

Notes and Field Reports

A colonial-era ‘strategic village’ in Kiambicho Forest, Kenya

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Abstract

Villagisation – the forcible removal of rural populations into internment camp-like settlements – was a policy of counterinsurgency and social engineering employed by the British colonial government in Kenya during the Mau Mau rebellion (1952–60). In 2021 a uniquely well-preserved example of these ‘strategic villages’ was discovered in Kiambicho Forest. This article describes a preliminary survey of the structural remains at the site, intended as a foundation for future survey and excavation.

Keywords: conflict archaeology, counterinsurgency, internment, Mau Mau, villagisation

Introduction

During the anticolonial Mau Mau rebellion in 1950s Kenya the largely Gĩkũyũ population of Central Province suffered forcible displacement by British-led forces. As part of the colonial government’s counterinsurgency strategy, rural settlements were burned or demolished and their inhabitants forced into ‘strategic villages’ where many suffered violence, malnutrition and forced labour (Feichtinger 2017a). Today, very few of these c. 840 villages survive. In 2021 National Museums of Kenya identified the uniquely well-preserved remains of a strategic village in Kiambicho Forest, Kiharu, Murang’a County. In June 2023 a survey of the village site, described here, uncovered further structural elements and details of the remains.

The Mau Mau rebellion

British colonial interference in Kenya began in the late nineteenth century, with formal integration into the British Empire in 1920. Throughout this period until Kenyan independence in 1963 there were numerous anti-colonial campaigns and uprisings, culminating in the Mau Mau rebellion of 1952–60. Much of this conflict was focused in Kenya’s Central Province, where the Mau Mau fought a guerrilla war based in the forest

strongholds of Aberdares and Mount Kenya. Following the outbreak of the rebellion the colonial government declared a state of emergency, leading to mass internment without trial in c. 60 detention camps spread across the country. Prisoners were used as slave labour in agriculture, manufacturing and infrastructure projects, with a high death toll from violence, disease and malnutrition (Anderson 2005). The military response to the Mau Mau included British and Kenyan troops, Kenyan 'Home Guard' militia under British command and the use of fighter-bombers and heavy bomber aircraft (Bennett 2012). The Mau Mau were increasingly diminished as a military force from the mid-1950s, and by 1960 the rebellion had come to an end. Kenya gained independence in 1963.

Villagisation

British counterinsurgency strategy in Kenya, including the use of mass-internment, drew strongly on contemporary experiences fighting communist guerrillas in Malaya. This included the decision in 1954 to introduce a policy of strategic resettlement or 'villagisation' of rural communities in Central Province. Over the following seven years some 1.2 million Kenyans – largely Gikūyū, Embu and Meru people – were forced into these strategic villages (Feichtinger 2017a). While the primary purpose of villagisation was counterinsurgency, it formed a part of a wider Kenyan government policy of agricultural intensification, land reform and other supposed reforms, as a form of extreme social engineering (Bruce-Lockhart and Rebisz 2023).

The strategic villages were surrounded by walls, fences and ditches with wooden spikes, while the entrances and boundaries were under constant surveillance by armed guards. Forcibly driven from their homes, rural communities were obliged to build the strategic villages themselves, with materials gathered from the local area (Feichtinger 2017b, 144). Families from dispersed rural settlements found themselves crammed into settlements of 500 or more: in several accounts, including contemporary reports, the overcrowding and the small distances between homes is identified as a source of misery and suffering as well as a factor in the very high mortality rates – particularly infant mortality – through disease and malnutrition (Branch 2010).

The strategic villages are remembered by those who lived in them as places of 'forced labour, severe malnutrition, violence, and, more specifically, sexual violence' (Bruce-Lockhart and Rebisz 2023, 489). In a news report on the discovery of the Kiambicho site, local resident Elias Mwangi recalled that two of his grandparents had died in the village: his grandmother from the effects of torture and malnutrition; his grandfather shot while trying to escape. Both of their bodies, Mwangi said, were left outside the camp to be eaten by hyenas (Gachane 2021).

Survey

The site was visited twice in the course of a week in June 2023: the first time for a preliminary walkover survey; the second for photographic recording, including drone photography, and to take measurements. The camp is located on one of the highest peaks

in Kiambicho Forest, on Kenya Forest Service land. The location is significant in terms of visibility and surveillance from surrounding peaks. Access is via a much-eroded track, with the last few kilometres inaccessible to vehicles. Since the discovery of the remains in 2021 the site has been visited intermittently by local community conservation volunteers who have removed vegetation from the interior of the camp.

