

AT THE PERIPHERY IN MAU MAU DISCOURSE: A CASE OF THE MBEERE OF EMBU COUNTY, KENYA, 1952-2014

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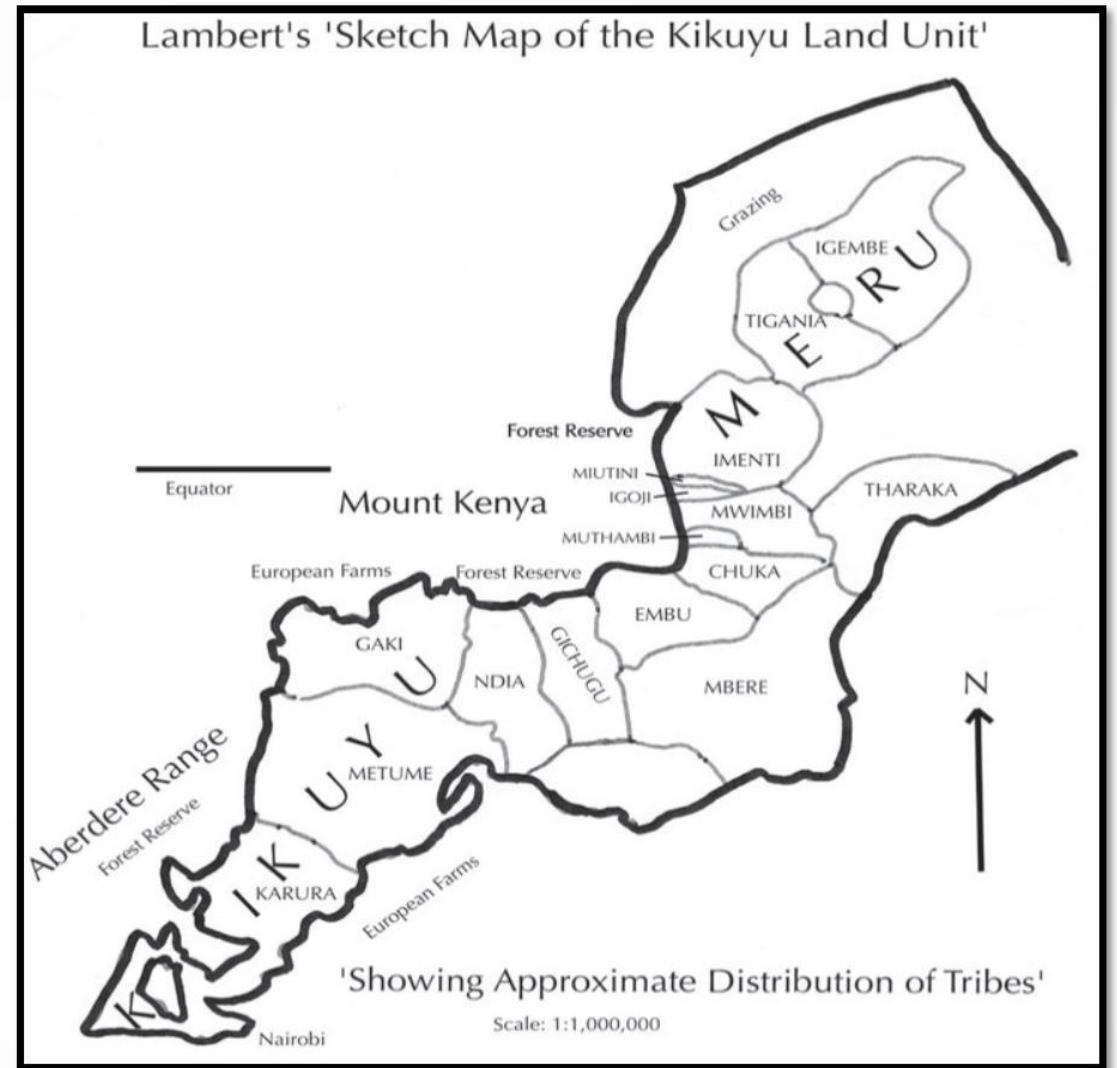
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Overview

Within the Kikuyu Land Unit (KLU), communities such as the Kikuyu, Embu, Meru and the Mbeere were regarded as Kikuyu sub-tribes.

