

Information in Kenyan liberation struggle - facts and fiction

Fact 1: Neo-colonial history books tell us that the route to India was "discovered" by Vasco da Gama. The reality is that there had been trade for hundreds of years between East Africa and India before Vasco da Gama was even born. In fact it was a Mombasa-based Gujarati pilot who guided Vasco da Gama's ships from Mombasa to India.

Fact 2: Kenyan children know that a large fort exists in Mombasa. Few know who built it and why. Fort Jesus was built by Portuguese colonialists in Mombasa to protect the Portuguese occupation army from the liberation forces of the Kenyan coastal people who waged an armed struggle to throw out the foreign invaders.

Fact 3: Neo-colonial history books show Mau Mau as a localised, primitive, "tribal" movement which used violence against its own people in an orgy of senseless murders. Children in Kenya are still not taught that Mau Mau was a sophisticated armed movement with its military wing, Land and Freedom Army, with its own anti-imperialist ideology, was well organised among workers and peasants and had support in all parts of the country. In fact, the colonial forces had to declare a state of emergency in the country in 1952 in order to control the growing forces of the liberation forces. The whole British army was mobilised to fight the liberation forces - from Aden, Burma, and U.K. Why was such a mighty army mobilised if Mau Mau was a local "tribal" "disturbance"?

Who is to document and interpret Kenyan history from a Kenyan, working-class point of view? The colonial government cannot obviously be expected to show history from the people's point of view. Nor can one expect the neo-colonial regime that was installed with colonial support after independence. It is a matter of fact that the most prominent Kenyan historian, Maina wa Kinyatti was imprisoned in solitary confinement for six years because of his research of the Mau Mau. His research involved interviewing Mau Mau activists, and collecting their liberation songs. Even after his imprisonment, Maina was not safe in Kenya and had to seek safety outside Kenya.

Mau Mau understood the importance of information and mass communication for a liberation movement. It published or controlled about 50 newspapers in the period from 1948 as part of its liberation struggle. The newspapers helped to organise and mobilise mass support for the political and military struggle against British colonialism. Mau Mau set up its own printing facilities at Mathare, a working-class area of Nairobi. It published its central newspaper, *The High Command* from this headquarters.

Mau Mau understood and used the one medium which colonial forces could not control: orature. Their songs and stories inspire a new generation of freedom fighters even today. Mau Mau maintained secret libraries hidden in the forests and trained information workers who maintained information centres even as they carried on the armed struggle. It was the British army which destroyed many Mau Mau libraries.

Similarly, the trade union movement in Kenya during the colonial times used communications and newspapers as a tool to fight capitalist exploitation. For example, the East African Trade Union Congress publishes the *East African Kirti* in four Kenyan languages. Trade union officials used the simple bicycles, lorry and taxi drivers, as well

as the network supplied by the railway line to carry worker news throughout the country. Their national strikes and campaigns changed the history of Kenya and these could not have been organised without an appropriate communications policy.

These lessons from colonial history were not lost on the post-independence liberation movements. A history of their communications policy is recorded in Durrani (1991, 1997) which stated:

Most literature available about Kenya today has been written from the point of view of imperialism or of the ruling class. Very little material representing the working people's interests is available. There is also a scarcity of *information about material* on Kenya (and Africa generally) from the point of view of the working people. This is a reflection of the lack of control over the process of communication and mass media by the working class.

Thus the liberation forces of necessity had to set up their own underground liberation libraries. Perhaps the largest one was the one run by Nazmi Durrani which provided a major reference point for December Twelve movement which published its own newspaper *Pambana* ("Struggle") in early 1980s. The library contained material which was banned in Kenya and which could lead to indefinite detention if found out. This included works of Marx, Lenin, Stalin, Castro, as well as publications from USSR and the Foreign Language Press in Beijing. This library also provided the source material for important document in the fight against the neo-colonial Moi regime such as Mwakenya's *Register of Resistance* (1987), and *Umoja-Kenya* (1989).

The collection of books on Kenya which are now being given to the Cuban Library Association contains material from this important library as well as material collected in London to support the struggle in Kenya. It is a matter of particular satisfaction to the Kenyan liberation movement, Mwakenya,- which itself has published a large amount of material - that we are able to give this material to Cuba which has played a major role in the liberation struggle in Africa, in military, economic and political terms. The struggles of the Cuban people, their example in standing up to the imperialist forces led by the USA and their internationalist spirit have inspired many generations of African people. The underground liberation activists in Kenya absorbed the lessons of the Cuban struggle. Che and Castro inspired countless youth to stand up against imperialist forces.

We hope to continue this anti-imperialist co-operation in a stronger way in future.

References

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