

## THE PSYCHOLOGY OF REBELLION: COLONIAL MEDICAL RESPONSES TO DISSENT IN BRITISH EAST AFRICA

BY SLOAN MAHONE  
*University of Oxford*

**ABSTRACT:** This article opens with a retelling of colonial accounts of the ‘mania of 1911’, which took place in the Kamba region of Kenya Colony. The story of this ‘psychic epidemic’ and others like it would be recounted over the years as evidence depicting the predisposition of Africans to episodic mass hysteria. This use of medical and psychological language in primarily non-medical contexts serves to highlight the intellectual and political roles psychiatric ideas played in colonial governance. The salience of such ideas was often apparent in the face of increasing social tension, charismatic leadership and a proliferation of East African prophetic movements. This article addresses the attempts by the colonial authorities to understand or characterize, in psychological terms, a progression of African ‘rebellious types’ in society that often took the form of prophets and visionaries, but were diagnosed as epileptic, neurotic or suffering from ‘religious mania’.

**KEY WORDS:** Kenya, East Africa, colonial, resistance, nationalism.

ON Christmas Eve 1911, the District Commissioner of Machakos wrote a lengthy sworn statement as a witness to the ‘recent outbreak of mania’ that had infected his region of British East Africa.<sup>1</sup> He proceeded to describe the events in almost breathless detail and identified the main perpetrators, whom he fully intended to deport. They were Siotune wa Kathuke, an old woman and a widow, and Kiamba wa Mutuaovio, described as a native man from a neighbouring sub-division who, although a professional rival of Siotune’s, might also be described as a partner in crime.

The District Commissioner’s agitation with Siotune began some months earlier following her possession by a spirit from the spring from which she drew water. Several deaths in the region prompted a series of exorcisms by Siotune and with each of her ceremonies the ‘mania’ continued to spread. Kiamba wa Mutuaovio then entered the picture offering his ‘latter day prophecies’ and these two working simultaneously were said to have ‘obtained the most extraordinary domination over the people and rivalled each other in the extravagance and presumption of their demands’.<sup>2</sup> More specifically, the District Commissioner complained that the proclamations of these ‘two neurotics’ so disrupted normal patterns of work that it had become impossible to obtain porters or collect the Hut Tax. Of the two,

<sup>1</sup> Kenya National Archives (KNA), DC/MKS/10B/8/1, K. R. Dundas to Provincial Commissioner, 24 Dec. 1911.

<sup>2</sup> KNA, DC/MKS/10B/8/1, K. R. Dundas.

Kiamba's claims were the most fantastical. He threatened those who would not listen to him that 'he would cause their villages to sink into the ground and create a lake on the spot where these stood'.<sup>3</sup> Kiamba also told the people that he would soon remove all the Europeans from the territory.

Beginning with the 'mania of 1911', this article examines the use of medical or psychological language to highlight the intellectual and political roles that psychological ideas played in colonial governance in East Africa. It draws on the existing literature on the 'pathologization' of the African subject, best exemplified by Megan Vaughan's seminal work on colonial approaches to medicine and its depictions of the African 'normal',<sup>4</sup> which generated a new interest in 'colonial psychiatry' in Africa, India and the Caribbean.<sup>5</sup> This literature has provided a wealth of comparative material concerned chiefly with the histories of specific hospitals and the means by which colonial ideology may be discerned through the language of normal/abnormal as it was applied to race or to subject peoples. This article takes this argument a step further, shifting the emphasis away from the colonial mental asylum to the influence and implementation of psychological ideas in primarily non-medical and non-institutional contexts. Most striking was the application of psychological and psychiatric ideas to prophetic movements. Using three case studies from Kenya, it focuses less attention on what such movements meant, what they achieved or what they eventually became in order to concentrate on what such movements may have meant to the district officials who routinely came into conflict with them.

In understanding these case studies, the definition of the term 'prophet' is given a wide berth.<sup>6</sup> To the colonial administration in Kenya, statements about the end of British rule or the mass departure of Europeans were frequently classed within the realm of fantasy and associated with notions of African 'magical' modes of thought. Similarly, ecstatic religious moments took on the appearance of 'symptoms' and in response, the more scientifically minded colonial administrators could employ their own magical language: a layperson's understanding of psychology and psychiatry. For the most famous example of the 'mad prophet', Elijah Masinde, his certification and two-year committal in Mathari Mental Hospital in Kenya has been treated as an interesting footnote in the broader historical analysis of the

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> Megan Vaughan, 'Idioms of madness: Zomba Lunatic Asylum, Nyasaland, in the colonial period', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 9 (1983), 218–38. See also her chapter, 'The madman and the medicine men: colonial psychiatry and the theory of deculturation', in *Curing their Ills* (Stanford, 1991), 100–28.

<sup>5</sup> This list is not exhaustive, but examples include: Jonathan Sadowsky, *Imperial Bedlam: Institutions of Madness in Colonial Southwest Nigeria* (Berkeley, 1999); Leland Bell, *Mental and Social Disorder in Sub-Saharan Africa: The Case of Sierra Leone, 1787–1990* (Waltham, MA, 1991); Jock McCulloch, *Colonial Psychiatry and 'the African Mind'* (Cambridge, 1995); Lynette Jackson, 'The place of psychiatry in colonial and early postcolonial Zimbabwe', *International Journal of Mental Health*, 28 (1999), 38–71; Richard Keller, 'Madness and colonization: psychiatry in the British and French Empires, 1800–1962', *Journal of Social History*, 35 (2001), 295–326.

<sup>6</sup> For a detailed discussion of the defining and naming of prophets and prophet-types, see the Introduction to David Anderson and Douglas Johnson (eds.), *Revealing Prophets: Prophecy in East African History* (London, 1995), 1–26.

meaning of his movement, Dini ya Msambwa,<sup>7</sup> and its oppression by a colonial administration reacting to fears of political agitation. I argue, however, that the use of such psychologized language in the response to prophetic movements illustrates a colonial political response that was buttressed by the increasing prominence of psychology, psychiatry and social anthropology; these disciplines supported an interpretation of the behaviour of dissenters as evidence that colonial occupation and the imposition of 'civilization' was leading to outbreaks of collective psychological instability in East Africa.<sup>8</sup>

