.
[32]KNA DC/MKS/1/1/32.
[33]Ibid.

British District Commissioners and District Officers. As recollected by J.C. Nottingham, the former Machakos D.O. who had been at the head of the witch-cleansings, "[d]uring this period the chiefs were functioning almost as junior D.O.s."[34] At the same time closer administration broadened the scope of Kamba officials' administrative authority; it worked in tandem with the fraught circumstances of the period to designate these officials as "experts" of local social (and supernatural) situations whose knowledge was respected and relied on by their British superiors.

The degree to which British authorities were ready to defer to the expertise of chiefs and headmen on the subject of the supernatural becomes clear when reading colonial documents in conversation with the recollections of Nottingham. For example, the "Witchcraft Appendix" of the 1955 Eastern Africa Handing Over Report explained that the question of why the state did not intervene in Mau Mau-related witchcraft had been broached initially by Chief Muthoka at an August 1954 meeting of the Eastern Area Chiefs, and that at the November meeting the group agreed to set up protocols for dealing with witchcraft in Ukambani.[35] Fifty years later Nottingham succinctly explained: "[t]he witch-cleansings were only possible because of the Emergency and the closer administration of the period. The program was wholly at the instigation of the chiefs. I wouldn't have touched it without the chiefs' pressure. . ."[36] In a manner similar to that of the Mau Mau de-oathing campaigns, British officials organized the witch-cleansings, while Kamba authorities were responsible for the identification and roundup of alleged witches.

These worries about witchcraft and Mau Mau brought into high relief several decades of colonial concerns about the challenges witchcraft posed to law and order in Machakos. Various witchcraft-related crimes had at regular intervals impeded the ability of the colonial state to maintain law and order in the Kamba districts and challenged its monopoly on spectacular, didactic violence.[37] Colonial officials were concerned as well by the

[34]J.C. Nottingham, interview with author, Nairobi, January 2004.

[35]KNA BB/PC/EST/12/15. More specifically, the appendix attributed the impetus for the witch-cleansings to the chiefs, and the D.O. stipulated: "I want to emphasise here that I was pushed into this by the Chiefs, who were in turn pushed into it by public opinion; and that, through-out I have gone as slowly as they would let me."

[36]Nottingham interview, January 2004.

[37]Richard Waller, "Witchcraft and Colonial Law in Kenya" *Past and Present* 180(2003), 241-76; Katherine Luongo, "Dead Bodies in the Archives: an Anthro-Historical Approach to a Witch-Murder in 1930s Kenya," paper presented at the British Institute in Eastern Africa/ Institut Français de Recherche en Afrique Seminar Series, Nairobi, Kenya, 2004; and Katherine Luongo, "Colonial and Contemporary Continuities in Conceptions of 'Witchcraft' in Kenya," paper presented at the Workshop on Colonial and Postcolonial Continuities in Kenya. Oxford University, Oxford, 2005.

British and Kamba authorities at a Machakos witch-cleansing, *ca*. 1955. J.C. Nottingham, second from right. Photo courtesy of J.C. Nottingham.

barriers to "development" and "progress" that they believed witchcraft beliefs and practices—"superstitions"—produced. And these authorities consistently queried the efficacy and appropriateness of using "witchcraft" to fight witchcraft. An extract from the section of the 1955 Machakos District Annual Report concerning the witchcraft cleansings incorporates a number of these strands.

> Witchcraft has a very considerable hold among the Akamba, and it is desirable to do all that can be safely done to reduce its practice, particularly in its black magic forms. But the greatest care must be taken that the steps taken do not result in entrenching the belief in, and efficiency of, witchcraft on a whole. Care must also be taken not to destroy the undoubted good which underlies white magic as a means of healing certain types of nervous disorders.[38]

Fifty years of experience with Kamba witchcraft motivated British officials to take seriously the chiefs' contentions that Kamba Mau Mau were in league with Kamba witches in using "*nzevu*"—a form of witchcraft whose object is to cause confusion—against British authorities and in

[38]KNA PC/SP/1/3/2.

deploying a different type of lethal witchcraft against black Kenyan officials.[39] The admonition that "it is desirable to do all that can be safely done to reduce its practice, particularly in its black magic forms," reflected the introduction of a new element into the colonial administrative approach to Kamba witchcraft—formal anthropological inquiry carried out by government authorities and targeted to produce a corpus of "expertise" about Kamba witchcraft. Yet at the same moment the Kamba inquiries were related to a broader postwar movement toward re-invigorated professionalism and formalized anthropology, not only in Kenya's administrative ranks but in those of the British African empire more generally.

