

STATE OF EMERGENCY

HARAKATI ZA
MAU MAU
KWA HAKI,
USAWA NA
ARDHI YETU

STATE OF EMERGENCY

State of Emergency Harakati za Mau Mau kwa Haki, Usawa na Ardhi Yetu

Max Pinckers et al. (2014 - 2024)

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Awards

- » Les Rencontres d'Arles Photo-texte Book Award Special Mention, Arles, France, 2024
- » PHotoESPAÑA shortlist for Book of the Year Award in the Investigación category, Madrid, Spain

Past and upcoming exhibitions

- » *State of Emergency*, solo exhibition, Exposed Festival, Palazzo Madama, Italy, May - June 2024
- » *True Fictions*, Arendt House, Luxembourg, March - September 2024
- » *Agents of Concern*, CC Hasselt, Belgium, November 2023 - January 2024
- » *Give and Take. Bilder über Bilder*, Hamburger Kunsthalle, Germany, May - August 2022
- » *Double Bind*, solo exhibition, FOMU - Fotomuseum Antwerp, Belgium, November 2021 - March 2022

Selected publications and reviews

- » Five-star review: *De helletocht van terrorist naar vrijheidstreider*, De Standaard, Belgium, 2025
- » *Acts of Defiance*, Opinion, [The Globe and Mail](#), Canada, 2024
- » Selected as book of the year by Gerry Badger, Colin Pantall, and Viory Schellekens on [photo-eye](#)
- » *Max Pinckers, State of Emergency*, [Collector Daily](#), New York, USA, 2024
- » *Photobook Review: State of Emergency by Max Pinckers et al.*, [PHmuseum](#), 2024
- » *'Shining a light on the blind spots': new book seeks to provide clearer picture of Mau Mau uprising*, [The Art Newspaper](#), London, UK, 2024
- » *Gallery - Photography by Max Pinckers*, [FT Weekend Magazine](#), London, UK, 2024
- » *Africa, una storia disoprusie lotte*, Itala Vivan, [Il Manifesto](#), Italy, 2024
- » *Unhistories*, [The Eyes Journal](#), Paris, France, 2022
- » *Unhistories*, The Elephant, [Part I](#), [Part II](#), [Part III](#), Nairobi, Kenya, 2021
- » *Reimagining Time, Reconstructing Space*, Chao Tayiana Maina & Max Pinckers, [Trigger: Uncertainty](#), 2020

“[A]n extraordinary book of archive material, round-table discussions and vivid recreations that reveal experiences that were systematically repressed for generations.”

— [Josh Lustig, FT Weekend Magazine](#)

“Through the reconstruction of traumatic scenes, the ‘re-photographing’ of places of confinement and torture and the portraits of those who were at the forefront of the rebellion, Pinckers makes a restorative instrument of the photographic medium that makes it possible to tell their truths to the powerful. He is among the few photographers who, through their practice and the dialogues they engage in, question their privileges and the symbolic power they exercise as white and Western individuals, as much as their position in the face of our shared colonial legacies.”

— [The Eyes Journal, guest edited by Laia Abril](#)

“*State of Emergency* comes together as a powerful visual statement that actively repositions the Mau Mau narrative”

— [Loring Knoblauch, Collector Daily](#)

“How can the British propaganda images, once a tool for violence, come to serve an opposite narrative? Long hidden for the violence they portray, in *State of Emergency* they become a mean to show things the way they were. With everything that isn’t represented becoming, at times, even more relevant than what is there. Hence, more than working as a counter-point, the veterans’ and Pinckers’ images come to fill the deliberate voids that haunt British visual history. It is about making images that weren’t there.”

— [Camilla Marrese, PhMuseum](#)

Chama cha Mau Mau War Veterans Association (MMWVA) Tawi la Murang'a kinatafakari kuhusu 'kumbukumbu zilizohamishwa' na picha kutoka *State of Emergency* wakati wa mazungumzo ya meza ya pande zote.

The Mau Mau War Veterans Association (MMWVA) Murang'a Branch reflect on the 'migrated archives' and photographs from *State of Emergency* during a roundtable conversation.

Murang'a, Kenya,
24 October 2022





SEE THAT THEY DON'T GET IT
IN THE LAST THREE MONTHS 65
FIREARMS HAVE BEEN STOLEN
FROM PRIVATE INDIVIDUALS

19 WERE STOLEN IN MAY
28 WERE STOLEN IN JUNE
18 WERE STOLEN IN JULY

EVERY ONE OF THESE IS A
POTENTIAL **MURDER** WEAPON

GUARD YOUR GUN



“Wakati wa kupigania uhuru nilikuwa mwanafunzi katika shule ambayo King’s African Rifles walikuwa wakiishi. Walikuwa wakipigania Waingereza, lakini askari wakawa marafiki zetu. Walitonyesha kila kitu, na ndipo nilipojifunza jinsi bunduki inavyofanya kazi.

Nilianza kujitengenezea bunduki zangu nyumbani. Ungeweza kutumia risasi moja tu kwa wakati mmoja. Ungetoa cartridge na kuweka nyingine. Tulitumia bunduki hizi kuwawinda wanajeshi wa Uropa. Tulipompata mmoja – tungemvizia au kujificha kando yake msituni na kumpiga risasi – tungechukua bunduki yake. Kwa njia hiyo tungepata bunduki. Bunduki mpya.

Tulitumia mabomba ya maji kutengeneza bunduki hizi. Na kisha tulikuwa tunatumia chuma ya kufunga mlango. Tungenoa ncha ya chuma hiyo na kutumia mpira bendi kuivuta ili kuifanya ipige risasi, ili oksijeni iingie na risasi ilipuke. Bunduki tulizokuwa tukitengeneza zingeweza kutengwa tukiwa safarini. Ili kuificha kwenye koti mrefu, unaweza kuitenga vipande viwili, na unapotaka kuwa katika hatua unaweza kuiweka pamoja tena. Ilikuwa rahisi kusafiri nayo.”

– Paul Mwangi Mwenja (Katibu wa Tawi la MMWVA Murang’a), Murang’a, 30 Agosti 2019

“During the struggle for independence I was a student at a school where the King’s African Rifles soldiers were staying. They were Africans fighting for the British, but the soldiers became our friends. They showed us everything, and that’s when I learned how a gun works.

I began making homemade guns. You could only use one bullet at a time. You’d take out the cartridge and put in another. We used these guns to hunt European soldiers. When we’d get one – we would ambush or hide beside him in the bush and shoot him – we’d take his gun. That way we’d gain a gun. A new gun.

We used water pipes to make these guns. And then we were using door lock hatches. We would sharpen the tip of the hatch lock and use a spring or elastic rubber to make it hit the bullet, so that oxygen would get in and the bullet fires. The guns we were making could be taken apart while traveling. In order to hide it in the *kabuti*, the trench coat, you could dismantle it up into two pieces, and when you wanted to be in action you could put it together again. It was easy to travel with.”

– Paul Mwangi Mwenja (MMWVA Murang’a Branch Secretary), Murang’a, 30 August 2019

Peter Irungu Njuguna, John
Mwangi and Paul Mwangi
Mwenja (left to right), Gitoro
Cave, Kenya, 29 August 2019



State of Emergency Harakati za Mau Mau kwa Haki, Usawa na Ardhi Yetu

Max Pinckers et al. (2014 - 2024)

“

We want these photos to be shown in Europe, and especially in Britain, so that they see the inhuman treatment they did to us. We want these photographs to be shown, not only to Britain, but to the whole world. We want the message to get across. Johanna was saying that, particularly people like him, who were maimed—and can show the deformities and scars—that he has no problem for them to be photographed and shown to the world, with the message: “Ask the British to compensate us for what they did.”

