Chapter 2: The Mau Mau Passbook

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Walk into the Nairobi National Museum,[1] perched atop Museum Hill, and one is confronted with an eclectic vivisection of Kenyan history: colonial-era ethnographic curios, taxidermized specimens of the country's wildlife, and a multicultural panoply of the nation's different ethnic groups. You will also encounter an entire room devoted to the history of British colonial rule and its bureaucratic and paper artifacts. Behind glass displays are tax receipts, a metal container that once held a *kipande*, and a sample passport from early independence. There is also a collection of faded buff and blue "Kikuyu, Embu & Meru pass books," some opened and mounted like butterflies on display, which were issued during the final, violent decade of colonial rule.

In October 1952, Kenya's Governor declared a state of emergency, following the spectacular assassinations of a white settler in her home and a senior Kikuyu chief in his car. Under enhanced Emergency powers, British and colonial authorities would deploy an array of counter-insurgency tactics—including mass detentions, forced villagization, pseudo-operations, and a large-scale propaganda and psychological campaign–to violently suppress a movement that came to popularly known as "Mau Mau."[2] Though historians disagree about the nature,

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[1] For more on the history of the Nairobi National Museum, see Hassan Arero, "Building the new Nairobi Museum: Perspectives on post-colonialism in an African national museum sector," in *Anthropologists, Indigenous Scholars and the Research Endeavour*, eds. Joy Hendry and Laara Fitznor, 157-161 (Routledge, 2012).

[2] Like the history of the movement itself, the etymology of the term "Mau Mau" is highly contested, with historians and Mau Mau leaders having put forward various meanings and explanations over the years. There is, however, a growing consensus that the term is likely a corruption of a Kikuyu term. As Elizabeth W. Williams explains: "The Mau Mau leader J. M. Kariuki suggested that it was a reworking of the term 'uma, uma' meaning 'go, go' and was meant to symbolize the demand that the Europeans leave Kenya. Another Mau Mau rebel, General China, explained that it was a corruption of the Gikuyu word for oath, 'mma.' The historian David Branch suggests that the word's etymology may describe a term for 'greedy eating'…" *Primitive Normativity: Race, Sexuality, and Temporality in Colonial Kenya* (Duke University Press, 2023), 143. See also Josiah Mwangi Kariuki, *"Mau Mau" Detainee: The Account by a Kenya African of His Experiences in Detention Camps, 1953–1960* (Oxford University Press, 1963), 23; and Waruhiu Itote, *Mau Mau in Action* (Transafrica Book Distributors, 1979), 167*;* Daniel Branch, *Defeating Mau Mau, Creating Kenya: Counterinsurgency, Civil War, and Decolonization* (Cambridge University Press, 2009), 23. Militants also referred to their movement as the Land and Freedom Army.

uniformity, and even nomenclature of this insurgency, "Mau Mau" is often understood as both an anti-colonial guerilla rebellion and an intra-ethnic civil war.[3]

As part of these Emergency measures, the colonial government introduced regulations that imposed passbooks on the Kikuyu, Embu, and Meru (KEM), who were seen as the wellspring of Mau Mau. Implemented in 1954, the passbook system, which bore resemblance to the formally abolished *kipande*, restricted the freedom of movement of a population seen as collectively suspect. Like the *vipande*, passbooks were aimed at controlling the movements of Africans outside their designated native reserves and regulating their ability to work. But the new system, which applied exclusively to those ethnic groups deemed a security threat,[4] further securitized this bottleneck. Passbooks were part of a broader counterinsurgency strategy aimed at screening "unidentifiable" urban residents, sieving the "loyal" from the "disloyal," restricting the mobility of inhabitants of Central Province, and isolating insurgents and their sympathizers from rights to the city. As I explain in this chapter, passbooks also became a vehicle for an ambitious, if short-lived, attempt at racialized social engineering—aimed at remaking Nairobi's residents into a "respectable" urban working class based on notions of stable, companionate marriage.

Since independence, the KEM passbook has become an important material and documentary artifact within the making of historical memories of Mau Mau. Muthoni G. Likimani's *Passbook Number F. 47927*—a semi-autobiographical, semi-fictionalized account of the war—is named after the author's own passbook number.[5] Historian Rose Miyonga describes how, sixty years later, Mau Mau survivors kept "tin trunk archives," personal records of the war,

[3] For the many, competing definitions of "Mau Mau," see John Lonsdale, "Mau Maus of the Mind: Making Mau Mau and Remaking Kenya," *The Journal of African History* 31:3 (1990): 393-421.

[4] In addition to the Kikuyu, Meru, and Embu, until 1957, colonial authorities also applied the passbook regulations to the Atharaka and Mbeere. A.E.T. Imbert, Director of Passbooks, "Passbook Control Department Annual Report 1957," 8, OP EST/1/397, KNA.

[5] Muthoni Likimani, *Passbook Number F.47927: Women & Mau Mau in Kenya* (London, 1985).

which often included their passbooks. "These passbooks," Miyonga explains, "turned into containers of memory." As one of her interlocutors, Sara Wanjiro, explained, "'I look at my passbook like a photograph.'"[6] According to Miyonga, these material and personal archives perform important memory work for veterans and their families, enabling them to "to counter contemporary national amnesia."[7]

As the late historians Bethwell A. Ogot and E. S. Atieno-Odhiambo have argued, the history of Mau Mau is repeatedly being made, remade, struggled over, and, in the process, selectively and often-willfully forgotten.[8] On the eve of independence, Kenya's first president, Jomo Kenyatta, described Mau Mau as a "disease" that "must never be remembered again."[9] Meanwhile, the Colonial Office, in coordination with departing local colonial authorities, destroyed or secretly whisked away thousands of archival files relating to imperial war crimes (some of which inform this chapter), whose very existence was only publicly disclosed during a 2011 British High Court case brought by Mau Mau veterans.[10] More recently, the war has been sanitized of its divisive past, and is today widely glorified as a collective, nationalist struggle that paved the way for independence. State-enforced projects of forgetting have long shaped the written, oral, and material histories of Mau Mau.

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[6] Rose Miyonga, "'We kept them to remember': tin trunk archives and the emotional history of the Mau Mau war," *History Workshop Journal* 96 (Autumn 2023): 104.

[7] *Ibid*.

[8] E.S. Atieno Odhiambo, "The production of history in Kenya: the Mau Mau debate," *Canadian Journal of African Studies* 25:2 (1991): 300-307; Bethwell A. Ogot, "Reviewed Works: *Histories of the Hanged: Britain's Dirty War in Kenya and the End of Empire* by David Anderson; *Britain's Gulag: The Brutal End of Empire in Kenya* by Caroline Elkins," *The Journal of African History,* 46:3 (2005): 493-505.

[9] Jomo Kenyatta, *Suffering Without Bitterness: The Founding of the Kenyan Nation* (Nairobi: Oxford University Press, 1968), 189.

[10] David M. Anderson, "Guilty secrets: Deceit, denial, and the discovery of Kenya's 'migrated archive'," *History Workshop Journal* 80: 1 (Autumn 2015): 142–160.

