THE YEAR is 1976. The nation is in the iron grip of a powerful KANU (Kenya African National Union) elite which tolerates no opposition to its tyrannical rule, nor any resistance to its anti-people policies. Anyone who dares to challenge the all-powerful armed might of the minority elite in power is detained, jailed, exiled, eliminated or disappeared. Those eliminated in early years of Uhuru for opposing land grabs and stealing of national wealth had included General Baimunge and Pio Gama Pinto (both 1965, see 'Biographies', below). JM Kariuki suffered the same fate in 1975. An overview of that year is provided by Carol Sicherman, indicating the political situation in the country:

"1975 (March): Disturbances follow assassination on 2 March of JM Kariuki; during student clashes with police, students are raped, nearly 100 students arrested, and dozens hospitalised .... 28 May: University of Nairobi closes following student disturbances .... 15 October: Martin Shikuku and Jean Marie Seroney, opposition MPs, are detained, gun being drawn on Seroney. On 16 October [President] Kenyatta warns his critics: 'People seem to forget that a hawk is always in the sky ready to swoop on the chicken.'"

In such an oppressive situation in 1976, the mass media dared not question the dictates of the regime. The looting of peasant land by 'legal means' was the order of the day. Key sectors of the economy were farmed out among the ruling elite, backed by murder gangs and the GSU paramilitary force. Starvation, landlessness, unemployment and homelessness were the reality for working people. The key demands of Mau Mau – return of land, free education, medical care, freedom and political power – became distant dreams.

All avenues of protest were blocked. No party but KANU could be registered. Peasants could not complain about their stolen lands and unfair returns; workers had no militant trade unions – like the East African Trade Union Congress under Makhun Singh or the militants in the 1950s who introduced working class ideology to Mau Mau – which could represent their economic and political rights; professionals, civil servants, students, indeed nobody, had constitutional rights to life and liberty anymore. Life itself became a gift from the ruling class, not a right.

History books were closed, historians silenced. The regime felt threatened by the calls for socialism, justice and equality, fearing it could destroy the status quo. The aims of Mau Mau would destabilise the neocolonial 'peace' for the elite. Armed resistance to colonialism and capitalism could not be mentioned. For what would happen if the same methods were used today? 'Forgive, and forget history' became the daily mantra from the ruling elite. We all fought for Uhuru, it claimed, even when homesteads who fought against the people and for the colonial masters were rewarded with state power. It was the time of torture, massacres and violent death. 'Follow what you are told or face the GSU' was the elite's message to the restless youth seeking justice. The country was turned into a prison without walls for the working class.

But wait. All is not silence. Resistance is taking root again as it must under all repression. Underground resistance is awakening once more. A forthcoming article by Kimani Wawera and myself looks at the growth of this resistance:

"Most of the open spaces to express discontent were shut down .... In 1975 resistance regrouped and formed an underground party, the Kenya Workers' Party. The party took a leftist stand and operated in utmost secrecy. Knowing too well that the people who were to bring genuine change were workers and peasants, it endeavoured to reach them and to learn from their experiences. They were the resistance, the real workers' party. It connected with working people through cultural activities. The most famous of their activities was theatre, and an example of this was Ngugi wa Thiong'o's play Ngaahika Ndeenda (I will marry when I want), which was performed in Limuru by peasants and workers. The play depicted the struggles of peasants and workers. Recognising its power, the government of the day banned it and detained the writer. The detention of opponents of the ruling regime was the order of the day during the seventies. Among those who were detained were Koigi wa Wamwere, a young MP at the time, deputy speaker of the National Assembly Jean Marie Seroney, another vocal MP, Martin Shikuku and George Anyona, among others."