This movement aimed both to enhance the anthro-administrative competencies of British administrators and to provide a cadre of trained anthropological fieldworkers to do research across British Africa in the service of the state.[40] To this end, in the mid-1940s the Colonial Development and Welfare Act established the position of Government Sociologist/Anthropologist.[41] The anthropological inquires preceding the cleansings and conducted by J.C. Nottingham and Godfrey Wilson, the Government Anthropologist, thus emerged not only from the specialized crisis context of Mau Mau, but also from more general postwar efforts to more formally integrate administration and anthropology.[42]

The 1955 Machakos District Annual Report describes the witchcraft cleansings and portrays them as growing out of Nottingham and Wilson's inquiries. It explains,

> Mr. John Nottingham was District Officer, Eastern Area, and delved considerably into the problems of witchcraft in his area. It is, of course, not possi-

[39]KOE.

[40]PRO CO 822/21/2. Courses like the "Summer Schools" at Oxford and the Tropical African Services Course were implemented to train colonial administrators.

[41]KNA MAA 7/602. The Colonial Development and Welfare Act (1946) supported the position of the Government Sociologist in part through the provision of research grants. In Kenya the position of Government Sociologist was contoured largely by the noted anthropologist Isaac Schapera and the Chief Native Commissioner. See KNA MAA 2/5/17 for Schapera's report, *Some Problems of Anthropological Research in Kenya Colony*, published for the International African Institute in 1949. Schapera's program was described in a 1947 memo from the Chief Native Commissioner to all Provincial Commissioners with sufficient enclosures for all District Officers. It was duly circulated from the Provincial Commissioner of Central Province to the District Commissioners of Thika, Kitui, Machakos, Nairobi and Kiambu. See, KNA VQ/16/25.

[42]G. Gordon Brown and Bruce Hutt, *Anthropology in Action: An Experiment in the Iringa Province of Tanganyika Territory* (London, 1935); Isaac Schapera, *Some Problems of Anthropological Research in Kenya Colony* (London, 1949); Joanna Lewis, *Empire State-Building: War and Welfare in Kenya 1925-1952* (Oxford, 2000); Lynn Schumaker, *Africanizing Anthropology: Fieldwork, Networks, and the Making of Cultural Knowledge in Central Africa* (Durham, 2001).

> ble to eradicate witchcraft here more than in any other parts of the world, but he amassed much useful knowledge, which has since been considered by the Government Anthropologist, Dr. Wilson. Further, lines of approach are being explored on the recommendations of Dr. Wilson. Of interest is the ceremony at Mumbumbuni in Kisau Location in October, 1955, when 700 witches, 50 warlock and 20 witchdoctors burnt their paraphernalia. In Western area there was an extra small experimental campaign into the realms of sorcery and in December 204 witches and 50 witchdoctors in the Watu section Kilumbu openly admitted their arts and crafts and gave up a formidable number of implements.
>
> Nzawi in the Southern Area had previously conducted a big ceremonial burning of witches' paraphernalia in May and a large cleansing ceremony held at Makueni was attended by every woman in the settlement. A small experiment in the Northern Area, especially in Mwala Location, towards the end of the year revealed still further the extent to which both black "Uoi" and white "Uwe" witchcraft have a grip on the lives of the people.[43]

Colonial narratives surrounding the witchcraft-cleansings point to the ways in which the Machakos cleansings were targeted at establishing witchcraft as a knowable, and hence potentially governable, category of administration bounded by colonial expertise and productive of fresh policies in the charged context of Mau Mau. With an approach similar to Mau Mau de-oathing campaigns, officials like Nottingham aimed to use witchcraft-cleansings to transform inherently secretive and hidden witchcraft beliefs and practices into public, bureaucratic, spectacle-centered performances of colonial governmentality. Colonial discourse neglects, however, to attend in any meaningful way to question of "why" people brought their witchcraft to be burned, suggesting simply that people wished to be relieved of the "burden" of their witchcraft.

VII

While documentary sources portray participation in cleansing ceremonies as largely voluntary, oral histories foreground the coercive activities through which colonial authorities such as chiefs and headmen saw to the collection and cleansing of Kamba witches and Mau Mau. The recollections of elderly Kamba indicate the degree to which British authorities devolved authority and responsibility to their black Kenyan subordinates in the course of the cleansing campaigns. Oral accounts also point to some of the ways in which state authority was perceived by ordinary Kamba.