– Julius Gilbert Kimari

In 2014 Max Pinckers was invited to the Archive of Modern Conflict in London where he was presented with a collection of British propaganda material relating to the 1950s “Mau Mau emergency” in Kenya. This became the starting point for years of research into one of Britain’s most violent episodes of colonial history. From 1952 to 1960, the colonial administration built a network of more than one hundred detention camps, torture sites and resettlement villages. People were systematically robbed of their land, deported to labor camps and tortured. More than a thousand people were hanged at the mobile gallows that were transported from town to town. Mau Mau emerged as a freedom movement in the run-up to independence as a reaction to colonial rule.

On the eve of independence in 1963, the colonial government destroyed most of its documentation relating to the uprising in a process known as “Operation Legacy,” in an effort to conceal its wrongdoings. The newly independent Kenyan government made it illegal to speak or write about Mau Mau up to 2003. It was only in 2013 that the British government formally expressed its regret about the abuses suffered at the hands of Empire. A small group of claimants were paid damages of about 20 million pounds in a court case that brought to light the “migrated archives”: a secret collection of thousands of files pertaining to 37 former colonies once deemed too sensitive to release to the public. This disclosure provided many unseen documents that describe in detail the systemic torture of detainees during the emergency, and the knowledge of those abuses by British Government officials in London and Nairobi. The fact that so much important documentation and proof of colonial violence was destroyed and hidden, has created gaps in history and impeded consequential reconciliation processes. Reproductions from this colonial archive form the backbone of *State of Emergency*.

State of Emergency - Harakati za Mau Mau kwa Haki, Usawa na Ardhi Yetu is a documentary project in collaboration with Mau Mau war veterans and Kenyans who survived colonial atrocities. In the form of in-person reenactments, or “demonstrations,” together they (re) visualise the fight for independence from British colonial rule in the 1950s, manifesting their past experiences in the present with a future audience in mind.

With most of the colonial archives deliberately destroyed, hidden or manipulated, this project attempts to shine a light on this history’s blind spots by creating new “imagined records” that fill in the missing gaps of historical archives. *State of Emergency* interweaves fragmentary colonial archives, photographs of architectural and symbolic remnants from the past, mass grave sites, demonstrations and the testimonies of people who experienced and survived the war themselves.

State of Emergency is a collaborative attempt at rebuilding and reimagining possible futures of reparation and reconciliation. Together with the National Museums of Kenya and members of Mau Mau War Veterans Association, they deliver a collective response aimed at healing – without erasing – the still gaping wounds of colonial violence, creating a restorative instrument of the photographic medium that makes it possible to tell their truths to the powerful.

Max Pinckers (b.1988, BE) grew up in Indonesia, India, Australia and Singapore, and is currently based in Brussels. His work challenges the conventions of documentary photography by exploring theatricality, performativity and collaboration within documentary and photojournalism, made visible through the explicit use of cinematic lighting and staging in a documentary context. Photography, for Pinckers, is a

speculative gesture that involves more than the mere representation of external realities. His approach to reality and truth is plural and malleable, open to articulation in different ways.

His works take shape as self-published artist books and exhibition installations such as *The Fourth Wall* (2012), *Will They Sing Like Raindrops or Leave Me Thirsty* (2014), *Margins of Excess* (2018) and *Red Ink* (2018). Pinckers is a Doctor in the Arts and a guest lecturer at the School of Arts/KASK in Ghent. He has received multiple international awards, such as the Edward Steichen Award Luxembourg 2015 and the Leica Oskar Barnack Award 2018. Pinckers is co-founder of the independent publishing imprint Lyre Press and The School of Speculative Documentary. He is represented by Gallery Sofie Van de Velde in Antwerp and Tristan Lund in London.

Credits: *State of Emergency - Harakati za Mau Mau kwa Haki, Usawa na Ardhi Yetu* is produced with the support of the National Museums of Kenya, Kenya National Archives, Nyeri Museum, Karatina University, National Mau Mau War Veterans Association of Kenya, Kenya Human Rights Commission, The National Archives (UK), Bristol Archives and Museums, Archive of Modern Conflict, De Bedoeling vzw and the Flemish Government. This project started during Pinckers’ time as a doctoral researcher in arts at KASK & Conservatorium, the HOGENT and Howest school of arts, financed by the HOGENT Arts Research Fund.

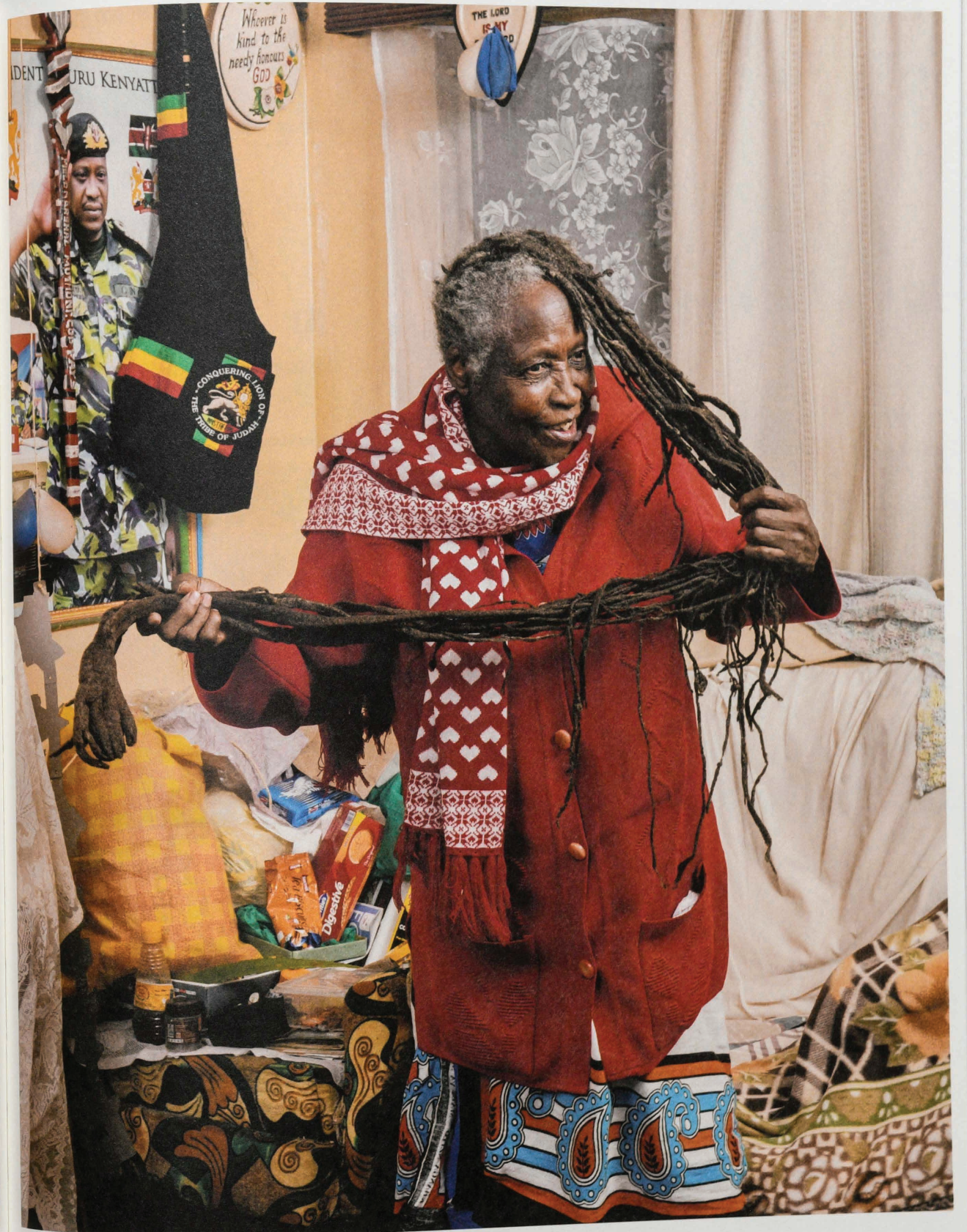
Research and production assistance by Victoria Gonzalez-Figueras. Research support by David Anderson and the Museum of British Colonialism. Translations and transcriptions by Maureen Ng’ayu and Terry Wairimu. Audiovisual assistance by Wiet Lengeler and Pedro Gossler. All photographs from 2015 were created during the project *The Struggle for Freedom in: “_____”* with Michiel Burger.

