

# We Need a Mau Mau in Mississippi

## *Malcolm X's Political Lessons for Today*

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On December 20, 1964, at the Audubon Ballroom in Harlem, Malcolm X declared, "Oginga Odinga [the vice president of recently liberated Kenya] is not passive. He's not meek. He's not humble. He's not nonviolent. But he's free."

This fact was part of a larger object lesson that Malcolm X had for black Americans:

[Jomo Kenyatta, Oginga Odinga, and the Mau Mau will] go down as the greatest African patriots and freedom fighters that that continent ever knew, and they will be given credit for bringing about the independence of many of the existing independent states on that continent right now. There was a time when their image was negative, but today they're looked upon with respect and their chief is the president and their next chief is the vice president.

I have to take time to mention that because, in my opinion, not only in Mississippi and Alabama, but right here in New York City, you and I can best learn how to get real freedom by studying how Kenyatta brought it to his people in Kenya, and how Odinga helped him, and the excellent job that was done by the Mau Mau freedom fighters. In fact, that's what we need in Mississippi. In Mississippi we need a Mau Mau. In Alabama we need a Mau Mau. In Georgia we need a Mau Mau. Right here in Harlem, in New York City, we need a Mau Mau.

I say it with no anger; I say it with very careful forethought.<sup>1</sup>

The most important insight of Malcolm X's speeches and writings during the last two months of his life concerns the relationship between the African diaspora's struggles against internal colonialism in the United States and the liberation movements' struggles against European colonialism and U.S. neocolonialism on the African continent. The key here is the recognition that blacks on both continents are fighting the same enemy—the white power structure of capitalist imperialism. While the civil rights movement in the United States emphasized an integrationist ethos that implicitly shored up the interests of the U.S. elite, Malcolm X fought not for a *civil* rights movement but for a *human* rights movement, having learned from the examples of Patrice Lumumba and Jomo Kenyatta that a truly independent African socialism depends on the forceful resistance to colonialism.

As noted above, not long before his assassination, Malcolm X told black America that in Mississippi, in Alabama, in Georgia, and in Harlem, “we need a Mau Mau.” His message to black America was that black liberation was possible in the United States as well as in Kenya, Ghana, and the Congo; that the African American struggle was part of the global struggles against imperialism; that “the revolution on the outside of the house” was troubling enough for the power structure, but they were then “beginning to see that this struggle on the *outside* by the black man is affecting, *infecting* the black man who is on the *inside* of that structure” (*MX*, 160–61, emphasis added). The influence of the African liberation movements has, in his words, never been fully told, and black *America* needs to follow black *Africa's* example and answer the racist violence of the white man with “vigorous action in self-defense” (164–65).

The greatest lesson for us to draw today from the speeches and interviews of Malcolm X from December 1964 to his death in February 1965 is to recognize the analytical and synthesizing moves of the argument he developed during this crucial period. This is especially true for his analysis of U.S. intervention in the Congo. These moves will allow us to draw similar conclusions regarding the intimate ties between imperialism abroad and imperialism here at home.

The most important element of the colonization of the mind—which is the main point underlying Malcolm X's analysis—is the role of the press in shaping public opinion, in particular the public opinion of Afro-Americans. It is through the press that the U.S. government and the imperialist power structure are able to “psycho”

black consciousness, to brainwash Afro-Americans into internalizing the colonial mythologies that justify the status quo, including the systematic violence that polices and maintains that status quo. Just as important, however, Malcolm X also developed a process of *decolonizing* black minds, and that involved seeing through the smokescreen created by the press and identifying with the struggles, methods, and achievements of the African liberation fighters such as the Mau Mau in Kenya and the Simbas in the Congo. As he put it:

When you begin to start thinking for yourself, you frighten them, and they try and block your getting to the public, for fear that if the public listens to you, then the public won't listen to them anymore. . . . And if you don't develop the analytical ability to read between the lines in what they're saying, I'm telling you again—they'll be building gas ovens, and before you wake up you'll be in one of them, just like the Jews ended up in gas ovens over there in Germany. You're in a society that's just as capable of building gas ovens for Black people as Hitler's society was.<sup>2</sup>

### Relationship between the African Revolution and the Afro-American Struggle

What “we know too little about,” Malcolm X told his audiences, “is our relationship with the freedom struggle of people all over the world” (*MX*, 117). In particular, he emphasized

the importance of realizing the direct connection between the struggle of the Afro-American in this country and the struggle of our people all over the world. As long as we think . . . that we should get Mississippi straightened out before we worry about the Congo, you'll never get Mississippi straightened out. Not until you start realizing your connection with the Congo. . . .

