



ARTICLE

Mapping Women’s Memories of Britain’s Forced Resettlement Scheme in Late Colonial Kenya, c. 1953–1960

Bethany Rebisz 

Department of History, University of Bristol, Bristol, UK
Email: bethany.rebisz@bristol.ac.uk

Abstract

This article maps the memories of Gikūyū women and girls who were forcibly concentrated during the 1950s emergency period in Kenya. Using Britain’s strategy of ‘villagization’, it considers the unique forms of surveillance and violence deployed against women understood as the ‘backbone’ of the anti-colonial Mau Mau movement. By analysing colonial records and women’s oral testimonies, the article examines civilian relationships to coercively designed counterinsurgency environments. It situates these ‘villages’ into a longer tradition of Britain’s carceral landscape across colonial states, offering fresh insights to established histories of violence, gender, and colonialism.

When asked if she could describe the strategic village that British colonial forces resettled her into in 1953, Sophia Wambui Kiarie produced a drawing she had prepared of Kamandura, as she remembered it. The drawing showed the various sections where people lived, where guards kept resources, and the individual family names of the neighbours she could recall. Sophia brought specific attention to the security post at the top of the drawing. She identified multiple watchtowers at this post. In describing these, she explains the watchtowers were in ‘all corners. People would say, “We see the Home Guards up there.” And it was like in a hilly area...the watchtower officers could see the entire village.’¹ Not only did the location of the watchtowers enable better surveillance for the African Home Guards – so-called loyalists employed by the colonial government – but it also reinforced state authority and its presence on inhabitants. This characteristic of British counterinsurgency strategy ensured those inside regulated their own behaviour knowing they were always under watch of the colonial administration. In the colonial mindset, this

¹ Sophia Wambui Kiarie, interview, Kiambu County, 4 Apr. 2019.

surveillance was only effective if the very real threat of violence followed any form of subversive behaviour. As Sophia went on to explain, moving into Kamandura meant that ‘everything had changed...In [Kamandura] you do not play, you do not make a noise. No. You stay in your house. With whispers.’² The fear of punishment was ever present.

Sophia was one of an estimated 1.2 million Kenyans forcibly resettled during the Kenya Emergency.³ Villagization was one aspect of Britain’s population-centric counterinsurgency campaign targeting those the colonial government suspected of operating as part of the Land and Freedom Army, who were later labelled ‘Mau Mau’. Kenyans, from the Gikūyū ethnic group, and Embu and Meru regions, mobilized in the early 1950s to directly challenge the British colonial government and its settler presence, generating a violent response from the administration.⁴ Initially planned as part of a long-term policy for land reform, mass villagization was an effective means of protecting those loyal to the colonial state in ‘loyalist villages’ and extending administrative authority over those suspected of aiding Mau Mau fighters in ‘punitive villages’.⁵ Sophia and the women featured in this article were forcibly resettled as families and suspected supporters of the Mau Mau. The focus here is on the punitive villages constructed.⁶

Colonial dominance, and its inherently gendered identity, asserted masculine European supremacy and imperial domination on the making of structures and spaces.⁷ The villages Britain introduced as part of its mass villagization programme were spatial formations of fear, terror, and violence. These villages were environments designed and governed by men – British colonial officers and African loyalists – who worked for the colonial government. Women and their children largely inhabited these spaces.⁸ By considering the intimacy of these sites, this article argues that women and girls experienced unique

² Ibid.

³ Moritz Feichtinger, ‘“A great reformatory”: social planning and strategic resettlement in late colonial Kenya and Algeria, 1952–63’, *Journal of Contemporary History*, 52 (2016), pp. 45–72 at p. 46; M. P. K. Sorrenson, *Land reform in the Kikuyu country* (Oxford, 1967), p. 110.

⁴ Demographer John Blacker calculates the estimated number of ‘excess’ deaths at 50,000, 26,000 being children (mainly caused by villagization) and 7,000 being women. See John Blacker, ‘The demography of Mau Mau: fertility and mortality in Kenya in the 1950s: a demographer’s viewpoint’, *African Affairs*, 106 (2007), pp. 205–27.

⁵ Sorrenson, *Land reform in the Kikuyu country*, p. 110; Kenya: Mau Mau unrest; plans for Central Province arising from War Council Directives, London, The National Archives (TNA), Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO), 141/6237, fo. 5/1.

⁶ For a longer history of the cultural landscape, functionality, and lived experiences of the villagization programme for both ‘rebel families’ and ‘loyalist families’, see Bethany Rebisz, ‘Violent reform: gendered experiences of colonial developmental counter-insurgency in Kenya, 1954–1960’ (Ph.D. thesis, Reading, 2021).

⁷ Ann Laura Stoler, *Carnal knowledge and imperial power: race and the intimate in colonial rule* (Berkeley, CA, 2010), p. 17.

⁸ Correspondance générale concernant la détention des membres du mouvement Mau Mau, 18 Apr. 1955 – 6 Jan. 1961, Geneva, International Committee of the Red Cross Archive, BAG 225/108–001, ‘British Red Cross work in Kenya – 1954–56’.

forms of surveillance and violence at a time when British rule was most under threat in Kenya.

Few studies have directly addressed women's and girls' experiences of forced resettlement. Those that have, mainly identify the strategic position of villagization in Britain's violent counterinsurgency campaign or the social engineering efforts made by administrators to reform the society who were villagized.⁹ The administrative discourse may have been that these were reformatory sites to protect these civilians, but the experiences of female occupants tell a far more violent story.¹⁰ The punitive nature of these sites is most pronounced when the memories of those relocated, in relation to the space they occupied, are compared to the design and function of the villages. This article builds on the growing scholarship seeking to visualize spatial histories of marginalized peoples.¹¹ While the colonial government attempted to depict these spaces as sites for social reform, circulating images of playgrounds and village shops, women's memories ascribe deeper meaning to the ways they encountered violence and navigated this gendered topography of terror.¹²

Seeking women's voices in colonial archives is an enduring challenge for historians. Despite Kenyan women's significant role in this insurgency, the literature which explores their experiences of the counterinsurgency campaign is still in its infancy.¹³ The marginalization of women's experiences has persisted with the 2013 release of Britain's 'secret' records. When Kenyan survivors successfully sued the British Foreign and Commonwealth Office at the landmark High Court hearings (2011–12) for the historic human rights abuses it committed in Kenya during this conflict, Britain was forced to release its 'migrated archive' which corroborated survivors' testimonies.¹⁴ While the release of

⁹ Caroline Elkins, *Imperial reckoning: the untold story of Britain's gulag in Kenya* (New York, NY, 2006), ch. 8; Feichtinger, "A great reformatory".

¹⁰ Andrew Thompson, 'Humanitarian principles put to the test: challenges to humanitarian action during decolonization', *International Review of the Red Cross*, 97 (2015), pp. 45–76, at p. 59.

¹¹ Vincent Brown, 'Mapping a slave revolt: visualizing spatial history through the archives of slavery', *Social Text*, 33 (2015), pp. 134–41.

¹² Kikuyu Villages and Home Guard Posts, London, TNA, Colonial Office (CO), 1066/9, 17; Kenya, 1944–62, London, TNA, Information Department (ID), British Empire Collection of Photographs, 10/158, fo. 11.