Field Marshal Muthoni wa Kirima baada ya kuibuka kutoka msituni mnamo 1963 kuweka silaha chini kwenye bendera ya Kenya huru katika Uwanja wa Ruringu, Nyeri, Kenya.

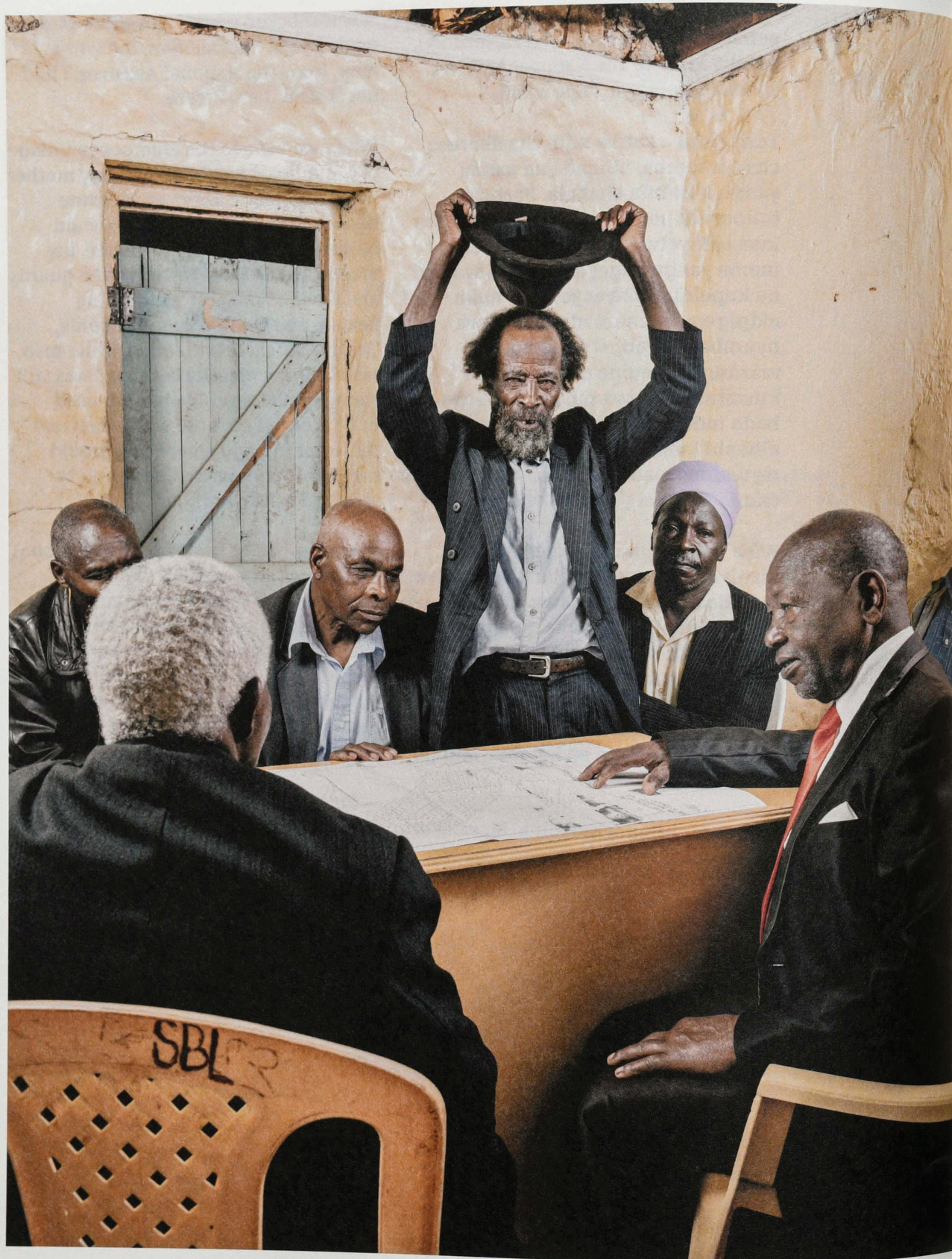


Field Marshal Muthoni wa Kirima after emerging from the forest in 1963 to lay down arms at the flag of free Kenya at Ruringu Stadium, Nyeri, Kenya.