When I speak of some action for the Congo, that action also includes Congo, Mississippi. But the point and thing that I would like to impress upon every Afro-American leader is that there is no kind of action in this country ever going to

bear fruit unless that action is tied in with the over-all international struggle. . . .

I might point out here that colonialism or imperialism, as the slave system of the West is called, is not something that is just confined to England or France or the United States. The interests in this country are in cahoots with the interests in France and the interests in Britain. It's one huge complex or combine, and it creates what's known not as the American power structure or the French power structure, but an international power structure. This international power structure is used to suppress the masses of dark-skinned people all over the world and exploit them of their natural resources, so that the era in which you and I have been living during the past ten years most specifically has witnessed the upsurge on the part of the black man in Africa against the power structure. (*MX*, 90, 89, 160)

### Analysis of the Trickery in the Congo: Manipulation by the Press

Malcolm X spoke of the "step-by-step" process used by the press:

First they [fan] the flame in such a manner to create hysteria in the mind of the public. And then they shift gears and fan the flame in a manner designed to get the sympathy of the public. And once they go from hysteria to sympathy, their next step is to get the public to support them in whatever act they're getting ready to go down with. You're dealing with a cold calculating international machine, that's so criminal in its objectives and motives that it has the seeds of its own destruction, right within. (AB)

Those seeds of destruction included the Afro-Americans' dawning recognition of their relationship to African liberation movements. But a major task of Malcolm X's analysis was to explain the apparent lack of sympathy by black America concerning the slaughter of black Africans. The major mystery, which he took on in his analysis of the situation regarding the Congo, was the fact that despite the mass murder taking place in an African country as Western planes

dropped bombs on Congolese villages, killing black men, women, and babies, there was no “outcry, no sympathy, no support, no concern” expressed by Afro-Americans. What could account for this lack of international racial solidarity? Malcolm X’s answer was the “trickery” of the press in the service of imperialism. Afro-Americans do not sympathize because, in his words, “the press didn’t *project* it in such a way that it would be designed to get your sympathy. They know how to put something so that you’ll *sympathize* with it, and they know how to put it so you’ll be *against* it” (AB, emphasis added).

The recognition of this ability and willingness by the press to manipulate public emotion and opinion was the first point in Malcolm X’s decolonizing analysis of the relationship between Africa and Afro-America. This manipulation involved, among many things, the choice of loaded descriptors: the bombing was a “humanitarian project”; the planes were flown by “American-trained anti-Castro Cuban pilots”; they were doing it “in the name of freedom.” Malcolm X asked, “You see how step-by-step they grab your mind” with this propaganda? These glorious terms “are used to pave the way in your mind for what they’re going to do” (AB).

The next point, the counterpoint, in Malcolm X’s decolonizing analysis was to offer an alternative description of these events and actors that better explained the power dynamics at play:

These pilots are hired, their salaries are paid by the United States government. They’re called mercenaries, these pilots are. And a mercenary is not someone who kills you because he’s patriotic. He kills you for blood money, he’s a hired killer. This is what a mercenary means. And they’re able to take these hired killers, put them in American planes, with American bombs, and drop them on African villages, blowing to bits Black men, Black women, Black children, Black babies, and you Black people sitting over here cool like it doesn’t even involve you. You’re a fool. They’ll do it to them today, and do it to you tomorrow. Because you and I and they are all the same. (AB)

Next, Malcolm X explained what has since come to be known as a classic “postcolonial” situation: In order to legitimate its colonialist interventions, the U.S. government handpicks a criminal to prop up as leader of the newly independent state, someone who allows U.S. interests unfettered access to the resources of the nation, cracks down on

his own people when they protest, and allows foreign military forces to operate within the country. In the case of the Congo, Malcolm X explained:

They take Tshombe. . . . He's the worst African that was ever born. . . . He's the murderer of Lumumba . . . the first and only rightful prime minister of the Congo. . . . The United States takes him, puts him over the Congo, and supports his government with your tax dollars. . . . His salary's paid by the United States government. . . . His first move is to bring in South Africans, who hate everything in sight. He hires those South Africans to come and kill his own Congolese people. And the United States, again, pays their salary. (AB)

Malcolm X explained that this justification of the installation of Tshombe as the only African who could “bring unity to” the Congo was really just a cover for their real reason for imperialist interest in the country, which was to recapture the country in order to exploit its vast mineral resources, to take advantage of its strategic geographic location as a base for intervention in other African countries, and to counter the inspiration of the Congolese liberation fighters who would support other African nations in their wars against colonialism.

Another cynical move by the press was their lack of coverage of the thousands of dead Congolese blacks while decrying the capture of white hostages: “A white skin is more valuable than a . . . black skin. This is what they're implying! . . . They're vicious in their whiteness” (AB). The most insidious effect of this press manipulation, however, was that the other side of *projection* is *internalization*. Given the three-to four-century history of seeing negative images of Africa and Africans projected in the Western press, the Afro-American has tended to internalize these negative images. Malcolm X described this process:

They always project Africa in a negative light: jungle savages, cannibals, nothing civilized. Why then naturally it was so negative that it was negative to you and me, and you and I began to hate it. We didn't want anybody telling us anything about Africa, much less calling us Africans. In hating Africa and in hating the Africans, we ended up hating ourselves, without even realizing it. Because you can't hate the roots of a tree, and not hate the tree. You can't hate your origin and

not end up hating yourself. You can't hate Africa and not hate yourself. . . .

And this is what the white man knows. So they very skillfully make you and me hate our African identity, our African characteristics. . . . It made us feel inferior; it made us feel inadequate; made us feel helpless. And when we fell victims to this feeling of inadequacy or inferiority or helplessness, we turned to somebody else to show us the way. (*MX*, 168, 169)

### Manipulation by the Government

Like the mainstream Western media, the government of the United States was a tool for imperialist control of the globe. And like the media, the government played its own role in the “trickery” involving perceptions, sympathies, antipathies, and ultimately action—or more often inaction. As Malcolm X explained, “After 1959 the spirit of African nationalism was fanned to a high flame and we then began to witness the complete collapse of colonialism” (*MX*, 169–70). Because the European countries that were losing territory and influence across the globe were so thoroughly identified with imperialism, international capital had to find a new governmental vehicle to carry on its legacy, a government that was not so obviously identified with the history of Western imperialism.

As Malcolm X put it, “They pulled a trick that was colossal. . . . They passed the ball to Uncle Sam. And he picked it up and has been running it for a touchdown ever since” (*MX*, 170). And in this case it was the Africans who, according to Malcolm X, had internalized the propaganda of the West: “At that time, the Africans couldn't see that though the United States hadn't colonized the African continent, it had colonized 22 million blacks here on this continent. Because we're just as thoroughly colonized as anybody else” (170).

This crucial move in Malcolm X's argument worked in two directions at once, alerting the newly independent African nations to their colonial kinship to blacks in America, while at the same time alerting blacks in America to their own colonial condition and therefore to their kinship to the decolonizing movements in Africa.