In the years preceding the First World War, cases of 'epidemic hysteria' like the one described by District Commissioner K. R. Dundas, were documented repeatedly by officials and anthropologists and would be recalled and reconstituted for years to come as 'remembered evidence' for the view that the African population was highly susceptible to psychic epidemics just as they were to the epidemics of tropical disease that routinely plagued them. Psychological disturbances came to be seen increasingly as both infectious and epidemic and as such they could be expected to spread rapidly if not monitored carefully and controlled when necessary. The ethnologist Gerhard Lindblom, working in the Kamba region in 1911 and 1912, also witnessed the Machakos 'outbreak' which he documented in his 1920 monograph, writing 'time after time remarkable psychical disturbances of a religious character pass like epidemics over the Kamba country, only to disappear as suddenly as they came'.<sup>9</sup> Lindblom described these symptoms as infectious hysteria and claimed that the attacks were triggered by the sight of a European wearing a pith helmet. Lindblom described the convulsions as:

The afflicted one fell to the ground, writhing as if suffering from violent cramp, moaning and groaning. The natives in the neighbourhood of Machakos tried to avoid the attacks – when they saw a European in the distance – by wrapping their blankets over their faces till he had gone by.<sup>10</sup>

In a brief report for the anthropological journal *Man*, a District Commissioner C. W. Neligan photographed a woman experiencing such a 'fit' and described the event as both a hysterical condition and a ceremony conducted to relieve the symptoms, and known locally as *Kijesu*.<sup>11</sup> C. W. Hobley's ethnology of the Kamba also remarked upon *Chesu*, which he described as a form of 'infectious mania' prompted by the sight of a pith helmet or a 'fez cap such as is worn by civilized natives'.<sup>12</sup> A review of Hobley's monograph noted that the 'periodic epidemics of a nervous disease

<sup>7</sup> The most extensive work on Dini ya Msambwa is Audrey Wipper, *Rural Rebels: A Study of Two Protest Movements in Kenya* (London, 1977), which chronicles both the Dini ya Msambwa and the rise of Mumboism.

<sup>8</sup> Such ideas paved the way for the government's ultimate expression of 'pathologization' and denial as seen in its official response to Mau Mau; the Mau Mau uprising remains outside the scope of this article, however.

<sup>9</sup> Gerhard Lindblom, *The Akamba* (Uppsala, 1920), 238.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.* 239.

<sup>11</sup> Charles Walter Neligan, 'Description of Kijesu ceremony among the Akamba, Tiva River, East Africa', *Man*, 11 (1911), 49.

<sup>12</sup> Charles William Hobley, *A-Kamba and Other East African Tribes* (Cambridge, 1910), 11–12. Hobley also uses the term *ki-jesu*, and, like Lindblom, speculated as to the term's origin as either the Kamba pronunciation of 'Jesus' (*Jesu*) or derivative of the

known as *Chesu* experienced by the Kamba corresponded psychiatrically 'in a remarkable manner to the malady known as *Latah* among the Malays, and which has been supposed to be confined to people of that stock'.<sup>13</sup>

Lindblom's monograph also referred specifically to the actions of District Commissioner Dundas whom he characterized as believing that the mental unrest of 1911 was directed specifically against the government. Despite this belief, any political or social impetuses for the disturbances were obscured by the extraordinary presentation of mass psychological 'symptoms'. 'I have forgotten what the affair was all about' Lindblom wrote, 'but it is certain that it was only a case of one of these periodical psychical anomalies. However, the over-excited minds soon calmed down in prison, and when the leaders were removed, the whole thing died away'.<sup>14</sup>

#### AGITATORS AND EPILEPTICS

The question of leadership, particularly over a population that was highly 'suggestible', was often at the heart of the analyses of prophets and visionaries. Dundas described Kiamba wa Mutuaovio, the main perpetrator of the 1911 outbreak, as having 'the same sleepy look as the rest of these Kamba neurotics, of whom there are a most extraordinary number in the tribe, and is probably a person of epileptic tendencies'.<sup>15</sup> This diagnosis did little to discredit the movement, however, as he admitted 'the fact that the promoters are epileptics and neurotics gives the necessary importance to their utterances and gains the people's credit'.<sup>16</sup> Whether or not some prophets, or these in particular, were epileptic, as claimed by the District Commissioner, is of course highly questionable, although not altogether impossible. But the significance of the label is that it attached the problem very neatly to individuals presumed to be troubled or 'unbalanced' in some way and denied the existence of other sources of social tension that the prophecies were responding to and that would not disappear with the deportation of the two 'witch doctors'.

Epilepsy, in both the popular and scientific imagination, has had a close association with 'excessive religiosity', explosive, even homicidal behaviour and also with genius.<sup>17</sup> From Mohammed to Simon Kimbangu, the folklore

---

Kamba word for 'knife' (*kisu*) as knives were instrumental in the ceremony to relieve the hysterical symptoms.

<sup>13</sup> T. A. J., Book Review, *A-Kamba and Other East African Tribes* by C. W. Hobley, *Man*, 11 (1911), 62. *Latah* was documented primarily among the Malays and was classified as a 'culture-bound' syndrome or in some cases, a syndrome caused by culture-contact.

<sup>14</sup> Lindblom, *Akamba*, 240.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> Matthew Woods, *In Spite of Epilepsy; Being a Review of the Lives of Three Great Epileptics, - Julius Caesar, Mohammed, Lord Byron, The Founders Respectively of an Empire, a Religion, and a School of Poetry* (New York, 1913); Owsei Temkin, *The Falling Sickness: A History of Epilepsy from the Greeks to the Beginnings of Modern Neurology*, 2nd edn. (Baltimore, 1971). Two journalistic accounts that cover the relationship between epilepsy and artistic personalities or cross-cultural variations in conceptualizing epilepsy are: Eve LaPlante, *Seized: Temporal Lobe Epilepsy as a Medical, Historical, and Artistic Phenomenon* (New York, 1993); and Anne Fadiman, *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down* (New York, 1997).

surrounding the great prophets has generally included an initiatory illness motif as a marker for the onset of a greater spiritual awareness and the power to prophecy. Often this illness was characterized as epilepsy or a single seizure although this might also be characterized simply as a temporary loss of reason following some other event such as the delirium associated with fever. The seventeenth-century Kongolese prophetess Doña Beatriz Kimpa Vita suffered an illness, symbolic death and then a return to consciousness or 'resurrection' as Saint Anthony.<sup>18</sup> The popular mythology surrounding the Congolese prophet Simon Kimbangu offers several variations on his emergence. Generally he is assumed to have suffered first a traumatic illness or a 'fit', a loss of consciousness and finally the appearance of visions and voices.<sup>19</sup> Nontheta Nkwenkwe fell victim to the influenza pandemic of 1918 before recovering to a spiritual renewal that she interpreted as the need for a societal regeneration in the aftermath of so many deaths.<sup>20</sup> Missionaries also recognized traumatic experiences as initiations into the realization of salvation. Christian converts and the newly saved were, as Richard Waller points out, 'required to give evidence of personal conviction, and for many this seems to have emerged out of dramatic or disorienting incidents. They expected salvation to be an equally traumatic and socially alienating experience for their converts'.<sup>21</sup>