[43]KNA PC/SP/1/3/2.

And they reveal how authority and "expertise" were conceived and mobilized outside the purview and sanction of the colonial state.

The oral recollections of elderly Kamba concerning both the Machakos Mau Mau and witchcraft-cleansings vary not only with archival sources, but also among themselves. These oral histories evidence a range of understandings and articulations about a number of significant issues: chronology, authority, methods, precedent religion, etc. At first glance, it might seem that the dissonances (some would argue discrepancies) in oral recollections would preclude using them to tease out more meaningful stories of the witchcraft cleansings. But, as Justin Willis explains, dissonances themselves offer historical information. He writes,

> Dissonances can tell us very much both about the ways in which people structure and understand the past—that is, about ways in they turn disparate fragments of knowledge into history—and they can also help us to formulate our own understanding of the past and write academic histories.
>
> Dissonances often show that people are aware of conflicting interpretations of the past and that they have a considerable and diverse range of historical knowledge, and they reveal something of how people deploy their knowledge in difference circumstances.[44]

As in Willis' work on rural Tanzania, the dissonances in stories of cleansing Mau Mau and witchcraft in Machakos reveal ways of being and of knowing, both past and present. In much the same way that documentary sources like Nottingham's article and official reports are shaped by attention to audience, and aims and protocols of production, so are oral histories actively considered rather than simply recounted. The telling of oral histories entails three aspects: the informative, the performative, and the recreative, the reshaping and enlivening anew of something that already exists.[45]

Oral histories like those shared by elderly Kamba are primarily a way of imparting information about past people and events, but the act of telling entails elements of affect and embodiment which add another layer of meaning to speech.[46] As much as they are a catalog of the past, oral his-

[44]Justin Willis, "Two Lives of Mpamizo: Dissonance in Oral History," *HA* 23(1996), 321-22.

[45]Mariano Pavenello, "L'événement et la parole, la conception de l'histoire et du temps historique dans les traditions orales Africaines: le cas des Nzema," *Cahiers d'Etudes Africaines* 43(2003), 461-81.

[46]For example, Stoler, *Carnal Knowledge*; Paul Stoller, *Embodying Colonial Memories: Sprit Possession, Power, and the Hausa in West Africa* (New York, 1995); and, Renato Rosaldo, *Culture and Truth: the Remaking of Social Analysis* (Boston, 1993).

tories are a project of recreating that past vis-à-vis present-day concerns and audiences. The dissonances that necessarily emerge in the telling of oral histories can be rendered meaningful to a broader audience through a process of contextualization that reads oral histories in conversation with each other, and also with the documentary records of the people, places, and events that oral recollections discuss.

Oral histories of 1950s Machakos situate the witchcraft-cleansings as emerging from concerns about collaboration between witches and Mau Mau that were voiced by Kamba people, formally articulated by Kamba colonial authorities and addressed by various state agents. Thus one elderly Kamba man explained generally: "[t]he colonial government came to the villages and exposed those who used witchcraft because they equated witchcraft with Mau Mau" and his contemporary stated more specifically, "They [colonial authorities] had the people who had the *nzevu* arrested and told to burn their witchcraft so they could not give it to people involved in Mau Mau."[47] Coercive activities of state actors constitute a central theme in oral historical discussions of Mau Mau and witchcraft in Machakos.

Oral sources counter and complicate documentary narratives about the voluntary nature of the cleansings, emphasizing instead the systematic identification and roundup of alleged witches while drawing parallels with the interdiction of alleged Kamba Mau Mau discussed above. As one elderly Kamba explained, "[t]here was a policeman who arrested women [witches] and took them to court. They were to bring their paraphernalia, and it was burned. . . . It was the government policy to use the Headmen to identify the women" while another noted that during Mau Mau Kamba who had been exposed as witches were "arrested and taken to camps as Mau Mau." And a third elderly Kamba man noted that "witches from every village were taken to the Chief's office. Assistant Chiefs organized it with the atumia. They sent the youth to bring the witches. Because they were known, they were all gathered up and taken to the Chief's Office at Nziu for cleansing. The atumia knew who the witches were."[48] Although subtle differences exist between these accounts, they concur that Kamba witches did not participate in cleansings solely of their own accord but were coerced by various representatives of the colonial state.