Mau Mau historiography has been viewed from one dimension. Studies have glorified the Embu, Kikuyu and Meru as the main actors rather than a collective action against the colonial administrators.

The Mau Mau consciousness led to a state of crisis in the Embu District where Mbeere community co-existed and suffered similarly with Embu.



Sourced from H. E Lambert, 'the systems of land tenure in the Kikuyu Land Unit: History of Occupation of the land,' *Communications from the School of African Studies*. 1949.

Statement of the problem

The Mau Mau historiography appears to have either ignored or marginalised the Mbeere community. Yet the 1962 African population census carried out by the British colonial government classified the Mbeere as an ethnic group in Kenya.

- ❖ Most Mau Mau literature focuses on large ethnic groups and ignores smaller groups such as the Mbeere, evidence show that the Mbeere lived in Embu District during Mau Mau period.
- ❖ A fight between the Embu and the Mbeere at Kanyuambora market. Chief Kombo of Mavuria, first chief to begin the de-oathing process, yet little research on the role of the Mbeere in the Mau Mau struggle for Kenya's independence.

Research Questions

- What role did the Mbeere chiefs play in the colonial penetration and administration?
- What evidence shows the contribution of the Mbeere in the Mau Mau struggle?
- What were the reasons for the exclusion of the Mbeere community in the Mau Mau narrative?
- How have the Kenya and British governments recognised and compensated the Mbeere Mau Mau veterans?

Research Methodology

Study Design

- ❖ Qualitative, adopted a descriptive and exploratory research design

Study area

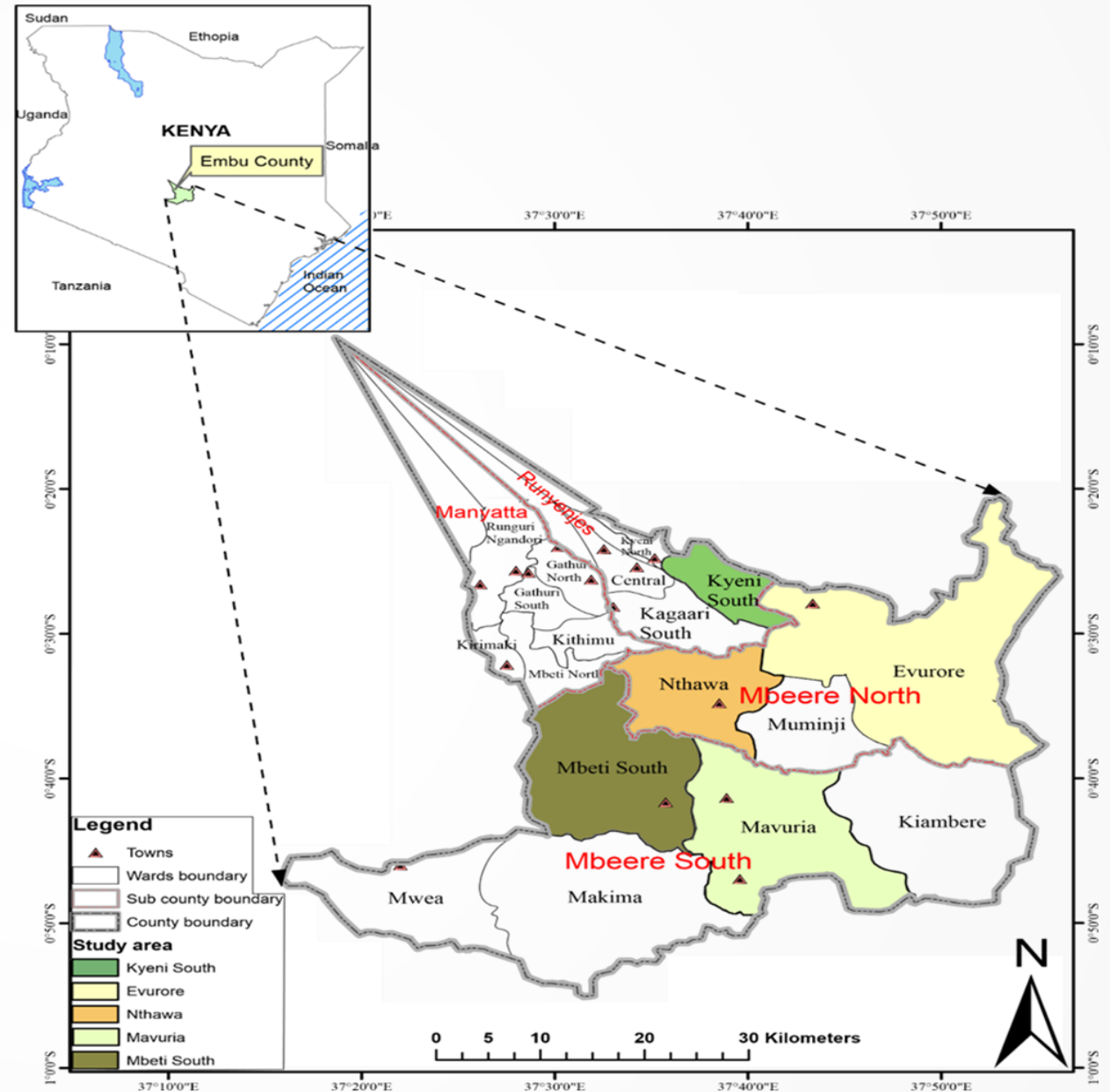
- ❖ This study was undertaken in Embu sub-counties- Embu East, Mbeere South and Mbeere North

