3 The Politics of Mau Mau

‘I speak the truth and swear before Ngai [God] and before everyone present here that if I am called upon to fight or to kill the enemy, I shall go, even if that enemy be my father or mother, my brother or sister. And if I fail to do this, may this oath kill me, may this thenge [he-goat] kill me, may this seven kill me, may this meat kill me.’ (One of the seven parts of the batuni (platoon, or warrior) oath)

‘Poor Mitchell, though a first-class Governor in many ways, had been entirely caught out by the Mau Mau movement and had told the Colonial Office there was no serious danger,’ Sir Evelyn Baring, who replaced Sir Philip as Governor in 1952, told Margery Perham after independence. Although cheerfully paternalistic in manner, Sir Philip Mitchell did not socialize with Africans and had sounded preoccupied by the thought that they had not invented the wheel. Because Baring had nearly chopped off his arm with an axe, there was a three-month gap while he recuperated between Mitchell’s departure and his own arrival. In the course of it only one high-profile arrest was made, that of Jesse Kariuki, who had made a speech inciting the police to disobey orders. But the police, increasingly frustrated at the lack of response to their warnings of really serious subversion, claimed that events were taking a set pattern. First, there would be a political meeting in some area at which Kenyatta was the main speaker and for which crowds were shuttled in from Nairobi; next Mau Mau meetings would occur in that same area, at which oaths were taken and dead dogs hung up in front of the houses of non-supporters; then would follow the murders. During the three months before Baring arrived thirty-six witnesses who had been subpoenaed had been assassinated as well as twenty-four headmen.

It was true that Kenyatta had on request made speeches denouncing Mau Mau but these appeared to have had no effect whereas his pronouncements on other subjects had been instantly obeyed. The new Governor was told that these obliging speeches must have been accompanied by sayings and gestures that made it clear to the audience that he did not mean what he said. Kenyatta’s name

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was constantly appearing in hymns and prayers designed to empty the mission schools and fill the independent schools and churches. The situation was clearly slipping out of control.4

The question has been much debated as to Kenyatta's share of responsibility for the traumatic experience which was Mau Mau. Most British opinion during the Mau Mau Emergency and for some time thereafter held that he was the fount and origin of it all, an African who had been well received in Britain and partly educated there, yet who, with all these advantages, had with satanic perversity chosen to cast his tribe back into the most degrading barbarism. The oath was the essential bond; it carried men out of their previously normal selves and across a behaviour barrier which was meant to debar return. Thus, for instance, loyal and trusted Kikuyu house servants could be turned into murderers of their employers. And as, later, the screws were being turned on the fighters who had retreated into the forests, pursued not only by the British but also by loyalist home guards and pseudo-gangs from their own tribe, more and more horrific and disgusting oaths were introduced to keep the survivors up to the mark. In the mind of the European, oaths of every degree were attributed personally to Kenyatta, albeit he had been out of circulation from the beginning of the Emergency.

Without an understanding of the intensity of this feeling about Jomo Kenyatta and Mau Mau, much of the story in the second part of this book will not make any sense. Dr J. C. Carothers, a psychologist employed by the Government of Kenya to guide them through the baffling phenomena with which they were confronted, identified resemblances between the Mau Mau oaths and freemasons' initiation oaths and rituals in mediaeval Europe. He inferred from the fact of Kenyatta's anthropological studies in Britain that he was the most likely agent of transmission.5 'He had the opportunity and it is easy to imagine more than one incentive,' Carothers wrote, though adding wisely, 'No dogmatic answer can be given.' Walter Coutts was still saying in 1960 when he was Chief Secretary that those who had not known Kenyatta 'seem to have forgotten the man's foul wickedness. He was hardly human in his evilness.'6 For most white settlers he was indeed Satan Incarnate.

And yet there is the positive record of his later achievements and the changed opinions of those who lived to see him functioning benignly as Prime Minister and then President of Kenya. One after another in a long line they testify that without him Kenya