Agnotology, the scholarly study of ignorance, asks how and why we don't know what we don't know.[11] Today, the KEM passbook is often remembered as an emblem of colonial oppression and trauma. But confined to an ethno-nationalist past, its infrastructural legacies have been largely overlooked. According to Paul N. Edwards, information infrastructures produce long-term records, patterns, and institutional memories that outlive individual employees, and which can then become the "targets' for the design of new" political norms.[12] The KEM passbook system, though short-lived, set in place enduring infrastructural routines—from the use of interview panels composed of elder male authorities to security screenings by the Criminal Investigation Department[13] to fingerprint checks against criminal and suspect databases. By further constricting the bottleneck of identification, the passbook system also created a "conduit of licit and illicit flows…demanding, at once, circulation and security."[14] As will be detailed in the next chapter, these counterinsurgency techniques (and the culture of gatekeeping, forgery, and mistrust it generated) would be revived in the postcolonial era to vet "suspect citizens" during national ID registration. Yet the links between Mau Mau screening procedures and today's controversial vetting process have been widely disregarded.

This chapter (which can be read alongside chapters three and five) approaches the KEM passbook system as a restrictive, if fragile, infrastructure of counterinsurgency. It examines how contestations over the passbook contributed to wider struggles over rights to Nairobi, where security concerns merged with long-held authoritarian dreams of urban social engineering. This

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[11] Robert N. Proctor and Londa Schiebinger, *Agnotology: The Making and Unmaking of Ignorance* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008).

[12] Paul N. Edwards, "Knowledge infrastructures under siege: Climate data as memory, truce, and target," in *Data Politics: Worlds, Subjects, Rights*, eds. Didier Bigo, Engin Isin, and Evelyn Ruppert (Routledge, 2019), 24. Edwards draws upon Richard Nelson and Sidney G. Winter's theory of organizational routines and Linda Argote's arguments about machine automation.

[13] Now known as the Directorate of Criminal Investigations (DCI).

[14] Townsend Middleton, "Connective insecurities: chokepoint pragmatics at India's chicken neck," *Ethnos* 88:2 (2023): 206-7.

chapter adds to an already robust historiography on Mau Mau, but my secondary aim is to bring siloed histories together, destabilizing commonplace understandings of who is considered "central" and who "peripheral" to Kenyan history. Securitized techniques of identification routinized during the campaign against Mau Mau—a movement now indelibly associated with a nationalist hagiography—are used today to constrain access to citizenship, contributing to the marginalization of Kenya's Somali, Muslim, and borderland populations. To begin to uncover the entanglements between the nation's margins and its center, I turn now to the making of these infrastructural continuities.

Rights to the city

Segregation depends on circulation, dispossession on incorporation.[15] In so many ways, the passbook system was inseparable from a decades-long, unworkable effort to maintain Nairobi as a segregated, European enclave reliant on African migrant labor. From its very inception as an outpost on the Nairobi-Mombasa railway line, Nairobi was a site of struggle for protectorate and colonial authorities, who were unable to fully regulate African mobility into the city and residency within it. The *kipande* system was among a wide variety of mechanisms of control, alongside vagrancy laws, segregated zoning, and "slum clearance," aimed at managing the contradictions of building a "European" city in which Africans were "thought of as only temporary residents."[16] Though politically unthinkable and logistically impossible without the Emergency, the passbook system was as much an exceptional security measure as an outgrowth of the *kipande* system and the struggles it instantiated.

[15] See, for example, Nivi Manchanda and Sharri Plonski," "Between mobile corridors and immobilizing borders: race, fixity and friction in Palestine/Israel," *International Affairs* 98:1 (2022): 183-207.

[16] Anne Nangulu-Ayuku, "Politics, urban planning and population settlement: Nairobi, 1912-1916," *Journal of Third World Studies* 17:2 (2000): 173.

By the end of World War II, colonial authorities had largely accepted the unassailable reality of permanent African urban settlement. Nevertheless, rapid post-war urban growth also fueled European moral panic about crime, unemployment, and "detribalization."[17] By the early 1950s, white urban anxieties had come to center on the Kikuyu, by then the majority of Nairobi's African residents. Their demographic dominance was, in part, a simple effect of geographic proximity. (Kiambu District, reserved for Kikuyu settlement, abutted Nairobi). But Kikuyu were also being driven into the city by the very forces of land alienation that would contribute to the Mau Mau insurgency. "Between 1948 and 1952," notes David Anderson, "the displacement and 'repatriation' of Kikuyu squatter labour from the European farms, coupled with increasing land-hunger within Central province, provoked an influx of Kikuyu job-seekers into the Nairobi area."[18] In 1952, the year the Emergency was declared, the male African workforce of Nairobi had doubled from an estimated 30,000 in 1948 (over half of whom were Kikuyu) to 60,000, 75 per cent of whom were Kikuyu.[19]

Mau Mau fueled European hysteria about Nairobi's Kikuyu population, who were now imagined not only as potential criminals, but also as prospective "terrorists." The Emergency also enabled colonial authorities to impose long sought-after influx control measures, justified in the name of war-time security. These reached their apogee in an unprecedented and draconian cordon-and-search operation dubbed Operation Anvil.

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[17] A colonial fixation and fantasy, "detribalization" referred to the supposed threat posed by Africans who were no longer under the thumb of rural, "tribal" authority and were instead experiencing the destabilizing forces of "modernity."

[18] David M. Anderson, "Seven: The Battle for Dandora Swamp: Reconstructing the Mau Mau Land Freedom Army October 1954," in *Mau Mau & Nationhood: Arms, Authority and Narration*, eds. Atieno Odhiambo and John Lonsdale (James Currey: 2003), 159.

[19] *Ibid.*

Operation Anvil began before dawn on the 24th of April 1954. Every "road, track, and path in and out of Nairobi" was sealed.[20] For the next month, Africans were barred from passing security checkpoints cordoning the city. Five British battalions, one battalion of the Kings African Rifles, and hundreds of Kenyan policemen, police reserve officers, and home guards[21] systematically swept through the city, screening residents and conducting house-by-house searches. Around 24,000 people, well over half the city's K.E.M. population, were expelled from Nairobi, either repatriated to the Reserves or sent to detention camps.[22] A hallmark of General Erskine's counter-insurgency campaign, Operation Anvil (and the acceleration of forced villagization in the Reserves that followed) is widely credited with breaking the Land and Freedom Army, whose fighters were driven further into the forests of central Kenya.

Operation Anvil was also followed by smaller sweeps, like "Operation Broom."[23] For the next two years, "military control of the city was reasserted with vengeance,"[24] with nightly raids of African residences. Historian Luise White describes how residents of Pumwani, one of the oldest African settlements in Nairobi, were marched at gunpoint to Memorial Hall, where they "were made to lie face down, one hand holding their passes or, in the case of established Muslims, residence permits in the air, while their rooms were searched."[25]

The main goal of Operation Anvil was to break up the urban command structure of the Land and Freedom Army, depriving it of supplies and logistical support from Nairobi. But the

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[20] Huw C. Bennett, *Fighting the Mau Mau: The British army and counter-insurgency in the Kenya emergency* (Cambridge University Press, 2013), 24.

[21] A Kikuyu Home Guard was a member of the colonial government's paramilitary force, set up to combat Mau Mau.

[22] Bennett, *Fighting the Mau Mau,* 24-27. See also Anthony Clayton *Counter-Insurgency in Kenya, 1952-60: A Study of Military Operations against Mau Mau* (Transafrica Publishers, 1976).