Research Population

- ❖ Elderly adults in Kyeni, Mbeere North and Mbeere South.

Target Population

- ❖ Elderly adults of sound mind, born 1930s-1950s-participated in the Mau Mau movement actively or passively in Evurore, Nthawa, Mbeti South and Mavuria.
- ❖ Specific persons- scholars



Sampling Procedure and sampling population

Purpose purposive non-probability sampling identify the Mau Mau veterans for in-depth interviews.

- Expert sampling technique for specific persons (familiarity with the subject matter).
- For FGD-a convenience sampling strategy to select respondents
- Used a snowball sampling strategy to locate other respondents who met study's selection criteria after a recommendation from other participants.
- I interviewed claimants on the list for compensation. The list was obtained (MMWVA) representative from the wards understudy.
- Sample size=59-22 women and 37 men.

Data Collection

- ❖ Both Documentary(primary & secondary) and field data
- ❖ Primary data was obtained from KNA(Nairobi and Nakuru),TNA and interviews, FGDs, observation.
- ❖ Data from archival sources was cross-checked with and supplemented by data from oral interviews.

What role did the Mbeere chiefs play in colonial penetration and administration?

- The institution of chieftaincy, a British creation, history revolved around them ignoring the subalterns (fragmented). So to understand subalterns in Mbeere, the chief's role was critical (relations).
- The archival sources revolved around the chiefs and statuses of divisions. These materials focused on the hegemonic class (chiefs, agricultural and veterinary officers) and their relations with colonial administrators.
- The chiefs were critical in welcoming the missionaries and giving out parcels of land for civilising missions. The CMS applied for places of worship at Ngenge and Kathera in Chief Kombo location.
- Application for schools followed the same process; they constructed rudimentary structures for preaching and proselytising.

Chief Kombo

Championed communal labour resolution. *"It is the responsibility of chiefs to keep camps in order to provide emergency repairs to roads..."* (KNA/PC/CEN/2/1/12).

- Spearheaded compulsory labour enforcement in the villages encompassing road construction
- Generated revenue harshly; failure to comply with the provisions attracted a fine of shs.5, OI, was challenging to obtain or pay all outstanding annual rents for most tenants.
- Chief Kombo tried to retain the young generation through **sisal** farming (KNA/PC/CEN/2/1/12). The younger generations were running away due to stringent measures put in place by Mbeere chiefs.
- Chief Kombo endorsed a ban on clitoridectomy.

Chief Mwandiko Ngira

Most active chief in LNC meetings. Tax increment from Rs.5 to 6 without consulting the Embu residents (KNA/PC/CEN/2/1/12).

- ▶ Forefront in anti-Mau Mau drive: He suggested energetic methods to prevent the extension of the Mau Mau movement in the Mbeere Division.
- ▶ Propagated ethnic hatred, progressed divide and rule approach (Kanyuambora, Ishiara incident).

