



COVER STORY

MAU MAU WOOD CARVINGS NARRATIVE

Volume 15, Issue 3 | Published 04/02/2019 | font size   | [Print](#) | [Email](#) | [Be the first to comment!](#)



By Shiraz Durrani

**Extract from:** Durrani, Shiraz and Waweru, Kimani (forthcoming): *Kenya: Repression and Resistance: From Colony to Neo-Colony, 1948-1990*.

The year is 1976. The nation is in the iron grip of a powerful KANU elite which tolerates no opposition to its tyrannical rule, nor any resistance to its anti-people policies. Anyone who dares to challenge the all-powerful armed might of the minority elite in power is detained, jailed, exiled, eliminated or disappeared. . Starvation, landlessness, unemployment and homelessness were the reality for working people. The key demands of Mau Mau — return of land, free education, medical care, freedom and political power — became distant dreams.

All avenues of protest were blocked. No party but KANU could be registered. Peasants could not complain about their stolen lands and unfair returns; workers had no militant trade unions — Life itself became a gift from the ruling class, not a right.

But all is not silence. In 1975 resistance regrouped and formed an underground party, the Kenya Workers' Party, which later became December Twelve Movement, which again became Mwakenya.

DTM cells organised different types of activities, in different languages at different times.

Kenyan history has failed to record not only the achievements of Mau Mau but also resistance to neo-colonialism, capitalism and imperialism after independence.



*Women's role is in the struggle: Protect family, collect food and confront homeguards*

### **Kenyan History Through Carvings**

It was in this climate that a group of Wakamba wood carver artists, with the support of December Twelve Movement's activists, began to study Kenyan history. This was not easy, as few books on Mau Mau and the struggle against colonialism and imperialism were available. DTM's underground library filled the gaps. The carvers' deep research revealed Mau Mau's real history and contribution to the war of independence. They then told Kenya's history by carving key scenes onto wood carvings. There were 36 carvings in all. The artists created multiple copies of the complete set which soon became collectors' items among DTM members and supporters. Many of these are, however, lost today as activists who had collected them faced increasing repression and had to distribute them among supporters. They are likely to be in homes of workers and peasants today, but as far as is known, no library, archive or museum in Kenya has the collection — another reflection of the neo-colonial control over people's culture. Settler and foreign artwork is easy to find in Kenya today. But sadly, the same does not apply to Kenya's artwork. The following section reproduces some of the ones rescued from imperialist claws.



*Democracy: Decisions made in meetings while ready to confront enemy*

What thus emerged on the art and historical fronts was truly remarkable. At one level, they demolished the ruling classes's embargo on protest and resistance. Here was the real history of Kenya which had been silenced since independence. At another level, they used a form where no words were written, no embargoes broken. Yet history was there for all to see. It mattered not whether one had reading skills or not, whether one was fluent in English or not. The form and content were in perfect harmony to give visual evidence of the heroic struggle. The neo-colonial embargo on history, on information, on communications was totally broken; this group of artist scholars created the history of the hidden aspects of Mau Mau.



For all their achievements, the artists remain almost unknown in Kenyan history today. They were Mule wa Musembi, Kitonyi wa Kyongo, Kitaka wa Mutua and Mutunga wa Musembi. An Exhibition was curated by Sultan Somjee from the University of Nairobi in a DTM-inspired project.

Little was known in Kenya about the history of Mau Mau in 1976 as research and publication on it had been suppressed by the government. It is therefore interesting to see the carvings dig out key aspects of Mau Mau. These include their ideology, their strategies and tactics, their actions, development of technologies, record keeping and communications, leadership as well as their attitude to women, nationalities and their class perspective. The write-up accompanying the exhibition of the carvings contained historical facts not commonly known. As Mau Mau activists already knew, for example, a team of two or more Mau Mau activists would carry messages from the Mau Mau High Command in the heart of Nyandarua to different Mau Mau centres, and its armies, or to the progressive workers and peasants throughout the country. The carving project brought such facts to the public. For example, the text accompanying Carving No. 1 (History of Kenya, 1952-1958, 1976) records the tactics of Mau Mau in communication when confronted by enemy soldiers:



*Colonial justice: Fearless fighter confronts judge and armed homeguard : Trial of Dedan Kimathia*

Two couriers carrying orders from the Kenya Defence Council are caught in the enemy ambush. One courier rushes at the enemy so that the other may escape and deliver the orders. The dying fighter digs deep the soil and exhorts his companion to continue. The courier crosses many ridges and valleys across Kenya.

With works like these, Kenyan artists became trendsetters in resistance art.

The full write-up will be published in the *Communist Review* (London) - possibly under its new title "Kenya Resists: Artists Challenge the Hawk in the Sky"

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Last modified on Wednesday, 06 February 2019 15:13

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JAK KATARIKAWE  
1938 - 2018

VOLUME 15, ISSUE 3, 2018

# PROTEST ART



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## Cover Story: PROTEST ART



### Sisi Kwa Sisi

More than 50 years after independence Kenya has no national art gallery or a calendar for art events at least state sponsored. Development and dissemination of art has been carried on through individual talent and effort using privately owned galleries, curio shops, foreign cultural centres and a myriad other trials. Through these channels three commercial aspects of art have evolved and thrived namely sign/mural-painting meant for social marketing and amusement in public spaces; 'airport art' masquerading between curio and fine art and lastly; 'serious art' meant for the expatriates, corporate and well-to-do members of East African society.



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