[23] Bennett, *Fighting the Mau Mau,* 25.

[24] Luise White, *The Comforts of Home: Prostitution in Colonial Nairobi* (University of Chicago Press, 1990), 211.

[25] *Ibid.*

"subsidiary object," as the Secretary for Defence later argued: "was to break the stranglehold of K.E.M on employment in Nairobi."[26] As the Mayor of Nairobi explained: "It has been the policy to rid Nairobi of all K.E.M. not essential to the life of the City."[27]

The passbook infrastructure, introduced in the wake of Operation Anvil, was shaped by this dual objective: It was at once a security document and a form of urban influx control. Although applied to many areas, including Mombasa and white-owned farms in Central Province, passbooks were devised with Nairobi in mind. They allowed colonial authorities to authorize the selective re-entry of Kikuyu, Meru, and Embu workers into Nairobi while continuing to deport those deemed "undesirable." As I explain below, they also became an engine for an ambitious racial project of urban social engineering, one that strained against the limits of colonial bureaucratic power.

The passbook and the official mind

On April 27th, 1954, the colonial government issued the Emergency (Kikuyu, Embu and Meru Passbooks) regulations,[28] following a year of discussion within the colony's Emergency Committee. Unlike the older *kipande* system or the newer identity cards introduced under the 1947 Registration of Persons Ordinance, the now-ignominious passbook system only applied to Kikuyu, Meru, and Embu (and a few other related "tribes") but was extended to both men and women. Resembling an international passport, the booklet included biodata, such as one's name, tribe, age, occupation, and location. It also had a Polaroid photograph; the left and right

[26] Secret note by Secretary for Defence, "Re-Employment of Kikuyu, Embu and Meru in Nairobi," 27 September 1956, FCO 41/6125, UKNA (The National Archives, United Kingdom).
[27] "Kikuyu/Embu/Meru Women in the Residential Areas of Nairobi: Statement to the Press by his Workshop the Mayor (Councillor R.S. Alexander," 10 August 1954, FCO 141/6129, UKNA.
[28] Government Notice No. 640, "The Emergency (Kikuyu, Embu and Meru Passbooks) Regulations, 1954, *Kenya Official Gazette* Supplement No. 22, 27 April 1954, OP EST/1/945, KNA.

thumbprint of its holder; and several pages where colonial agents could enter movement permits, residence permits, and special endorsements. Possession of this "stiff-covered pre-printed book four inches wide and five inches deep containing 28 numbered pages"[29] determined whether one could legally move about, work, or live outside the Native Reserves of Central Province. The entire system was underpinned by a disorderly filing system and a consistently short-staffed bureaucracy, maintained by the newly established Passbook Control Office under the Ministry of African Affairs.

A polyvalent artifact, the passbook was shaped by both civilian and Emergency infrastructures. It was, in part, an extension of the bureaucratic infrastructure that had developed around the Central Registration Office and the fingerprint division of the Kenya Police. It was also an instantiation of tried-and-tested British counter-insurgency techniques. Though it is difficult to pinpoint specific transfers of technologies or techniques, by the mid-twentieth century, compulsory IDs and fingerprinting had become a familiar if exceptional tactic in times of emergency. In a "highly circulated"[30] 1927 article drawing comparisons between the Irish War of Independence and the South African War,[31] Major B. C. Denning had advocated for the use of ID cards as a means of population control during guerilla warfare.[32] Amidst the 1948 Arab-Israeli war, the Israel Police, having taken over the Fingerprint Bureau of the British Mandate for Palestine, petitioned the Ministry of Interior to collect fingerprints from all Israeli citizens—a proposal that, as historian Michelle Spektor notes, was ultimately rejected.[33] During the

[29] Ministry of African Affairs, Organisation and Methods Unit, Treasury, *Review of Passbook Control* (November 1957) 1, ABK/11/1, KNA.

[30] Montgomery McFate, *Pax Britannica: British Counterinsurgency in Northern Ireland, 1969-1982*. Revised text of PhD Thesis, Philosophy, Yale University, 1994 (Wilberforce Codex, 2014), 81.

[31] Also known as the Anglo-Irish War and Second Boer War, respectively.

[32] B. C. Denning, "Modern Problems of Guerrilla Warfare," *Army Quarterly* 13, 1927: 347-54.

[33] Michelle Spektor, "Biometric Statecraft, Policing, and Fingerprint Technology in Palestine/Israel, 1920-1948," presentation for the WISER Trust seminar, Wits Institute for Social and Economic Research, 21 October 2024.

Emergency in Malaya (1948–1960), whose execution influenced the counter-insurgency campaign in Kenya, the British colonial government also issued the population with identity cards.[34] These techniques of asymmetric warfare diffused widely, "resulting in imperial isomorphism,"[35] which would ultimately come to shape our post-9/11 geopolitical landscape. (On the battlefields of Iraq and Afghanistan, for example, US and British military personnel aspired to capture biometric data from the entire population, whether "friend" or "foe."[36])

But the most salient blueprint for Kenya's passbook regulations lay not in imperial combat zones, but rather in apartheid South Africa. There, then-Minister of Native Affairs H. F. Verwoerd was overseeing the establishment of the Bewysburo (Bureau of Proof) and the roll-out of the much-despised passbook system known to many South Africans simply as the Dompas (literally "dumb pass").[37] Like the architects of the Bewysburo, Kenya's Emergency Committee hoped to stem the "confusion" resulting from "the number and significance of the many permits and documents which the Kikuyu are now required to carry,"[38] thus simplifying the chaotic, haphazard, and insecure system of paperwork, IDs, and permissions that had evolved over the years.[39] Kenyan authorities were particularly concerned about police reports of widespread "forgeries" amongst Kikuyu pass holders.[40] While the K.E.M. passbook system would never

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[34] Leon Comber, *Malaya's secret police 1945-60: the role of the Special Branch in the Malayan Emergency* (Monash University Press, 2008), 38, 152.

[35] Laleh Khalili, "The location of Palestine in global counterinsurgencies," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 42:3 (2010): 415.

[36] Stefka Hristova, "Recognizing friend and foe: Biometrics, veridiction, and the Iraq War," *Surveillance & Society* 12: 4 (2014): 516-527.

[37] Keith Breckenridge, *Biometric state: The Global Politics of Identification and Surveillance in South Africa, 1850 to the Present* (Cambridge University Press, 2014), 138-163.

[38] Secret memorandum from Office of the member for African Affairs, "Passports for Kikuyu," 19 November 1953, FCO 141/6740, UKNA.

[39] "Documents Which African Must or May Carry," appendix C in *Report on The Investigation into the Issue of KEM Passbooks,* 23 October 1954, FCO 141/6132, UKNA; Office of the Member for Labour, "Documents Required to be Carried by Africans," 4 July 1953, FCO 141/6132, UKNA.

