LIVING WITH A BULLET IN ONE'S BODY: GENERAL MAGOTO AND KENYA'S QUEST FOR INDEPENDENCE

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ABSTRACT

Mau-Mau revolutionary rebels began fighting for Kenyan independence in the 1940s, with the warfare reaching its zenith in the 1950s. The war was fought mainly by soldiers in their 20s and 30s, most of whom were from the central region of Kenya. The rebels and society at large were against British colonialism, which began when Kenya was declared a British protectorate in 1885 and a colony in 1920. It was the elites who encouraged people to see forced taxes, poor wages, the carrying of the Kipande (identity card), poor quality education, the colour bar (as Kenya's version of apartheid was called), forced labour, constant harassment and arbitrary beatings and mass arrests, especially in the major towns, and indeed the general systemic poverty to be indicators of their enslavement. Furthermore, the African soldiers who returned from fighting on the side of the British during the Second World War came out strongly against the assumed superiority of the coloniser. By 1952, various Mau-Mau platoons had been established, with General Magoto joining the erstwhile Haraka platoon of Embu district. He is deserving of mention not only for having survived the military offensives via land and air, but also for having lived with a bullet lodged in his body for over 50 years.

Keywords: Bullet-lodged-in-the-body; Mau-Mau rebels, General Magoto; Mau-Mau platoons; Mau-Mau oath; Mau-Mau movement; revolutionary history; reluctant rebels

INTRODUCTION

As Kenya prepared to celebrate her fifty-third year of independence on 12 December 2016, the memory of Mau-Mau rebel leader General Magoto of Kirinyaga County was being reconstructed. Particularly noteworthy is the fact of his having lived with a bullet in his body for more than 50 years. Was this sacrifice in the Kenyan war of

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independence necessary? Kirinyaga, which is one of the 47 counties of which Kenya is made up, is associated with other former Mau-Mau rebel leaders, among them generals, sergeants, brigadiers and majors, at the time of writing some dead and some still living, such as Generals Chui, Kassam, Matene, Ndaya, Aga Khan, Odera, and Kimkung; Majors Judge, Kabwere, J. Christo, Njee Kambo; and Brigadier Kubai, all of whom fought in the war of independence from the 1950s to the early 1960s (Gachau, interview on January 17, 2014). However, General Magoto (the literal meaning of whose name is "dry banana leaves") remains significant in light of the bullet lodged in his body. Have Kenyans forgotten those who were shot and injured in the quest of freedom, but survived to tell the story? In my interview with him on 6 May 2014 in his Guama home, General Magoto narrated the details of his life story, which I felt should be shared with a wider constituency.

The Mau-Mau was a guerrilla movement comprising soldiers who had returned from the Second World War and who encouraged younger Kenyans to seek independence from British colonial rule. The young people in central Kenya led their parents to demand independence following a series of activities such as "educating" the populace on their rights and privileges, setting up fundraising groups, setting up leadership structures from the highest to the lowest level (national to sub-location leadership), voluntary and/or forced oath taking and the threatening of those who did not cooperate, setting up intelligence and military structures that mirrored formal national military systems, and so on from 1945 (Gathogo 2013; 2014a). It compares well with other peasant revolutions such as the American War of Independence of 1776, the French Revolution of 1789, the Chinese Revolution of 1949, and the Russian Revolution of 1917. Poorly trained Africans waged spirited war against a well trained professional army, and engaged the British government in fierce battles for a decade. What drove them to offer such resistance against the British army? How were injured Mau-Mau rebels treated or viewed by the African populace, which yearned for freedom? The case of General Magoto helps us to find answers to these and other questions.

Having experienced the weaknesses of the British soldiers during the Second World War, the returning African soldiers were able to pull the final revolutionary trigger, and successfully demystified the colonial authorities. This is in line with John Walton's (1984) theory of "reluctant rebels", which states that a revolutionary movement is always slow to act and/or gather momentum until it is ignited by the social and political elites in a society that yearns for change. In this instance, the African elites in Kenya convinced the rank-and-file of society that if they were given the chance to rule, they would do better than the British. Hence after socio-political activities that included "teaching", politicising and "enlightening" people, oath-taking sessions, political dances and songs, the rebels began to position themselves in the forests within the Mount Kenya region with the purpose of waging guerrilla warfare against the colonial regime (Gathogo 2013; 2014).