The camp is a four-sided enclosure measuring 46.7 m north–south, and 41.6 m east–west, at the longest and widest points (see Figure 1). The enclosure is bounded by a ditch and a bank, which is topped with a stone wall (see Figure 2). At the deepest point the measurement from the bottom of the ditch to the top of the wall is 4.5 m, and the ditch, which survives for most of the perimeter of the camp, measures up to 3 m wide (see Figure 3). The stone wall varies in thickness but most of it is c. 0.9 m wide. At several points



Figure 1 Aerial view of the site



Figure 2 The stone wall

on the south side the wall incorporates large boulders and rocky outcrops. One such high outcrop is incorporated into the southern end of the enclosure.

In three of the corners of the enclosure – north-east, north-west and south-west – there are circular stone structures incorporated into the boundary wall, giving the appearance of a castle with corner towers (see Figure 4). Prior to our survey only one of these enclosures had been identified. There are different interpretations of these enclosures, including security posts with resident guards and potentially their families. It is also possible that these enclosures were used as corrals for livestock.



Figure 3 Part of the boundary ditch



Figure 4 Circular structure built into the north-west corner of the boundary wall

The only entrance to the camp is on the north side. The ditch is less deep at this point, and there is a gap in the wall, leading into a small semi-circular area within the camp, bounded by an earth bank. One of the three circular stone enclosures described above sits directly adjacent to this entrance, and the doorway to the enclosure looks out onto this 'reception' area. This arrangement does suggest a security role for the circular enclosures, or at least for this particular one, as it would have allowed movement in and out of the camp to be forcibly slowed, limited in numbers and more easily controlled or surveilled.

In previous visits to the camp three hut circles had been identified, including one with hearth stones in place. During our survey we identified two further hut circles, all five consisting of low, circular earth banks. All the circles measured almost exactly 8 m in diameter, suggesting some uniformity and planning in the layout of the site. The distance between the hut walls was as little as 2 m in several places, and the buildings themselves would likely have been even closer given the wider diameter of the overhanging roofs. This supports the contemporary reports of extreme overcrowding and cramped living conditions in the strategic villages (for example, Branch 2010, 26; Feichtinger 2017b, 143).

Mr Haig's Camp

During the survey of the strategic village we visited a site on an adjacent hilltop known as 'Mr Haig's Camp', allegedly after the colonial administrator who resided there during the period of the rebellion. The remains of the strategic village are visible from the camp, which also offers good views of the surrounding landscape. At the camp we located a long rectangular area of ground that had been levelled, demarcated by a low earth bank. We interpreted this as the remains of a hut or tent, some 12 m long by 4 m wide (see Figure 5). Many strategic villages were located within direct site of colonial surveillance posts in this way, or even directly adjacent to them.



Figure 5 The remains of Mr Haig's Camp

Future of the site

In the aftermath of the conflict, the overwhelming majority of the c. 840 strategic villages were abandoned and destroyed; as Feichtinger (2017b, 150) notes, ‘only a few of the Kenyan Emergency villages are still inhabited – most of them as markets and rural trading centres’. None, aside from the site described in this article, is preserved so close to its original state. This unique survival is the basis of the considerable heritage value of the remains and is likely a result of the surrounding landscape of Kiambicho Forest being gazetted for protection in 1963, shortly after Kenyan independence. For this reason, it was deemed unnecessary for the village remains to be gazetted separately as a heritage site.

In discussions of future research, Kenya Forest Service staff responsible for the site as well as local National Museums of Kenya representatives were enthusiastic about the prospect of further archaeological work, including potential excavations of the hut circles, the boundary ditch and other parts of the camp infrastructure. This future fieldwork depends on the successful acquisition of further funding.

This survey was conducted as part of a British Academy/Leverhulme Trust-funded project aimed at identifying key Mau Mau heritage sites with potential for further archaeological study. The work was carried out in collaboration with Anthony Maina of National Museums of Kenya, and forms part of a longer-term programme of historical and archaeological research under the auspices of the Museum of British Colonialism (see Moshenska et al., forthcoming).

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