

# Voices in Melodies: Remembering Mau Mau

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*This paper explores the transformative power of music in amplifying marginalized voices, with a specific focus on the 'Nyimbo cia Mau Mau' album and its contemporary musical expressions. By examining the historical and cultural significance of these songs and conducting field visits in the Dagoretti area, the study reveals how music serves as a vital conduit for addressing and preserving the silenced narratives of the Mau Mau uprising. The research involved interviews with respondents aged between 55 and 80 years old, who shared personal stories and reflections on the enduring impact of Mau Mau songs. The analysis extends to contemporary compositions like Eric Wainaina's "Fungeni Macho" which draws parallels between past injustices and present political realities. The study underscores the multifaceted role of music in uniting communities, empowering the oppressed, and fostering a collective memory of resistance. By bringing to light the powerful legacy of Mau Mau music, this paper highlights its continued relevance in advocating for social justice and commemorating historical struggles.*

## **Introduction**

The Mau Mau movement that took place in Kenya during the 1950s and 1960s was a pivotal period of resistance against British colonial rule (Van De Walle et al., 2005). The Mau Mau fighters, primarily consisting of the Kikuyu community, experienced marginalization and oppression, leading to the suppression of their voices. This paper seeks to investigate the utilization of music as a form of expression for marginalized communities and its significance in the Mau Mau movement.

Dagoretti's relationship with the Mau Mau movement was deeply intertwined with the area's socio-economic dynamics and proximity to Nairobi. The colonial restrictions on African cultivation of cash crops led Dagoretti's residents to turn to trade in foodstuffs and rental houses as a primary means of capital accumulation. However, these activities faced severe restrictions from the colonial government, intensifying local grievances. Both the Kenya African Union (KAU) and the Mau Mau movement in Dagoretti relied heavily on the marginalized peasantry and economically oppressed segments of the population. This socio-economic

context fueled the radicalization of the local populace, making Dagoretti a significant base for Mau Mau leaders who were embittered by racially discriminatory legislation and economic disenfranchisement. Additionally, the repatriation of Kikuyu squatters from the Rift Valley during the Emergency period added to the radical political dimension in Dagoretti, further solidifying its role as a stronghold of anti-colonial sentiment and activity (Chege, 1981).

This relationship was particularly evident during our interviews in the Dagoretti area. Although Mau Mau wasn't the primary focus of our visits, it consistently emerged as the predominant topic of discussion among respondents aged between 55 and 80 years, hence the interest of this researcher. One respondent mentioned that he had received a piece of land as restitution after their previous land was taken during the Mau Mau period. This illustrates the deep historical connection the area has with the Mau Mau uprising.

### **Speaking through music**

Music has been a powerful medium for marginalized communities to voice their concerns and address social issues throughout history. It serves as a platform for expressing experiences, frustrations, and aspirations that may otherwise remain unspoken. By examining instances of music being used to amplify the voices of the silenced, we can gain valuable insights into the transformative potential of music.

One notable example of music being used to voice concerns is found in the African context. During the apartheid era in South Africa, music played a crucial role in the struggle against racial segregation and oppression. Artists such as Miriam Makeba and Hugh Masekela used their music to protest against the apartheid regime and raise awareness about the injustices faced by black South Africans. Makeba's song "Soweto Blues" (1987) and Masekela's "Bring Him Back Home" (1987) are powerful examples of how music can convey the pain, resilience, and hope of a marginalized community (Hull & Coplan, 1987). These songs became anthems of resistance, uniting people and inspiring them to fight for justice.

Beyond Africa, music has also been used as a means of expressing concerns and advocating for social change. In the United States during the Civil Rights Movement, musicians played a significant role in the struggle

for racial equality. Artists like Nina Simone, Bob Dylan, and Sam Cooke used their music to address issues of racial discrimination and promote social justice. Simone's iconic song "Mississippi Goddam" (1964) and Cooke's "A Change Is Gonna Come" (1964) became powerful anthems that captured the spirit of the movement and gave voice to the frustrations and aspirations of African Americans.