¹³ Margaret Wangui Gachihi, 'The role of Kikuyu women in the Mau Mau' (MA thesis, University of Nairobi, 1986), p. 23. See also Katherine Bruce-Lockhart, 'Reconsidering women's roles in the Mau Mau rebellion in Kenya, 1952–1960', in Martin Thomas and Gareth Curless, eds., *Decolonization and conflict: colonial comparisons and legacies* (London, 2017), pp. 159–75; Katherine Bruce-Lockhart and Bethany Rebisz, 'Discourses of development and practices of punishment: Britain's gendered counter-insurgency strategy in colonial Kenya', in Martin Thomas and Gareth Curless, eds., *The Oxford handbook on colonial insurgencies and counterinsurgencies* (Oxford, 2023), pp. 482–500; Tabitha Kanogo, 'Kikuyu women and the politics of protest: Mau Mau', in Sharon McDonald, Pat Holden, and Shirley Ardener, eds., *Images of women in peace and war: cross-cultural and historical perspectives* (Madison, WI, 1987), pp. 78–99; Cora Ann Presley, *Kikuyu women, the Mau Mau rebellion, and social change in Kenya* (Baltimore, MD, 1992); Rose Miyonga, "'We kept them to remember": tin trunk archives and the emotional history of the Mau Mau war', *History Workshop Journal*, 96 (2023), pp. 96–114.

¹⁴ David Anderson, 'Guilty secrets: deceit, denial and the discovery of Kenya's "migrated archive"', *History Workshop Journal*, 80 (2015), pp. 142–60, at pp. 144–5.

these files has encouraged a flurry of scholarship to assess this violence, the shaping of this story has led to an androcentric dominance in histories of detention and British counterinsurgency.¹⁵ The colonial government may have been prolific in documenting its governance of the military campaign, but crafting the history of villagization is near impossible with what remains in the archives.¹⁶ One can locate lists of so-called ‘village’ names, blueprints of this military measure from its previous incarnation in the Malaya Emergency, village planning documents, and financial records. The records are severely lacking in any rich or diverse insight into the day-to-day experiences of those who lived inside the villages.

Subsequently, historians of Africa have long emphasized the importance of oral history traditions and ethnographic methods to contribute African narratives and experiences of European colonialism.¹⁷ Oral history has historically been an approach to include marginalized histories in particularly White and androcentric discourses.¹⁸ This article therefore seeks to respond to the ‘glaring absence of African women’ in written primary sources by contributing to an ever-growing archive of African women’s oral testimonies.¹⁹ It combines oral history methodologies with archival research to ascribe meaning and memory to specific sites based on survivor testimonies. Memory is both a

¹⁵ David Anderson, ‘Mau Mau in the High Court and the “lost” British empire archives: colonial conspiracy or bureaucratic bungle?’, *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 39 (2011), pp. 699–716; David French, ‘Nasty not nice: British counter-insurgency doctrine and practice, 1945–1967’, *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, 23 (2012), pp. 744–61; Andrew Mumford, *The counter-insurgency myth: the British experience of irregular warfare* (London, 2012); with the exception of Katherine Bruce-Lockhart, ‘“Unsound” minds and broken bodies: the detention of “hardcore” Mau Mau women at Kamiti and Gitamayu detention camps in Kenya, 1954–1960’, *Journal of Eastern African Studies*, 8 (2014), pp. 590–608.

¹⁶ The production of colonial archival documentation was an inherently violent practice and scholars have extensively shown how this process served an important function for colonial administrators to legitimize its rule. See Ann Laura Stoler, *Along the archival grain: epistemic anxieties and colonial common sense* (Princeton, NJ, 2010), pp. 14–16. See also Anjali Arondekar, *For the record: on sexuality and the colonial archive in India* (Durham, NC, 2009); Kathryn Burns, *Into the archive: writing and power in colonial Peru* (Durham, NC, 2010); Riley Linebaugh and Bettina Severin-Barboutie, eds., *Gatekeepers to the past? An archival guide* (Giessen, 2022); James Lowry, ed., *Displaced archives* (London, 2017); Verne Harris, ‘The archival sliver: power, memory, and archives in South Africa’, *Archival Science*, 2 (2002), pp. 63–86.

¹⁷ See Luise White, Stephan Miescher, and David William Cohen, eds., *African words, African voices: critical practices in oral history* (Bloomington, IN, 2001).

¹⁸ See Joanna Bornat and Hanna Diamond, ‘Women’s history and oral history: developments and debates’, *Women’s History Review*, 16 (2007), pp. 19–39; Joan Sangster, ‘Telling our stories: feminist debates and the use of oral history’, *Women’s History Review*, 3 (1994), pp. 5–28.

¹⁹ Anna Adima, ‘The sound of silence: the 1929–30 Gikuyu “female circumcision controversy” and the discursive suppression of African women’s voices’, *Gender a výzkum / Gender and Research*, 21 (2020), pp. 18–37, at p. 19. See also Tabitha Kanogo, *African womanhood in colonial Kenya, 1900–50* (Oxford, 2005); Kenda Mutongi, *Worries of the heart: widows, family, and community in Kenya* (Chicago, IL, 2007). On the challenge of finding women in archival sources, see Nupur Chaudhuri, Sherry J. Katz, and Mary Elizabeth Perry, eds., *Contesting archives: finding women in the sources* (Urbana, IL, 2010).

methodological tool to access the past and becomes part of the study itself.²⁰ Memories of the events of the 1950s have been highly politicized and contested both in Kenya and Britain. This context cannot be separated from the examination of each of the six individual women's testimonies included. The way they remember their time during villagization is informed by their gender, social age, and socio-economic status, both at the time of villagization and at the time of the interview.

This study of memory offers oral historians an opportunity to interrogate how the past is actively shaping the present lives of those interviewed seventy years on from the events.²¹ All women interviewed identified as Gikūyū, and their ages at the time of interview ranged from 69 years old, to 105 years old. Their memories are 'complemented by silences – experiences forgotten, not given meaning in the first place, repressed, or simply not shared'.²² These silences would have been influenced by my own positionality, being a White, British researcher speaking with Black, Kenyan survivors. One cannot wholly mitigate and rebalance pre-existing power dynamics in an interview setting, though it was vital that I had established a cultural archive prior to the interviews to ensure the interactions were respectful, safe, and did not pose harm to interview participants.²³ This article is by no means representative of all those forcibly resettled in this campaign. It cannot claim to be, but it does offer a more nuanced assessment than scholars currently portray in the existing literature.

By drawing together colonial records in conversation with new evidence of women remembering their lives in these villages, this article makes three main arguments. First, the colonial government designed and implemented militarized zones in the form of so-called 'villages' that sought to exacerbate the feeling of punishment and pressure on those suspected of aiding insurgent fighters. Unlike other counterinsurgency campaigns whereby women have been assumed as inherently non-violent victims of these circumstances, the colonial officials in Kenya were highly aware of the instrumental role played by them in this insurgency.²⁴ Women were the 'backbone' of this movement, and the administration needed to break this if it were to succeed.²⁵ Officials sought means to incarcerate them outside of the wider nexus of detention camps introduced.

Secondly, this article argues that geographically mapping the battlegrounds of counterinsurgency campaigns to understand the nature of brutality and coercion must go further than literature has previously shown.²⁶ While

²⁰ Heike I. Schmidt, *Colonialism and violence in Zimbabwe: a history of suffering* (Oxford, 2013), pp. 8–9.