Mwandiko, just like the colonial administrators, viewed the Embu as terrorists, as noted by the Embu District Intelligence Committee Report of April 1954. In the DO precis; “the Mbeere continues to identify all Embu as Mau Mau movement followers; this is not a satisfactory position” (TNA/FCO 141/5767).

Jackson Ireri-the eyes of the Mbeere and Embu would not look at each other since the Mbeere considered the Embu as Mau Mau supporters.

Deothing process.... Her Majesty's witch doctor.

Chief Manunga Ngochi

- ▶ Adopted (redemption by goat). Highly spoken chief, admired, accommodative. Clandestine supporter of the Mau Mau insurgencies.
- ▶ Prohibited clitoridectomy-offending women in Mbeere, causing them to demonstrate to the DO's office at Siakago.
- ▶ OI by Birici Gatheri, He took the oath promising to assist the insurgency yet at the forefront in de-oathing.

What evidence shows the contribution of the Mbeere in the Mau Mau struggle?

Oathing, was deeply rooted in the Mbeere culture to achieve unity and justice.

- Oral evidence, Mau Mau oath, and Oathing were similar, oath spread from the core to the periphery.

Gathagu wa Titima alias General Wakimere (O.1, 11/08/2020); There were no specific oaths for different groups of people. That oath that the Embu took was the same oath that the Kikuyu, Mbeere and Meru took.

- The colonial government was slow to associate the Mau Mau movement with the Mbeere (blamed the Kikuyu *Ahoi* who came by invitation by chief Muruatetu (KNA/DC/EBU/1/10).
- Oath administration in Mbeere (freewill, false pretence or under duress). incidences of intimidation Mbeere initiates- cutting off ears, stripping women of their clothes, and slaps on the face to confuse the oathees until one consented to take the oath
- In April 1953, oath-taking ceremonies were conducted in broad daylight in the entire Embu District by urban-based Mau Mau. By May 1953, it was beyond control.

In the week ending May 1, 1953, the situation in Embu District had changed and oathing ceremonies were reported in all parts of the District, including Mbeere, except for the Sagana police post (TNA/FCO 141/5766).

Embu District Annual Report (1953), papers found on one of the arrested Mau Mau movement followers indicated money collected from two locations amounting to sh.15,500 (KNA/DC/EBU/1/12). sh.15,500 was a lot considering the wage, many subscribers.

The Role of Urban-based Mbeere in the Mau Mau Insurgency

The Mbeere believed in '*Kamuingi Koyaga Nderi* (a group of people lifts a heavy mortar), they never formed a frontline like other ethnicities but joined already progressive groups.

- Those in Nairobi like Kivuti wa Mbuta introduced the oath to the Mbeere. Explained to the Mbeere people the need to take the oath (**OI**).
- Gathagu wa Titima (General Wakimere) joined the insurgency in Nairobi, upon returning, explained why joining the Mau Mau movement was necessary and spearheaded massive oathing at Kianjiru hill.
- Jeremiah Nyaga Mwaniki alias *General Kufunga na Kufungua* (guarded the oath in Nairobi). In Mbeere he administered the oath.
- The majority of the Mbeere joined upon the advice given by urban-based Mbeere or oath administrators who were traversing Mbeere Division during the night in the 1950s- emphasising the similar point of origin from Gikuyu and Mumbi.

Songs

Songs were a tool to gauge subaltern consciousness, their meaning was hidden to the colonial elites who tended to depend on conventional sources for information.

- Mwaniki Kabeca (O.I, 8/2/2020) acknowledged the Mbeere preservation of history through songs. He added that the Mbeere were excellent at transmitting their history through songs.
- Mbeere Mau Mau veterans could sing in Kikuyu fluently--shared lineage through a common ancestor. (*Ciana cia Mumbi, Nyumba ya Mumbi*).
- In the forest, Jeremiah Mugo (O.I, 5/2/2020) revealed how they were taught to sing and recite the songs collectively to enhance morale. The Mau Mau songs played a critical role in capturing the power of the moment as they fought for freedom and land.
- Special greetings as illustrated by the respondents in the Mbeere regions; greet licking the soil, Cf Wanyumbari (1993) on the centrality of soil-do anything -protect the land belonging to the people.
- As illustrated **OI**, the secret handshake involved joining both palms, but the thumb would be pulled outwards.
- Muturi Ndari a Mau Mau scout, security forces appeared; we used a secret warning: "*Runji nirwaucura*" (the river is full) the enemy was **near (Not corroborated)**. Developed their own for the progression of the insurgency.