President Kennedy played a pivotal role in Malcolm X's argument, for Kennedy was the figure who, having caught the ball, scored against Africans and Afro-Americans at the same time. And this analytical

move of X's provided a hinge point for comparing the trickery concerning perceptions of Africans and Afro-Americans. Kennedy's great propagandistic ploy in Africa was the creation of the Peace Corps, and with it the move from an openly militaristic form of imperialism to an apparently benign form. In X's words, "They came up with some benevolent colonialism, philanthropic colonialism, humanitarianism, or dollarism. Immediately everything was Peace Corps, Operation Crossroads, 'We've got to help our African brothers.' Pick up on that. Can't help us in Mississippi. Can't help us in Alabama, or Detroit, or out here in Dearborn where some real Ku Klux Klan lives" (*MX*, 170–71). So in this way the United States could pose as humanitarians and still end up controlling the resources of Africa. According to X, "This country can seduce God. Yes, it has that seductive power—the power of dollarism. You can cuss out colonialism, imperialism and all other kinds of isms, but it's hard for you to cuss that dollarism. When they drop those dollars on you, your soul goes" (199). And so, through the seemingly benevolent ideology of progress and development, the United States could gain strategic influence over many a postcolonial African leader.

### Analysis of the Trickery at Home

In the same way Kennedy, according to Malcolm X, was able to seduce the leaders of the civil rights movement here at home. JFK "specialized in how to psycho the American Negro" (*MX*, 173). Malcolm continued:

Kennedy's new approach was pretending to go along with us in our struggle for civil rights. He was another proponent of rights. But I remember the expose that *Look* magazine did on the Meredith situation in Mississippi. *Look* magazine did an expose showing that Robert Kennedy and Governor Barnett had made a deal, wherein the Attorney General was going to come down and try to force Meredith into school, and Barnett was going to stand at the door, you know, and say, "No, you can't come in." He was going to get in anyway, but it was all arranged in advance and then Barnett was supposed to keep the support of the white racists, because that's who he was upholding, and Kennedy would keep the support of



the Negroes, because that's who he'd be upholding. It was a cut-and-dried deal. And it's not a secret; it was written, they write about it. But if that's a deal, how many other deals do you think go down? (*MX*, 173)

The U.S. media are equally effective in their collusion with such government trickery in their depiction of conditions here at home as they are abroad, especially in the maintenance of the government's monopoly on violence. Whether it is South Vietnam, South Africa, or South Carolina, the situation is the same—the brutal suppression of people of color by whites in positions of power. “But when it comes time for you and me to protect ourselves against lynchings,” Malcolm X pointed out, “they tell us to be nonviolent.” He continued:

That's a shame. Because we get tricked into being nonviolent, and when somebody stands up and talks like I just did, they say, “Why, he's advocating violence.” . . . I have never advocated any violence. I have only said that black people who are the victims of organized violence perpetrated upon us by the Klan, the Citizens Councils, and many other forms, should defend ourselves. And when I say we should defend ourselves against the violence of others, they use their press skillfully to make the world think that I am calling for violence, period. I wouldn't call on anybody to be violent without a cause. But I think the black man in this country, above and beyond people all over the world, will be more justified when he stands up and starts to protect himself, no matter how many necks he has to break and heads he has to crack. (*MX*, 164)

The manipulative lever for this move is to the diversionary tactic of characterizing black self-defense as racist and “violence in reverse.” And as before, this projection of a negative image becomes internalized by black Americans:

This is how they psycho you. They make you think that if you try to stop the Klan from lynching you, you're practicing “violence in reverse.” Pick up on this, I hear a lot of you all parrot what the man says. You say, “I don't want to be a Ku Klux Klan in reverse.” Well, you—heh!—if a criminal comes around your house with his gun, brother, just because he's got a gun and he's robbing your house, brother, and he's a robber, it doesn't make you a robber because you grab your gun and run him

out. No, see, the man is using some tricky logic on you. And he has absolutely got a Ku Klux Klan outfit that goes through the country frightening black people. Now, I say it is time for black people to put together the type of action, the unity, that is necessary to pull the sheet off of them so they won't be frightening black people any longer. That's all. And when we say this, the press calls us "racist in reverse."

