Human Rights for Kenya’s Kikuyu

On June 6, 2013, the British high commissioner in Nairobi acknowledged Britain’s colonial-era torture of the Kikuyu people, Kenya’s largest ethnic group, during the "Mau Mau" counter-insurgency of the 1950s in which, it is estimated, over 25,000 Kenyans lost their lives. Expressing "sincere regret" that the abuses had taken place, the commissioner announced a financial settlement to each of 5,200 surviving claimants, and urged that the process of healing for both nations begin. The research of Caroline Elkins, Harvard Professor of History and Professor of African and African-American Studies, and a member of the Harvard Global Health Institute’s Steering Committee played a pivotal role in the case.

The legal case and its victory rest largely on archival documents that Elkins had uncovered in Kenya during her doctoral research, published in her 2005 award-winning book exposing the atrocities, *Imperial Reckoning: The Untold Story of Britain’s Gulag in Kenya*. As part of the suit, Elkins, together with historians David Anderson and Huw Bennett, reviewed 300 boxes of previously undisclosed material discovered in 2011 in files stored since the 1950s at the British Foreign Office. Several elderly and frail survivors testified, and evidence for the case was further supported by the Kenya Human Rights Commission.

"The British validation of the Mau Mau claims – and its first form of an apology for modern empire – offers its citizens an opportunity to understand more fully the unholy relationship between liberalism and imperialism" said Elkins, currently on sabbatical in Kenya. Elkins also serves as Chair of the Committee on African Studies, a university-wide interdisciplinary organization that recently gained anthropologist, Dr. Sue Cook, as its new Executive Director.

Elkins’ research was not without risk. "I took on both the book and [the role of] expert witness in the case at great professional peril," she says, "because I felt strongly that this is something that needed to be done. There is nothing more satisfying than to see the impact this work has had on the individuals that I have worked with, taken oral history from, and who trusted me with their stories."

Read more:

*Reflections on justice delayed (Harvard Gazette, 6/11/13)*

*Mau Mau Settlement: How much cash fixes the past? (NPR, 6/13/13)*
Drawing a Line Under History (The Economist 6/15/13)

Harvard Committee on African Studies: Facebook

Image: Dedan Kimathi Waciuri (1920-1957), a Kenyan leader executed during British suppression of the Mau Mau rebellion. This bronze statue and graphite plinth stands in central Nairobi. Photo by Jorge Laskar. Reproduced in accordance with Creative Commons licensing.

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