

The Shortcomings of AI: How ChatGPT is Incapable of Accurately Explaining Mau Mau

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Historians are shaking in their boots with the invention and wide circulation of the Artificial Intelligence (AI) software named ChatGPT. ChatGPT allows users to have “human-like” conversations with its computer software based on a question-and-answer format, drawing its answers from any and all online sources. This operation is now being used by history students in the writing of their papers to scour and plagiarize internet sources almost instantly. Could this be the end of the academic discipline of history and the proper training of historians? I argue no, for contrary to what many history professors may think about ChatGPT, it is merely AI, which means that it is only as intelligent as the person who created it, and only as knowledgeable as the information already written and posted on the web. As a result, it cannot fundamentally replace historians, because at the end of the day, the discipline of history entails creative storytelling and attention to nuance and details that cannot be achieved without the creativity and innovative analysis of historians.

In order to test my hypothesis, I prompted ChatGPT to tell me about the Mau Mau uprising using this command: “Write an eight page paper explaining what the Mau Mau uprising in Kenya was.” The reason I chose the Mau Mau uprising is because it is one of the most complicated historical events in African History. To explain further, Mau Mau was a social movement in 1950s Kenya, and many historians and anthropologists have already examined it using a variety of historiographical tools. Academics have discovered a plethora of details despite there being no exact consensus of interpreting Mau Mau; it is for this reason that ChatGPT underperformed in expounding the intricate nature of Mau Mau. With that said, in this paper I will analyze ChatGPT’s Mau Mau uprising essay, both in its successes and shortcomings, subsequently providing my own interpretation of what the Mau Mau was, using historiographical tools with which ChatGPT is not proficient.

The goal of historians, given the complex ambiguity of the Mau Mau uprising, is to construct the most holistic account of what happened by providing details, being historically accurate, and incorporating multiple

perspectives. In the same way historians are judged in their level of achievement of this goal, this paper will likewise judge ChatGPT in the same three major areas. To provide a framework for this difficult task, I will describe ChatGPT's absence of important details coupled with its tendency to rush through the ones that it mentioned, its introduction of entire historical inaccuracies (many of which turned out to be quite racist and insensitive), and its failure to provide various perspectives to explain Mau Mau's multiple origins accompanied with its lack of ideological framework when describing the single major perspective it introduces.

ChatGPT provided me with this essay, formatted in the exact same way the website provided and encompassed within quotation marks and italics:

Prompt: "Write an eight page paper explaining what the Mau Mau uprising in Kenya was."

"Introduction."

"The Mau Mau uprising in Kenya, also known as the Kenya Emergency, was a nationalist revolt that occurred between 1952 and 1960. It was a response by the Kikuyu people and other ethnic groups to the British colonial rule and the economic and political injustices they experienced. This paper aims to provide a detailed analysis of the Mau Mau uprising, including its causes, nature, and consequences."

"Causes of the Mau Mau uprising."

"The Mau Mau uprising was caused by a combination of factors, including political, economic, and social grievances. At the heart of the uprising was the issue of land ownership, which had been a contentious issue for many years. In the early 1900s, the British colonial government had seized large tracts of land from the indigenous people, which they gave to white settlers. The indigenous people were then forced to work on these farms as laborers, earning very little in wages."

"As the population of white settlers increased, the demand for land also increased. The British colonial government responded by implementing policies that further disadvantaged the indigenous people, such as the Land Apportionment Act of 1951. This law divided the land into European, African, and Native reserves, with the European reserves occupying the

most fertile land. This policy effectively locked the indigenous people out of the most productive areas and forced them to live on infertile land.”

“The indigenous people also experienced political and social injustices. The colonial government appointed white settlers to positions of power, denying the indigenous people the right to participate in the political process. The colonial government also enforced discriminatory laws that restricted the movement and freedoms of the indigenous people.”

“Nature of the Mau Mau uprising.”

“The Mau Mau uprising was characterized by violence and brutality. The Kikuyu people, who were the largest ethnic group in Kenya, formed the majority of the Mau Mau fighters. The Mau Mau fighters were organized into secret societies, with the most prominent being the Kenya Land and Freedom Army (KLFA).”