These examples demonstrate how music can transcend barriers and amplify the voices of marginalized communities. Through its emotional and evocative power, music can convey the experiences and struggles of a community, fostering unity and inspiring action. It provides a platform for marginalized individuals to express their concerns and demand change.

### **Music and Mau Mau**

The Mau Mau movement in Kenya was characterized by a strong sense of resistance against British colonial rule, and music played a crucial role in mobilizing and uniting the fighters. Music served as a powerful means of communication, conveying messages of resistance, solidarity, and hope thus providing a space for the fighters to express their grievances, share their stories, and inspire others to join the struggle.

During the field visit, respondents frequently turned the conversation to music, each offering unique insights. One respondent expressed discomfort with listening to Mau Mau songs due to the painful memories of torture they evoked. In contrast, others referred to the album "Nyimbo cia Mau Mau" as a valuable tool for remembering the struggle. They noted its significance during the Mau Mau era, its relevance in post-Mau Mau times, and its enduring importance today.

Furthermore, the ongoing popularity of the "Nyimbo cia Mau Mau" songs on platforms like YouTube, where they have garnered significant views, underscores their lasting impact and relevance. These songs continue to attract interest and serve as a contemporary source of cultural and historical connection, highlighting how historical music can bridge past and present.

By recognizing and honoring the significance of music in the Mau Mau Movement, we not only pay homage to the past but also draw inspiration for the ongoing struggle towards a more just and equitable society in Kenya and beyond. The transformative power of music as a vehicle for amplifying marginalized voices remains a vital tool in the fight for social justice,

ensuring that the legacy of the Mau Mau Movement continues to inspire and resonate with future generations.

### **Nyimbo cia Mau Mau**

Nyimbo cia Mau Mau, which translates to “Songs of the Mau Mau” stands as a poignant musical anthology that encapsulates the spirit and struggles of the uprising in Kenya. The album, composed by Joseph Kamaru, comprises a collection of songs passed down through oral tradition. Its songs were composed during and after the period of colonial resistance. Through the album’s stirring melodies and evocative lyrics, it offers a window into the untold stories, sacrifices, and triumphs of those who fought for Kenya’s independence, making it a living legacy of the enduring spirit of resistance and liberation. A Kikuyu elder from Nakuru, who refers to himself as a son of Mau Mau and did not want his name disclosed, helped with the translation and summaries of the randomly selected ten songs from the album “Nyimbo cia Mau Mau”.

*Wiyathi na Ithaka:* (Self-Rule and Our Land) This song symbolizes the fighters’ unwavering commitment to reclaiming their ancestral land and re-asserting their right to self-rule. Through stirring lyrics and evocative melodies, it served as a rallying cry for independence and galvanized support for the Mau Mau cause.

*Twathiaga Tukenete:* (We Happily Went) vividly portrays the experiences of the fighters in the forests, weaving together Kikuyu proverbs to narrate their struggles, triumphs, and sacrifices. Despite the hardships endured, the song emphasizes the fighters’ resilience and determination, highlighting their unwavering commitment to the struggle for freedom.

*Mbara Ndiri Mwago:* (War is Not Fun) This somber song reflects on the profound losses suffered by the Kikuyu community during the uprising, particularly the tragic fate of many first-born males who perished in the forests. Although sorrow permeates the lyrics, the song conveys a message of resilient hope, honoring the sacrifices of fallen heroes.

*Kambi ya Lang’ata:* (Lang’ata Detention Camp) is a haunting reminder of the atrocities committed in detention camps, where detainees endured brutal, inhumane treatment meted out by the colonial authorities. Its lyrics bear witness to the long suffering of the detainees, serving as a testament to their indomitable spirit.