The dynamics of the relationship between epilepsy and a shamanic or prophetic calling are multifaceted. On the one hand, persons suffering from what we would define neurologically as seizures, or perhaps, psychoses, could exhibit behaviour sufficiently outside the norm to warrant a culturally defined label as seer, diviner or prophet. In this case, while not all prophets or seers will actually suffer from a neurological condition, many individuals who do suffer from such conditions might be labelled as divinely touched or specially gifted. Although these ideas are ancient, in modern times it is the discipline of anthropology that has highlighted this relationship. Claude Levi-Strauss suggested that 'normal thought cannot fathom the problem of illness, and so the group calls upon the neurotic to furnish a wealth of emotion heretofore lacking in focus'.<sup>22</sup> While not contradicting this idea, Roland Littlewood, an anthropologist and psychiatrist, asserts another motivating factor 'if epileptic fits are believed to be a consequence of

<sup>18</sup> John K. Thornton, *The Kongolese Saint Anthony: Doña Beatriz Kimpa Vita and the Antonian Movement, 1684–1706* (Cambridge, 1998).

<sup>19</sup> Marie-Louise Martin, *Kimbangu: An African Prophet and his Church* (Oxford, 1975); Susan Asch, *L'Eglise du Prophète Kimbangu* (Paris, 1983). See also Samuel Simbandumwe, *A Socio-Religious and Political Analysis of the Judeo-Christian Concept of Prophetism and Modern Bakongo and Zulu African Prophet Movements* (Lewiston, NY, 1992).

<sup>20</sup> Robert R. Edgar and Hilary Sapire, *African Apocalypse: The Story of Nontheta Nkwenkwe, a Twentieth-Century South African Prophet* (Johannesburg, 2000). It should be noted that the prophetess Nontheta was institutionalized in an asylum in South Africa's Eastern Cape, although in this case the authors point to her gender as a factor in characterizing her actions as insane.

<sup>21</sup> Richard Waller, 'They do the dictating and we must submit', in Anderson and Johnson (eds.), *Revealing Prophets*, 85.

<sup>22</sup> For example, see, Claude Levi-Strauss, *Structural Anthropology* (New York, 1963), 181. For a discussion and application of this idea, see Mircea Eliade, *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy* (New York, 1964).

possession, then all episodes of possession, including voluntary possession for the purposes of prophesying, are likely to be marked by fits'.<sup>23</sup>

Siotune wa Katuke and Kiamba wa Mutuaovio were both deported to the coast on the charge of 'prejudicing the peace and good order'. According to the District Commissioner, it was their credibility based upon the local observation of their neuroses that made them especially powerful as 'rebellious types'; they were therefore believed to be especially disruptive and influential. Of the two, Siotune was considered to be the least dangerous, perhaps due to her advanced age and gender, and was described as 'not a genuine medicine woman, but [one who] dabbles in divination and in rainmaking and generally prescribes in times of trouble and disaster'.<sup>24</sup> The government deemed that she had been discredited for erroneously prophesying the end of the world. For her crime, a temporary deportation order was considered sufficient. Kiamba wa Mutuaovio, on the other hand, was taken more seriously by the District Commissioner. He was described as both a 'budding medicine man of great promise' and a 'most dangerous man' and the District Commissioner wanted him out for good.<sup>25</sup>

After a show of force by the Kings African Rifles and a series of imprisonments and deportations, the mania of 1911 died down and there followed a few years of relative calm. According to J. Forbes Munro, this particular wave of spirit cults died out under the 'disillusionment which followed the non-appearance of the millennium ... and partly from colonial reforms in local government which cut away much of the ground-swell of social and political frustration on which the cults had thrived'.<sup>26</sup> The mania of 1911 helped to create a growing body of evidence that applied anecdotal psychological profiles of certain emerging rebellious types as a warning sign for potential leadership and influence. The records indicate that Kiamba wa Mutuaovio escaped from his island exile with little concern for him shown after that. The mental unrest that his agitation appeared to inspire would be remembered in official and anecdotal accounts and in government handing-over reports that provided a foundation of descriptive evidence for the psychological character of the region.

#### THE PROPHET NDO NYE WA KAUTI

In 1922 another disturbance appeared in the Machakos District in the form of Ndonye wa Kauti, a poll-tax-evading prophet who preached about the arrival of a European God who would banish the existing Europeans from the land and end the tax system. One of the earliest references to his activities exists in the form of a handwritten note from District Officer, R. G. Stone

<sup>23</sup> Roland Littlewood and Maurice Lipsedge, *Aliens and Alienists: Ethnic Minorities and Psychiatry* (London, 1997), 202.

<sup>24</sup> KNA, DC/MKS/10B/8/1, K. R. Dundas. See also J. Forbes Munro, *Colonial Rule and the Kamba* (Oxford, 1975), for a brief description of these issues as well as Munro's early review of materials in the Kenya National Archives; J. Forbes Munro, 'Muindi Mbingu the rebel: political protest in Ukamba, 1900-1940: the documentation', *East Africa Journal*, 5 (1968), 27-35.

<sup>25</sup> KNA, DC/MKS/10B/8/1, K. R. Dundas.

<sup>26</sup> Munro, *Colonial Rule*, 117.

who warned that the new rumours emanating from the Ukamba region 'bear the look of a recrudescence of the 1911 trouble'. His safari to discern what the trouble was about, he said, was an 'endeavour to nip in the bud any likely hysterical outbreak'.<sup>27</sup>

While locally Ndonge was considered at first a minor prophet, his arrest and the government's unsuccessful attempts to have him certified under Kenya's lunacy laws gave him a much-needed boost in credibility. His case is fascinating, in part, because more of the African responses to his prophecy can be gleaned from the written record than is usual. His followers reported that they had come to listen to him largely because he was predicting the complete removal of Europeans. While it was no innovation to describe the benefits of the demise of colonial occupation, the authority inherent in the prophecy – even with its fantastical elements – offered a platform upon which the community might voice its own discontent and envision either a return to the old ways or, as Ndonge preached it, a reversal of fortune such that Europeans would be removed but replaced with a wealth of material goods and technologies. As part of the government campaign to detain him legally a series of sworn statements from village headmen were taken to document what the British saw as his bizarre claims, anti-government rabble rousing and growing influence over the people. Waita wa Ndunda, a former headman of Kilungu, stated:

As proof of Ndonge's influence, I know that, even while Ndonge was in goal [sic], women went in very large numbers to work his garden, as they said he had assured them that he would return very shortly quite unharmed by Government. When he was released, without receiving any punishment, people went mad & really believed that he was all-powerful!<sup>28</sup>

A statement by the tribal retainer of Kilungu voiced a similar claim. 'Most of the people of Kilungu, to this day, believe that Ndonge is the Government's master and that he will soon return again ... If Ndonge is released again I have no idea what will happen, as all the people will go mad'.<sup>29</sup> Ndui wa Matolo, a headman from Kilungu, stated that he joined a gathering to hear Ndonge speak after hearing people 'sing his praises' after he had brought rain and in light of what he had said about the white men. Ndonge spoke of a god called 'Simiti' (cement) who would come from above. The Europeans would soon leave the country and Ndonge would rule and would abolish the tax. He also said that a telegraph line and books would be sent to him from above.<sup>30</sup>

Ndeti wa Kibai, a headman and former government interpreter, described the encounter between Ndonge wa Kauti and R. G. Stone.