²¹ Alistair Thomson, 'Memory and remembering in oral history', in Donald A. Ritchie, ed., *The Oxford handbook of oral history* (Oxford, 2010), pp. 78–95, at p. 91.

²² Schmidt, *Colonialism and violence in Zimbabwe*, p. 19.

²³ I am indebted to Caroline Wanjiru, Joyce Wangari, Trevas Matathia Nyambura, Purity W. Gitonga, and Evans Muriu Matindi who guided and supported me as research assistants.

²⁴ Bruce-Lockhart, 'Reconsidering women's roles', p. 162.

²⁵ Gachihi, 'The role of Kikuyu women in the Mau Mau', p. 15.

²⁶ Elkins, *Imperial reckoning*; Feichtinger, "'A great reformatory'".

historians have demonstrated the characteristics of counterinsurgency warfare and the mechanisms of power and violence deployed by states against civilian populations, it is vital that the interactions and manifestations of this violence between individuals is central to the analysis. How and why perpetrators can inflict such brutality is directly connected to the built environments of these campaigns. A close spatial mapping of villages within the scheme reveals a more intimate map of suffering inflicted on women and girls. Torture and violence were not limited to the detention and works camps, civilian women and girls faced heightened levels of surveillance and cruelty in their day-to-day lives. It is evident from the testimonies shared that there were key danger zones to be aware and fearful of. Yet, the psychological threat of violence did not discriminate between these identified sites and the general geography of the villages. This case-study offers wider ramifications to understanding the design and lived experience of forced relocation schemes; a strategy still largely adopted by states and militaries today.

Finally, this article is an exploration of people's relationship to coercively designed counterinsurgency environments. Inhabitants of these villages invested meaning to these spaces in competing and contesting articulations. Through their recollections, women and girls can map the multilayered experiences of violence and violation they encountered within these coercive spaces. They identify ways they navigated these threats and resisted them. In contrast, male guards were able to use villages to manifest and enact their own personal power over female inhabitants, with the materiality of the enclosed, militarized infrastructure facilitating their behaviours.²⁷ Britain may have sought to rebrand this branch of their campaign through the discourse of social reform and humanitarian necessity, but the 'villages', in all but name, represented spatial formations of fear and terror designed to punish Gikūyū women and girls assumed to be fuelling anti-colonial action.

I

How to deal with women was a central aspect of Britain's response to the Mau Mau. The colonial state designed spaces 'to control and punish women *en masse*'.²⁸ These 'gendered geographies of coercion' were particularly pronounced in Kenya due to the mass forced resettlement of mainly Gikūyū women and girls.²⁹ While the British had originally assumed that Kenyan women would play a limited role in the Mau Mau insurgency, unsurprising given the enduring assumptions of women in armed conflict, it became clear to colonial state security by 1953 that they were playing significant roles in the Mau Mau. Women were characterized as the 'eyes and ears' of the movement and the part they played in aiding the forest fighters was

²⁷ For an assessment of the masculinity/militarism nexus, see for example Jacklyn Cock, 'Women and the military: implications for demilitarization in the 1990s in South Africa', *Gender & Society*, 8 (1994), pp. 152–69, at pp. 167–8.

²⁸ Bruce-Lockhart and Rebisz, 'Discourses of development and practices of punishment', p. 486.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 486.

'considerable'.³⁰ Thomas Askwith, commissioner for the Department of Rehabilitation and Community Development, argued in 1954 that it was 'more important to rehabilitate the women than the men if the next generation is to be saved'.³¹

The colonial government extended its eyes and ears over this faction of the insurgency through villagization. It began developing the policy in 1953 and introduced it widely in 1954 forcing mainly the Gĩkũyũ, Embu, and Meru districts into 854 enclosed villages by October 1955. Some villages were pre-existing, most were newly established and fortified.³² This rural transformation cut to the core of women's and girls' day-to-day lives. In contrast to conventional war with more defined battlefields, counterinsurgency campaigns intrude into spaces often inscribed as 'safe'. Sites coded as feminine – homes, hospitals, and schools, for example – are disrupted and invaded by counterinsurgents. The everyday landscapes inhabited by civilians are co-opted, further entrenching conflict into the lives of non-combatants.³³

By rapidly accelerating villagization in 1954, the colonial state sought to extend its punitive punishment on those suspected of supporting the Mau Mau. Operation Anvil had been a decisive step taken to purge Nairobi of Gĩkũyũ, Embu, and Meru citizens and force them into screening camps to determine how deeply they were involved in the movement. Suspected fighters faced the 'Pipeline' network, a system of works and detention camps where the use of torture and forced labour proliferated during their incarceration.³⁴ Villagization built upon this by further solidifying the closer administration of civilian supporters and resources as a form of collective punishment. The 1909 Collective Punishment Ordinance in Kenya had historically given the colonial government authority to punish communities collectively if they were thought to be defying orders.³⁵ While collective punishment was outlawed as a war crime under the 1949 Geneva Conventions, Britain justified these measures under emergency powers enacted from 1952.³⁶ By concentrating forced resettlement to the Central and Rift Valley Provinces, the administration made it as difficult as possible for the 'civil population' to assist the forest fighters.³⁷

The colonial administration sought to neatly categorize the rural population of Kenyans into a 'loyalist' group, and that of the enemy: the Mau Mau. These

³⁰ Ibid., p. 487.

³¹ Rehabilitation, 6 Jan. 1954, London, TNA, CO, 822/794, fo. 1.

³² Sorrenson, *Land reform in the Kikuyu country*, p. 110.

³³ Laleh Khalili, 'Gendered practices of counterinsurgency', *Review of International Studies*, 37 (2011), pp. 1471–91, at p. 1479.

³⁴ Wunyabari O. Maloba, *Mau Mau and Kenya* (Bloomington, IN, 1993), p. 137. See also Elkins, *Imperial reckoning*, p. 190.

³⁵ Hannah Whittaker, 'Legacies of empire: state violence and collective punishment in Kenya's north eastern province, c. 1963–present', *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 43 (2015), pp. 641–57, at p. 645.

³⁶ Ibid., p. 646.

³⁷ Emergency Organisation, London, TNA, FCO, 141/6615, fo. 14.

categories shaped every aspect of its campaign and the tactics deployed.³⁸ The War Council's approach was to 'incorporate a judicious mixture of punishment for co-operating with the enemy and rewards for loyal service'.³⁹ This 'judicious mixture' encompassed villagization, 'rehabilitation' in the Pipeline, as well as passbooks. Passbooks, more commonly referred to as *kipande*, permitted free movement for those who could obtain one. While the authorization of these passes was given mainly to those needing movement to continue attending their place of work, the passbook order clearly stipulated that only loyalist Africans would receive one as a part of the reward system.⁴⁰ Put plainly, if an individual's allegiance was clear to the colonial authorities, they were able to continue to move and work in a similar manner prior to the emergency even if they were villagized. It is vital to note that the authorities did not close the Passbook Organization until the December of 1959, highlighting that these population control measures outlived the military operations which had all but ceased in 1956.⁴¹

Villagization planners used the internal layout of villages to further differentiate between loyalists and Mau Mau sympathizers. The newly formed villages were to be 'divided into sections for the good and the bad'.⁴² Loyalists, often voluntarily, were rehoused in the 'good' section where greater advantages were available to reward them for their loyalty. In contrast, colonial guards established tightened control over those suspected of supporting the Mau Mau. This included more restricted access or movement out of the villages as well as ongoing punishments consequently for disloyalty.⁴³ Resettling both loyalists and Mau Mau sympathizers into adjacent sections was partly a logistical consequence to the fast process of concentrating vast areas of the population into tight spaces near security posts. An additional, and more advantageous, outcome for the colonial government was that it intensified the punishments experienced by those in the punitive parts of the villages by the proximity and ability to observe the material benefits of those in the loyalist section.