The Mau Mau Argots, Handshakes and Signs in Mbeere Region

The government employed pseudo-gangs (*pseudos*) as part of the strategy to hasten the destruction of the Mau Mau insurgency (mind games).

- Mau Mau veterans devised secret language to conceal linguistic knowledge from ‘outsiders.’ (complicated codes of speech and behaviour unique for survivability).
- To recognise those who had not taken the oath in Mbeere, uttered this house has fleas...) corroborated with Londiani research.
- Blowing the horn chasing birds from destroying the millets. Mau Mau fighters knew food was ready and on its way.

Whenever young and elderly women met, they sat down and stretched out their legs straight and did not crouch or put one leg over the other.



Mau Mau veterans in an FGD held at Mwanyare on February 3, 2020. Women seated, stretching their legs, a form of Mau Mau coded language



A Mau Mau meeting held by the researcher in Maua-Laare on July 8, 2015. The Mau Mau women seated in a coded form.

What were the reasons for the exclusion of the Mbeere in the Mau Mau narrative?

Core and Periphery relations

- Representation in the Mau Mau historiography depended on positionality; the core defined who was who in the Mau Mau narratives.
- The core became the point of analysis. Forests were no longer the primary avenue of the conflict. Insurgents were oscillating between the reserves and Nairobi,
- Mbeere remained impervious to indoctrination because of **its geographical location** (KNA/DC/EBU/1/14) (Propaganda).
- Ukambani was far from Mt. Kenya yet well covered?
- Narok, evidence of Mau Mau infiltration: The colonialists cited the infiltration of the Kikuyu, Embu and Meru, leading to mixed blood in Nairagiengare.
- Colonial administrators could not distinguish between the Embu and the Mbeere, as shown in the correspondence letter between the Taita DC and District Pass Officer;

Mr. Munyi Musungu, a Mbeere, was charged before Second class Magistrate Voi on January 13, 1958, for failing to preserve his Kikuyu, Meru and Embu passbook contrary to section 20(e) of the Emergency Regulations 1954. He was fined Shs.5, which he paid on 13. 1. 1958. On January 15, 1958, the District Pass officer Mombasa wrote a letter to the District Commissioner Taita District that Munyi Michungu Passbook No. 28766 was a member of the Mbeere ethnic group and was not required to have a passbook (KNA/PC/Coast/2/1/80).

- The Mbeere did not live in isolation as they interacted with Kikuyu *Ahoi*, Kikuyu pit-sawyers, who engaged in the timber business in Mbeere locations (TNA/FCO141/5727) (Source of trouble).

- **Identity Game:** A community exists when identified as unique, their contributions appreciated, Mbeere case was different, the administrative division newly created merged Embu and Mbeere (lacked territorial inclusivity and thus concealment).
- Mbeere as consumers, food is connected to the nuances of power. Their livelihood and political status suffered.
- The Mbeere constantly shifted identity depending on whether it suited them. Sometimes, a *Mumbeere* became *Muembu*.
- Operation Anvil was quick, characterised by moments of confusion (no time to distinguish who was who).
- Intellectuals given the privileged position as experts in expounding the truth. Interviewing the Mbeere themselves and delineating the game of inclusion and exclusion.

Lack of Independent Schools

Chief Koinange's speculation, as noted by Clough (1990: 164), "when the Kikuyu have gotten wise (educated) sons, they will consider what deceits and cheatings their fathers suffered from the whites." Therefore, the KISA schools were in the sense of mission for a political claim.

- With the spread of Mau Mau's indoctrination, the colonial officials considered these schools as centers for enhancing Kikuyuness and Mau Mau movement's oath.

Jackson Ileri revealed: The Independent church brought the idea of fighting for self-governance. They also introduced the oath to the Embu. The Kikuyu came from Githunguri and administered the oath at Muganjuki Independent Church. Most people partook in the oathing ceremony. Those who refused were thoroughly beaten. Then, after the government realised what was happening, they burnt Muganjuki Church...