Ndonge was asked whence his chieftainship was derived and he replied from 'Bwana Jesu', whom he said he had met in the road, and from whom he had received a pencil, which was placed behind his ear. Mr. Stone took the pencil and

<sup>27</sup> KNA, PC/CP/8/2/4, note to Mr. Traill from R. G. Stone, Machakos, 3 Apr. 1922.

<sup>28</sup> KNA, PC/CP/8/2/4, statement of Waita wa Ndunda, 24 Sept. 1922.

<sup>29</sup> KNA, PC/CP/8/2/4, statement of Kithuku wa Kibungo, 21 Sept. 1922. Such translated references to 'going mad' are perhaps representative of British anxieties about Kamba collective enthusiasm rather than precise translations.

<sup>30</sup> KNA, PC/CP/8/2/4, statement of Ndui wa Matolo, 22 Aug. 1922.

informed Ndongye that the pencil came from America. A house was being built in his village and Mr. Stone asked him what it was for, and he said that it was a house for the reception of pencils, books and other European articles. He added that when it was finished, he would build a house of stone, iron, and underneath would floor it with cement (SIMITI). He was asked where these materials would come from and he said 'From above'. He also said that the house would be used as a hotel for Europeans. Asked where these would come from, he replied that the Europeans would be replaced by Europeans from the land of 'SIMITI'. He was asked what 'SIMITI' was, and he said the material with which houses are built. He was placed under arrest and taken to camp.<sup>31</sup>

Munyoki wa Mutiambui, a member of the African Inland Mission, said that Ndongye described three gods: The God, Bwana Jesu and Simiti. He claimed that he was building a house to receive 'books, clothes, rifles and a telegraph line. The telegraph line will reach from this house to God and will provide a means of communication between us'. Ndongye claimed that he would soon take charge of the country and 'change the whole Administration ... and everything will revert to its old state'. Munyoki then asked if he had received anything from God. 'He then went into his house and after a few minutes, returned with a pencil, of the type one buys in shops. He stated that this came from Heaven'.<sup>32</sup>

Ndongye wa Kauiti's burgeoning movement among the Kamba is striking for its obvious similarities to the 'Cargo cult' phenomenon.<sup>33</sup> These mass movements, documented initially and almost exclusively in the Pacific, were said to prophesy the sudden end of an existing rule with the arrival of ships laden with the cargo of Europeans, delivering these goods to the people. Despite the institutionalization of the term 'Cargo cult' within anthropology, the first use of the term appears in a racist polemic written towards the end of the Second World War in response to fears that the New Guinea 'natives' were moving closer to the violent annihilation of whites in the Pacific.<sup>34</sup> Assumptions about the characteristic psychological symptoms of cult adherents were buttressed by the earlier work of government anthropologists like F. E. Williams who documented what he called the 'Vailala Madness' in Papua New Guinea.<sup>35</sup> Cargo cults were thought to highlight the tensions inherent in desiring a return to a previous value system, including self-rule, in tandem with an envy of European material wealth and technology. In colonial Africa the presumed envy of European goods emerges

<sup>31</sup> KNA, PC/CP/8/2/4, statement of Ndeti wa Kibai, Iveti location, 22 Aug. 1922.

<sup>32</sup> KNA, PC/CP/8/2/4, statement of Munyoki wa Mutiambui, 4 Sept. 1922.

<sup>33</sup> Cargo cults are known most famously and prolifically for Melanesia. For example, Peter Worsley, *The Trumpet Shall Sound: A Study of 'Cargo' Cults in Melanesia* (New York, 1968); Lamont Lindstrom, *Cargo Cult: Strange Stories of Desire from Melanesia and Beyond* (Honolulu, 1993). For a critique of the Cargo cult as a colonial invention, see Martha Kaplan, *Neither Cargo Nor Cult: Ritual Politics and the Colonial Imagination in Fiji* (Durham, 1995). My thanks go to Josh Bell for this last reference.

<sup>34</sup> N. M. Bird, 'Is there danger of a post-war flare-up among New Guinea natives?', *Pacific Islands Monthly* (Nov. 1945), 69–70. The 'postwar' designation is important as the author asserts that the 'natives' after contact with 'tens of thousands of white soldiers, are more difficult to handle than ever before'. I thank Eben Kirksey for providing me with a copy of this article and for subsequent discussions about the Cargo cult phenomenon.

<sup>35</sup> F. E. Williams, *The Vailala Madness and the Destruction of Native Ceremonies in the Gulf Division* (Port Moresby, 1923).



even within twentieth-century psychiatric assessments that sought to differentiate between African versus European 'style' psychotic delusions, as Megan Vaughan has documented for Nyasaland. Such diagnoses suggested that the increasingly 'detrribalized' African subject was likely to go mad in strange and unsettling new ways as evidenced by delusions incorporating European technologies such as airplanes, motor cars and divine messages transported through telegraph lines. In short, the 'normal' African psychotic should believe himself to be a lion; the 'detrribalized' psychotic subverted this category with claims to be the king of England.<sup>36</sup>

By all British accounts, Ndongye wa Kauti's prophecies centred around the procurement of material goods and new technologies that would descend from above, delivered by a new, more agreeable type of European. He spoke of books, rifles and a telegraph line that would provide his direct communication with God. The name of this new god was 'Simiti' which he did not differentiate from the material (cement) to be utilized in the construction of a storehouse to hold the new surplus of cargo.

To British officials, Ndongye wa Kauti's claims were completely outlandish in their specificity. They were consistent, but 'read' as delusional. Despite his clearly anti-government stance in speeches and his denouncement of the tax and labour laws, his reliance on fantastical imagery meant that he was approached initially as a 'religious maniac' not as a political ideologue. While the district administration was used to Africans' 'backward beliefs' in witchcraft and a reverence for the spirit world, Ndongye's utterances constituted a subversion of the normal Kamba fear of spirits with his own empowerment by divine intervention. Most significantly to the government, this power was not only divine, but also absurdly anti-British.