Forced resettlement was not a wholly new strategy trialled in Kenya by the British. Military authorities and governments across the globe have resettled people into enclosed spaces in various ways.⁴⁴ Most notably, the use of forced resettlement in Kenya was influenced by Britain's deployment of the measure

³⁸ Huw C. Bennett, *Fighting the Mau Mau: the British Army and counter-insurgency in the Kenya emergency* (Cambridge, 2013), p. 128; Daniel Branch, *Defeating Mau Mau, creating Kenya: counterinsurgency, civil war and decolonization* (Cambridge, 2009), p. 1.

³⁹ Emergency Organisation, London, TNA, FCO, 141/6615, fo. 14.

⁴⁰ K, E, and M Passbooks and Loyalty Certificates, 1954–9, London, TNA, FCO, 141/6740, fo. 1/3.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, fo. 1/3.

⁴² Kenya: Mau Mau unrest; plans for Central Province arising from War Council Directives, London, TNA, FCO, 141/6237, fo. 5/1.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, fo. 5/1.

⁴⁴ Ian. F. W. Beckett, *Modern insurgencies and counter-insurgencies: guerrillas and their opponents since 1750* (London, 2001), p. 36; Feichtinger, "A great reformatory", p. 46; Schmidt, *Colonialism and violence in Zimbabwe*, p. 178; Andreas Stucki, "Frequent deaths": the colonial development of concentration camps reconsidered, 1868–1974', *Journal of Genocide Research*, 20 (2018), pp. 305–26.

in their colony Malaya, 1948–60. The policy was part of the military plan nicknamed the ‘Briggs Plan’ after the British General Sir Harold Briggs who acted as director of operations during the war. Briggs’s inspiration for the ‘New Villages’ had originated in British Burma. The British had suppressed an uprising between 1930 and 1932, with the establishment of permanent security posts in disaffected areas, combined with a series of large-scale sweeps and search operations for insurgents. Briggs found that by denying the enemy food, supplies, and intelligence, the task for the security services was easier. They were now starving the fighters of sustenance but also drawing them into clear areas of battle when trying to search for food.⁴⁵ As Hannah West shows, ‘reinforcing racialized power dynamics between the civilizing and civilized while employing the prize of independence’ became a ‘classic’ approach of the British Army’s counterinsurgency theory post-Malaya.⁴⁶

Britain’s War Council believed that women supporting the Mau Mau could be easily enticed ‘into a change of heart’ if they were shut off from male fighters.⁴⁷ Although women had historically demonstrated their active involvement in challenging colonial policies like bans on clitoridectomy, Katherine Bruce-Lockhart argues that women’s participation in the Mau Mau was still characterized by the government as a ‘product of male persuasion’.⁴⁸ In order to regain the control of women, the administration therefore assumed they could be ‘easily persuaded away from the Mau Mau cause’.⁴⁹ Persuasion, here, translated to pressure. As military historians of British counterinsurgency have shown, the foundation of British counterinsurgency doctrine was never the quest to win the ‘hearts and minds’ but was instead the application of ‘wholesale coercion’ with indiscriminate force.⁵⁰ The view that women were malleable had endured throughout the colonial period.⁵¹ This is important to highlight as it framed the design of the villages but also how gendered violence manifested in these spaces. The literature on villagization as a counterinsurgency measure is still limited in gendering our understanding of how the policy has been deployed and experienced in these campaigns. For the case of Kenya in particular, only recently have scholars explored the gendered dynamics of counterinsurgency warfare and wholesale coercion of Kenyan women.⁵²

⁴⁵ David French, *The British way in counter-insurgency, 1945–67* (Oxford, 2011), p. 117.

⁴⁶ Hannah West, ‘Camp follower or counterinsurgent? Lady Templer and the forgotten wives’, *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, 32 (2021), pp. 1138–62 at p. 1139.

⁴⁷ Emergency Organisation, War Council Directives, London, TNA, FCO, 141/5688, fo. 1/1.

⁴⁸ Bruce-Lockhart, ‘Reconsidering women’s roles’, p. 162.

⁴⁹ Bruce-Lockhart, ‘“Unsound” minds and broken bodies’, p. 592.

⁵⁰ French, ‘Nasty not nice’, p. 744.

⁵¹ Stacey Hynd argues that a gendered discourse emerged in discussions of African women charged with murder in colonial Kenya. Hynd highlights that women were mainly declared as underdeveloped emotionally and mentally, and therefore could not be responsible for the crime they had committed. As she shows, this was a deliberate legal strategy used to prevent the execution of women in the colony. See Stacey Hynd, ‘Deadlier than the male? Women and the death penalty in colonial Kenya and Nyasaland’, *Stichproben: Vienna Journal of African Studies*, 12 (2007), pp. 13–33, at p. 13.

⁵² Bruce-Lockhart and Rebisz, ‘Discourses of development and practices of punishment’, p. 486.

The colonial government's heavy-handed response was influenced by the environment this campaign was unfolding in. Across central Kenya, the impending threat of an anti-White, dangerous movement in Gĩkũyũ-populated areas was further exasperated by settlers' inflammatory demands to 'hang every Kikuyu from the nearest tree', a sentiment expressed in the memoirs of Eric Griffith-Jones, the acting attorney-general in Kenya at this time.⁵³ Villagization reconciled these very real anxieties among White settlers. It facilitated the concentration of vast numbers of people who the state could not legally classify as criminals, but were seen as real threats to the colonial state's and settler population's authority.⁵⁴ 'Villagization', rather than 'detention-without-trial', was an effective means of concentrating so the colony could still endorse the idea of 'liberal reform and British civilizing values'.⁵⁵ The settler community in Kenya, however, refused to support welfare work for the African population and Askwith struggled to gain an effective budget or workforce to tackle the dire issues facing those forcibly resettled.⁵⁶

While colonial officials used euphemistic terms such as 'village' to occlude the violent nature of this process in external-facing discourses, the carceral language found in internal planning documents and correspondence is evident. Village planners used barbed wire fences and ten-feet-deep by fifteen-feet-wide trenches lined with thick sharpened sticks to enclose punitive villages. The purpose of this design was to keep inhabitants in and Mau Mau fighters out of access to their supply chain.⁵⁷ Ideally, villages were established on hillsides with the security post, also referred to as the Home Guard post, situated at the top of the ridge, protected by spike-filled trenches called *punji* moats, with the houses built below in rows.⁵⁸ Drawbridges were also established to ensure guards had interior control of inhabitants with some villages having drawbridges as the main entrance and exit for the entire site.⁵⁹ With the gate placed by the Home Guard security post, these guards could thoroughly control the movement of villagers.⁶⁰ For the administration, this design facilitated greater checks on 'inmates' and better control of the general population.⁶¹ In the 1955 annual report for Embu District, it goes as far as confirming the 'incarceration' of civilians in villages.⁶² In an interview, Grace Kanguniu describes Kamatu village as having two gates with officers manning them. She depicts the 'entire place' as being 'well-fortified' as the gate 'would be brought down with a rope whenever they wanted to get in or out'.⁶³

⁵³ Sir Eric Griffith-Jones Memoir, Weston Library, Mss. Afr.s.2213, fo. 12.