The December Twelve Movement (DTM), successor to the Kenya Workers' Party, set out its ideological position. It became active in the three areas that were essential in any resistance movement: political, economic and cultural activities. It established study cells and linked its theories with practice. It was active in trade unions and started working with workers and peasants in their struggles. It radicalised professional bodies. It realised the importance of information and communications and published an underground newspaper, Pambana. It also established a library underground, many of which books are in the Ukombozi Library today (see first box). It was actively researching and...
publishing historical material. It was also active on many of the sorts of cultural front recently outlined by Len McCluskey⁶ in the British context:

“There is another struggle, though – the cultural struggle. And culture is not just the arts, it is all the things we do to entertain, educate and enlighten ourselves, usually with others. It includes the arts like music, films, theatre and poetry.”

As was the practice with all of DTM’s work, its cultural policy and practice was influenced by theories from other revolutionary situations in Africa and elsewhere, such as the Soviet Union, China, Cuba and Vietnam. Particularly important was the use in its study sessions of Mao’s *Talks at the Yan’an Forum on Literature.* At the same time, it circulated underground the history of Kenya from a working-class perspective and its vision of the society it was aiming for. This was later published as *Independent Kenya.*

DTM cells organised different types of activities, in different languages at different times. For example, they produced a children’s play, *Amara Desh, Kenya (Our Country, Kenya)* in Gujarati with child actors and actresses. Plays it produced included *Portraits of Survival* and *Kinjikitile – MajiMaji* (see Box 1). Another activity was the showing of progressive films to workers and peasants, as I have recorded:

> “Among its early ventures was the showing of progressive films to workers and peasants in a semi-rural area just outside the city. The shows were organised by Sehemu (see Box 2 –SD) as part of the work of the Kabete Library serving the Faculties of Agriculture and Veterinary Science of the University of Nairobi at the Kabete Campus, about 16 km from the city centre. The film shows were held in the lecture theatre at the campus and took place in 1981. This was an important departure for the progressive

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### 1 The Underground Libraries, and the Ukombozi (‘Liberation’) Library Today

The liberation forces of necessity had to set up their own underground liberation libraries. Perhaps the largest one was that run by Nazmi Durrani, which provided a major reference point for the December Twelve Movement. The library, in a safe house in Nairobi, contained material which was banned in Kenya and which could lead to indefinite detention if the owner was found out. This included works of Marx, Lenin, Stalin and Castro, as well as publications from the USSR and the Foreign Languages Press in Beijing. The library also provided the source material for important documents in the fight against the neocolonial Moi regime, such as *Mwakenya’s Kenya, Register of Resistance* (1987), and *Umoja-Kenya’s 1989 publication, Moi’s Reign of Terror: a decade of Nyayo crimes against the people of Kenya* [Nyayo House is a government skyscraper in Nairobi, notorious for its detention chambers in the basement.] The safe house also became a centre of cyclotyding and distribution for the second edition of *Pambana,* published in July 1983. Cell members used motorbikes, cars, bicycles and public transport to distribute the newspapers to other cadres as well as to members of the public.

The Ukombozi Library was established in Nairobi by the Kenya chapter of the Progressive African Library and Information Activists’ Group (PALIAct) in partnership with Vita Books and the Mau Mau Research Centre.

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### 2 Sehemu ya Utungaji and Kinjikitile, MajiMaji

Sehemu ya Utungaji (“The Creative Wing”) was a group of patriotic Kenyan librarians in the 1980s associated with the University of Nairobi Library Magazine. They felt that the information services then were a continuation of colonial practices and had not been changed to answer the needs of the people of Kenya. The Sehemu brought together all creative activities, ranging from painting, drawing, creative writing, creative awareness through film shows, plays etc, generating new ideas which they aimed to translate into action.

The Sehemu group was planning to produce books on Mau Mau leaders but came to an early end in 1984. Before that, however, it had formed a partnership with a Nairobi drama group, Takhto Arts, to produce the play *Kinjikitile, MajiMaji.* This dealt with the Tanzanian people’s war of liberation against German colonialism, 1904-1907, conducted by the MajiMaji movement and led by Kinjikitile. “Maji” is the Kiswahili term for water and was used at the time as a call for unity. The script of the play was taken from *Kinjikitile,* by Tanzanian author Ebrahim Hussein (1969), but adapted by Nails Durrani and Shiraz Durrani to reflect Kenyan reality.