*Uka Murata Twaranirie:* (Come We Talk, My Friend) uplifts and celebrates the camaraderie and solidarity among the fighters. It encourages mutual support in the face of adversity. Its lyrics instill a sense of unity and purpose, reinforcing the resolve to overcome all obstacles in fighting for freedom.

*Mwene Nyaga Twakuhoya:* (Almighty God We Beseech You) This is a heartfelt prayer expressing gratitude while seeking divine guidance in warfare tactics. The lyrics provided spiritual solace and strength to the fighters, reminding them of the power of prayer in times of trial and tribulation.

*Aciari Tigai Kumaka:* (Parents, Don't Panic) is a song that sheds light on the betrayals and treachery that unfolded in the community because of war related anxieties and lack of faith. Parents are urged to cease worrying in the face of this treachery. The poignant lyrics are a stark reminder of the betrayals endured by the community because of the Mau Mau uprising.

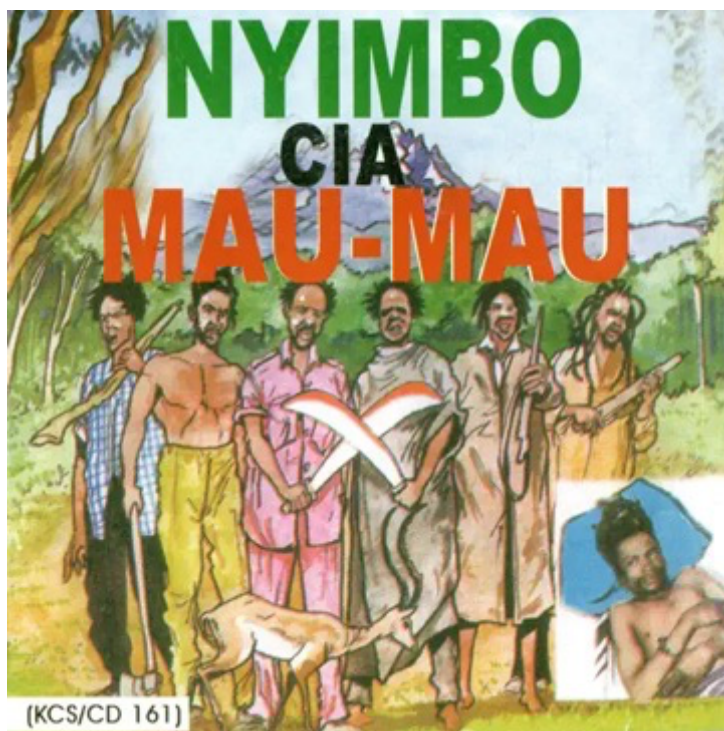
*Bururi Witu wa Gikuyu:* (Our Land, O Gikuyu) celebrates the divine blessing bestowed upon the Gikuyu people, affirming the unbreakable bond between the people and the land gifted to them by God. Through its empowering lyrics, the song instilled a sense of resilience and determination in the hearts of the listeners, rallying them to defend their ancestral homeland.

*Kenyatta Niagathirwo:* (Kenyatta Was Praised) pays homage to Jomo Kenyatta, Kenya's first president, revered as a chosen leader and it recounts his arrival at the Yatta detention camp amidst a thunderstorm. Its stirring lyrics celebrate Kenyatta's enduring faith and vision for a free and prosperous nation.

*Ndiui Undu Ungi:* (I Don't Know Anything Else) This song serves as a defiant anthem mocking the futile attempts of British interrogators to extract information from Mau Mau fighters. Its lyrics are witty. It celebrates the fighters' steadfast refusal to betray their cause and their unwavering loyalty and solidarity in the face of adversity.