⁵⁴ Dan Stone, *Concentration camps: a very short introduction* (Oxford, 2017), p. 5.

⁵⁵ Elkins, *Imperial reckoning*, p. 236.

⁵⁶ Thompson, 'Humanitarian principles put to the test', p. 59.

⁵⁷ Elkins, *Imperial reckoning*, p. 241.

⁵⁸ Kikuyu Villages and Home Guard Posts, London, TNA, CO, 1066/9, fo. 729/40.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, fo. 729/44.

⁶⁰ Branch, *Defeating Mau Mau*, p. 108.

⁶¹ Mau Mau unrest; Action after Operation Anvil; Operations in 1955, London, TNA, FCO, 141/5703, fo. 20.

⁶² Annual Report – Embu District, 1955, Nairobi, Kenya National Archive, DC/EBU 1/1/14, fo. 7.

⁶³ Grace Njoki Kanguniu, interview, Nyeri County, 26 Apr. 2019.

This was a stark comparison to the images the Information Department circulated in public relation materials. Village playgrounds, village shops, women drinking tea with one another, and women learning new crafts together are among those used to portray these villages.⁶⁴ These photographs depict a 'model village' designed for loyalists rather than Mau Mau sympathizers. The Information Department was instrumental in controlling the narrative of events taking place in Kenya. The Information Department shared newsletters, photographs, and reports as part of a propaganda strategy against the Mau Mau. To manipulate public perceptions of the brutal methods deployed in the colonies, Britain undermined activists' criticisms of these measures and challenged the credibility of these complaints.⁶⁵ Staged photographs were an important tool in this process.⁶⁶ As Caroline Elkins argues, 'Mau Mau was as much about propaganda as it was about reality.'⁶⁷ The Information Department worked closely with the public relations officer based in the London Colonial Office to chronicle unfolding events with a particular effort to present Mau Mau atrocities and heavily control and sanitize details of Britain's counterinsurgency strategy.⁶⁸

Military strategists used the material culture and the security-led design of the villages to effectively create an environment whereby those villagized experienced a sense of imprisonment. Esther explains how she and those forcibly resettled into the same location as her 'were encamped'.⁶⁹ Later in the interview, she expands on this and stresses: 'I told you we were encamped. Although we were told that we were being protected, we felt like people in detention camps because there was nothing you could do.'⁷⁰ Esther describes how she felt like she had lost full control of what she could do. Esther associates the space that she was in to be far more punitive in nature than that which is associated with the term 'village'. At another stage of her interview, Esther explains that 'we looked like caged people. Like people in prison because you could not go out.'⁷¹ This quote encapsulates how this experience was embodied and further supports the evidence which situates the villagization scheme firmly within Britain's carceral landscape built to uphold colonial power and control.

⁶⁴ Kikuyu Villages and Home Guard Posts, London, TNA, CO, 1066/9, fo. 17; Kenya, 1944–62, London, TNA, ID, 10/158, fos. 10 and 11.

⁶⁵ Brian Drohan, *Brutality in an age of human rights: activism and counterinsurgency at the end of the British empire* (New York, NY, 2017), p. 4.

⁶⁶ For assessments into the histories and ethics of humanitarian and war photography, see for example Heide Fehrenbach and Davide Rodogno, eds., *Humanitarian photography: a history* (Cambridge, 2015).

⁶⁷ Elkins, *Imperial reckoning*, p. 46.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 46.

⁶⁹ Esther, interview, Nyeri County, 26 Apr. 2019. Esther requested that only her first name be shared.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

II

While villagization was designed to physically secure the movement of Gikūyū society, internal surveillance strategies were of paramount importance to ‘prevent the re-establishment of Mau Mau activity’.⁷² The colonial administration was aware that by concentrating vast numbers of supposed Mau Mau adherents into tight quarters, anti-government resistance could easily manifest.⁷³ State surveillance did not only come in the form of guard look-out posts, characteristic of this form of concentration, though these were important components. Monitoring permeated the day-to-day activities enforced on those inside the villages, the rules which inhabitants had to follow, and the ways their living quarters were designed. Village organizers designed individual huts to improve guard visibility of those inside. To enable tighter monitoring, Sophia describes an integral part of this design when depicting her village hut:

The windows were two and they are facing the post. So, in the morning, you are supposed to open the windows, you open the windows, sweep, and put ashes on the ground and sweep and make the bed...So, you will cover that and there was an inspection planned by the health officers, and the guards would make sure, and so they would use the binoculars to see which house window is not open, they would know and send the guards there to check.⁷⁴

By forcing women to build their huts with windows facing the security post, the colonial state was able to occupy its gaze on the living quarters of all inhabitants. Living huts became de facto cells. Using binoculars and the watchtower to look out for illegitimate activity and combining this with a physical presence of guards near the huts themselves, village security could effectively uphold its surveillance strategies.

This method drew from carceral traditions of the colonial state and was reflected in the design of detention camps introduced as part of the Pipeline. By designing sites in this way, it reduced the number of those needed to exercise power while at the same time increasing the number of inmates being monitored.⁷⁵ Though there were far fewer guards in the villages than those villagized, women and girls were highly aware of the village hierarchies.⁷⁶ Punitive spaces designed in this way were key symbols of colonial control and its ‘violent imposition’ on colonized peoples.⁷⁷ Eleanor O’Gorman has presented similar findings in her work on Zimbabwean women experiencing

⁷² Emergency Organisation, War Council Directives, London, TNA, FCO, 141/5688, fo. 1/1.

⁷³ Feichtinger, “A great reformatory”, pp. 52–3.

⁷⁴ Interview with Sophia.

⁷⁵ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and punish: the birth of the prison* (London, 2020; orig. edn 1975), pp. 199–201. For a history on the imposition of prisons in Britain’s colonial rule in Africa, see Katherine Bruce-Lockhart, *Carceral afterlives: prisons, detention, and punishment in postcolonial Uganda* (Athens, OH, 2022), pp. 22–30.

⁷⁶ Foucault, *Discipline and punish*, p. 204.

⁷⁷ Bruce-Lockhart, *Carceral afterlives*, p. 4.

'protected villages' during the liberation war. The central fortress which housed village security personnel was surrounded by the accommodation structures for villagers. This surveillance was an integral theme in the testimonies O'Gorman compiled.⁷⁸

In addition, local administrators set curfews to keep inhabitants in their huts during the night. Between the hours of 9 pm and 5 am, guards prohibited anyone from leaving their huts. Guards closely monitored huts in the villages during the evening and night to ensure inhabitants were not holding illicit meetings. Agnes Wanjiru Mwangi elaborates that guards punished people if they had a light on at night. She explains that if the White officer saw a light, 'he would go there with plenty of hostility'.⁷⁹ Agnes describes him patrolling from his Land Rover at the top of the hill surveying and identifying lights 'in the midst of the houses'.⁸⁰ There was a consistent concern among those in the colonial forces of certain pitfalls of villagization. In some cases, guards extended these curfews for up to twenty-three hours at a time, or for periods of a week to ten days. Esther describes, 'you see, a curfew was issued. A curfew of seven days. In the house, you could not open the door or window...if you opened you would be shot.'⁸¹ This meant inhabitants had extremely limited access to water and food whilst the curfew was in place, and as Esther further expands, 'we lived in darkness inside there. You would go to the toilet right there...We lived like that. We spent seven days locked inside. Yes, because of the curfew.'⁸² Preventing people from using the shared latrines outside of the huts was a cruel way to coerce people into submission. Esther's testimony shows that families were forced to relieve themselves in front of one another and remain in that squalor for the duration of the curfew.