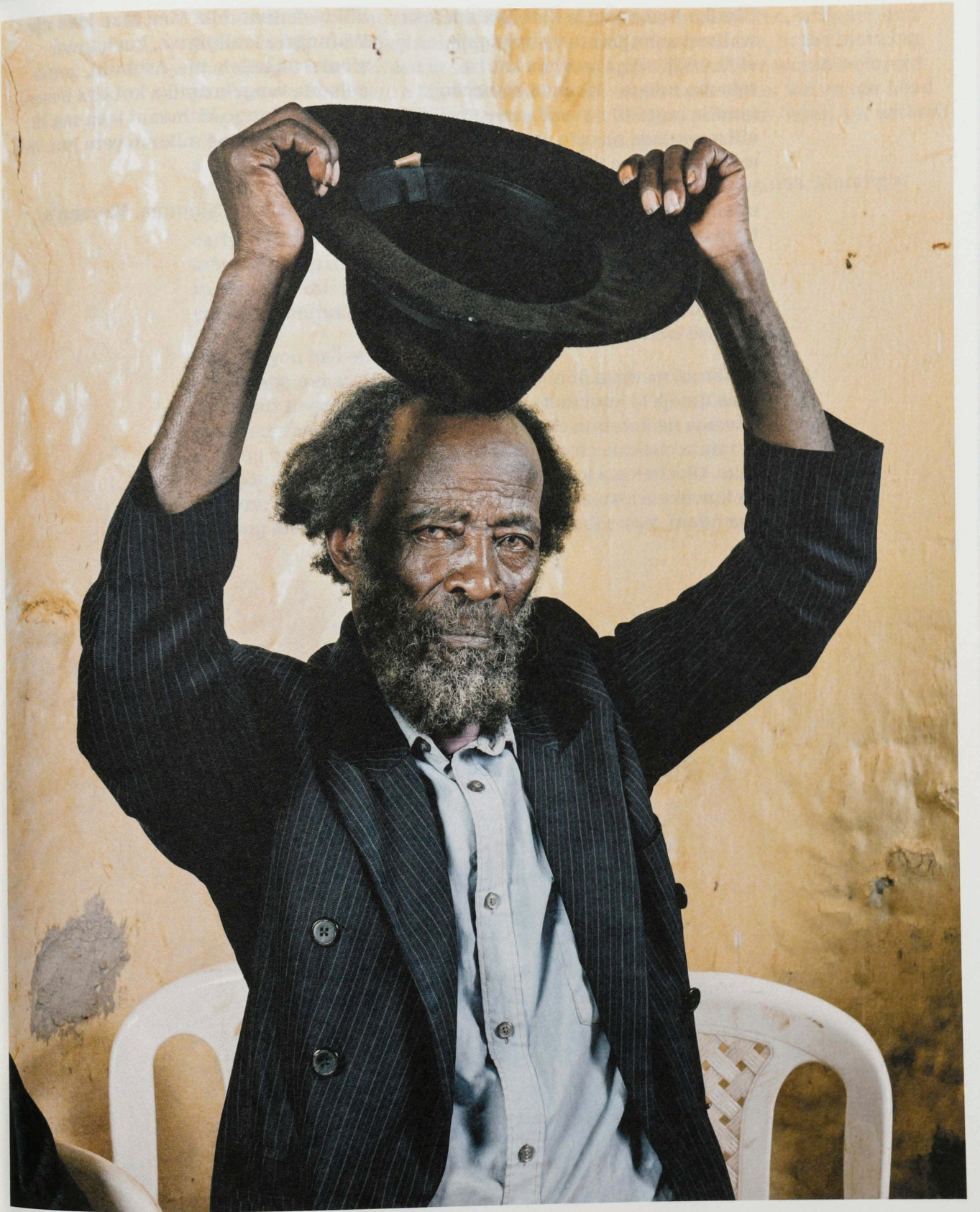
Courtesy Muthoni wa Kirima



Field Marshal Muthoni wa Kirima, Nyeri, Kenya, 28 Agosti 2019



Peter Irungu Njuguna, MMWVA Murang'a, Kenya, 29 August 2019





The National Archives, UK:
INF 10/168 (part 2). Kenya:
180 photographs compiled
by the Central Office of
Information depicting events,
1945-1963

K 26730

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INF 10/168

RECORD COPYING COUNTER SHOULD NEED FURTHER ASSISTANCE. *****

✓ WHEN MARKING UP DOCUMENTS FOR COPYING PLEASE TICK THE APPROPRIATE BOX ON THE OPPOSITE SIDE OF THE



"An aerial view of the 'closed' camp at Hola which houses the Mau Mau detainees who refuse to cooperate with the Kenya Government. These detainees, although offered a chance to leave the barbed wire and work on the 'open' irrigation project, refuse to move."



About ‘State of Emergency’

Hans Theys

First published in State of Emergency,
self-published by Max Pinckers, 2024

“

To be frank, our curriculum does not tell our story. Our curriculum has been telling the European narrative. How Europeans viewed the African struggle. In the history books before the year 2002, the Mau Mau were referred to as terrorists. To call Mau Mau terrorists in 2002, having attained independence in 1963, is a great omission in our syllabus. Our kids have been told and retold that Mau Mau were terrorists and not freedom fighters. We should relight our history to paint a true picture of who the Mau Mau were. (...) The real Mau Mau who are in their 80s and 90s now. Sooner or later we’re going to lose them. Who will tell the stories then? That is what we need to do, and we need to do that very fast. (...) The Mau Mau story is indigenous knowledge. It is our personal story. It is a Kenyan story. It should be told by Kenyans—the way they see it, the way they acted it.”

– Dr. Peter Kinyanjui Mwangi

Max Pinckers was born in Brussels in 1988. The greater part of his childhood and adolescence took place in India, Australia, Bali and Singapore. Spending his early childhood in Indian ashram-like environments with his mother as a single parent has left a strong impression on him.

For his first book *Lotus* (Thailand, 2009-10) Pinckers developed a personal approach to documentary photography, revealing its subjective nature by implementing partial staging and artificial lighting in a demonstrative way. This approach was further developed and diversified to make the documentaries *The Fourth Wall* (India, 2011-12), *Will They Sing Like Raindrops or Leave Me Thirsty* (India, 2013), *Two Kinds of Memory and Memory Itself* (Japan, 2014-15), *Margins of Excess* (United States, 2016-18) and *Red Ink* (North Korea, 2017).

Thus far, *State of Emergency* (Kenya and UK, 2014-2024) has been his longest, deepest and most challenging documentary.

The starting point was an invitation extended in 2014 by The Archive of Modern Conflict in London to consult their collection. Struck by the one-sided military documentation of the war leading to the independence of Kenya, Pinckers met with Mau Mau veterans and asked them whether they would be interested in visualizing their side of the events. Most of them agreed. Together they proposed to organize ‘demonstrations’ of past events.

The following years Pinckers’ research into this matter expanded. He repeatedly interviewed dozens of survivors in Kenya, organized meetings with them, visited important Mau Mau sites, had part of a so-called ‘Emergency Village’ reconstructed, met with historians, consulted several archives and museums in Kenya and elsewhere, read and photographed thousands of sensitive documents and tried out several visual approaches including

analogue and digital photo camera’s, filming, handing out cameras to local photographers and collecting archival material, press clippings and found footage. He also brought back reproductions of thousands of archival documents from the UK to Kenya.

Finally, the resulting findings, texts and images were bundled into this book, which does not want to present a final truth about the events but wants to make them visible for outsiders, as is the explicit wish of all the Kenyan participants. The book tries to encompass the probing research of somebody who wants to know and see, not forgetting that absolute truth is always beyond our reach.

Apart from photographs and interviews made by Pinckers, the book contains short essays by historians and a selection of documents and photographs made by the British Colonial Office Information Service that has documented the events with bureaucratic (but prejudiced) precision.

The photographs made for propaganda purposes by anonymous photographers often meet high esthetic standards. Many of the photographs are staged and beautifully lit. In this book, sometimes they are reproduced as they were found in the archives, wrapped in transparent sheets, sometimes they are singled out and presented as autonomous photographs, thus turning this book in an essay on the role of the photographer as well, revealing Pinckers’ continuing doubts with regard to his own position.

The most gruesome photographs have been omitted. The aim of the book is not to judge, but to make visible. Ultimately, the underlying subject not being the Kenyan situation, but our human condition and the necessity of every man to deal with his, her or their past and to strive for a dignified future for all of us.

As a book, *State of Emergency* unintentionally became the mirror image of Pinckers’ earlier publication *Margins of Excess* (2018), dedicated to the impossibility of distinguishing truth from fiction in the 24-hour news cycle in the United States. Both books show the strength and powerlessness of photographic imagery. *Margins of Excess*, however, evokes a world wherein truth and justice have become hard to track down, whereas *State of Emergency* tells a tale of a gradual unveiling at the service of dignity. The first book might leave an impression of hopelessness, the second celebrates hope and empowerment. As such, this book is also a portrait of the photographer himself, a new development of his approach to documentary photography, the fruit of a vague but persistent motivation that made him chose to become a photographer.