GENERAL MAGOTO

General Magoto's real name is Francis Gachoki wa Mutagatwe. Born in Ndundui-ini area, Guama sub-location, Baragwi location of Gicugu Division in 1927, he started school in 1938 at Guama Anglican primary school, also called CMS Guama. He sat for his Common Entrance Exam in 1943 at CMS Gatunguru. After failing to get the right grade at the Catholic sponsored CCM Kianyaga school, he sat again for his Common Entrance in 1944, and passed well. He was admitted to Mathari Catholic Mission primary school for standard five. School fees were Ksh 80 per year (about 0.8 American dollars). He studied for one year, but could not raise the money for further school fees, and therefore left school permanently. He was interviewed for Agriculture in 1946, and was accepted. He was told to wait three months, but his impatience got the better of him, and he left the village in 1947 and went to look for a job in Nairobi. In Nairobi, he secured a job at Standard Bank in 1947, where he continued to work until 1952, which marked the start of the infamous state of emergency.

He was first approached to take the Mau-Mau oath in 1947. Initially he refused to do so on the grounds that he was a Christian, and Jesus'actions made any other oath unnecessary. In mid-1952 Mutagatwe returned to his rural home as a form of protest against the forced oaths, which went against his Christian belief. However, in November 1952, he took the rebel oath at Weru wa Nguuru, Karumandi area of Gicugu Division. During that period, Chief Johana Ngungi of Baragwi was forcing young men to undertake bush clearance rather than remain idle. Mutagatwe immediately assumed a leadership role in protesting against the "forced labour" that the chief was insisting on.

Subsequently, a group of young men led by Kimani Kariti invited him to lead the protest in a more organised way. This in time became a widespread demonstration against the chief and his policy of forced labour. In light of his bravery, the planners of the meeting knew that Mutagatwe would definitely attend the demonstration. Upon his arrival, he discovered that the intention was in fact to trick him into taking the Mau-Mau oath. He therefore took the oath of membership in November 1952, but learnt subsequently that oath takers were known to the local administration and were likely to be arrested. He was arrested in 1953 and taken to Embu prison, but later released on the grounds of lack of evidence that he had taken the oath. However, due to intelligence surveillance, he decided that he needed to leave the village as he feared another arrest. He called his wife (Elizabeth Warui), his father (Mutagatwe Ngari), his brother (Mugucu Mutagatwe) and his mother (Mutune Mutagatwe), in 1953, and told them,

> See me burning my Identity Card, and as it burns through the flame of fire, understand that I see no future here. I can get killed any time. So now, I join the Freedom Fighters in Mount Kenya forest. I do not want to die at home. If arrests are done arbitrarily, what else do I expect? (Interview with General Magoto, May 6, 2014)

They were shocked to receive this news, but in the face of his determination, they wished him well and promised to uphold him in prayer as he fought for freedom. Gachoki wa

Mutagatwe packed his clothes and left for the forest to join any battalion or platoon that would accept him. In his search for a Mau-Mau platoon to join, he first met General China (Waruhiu Itote, 1922–1993) at Kangaita forest in Kirinyaga County. In his book, "*Mau Mau" General* (Itote 1967), General China mentions Gachoki wa Mutagatwe, who joined his Mwiruti platoon of what is today Nyeri county in February 1953. Although the Heka Heka platoon was the most famous platoon in what was then Nyeri district, the Mwiruti platoon was one of those that emerged later. He was subsequently joined by Batiri Njogu, later General Kassam, General Kubukubu, and Chui wa Mararo, later General Chui, among others.

In his confessions to the researcher, Gachoki wa Mutagatwe revealed that he was first promoted to a Royal Commissioner of the Military (RCM), and then to a Brigadier. Certainly, the rebels' mode of promotion was unique, as one would have expected the promotion to a Brigadier to have come before the one of the Royal Commissioner of the Military (RCM). When General Kassam was captured in 1956, he was made to superintend the area and rose to the rank of general. Both Generals Bahati of Nyeri and Magoto were Decorated Generals by 1956. On 16 June 1956, General Magoto was shot at by the then District Officer (DO) of Gicugu, a Briton who was nicknamed Gicuiri (meaning the long-haired person). This occurred at night. Asked to identify himself, he replied, "I am Magoto." The DO and his team then instructed him to sit down, after which the DO shot him in the stomach, and again in the hip. At the time he was interviewed in 2014, he still had a bullet lodged in his body. At times it would ache, especially when he carried heavy loads. He stated that human rights groups had not taken the issue up seriously, and that nothing had come of it.

