

BOOK REVIEWS

Never Be Silent: Publishing & Imperialism in Kenya 1884-1963, by Shiraz Durrani. London: Vita Books, 2006. 271 p. Distributed in the U.S. by the Mau Mau Research Center, 138-28 107th Ave., Jamaica, NY 11435.

Reviewed by Al Kagan

Activist Kenyan librarian Shiraz Durrani went into exile in England in 1984 after trying to publish a series of articles on the hidden history of the later Kenyan anti-colonial struggle, The Mau Mau Rebellion (1950-1963), which finally threw out British rule. His new book is a history of that rebellion spanning the whole colonial period from the Berlin Conference where Africa was divided between the European powers to formal independence from Great Britain. The author uses the history of publishing including interesting key excerpts from periodicals to tell the story from the point-of-view of those like himself who were actively involved in the struggle. Most Westerners who know something about Kenyan history know the name of the first President, Jomo Kenyatta, who is widely remembered as a struggle leader. However, Kenyatta was not involved in the Mau Mau Rebellion. He was rather the betrayer of the rebellion, the safe politician that Britain could trust to change a few faces and leave the colonial economy in tact. Those who want to know more about this story should have a look at the story of a real Mau Mau fighter, Roots of Freedom, 1921-1963: the Autobiography of Bildad Kaggia (Nairobi: East African Publishing House, 1975). Kenya was a settler state (similar in that way to the U.S. and Australia) with a so-called “white highlands” where a few thousand European farmers took over the land and lived their comfortable life on the backs of the local people who became their laborers.

Kenya’s most famous author, Ngugi wa Thiong’o, provides a short introduction noting the importance of the work. Let me recommend Ngugi’s works to those looking for wonderful African literature based on clear progressive politics. Ngugi was himself detained and sent to prison by President Kenyatta for explaining the neo-colonial truth in his novels and organizing village plays that reached the local people in his own first language, Gikuyu. His prison experience is recorded in a book originally written on toilet paper secretly hidden in his cell. See Detained, a Writer’s Prison Diary (London: Heinemann, 1981). Ngugi is known for championing the idea

that Africans should write for themselves in their own languages, and Durrani cites many publications in African as well as in

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Indian languages. There is an entire chapter on Kiswahili as a language of resistance, including songs and traditional poetic forms with examples.

The work is divided into three periods: 1886-1922 (“resistance of nationalities”), 1922-1948 (“working class struggles”), and 1948-1963 (“Mau Mau and the struggle for national and social liberation”). The chapters address the publishing activities of three groups: the colonialists and settlers, African peasants and workers, and the South Asian Kenyans who brought their anti-imperialist ideas with them. There is also a short chapter on international solidarity, with sections on eight countries including the United States.

I found the list of Swahili code words used during the Mau Mau struggle particularly interesting. For example “Kenya Ng’ombe” is literally a cow but also the symbol used by the British Kenya military. “Gikonyo” literally means protruding navel but was the term used for the British bombers “derived from the impression conveyed by the open bomb doors.” “Tie- Ties” was the derisive term used for Europeanized Kenyans who were likely to side with the British.

Shiraz Durrani provides a large bibliography, lists of information activists who suffered repression or death, and a list of banned imports. But it is too bad that these lists were presented in such small print.

This work is an important addition to the hidden history and documentation of the Kenyan anti-colonial struggle. It deserves wide distribution.

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