[47]KOE.
[48]KOE. "*Atumia*" refers to the Kamba council-of-elders who held a politico-judicial function in precolonial Kamba society. The atumia's powers were largely stripped or redirected during the colonial period, although atumia remained in existence and were regarded by Kamba people as arbiters and authorities in a broad range of community conflicts.

Oral histories also indicate that in certain parts of Kambaland cleansing expertise was not strictly institutionalized, but largely up for grabs. Numerous elderly Kamba explain that cleansings took place outside the geographical and authoritative bounds of the Machakos administration. They indicate further that the cleansings did not follow the state-sanctioned *kithitu*-based ceremonies outlined above, nor were they even necessarily carried out by state-appointed Kamba ritual specialists. For example, one elderly Kamba man noted that "the famous cleanser from Kilifi, Kabwere, came. The Chief and the nzama wanted to finish witchcraft using Kabwere." Another contemporary explained that during Mau Mau "people were taken to Mombasa to be cleansed by Kabwere" and that "they were cleansed and then allowed to come back."[49]

Such departures from, and discrepancies with, the "official" colonial narrative of the cleansings speak more generally to the politics of knowledge and power surrounding the state's intervention in witchcraft in Machakos. It is worth quoting at length elderly Kamba people's accounts of the organization of power surrounding the witchcraft cleansings:

> They [D.O.s and D.C.s] authorized the round-up of the witches. . . . The D.C. would give the Chief a permit. . . . The witches had to produce their paraphernalia. . . . Refusal was not an option. . . . It was burned during the day time. It even caused other witches to fear. Nobody could practice witchcraft.[50]
>
> The D.O. gave the Chief the authority to administer the burning. . . . The ex-witches donated lambs, the stomach contents were removed, they were spilled over the burned paraphernalia. . . . The witchdoctor from Mombasa directed the witches' families to make sure all the paraphernalia had been given up. . . . If not, the process was repeated and there was a fine of 1 bull or cow. It was announced using drums. . . . The D.C. talked to the people. . . . Everyone had to attend. The elders could approach. . . . Others had to watch from a distance.[51]

These two statements address further the issues of authority and responsibility. From the perspectives of these elderly Kamba men, the role of British colonial officials was to sanction the policies/practices that had been initially imagined by their black Kenyan subordinates. In Mau Mau-

[49]KOE. Kabwere was a renowned witchdoctor from the Mombasa area. For earlier colonial discussions on "importing" witchdoctors from the Coast see KNA CC/13/39 "Native Medicine and Witchcraft, Kwale."

[50]KOE.

[51]KOE.

era Machakos, the concerns of ordinary Kamba did not find their first audience in the D.O. or D.C., but rather in the headmen and chiefs. Accordingly, many elderly Kamba like those quoted here cite the practicalities of governing as the purview of black Kenyan officials, even if they recognized the ultimate authority of British superiors. The statements of these two men also speak to the various degrees and types of coercion underlying the cleansings of witchcraft (and Mau Mau). In the first instance, witches were forced by agents of the state to produce their paraphernalia, while in the second case the state-sanctioned cleansing incorporated the more "traditional" mechanism of familial authority to drive the witches to turn in their wares. Both accounts attend to the didactic character of the cleansings. Not only were they a lesson to witches, but they offered a broader audience a spectacular demonstration of state-sponsored authority over the supernatural.

Questions of authority, responsibility, etc. are addressed more explicitly in a third interview:

> Q: Who was responsible for the cleansings?
> SM: *Nzama* were responsible for the cleansings. They met secretly without women and identified all the witches. They arrested them with *askaris*. They asked them questions about witchcraft, and those who refused to answer were given the substance.
> Q: Who else was involved?
> SM: The Chiefs, the Assistant Chiefs, the Elders and the APs.
> Q: Were the D.O. and D.C. involved?
> SM: They gave instructions to the Chiefs to do the cleansings. Sometimes they were present.
> Q: Were they responsible for sending to Mombasa for help?
> SM: The Chiefs and the *nzama* did it for the location.
> Q: Did they get a permit or permission?
> SM: No.[52]

The meeting of the *nzama*—the group of elders to whom responsibility for the cleansings is accorded—is reminiscent of the precolonial (and colonial) meetings of the *king'ole* to deal with witches, but in the context of Mau Mau, the Kamba elders worked with agents of the state, *askaris*, to discipline witches.[53] While questioning witches was a "traditional" ele-

[52]Ibid.