After independence in 1963, Kenya did not have a version of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission that listened to the cries of the people, and so therapy took the form of confession and/or compensation where possible. Nevertheless, a religious outfit called the Moral Re-Armament **(**MRA) for peace sought to reconcile the post war Kenya since 1958. Though locally led by an ex-Mau-Mau detainee, Nahashon Ngare Rukenya, the Moral Re-Armament came into existence in 1938. It was the brainchild of an American Christian missionary, Dr. Frank Buchman (1878–1961); and indeed an offshoot of his earlier ecclesiastical outfit called the Oxford Group (Buchman, 1955).

In coming up with the Oxford Group that preceded MRA, Buchman, an American Lutheran Cleric of Swiss descent, had had a conversion experience in 1908 while in the Keswick chapel, England, as he listened to an ongoing sermon by Jessie Penn-Lewis (Luttwak, 1994). It is after this experience that he founded a movement called *A First Century Christian Fellowship* in 1921. As the website for the Initiatives of Change International (IOFC), which became the new name for MRA in 2001, has noted, the MRA began its activities in Kenya in 1954 when the Mau-Mau rebellion against the British colonial hegemony was in its pick. Men, women, and children were killed in thousands; with the atrocities promising endless revenges and counter-reactions (http://www.iofc.org/history/Kenya) (Gathogo, 2017). In the Kenyan context, MRA like

in other global contexts sought to reconcile people who were experiencing war and conflict. In so doing, it aimed at arming people morally, and strived to do so by visiting the various troubled spots of the world. Kenya of 1950s was such a troubled spot.

In the shooting incident of 16 June 1956, General Magoto bled profusely after being shot at. Nevertheless, he feebly made his way towards the forest, where he was treated using traditional herbs. On the way to the forest he encountered people taking the oath, and advised them to stop, as they ran the risk of being caught. He told them that he had been shot, and that the government forces were pursuing him. Having by now lost a lot of blood, he was carried by two women who were taking the oath to somebody's home, where he received first aid. He was moved from one home to another as the community sought to save his life and avoid detection by the local administration. After having recovered to some degree he returned to fighting where he was needed (Gachau, interview on January 17, 2014).

In 1957, he was captured by ex-Mau-Mau in the Kamweti forest and taken to Catle camp at Kimunye, where he was asked by European soldiers, "Are you General Magoto?" From there he was taken to the Gatugura chief's camp and later to Kianyaga police station, where the DO interrogated him. He was later taken to Embu police station for interrogation. From Embu, he was taken to court in Nyeri to face prosecution. Along with 13 others, he was accused of killing a person from Gicugu Division. Three former rebels who had surrendered earlier testified against him. The three witnesses were cross-examined in court by a volunteer European lawyer for General Magoto. At the conclusion of the cross-examination it was established that since the general had in the past worked as the senior of the three witnesses, they had all participated collectively in the alleged killings, and therefore all four needed either to be hanged together or to be released together. They were released, and General Magoto was set free in 1957 (Gachau, interview on January 17, 2014).

Despite being 'officially' acquitted in court, General Magoto nevertheless remained in the police cells. The volunteer European lawyer who represented him later advised him to visit the captured Field Marshall Dedan Kimathi Waciuri (1920-1956), the overall head of the Mau-Mau movement. This was a trick to ensure that he revealed the secrets of the Mau-Mau (Makumi, interview on December 30, 2013). As General Magoto, the security team, and other Mau-Mau rebels reached Mathari hospital, he was in particular questioned about certain people who were allegedly seen to be part of the Mau-Mau movement. Afterwards, Magoto was taken to Gathigiriri, Hola and other Mau-Mau detention camps that were set up for the detention of rebels across the country. He was released from Hola detention camp in 1961. Upon returning to Kabuti village, he found his wife on his father's farm, which he then began to manage productively. He was assisted by Chief Bernard Makanga in transferring his father's farm into his name. He became established as a farmer, and in 1963 the locals asked him to become their chief, after which he became the sub-chief of Guama sub-location, Baragwi location. He retired in 1986 to focus on farming livestock and growing tea. In

2014, he was the chairman of the Mau-Mau war veterans of Kirinyaga East (Gachau, interview on January 17, 2014).