Critics might object that a person of European descent has no right dealing with such an important aspect of African history. They are right. For this reason, Pinckers returned to Kenya in November 2022 to ask all the participants whether he should make this book or not. They all urged him to do so.

With Emmanuel Levinas, I would like to plead for a personal responsibility for the Other, in the broadest sense of the word (every living being, all things we cannot grasp without effort). We are responsible. If we have a talent, we must put it at service. Some become warriors, others become poets or photographers. If Pinckers would not have developed his personal approach to documentary photography, partly staging scenes and using additional artificial light in an ostensible way, he could never have proposed the veterans to demonstrate events from their past.

– Montagne de Miel, 4 February 2023

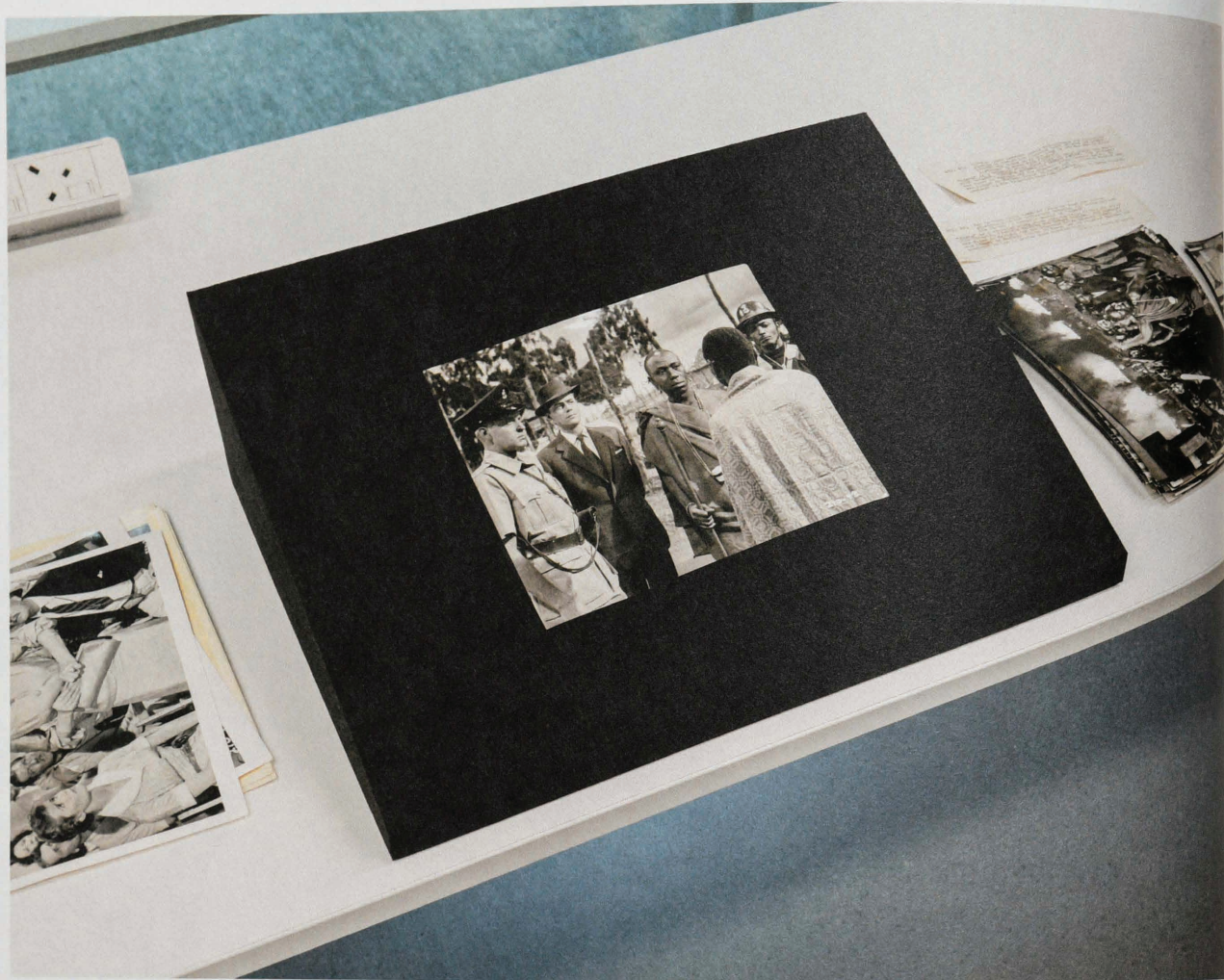


Beninah Wanjugu Kamujeru kutoka MMWVA Murang'a anaonyesha jinsi alivyohojiwa. John Mwangi, Ndungu Ngondi (1939-2023), Joseph Gachina na Wilfred K. Maina (kushoto kwenda kulia) wakijifanya kuwa timu ya uchunguzi.

Beninah Wanjugu Kamujeru from MMWVA Murang'a demonstrates how she was interrogated. John Mwangi, Ndungu Ngondi (1939-2023), Joseph Gachina and Wilfred K. Maina (left to right) pretend to be the screening team.

Murang'a, Kenya, 30 Agosti 2019





Mwanahistoria David Anderson aliniambia kwamba alikumbuka kuona picha za nyongeza kwenye pingu alipokuwa akisoma picha za seti kutoka kwa *Simba* katika British Film Institute wakati fulani katikati ya miaka ya 1990. Baada ya mwaka mmoja wa kuwasiliana na BFI, niliruhusiwa kusoma picha katika Berkhamsted Special Collections mnamo 2021. Picha ambazo Anderson alikuwa ameelezea zilikosekana kwenye kumbukumbu.

Historian David Anderson told me that he remembered seeing images of extras in handcuffs when studying the set photographs from *Simba* at the British Film Institute sometime in the mid-1990s. After one year of corresponding with the BFI, I was allowed to study the photographs at the Berkhamsted Special Collections in 2021. The images Anderson had described turned out to be missing from the archive.



Mrundo moto wa hati za enzi za ukoloni ambazo zilifichuliwa kwenye hifadhi katika Nyeri County Archives na wahifadhi wa Makumbusho ya Nyeri (Makumbusho ya Kitaifa ya Kenya). Faili hizi zilisemekana kuwa nakala, ambazo nakala zake zimewekwa katika Nairobi National Archive.

A burning pile of colonial-era documents that were uncovered in a stock in the Nyeri County Archives by archivists of the Nyeri Museum. These files were said to be duplicates, the originals of which are held at the Nairobi National Archive.

Nyeri Museum, Ruringu, Kenya,
22 Aprili 2015



Acts of Defiance

Max Pinckers

First published in Opinion, The Globe and Mail, Canada, 30 November 2024

“

I act this out, even in bitterness, to remind people who may not know what we went through, and at the same time, I am also doing it because I participated in removing the British from here. And now I have a government formed by the people of Kenya. And I am proud of that.”