- 'Independent thinking missing in Mbeere' Peterson (2003) posits they were left out in creative engagement with British powers (grammar of the colonial state).
- In Ndia, for instance, the Mau Mau insurgents used schools in chief Naaman's locations for the Mau Mau movement ceremonies (TNA/FCO141/5727).
- The absence of KISA schools in Mbeere meant that the community was left out when the others negotiated how to handle issues affecting them.

Ear Amputation out-rage and Power of Labelling

- ▶ Clipping the Mbeere ears was a means of identification (*rori*). On the upper part of the Mbeere ears to show their refusal to partake in the Mau Mau oath. It served as a form of domination, identifying and sorting the Mbeere resulting in permanent exclusion.
- ▶ Cutting off ears relayed information to the residents of central Kenya that the Mbeere were against subaltern consciousness.
- ▶ The engraved sign meant easier identification, a permanent transition to low status and a ploy to stigmatise the Mbeere through a permanent mark.
- ▶ Macumo incidence, The labellers (the Embu) constructed social othering where they labelled (the Mbeere). Labelling the Mbeere as 'loyalists' and the ear clipping practices became authoritative and appeared legitimate to the residents of Embu District.

During the interviews, evoking the Gachoka memory triggered a general feeling of subordination and inferiority upon the Mbeere, which is still evoked today, “Mumbeere ti Mundu,” (the Mbeere are less human).

Social Welfare, Information Office and Propaganda regarding Colonial Projects in Embu District

- The colonial government portrayed the Mbeere as loyalists, always recording how the Mbeere residents benefited more from colonial projects than those in Embu, Ndia and Gichugu.
- Producing propaganda through exaggeration.... *No change in their attitude was well shown by 600 Wambere turning up for an operation near Embu when only 100 were asked for. The ear-cutting campaign is one that will bitterly be regretted by the Mau Mau in the months to come. Embu District Intelligence Committee December 17, 1953 (TNA/ FCO 142/5766).*
- The Embu District Annual Report of 1955 recorded as follows; *It is most gratifying to be able to record that the Mbere have remained impervious to the Mau Mau indoctrination . . . but the fact of the matter is that the government's policy of supporting and rewarding the tribe has successfully stimulated and maintained a healthy contempt for Mau Mau throughout the Mbeere country (KNA/DC/EBU/1/14).*
- Mbeere Development Committee meeting held on July 6, 1956, reported that they were exploring the possibilities of development projects in Mbeere as it was felt that so much was done in top areas (Embu region) with so little done to the loyal Mbeere (KNA/BD/8/2).
- Brokensha and Nellis (1971) argued that by the 1960s, there was a sketchy network of social services in Mbeere, and up to 1970, newly posted DO's request for transfers was high.

How have the Kenya and British governments recognised and compensated the Mbeere Mau Mau veterans?

- The Mbeere Mau Mau veterans are waiting their grievances to be addressed just like other Mau Mau veterans from other Districts.
- **OI & FGDs**, the post-colonial government, did nothing to the Mau Mau veterans in Mbeere. They were denied a platform to air their grievances, whenever they tried to rekindle their memory, they were thwarted.
- From the testimonies and Association books, none of the Mbeere interviewed had received any payment.
- The current research posits that unless the Mbeere's claim for compensation is acknowledged by the War Veteran's Association headed by dominant groups, then legitimized by western scholars, they will remain silenced.
- The British government promised to pay for atrocities, but the Mbeere surviving claimants were left out of historical injustices claims in Kenya.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Conclusion

- Through the Mbeere voices and reinterpretation, they were denied recognition as historical actors as their legacy of the Mau Mau movement was obscured.
- Mau Mau narrative is changing, constitution has recognised those who fought for independence (apology, voice their stories, unveiling of the Mau Mau memorial).
- The Mbeere veterans are hopeful that the new narrative from scholars who collect first-hand information is a breakthrough to the community and favours posterity.
- Mbeere are hopeful for their recognition, contribution followed by reparation, a form of repair of sour relations that may involve truth commissions and monetary compensation to those who suffered.

Recommendations

The study falls under new wave of research justice calling for knowledge creation to achieve liberation for those invisible to build power (replication). (Enhance Subaltern epistemology).