[40] L.W. Clark, East Africa Statistical Office, "Report on the Investigation into the Issue of the Kikuyu Embu and Meru Passbooks," 23 October 1954, p. 1, FCO 141/6132, UKNA.

reach the scale or scope of Verwoerd's enterprise, itself a "panoptic fantasy,"[41] South Africa and Southern Rhodesia[42] remained a constant paragon for authorities in the colony. Verwoerd's hubristic aspiration to build an informationally "complete" archive very likely inspired Kenya's development of life cards, which were kept in the archives of the Pass Book Control Office. On these cards, clerks would record "the complete Passbook entry history of applicants from issue to withdrawal and destruction," including deaths, marriages, and "notified convictions."[43] Despite concerns about "a resuscitation of the kipande issue," the Emergency Committee also toyed with the prospect of a passbook system that would apply to anyone in the colony, rather than exclusively the Kikuyu, Meru, and Embu.[44] When, at the end of 1954, the colonial government set up a working group to consider extending the passbook system to all adult African males in Nairobi and Mombasa,[45] officials took inspiration from South Africa's passbook and influx control systems.[46] The American Polaroid company—which provided the cameras and films for the apartheid-era passbooks—also supplied the Kenyan government, yet another indicator of the circuits of technical expertise that tied Kenya to South Africa.[47]

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[41] Breckenridge, *Biometric state*, 139.

[42] See, for example, P.W. Low, for Secretary for African Affairs, to Secretary for Local Government, Health and Housing, "Pass Regulations," 9 September 1954, OP EST/1/949, KNA. "I am informed that the native pass system operating in Salisbury, Southern Rhodesia, is under the control of the local government authorities," wrote Low: "I believe that we should get valuable guidance from an examination of this system."

[43] "Review of Passbook Control Hq. and investigation into whole organization of administrative machinery for control of Passbooks," 24 October 1957, 4, FCO 141/6134, UKNA.

[44] L.W. Clark, East Africa Statistical Office, "Report on the Investigation into the Issue of the Kikuyu Embu and Meru Passbooks," 23 October 1954, p. 1, FCO 141/6132, UKNA.

[45] Secret Letter from P. W. Low for Secretary for African Affairs to Commissioner of Police, "Passbooks," 5 October 1954, FCO 141/6137 UKNA; Office of the Minister for African Affairs, "Notes on the Extension of the Passbook System to Non Kikuyu, Embu and Meru," 8 October 1954, FCO 141/6137 UKNA.

[46] F. A. Passells, City African Affairs Officer, "Control of Influx of Africans into Urban Areas in the Union of South Africa," 3 September 1954, FCO 141/6137 UKNA.

[47] Ministry of African Affairs, Organisation and Methods Unit, Treasury, *Review of Passbook Control* (November 1957) 1, ABK/11/1, KNA. Michael McCanne, "When Polaroid Workers Fought Apartheid," *Dissent,* 14 August 2020, https://www.dissentmagazine.org/online_articles/when-polaroid-workers-fought-apartheid.

Apartheid (and its influx control measures) hung like a shadow over Kenya's passbook system, but so did the new logic of counterinsurgency: screening. Virtually the entire Kikuyu, Meru, and Embu population were at one point screened over the course of Emergency. Screening can refer to diverse processes of interrogation and classification, which often made liberal use of torture, beatings, and forced confessions. Although these "procedures were initially rather loosely coordinated," the "vast majority" taking "place outside the confines of the officially designated screening centres,"[48] the screening process is often associated with the notorious Mau Mau detention camps and Pipeline system. In the camps, detainees were interrogated and assigned an overtly racialized color classification based on their perceived threat level—ranging from black for the "hard core;" grey for those seen as sympathizers; and white for those deemed co-operative, the latter repatriated to their Reserves. Remaining detainees were then funneled through a system of work camps and detention centers with the goal of being "rehabilitated" from what colonial authorities had come to understand, in ethno-psychiatric terms, as a disease.[49]

Though often associated with the Pipeline, the logic of screening (and the dubious effort to distinguish the "loyal" from the "disloyal") pervaded Emergency regulations writ large, including the passbook system. While it varied over time and by district, passbook issuance almost always involved an element of interrogation. In her quasi-autobiographical, quasi-fictionalized book, Likimani describes the process of applying for a passbook in Nairobi, where the regulations were most strictly enforced: "To obtain a passbook in Nairobi one stood in a queue for hours, only to face a thorough and hostile interrogation."[50] Designated authorities, such

[48] Juliana Appiah, Roland Mireku Yeboah, and Akosua Asah-Asante, "Architecture of Denial: Imperial Violence, the Construction of Law and Historical Knowledge during the Mau Mau Uprising, 1952–1960," *African Journal of Legal Studies* 14:1 (2021): 15.

[49] See, for example, Caroline Elkins, "The struggle for Mau Mau rehabilitation in late colonial Kenya," *The International Journal of African Historical Studies* 33:1 (2000): 25-57.

[50] Muthoni Likimani, *Passbook Number F.47927: Women & Mau Mau in Kenya* (London, 1985), 40.

as employers or "a district commissioner, a location chief or even a well-known loyalist," would have to "vouch for your loyalties."[51] In rural areas, the Officer-in-Charge of a screening team was often authorized with issuing passbooks.[52] While applicants would need to evidence entitlement by, for example, showing proof of employment, urban residence, or marital status (more on this below), their success also hinged on their perceived loyalty and security risk.

This interrogation process was reinforced by background security and biometric checks. The Passbook Control Office—despite facing various administrative obstacles, staffing shortages, and backlogs—eventually introduced a series of cross-checking procedures. This included a simplified thumbprint check made "in the field" against a male applicant's registration certificate/identity card.[53] Applications, including full ten prints, were also sent to the C.I.D. for security screening. By 1956, this was extended to the Special Branch[54] due to concerns that "a simple C.I.D. check" might "bring to light the habitual criminal, but…not uncover the subversive element."[55] As the secretary of the War Council explained to an anxious European Legislative Council Member in 1955, before issuance of a passbook, "a check is carried out to make sure that the applicant has not been convicted of a Mau Mau offence, is not on the wanted persons list, has not previously been refused a passbook and that his fingerprints tally with those on his identity certificate."[56] These procedures, like all aspects of the passbook system, frequently broke down in practice and were the subject of persistent administrative anxiety. Yet they speak to broader efforts to securitize identification.

[51] *Ibid.*

[52] Letter from Secretary, War Council, to Hon. Humphrey Slade, MLC, 31 January 1955, OP/EST/1/949.

[53] Memorandum from F. D. Homan, Director of Passbooks, "Kikuyu, Embu, Meru-Passbooks," 9 June 1955, FCO 141/6136, UKNA.

[54] A.B. Tannahill, District Commissioner, Nairobi, to Officer-in-charge, Nairobi Extra-Provincial District, "Control Measures: K.E.M. Nairobi," 4 January 1956, FCO 41/6125, UKNA.

[55] "K.E.M. Passbooks—Recruitment of Additional Fingerprint Staff," Report by the Emergency Joint Staff, 28 April 1955, 2, OP EST/1/941, KNA.

[56] Letter from Secretary, War Council, to Hon. Humphrey Slade, MLC, 31 January 1955, OP/EST/1/949.

Influenced by different models and imperatives, the passbook was alternatively (and often simultaneously) thought of as a temporary counter-insurgency measure and a potentially permanent urban influx control infrastructure. Neither of these functions, however, could be fully realized. During its brief period of operability, the passbook system consistently tested the limits of colonial power.