– Peter Irungu Njuguna

In 2014, I was invited by the Archive of Modern Conflict (AMC) in London to work with their collections: a wunderkammer of mostly photographic material dealing with war, arranged on the shelves in order of acquisition. Amongst one of the many intriguing items is a folder containing British documents from 1950s colonial Kenya: remnants of a crumbling empire, Ministry of Information photographs, news articles, pamphlets, and wartime propaganda against “Mau Mau.” Propaganda sparked my curiosity as it is one of the most ideologically driven forms of communication, and my work as a speculative documentarian mostly revolves around questioning the relationships between photographs and truths.

At that time I had no idea what Mau Mau was, and only much later did I learn that not only was this a story of resistance and resilience by people against their oppressors, but also a tale of lost and surviving documents that would later undermine government institutions. I decided to travel to Kenya in 2015, where I had the honor of meeting some of the remaining Mau Mau freedom fighters, who had organized themselves into associations to claim back the land that was stolen from them. This became the starting point of a ten-year art research project into one of Britain’s most violent episodes in colonial history and the subsequent government conspiracy to cover up the evidence.

I returned several times to Kenya. The relationships with Mau Mau veterans grew stronger, and I sought dialogue with local museums, universities, historians, thinkers and other artists. Guided by the National Museums of Kenya, I was introduced to Elijah Kinyua Ngang’a (1933-2021), aka General Bahati, National Chairman of the Mau Mau War Veterans Association (MMWVA), who granted me his blessing to work with all the veterans of his organization. I presented them with the propaganda images I had collected in British archives and asked them how we might create counter-images, together, according to their terms, their memories. We decided to stage “demonstrations,”

scenes they arrange in which they reenact their personal experiences from the war as a response to the colonial photographs. A form of “imagined records” that attempt to fill in the missing gaps of fragmented historical archives.

The result is the 448-page book *State of Emergency - Harakati za Mau Mau kwa Haki, Usawa na Ardhi Yetu* (Mau Mau Movement for Justice, Equality and Our Land). Both in English and Swahili, it interweaves photographs of architectural and symbolic remnants from the past, mass grave sites, colonial archives, demonstrations, and the testimonies of people who experienced and survived the war themselves.

It is a collaborative attempt to shine a light on history’s blind spots. A way of rebuilding and reimagining possible futures of reparation and reconciliation aimed at healing – without erasing – the still gaping wounds of colonial violence, creating a restorative instrument of the photographic medium that makes it possible to tell their truths to the powerful. To remind King Charles III to officially address the claims of Mau Mau veterans, we sent him a copy of the book but it was returned to sender. We will continue to mail it back to Buckingham Palace until we receive a response.

“Demonstrations”

As a photographer, my challenge was to visualize the past by photographing the present with a future audience in mind. History and memory have a complicated relationship to photography. Rather than working only with provable facts, I departed from existing photographic archives, physical remnants from the past, and testimonies of people who experienced the war themselves. This eventually grew into a visual historiography in which ambiguity, uncertainty and speculation became inherent to the retelling of history.

Inspired by how the elders spontaneously gesticulate actions while

telling their stories – transforming their walking sticks into rifles, for example – I decided to focus my artistic approach around the “in-person reenactment,” or “demonstration,” in which people demonstrate personal experiences from their own past through bodily gestures. Here, the body bridges temporal and spatial gaps, connecting past events with present performances. The term “demonstration” not only means to show that something exists or is true by exhibiting evidence, it also means to protest against something or to express views on a political issue. I introduced the term “demonstration” instead of “reenactment” because the reenactment is usually associated with well-organized grand historical tableaux involving costumes, extras and some form of predetermined action plan usually defined by amateur historians and hobbyists, and is often not considered a form of individual self-expression. What distinguishes the demonstration from other forms of mimetic, illustrative reconstructions of the past is that the agency of what is being shown entirely lies with the performers themselves as reliable narrators. The document now becomes the individuals – their physical presence – and the performance of their imagination and recollections. This ambiguous agency of the protagonist-turned-actor also grants the performers the opportunity to treat the original events and experiences creatively, allowing them to transform their memories to resonate with the contemporary context.

These spontaneously improvised micro-performances are examples of “how it may have been,” emphasizing the act of the demonstration itself and the spectral aura of repeating what is historically unique. For instance, elderly veterans don’t wear the same clothing that they may have while living in the forest; instead, they appear in casual suits. Walking sticks can be seen along the fringes of scenes with many other anachronistic objects. But historical accuracy isn’t the point here. Rather, the

very fact that people, decades later, are able and motivated to physically perform what they’ve experienced is what resonates, especially together with a white man, directed at a Western audience.

The “pipeline”

The British occupied Kenya in 1885 and the first white settlers arrived in 1902. The fight for independence was initiated by the Kenya African Union, a political organization, and gained momentum in the early 1950s with the Kenya Land and Freedom Army, its militant counterpart that popularly became known as Mau Mau. As a homegrown resistance movement led by men who served in the British army during the Second World War, bound by a sacred oath and armed with rudimentary homemade guns and *pangas*, the Mau Mau forest fighters developed renowned guerrilla warfare tactics in the Aberdares and the forests around Mt. Kenya, to which superior British military power was ineffective.

The British Ministry of Information campaigned heavily to portray the movement as a gang of savage criminals, a myth that still very much lives in the imagination of Europeans today. One magazine in the AMC collection, published by the BBC in 1973, reads: “Mau Mau was more than just a ruthless form of nationalism. It was a frenzied plunge back into tribal savagery and its apostles were not political theorists but witch-doctors.” The events leading up to Britain’s exit from Kenya, and the way they would be remembered later, have become part of a carefully curated history by the well-oiled propaganda machine of imperial rule. Omitted from the official narrative is the Empire’s brutal response to the uprising that eventually forced them to leave.

In October 1952, the British colonial administration declared a state of emergency and was on the verge of one of

the bloodiest and most protracted wars of decolonization that lasted more than seven years. As one of the last remaining colonies, with India, Pakistan, Malaya and Palestine already lost, Britain scrambled to hold on and did so with a shocking amount of violence. Not only was a war being waged against colonial oppression, it was also a civil war between revolutionaries and Africans loyal to the British. Alongside the Europeans stood Kenyan “loyalists,” also known as Home Guards and members of the Kings African Rifles. This was a conflict that would create a complicated long-lasting division of land, wealth, and power that still remains unresolved today. “Blood, sweat and tears. Mau Mau won the war, the spectators stole the trophy,” rapped the hip-hop collective Ukoo Flani Mau Mau in their 2008 song Angalia Saa.

In the name of retaining colonial control and “rehabilitating” those in favor of an independent nation, the British state constructed a large-scale network of more than one hundred work camps, detention camps, torture centers and “emergency villages” throughout the country. The network of detention camps was formally known as the “pipeline,” designed in 1953 by Thomas Askwith, Commissioner for Community Development in Kenya’s colonial administration. The notion of a pipeline was used to denote the progression of individuals from their initial detention to their ultimate release. Some detainees would be moved through dozens of camps in an attempt to extract a confession of their connection to Mau Mau. Along with the pipeline, a rigorous villagization program was developed that placed over a million women and children in villages behind barbed wire fences, spiked trenches and watchtowers.