Although Ndongye wa Kauti engendered enough interest in the region to warrant close monitoring by the government, his public proclamations and gatherings never resulted in an organized movement. In effect, the government's concerns about the prophet's activities stemmed from recollections of the 1911 epidemic hysteria and fears of what such a revival might mean for the stability of the region. Ultimately the official record pointed to the fact that any 'ideas that he is not in his right mind may be dismissed', stressing that the Medical Officer observing him was unable or unwilling to certify him as insane, a legal requirement for confinement in a mental asylum.<sup>37</sup> Rather, Ndongye wa Kauti came to be viewed as a malcontent whose preaching represented a direct challenge to the government by urging non-payment of taxes, the withdrawal of all Europeans and the assertion of his 'own superiority to Government, and eventual suppression of Government'.<sup>38</sup> For whatever reason, the Ndongye wa Kauti movement failed to take hold, perhaps because the interest generated by his words were associated mainly with his personal potential as a prophet, but not with any organized or new social or religious movement. The written record depicts an unfolding drama of observation, hope, the consideration of evidence by both sides and ultimately local scepticism among the Kamba about his true purpose or powers. John Lonsdale has documented the

<sup>36</sup> Vaughan, 'Idioms of madness', 218–19.

<sup>37</sup> KNA, PC/CP/8/2/4, memo of Acting District Commissioner, Machakos, 17 Oct. 1922.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

'scepticism of the Kikuyu' amidst similar prophetic encounters. The Kikuyu, he writes, 'like other people, feared the future, paid for its divination and yet mistrusted their diviners; they thought them, rather like professors, to be mere slaves to fashionable theory'.<sup>39</sup> For the myriad of prophetic movements that did take hold in East Africa, there were scores of others that failed to incite larger movements. The case of Ndongye wa Kauti may represent an unusually well-documented case of the latter. The reactions to his prophecies were most likely prompted by what district officials believed they were about to see unfold, particularly as the Kamba were recalled, and had already been documented officially, as psychologically predisposed to an infectious loss of reason.

Ultimately, Ndongye wa Kauti came to be seen by the British as sane, at least legally, and therefore rationally seditious. Despite the attention paid to him by district officials, Ndongye wa Kauti does not fit the bill of a charismatic leader holding sway over the people, although this was certainly what the administration feared. However, the government's inability to hold the prophet in any form of legal custody threatened to increase his credibility tremendously, a point that was not lost on the Chief Native Commissioner as he deported Ndongye wa Kauti to the Kenyan coast.<sup>40</sup>

#### THE DIVINE INSPIRATION OF ELIJAH MASINDE

From the mid-1940s, the activities of even more formidable prophets began to threaten the colonial sense of security and order and the written record depicts increasingly medicalized explanations for dissent. Such definitions were far preferable to economic and political analyses that might find colonial policies to be culpable in African unrest and fit nicely within postwar ideas that characterized whole societies in terms of their social health. In addition, increasing familiarity with psychological or psychiatric language – in some cases derived from research generated from within East Africa – supported further characterizations of twentieth-century prophets and their followers in terms of their 'delusions of persecution', 'obsessive religiosity' or 'religious mania'. Their presence created repeated circumstances for medical and political authorities to clash.

Elijah Masinde was already in jail for subversive activities when he was examined by a doctor and certified as insane. He was sent to Mathari Mental Hospital in Nairobi in 1945, diagnosed as a religious maniac. Masinde's particular brand of mania was seen as especially dangerous to the welfare and stability of the community as a whole. He was accused of abusing the chiefs and native authorities, of breaking up meetings and generally inciting his disciples to take action against Europeans. The Provincial Government classed him as a 'very dangerous political character' and claimed that

<sup>39</sup> John Lonsdale, 'The prayers of Waiyaki: political uses of the Kikuyu past', in Anderson and Johnson (eds.), *Revealing Prophets*, 243. My thanks to John Lonsdale for drawing my attention to this particular point.

<sup>40</sup> KNA, PC/CP/8/2/4, deportee Ndongye wa Kauti, 21 Oct. 1927. In 1927 Ndongye wa Kauti's case came up for review with some administrators and the local headmen advocating for Ndongye's return to Ukamba, though this was met with some opposition in part due to the presence of anti-government sentiment and activities in neighbouring districts that might be agitated further by the re-emergence of the prophet.

his 'obsessive religious mania' had caused him to undertake anti-European propaganda and in some cases to take action to evacuate all Europeans from his location.<sup>41</sup>

To the British authorities monitoring his activities, Elijah Masinde was not just any 'religious maniac'. He was the founder and leader of Dini ya Msambwa, a popular religious movement which sought primarily to protect or reclaim lands that were being encroached upon by white settlers in the region. It was one of the largest movements of its kind in East Africa and was closely monitored by the government.<sup>42</sup> The *African Affairs Annual Report* for 1948, while not the earliest reference to Elijah Masinde, refers to the organization as having 'originated' within the confines of Mathari Mental Hospital. The report held that Masinde:

apparently found sufficient leisure during his period as a certified lunatic to frame a political policy to fit his pronounced tendency to violent religious mania, and on his release in 1947 had immediately set about the task of stirring supporters into action under the guise of religious fervour. By the end of 1947 his followers numbered thousands who, though they had not his excuse of a previous history of mental illness, showed themselves quite ready to adopt the principles devised in his aberrant brain.<sup>43</sup>

After Masinde's two years' confinement in Mathari, his case created a further political panic when the mental hospital's Visiting Committee indicated it was prepared to recommend his discharge. Upon the threat of his release the Provincial Commissioner made clear the problem to the psychiatrist J. C. Carothers at Mathari:

[this] location is the one area of this Province where there is considerable political activity at present; and knowing the particular form of this man's mania, it would be a fatal administrative error to allow him to return to his home at the present time. I must therefore advise that he be *not* released at present ... in a few years the political issues may well sort themselves out and become stabilized, when it may be possible for Elijah to return to his family.<sup>44</sup>

What is striking about the medical case of Elijah Masinde is that the factor most influential in deciding his discharge from the mental hospital was not based upon his diagnosis or a presumed return to sanity, but on the perceptions or 'delusions' of his family and the wider community. Carothers stated that Masinde would most likely retain his 'persecutory attitude' and 'peculiar religious ideas' for the rest of his life. However, if it could be shown that his family members were to acknowledge his mental abnormality, then it might be possible for him to return home. If, on the other hand, they continued to view Masinde as divinely inspired, it seemed likely that he would never be discharged from the hospital.<sup>45</sup>

<sup>41</sup> KNA, PC/NZA/2/7/97, Provincial Commissioner, Nyanza, to MO in Charge, Mathari, E. R. N. Cooke, 11 June 1946.