GENERAL MAGOTO'S RELIGIOUS LIFE

Gachoki wa Mutagatwe, later General Magoto, was baptised at CMS Kabare mission in 1943 by Rev. Musa Mumae, the first African clergyman in what was then the Kabare pastorate. At the time, Embu district had three pastorates, Kigari-Embu, Kabare-Kirinyaga, and Mutira-Kirinyaga. Rev. Mumae had taken over from a European missionary, Rev. L. J. Beecher, who headed the parish from 1937 to 1938. Mumae served the Kabare pastorate, which comprised the entire Gicugu division and some Eastern part of Mwea division, from 1935 to 1951. He is comparable to Johana Njumbi of the neighbouring Mutira pastorate (Nyagah 2010).

General Magoto left the Anglican Church in 1944 and joined the Catholic Church when he studied at a Roman Catholic sponsored school, CCM Kianyaga, where he sat for his Common Entrance Exam. He remained a member of the Roman Catholic Church from 1944 onwards. General Magoto is a rebel who, after escaping death, returned and, like Major Judge, led a normal life. General Magoto considered the conflict between the Anglican Church and the rebels to be driven by the feeling on the part of some leaders within it that the oath was satanic. Coupled with this, the East African Revival Movement, which operated as a semi-church within the Anglican Church, ended up as martyrs as they denounced their oath openly, or refused to take it when called upon to do so.

EAST AFRICAN REVIVAL MOVEMENT (EARM)

In turn, the East African Revival Movement (EARM) traces its roots in Rwanda. The seed was sown in 1920s/30s when in September 1929 two persons, Dr. Joe church (European missionary) and Siomeoni Nsibambi (a Ugandan), undertook serious bible study on the Holy Spirit. Dr. Church was a medical doctor who had gone to Gahini in Rwanda to help during a period of drought and famine. As a result of the study, the two sank into deep spiritual experience. The experience became the driving force that led to a series of conventions. Subsequently, several conventions took place across the East African region, as the fast spreading Christian revivalist team urged piety, holiness, sinless living, and so on. Hence several conventions such as Gahini Convention 1933, Kabale Convention 1935, Mbarara Convention 1936 took place. The movement emphasized on personal salvation (being born again) and abandoning worldly greed and/or desires (Hildebrandt 1996, 234).

To demonstrate their pietistic leanings, Hildebrandt (1996, 234) observes that, "There are no officials, no executives, no salaried workers; no headquarters, no offices; no bureaucracy, no paper-wok, no minutes, no budgets, no membership lists, and no subscription fees." Its members condemned fornication, adultery, drinking and gossip

vigorously and religiously. During its active days the movement could not stand the idea of procuring loans from banks since part of its philosophy was against accumulation of worldly wealth. In some extreme cases, polygamous converts to the East African Revival movement were made to divorce the second and third wives in order to keep God's covenant in monogamous marriages. This however affected children who were oblivious of what was happening. It would affect children's learning, upbringing, and identity among other challenges.

In a nutshell, the movement spread to the whole of East Africa like bush fire and by 1938 it had reached Kenya. Its arrival coincided with the struggle for political independence in the country. Christianity as preached by the whites was fast losing meaning to the people especially with regard to "loving others." It was not easy to see love where the "natives" were displaced from their ancestral land only for them to become landless squatters. The situation coupled with discriminatory treatment in public institutions engendered despondency among Africans who sought for comfort and consolation in other forums. The European Church, as the mainline churches were seen, had failed to provide solutions to social and economic injustices. Dissatisfaction spilled over to political issues.

Africans were thus divided, with some remaining loyal to the colonial masters. Others became agitators for independence in the area of governance. As noted earlier, land alienation was a critical factor that contributed to the birth of Mau-Mau rebel movement. In *Mau Mau* rebels were to be found the group opposed to colonial rule. In turn, the majority of the Balokole (referring to the Brethren or Adherents of the movement) sided with the government of the day and so they were viewed as traitors (Baur, 1994, 480f) and many died as martyrs.