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PALIAct’s publicity states:

> “PALIAct is an initiative of a group of progressive African librarians and information workers. We recognise that current leaders in the African information field have done little to break the colonial and imperialist policies and practices in meeting the information needs of working people in Africa, or to make the profession more relevant to the needs of African librarians and information workers.”

The Library incorporates the December Twelve Movement’s underground library. It aims to make available progressive material and to encourage reading, study and research by working people in Kenya. The need for such a library follows from the fact that progressive literature has been generally ignored by most libraries and learning institutions. Young people with a passion to bring about improvement in the country and a thirst for materials that would inspire them in their quest for social justice get disappointed as such materials are hard to come by. The Ukombozi Library has an initial collection of almost a thousand titles of progressive material, mostly books but also pamphlets, videos and photographs. A majority of these are classics which are either out of print or cannot be found in the local bookshops. Other material has been donated by the Mau Mau Research Centre, Vita Books and many progressive individuals active in the information struggle in Kenya.
librarianship movement from the conservative service in Kenya in a number of ways. The use of film shows as a way of meeting information and learning needs of local communities was one such departure. Another was the fact that the doors of a major academic institution were opened for the first time to a non-academic – worker and peasant – audience. But perhaps the most significant point was the content of the films. Three films were shown in the Black Man’s Land trilogy: White Man’s Country, Mau Mau and Kenyaatta. These were produced and directed by Anthony Howarth and David R Koff and were written by David R Koff. The significance of showing these films was that they were frowned upon by the KANU Government at the time and even the normal showing of the films was extremely difficult, if not impossible.”

DTM also encouraged its members to write plays, short stories and poems. Some poems were carried in Pambana. A collection of resistance poems was circulating underground and is to be published by Vita Books in 2019 under the title Tunakataa! (We Say No!). Kenyan history has failed to record not only the achievements of Mau Mau but also resistance to neocolonialism, capitalism and imperialism after independence. This includes the work of DTM in different fields. It is not surprising that the KANU-Moi government sought to eliminate DTM as it saw the real danger posed to the comprador rule, particularly as DTM mobilised thousands at its cultural activities.

**Kenyan History Through Carvings**

It was in this climate that a group of Wakanba wood carver artists, with the support of DTM activists, began to study Kenyan history. This was not easy, as few books on Mau Mau and the struggle against colonialism and imperialism were available. DTM’s underground library filled the gap. The carvers’ deep research revealed Mau Mau’s real history and contribution to the war of independence. They then told Kenya’s history by carving key scenes onto wood carvings. There were 36 carvings in all. The artists created multiple copies of the complete set which soon became collectors’ items among DTM members and supporters. The entire collection was on exhibition for a month at the YMCA (Young Men’s Christian Association) Cottage Crafts, Nairobi in 1976 and attracted thousands of students and workers.

As the exhibition did not attract mainstream politicians’ attention, it was not banned. However, many of the carvings are currently lost as activists who had collected them faced increasing repression and had to distribute them among supporters. They are likely to be in the hands of workers and peasants today, but as far as is known, no library, archive or museum in Kenya has the collection – another reflection of the neocolonial control over people’s culture. Settler and foreign artwork is easy to find in Kenya today, but sadly the same does not apply to Kenya’s artwork. The accompanying images reproduce some of the ones rescued from imperialist clutches.