The Gikuyu, the largest ethnic group involved in the rebellion, continued to be systematically robbed of their land, much of which has not been returned to this day. According to the Kenya Human Rights

Commission an estimated 160,000 people were placed in camps and deprived of their land, and 90,000 were tortured or subject to violence in an attempt to “rehabilitate” them (popularly referred to as “screening” by its survivors as there is no word in Gikuyu or Kiswahili that captures the same meaning). One thousand and ninety people were hanged for Mau Mau-related crimes, executed in “mobile gallows” that traveled from one town to the next, the largest number of executions in any British colonial “emergency.” Kenya’s central region is littered with mass graves, and human bones are now emerging from the soil.

It was in January 1959, when a group of detainees at Hola camp refused to work, that camp guards brutally clubbed to death eleven men and maimed many others. When I listened to Samuel Wambugu Nyingi (1927-2020) telling me his story in 2019 about how he survived the massacre but was beaten unconscious and loaded into a truck with corpses, he demonstrated how he was forced to wear leg irons for nine years during detention by putting a chain around his ankles, which still bore open wounds.

The violence of the Hola massacre, and the attempts to cover it up, finally exposed the atrocities of the British colonial administration and sparked British public outcry. Later that year, a debate in the UK House of Commons led by Barbara Castle concluded that there was no justifiable reason to support the actions of the colonial administration in Kenya, which paved the way for independence.

“Mau Mau was a disease which has been eradicated and must never be remembered again,” wrote Jomo Kenyatta in 1963, shortly after becoming Kenya’s first president. “I have no intention of retaliating or looking backwards,” he famously proclaimed in his post-election speech, “we are going to forget the past and look forward to the future.” The post-independence

governments maintained the colonial-era law that it was illegal to speak or write about Mau Mau up to 2003. This collective amnesia has led many people in Kenya to forget where these camps were or even that they existed at all. Former Home Guards remained in power and colonial land divisions remained unchanged. Only when President Mwai Kibaki came into office were streets renamed after Mau Mau freedom fighters, and other nationalist heroes, and monuments erected in their honor. But Kenya’s freedom fighters still seem to be forgotten heroes, mostly living in poverty, deprived of their land and recognition. That veterans today are demonstrating the same scenes as what they experienced 70 years earlier speaks volumes about the postcolonial condition of the people who fought for freedom.

Under the rug

“If we are going to sin, we must sin quietly,” wrote the Attorney General Eric Griffith-Jones to Governor Sir Evelyn Baring in 1957. On the eve of independence, the colonial government erased most of its documentation relating to the emergency crisis in a process that later came to be known as “Operation Legacy.” Colonial officers were given meticulous instructions to either falsify, hide, or destroy any documentation that “might embarrass Her Majesty’s Government” or “might be used unethically by Ministers in the successor government.” It was even specified that documents “could only be destroyed by shredding or burning,” and when it is burnt “the waste should be reduced to ash and the ashes broken up.” On some occasions it was “permissible, as an alternative to destruction by fire, for documents to be packed in weighted crates and dumped in very deep and current-free water at maximum practicable distance from the coast.” The result is that there are relatively few documents available in Kenyan archives or museums, and the people who

experienced this war have almost no official records to prove what happened to them.

Today, former detention camp sites, prison cells and torture chambers have been repurposed into school classrooms or other community buildings. Despite the presence of so many camps in Kenya, and with thousands of people still bearing unhealed wounds, the history of detention isn't taught in schools. Equally so in Britain, the history of colonialism is not taught sufficiently, often presenting the country as the savior rather than an oppressor. Only recently has Mau Mau become part of national discourse in Kenya. It's used as a political tool during elections, and popular youth culture appropriates the movement's symbolism and iconography.

A bone to pick

On June 6, 2013, fifty years after Britain's exit from Kenya, the British Government announced that it had reached an out-of-court settlement with Leigh Day & Co., the Mau Mau War Veterans Association and the Kenya Human Rights Commission for compensation payment to 5,228 claimants for a total sum of £19.9 million, along with the construction of a memorial in Nairobi acknowledging the torture and ill-treatment inflicted during the colonial era (which is already crumbling apart). After the law firm took its commission of 30% for a total of close to £5 million, each claimant received about Sh348,000 (£2,000). Not even enough to "educate a child nor buy a piece of land," argued the late MMWVA Secretary General Mwai wa Muthigi. And so, the blood-stained hands of the British Government were washed clean. But it was a meaningless settlement for the majority. Thousands were left out of this case, which caused veteran associations to splinter apart into separate groups that now accuse each other of being imposters and collaborators (*State of Emergency* was made together with people excluded from the settlement).

After the lawsuit's success but shortcomings in only compensating a fraction of the people who underwent systematic, organized abuse, more cases were brought to the Royal Courts of Justice in London. In June 2016, Tandem Law filed a case representing 40,000 Kenyans who were allegedly mistreated, amongst them was General Bahati. In January 2023, MMWVA Embu filed a new lawsuit demanding Sh54 quadrillion in compensation (£364 trillion) from the British Government. However, they refuse to settle larger claims, arguing that the events took place too long ago.

By contrast, the British Government passed the Slavery Abolition Act in 1833, which outlawed slavery in some parts of the Empire, and took out one of the largest loans in history to finance the slave compensation package. A total of £20 million was borrowed (40% of its national budget), equivalent to around £300 billion today. But this money did not compensate the newly freed slaves, instead, it went exclusively to the owners of slaves, who were being compensated for the loss of what had, until then, been considered their property. The benefits of slave-owner compensation were passed down from generation to generation of Britain's elite, among them the former prime minister David Cameron. Up until 2015, several generations of British taxpayers' money was used to pay off this loan.

The Mau Mau compensation case set a global precedent for a former colonial power paying for the abuses it committed in the past. This led to numerous other colonial-era compensation claims, such as the class action lawsuit by Greek Cypriots in 2019. In 2021, Germany agreed to pay Namibia €1.1 billion for the genocide in the early 1900s as a gesture of reconciliation but not a legally binding reparation. But more surprisingly, the Mau Mau High Court Case brought to light the "migrated archives," a vast secret collection of some twenty thousand files and other records created

by the governments of 37 British colonial dependencies, known as the "Hanslope Disclosure."

Repatriate the archives!

In 2011, during the court hearings for compensation, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office was forced to admit that it had secret documents on its Kenyan operations. This led to the declassification of what became known as the "migrated archives." A key witness was Prof. David Anderson (author of the instrumental book *Histories of the Hanged: Britain's Dirty War in Kenya and the End of Empire*), who presented a memo from 1967 that detailed information about a cache of documents "retained" from Kenya in three hundred boxes taking up some 100 linear feet of shelving.

Over 1,500 government files that were secretly removed from Kenya just before independence were ordered to be released into the public domain and moved to The National Archives (TNA) between 2013 and 2014. They contained many unseen documents that described in detail the systemic torture of detainees during the emergency and the awareness of those abuses by British government officials in London and Nairobi, corroborating the allegations of widespread acts of murder and torture by the colonial authorities.

This repository of evidence led to the claimants winning their settlement in 2013. The "migrated archives" are just a small part of a much larger collection of documents that were either destroyed or have disappeared. However, a secret archive of an estimated 1.2 million files is still illegally withheld from the public at Her Majesty's Government Communications Centre in Hanslope Park, a highly-secured Foreign Office and MI6 outstation in which "batches of files are catalogued according to the length of shelf space they occupy, with six metres and two centimetres dedicated to files about Rhodesia, for example," and

"50 metres of files on Hong Kong, and 100.81 metres about the United States," reported journalist Ian Cobain. Before any of those files can be made public, they must be revised and checked manually, one by one, by state personnel in charge of the declassification process, who are mostly retired clerks and former colonial officers who work at a painstakingly slow pace. At this rate, clearing the collections could take another 340 years.

