

Can we view historical events from all sides?

Mark Lunt's letter on the review of my book *Never be Silent: publishing and imperialism in Kenya* (Vita Books, 2006) by John Pateman (April Update) raises important issues about the role of information professionals in disseminating historical facts in an objective way. We can censor, hide and misrepresent historical facts – or allow our users to make up their own minds by making all sides of history available. As members of a particular class in a class society, it is inevitable that we represent 'truth' from our personal and class point of view.

The facts about the brutality of British colonialism are now well documented. It is a disservice to the British public to see the 'achievement' of colonialism (and imperialism) in a one-sided way. I suggest that Mark Lunt reads just two of the many books published recently. The first one is John Newsinger's *The Blood Never Dried: a people's history of the British Empire* (Bookmarks, 2006), which covers the period from slavery to the invasion of Iraq. The chapter on Kenya states: 'The British campaign to crush the Mau Mau rebellion has become a byword of colonial brutality.'

The second title is Caroline Elkin's *Britain's Gulag: the brutal end of Empire in Kenya* (Pimlico, 2005). She makes the plea that we 'examine the crimes perpetrated by colonial forces against Mau Mau, and the considerable measures that the British colonial government undertook to conceal them'.

Official history is seldom presented from the victims' point of view.

I will leave the final word to Esther Obachi who is the Chair of the Kenya chapter of the Progressive African Library

& Information Activists' Group (PALIAct) and the Secretary of the Kenya Library Association. Esther says:

'It is absurd to hear anyone say that some colonial governments were good! Good for whom? Who says that if I am economically poor but free, then I am worse than being a captive with funds that benefit my captor? I hate to think that there are still people who believe that Africans were poor just because they were not westernised. We were rich in our own way!

'Our culture of tight-knit communities where everyone was a brother/sister and all outsiders were intruders will never be regained! I still strongly believe that the colonialists destroyed our culture and raped our land leaving it bare and exposed to abuse and theft. It would be nice if this ignorance would be corrected. When people talk of good governance, then they should clarify whom it is good for. One cannot impose governance on a community and insist that it is good for that community. That is intrusion. Let us respect each community as sovereign and able to run its own affairs. One can only assist on request.'

It is important to see the brutality of the colonial forces that the people of Kenya and Mau Mau faced and judge their achievements (or lack of) in that context. There is little doubt that without Mau Mau, Kenya would have become another white settler colony.

Shiraz Durrani

Senior Lecturer, Information
Management

Department of Applied Social Sciences
London Metropolitan University