What thus emerged on the art and historical fronts was truly remarkable. At one level, the carvings demolished the ruling classes’ embargo on protest and resistance – here was the real history of Kenya which had been silenced since independence. At another level, they used a form where no words were written, no embargoes broken – yet history was there for all to see. It mattered not whether one had reading skills or not, whether one was fluent in English or not. The form and content were in perfect harmony, to give visual evidence of the heroic struggle. The neocolonial embargo on
history, on information, on communications was totally broken. While historians could not do research or disseminate the results of their research to the people whose history they were working on, this group of artist-scholars created the history of the hidden aspects of Mau Mau. They highlighted the key vision of the movement which challenged the colonial and imperialist-induced social values. They explained their position on burning issues of the day and threw light on the historical approaches to resolving social contradictions.

**Resistance Art**

The neocolonial setup in Kenya in 1976 had ensured that people's art and culture served only tourist markets, divorcing them from lives of working classes. The wood art of the Kamba nationality had been one of the victims of the attacks on people's customs and cultures. It was gradually depoliticised by market forces, which became the new rulers under capitalism and imperialism. Tourists do not want politics, just items of what they consider 'beauty', and the Wakamba artists began producing wood carving of animals which satisfied the tourist and overseas markets. The needs of the Kenyan people remained ignored. Until, that is, the youthful group of the activist carvers broke the embargo imposed by the market economy. They pioneered a new art form with relevant content in their revolutionary wood carvings. They put politics in command once more in art.

For all their achievements, the artists remain almost unknown in Kenyan history today. They were Mule wa Musembi, Kitonyi wa Kongo, Kitaka wa Mutua and Mutunga wa Musembi. The exhibition was curated by Sultan Somjee from the University of Nairobi.

Little was known in Kenya about the history of Mau Mau in 1976 as research and publication on it had been suppressed by the government. It is therefore interesting to see the carvings dig out key aspects of Mau Mau. These include their ideology, their strategies and tactics, their actions, development of technologies, record keeping and communications, leadership as well as their attitude to women, nationalities and their class perspective. The write-up accompanying the exhibition contained historical facts not commonly known except to Mau Mau activists. For example, a team of two or more Mau Mau activists would carry messages from the Mau Mau High Command in the heart of Nyandarua to different Mau Mau centres, and to its armies, or to the progressive workers and peasants throughout the country. The carving project brought such facts to the public. The text accompanying Carving No 1 (unfortunately not included here) records the tactics of Mau Mau in communication when confronted by enemy soldiers.10

“Two couriers carrying orders from the Kenya Defence Council are caught in the enemy ambush. One courier rushes at the enemy so that the other may escape and deliver the orders. The dying fighter digs deep the soil and exhorts his companion to continue. The courier crosses many ridges and valleys across Kenya.”

With works like these, Kenyan artists became trendsetters in resistance art.

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This article is a much extended version of the author's 'Mau Mau Wood Carvings Narrative', which appeared in *Ara az* magazine Kenya, Vol 15, issue 3, 2018, pp 16-17. Fig 1 is reproduced with kind permission from *Ara az*; Figs 1, 2, 4 and 5 are © Shiraz Durrani.

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**Biographies of cited Kenyan political activists**

**GENERAL BAIMUNGE (1872-1965)** was a Mau Mau general, and deputy to Dedan Kimathi. He refused to leave the forest at independence in 1963, demanding that the government give free land, jobs and assistance to Mau Mau. He was killed on 26 January 1965 “at the hands of the Uhuru (independent) government” of Jomo Kenyatta.11

**PIO GAMA PINTO (1927-1965)** was a trade unionist, journalist and nationalist. He was an anti-colonial activist in Goa (then under Portuguese rule) and Kenya and was active in the Mau Mau liberation movement. After independence in Kenya, he continued his anti-imperialist struggle and supported socialism. He was assassinated on 24 February 1965.12

**JOSIAH MWANGI KARIUKI (1929-1975)** was a Mau Mau detainee, later a Member of Parliament. “In later years he became a widely popular spokesman for the peasantry and the poor, claiming that ‘we do not want a Kenya of ten millionaires and ten million beggars’ … he was brutally murdered on 2 March 1975. When he was killed he was campaigning against corruption and actively opposing the political leadership … there was no doubt whatever that high authorities in Kenya were responsible for his murder”.13