Archival records, testament to the "official mind," provide insight into the everyday disorder of the passbook system, which was marked by iterative failures, endless battles against fraud and forgery, and incremental reform. The regulations required continual amendment.[57] The Passbook Control Office, which was set up hastily, under Emergency pressure, faced constant scrutiny. Early on, in a damning investigation, L.W. Clarke, a member of the East Africa Statistical Office tasked with auditing the office, warned that "most urgent action is necessary if the whole organisation is not to become useless" or "so confused, as to be of no practice security value."[58] European and Indian employers and administrators, in turn, found the passbook system cumbersome and unruly. In 1955, the Security Director for Nairobi's New Stanley Hotel, complaining about "blatant inaccuracies" in the employment registry supplied by the Pass Book Control Office, lamented that the passbook system "like most other administrative measures introduced to control the African, breaks down in practice."[59] Even at the height of its administrative capacity, empowered by Emergency Law, the late colonial regime was a disorderly, imperfect surveillance state.

[57] See OP/EST/1/945, KNA.

[58] Preliminary Report on the Investigation into the Issue of Passbooks Carried Out by Mr. L.W. Clarke, 7 October 1954, FCO 141/6132, UKNA. See also his subsequent report: "Report on the Investigation into the Issue of the Kikuyu Embu and Meru Passbooks," 23 October 1954, FCO 141/6132, UKNA. Clarke's reports also spurred a hurried effort to account for misplaced passbooks, out of concern that they would fall into the hands of Mau Mau. Secret Letter from P.W. Low, for Secretary for African Affairs, to Passbook Control Officer, "Security and Loss of Passbooks," 26 October 1954, FCO 41/6125, UKNA.

[59] Extract from letter dated 19th January 1955 from the Security Office of Block Hotels Ltd. to the Managing Director, appended to letter from P.W. Low, Secretary for African Affairs, to the Director of Passbooks, 16 February 1955, OP/EST/1/949, KNA.

Colonial administrative limitations, so evident in the archival record, nevertheless sit at odds with the stories and memoirs of Mau Mau veterans and survivors, many of whom recall passbooks as an authoritarian system of control. According to Likimani, the passbook "gave you no real liberties…Rather it permitted the government to supervise you more closely," subjecting its holder to array of restrictive rules:

> You could not, as a passbook holder, spend a night in anyone's home but you own without official approval. Some locations in Nairobi such as Kaloleni and Ziwani were off-limits to you; you could not live or visit there without written authority. After any new turmoil, you were subject to a curfew from 6pm to 6am during which time you could not leave your house even to use the communal facilities.[60]

These differing perspectives can be partially reconciled. Passbook regulations may have consistently failed to meet state objectives, serving as an inadequate screening method that underscored the gaps and breaches within the colonial infrastructure of identification. But they succeeded, throughout the 1950s, in restricting access to urban areas like Nairobi and Mombasa. Even in its breakdowns and "failures,"[61] passbooks changed urban life in Kenya. Creating a securitized bottleneck, the passbook system altered the gender and ethnic fabric of Nairobi, shifting power further into the hands of European employers, police officers, Home Guards, and men, and denying many long-time residents rights to the city.

Gendered trouble

The passbook system, and the controls it maintained, were more than simply a security infrastructure; it was also part of a grand, authoritarian, and short-lived effort to remake the African urban worker and his family. Mau Mau was widely understood in European circles as a

[60] Likimani, *Passbook Number F.47927*, 41.

[61] For more on the analytical purchase of infrastructural failure, see Sarah Green, "When Infrastructures Fail: An Ethnographic Note in the Middle of an Aegean Crisis," in *Infrastructures and Social Complexity: A Companion*, eds. Penelope Harvey, Casper Jensen, and Atsuro Morita, 271-83 (London: Routledge, 2017).

backlash against modernity, a result of Africans having been "rushed" too quickly into modernity. The solution, according to many high-ranking colonial officials, lay in a state-managed project "to cull a respectable working class from the laboring poor."[62]

To achieve this feat of racialized social engineering, the government considered extending the passbook system to all African working men in Nairobi and Mombasa. As the Minister for African Affairs explained, "the Emergency, and in particular the events leading up to Operation Anvil, had shown that there was an urgent need for the establishment, as a permanency, of closer measures of control over Africans in the city."[63] African men would be allowed to live in the city only if they were identifiable, lived in "proper accommodation, which in most cases amounts to a receipt from the Nairobi City Council for the rent of a quarter,"[64] and were formally employed: "Put in the briefest possible terms, it was felt that permission to live in the city should be confined to persons whose identity was established, whose engagement has been authorized and who were housed at a standard approved by the Labour Department."[65]

Underlying the remaking of the African urban man was a new vision of the African woman. Early on, the Emergency Committee decided that the passbook system would apply to K.E.M. women, who were seen not only as a potential security risk but also as a prospective stabilizing force for male laborers. The application of biometric identification to women, accompanied by a renewed emphasis on companionate marriage, broke with longstanding patterns of urban informality.

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[62] Luise White, "Separating the men from the boys: constructions of gender, sexuality, and terrorism in Central Kenya, 1939-1959," *The International Journal of African Historical Studies* 23: 1 (1990): 9.

[63] "Control of Africans in Nairobi," Secret Memorandum by the Minister for African Affairs, 5 November 1954, FCO 141/6137.

[64] A.C. Small, District Commissioner, Nairobi, to Officer-in-Charge, Nairobi Extra-Provincial District, 9 September 1954, OP EST/1/949, KNA.

[65] "Control of Africans in Nairobi," Secret Memorandum by the Minister for African Affairs, 5 November 1954, FCO 141/6137.

Nairobi, from its very establishment,[66] depended on the often-invisibilized labor of African women. Despite gender-restrictive colonial labor and influx control measures, for decades, African women had moved to the city illicitly, where they worked as beer brewers, hawkers, vegetable sellers, and sex workers. "While British colonialists sought to make the capital a city of male migrants,"[67] notes Luise White, they could do little to uproot these feminized forms of non-wage labor.

In her groundbreaking book, *Comforts of Home*, White explores how sex work[68] was a means for women in Nairobi to accumulate financial and social capital, secure rights to the city (and sometimes also property and usufruct rights), and autonomy from rural patriarchs. Sex work was also a form of social reproduction that underpinned the segregated colonial migrant labor system. By providing food, bathing water, and temporary accommodations in addition to sex and companionship, Nairobi's sex workers (many of whom were also landlords) offered indispensable domestic services to the city's African male laborers (who were often barred from bringing their families with them) while also contributing financially to extended and often-impoverished rural households.

Until the advent of the passbook system, African women—being part of the city's illicit yet often tacitly tolerated urban economy—were largely excluded from the infrastructures of biometric identification. Although formally employed women were given state-issued IDs (such as the "red book" issued to domestic servants[69]), most of Nairobi's female residents remained "unidentified." Nevertheless, many women were bureaucratically recorded and known to

[66] Diana Jeater, "African Women in Colonial Settler Towns in East and Southern Africa," in *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of African History*, ed. Thomas Spear (Oxford University Press, 2020).

[67] White, *Comforts of Home*, 1.

[68] White uses the term prostitute as she finds the term "sex worker" too reductive for women who provided numerous non-sexual services to urban men. However, as many sex workers reject the stigmatizing term "prostitute," I have not followed her lead.