The colonial administration and security forces saw women as particularly vulnerable and easier to pressure and break when gathering intelligence. This is unsurprising when considering Western depictions of men and women in conflict.⁸³ Officials therefore held compulsory propaganda meetings, known as *barazas*, alongside these curfews and food denial tactics. By creating a space for confession and indoctrination, further pressure was applied on inhabitants to open up about their involvement in the Mau Mau or share any intelligence they had on insurgent activity.⁸⁴ These public confessions sometimes led to convictions and the subsequent hanging of individuals convicted of murdering loyalists.⁸⁵ The colonial government exploited the assumption that women have an affinity with peace, whereas men have a connection to war

⁷⁸ Eleanor O'Gorman, *The front line runs through every woman: women and local resistance in the Zimbabwean liberation war* (Woodbridge, 2011), p. 96.

⁷⁹ Agnes Wanjiru Mwangi, interview, Murang'a County, 20 Apr. 2019.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

⁸¹ Interview with Esther.

⁸² *Ibid.*

⁸³ Jean B. Elshtain, *Women and war* (Brighton, 1987), p. 4.

⁸⁴ Susan L. Carruthers, *Winning hearts and minds: British governments, the media and colonial counter-insurgency, 1944-1960* (London, 1995), p. 91.

⁸⁵ David Anderson, *Histories of the hanged: Britain's dirty war in Kenya and the end of empire* (London, 2015), p. 296.

and violence. In his telegram to the then secretary of state for the colonies, Alan Lennox-Boyd, in August 1955, Governor Baring applauded the success that village *barazas* were having on the war effort. Baring emphasized that women were giving up a great deal of information leading to the capture of Mau Mau fighters.⁸⁶ By channelling such concerted efforts toward women, by watching their every move, and by controlling their time, the colonial government gained traction in breaking this support for the enemy.

These mechanisms of coercion manifested in women and girls regulating their own behaviour closely. Sophia explains that in Kamandura village, 'we would not assemble. Not more than two people. Not even three people...the women would not go to the neighbour; you stay in your house.'⁸⁷ The colonial state had created an environment whereby inhabitants were inescapably aware of the watching eye of guards and potential informants. To mitigate this in exceptional circumstances, Sophia explains: 'if you don't have salt, the kids would be the messengers to either take your food to your neighbour, ask for salt'.⁸⁸ Women knew that children possessed a more fluid use of this dangerous space, with them being much smaller and agile and able to move at nightfall more easily undetected. With children having been such instrumental actors in transporting messages to and between forest fighters, these skills were reapplied and readapted in the villages.⁸⁹ Villages also continued to supply insurgent fighters with food and intelligence. Women put themselves at risk to sneak food out of the villages and hide it close by for insurgent fighters to locate.⁹⁰

III

The colonial state used the built environment to extend power and scrutiny over the wider population. It was not, however, the singular result of the built environment of villagization that gave these spaces a specific meaning to those inside. As cultural geographers show, landscapes are culturally coded and can be subjectively experienced.⁹¹ While the physical objects of the villages endorsed a 'prison-like' environment as intended, how these territories were physically experienced by those inside is a key area of exploration. The spaces formed by the villagization scheme enabled the colonial government to enact menace against the African population in a much more centralized and targeted way.⁹² Violence could be unexpected, with no safe

⁸⁶ Emergency Organisation, London, TNA, FCO, 141/6615, fo. 18.

⁸⁷ Interview with Sophia.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Stacey Hynd, 'Small warriors? Children and youth in colonial insurgencies and counterinsurgency, ca. 1945–1960', *Comparative Studies in Society and History: An International Quarterly*, 62 (2020), pp. 684–713, at pp. 698–9.

⁹⁰ Grace W. Mwathe, Nyeri County, 26 Apr. 2019, and Susan Wanjiru Giteru, interview, Nyeri County, 30 Apr. 2019.

⁹¹ Tõnu Viik, 'Human spatiality: a cultural phenomenology of landscapes and places', *Problemas*, 79 (2011), pp. 103–14, at p. 105.

⁹² On menace and colonial violence, see Homi Bhabha, 'Of mimicry and man: the ambivalence of colonial discourse', *Discipleship: A Special Issue on Psychoanalysis*, 28 (1984), pp. 125–33.

havens to escape it. While surveillance strategies were used to control villagers, physical forms of punishment were widespread, enacted publicly, and could be accelerated at a moment's notice.

Guards routinely terrorized women and girls, and they enacted this extremely close to home. Sophia details the 'frightening experience' of witnessing guards torch the roofs of huts where inhabitants were suspected of aiding forest fighters from their village. Sophia explains 'it was part of persecution and to make people submissive'.⁹³ She reveals that when it did happen, it took place consistently at eight o'clock in the evening, when families were in their homes having dinner. Due to the direction of wind, this could have a detrimental impact on surrounding huts as they were so close to one another, and other roofs could also catch alight. Sophia recounts people mobilizing to remove the grass from their roofs to prevent it catching on fire and waiting until the early hours of the morning to rebuild.⁹⁴ The predictability of this intrusion is evident in Sophia's testimony. She describes this punishment as a routine where women became prepared and well practised to avoid further destruction. Infrastructure dedicated to family and social reproduction was not safe in the villages. Similar tactics had been deployed in the initial removal of families from their homesteads and into the villages. By destroying these homesteads, the colonial administration ensured that people could not return to these properties and prevented insurgent fighters from inhabiting them. The traditional 'scorched-earth' military tactic has been employed regularly in warfare, notably by the British in the Second South African War.⁹⁵ This form of arson is also a deliberately frightening tactic to deploy as it generates a spectacle which enhances the aim to intimidate.⁹⁶

While living huts were key sites where women experienced terror tactics, atrocities were particularly prevalent in the Home Guard posts. These areas became part of a shared consciousness and association of terror among the village populations. While Agnes conducted her interview in Gīkūyū, she used the English term 'private' to describe this post in her village. As she recalls, Home Guards 'had a house that they would call private that they used to monitor the entire camp'.⁹⁷ This supposedly private post became far too familiar to women and girls in the villages. Descriptions of the *ndaki*, translating to a cell-like structure in the Home Guard post, emerge in Grace Kanguniu's and Agnes's testimonies as key places associated with physical violence and torture enacted by security personnel.⁹⁸ Screening was a vital component in the so-called rehabilitation process and this practice sits at the centre of the human rights

⁹³ Interview with Sophia.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

⁹⁵ J. R. Jewell, 'Using barbaric methods in South Africa: the British concentration camp policy during the Anglo-Boer war', *Scientia Militaria - South African Journal of Military Studies*, 31 (2012), pp. 1-18, at p. 1.

⁹⁶ Gemma Clark, 'Arson in modern Ireland: fire and protest before the famine', in Donald MacRaild and Kyle Hughes, eds., *Crime, violence and the Irish in the nineteenth century* (Liverpool, 2017), pp. 211-26, at p. 215.