The ten songs from the 'Nyimbo cia Mau Mau' album encapsulate a diverse range of themes that held significant relevance during the Mau

Mau uprising and continue to, in contemporary Kenya. Themes such as resistance and defiance underscore the fighters' unwavering commitment to challenging British colonial rule, while solidarity and camaraderie highlight the importance of unity in the face of adversity. Sacrifice and loss speak to the profound hardships endured by the Gikuyu community during the struggle for independence. At the same time, themes of endurance and resilience emphasize the fighters' determination to persevere despite the challenges they face. Additionally, faith and spirituality play a role in providing solace and guidance. They bring to the surface the deep-seated beliefs that sustained the community throughout the Mau Mau ordeal. In contemporary Kenya, these themes continue to resonate, serving as enduring symbols of courage, resilience, and unity in the ongoing quest for social justice and liberation. Through reinterpretations by modern artists, the songs remain relevant, offering a powerful reminder of the enduring legacy of the Mau Mau movement and its impact on the collective consciousness of the Kenyan people.



Nyimbo cia Mau Mau album cover (JOSEPH KAMARU – Kamaaru wa Wanjiru, 2020)

### **Mau Mau music in Contemporary Kenya**

The reverberations of the music from the Mau Mau era continue to be heard in contemporary times. Eric Wainaina's 2001 song, '*Fungeni Macho*' reflects the historical injustices faced by the Kikuyu people, relating them to the country's current political state while underscoring the significance of remembering and learning from the past. Through the lyrics, Wainaina pays tribute to the sacrifices made by the Mau Mau fighters, calling for a collective understanding of their enduring struggle. A respondent, in Dagoretti, mentioned Eric Wainaina during the interview, pointing him out as a contemporary artist imbued with the spirit of Mau Mau.

In exploring music's role in the Mau Mau era, a respondent shared a personal connection to the hymn "*Mwene Nyaga*" that is part of the 'Nyimbo cia Mau Mau' album. The respondent said the song resonates with him because it encapsulates the cultural and historical essence of his community. It is a symbol of his personal connection with the [Mau Mau] historic movement. He emphasized the hymn's rich metaphorical lyrics that capture the emotions and narratives related to the historic resistance. This intimate connection to "*Mwene Nyaga*" adds a poignant layer to his narrative, illustrating that music is more than a mere documentation of historical artefacts. Music is a living, breathing embodiment of personal experiences that bring back to life a spirit of resilience that was borne in the Mau Mau experience.

The resonance of "*Mwene Nyaga*" is palpable in contemporary Kenya. Modern artists continue to draw inspiration from this iconic song. A notable example is Kwame Rĩgĩ's, rendition of the song which pays homage to the original while infusing contemporary elements into it. His re-interpretation not only honours the legacy of the Mau Mau movement but also recontextualizes the song for the current generation. By preserving and re-imagining the themes of faith, resilience, and liberation embedded within "*Mwene Nyaga*", Rĩgĩ ensures that the Mau Mau spirit remains alive and relevant in Kenya's musical landscape.

The songs from the 'Nyimbo cia Mau Mau' album were uploaded on YouTube between 2019 and 2022, six decades after the end of colonial

rule. They have since garnered significant attention. For instance, the song “Wiyathi na Ithaka” had accumulated 157,000 views by June 2024, demonstrating the continued relevance and resonance with listeners today. The album serves as a contemporary source of cultural and historical connection.

## Conclusion

The exploration of music’s role in the Mau Mau uprising illuminates its profound impact as a form of resistance, resilience, and cultural expression. The ‘Nyimbo cia Mau Mau’ album serves as a poignant testament to the struggles and triumphs of the Mau Mau fighters, encapsulating themes of resistance, solidarity, sacrifice, and hope. Through its evocative melodies and powerful lyrics, this musical anthology continues to resonate in contemporary Kenya, inspiring artists and activists to draw from its legacy in their quest for social justice and liberation.

The enduring significance of Mau Mau music is evident in modern reinterpretations, such as Kwame Rĩgĩ’s rendition of “Mwene Nyaga” which honours the legacy and recontextualizes the song. By preserving and re-imagining the themes of Mau Mau songs, contemporary artists ensure that the spirit remains alive and relevant in today’s Kenya.

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