[69] For more on the "red book," see the Registration of Domestic Servants Ordinance of 1929.

colonial authorities and police—emblematic of their "formal informality." The passbook system, however, shifted this terrain of il/legality for Kikuyu, Meru, and Embu women.

Colonial systems of knowledge, and the archival documents that are testament to them, not only construct, but also presuppose, certain objects of knowledge.[70] K.E.M. women appear in the archival record at this time as objects of colonial social engineering; they are defined in relation the ostensible stability of married, housed domestic life—the hallmark of a respectable working class. The War Council, which divided self-employed and unemployed women into "known" or "potential" security risks,[71] deemed virtually all unattached women and their children in Nairobi ineligible for passbooks. To obtain a passbook, women had to "fit the colonial definition of a proper woman"[72] by either being legitimately employed or being the wife of a passbook holder and having "suitable accommodation"[73] in the city.

Meanwhile, sex workers writ large were treated as in league with Mau Mau. Shortly after the regulations were put into force, the Minister for African Affairs issued guidance stating that women who were: "Known security risks; e.g. prostitutes, suspected Mau Mau couriers, hawkers form the reserves and unauthorized visitors to the city" should be refused passbooks and deported from the city.[74] The moral panic about Nairobi's sex workers fed into broader colonial narratives, which saw Mau Mau as a form of "detribalization" marked by socio-sexual deviancy. Pornographic rumors of oathing rituals, many featuring men consuming menstrual blood and semen, were proffered as evidence that Mau Mau adherents had broken with the "traditional"

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[70] Sean Hanretta, *Islam and Social Change in French West Africa: History of an Emancipatory Community* (Cambridge University Press, 2009), 123.

[71] "Extracts from the 51st Meeting of the War Council Held on 1st October, 1954," 1, FCO 41/6125, UKNA.

[72] Jean O'Barr, "Introductory Essay," in Likimani, *Passbook Number F.47927*, 21.

[73] "Extracts from the 51st Meeting of the War Council Held on 1st October, 1954," 1, FCO 41/6125, UKNA.

[74] "Issue of Passbooks to Kikuyu, Embu and Meru in Nairobi: Memorandum by the Minister for African Affairs," 29 September 1954, FCO 41/6125, UKNA.

conservatism of African life. Urban sex workers were seen as one of many vectors of male contamination and contagion.[75]

In defining women and their rights to the city in relation to men, colonial authorities spurred a move towards co-habitation and the formalization of relationships. "Mau Mau," notes White, "transformed prostitution and legal sexual relations in Nairobi… encourage[ing] marriage in direct and indirect ways."[76] Many women became "passbook wives," living with men performatively or in some semblance of a monogamous relationship to secure their rights to the city. But this inevitably generated contestation over what defined a "wife."

Colonial archives speak to a certain degree of willful blindness, if not acceptance, about the domestic contortions that predictably followed enforcement of the passbook regulations. In August 1954, the Minister of African Affairs noted that passbooks could "be issued to genuine wives or accepted 'keeps'" providing they had "satisfactory housing," a "category" that "does not include Kikuyu prostitutes."[77] This dictate presupposed a neat distinction between a "genuine" wife or girlfriend and a "prostitute." Authorities tasked with issuing passbooks, however, quickly found themselves enmeshed in complex domestic rearrangements, sometimes having to make determinations over what constituted a legitimate relationship. A.E.T. Imbert, who would later become head of the Passbook Control Office, complained in 1954 that "women, generally, are proving a tougher proposition than the men and there appears to be no limit to their wangles to get a Passbook."[78] In the same month, the Minister of Defense wrote to the Minister for African Affairs to report rumors that "a number of KEM males employed in Nairobi were

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[75] For more on colonial ideas of African sexuality, see Elizabeth W. Williams, *Primitive Normativity: Race, Sexuality, and Temporality in Colonial Kenya* (Duke University Press, 2023).

[76] White, *The Comforts of Home,* 207.

[77] Minister of African Affairs, "Issue of Passbooks in Nairobi," 9 August 1954, FCO 141/6129.

[78] A.E.T. Imbert, Passbook Control Officer, to A.C.C. Swann, Provincial Commissioner, Rift Valley Province, 16 August 1954, FCO 141/6740, UKNA.

now contracting marriages in the Reserves." He attributed these domestic arrangements not to malfeasant Mau Mau activities, but rather to the new restrictions on urban residency: "it seemed more likely that a reserve of wives was being established which could lawfully kept in Nairobi under the Passbook Regulations."[79]

Rare insights into the experiences of Nairobi's "passbook wives" can be found on the pages of *Passbook Number F. 47927*. Likimani's story, though informed by her own life experience and her strong narrative voice, is also a bricolage: it is based on the accounts of friends, family, and acquittances, including her sister and former housemaid. In one chapter, Likimani tells a moralizing and semi-fictional tale of three "wives living like widows"[80] in the African reserves. Separated from their husbands and forced into communal labor, Nduta, Nyakio, and Njeri decide to make a dangerous, illicit trek to Nairobi. Once in the city, each woman eventually learns about the fate of their respective husbands: one has been detained, another killed, and a third (Maina) has been living with a "prostitute." New to Nairobi, the women seek council from Wanjira, a vegetable seller and longstanding resident, who has been forced into marrying a Home Guard. She explains the passbook system to the newcomers: "This law has made many women move into men's houses and pretend to be their wives; now many prostitutes live with men as their wives. These men sign that these prostitutes are legal wives…Many legal wives have no chance to obtain their passbooks."[81]

In Likamani's didactic and moralistic tale, there are well-defined protagonists and antagonists: collaborators versus Mau Mau supporters; prostitutes versus devoted wives. The sex worker living with Maina is described as unfaithful, quarrelsome, and alcoholic, while his wife

[79] Letter from Minister for Defence to the Minister for African Affairs, 14 August 1954, OP/EST/1/949, KNA.
[80] Likimani*, Passbook Number F. 47927*, 93.
[81] *Ibid,* 108.

(with whom he eventually reunites) is portrayed as self-sacrificing and loyal. Likamani paints a world turned upside down, in which prostitutes are given rights to the city while "legitimate wives" are threatened with detention and deportation. Despite the conservative overtones to her story, Likamani's work speaks to and dramatizes the diverse strategies of Kikuyu, Meru, and Embu women navigating Emergency law. She also highlights how the passbook regulations exacerbated divides between urban and rural women. As her book suggests, some women became estranged from their husbands, others were forced into undesirable marriages, while still others managed to negotiate workable arrangements with urban men.

The passbook system altered social and sexual relationships in Nairobi, shifting power into the hands of men by making women their "dependents." But there were also tangible limits to colonial efforts at social engineering. During the draconian early years of the emergency, colonial authorities were able carry out large-scale removals, surround Nairobi's African locations with barbed wire, and demolish many of the city's so-called slums, including Mathare, Buruburu, and Kariobangi (all of which were later rebuilt by African men and women).[82] But such heavy-handed security measures could only be sustained for so long. In 1954, the Nairobi District Emergency Committee "recommended the removal…of K.E.M. women and children who did not qualify for passbooks."[83] Yet, even as the colonial regime began to plan these evictions,[84] their authoritarian ambitions were tempered by concerns about administrative incapacity and fears that large-scale, forced removals of women and children would lead to strikes and civil disobedience.[85] Women were not so easily uprooted from the life of the city. As

[82] White, *Comforts of Home,* 209.