In an interview, held on 6 May 2014, the retired clergyman Rev. Hezron Mwangi explained how his father, Wilson Muriuki, was killed by the rebels in 1953 when he refused to take the Mau-Mau oath that General Magoto's team was administering. In such scenario, an adherent of the EARM could not understand why the Mau-Mau movement was administering the binding oath; yet Jesus' death and resurrection was enough universal oath. They also failed to understand the reason for violence in the quest for political freedom (Gathogo 2014b). To the revivalists, the Mau-Mau rebel activities smacked-off indiscipline, ungodliness, irreligiosity, and were indeed the climax of the fallen-ness of the human nature, whose restoration was only through Christ. As some of their leaders preached in the mission churches such as the Presbyterian and mainly the Anglican Church, they would mock the Mau-Mau activities, and especially their oathing ceremonies.

In the case of Wilson Muriuki, noted above, his opposition to the activities of Magoto and his team was clearly known. As a revivalist, he saw Kenya's political freedom as unnecessary now that freedom in Christ precedes every other thing. Nevertheless, the problem with the revivalists is that, they failed to see the Christian faith from a holistic perspective; a phenomenon where both the physical and the spiritual needs are necessarily factored in, in our theo-social discourses. Interestingly, Muriuki, in particular,

pleaded with the Mau-Mau rebels to let him pray before he was martyred, but they shot him fatally and cut his body into pieces. This illustrates the hatred of the Mau-Mau for missionary churches, which they viewed as another arm of colonialism. It also shows the deep hatred with which the rebels had for the collaborators, the fellow Africans who did not see the urgency of political freedom. In so doing, they also administered extreme brutality similar to the one that the colonialists displayed to the general African populace; hence General Magoto's team also have a huge share of blame.

CONCLUSION

The article has retraced and reconstructed the memory of General Magoto, a Kenyan freedom hero of the 1950s, whose body has nursed a bullet since he was shot during the war of independence. The pain that he experiences from time to time as a result of the bullet reflects the legacy of pain that the post-independent African nations continue to experience. These include ethnic, economic, and gender imbalances, xenophobia, false images of ourselves and economic stagnation.

As General Magoto lives out his old age in his Guama village home with a bullet lodged in his body, one wonders whether the post-independence call to forget the past and focus on the future really does justice to those rebels who continue to live with injuries.

Like General Matene of Gitumbi-Inoi in Kirinyaga Central, who bears scars from the time of his participation in the war, General Magoto is representative of those who fought in the war of independence but were not given serious medical attention after Kenya gained her independence – does this signify that this was just a constitutional independence, devoid of action and implementation? Some who fought for freedom died earlier than they might have, while others remained unsung heroes and heroines. Some went to their graves traumatised, while others lived with trauma that was never dealt with. Perhaps an equivalent of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) could have been established in Kenya in 1963. Although the contribution of the Moral Re-Armament (MRA) under lay Anglican leader Nahashon Ngare Rukenya (1930–96) made a bold attempt to reconcile Kenyans, and compares well with Tutu's TRC, it largely failed to comprehensively handle the post war Kenya. Without the government in-put, Ngare-Rukenya's MRA could not do any reparations, nor prosecute extreme cases.

With the promulgation of Kenya's liberal constitution on 27 August 2010, and where Kenya was reorganized from the former 8 Provinces that obtained from 1963 to 47 Counties, the 47 devolved governments can address some of the issues that were not initially addressed. Indeed, such incidences can be addressed at county government level and a gesture made in the form of naming roads and avenues after some of the most outstanding fighters such as General Magoto, General Chui wa Mararo, General Matene, General Ndaya and so on from Kirinyaga County in particular. Similarly, some of the most celebrated Mau-Mau martyrs such as Reuben Kinyua Kaara and Wilson

Muriuki should be celebrated and churches and hospitals named after them. I personally believe that ACK Mutira Mission Health Centre should be renamed Reuben Kinyua Health Centre because it is where he worked before he was martyred by Mau-Mau rebels in September 1953. Even though every case should be dealt with on its own merits, we need to realise that failure to acknowledge and appreciate its history in the name of "forward marching" spells doom for the future of any African nation.

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