[53]In colonial parlance, recent anthropology and the testimony of present-day informants, *king'ole* emerges as a broadly-defined term. It can refer to a body of law, to the group charged with carrying out the law, or to an act. In the first instance *king'ole* signifies the law that demands that serial or particularly serious social transgressions–thievery, murder, and witchcraft–be punished through various forms of lynching. *King'ole*

ment, in this instance the questioning also refers to interrogations of Mau Mau and witches carried out in administrative offices and internment camps across Kambaland. Citing the participation of the "Chiefs, the Assistant Chiefs, the Elders and the APs," the elderly Kamba man quoted here indicates his familiarity with the hierarchy of state authority. The phrasing used to describe the role of British colonial authorities renders their activities somewhat ambiguous. In giving "instructions to the Chiefs to do the cleansings," did British officials provide their black Kenyan subordinates with plans to be carried out or with sanction for the plans that Kamba people themselves had imagined?

While documentary evidence indicates the former, the elderly Kamba informant's contentions that the "*nzama* was responsible for the cleansing" and that the Chiefs and *nzama* had sent to the coast for a witchdoctor on behalf of the local people and without a tangible permission from their British colonial superiors, suggests that local people perceived of the protocols of the cleansing programs as having been envisioned by black Kenyan officials and sanctioned by British authorities. Finally, this informant's suggestion that British authorities did not provide chiefs and headmen with a permit to call in assistance from Mombasa raises questions about the extent to which D.O.s and D.C.s were truly cognizant of the activities carried out by their subordinates on the ground.

Each of these elderly Kamba men indicates that ordinary Kamba envisioned the state not as a monolith but instead as encompassing a range of actors and operating at numerous levels. Their narratives shed light on some of the ways in which ordinary people perceived authority, who exercised it, and how this was indicated. They also indicate how ordinary Kamba problematized governmental responsibility in this period, situating it in state actors who implemented policy rather than in those at the apex of the administrative pyramid. Further, they emphasize the didactic nature of the cleansing suggested in other oral and in documentary sources and the ways in which the state aimed to subject witchcraft—both "black" and "white"—to bureaucratic discipline and protocols.

also refers to the *atumia*, charged with carrying out this law and maintaining social order in precolonial and early colonial-era Kamba communities. And *king'ole* denotes the actual killing of murders, witches, and thieves by beating, stoning, hanging, or shooting with poisoned arrows. Administrative literature dating from the colonial era defines *king'ole* as the beating of a "witch" dispensed by a group of adult men using small sticks. See also C. W. Hobley in *Akamba and Other East African Tribes* (Cambridge, 1910); J. Forbes Munro, *Colonial Rule and the Kamba: Social Changes in the Kenya Highlands, 1889-1939* (Oxford, 1975); and John Ndeti Somba, *Akamba Mirror: Some Notable Events in the Machakos District of Kenya, 1889-1929* (Nairobi, 1979).

VIII

Overall, as adherence (or even exposure) to Mau Mau created a rupture with the community of "loyal" subjects, so did participation in witchcraft activities create fissures in local social situations. What the cleansings achieved was first to recognize Mau Mau adherents and witches publicly, and then to accomplish and recognize their transformation, again publicly, into "good" people who could be reincorporated into their respective communities. Within the context of Mau Mau, these transformations were effected by the development of a systematized body of knowledge about the supernatural, specifically witchcraft and *kithitu* oathing.

But at the same moment that the cleansings spoke to the scope and facility of the colonial knowledge-power complex, they also highlighted its diffuse and oftentimes limited nature. In organizing the cleansings, British colonial officials imagined that they had co-opted the Kamba occult—actors, institutions, and practices—into their own administrative disciplinary repertoire and that the supernatural could be made to serve the state. But rather than shoring up the power of the colonial state, the cleansings ultimately reflected its weaknesses. While British officials had recognized Kamba supernatural specialists as power-bearers and brokers within Kamba communities, British authorities did not designate them as such within the larger *colonial* governmental sphere until the exigencies of Mau Mau demanded drastic measures.[54] Further Mau Mau's pressure on the colonial administration led to policies that delegated the logistical and disciplinary work surrounding cleansings to local authorities, ultimately investing the power of the state more squarely in them.

[54]See KNA MAA 7/835.