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“It should have been Mau Mau Sex Sex...”: Exploitation, the British Empire in Danger and the Scam American Documentary *Mau Mau* (1954)

Richard A. Voeltz
Cameron University

Abstract

When the British Empire returned after a hiatus during World War II, the tone of these feature films were very different. Many of the films were set against a background of colonial insurgencies in Malaya, Cyprus, and Kenya. These films had to walk a fine line between portraying duty and dedication to empire with a “British sense of fairness” in the face of coming decolonization. But deserving special attention is the American exploitation documentary *Mau Mau* (1954). This documentary may have started out as a clearly British slanted project about the Mau Mau revolt in Kenya but became a controversial atrocity/exploitation film unintentionally verging on being a “mockumentary”. Documentary, or “mockumentary”, *Mau Mau* is truly sui generis, and should be appreciated as the gem it is for understanding the American fascination with Africa, Kenya, and the Mau Mau in the context of 1950s popular culture. The film has previously been subsumed under the exploitation genre, not being associated with the cinema of the British Empire in danger as a so-called documentary that sanitized the dismantling of the British Empire. Here is the nexus between atrocity/exploitation films and the Empire in danger films.

Keywords: Mau Mau, Kenya, Exploitation, British Empire

When imperial cinema returned after the hiatus of World War II it had to confront new realities of the Cold War, cooperation not confrontation with colonials, decolonization, insurgency, American ascendancy, the rapidly diminishing influence of British power, and the end of the British Empire itself. The theme of the empire in danger dominated the new contemporary empire films of the 1950s, particularly the British-made ones. There were the colonial police films such as *Where No Vultures Fly* (1951), *West of Zanzibar* (1954), *Nor the Moon by Night* (1958) and *Pacific Destiny* (1956). *The Planters Wife* (1952), starring Jack Hawkins and Claudette Colbert, dealt with the “communist” insurgency in Malaya. *The Seventh Dawn*, a British/American United Artists 1964 production, starring William Holden and Capucine, also dealt with the same Malayan Emergency. *Windom’s Way* (1957), generally agreed to take place in Malaya, represents the moral power and benevolence of British rule in the face of change. Then came the films set in Kenya, *Simba* (1955) *Safari* with Victor Mature (1956) and *Something of Value* (1957), featuring Rock Hudson and Sidney Poitier, based upon the novel by the American tough guy writer Robert Ruark, and directed by another American Richard Brooks. The American documentary *Mau Mau* (1955) started its life as a sober, clearly British slanted, documentary, but became a controversial atrocity/exploitation film, unintentionally verging on being a “mockumentary”. A “mockumentary” can be defined as a motion-picture or television program that takes the form of a serious documentary in order to satirize its subject. This American documentary is not to be confused with another documentary of the same name (*Mau Mau*) produced in 1954 (19 minutes) by the Johannesburg-based production company African Film Productions and directed by Donald Swanson, who also directed the black South African classic *Jim Comes to Jo’burg* (1949)

and *The Magic Garden* (1961). While much more moderate than its American namesake, it nonetheless sensationalizes the Mau Mau. (Colonial Film) Also the film should not be mistaken for the *Mau Mau* segment of the *Black Man's Land Trilogy* (1970-73) a pro-Mau Mau documentary produced and directed by Anthony Howarth and David R. Koff. Documentary, Or "mockumentary", *Mau Mau*, truly *sui generis*, has been long neglected as the gem it is for understanding the popular American fascination with Africa, Kenya, and the Mau Mau in the context of the popular culture of the 1950s, or simply subsumed under the exploitation film genre, not being associated with the cinema of empire at all as a so-called documentary. Joe Cowans in his recent comprehensive study of "empire" films in the 1950s termed *Mau Mau* a "...low budget exploitation documentary...which has little to do with Kenya..." (Cowans, 163)