**MARTIN SHIKUKU (1963-2012)** was a Kenyan Member of Parliament from 1963 to 1988. “Seen as a radical, he early declared himself ‘President of the Poor’. He paid for his prolonged opposition with detention in October 1975. He was adopted by Amnesty International as a prisoner of conscience. He was released in December 1978,”14 “In KANU, Shikuku gained a reputation as an outspoken backbencher, critical of corruption and abuses of power, and a defender of parliamentary privileges.”15

**JEAN MARIE SERONEY (1925-1982)** was Deputy Speaker of the Kenyan Parliament in 1975, when his support of Shikuku’s declaration that “KANU has been killed” led to his detention; he was adopted by Amnesty International as a prisoner of conscience. He was released in December 1978.16

**MAKHAN SINGH (1913-1973)** has previously been profiled in this journal.17 He was, according to Carol Sieherman, a “Pre-eminent trade union leader, Secretary of the Labour Trade Union of Kenya when he organised a two-month strike in Nairobi (1937). Interned in India for five years (1940-1945). In 1949, he founded the East African Trade Union Congress with Fred Kubai. He was arrested in 1950 and restricted until 1961. His attempt to enter the trade union movement [after his release] was banned by the new leaders (after independence) ‘suspicious of his socialist’ leanings. He spent his final years writing a two-volume history of the [trade union] movement.”18 While in India, 1939-47, he was a member of the Communist Party and edited its newspaper. His son Hindpal Jabal says:
NGÜGI WA THIONG’O is an award-winning, world-renowned Kenyan writer and academic who writes primarily in Gikuyu. His work includes novels, plays, short stories, and essays, ranging from literary and social criticism to children’s literature. He is the founder and editor of the Gikuyu-language journal Mźũũũiī. In 1977, Ngũgĩ embarked upon a novel form of theatre in his native Kenya that sought to liberate the theatrical process from what he held to be “the general bourgeois education system”, by encouraging spontaneity and audience participation in the performances. His project sought to “demythify” the theatrical process, and to avoid the “process of alienation [that] produces a gallery of active stars and an undifferentiated mass of grateful admirers” which, according to Ngũgĩ, encourages passivity in “ordinary people”. Although his landmark play, Nuguikhika Ndeenda, co-written with Ngũgĩ wa Mirii, was a commercial success, it was shut down by the authoritarian Kenyan regime six weeks after its opening. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o was subsequently imprisoned for over a year. Adopted as an Amnesty International prisoner of conscience, he was released from prison, and fled Kenya. For further information see Carol Sicherman’s book.

KOIGI WA WAMWERE (1949-) is a Kenyan politician, human rights activist, journalist and writer. He became famous for opposing both the Jomo Kenyatta and Daniel arap Moi regimes, both of which sent him to detention.

GEORGE ANYONA (1945-2003) was elected an MP in 1977, but later that year was detained without trial by then President Jomo Kenyatta. Although released in 1978 by President Daniel arap Moi, he was arrested again in 1982, along with his longtime friend and veteran politician Jaramogi Oginga Odinga. The two were detained without trial for attempting to form a political party, the Kenya African Socialist Alliance (KASA), to challenge the ruling party KANU. Shortly after their arrest, KANU pushed through a constitutional amendment, making Kenya a de facto one-party state. Released from detention in 1984, Anyona made a political comeback in 1990 during the clamour for multi-party democracy in Kenya. However, he was then arrested with several others on a charge of sedition. After a marathon trial, the defendants were jailed for seven years. It was later revealed by an assistant minister in the Office of the President, John Keen, that the allegations were nothing but government fabrications, and in 1992 the defendants were released on bail and then had their sentences quashed.
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Cover image
Proletarians of All Countries Get United!
by El Lisitsky (Lazar Lisitsky).

Above right
Vladimir Tatlin's Monument to the Third International

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