

**Shiraz Durrani: Never be silent; publishing and imperialism in Kenya, 1884-1963 2006 review by John Pateman**



## Information for Social Change

**"an activist organisation that examines issues of censorship, freedom and ethics amongst library and information workers..."**

<http://libr.org/isc/neverbesilent/> [Accessed: 01-10-14]

This important book is well researched and scholarly, but at the same time written in a popular style and very accessible. It tells the inspiring story of the successful Mau Mau resistance movement against imperialism and colonialism in Kenya. It also tells the story of how central publishing and information were to this struggle for freedom. While it deals with a particular country and period in history, it is timeless and relevant in the sense that these struggles continue today.

The book is organised into three main time frames: the resistance of nationalities, 1884-1922; the consolidation of the working class, 1922-1948; and the Mau Mau revolutionary struggle, 1948-1963. There are also sections on Kiswahili resistance publishing, overseas support for Kenya liberation, and independence and neo-colonialism.

Each chapter follows a common pattern so that the evolution of publishing can be traced through different historical periods and situations. The emergence of an African nationalist movement between 1884-1922 is illustrated through examples of settler, colonial government, church, South Asian and African publications. The different currents and tensions within these groups is evidenced via their respective publications; for example, the divergence between settler and

colonial interests and the support given to the emerging nationalist movement by South Asian publications.

After 1922 there was growing convergence between nationalist and working class politics and this was seen in the growth of trade unions and their publications. Militancy on the streets and in the workplace was mirrored by increasingly radical literature which encouraged the African masses to rise up and overthrow both their colonial and class oppressors. What was striking to me, reading this little recorded episode in the history of British imperialism, was the sovereignty and independence of the liberation struggle. Revisionist capitalist historians would have us believe that all independence movements in Africa were organised and financed by international Communism. The Mau Mau movement needed no such external intervention or interference (although it did receive support from the UK, Canada, USSR, Egypt, Ireland, India, USA and Trinidad).

The core of Never Be Silent is the hidden history of the Mau Mau revolutionary struggle: the establishment of liberated territories; the Mau Mau communications strategy; oral communications; revolutionary publishing; preparation for the armed phase; and the establishment of a people's press. The Mau Mau were highly organised and carried out their intelligence gathering operations under the very noses of the colonial regime. Mau Mau seemed to be everywhere in Kenya, and the authorities became increasingly desperate to control the situation. This led to the declaration of a National Emergency in 1952, after which many publications were closed down, only to re-emerge with a different title or guise.

The aims of the Mau Mau were clear, and articulated via a sophisticated communications strategy and a well organised leadership. When it became obvious that armed struggle was the only way forward, these actions were well planned, targeted and carried out. The colonial response was swift and savage, leading to mass arrests, torture, executions and random violence. What we would now call crimes against humanity and genocide were perpetrated against the Kenyan people; crimes for which there should be both justice and reparations. No amount of reprisals and arbitrary actions could deflect the Mau Mau from their mission and it strengthened the resolve of the masses who rallied behind their leaders. After such an inspirational model of self determinism and focused intent, it is all the more shocking and shameful that the work of Mau Mau was ultimately undone by the post independence ruling class in Kenya. Neo-colonialism is always a more damaging and insidious offspring than its odious parents, colonialism and imperialism.

But reading this book does not leave you with feelings of disappointment and defeat; far from it, you come away feeling energised and ready to use the valuable lessons of Mau Mau in today's struggles. The quotes which are liberally scattered throughout this book should be used in library and information schools throughout the world to teach the next generation of library workers that information truly is power. We have the information tools at our disposal to shift power away from rich oligarchies and into the hands of the working class. Where that has been achieved, in countries such as Cuba, society has been transformed.

The other central message in this book is that, in the face of injustice and oppression, library workers should never be silent: they should speak out against the illegal invasions of Yugoslavia, Afghanistan and Iraq. They should speak out in support of asylum seekers and refugees who are their fellow workers. And they should put their skills in the service of those who are most excluded and who have the greatest needs. As Durrani concludes, 'people struggling to change their society always find ways of establishing their own system of communicating with the people they lead and by whom they are led. Their mission of revolution, of change, of peace, of social and economic justice requires that they should never be silent.'

Shiraz Durrani: *Never be silent; publishing and imperialism in Kenya, 1884-1963*. 2006. London: Vita Books. ISBN: 978-1-869886-05-9.