For the purposes of this paper American actor William Holden provides the perfect introduction and transition from Malaya and the cinema of the Empire in danger to Kenya, the Mau Mau, and the exploitation documentary of the same name. Just prior to his commitment for his role in *The Seventh Dawn* with Capucine he had done a film called *The Lion* (1962) set in Kenya. Holden had had a long standing interest in Kenya since he and his partners bought the old Mawingo Hotel in 1959 and turned it into the Mount Kenya Safari Club. He even wanted to create a full movie studio on the premises. Kenya was on the verge on independence, the Mau Mau had been subdued, and the British settlers still remained an influential force in the country. But the Mount Kenya Safari Club not surprisingly operated at a loss for its first years. As Bob Thomas noticed, "To most American tourists in the early 1960s, Kenya seemed distant and dangerous, the specter of marauding Mau Mau still vivid in their minds." But Holden could take the losses for "He had discovered in Africa his spiritual home." (Thomas, 153) He expressed his passion during an interview with *Africana* magazine as quoted by Thomas:

There are two things that happen to you when you come to Kenya. You can regenerate yourself here, and you can reconstitute yourself. A few years ago, the centers of Europe were the places to go to enrich yourself culturally. It's still important for many Americans who must find their cultural roots. But, in my opinion, once this has been done, there's little to be had from Europe in terms of plain enjoyment. Kenya offers the opportunity for a much deeper cultural experience. It is, after all, the cradle of man, as Leakey and others have shown. And because the concept of learning and the quest for knowledge is so much more intense than it was, say, two generations ago, this is of great interest to people. On top of all that, you have this marvelous climate and an infinite variety of landscapes within a relatively small area.

"Bill once rhapsodized to a friend, 'Every day in Africa might be your last. The sense of anticipation keeps you thrillingly alive.'" (Thomas, 153-154) Holden had not only bought into the myth of the Great White Hunter but also the mythology of the white European settlers in Kenya that had proved so intractable during the Mau Mau Rebellion, and so useful for the British government.

"Never Told Before! Filmed in Africa! In Flaming Color! See Savage Jungle Rituals that Will Make You Gasp! Cult Secrets of Barbaric People Practicing Black Magic! Weird, Mysterious Love Rites Performed by Sex-Mad Natives! The Naked Truth! "You Are There! A 20th Century Jungle Massacre! Africa Explodes with Naked Terror! See Women Ravaged by Marauding Night Raiders! The Savage Mau-Mau Blood Ritual!" (*Mau Mau DVD Cover*) Promoted with this lurid advertising campaign, accompanied by lots of pictures of topless African women and African men with machetes, the film *Mau Mau* promised viewers in the 1950s that they would "see the secret killer society massacres that shocked the world raw." (Jane) Elwood Price, a used car dealer, who also had the Rambler dealership in San Bernardino, as well as an amateur film maker, went to