- For further studies.... need to show nuances of the Mbeere marginalisation in resource allocation and how it intersects with the history of decolonisation.
- A need for extensive research to determine the Mbeere marginalisation after the post-dispensation of the new constitution.
- A need to review the relationship between Embu and the Mbeere in Embu County politics that has continued to be unpredictable, especially with the devolved government.
- Review the state of non-Embu (the Kikuyu and the Kamba) who claimed to have been born into the Embu tribe while the colonial government, the Embu elders and ADC members expressed in 1961 there was no place for them in the District.

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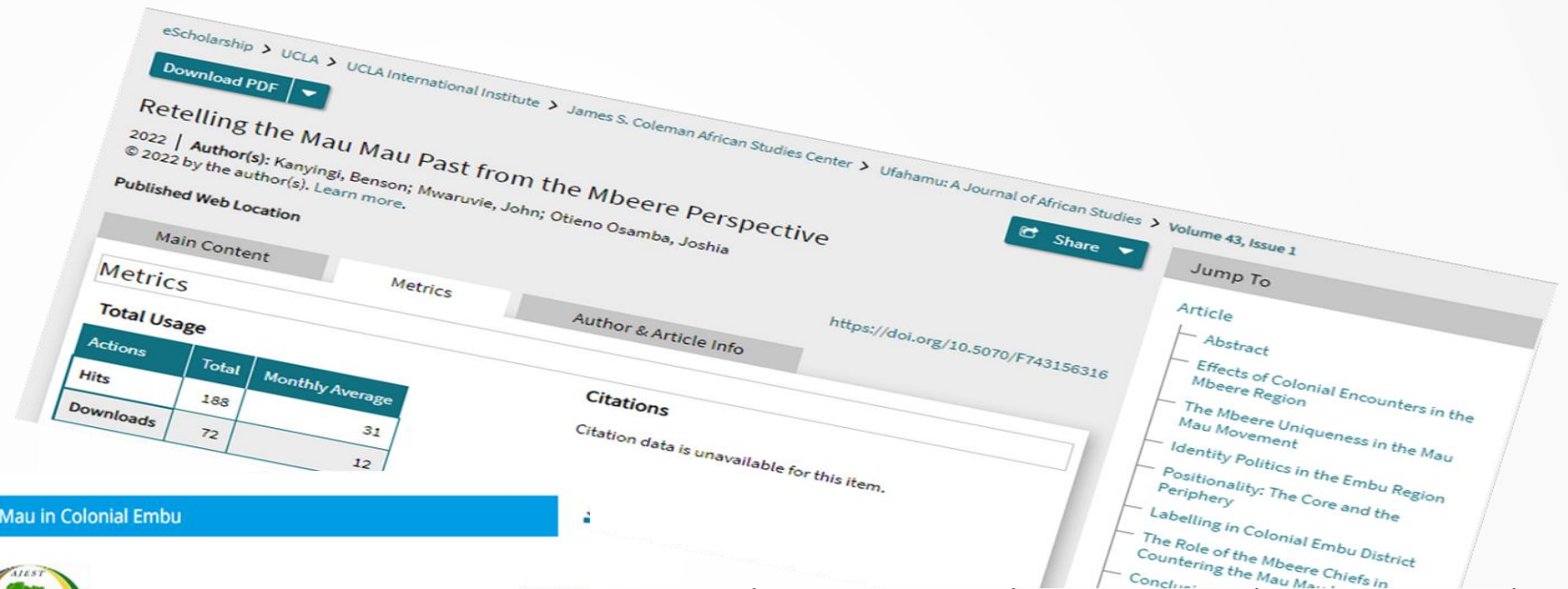
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Publications and Presentation



← The Rhetoric of 'Speaking in Tongues' amongst the Mbeere Mau Mau in Colonial Embu



The Rhetoric of 'Speaking in Tongues' amongst the Mbeere Mau Mau in Colonial Embu

Kanyingi Benson^{1,2*}, Mwaruvie John¹ and Osamba Joshia¹
School of Education and Social Sciences, Karatina University

1215hrs-1230hrs

14th Biennial Egerton University International Conference

Interpreting Contemporary Embu-Mbeere Politics in the Lens of Sibling Rivalry, 1906-2021
Kanyingi B., J. Mwaruvie & J. Osamba

The African Peacebuilding Network (APN) and Next Generation Social Sciences in Africa...Casablanca, Morocco in September 26-29, 2022.

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