⁹⁷ Interview with Agnes.

⁹⁸ Interviews with Grace Kanguniu and Agnes. Also Elkins, *Imperial reckoning*, p. 76.

abuses that the British government acknowledged following the High Court case. Exploration of the screening processes permeating villagization is still in its infancy.⁹⁹

Expanding the oral history evidence among those who were villagized demonstrates some of the similarities in experiences of those villagized and those detained. Grace Kanguniu's testimony is particularly important when considering how areas in the Home Guard post operated as prisons and torture chambers. Grace Kanguniu was actively involved in the Mau Mau, working as a messenger for forest fighters in the Tumu Tumu region. She was highly revered among this branch of the Mau Mau, with insurgents giving her the Mau Mau name Kanguniu after leading a group to safety to a place called Nguniu. Grace Kanguniu helped them avoid capture from the encroaching colonial forces. In 1954, Grace Kanguniu was villagized; she was fourteen years old. During her time in Kamatu village, guards took her to the security post under suspicion of her involvement to the Mau Mau. It was here where she experienced screening.

Guards interrogated Grace Kanguniu and she sustained severe bodily harm in this process. It is now known that this was a widespread reality for those screened.¹⁰⁰ Grace Kanguniu recalls guards beating her, forcing her to live in a cell with no roof during the wet season, and torturing her in an attempt for her to denounce the Mau Mau oath. Oaths had been a vital tool used to unify members of the Mau Mau.¹⁰¹ Grace Kanguniu was imprisoned at this post for 'almost a year', further clarifying that 'we must have stayed there for six to seven months'.¹⁰² During this time, she recounted being beaten while naked, describing how 'you'd have a wet cloth placed here so that when you're beaten, you'd feel the shock'.¹⁰³ As the administration used these forms of torture to extract information from insurgents and force them to denounce the oath, Grace Kanguniu was firm in explaining that 'no way could you tell them that you have taken the oath'.¹⁰⁴

Grace Kanguniu's testimony not only reveals that screening took place in villages, but it also locates where this specific torture occurred in the overall village geography and how visible this was to others. This expands our understanding that the security posts were not only structures built for surveillance purposes, but also integral areas to imprison, torture, and extend the colonial

⁹⁹ Elkins, *Imperial reckoning*, ch. 8; Anderson, 'Guilty secrets', pp. 294–5.

¹⁰⁰ The evidence shared in this article contributes to the limited, but significant, written memoirs and biographies of women who contributed to the Mau Mau effort and were reprimanded for it. See for example Wambui Waikyaki Otieno, *Mau Mau's daughter: a life history* (Boulder, CO, 1998); Wairimu Nderitu, *Mūkami Kĩmathi: Mau Mau woman freedom fighter* (Nairobi, 2019).

¹⁰¹ Maia Green, 'Mau Mau oathing rituals and political ideology in Kenya: a re-analysis', *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute*, 60 (1990), pp. 69–87, at p. 76; Maloba, *Mau Mau and Kenya*, p. 60. Wambui Waikyaki Otieno describes the oathing ceremonies she participated in, which shows the corresponding aims of male and female Mau Mau fighters. See Otieno, *Mau Mau's daughter*, pp. 33–8.

¹⁰² Interview with Grace Kanguniu.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

state's terror on suspected Mau Mau participants. The security posts were situated at the most visible and highest point of the villages. While the guards may have described this place as 'private' to Agnes, there was nothing private about them forcibly handling a woman or girl up to the security post to face interrogation or imprisonment. Other inhabitants could watch and hear this happen from their huts.¹⁰⁵

Evidence suggests that Home Guard posts were key sites whereby colonial guards sexually assaulted female inhabitants.¹⁰⁶ As David Anderson and Julianne Weis reveal, male guards dominated these fortified posts, acting with full autonomy as the colonial state did not prosecute most alleged perpetrators. The view among colonial officials was that these prosecutions did more harm 'to the morale of the security services and undermined the counterinsurgency campaign'.¹⁰⁷ A perfect cocktail for abuse was formed. It is important to note that loyalist women also faced this threat. The British Red Cross Society had sent a volunteer welfare worker in April 1955 to live in a security post to support inhabitants in the surrounding villages. It was not long before she requested a transfer having been reprimanded by the village headman who had a 'weakness for women' which she 'would not oblige him' in.¹⁰⁸

Anderson and Weis's study uses the phrases 'women' and 'females', but eyewitness testimonies offer more nuance in understanding the breadth of the age range of victims of sexual violence in the villages. As Sophia's testimony attests, girls in the villages were particularly vulnerable because their mothers were away from the village each day for forced labour. She describes this as a 'daily-threat' that meant 'girls were raped and they were terrorized'.¹⁰⁹ In addition to this, during the 2016 further witness hearings held at the Royal Courts of Justice in London, 'Ms M' alleged that during her time in Kibichoi village she was raped by the headman.¹¹⁰ She was twelve years old at the time and recalls being taken from her hut in the village to the Home Guard post where she was forced to the ground and raped.¹¹¹ Grace Kanguniu explains that girls were sexually assaulted and then subsequently beaten for having 'done immoral things'.¹¹² This illuminates the double burden girls endured. Not only were they extremely vulnerable to sexual violence, but members of their communities also blamed them for this 'immorality' and the shame this brought culturally. Sophia's aunt was 'first raped, and then forced' to marry the man who raped her since he had impregnated her. The man who had raped her was a sub-chief serving that village. As Deniz Kandiyoti shows, it was often in

¹⁰⁵ For a listing analysis of memories of colonial violence, see for example Nancy Rose Hunt, *A nervous state: violence, remedies, and reverie in colonial Congo* (Durham, NC, 2016), p. 31.

¹⁰⁶ Branch, *Defeating Mau Mau*, pp. 109–10.

¹⁰⁷ David Anderson and Julianne Weis, 'The prosecution of rape in wartime: evidence from Kenya's Mau Mau rebellion, 1952–60', *Law & History Review*, 36 (2018), pp. 267–294, at p. 282.

¹⁰⁸ Women's Work Tumutumu Community Development, Notices and Correspondence, 1954–5, Nairobi, Presbyterian Church of East Africa, II/CP/4.

¹⁰⁹ Interview with Sophia.

¹¹⁰ Individuals remained anonymous during the hearing process.

¹¹¹ Fieldnotes, Royal Courts of Justice, London, 20 July 2016.