<sup>42</sup> Dini ya Msambwa had a significant impact on colonial thinking, but it was just one of many social movements that the government felt the need to monitor, at least on some level.

<sup>43</sup> *African Affairs Annual Report for 1948*, Kenya Colony, 2.

<sup>44</sup> KNA, PC/NZA/2/7/97, Provincial Commissioner to J. C. Carothers, 11 Dec. 1946.

<sup>45</sup> KNA, PC/NZA/2/7/97, letter to B. J. Hobson, 8 May 1947.

Elijah Masinde's case came under the newly designated 'special category criminal lunatic' and while the charges under this special designation varied, Masinde was clearly not the only political detainee to be certified in this way. In 1947, one of Masinde's followers, Daniel Wekanda, was arrested with the assistance of the Brigadier in charge of the Salvation Army. He was sent across the country to Mathari where he remained for three years on the charge of 'singing and preaching, quoting the Bible and assaulting Europeans'.<sup>46</sup> In 1950, the Acting Specialist Psychiatrist, E. J. Foley,<sup>47</sup> who had replaced J. C. Carothers, wrote to the District Commissioner asking for his views regarding the return of Wekanda to his location as he had been 'well behaved and rational since his admission' to the mental hospital. Not surprisingly, the response was swift and emphatic. With the unfortunate case of Elijah Masinde fresh in their minds, including evidence that Masinde returned to his illegal activities immediately after his release from the hospital, the authorities wrote a forceful statement to Mathari referring to the hospital's own medical reports:

It would be most unwise to allow this man out of your control. From the medical report at the time it is apparent that he was imbued with all the dangerous traits of a member of the *Dini ya Msambwa*. It is felt that this fanaticism might erupt again if he were allowed to return to his district and to hear of recent occurrences. This is a risk which we cannot afford to run and I must therefore urge you to delay his release until present situation has been clarified and becomes quiescent.<sup>48</sup>

In the following week the Provincial Commissioner again reminded Dr. Foley that 'all subsequent *Dini ya Msambwa* activities' could be attributed directly to the fact that J. C. Carothers and the previous hospital Board of Visitors had refused to continue to detain Elijah Masinde. Wekanda's case took an interesting turn four months later with his escape from Mathari. The hospital's letter informing the District Commissioner shows some attempt to be reassuring, stating again for the record that Wekanda had been 'well behaved and rational for some considerable time' and although he was presumed to support *Dini ya Msambwa*, he was, in fact, a Roman Catholic.<sup>49</sup>

The question that lingers in the case of Elijah Masinde and his followers is why psychological explanations, or in some cases committal to the mental hospital, became the most logical or attractive solution to the problem of dissent. Certainly, abusing the authorities, making threats, occupying land, inciting protests and assaulting Europeans were charges sufficient to send Masinde and other followers of an anti-European movement to prison without any of the legal complications encountered in attempting to keep him and others certified as 'lunatics'. With increasing regularity, unambiguous political statements regarding conditions in which Kenyans found themselves were sometimes recorded by the administration but were largely

<sup>46</sup> KNA, PC/NZA/2/7/97, Lunacy Cause No. 30/47, Daniel Wekanda, 1 Apr. 1950.

<sup>47</sup> E. J. Foley had served in East Africa previously as the psychiatrist in charge of Dodoma Mental Hospital in Tanganyika.

<sup>48</sup> KNA, PC/NZA/2/7/97, letter to Acting Specialist Psychiatrist from District Commissioner, Nyanza, 8 May 1950.

<sup>49</sup> One month later Daniel Wekanda was caught by police and returned to Mathari. It is unclear from the records what happened to him after that.

ignored or overshadowed by analyses that attempted to diagnose an African psychological profile. A report by District Officer C. Campbell in Kakamega describes his interview with a young Dini ya Msambwa member.

I had a long talk with Eriya after convicting him and formed the impression that he was a D.Y.M. religious fanatic, as well as being slow and simple minded. He is a man of about 25 years of age who has knocked about the Kitale farms doing periodic work including, with his smattering of education, some school teaching ... He is ex-C.M.S. [Church Missionary Society] but left it as he found the D.Y.M. more attractive. His reasons for continuing with the sect are that the Europeans have been ruling them for 50 years and have not improved their lot. A man can only earn 9/- or 10/- a month on a farm, which is insufficient to feed and clothe his family ... Eriya is mentally unbalanced and made no effort to withhold information about his beliefs and actions. He is too slow witted and simple minded to be considered as a leader.<sup>50</sup>

Despite the obvious political and economic opinions offered by the young man, Eriya, the District Officer was determined to evaluate the clearly stated views in psychological terms, and was quite willing to record the sentiment that fifty years of colonial rule had not improved the common lot.

Dini ya Msambwa did not engender the same fear and mythology that the Mau Mau rebellion ultimately did, but its 'fanatically' religious overtones and successful collective action provoked similar expressions of white shock that consistently warranted psychological profiles and classifications. Elijah Masinde seems to represent a maturation of prophetic responses to colonial rule and his success helped to set the stage for the characterization of the 'deranged' charismatic leader who could lead the less sophisticated masses into frenzied collective, and potentially nationalistic, action. 'Fanatics' themselves were, in strictly medico-legal terms, not necessarily 'lunatic' but they were often close enough and in any case their role in destabilizing the mass psychology of their followers posed a threat to the stability of the region or even the government. In these cases, religion or 'religiosity', particularly if it was deemed 'traditional', became a risk factor for a collective mental instability.

#### BRITISH PSYCHOLOGY AND AFRICAN RELIGIOSITY

Elijah Masinde and his most 'fanatical' followers were deported to Faza Island in Lamu District in 1948 and most remained there until 1960–1.<sup>51</sup> Masinde, however, was exiled to Marsabit in 1949 despite warnings from those who rightly feared any substantiation of his prophecies. The transfer was called a 'grave psychological error' by Provincial Commissioner K. L. Hunter precisely because of Masinde's initial boast that the 'Europeans still fear him' and that he 'would not remain in Lamu'.<sup>52</sup>

<sup>50</sup> KNA, DC/NN/10/1/5, memo regarding Dini ya Msambwa from District Officer, Kavujai, 1949.

<sup>51</sup> National Archives, London (NA), CO/822/2017, Kenya Intelligence Service, Deportation Ordinance for Elijah Masinde and nine other Dini ya Msambwa, 1960.