Although the archive is in the public domain, it is not accessible to everyone. The National Archive has not digitized the documents, and the government refuses to "repatriate" or make copies available to Kenyan archives. For someone living in Kenya, it would require a passport, a visa, air travel, a TNA membership card, and quite a significant budget to be able to see the files. I used my privilege to access as many institutional archives as I could. I reproduced over 1,200 photographs at TNA in high resolution, printed and bound them in folders as facsimiles, and brought them back to Kenya straight into the hands of Mau Mau veterans and camp survivors (now in the collection of the National Museums of Kenya). These reproductions formed the departure point for the creation of new documents, photographs and demonstrations in *State of Emergency*. Mau Mau veterans would study and discuss them during roundtable conversations. They would then decide which scenes they wanted to have photographed as counter-images to the archives.

Historian Riley Linebaugh pointed out that the movements of colonial records stood in stark contrast to the migration restrictions the UK Government placed on people upon decolonization, making clear the government's commitment to British xenophobia through the enactment of new border regimes. While the UK Government pushed people from former colonies away from its borders, it smuggled in the documents relating to those very people and their colonial past.

Unlearning and unplanting

The fact that so much important documentation and proof of colonial violence has been destroyed and hidden, has created gaps in history and impeded consequential reconciliation processes. This greatly suppressed oral history and community discussions around the subject and prevented an official restorative body of justice from healing the wounds of the past. *State of Emergency* is an attempt to find collaborative ways of working together and moving forward. Proceeds from the project are shared with the MMWVA to support their operations, and to gain access to larger institutional support. The long-term aim of this project is to look towards the future by garnering support for an ecological initiative managed by the MMWVA that aspires to restore and rehabilitate ancestral forest land by the veterans and their children. Land that has been exhausted by colonialists cutting down hardwood forests and planting exotic water-draining trees such as eucalyptus, cypress and pine. Land that urgently needs to be replenished with indigenous vegetation to fight the disastrous effects of climate change.

Today a new generation of revolutionaries is emerging in Kenya dubbed “Gen Z,” who are fighting against government corruption on the beat of Kendrick Lamar’s *Not Like Us* sampled by local rapper Sabi Wu in the movement’s anthem *Reject Hio Bill*, with the music video explicitly referencing Mau Mau iconography. One Mau Mau veteran told me “that Gen Z are the grandchildren of Mau Mau, fighting against corruption, police brutality, bad governance, and imperial presidencies.” We are not attempting to position our work as absolute truth, but to present it as stages in our learning process. We want to show that you don’t have to be an expert to take an interest in this history, participate in this work, or listen and record the testimonies of a vanishing generation of revolutionaries and witnesses of mass atrocities. Perhaps decolonization is not about experts

teaching non-experts, but in learning to unlearn what we have known to be true. To participate in a collective and collaborative attitude that attempts to transcend boundaries of time and authority, and to make common cause with the experiences of other people, without asserting egocentric, authoritative, or absolute truth claims. To inspire action and new forms of solidarity today based on the power and importance of yesterday’s struggles, and honoring the way they live on in the present while looking out for tomorrow.

To conclude with the words of historian Rose Miyonga: “Mau Mau was – and remains – a way of thinking about and negotiating Kenya’s past and the present, and of imagining the future, both individual and collective. In this way, Mau Mau was, and is still existential. It is about who we were, who we are and who, in the face of all adversity, we want to be.”

“My head keeps buzzing while reading material dug up from only recently declassified archives and looking at the re-enactments of long-kept memories that include gruesome torture; stories performed by elderly Mau Mau, some so fragile that they didn’t live long enough to see their book. *State of Emergency* was made in 10 years, not just to gather pieces of history but as the Kenyan anti-colonial fighters’ appeal for compensation and restitution. For the land, the freedom, and dignity colonial Britain took from them. The Mau Mau veterans, as co-authors, surely believed in the truth-finding and participatory power of photography. To an extent that makes me feel uneasy. But Max Pinckers tackled this. He surveyed his own photographer role and discussed it – with the veterans during participation, and subtly with the reader in this skillful multi-layered book. A never-before so intimately researched and monumental now-or-never record, relevant for anyone who believes history can empower the future.”

— [Viory Schellekens, photo-eye](#)

“They naturally tell a different story from the official British colonial view, which makes the book, although documenting a revolt that ended long ago, extremely relevant in the light of today’s conflicts in places like Ukraine, the Middle East, and of course in Africa.”

— [Gerry Badger, photo-eye](#)

“In *State of Emergency*, Pinckers use archives, memory recollection, and the retelling of past events to unpick the histories, the myths, the phony science, and the buried pasts of the most brutal period of British postwar colonial rule. In so doing, the book asks questions on who writes history, what is revealed and what is concealed, not least by the Mau Mau veterans who revisit their pasts in intricately staged photographs, and take a stand for compensation from the British government.”

— [Colin Pantall, photo-eye](#)

Geoffrey Nderitu (z. 1946) anawasilisha mifupa ya wapiganaji wa Mau Mau waliozikwa kwenye kaburi la pamoja katika ardhi yake. Kama mlinzi wao, wakati mwingine huchimbua mifupa hiyo ili kuwaonyesha watu wa jamii hiyo ili kuwaelimisha kuhusu historia ya mababu zao.

Geoffrey Nderitu (b. 1946) presents the bones of Mau Mau fighters that are buried in the mass grave on his land. As their custodian, he sometimes digs up the bones to show them to people from the community to educate them about the history of their ancestors.

Gititu, Kenya, 28 Agosti 2019



Hapa kulisimama moja ya miti mikubwa ya Mugumo nchini, yenye kipenyo cha takriban mita nne na nusu. Mhenga Mũgo (Chêgê wa Kibirũ) alitabiri kwamba kuanguka kwa mti huu mkubwa kungeashiria mwisho wa utawala wa kikoloni wa Waingereza nchini Kenya. Mnamo mwaka wa 1946, Waingereza waliweka ulinzi wa saa 24 kuzunguka mti huo na waliamua kuuimarisha kwa chuma na pete ya mviringo iliyojaa udongo ili kuzuia kuanguka. Muda mfupi kabla ya Kenya kuwa huru mnamo 1963, mti huo ulipigwa na radi, ukagawanyika sehemu mbili na kukauka. Uimarishaji wa mviringo bado unabaki leo, na mti mpya unaokua kutoka kwake.

Here stood one of the largest Mugumo trees in the country, with a diameter of about four and a half meters. The sage Mũgo (Chêgê wa Kibirũ) foretold that the fall of this giant fig tree would mark the end of British colonial rule in Kenya. In 1946, the British assigned 24-hour security around the tree and decided to fortify it with metal bars and a circular iron ring filled with soil to prevent it from falling. Shortly before Kenya became independent in 1963, the tree was struck by lightning, split into two parts and withered away. The circular reinforcement still remains today, with a new tree growing out of it.

Monumental Uhuru Gardens, Thika, Kenya, 15 April 2015



MAU MAU MOVEMENT FOR JUSTICE, EQUALITY AND OUR LAND

Max Pinckers et al.
2014 - 2024