[83] Letter from Ministry for African Affairs to Officer-in-Charge, Nairobi Extra-Provincial District, "City Council K.E.M. Employees," 20 September 1954, FCO 141/6131, UKNA.

[84] Memorandum, Minister for African Affairs, 18 August 1954, FCO 141/6131, UKNA.

[85] P.W. Low, for Secretary for African Affairs, to Officer-in-Charge, Nairobi Extra-Provincial District, "Issue of Passbooks to K.E.M. Women," 16 September 1954, FCO 141/6131, UKNA; and "Issue of Passbooks to Kikuyu, Embu and Meru in Nairobi: Memorandum by the Minister for African Affairs," 29 September 1954, FCO 41/6125,

Luise White explains, deploying an infrastructural metaphor, colonial states "could build walls and drains, but no lasting bonds."[86]

The breakdown of the passbook infrastructure

Archival records—a selective, depersonalized "montage of fragments"[87] divided between Nairobi and London (testament to the British state's unsuccessful efforts to "anaesthetise the past")[88]—reveal a rift between grand administrative plans and everyday, operative obstacles. Behind the passbook scheme lay a utopian desire for standardization, universal registration, centralization, and the hope that a single document could finally bring order to the colony's chaotic, haphazard, and insecure system of passes, identity cards, work permits, and employment records—a fantasy of control that would be revived decades later, in digitized form.

But such "panoptic-like...delusions," as historian Jacob Dlamini reminds use, should not be taken "as givens."[89] In fact, government archives, as Dlamini writes of apartheid South Africa, continually "expose the chasm between what the state thought it could do and what it was in fact able to do."[90] In practice, the passbook system would frequently break down, exhausting administrative capacity, creating new reams of paperwork, and often duplicating the efforts of registration officers. Then, as now, this new infrastructure generated frictions between different governmental departments, including the Police, the C.I.D., the War Council, the Provisional and District administrations, the Central Registration Office under the Labour Department, and the

UKNA.

[86] White, Comforts of Home, 223.

[87] Achille Mbembe, "The Power of the Archive and its Limits," in *Refiguring the archive*, ed. Carolyn Hamilton (Dordrecht: Springer Netherlands, 2002), 21.

[88] *Ibid*, 23.

[89] Jacob Dlamini, *The Terrorist Album: Apartheid's Insurgents, Collaborators, and the Security Police* (Harvard University Press, 2020), 13.

[90] *Ibid,* 3.

newly formed Passbook Control Office. In addition, there was no clear administrative consensus over the passbook's purpose. Primarily understood as a security document, it was also envisioned as an identity document, an employment record, a means of urban influx control, and, briefly, even a tax log.[91] At times, the passbook was also thought of as a marker of loyalty (as select loyalist elites were sometimes given special passbooks or endorsements within their passbooks.)[92]

While the Emergency would stay in effect until early 1960 (three years before formal independence), colonial authorities had largely reasserted control over central Kenya by 1955—though not without the assistance of ten thousand British troops and a massive detention system. As the insurgency died down, colonial officials increasingly questioned the utility and economy of the passbook system. By 1957, 236,827 passbooks had been issued since the regulations were first instituted[93] at a significant cost of over £70,000 per annum.[94] In that year, colonial officials began to plan for the system's dissolution, with the Permanent Secretary for African Affairs writing that he was "anxious to disband the Passbook Control Headquarters in Nairobi as soon as possible."[95]

The decision to shutter passbook control did not come without internal dissent. In the twilight years of the passbook system, its director, A.E.T. Imbert, would complain of escalating cases of forgery and fraud. In December 1958, he wrote to the Permanent Secretary for African Affairs to request amendments to the passbook regulations so that those carrying forged

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[91] Initially, the passbook was envisioned as a document that would apply "to any or all persons in the Colony" and would include "tax particulars," a feature that was later discarded. L.W. Clark, East Africa Statistical Office, "Report on the Investigation into the Issue of the Kikuyu Embu and Meru Passbooks," 23 October 1954, p. 2, FCO 141/6132, UKNA.

[92] J.B. Carson, Ag. African Courts Officer, "Loyalists' Passbooks," 9 September 1957, OP EST/1/949, KNA.

[93] A.E.T. Imbert, Director of Passbooks, *Passbook Control Department: Annual Report 1957*, p. 2 OP/EST/1/397.

[94] A.B. Tannahill, District Commissioner, Nairobi to the Officer-in-charge, Nairobi Extra Provincial District, "Passbook Control," 4 January 1957, FCO 41/6125.

[95] Memorandum, L.F.G. Pritchard, Ag. Secretary for African Affairs, 1 April 1957, FCO/141/6134, UKNA.

movement and residency permits could be more effectively prosecuted: "For some time, cases of forgeries in Passbooks have been mounting steadily; they are now almost an epidemic…"[96] His persistent appeals, nonetheless, went unheeded.[97] Even as high-raking colonial officials began to divest from the costly and burdensome passbook system, local officials, including district and provincial commissioners, expressed anxieties about the supposed breakdown of order this would attend. Many raised concerns that the lifting of emergency regulations would lead to the uncontrolled migration of Africans into Nairobi, Mombasa, and the Rift Valley Province.[98]

In 1959, only five short years since its inception, the passbook infrastructure was dismantled.[99] Over the course of the year, in a process dubbed "Operation Finis," the colonial regime gradually relaxed and phased out the passbook regulations.[100] The passbook office was formally shuttered on the 29th of February 1960,[101] its archives folded into the Central Registration Office. What became of this archival debris, the clerical backend of the passbook infrastructure, a layer within the palimpsest of the colonial bureaucracy, remains unknown to the public historian.

Anthropologist Michael Degani notes a "latent structuralism" within infrastructural studies: "With its healthy suspicion of closure, a broadly actor network-inspired branch of

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[96] A.E.T. Imbert, Director of Passbooks, to the Permanent Secretary for African Affairs, "Passbook Control—Amendments to Passbook Regulations," 23 December 1958, OP EST/1/945, KNA.

[97] A.E.T. Imbert, Director of Passbooks, to the Permanent Secretary for African Affairs, "Passbook Control: Amendments to Passbook Regulations," 31 March 1959, OP EST/1/945, KNA.

[98] "Review of Passbook Control HQ and investigation into the whole organisation of administrative machinery for control of Passbooks," 24 October 1957, 1, FCO 141/6134, UKNA; Provincial Commissioner, Rift Valley Province, to the Permanent Secretary for African Affairs, "Control of Movement of Africans," 25 August 1959, FCO 41/6125, UKNA; Provincial Commissioner, Rift Valley Province, to the Permanent Secretary for African Affairs, "Control of Entry of K.E.M. into Rift Valley," 26 August 1959, FCO 41/6125, UKNA; "Note by the Permanent Secretary for African Affairs on the Control of Movement After the Ending of the Emergency," 1959, FCO 41/6125, UKNA.

[99] *Passbook Control Department: Annual Report 1959,* 23 February 1960, OP/EST/1/397.

[100] A.E.T. Imbert, Director of Passbooks, to Permanent Secretary for African Affairs, "Abrogation of Passboook Regulation and Closure of Passbook Control Department: 'Operation Finis,'" 30 July 1959, FCO 141/6134, UKNA.