<sup>52</sup> KNA, DC/NN/10/1/5, memo from K. L. Hunter to Hon. Member for Law & Order, 7 Dec. 1949.

The intelligence reports written just prior to the release of the most intractable Dini ya Msambwa radicals included observations by the Lamu District Mudir who commented upon what he perceived as the remaining traces of fanaticism for each individual. Clearly it worked in a detainee's favour if he converted to Islam or decided when restrictions were lifted to remain and set up a new home in Lamu. Previous attempts by Christian missionaries to assist in the rehabilitation of prophets by conversion had been far less successful. Although the missions attempted to do their bit, officials reacting to Intelligence Reports on the movement in the fifties did not view Christian conversion as a likely solution to quelling this type of religious fervour. In fact, it was often the influence of missionaries' Biblical teaching that was seen as having contributed to the aberrant religious excitement in the first place. A western Kenya police memorandum instructed that one of the signs that officers should look for in identifying leaders of the Dini ya Msambwa was the presence of a prayer book from either the Church Missionary Society or the Friends African Mission, and specifically the marking of Acts 24:16 – *And herein do I exercise myself, to have always a conscience void of offence toward God, and [toward] men.*<sup>53</sup>

The African attraction to the Bible, and the Old Testament in particular, was thought to have created such a perversion of religiosity that hysteria was its most likely outcome. Still, under these conditions, it was not Christianity itself that was under attack in the rhetoric of the new sects, but the entire colonial state, which might also include missionaries in the sense that they were equally complicit with European occupation. Interestingly, the 'African' traits that were often the most worrying to the British sense of order were mirrored and, in fact, preceded by the 'evangelical fervour of middle class revivalism' of the Protestant missions. As Richard Waller notes for the Africa Inland Mission, 'the mission had as its central tenets of belief a conviction of the sole efficacy of salvation through a personal experience of Christ and an acceptance of Divine Revelation in matters great and small, the inerrancy and primacy of scripture, and an absolute abhorrence of 'modernism'.<sup>54</sup> Repeatedly, mission rhetoric and a sound knowledge of scripture were thrown back at the missions and the government by African converts inside burgeoning spiritual movements.

By the 1950s, official reports warned that Dini ya Msambwa could become a 'larger disturbance than Mau Mau' because it was 'a combination of the almost universal pagan African spirit worship and many of the not dissimilar Old Testament beliefs and ceremonies learnt in Christian Missions'.<sup>55</sup> The British administration held that such psychological chaos could be caused by an amalgamation of conflicting beliefs and that this new social temperament posed a significant threat. The Kenya Intelligence Report of 1954, recording the continuing threat of Dini ya Msambwa, stated that the group had

the great advantage of being started by what we call a lunatic. It could appeal not only to the pagan but also the semi-educated 'Mission boy' as well as to the tribesman converted to a nominal Islam close to the beliefs of the

<sup>53</sup> KNA, DC/NN/10/1/5, W. R. B. Pugh, Superintendent of Police, Nyanza, re: Dini ya Msambwa, 15 Mar. 1943.

<sup>54</sup> Waller, 'They do the dictating', 84–5.

<sup>55</sup> NA, CO 822/809, Dini ya Msambwa, Kenya Intelligence Committee, Oct. 1954.

Prophets ... like any other belief-movement, it could be used by well grounded political agitators.<sup>56</sup>

In one brief paragraph, the Kenya Intelligence Service managed to corral the full range of colonial anxieties – the ‘lunatic’ origins of a social movement, African paganism, the unpredictability of the semi-educated and the semi-converted, the spread of Islam and the influence of apocalyptic prophecy over susceptible groups. Adherents to such ‘primitive’ cults or sects were unpredictable in ways that more sophisticated political movements, even dissenting ones, were not. The exiles’ conversion to Islam, while not politically beneficial to the state, seemed at least rational. Such accounts dating back to the 1920s, like the following from the District Commissioner in North Kavirondo, had long reported on the highly charged religious environment in western Kenya. Although Islam itself is not seen as pathology, the comments paint a picture of psychological chaos as an explanation for the increasing appeal of Islamic conversion.

My Interpreter, Jairo, a C.M.S. Jaluo, informed me that Mohamedans had been very active in all locations of the District. He stated that an intensive proselytising campaign commenced in May last and was still active; Wanga was fast embracing Islam, and Marama was following suit in spite of our Christian ‘loyalist’ Joseph J. Malama; Mwanza, our ‘harmless’ Islamic fanatic, had run amok in his district; Murunga an ardent Mohamedan but Joseph’s favourite brother, had also taken a hand in things; heathens and luke-warm Christians were being snapped up fast; Mumia, a supporter of Government and a nominal follower of the Prophet, was being driven to distraction in his premature senility.<sup>57</sup>

In the early 1930s the Watu wa Mungu sect, whose members were Kikuyu, were arrested for manufacturing large quantities of arrows in violation of the Native Arms Ordinance. In their defence they quoted the Bible. The statement of the presumed leader, Kagana wa Chege, accompanied a police report laden with scripture. Kagana stated he was born on the Kikuyu reserve and became a convert to the Africa Inland Mission. He worked as a labourer on European farms but eventually became a forest squatter. He was literate in Kiswahili. He claimed that in 1932 he had a series of dreams during which a voice called out to him that he should read specific verses of the Bible which he found were related to hearing God’s word in dreams and prophecies. In his final dream he was told to read the 7th Psalm:

God judgeth the righteous and God is angry with the wicked every day.  
If he turn not, he will whet his sword; he hath bent his bow, and made it ready.  
He hath also prepared for him the instruments of death;  
he ordaineth his arrows against the persecutors.

Kagana stated that he had not returned to the Mission since he first heard the voice. The knowledge to create a poison from the forest had also come to him in a dream and as a result he began making poisoned arrows, which he stockpiled awaiting for the inevitable message about their purpose.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>57</sup> KNA, DC/NN/10/1/2, memo from Assistant District Commissioner, ‘Mohamedan or Anti-European Movement in North Kavirondo’, 25 Sept. 1926.