Africa in 1952 to shoot a travel film and just happened to “stumble onto the Mau Mau revolt---he was Johnny on the spot” in Kenya . (*Mau Mau Sex Sex*, audio commentary) Seeking that “...sense of anticipation that keeps you thrillingly alive” *Mau Mau Sex Sex* Audio Commentary) while expecting to film Kenyan wild life while on vacation, he came back with lots of film footage from Kenya, some of which looks clearly staged, and combined it with what looks like newsreel shots, to create a documentary on the Mau Mau revolt in Kenya. This anti-colonial land war of the Kikuyu people against the British colonial authorities and white settlers raged from 1952 to 1960. The term “Mau-Mau” is really just a nonsensical, made up word. The British government responded with overwhelming military force because of the uncontrolled terror expressed by white settlers. Ultimately around 60 white settlers were killed while the death toll among the Kikuyu people may have reached as high as 400,000, many thousands perishing and/or tortured in detention camps. (Elkins) Footage from Price’s film—not the obvious faked stuff—found its way into an acclaimed, and now much used in the college classroom today, documentary *The British Empire in Color* (2002). This is the only Elwood G. Price Mau Mau film and indeed it is the only Elwood G. Price video available. The man’s oeuvre is a brief one. Price then hired Chet Huntley to do the narration written by Dan Sheppard, who also seems to be a just a one trick pony screenwriter. Huntley pointed out the “clash of civilizations”, stating that the Mau Mau” has a cell structure similar to the communists.” He intones how “time is running out” for whites and blacks in Africa. Huntley did the documentary before joining NBC in 1955, and prior to the launching of the famous Huntley-Brinkley Report. In a brief review in the *New York Times Film Review*, which generally panned the film, the reviewer wrote that Huntley gave a “worthy narration.” (Johnson, 41.) In April 1960 Huntley would narrate the NBC News Special Report “Winds of Change” about African decolonization. In his comments about the racial situation in South Africa, Huntley drew the ire of the South African Foreign Minister for speaking of “terror and bloodshed”, describing “...South Africa’s policy of apartheid as going beyond segregation and...flirting with slavery.” (Johnson, 173) Similarly in his earlier narration on Kenya, which he always referred to as a “Travelogue”, while clearly taking a pro-British, pro-white settler position, there is at least some attempt to give a historical background to the revolt. One could say that there was even sympathy expressed for the plight of the Kikuyu. But much more time is spent on atrocities and “savage” blood oaths, as well as many depictions of the British Colonial Governor Evelyn Baring, and even Colonial Secretary Sir Oliver Lyttleton, himself, looking concerned but confident in the face of the pervasive fear of the Mau Mau that existed in the white settler community. Police Commissioner O’Rourke orders a shanty town near Naroibi demolished as a hot bed of Mau Mau activity. Armored cars and RAF units swing into action against Mau Mau cells, with cave hide-outs being blown up. Also there were many shots of white women brandishing and firing revolvers. The white settlers built up a John Wayne type of bravado. There are several shots of burned and mutilated bodies. Elwood Price tried to hawk his film to every major studio, too short in length, and even television, too raw and violent, but had no takers—“Who in America would be interested in Africa in the 1950s?”—so he took the film to Dan Sonney, exploitation film distributor extraordinary, who frequently teamed up with David F. Friedman to produce such classics as *Forbidden Desires*, *Forbidden Adventures*, *Mad Youth*, *Teen Bride*, *Images of Sin*, *Sex Maniac*, and countless other “blood and guts”, “nudie-cutie”, “sex hygiene,” and “volleyball” (nudist) films.

They were truly the exploitation, grindhouse kings of their day. So over the top and campy were these guys that the horror film director Frank Henenlotter, an avid fan of the films of these two schlock-meisters/scamsters , summed it all up with, “Sometimes, watching them, you have to

even wonder if they were made on the planet earth.” (*Mau Mau Sex Sex*) An example would be *Forbidden Adventure* (1930) which Hennenlotter describes as just “jaw dropping”. (*Mau Mau Sex Sex*) Again it was a faux documentary involving explorers who have discovered a tribe of topless women who have sex with chimpanzees and gorillas, or at least extras in cheap custom gorilla suits: prurient, lewd, suggestive, but not pornographic. In the “reality” films dealing with “nudist colonies” as is frequently the case ordinary people do not look particularly attractive in the buff, so Friedman planted attractive, well endowed professional model “ringers” in the midst of the other nudists. (*Mau Mau Sex Sex*) In fact the rise of unfiltered pornography put them out of business. Friedman summed up their philosophy, “A movie is like a flour sack; no matter how many times you shake it, a little more flour comes out.” To which Sonney added, “It it don’t, you just keep changing the title to get some more flour.” (*Mau Mau Sex Sex*) Sonney agreed to distribute the film, but since it needed more “juice” or “flour”, he arranged to add footage of burning huts, and attacks with machetes, all filmed with the use of local blacks on a vacant lot in Los Angeles, against a painted back drop that stood in for Kenya. One can clearly see the actors’ shadows falling on these painted landscapes. Topless African women run around while African men chase them with machetes and spears before reasonably legitimate footage returns to the screen. Joe Rock, legendary producer of *Krakatoa* (1933), helped produce and promote the film. (Shaefer, 287) Sonney particularly needed photo stills and titles to enhance the exploitation, sex angle. The film featured a special designed Lobby Card that an astute user reviewer on IMDb noticed and commented upon:

Of course no newspaper was going to run those ads and even the grind houses couldn’t get away with running posters showing women sans any kind of foundation garment, meaning bra-less and buck-naked. But that was no problem. Rock hired someone to draw palm trees behind the women on the posters and ads, and then draw a branch from that tree covering up whatever was showing that might offend the community. One of the drawings was really artistic as it had a palm shaped leaf shaped like a hand covering a bare bottom. (Adam. IMDb)

It opened in San Francisco on November 12, 1954 and in Los Angeles on February 9, 1955. One critic seemed to buy into the deception writing that scenes of burning native villages were “eye-catching enough, but the scenes of violence, in which men and women [were] butchered, and the scenes of victims after the massacre, [were] on the gruesome side.” But another reviewer saw through the deception: “I have a strong suspicion that, aside from being ludicrous and excessively gory, this scene was reenacted by native ‘actors’; it is hard to believe that the Mau Mau tipped off a photographer they were coming.” (Schaefer, 89) There appears to be no evidence that the film was released outside of the United States. At the time the film would certainly have been deemed inappropriate for public exhibition by official British film censors for both moral and political reasons. TCM.com reports that according to a July 14, 1955 report in the film’s file in the MPAA/PCA collection in the AMPAS (Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences) Library, Joe Rock Productions withdrew its request for a PCA certificate. (Notes) Whether or not American audiences in the 1950s were sophisticated enough to see through such obvious fakery remains open, but anyone sucked into a movie house expecting to see something salacious, rather than something educational, probably left disappointed, but don’t they always. Sonney claimed that “this was not exploitation this was Mau Mau”, a travelogue. And he certainly had to work at making it an exploitation film. He also said he never made any money on the film. “It should have been called Mau Mau Sex Sex...Mau Mau don’t sell... *Mau Mau Sex Sex* sells. .Sex sells”. (*Mau Mau Sex Sex*) Despite Sonney’s disclaimers, the film “...finally managed to pull in a profit.” (Description by Oldies.com) *Mau Mau* not only reveals much about popular attitudes toward the

Mau Mau Emergency in Kenya, it also represents a prime example of exploitation film marketing as done in the 1950s. (Clark, *Sex and Buttered Popcorn*). *Mau Mau* certainly paved the way for a number of “atrocious” pseudo-documentaries that came out in the early 1960s, the most famous being *Mondo Cane* (1964) and *Africa Addio* (1966). (Shaefer, 288-289) Also it is important to remember that as innocent, fun, and campy as many of the exploitation films by Sonney and Friedman appear today, they definitely propagated racism and sexism.

Elwood Price, Don Sonney, and Joe Rock, all sleazy promoters of the first rank, tried to capitalize on the power that Mau Mau held for America and Britain, and indeed much of the world, in the 1950s. Joel Foreman writes:

Like ‘megaton’, ‘sputnik’, and ‘black power’, ‘Mau Mau’ was one of the notable signifiers circulating internationally in the 1950s. Its first documented appearance in the 1948 records of the British East African police was unremarkable at the time, foretelling neither the explosion of American interest when news agencies first reported the 1952 Mau Mau revolt against white rule in Kenya. Carried along first by news reportage, then by a best-selling novel, and finally by a Hollywood film, Mau Mau caught ‘the imagination of the American public’ for five years. (Foreman, 78, Weisbord, 185)

And now one can add the exploitation documentary *Mau Mau* into the brew that helped intoxicate the American cultural discourse on Mau Mau in the 1950s. Carolyn Martin Shaw studied American news sources to understand their reportage on the British suppression of the Mau Mau. She found *Time* magazine to be the most rabid on the fears of communism. Just after the state of emergency was declared, *Time* reported:

Part land hunger, part savage revolution against domineering white men and the bewildering 20th century, the Mau Mau’s blind fury, could, if left unchecked, turn the Crown Colony of Kenya into another Malaya. (*Time*, November 1952: 36)

But the magazine also found issue with the British government’s handling of this serious matter:

Since Nairobi is by and large run by the sons of old Colonel Blimp, the ex-Indian army colonels, the not-so-young younger sons of aristocratic families with hyphenated names, it is not surprising that the embattled farmers explode with numerous complaints about Nairobi’s incompetence and muddle-mindedness. (March 30, 1953: 31. (Shaw, 175)

Time also spent an inordinate amount of print writing about such things as the Mau Mau drinking blood and eating sheep eyes, taking the eyeballs from living people, and drinking menstrual blood and semen cocktails. The maiming and killing of domestic European pets received much attention. A November 3, 1952 article made reference to “the Mau Mau habit of nailing headless cats to their victims’ doors”. (Shaw, 176-177) In *The Maniac*, one of Sonney’s and Friedman’s exploitation flicks, there is a scene where a cat’s eyeball is plucked out and then eaten like a grape and in the British made Mau Mau feature film *Simba* released at the same time as the Price, Rock, and Sonney effort, a headless cat dangles from a tree, much to the horror of stars Dirk Bogarde and Virginia McKenna. While *Time* emphasized the bloody violence of the Mau Mau, it also played the group for laughs with headlines like “Meow-Meows”, “Land of Murder and Muddle”, “Challenge, Then Shoot”, “Mow Them Down”, “Mau Mau In the Cathedral”, and “Bwana Tom Goes to Court”. The name Mau Mau was said to rhyme with “yo-yo”, or “mo-mo”, or even with “bow-wow.” Shaw writes that this “flippant style saturated its reporting”: “If the story was about whites besieged by blacks, the underlying tone smirked that only the “blimpish” British could let

themselves in for this.” (Shaw, 177) It appears that the ” mockumentary” *Mau Mau* and *Time* are not that far apart To praise one as exploitation and the other as respectable middle-brow fare imposes a double standard that is intellectually dishonest. But as Joel Foreman concludes, “...the forces of repression would win the fifties struggle to deny the Mau Mau signifier both in the imagination of the American people and in the highlands of East Africa...” (Foreman, 96) Through magazines just as *Time*, feature films, novels, and with the help of the tawdry intentional schlockumentary or unintentional mockumentary *Mau Mau*, those two words had produced more terror, even fascination, in Cold War America (comparisons with the Ebola scare of 2014 are not far-fetched) than in Kenya or Britain , along with some patronizing and racist humor at the expense of the inhabitants of both places. For Britain and America these machete-wielding terrorists threatened not only a small group of white British settlers, but indeed all of western civilization, as did the science fiction aliens, monsters, sex fiends, drug addicts, nudists, maniacs, voyeurs, fiends, and assorted “perverts” that so inhabited both the mainstream Hollywood and especially the exploitation films of the period.

By 1964 with the release of *The Seventh Dawn* and *The High Bright Sun*, with Dirk Bogarde starring again in one of the only films dealing with the emergency in Cyprus, the cycle of empire in danger films came to an end, perhaps for as simple a reason as the British Empire came to an end, leaving nothing in danger to protect, either by military action, or moral resolution coupled with benevolence. There were never many of them which really deserved the title, for who wanted to be reminded of retreat, even if done for some greater good. These films in their time tried to capture American, Cold War, and world sympathy, by emphasizing the idea of the British Empire, and its presumed western values, as being in mortal danger, as opposed to a British Empire that conquered, subjugated , and oppressed millions around the globe. In a very real sense these two films were the last depicting a parochial British Empire in danger before “Empire” went global in the persona of James Bond in *Dr. No* (1962), where nothing less than world civilization had to be saved. Much the same can be said of the exploitation films of Freidman and Sonney which by the 1960s had been rendered obsolete by real pornography and more sexually daring Hollywood films. Freidman called himself a leader in “...the sexual revolution”....Yet Friedman would lament that “1960 is not a year I recall fondly, financially. The sex-hygiene shows were waning, book sales dropping alarmingly. If the drooling masses wanted to read about sex, they could buy *Playboy*—in that magazine they didn’t even have to puzzle over the printed word.” (*Mau Mau Sex Sex*, Schaefer, 325) This along with the disappearance of the Drive In Movie, and the much more vivid horror, kinky sex, zombie, and “slasher”, along with countless other genres and sub-genres, of exploitation films produced by the likes of, George A. Romero, Hirschell Gordon Lewis, Jack Hill, Jesus Franco, Russ Meyer, Roger Corman, John Waters and John Carpenter made the work of Freidman and Sonney feel quaint and campy. The illegitimate grandchild of *Mau Mau* itself might very well be Ruggero Deodata’s *Cannibal Holocaust* (1980), which contained such extreme violence and carnage that it was even labeled a “snuff film”, as well as earning the number 1 ranking in “The 10 Sickest Exploitation Movies”. (Barone, 1) Trying to create an authentic, true feel to the film, *Cannibal Holocaust* is “... set up as footage from the lost tapes of documentary filmmakers who entered the Amazonian rainforest and never returned home....they run across flesh-eating tribesmen and their *National Geographic*-nude women...tons of authentic looking slaughter....it genuinely feels like jungle-feverish snuff footage.” (Barone, 1) But on a more prosaic level Friedman and Sonney and other “exploitation” filmmakers did very much presage the “reality” television and YouTube of today with its unique blend of fact , suggestion, and manipulation.