"Don't struggle—only within the ground rules that the people you're struggling against have laid down." Why, this is insane. But it shows you how they can do it. With skillful manipulating of the press, they're able to make the victim look like the criminal, and the criminal look like the victim. (AB)

The press distortion of the riots during the summer of 1964 provided Malcolm X with a powerful example of this projection/internalization tendency:

I was in Africa, I read about [the riots] over there. If you noticed, they referred to the rioters as vandals, hoodlums, thieves, and they skillfully took the burden off the society for its failure to correct these negative conditions in the black community. They took the burden completely off the society and put it right on the community by using the press to make it appear that the looting and all of this was proof that the whole act was nothing but vandals and robbers and thieves, who weren't really interested in anything other than that which was negative. (MX, 166)

And according to Malcolm X, some black Americans accepted this characterization of the riots and repeated it themselves. Malcolm X countered this version with the socioeconomic context of the riots: far from participating in random, senseless violence, the rioters, because they could not get to the white landlords and store owners who profited daily from the institutionalized racial violence against blacks in America, instead targeted their property, the sites of racialized economic exploitation.

The inescapably exploitative nature of capitalism is the final connection between Africa and Afro-America that this chapter will address. Capitalism, Malcolm X told us, is a vulturistic system, a system of bloodsuckers (MX, 121). For this reason, he suggested:

All of the countries that are emerging today from under the shackles of colonialism are turning toward socialism. I don't think it's an accident. Most of the countries that were colonial powers were capitalist countries, and the last bulwark of capitalism today is America. It's impossible for a white person to believe in capitalism and not believe in racism. You can't have capitalism without racism. And if you find one and you happen to get that person into a conversation and they have a philosophy that makes you sure they don't have this racism in their outlook, usually they're socialists or their political philosophy is socialism. . . .

We pray that our African brothers have not freed themselves of European colonialism only to be overcome and held in check now by American *dollarism*. Don't let American racism be "legalized" by American dollarism. (MX, 69, 75)

### Lessons from Malcolm X

My overall point is that this kind of analysis that Malcolm X put to work in his speeches during the final two months of his life provides us with crucial lessons for today. The Western press and the United States government still function at the behest of the capitalist system, the international imperialist power structure of U.S. corporations. Capitalism is still racialized in order to function as a divide-and-conquer strategy of the rich against the poor. The power plays at home still have intimate connections to the same power plays abroad.

The demonization by the press and our government of the new socialist leaders in Latin America works hand in hand with anti-Arab and anti-Mexican racism in the United States. The rape of the environment in the Middle East by oil companies is intimately connected to global climate change, resulting in the increased frequency and magnitude of hurricanes in the Gulf of Mexico, revealing the relationship between indigenous Alaskans whose lives are disrupted by melting ice caps and poor people in New Orleans whose lives were ended by Hurricane Katrina. Then add the manipulation by the press in its portrayal of blacks "looting" stores in a crime spree while whites were simply "finding" food in these same stores in their attempt to survive.

Malcolm X's analytical strategy is helpful in showing the connections between the U.S. government's so-called "War on Drugs" in the

Andes; the rise of right-wing death squads in that region; the demonization of the democratically elected Socialist presidents of Venezuela, Ecuador, and Bolivia; and the crack boom in poor urban neighborhoods in the United States. How coincidental is the connection between the boom in heroin production in Afghanistan since the U.S. invasion and the boom in heroin consumption in poorer communities in the United States itself, such as in Athens County, Ohio, where I am writing from?

And finally, what does it mean, from Malcolm X's perspective, that the president of the United States is the child of a Kenyan father and a Euro-American mother—some of whose family members were slave owners while others fought against the South during the Civil War? What would Malcolm X make of this person who, on the one hand, symbolizes the rise from slavery to the presidency, but who, on the other hand, occupies the role of commander in chief of imperialism? An African American who expresses heartfelt concern for the downtrodden while promising to bomb the people of Afghanistan? An African American who will oversee the exploitation of Nigerian and Venezuelan oil? We might finally have an African American in the White House, but will we have a Mau Mau in Mississippi?

## Notes

1. Malcolm X, *Malcolm X Speaks: Selected Speeches and Statements*, ed. George Breitman (New York: Merit, 1965), 106 (hereafter cited as *MX*).

2. Malcolm X, "After the Bombing / Speech at Ford Auditorium," transcribed and edited by the Malcolm X Museum and Noaman Ali, [http://www.malcolm-x.org/speeches/spc\\_021465.htm](http://www.malcolm-x.org/speeches/spc_021465.htm) (hereafter cited as *AB*).