[101] A.E.T. Imbert, Director of Passbooks, to Permanent Secretary for African Affairs, "Passbook Control-Closure of Department," 4 February 1960 OP EST/1/940, KNA.

infrastructure studies has cultivated an appetite for tracing out the proliferation of more-than-human assemblages," which persist and resist amidst change, "addition and 'accretion.'"[102] But an over-emphasis on hybridization, continuity amidst change, and reconstruction atop debris can easily appear "auto-limitlessness," as Marilyn Strathern reminds us.[103] Once laid down, informational and biometric infrastructures often leave lasting institutional memories, legal precedents, technical routines, and path dependencies. Nevertheless, infrastructures, like networks, can be cut, dismantled, or simply fade into irrelevance.[104]

Colonial identification systems—consisting of file cabinets, clerks, paper forms, ink pads, stamps, cameras, printing machines, institutional memory, and brick-and-mortar registration offices—would become the rootstock upon which postcolonial systems were grafted.[105] But political independence would also truncate many bureaucratic practices, political rationalities, and networks of expertise, leading to institutional forgetting. In the final years of colonial rule, movement controls were eased or lifted in most parts of the country, with the notable exception of the Northern Frontier District (NFD), which would become a battleground at independence. With decolonization on the horizon, colonial authorities abandoned their authoritarian dreams of reengineering the city along racial and ethnic lines. Under the rule of Jomo Kenyatta, Kenya's first president, state-issued identity cards did not fade into obsolescence; but they did diminish in significance. It was only when the postcolonial state became reoccupied with the "unidentifiable"—this time in the guise of the foreigner, the "*shifta*" (bandit), the "poacher," and

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[102] Michael Degani *The City Electric: Infrastructure and Ingenuity in Postsocialist Tanzania* (Duke University Press, 2022), 11.

[103] Marilyn Strathern, "Cutting the network," *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 2:3 (1996): 522.

[104] *Ibid.*

[105] Nikhil Anand, "Accretion," Society for Cultural Anthropology, *Fieldsights: Theorizing the Contemporary,* series: The Infrastructure Toolbox, 24 September 2015, https://www.culanth.org/fieldsights/accretion.

later the "terrorist"—that these infrastructural continuities come into focus again, as an object of historical analysis.

Conclusion: Temporal knots

Though only briefly enforced and riddled with administrative failures, passbooks (and the movement passes and residence permits they enclosed) were a key infrastructure of counterinsurgency in the late colonial era. So much so that they featured in the making of Mau Mau's counter-bureaucracy. Upon joining the Land and Freedom Army, notes anthropologist James Smith, men and women "ritually burned their identity cards...thereby severing all ties to the bureaucratized colonial arena that they would later reproduce, in all its minute forms, in the forest."[106] The insurgents' literate leadership, confined to the forests, produced stamps, letterheads, meeting minutes, and movement passes—the trappings of a proto-state in waiting.

The defeat of Mau Mau and the end of the Emergency may have done away with the passbook system; but this short-lived infrastructure set down securitized routines and sensibilities that had enduring effects on the postcolonial Kenyan state. As the next chapter details, these bureaucratic traditions would be made and remade as Kenya moved from colony to postcolony. In the late 1980s, the postcolonial Kenya state introduced screening procedures and a pink screening card for the Somali population. By the mid 1990s, the government had institutionalized vetting procedures for Muslims, borderland populations, and any ethnic

[106] James H. Smith, "Njama's supper: The consumption and use of literary potency by Mau Mau insurgents in colonial Kenya," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 40: 3 (1998): 533. As J. Kiboi Muriithi, a former fighter, recounts in this autobiography, "A tradition had grown-up—the identity card and all government documents of every new forest-fighter were burnt. Soon there was a large heap of official papers, mine among them. The blaze they made could be seen three miles away" Kiboi Murithi with Peter Ndoria, *War in the Forest* (East African Publishing House, 1971), 17.

minority deemed "non-indigenous." To this day, these populations are subjected to heightened evidentiary requirements when applying for a national ID (see chapters five and chapter six).

In so many ways, the legacy of Emergency passbook regulations, screening policies, and influx controls hide in plain sight in Kenya today. Like the passbook regulations of the 1950s, contemporary vetting procedures empower elder male authorities, who have become the arbiter of legitimate relationships and families. Much like the Kikuyu, Embu, and Meru women who arranged "passbook marriages," those subjected to vetting often create "fictive" kinship ties to satisfy the vetting committees and chiefs charged with determining their citizenship (more on this in chapter five). Postcolonial vetting procedures have also included fingerprint checks, security screenings, and intensive interviews before officialdom, not unlike the procedures enforced by the Passbook Control Office. Access to Nairobi is also restricted through police and military checkpoints that crisscross northern Kenya and movement passes that are imposed on refugees and asylum seekers.

Mau Mau lives on in today's infrastructures of identification. Yet the passbook system and today's vetting procedures are rarely talked about in the same breath, as a set of related, inherited techniques.

This elision is a byproduct of Kenya's fragmented nationalist history. Writing about the contested history of Mau Mau over two decades ago, Atieno Odhiambo remarked that the story of Kenyan nationalism is tied up with the question of who gets to enjoy (or "eat") the "fruits" of independence and, indeed, the very meaning of *uhuru*. He also argued that decolonization cannot be reduced to Mau Mau: "What so far has not been documented fully is the social struggle of the non-winners," from the "historical nations" of the Somali to the "resistances of the Oromo people" to the "nationalism of the partitioned Maasai," which are so often "reduced to a border

problem."[107] In the decades since Atieno-Odhiambo wrote those words, many scholars, popular historians, and commentators have pluralized the history of Kenyan decolonization, resisting the tendency towards ethnic siloes, and highlighting the political struggle of women, militants, pastoralists, farmers, church goers, minority groups, and bureaucrats. Still, a sanitized version of "Mau Mau" often takes center stage in popular narratives, while Somalis, northerners, and Muslims are frequently written out of the history of Kenyan nation-building.

Identification infrastructures—which are built over multiple lifetimes, straddling the colonial and postcolonial periods—lead us to back to this contested episode in Kenyan history, to the unfinished story of what Evan Mwangi calls an "incomplete rebellion."[108] Tracing the history of Kenya's identification infrastructure also upends conventional geographies, placing the nation's "center" into conversation with its "margins." Untangling these temporal and geographic knots is one way to work against the pull of a nationalist amnesia that allows Mau Mau to be simultaneously memorialized and forgotten. In the next chapter, which brings the reader into the post-independence period, I explore how colonial systems of identification diminished in importance, only to be reanimated in the late 1970s and re-securitized in the late 1980s, as the boundaries of the Kenyan nation came under strain and reconfiguration.

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[107] E.S. Atieno Odhiambo, "Two: Matunda ya Uhuru, Fruits of Independence: Seven Theses on Nationalism in Kenya," in *Mau Mau & Nationhood: Arms, Authority and Narration*, eds. Atieno Odhiambo and John Lonsdale (James Currey: 2003), 44-45.

[108] Evan Mwangi, "The incomplete rebellion: Mau Mau movement in twenty-first-century Kenyan popular culture," *Africa Today* 57:2 (2010): 88, 87.