¹¹² Interview with Grace Kanguniu.

girls' and women's best interest to remain in these marriages to ensure men took 'responsibility for the reproductive consequences of sexual activity'.¹¹³

It is evident that guards and colonial officers did not always rely on their closed off *ndaki* to violate women and girls; women and girls also experienced this violence and humiliation far closer to home. While those who were too young to participate in forced labour outside of the villages were a particularly vulnerable group, the presence of family members was not necessarily a protection. As Elkins's research has shown, guards raped women of all ages, sometimes repeatedly, and often in front of those they shared their hut with. In one example given by Elkins, a guard raped a woman in front of her father-in-law. Elkins also claims that guards raped mothers and daughters in the same hut, at the same time. It is important to note that in Elkins's findings, it was not just the Home Guards who were rapists. It was often the British colonial officers known as 'Johnnies' who raped women and girls first and then left the victims for Home Guards.¹¹⁴

The visibility of guard violence was exacerbated by the entrenched de facto carceral status given to those forcibly resettled. The concentration of vast numbers of people in a close confined area ensured little happened behind closed doors. Guards used public beatings as a form of punishment for those who did not follow orders or those they suspected of aiding forest fighters. Sophia states that if someone did not follow orders, Home Guards beat them with the 'big sticks' and recalls people being beaten to death. She remembers people saying 'enough!' to the gruelling work regime or Home Guard threats and then, 'they'd be beaten to a point of death and some even died. Those who refuse to be raped would be beaten to death.'¹¹⁵ Sophia goes on to state: 'if you argued with the Home Guards you'd be seen as though you want to start a riot, you'd be beaten to death'.¹¹⁶ As Sophia's testimony validates, a mere verbal disagreement could result in the public murder of an inhabitant. Guards shot or hanged women in a central location of the villages if they suspected them of aiding forest fighters.¹¹⁷ Esther detailed a particularly brutal experience from when she was fourteen years old, showing that children were not immune from public beatings. Home Guards beat her so badly that she could not remember how it ended, she just remembers waking up in hospital. At this stage of the interview Esther became emotional and showed the scarring on her neck from this attack. A *gakunia* (informant) had identified her as she stood in a queue, waiting to attend school.¹¹⁸ While manufacturing a topography of terror in the villages was a key component to

¹¹³ Deniz Kandiyoti, 'Bargaining with patriarchy', *Gender & Society*, 2 (1988), pp. 274–290, at p. 284.

¹¹⁴ Elkins, *Imperial reckoning*, pp. 247 and 254.

¹¹⁵ Interview with Sophia.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁷ Elkins, *Imperial reckoning*, p. 246. Public hangings have historically been used as a mechanism for combating threats to law and order; this was prevalent in colonial Kenya but explicitly disallowed publicly during the emergency period. See for example Anderson, *Histories of the hanged*; Stacey Hynd, 'Murder and mercy: capital punishment in colonial Kenya, 1909–1956', *International Journal of African Historical Research*, 45 (2012), pp. 81–101.

¹¹⁸ Interview with Esther.

villagization, the suffering women and girls experienced can be mapped outside of the village territories.

Finally, Home Guards frequently deployed humiliation tactics to punish inhabitants individually and collectively. Esther explains that beatings were common punishment for those who failed to turn up to forced labour on time. Esther describes how 'some would have their clothes taken off and they would be caned naked'.¹¹⁹ Guards who stripped villagers naked before beating them publicly sought to terrorize and shame these individuals in an even more perverse way. It demonstrated that guards wielded ownership over the bodies they controlled in villages. Today, international criminal law considers forced nudity as a war crime and recognizes it as a form of sexual violence.¹²⁰ Scholarship dedicated to the human rights abuses in the detention and works camps in Kenya has determined forced nudity and the violation of bodies as widespread practice among torture methods. Here, in the so-called villages, this violation was endured on a far more public stage, with all inhabitants able to see. In seeking to understand how these levels of violence persisted with such autonomy, Agnes explains: 'you know the Home Guards did as they pleased'.¹²¹ While the colonial state's scapegoat for the human rights abuses inflicted on Kenyans during this conflict has been the African Home Guards, historians challenge this. The scholarship has determined that those at all levels of the colonial administration inflicted or condoned abuse and ill-treatment.¹²²

IV

In attempting to break the backbone of the Mau Mau and prevent civilian support for the insurgency, Britain deployed a tried and tested strategy: punitive forced resettlement. These sites were instruments of colonial power and were used by the administration to negotiate for the control of the bodies, the resources, and the social-cultural structures of those inside, despite justifying the strategy on humanitarian grounds. While it is evident that individual perpetrators enacted various forms of coercion and violence, the built environment, and the punitive design of these so-called 'villages' facilitated this behaviour. The modalities of power in the villages – mutually embedded through the formation of the space and through the actions of those governing it – were effective tools in curating a geography of terror where the lives and bodies of those inside were violated daily by the watchful eye and the physical abuse of colonial state actors.

The colonial government called these spaces, 'villages'. While the term 'village' may conjure up an image of a quaint rural setting populated with homes and community spaces, the Kenyan 'villages' were simply not like this. The

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*

¹²⁰ Maria Sjöholm, *Gender-sensitive norm interpretation by regional human rights law systems* (Leiden, 2017), p. 345.

¹²¹ Interview with Agnes.

¹²² See for example Anderson and Weiss, 'The prosecution of rape in wartime'; Anderson, 'Guilty secrets'; Elkins, *Imperial reckoning*.

villages implemented as part of villagization were controlling, carceral-styled sites whereby the material culture and blueprints of the policy upheld this purpose. Drawbridges, spike-filled moats, government surveillance lookouts, and forced labour regimes juxtapose starkly from the characteristics of a village. Depicting these spaces as villages enabled the colonial government's real policy to go largely undetected and ensured it avoided accountability regarding the oppressive enactment of its population-centric counterinsurgency campaign. The British colonial government could attempt to avoid any international outcry that it was re-establishing concentration camps that had caused thousands of deaths in the Second South African War, by instead calling these villages. Evidence explored in this article, however, situates these spaces into a longer tradition of Britain's carceral landscape within colonial states.

The villages in Kenya were male-controlled, militarized spaces; areas that women and their children largely inhabited. The colonial government was aware at the outset of the campaign that Gikũyũ women were playing a powerful and effective role in sustaining Mau Mau activity. Merely resettling women to separate the fish from the water was not enough in the eyes of military strategists. If the colonial state were to fully achieve control and the Kenyans associated with anti-colonial action were to become more governable, officials deemed coercion on multiple levels as necessary. While security forces saw women as integral actors facilitating insurgent activity, the enduring stereotypes of women being 'malleable' generated the belief that women were easier to pressure and break. Monitoring the day-to-day lives of women, forcing confessions through screening, food denial, and public *barazas*, the colonial government sought to target and punish Gikũyũ women and girls as a key component to its campaign.

The memories of former inhabitants ascribe deep-rooted meaning to the places constructed inside these villages and their memories of violence embody the buildings which made up the villagization scheme. Drawbridges restricted their freedom. The *ndaki* cells imprisoned them. Individual huts were set on fire and destroyed. While little remains physically of these strategic villages in Kenya today, a stark comparison to the enduring structures of the former colonial detention camps now part of independent Kenya's prison system, traces of their existence can be located. Across central Kenya, the ditches which once signified the external perimeters of these sites are visible. Cooking stones which would have once been inside the living huts where families shared meals can be found. Some of the women interviewed for this research still live on the sites where they were once encamped. They may now live in new structures, with freedom to move and live their lives as they see fit, but the memory of villagization is ever present. Women's testimonies shared here reveal more broadly how the violent landscape of conflict continues to manifest in post-conflict societies. Their memories are significant contributions to the wider legacy of British colonialism and the development of its carceral enterprise.

Acknowledgements. The author wishes to thank Heike Schmidt, Stacey Hynd, and Francesca Baldwin for their feedback on earlier versions of this article, and the editor and reviewers for their thoughtful engagement and feedback.

Competing interests. The author declares none.

Cite this article: Rebisz B (2024). Mapping Women's Memories of Britain's Forced Resettlement Scheme in Late Colonial Kenya, c. 1953–1960. *The Historical Journal* 67, 1045–1065. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0018246X24000438>