Eric Schaefer has written that the, “...subject of atrocity films worked in concert with the conservative ideological stance of most other exploitation genres....The postwar years included civil wars, slaughters provoked by political uprisings, and incipient terrorism.” (Schaefer, 288) Here is the nexus between the atrocity/exploitation film and the Empire in danger films, both “...forged in the years of fear and cold war dogma.” (Schaefer 287) While being mildly exploitive even in its time, the documentary *Mau Mau* most certainly contributed to the politically conservative notion of western superiority and the myth of righteous transition to independence manufactured by the British as regards their former African colonies. After all the film’s opening credits have the following written acknowledgement: “We express our gratitude to those members of the Kenya Government and Police Department, Reserve and Home Guard units, loyal chiefs and members of the Kikuyu tribe and officers and men of the 39th Brigade, the King’s African Rifles, and the Royal Air Force, whose help made this picture possible.” (*Mau Mau*) Much of this colonial myth making has now been demolished, including the long-standing notion of British competence in counter-insurgency during the much-hyped Malayan and Mau Mau Emergencies. (Mumford, Hale) The true scale, magnitude, and cruelty of the British suppression of the Mau Mau and Kikuyu people, along with the campaign of lies and deception designed to preserve the British sunny side of decolonization, has recently received extensive treatment. (Anderson, Elkins) And now thousands of people are coming forward with legal claims against the British for mistreatment during those last years of empire. Ten Thousand former prisoners of empire in Kenya may be in line for compensation if talks bring a legal settlement. (*Kenya Mau Mau*, 14) Other possible claims include Cyprus where the Red Cross documented hundreds of cases of torture during the 1950s EOKA insurgency. In Aden Amnesty International found that British forces were torturing prisoners in the mid-1960s. And in Malaysia families of 24 rubber plantation workers who were massacred by British troops in 1948 at Batang Kali are seeking a public inquiry. (Hale, *Mau Mau victims*, 21) Secret government files from the final years of the British Empire, first made known to lawyers for the Kenyans, were still being concealed as of 2013 despite a pledge by William Hague, the British foreign secretary, that they would be declassified and opened to the public. Limited access to those documents has now occurred. The withheld files are among a huge cache of documents that remained hidden for decades at an undisclosed Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) archive. (Englehart, 50-51) They could rewrite the history of the last days of the British Empire as portrayed not only in the feature films of the empire in danger , and scam atrocity/exploitation documentaries such as *Mau Mau*, but also as presented in the current historiography as well. (Hale, 6-7, 287-288, 298)

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Richard A. Voeltz is Professor Emeritus of History and Humanities at Cameron University in Lawton, Oklahoma USA. He received his Ph.D in History from the University of California, Los Angeles. He has published *German Colonialism and the South West Africa Company* as well as numerous articles and reviews. His current research involves the relationship between history, film, and the new digital media.