A report to the Commissioner of Police in Nairobi claimed that members of Watu wa Mungu 'all have a peculiar and wild facial expression and appear to be slightly deranged. Whether this is a result of their faith or whether they were previously unbalanced and so adopted the faith readily, is not known'.<sup>58</sup> The report proposed several possible explanations for the emergence of the cult – including that they were 'merely natives who are suffering from a form of religious hysteria'; they were 'concealing some other activities under the guise of religious faith'; or lastly that they were 'simple minded individuals who are being used, without their knowledge and by means of deception, by cleverer politically minded Africans for the purpose of creating unrest'.<sup>59</sup> Of all the possibilities, an outbreak of religious hysteria was deemed to be the most probable cause by the authorities. By the 1940s, the Watu wa Mungu were among many groups responding to worsening conditions in the Kikuyu reserves with resistance to colonial public health mandates such as plague inoculation, the killing of rats or the importation of foreign medicines and practices. District Commissioner H. E. Lambert observed that the psychological impetus for the growth in popularity of sects like Watu wa Mungu was a Kikuyu reaction to 'the increasing complexity of life and the increasing competition for success in the new Kikuyu conditions', and that their justification by faith was proving to be an effective means of 'self-protection from the normal consequences of non-cooperation with Government'.<sup>60</sup>

Much of the historical literature on prophetic or millenarian movements depicts such events as a response to external social pressures or grievances, most often as the result of foreign occupation and the subsequent rapid breakdown of previous social, political and economic norms. This analysis speaks to a basic human reaction to encroachment and social stress and can be equally applicable to the precolonial environment. Even those movements that failed to evolve into broader religious, cultural or nationalist organizations are important for how they prompted the colonial government to respond, not only to every minor 'cult', but also to the phenomenon, often assumed to be psychological, of recurring waves of prophetic movements spanning decades.

#### CONCLUSION

As depicted here, the nature of the colonial response to dissent in East Africa serves as an illustration of the unique influence of even minor prophets and of social movements that often defied British categories as strictly political or religious and so prompted more psychological assessments as 'neurotic', 'manic' or even 'epileptic'. African prophetic movements occupied an uncomfortable terrain, often subverting clear categorizations such as 'traditional' African 'paganism' or the 'successful' conversion to Christianity. The psychological assessment of prophets and their followers came naturally to the colonial mindset which, supported by a wealth of research on the increasing impact of 'acculturation', saw the 'semi-educated' and the

<sup>58</sup> KNA, PC/CP/8/7/3, memo to Commissioner of Police, Nairobi, 21 May 1934.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.* <sup>60</sup> KNA, PC/CP/8/7/3, H. E. Lambert, 'Watu wa Mungu', 15 June 1942.



'semi-converted' as straddling conflicting worlds leaving them virtually on the brink of madness. These 'detrribalized' Africans, ultimately at the centre of debates on educability and the potential for self-governance, were assessed increasingly in psychiatric terms. Law-breakers, anti-government militants and the politically subversive fell within the realm of government understanding and there were measures to deal with such disturbances. In contrast, the potentially mad, 'religious maniac' was unsettling in different ways and prompted official speculation into the psyche of the African subject, the identification of potential risk factors for collective action and an emphasis on the need for a more psychologically informed approach to governance.

Clearly, prophetic movements across Africa do not fall neatly into ready-made categories. In some instances prophecies included overtly seditious and anti-European rhetoric and stood in contrast to the more 'traditional' prophecies, which might see the end of colonialism as just one part of the journey to the end of the world. Still, prophetic movements, whatever the primary focus of their attention, often caused economic upheaval. Religious restrictions that forbade modern encumbrances or the espousal of a return to traditional values often resulted in a refusal to pay poll taxes or participate in conscripted labour, or quite often the rejection of government mandated veterinary or agricultural measures. In the face of clearly subversive or illegal actions, why then did the British government characterize the problems in the way that they did? A clear contrast can be made with Tanganyika, which appears to have had fewer prophet movements than Kenya, or certainly fewer that caused the British administration such trouble. However, the government reacted to the political environment in Tanganyika with primarily political, not psychological, language. Ranger suggests that one reason Tanganyika addressed socio-economic conditions in more realistic terms was that the government feared another Maji-Maji uprising. He writes:

[the] thinking of administrators and settlers, especially in Tanganyika after Maji-Maji and in Rhodesia after the Ndebele and Shona risings of 1896–7, was dominated by the fear of the repetition of such outbreaks. This fear had many and complex effects, but among other things it led to certain concessions to anticipated African discontent as well as to military and police contingency-planning.<sup>61</sup>

Until the Mau Mau emergency in the 1950s, the colonial government in Kenya endured no singular crisis of rebellion on such a scale.

Early colonial attempts at understanding or quashing these prophetic movements seem in retrospect to have been somewhat haphazard. I suggest that responses were largely local and that the disturbances were still seen as the manipulations of unbalanced but clever individuals. Historians of the period generally agree that the Dini ya Msambwa and Mau Mau movements were not directly linked, in that the one movement did not simply evolve into the other. However, British officials made the obvious comparisons between the two, often citing the psychological impact that both movements had on the population as a whole and the ways in which such behaviours could

<sup>61</sup> T. O. Ranger, 'Connexions between "primary resistance" movements and modern mass nationalism in east and central Africa', part 1, *Journal of African History*, 9 (1968), 443.

become infectious, even epidemic.<sup>62</sup> In reality, Elijah Masinde asserted not so much a prophecy that European rule would end, but a conviction that it must, by means of force if necessary. Ndonye wa Kauti was perhaps more conventionally prophet-like in his use of imagery drawn from the innovations of his surroundings – books, rifles and telegraph lines – and his predictions that radical change was on the horizon. The mania of 1911 as a phenomenon that confounded British observers was not incited by individual prophetic leaders; but its appearance of collective instability and excitement was an unwelcome accompaniment to the emergence of even minor agitators.

In East Africa, by the late 1940s, the belief that Africans could become collectively unstable was well supported by decades of ‘remembered evidence’. Such evidence was passed through anecdotal and administrative reports documenting ‘epidemic’ behaviours, a burgeoning psychiatric literature that drew upon the patient populations of East African mental hospitals<sup>63</sup> and an increasingly prominent psychological, anthropological and administrative literature on ‘detribalization’. Both the colonial beliefs and the ‘evidence’ overshadowed the need for more cogent analyses of the post-war economic pressures experienced by the African population. This article suggests that the colonial administration’s inability to recognize such ‘rebellious types’ for what they were ultimately led to the British government’s famously ‘psychologized’ interpretation of the Mau Mau rebellion.<sup>64</sup>

<sup>62</sup> By the 1950s, such psychological approaches were well accepted and opened the way for official reports such as *The Psychology of Mau Mau* (Nairobi, 1954) authored by Mathari Hospital’s former psychiatrist-in-charge, J. C. Carothers.

<sup>63</sup> From the 1930s, this psychiatric literature was published frequently in the Nairobi-based *East African Medical Journal*, but also found its way into the pages of the *British Medical Journal*, *The Lancet* and the *Journal of Mental Science*.

<sup>64</sup> An analysis of the Mau Mau emergency sits outside of the scope of this article; however, on this point see J. C. Carothers, *The Psychology of Mau Mau* (Nairobi, 1954).