“The Mau Mau fighters used guerilla tactics to attack British colonial targets, including police stations, government offices, and white settler farms. They also targeted indigenous people who were perceived to be collaborating with the British colonial government. The Mau Mau fighters used traditional weapons such as machetes, spears, and bows and arrows, as well as firearms that they had acquired from the British colonial army.”

“The British colonial government responded to the Mau Mau uprising with brutal force. They declared a state of emergency in Kenya, which gave them sweeping powers to arrest and detain suspected Mau Mau fighters without trial. The British colonial army was deployed to Kenya to quell the uprising, and they used brutal tactics such as torture, mass arrests, and executions.”

“Consequences of the Mau Mau uprising.”

“The Mau Mau uprising had far-reaching consequences, both for Kenya and for the British colonial government. One of the most significant consequences was the end of British colonial rule in Kenya. The Mau Mau uprising was one of the factors that led to Kenya gaining independence in 1963.”

“The Mau Mau uprising also had a significant impact on the indigenous people of Kenya. The uprising galvanized the indigenous people, giving them a sense of pride and identity. It also led to a significant shift in land ownership, with the indigenous people reclaiming some of the land that had been taken from them during the colonial era.”

“The Mau Mau uprising also had a significant impact on the British colonial government. The brutal tactics used by the British colonial army to quell the uprising attracted international attention and condemnation. The British colonial government was criticized for its human rights abuses and for its failure to address the grievances of.”

Before jumping into its shortcomings, I would like to point out that ChatGPT did succeed, even if only in part, in giving an extremely broad overview of the Mau Mau uprising. It was more or less correct in providing three broad causes for Mau Mau (“political, economic, and social grievances”), briefly describing the physical conflict between the Mau Mau forest fighters and both the British colonial government and its many supporters, and providing a broad overview of Mau Mau’s consequences. In other words, its splitting up into three main parts of causes, nature, and consequences was rather useful. Another area where it succeeded is the drawing of international attention to the brutalities undertaken by the British colonial government during its attempts to extinguish Mau Mau.¹ It is worth noting that for the right purposes, this cursory summary may be helpful as a starting point to introduce people to Mau Mau. However, ChatGPT’s failures far outweigh its successes.

With regards to the needs and wants of serious historians and students of history, ChatGPT and the information it spouts is virtually useless in both minor and major ways. Beginning with its minor and technical shortcomings, when prompted to write an eight page paper, it instead only wrote a two-page paper when copied into Google Docs. Furthermore, it also stopped writing its paper midway through its final sentence. ChatGPT’s insufficient usage of historical analysis and historiographical tools resulted in its inability to provide more than just fundamental knowledge about the Mau Mau uprising. For instance, it has no

¹ David M. Anderson, “Guilty Secrets: Deceit, Denial, and the Discovery of Kenya’s ‘Migrated Archive’,” *History Workshop Journal* 80, University of Warwick (2015): 142-160.

mention of the well-known oaths, which were an integral part of the Mau Mau uprising. These oaths played a large role in Mau Mau's recruitment efforts and were often depicted by the British as being supernatural and primitive rituals related to witchcraft, the devil, and even hypnosis.² Contrary to this understanding, the oaths were actually used to initiate people into the Mau Mau movement and were in no way prompted by demonic or witchcraft-related motives. The oaths also proved to be key in provoking working and lower-class solidarity that led to the conflict.

The oaths were often administered during "massive oath-taking ceremonies," which members of Mau Mau would set up either by request or out of pure necessity; forcibly making everyone in the vicinity take an oath for the sake of "collaboration" and security of the Mau Mau agenda during the most trying and dangerous times.³ Sometimes there were individual, or at least smaller group oath-taking ceremonies, but they all followed a similar structure and theme.⁴ In the words of Waruhiu Itote, "the basic theme of [the] ceremonies [was]: the oath-giving, an explanation of our people's fate under British colonialism, and a clarification of the new obligations to which the oath bound its takers... those who had taken the oath must help us in every possible way."⁵ Lastly with respect to the oaths, there is no set number of how many oaths there were and what their names and purposes were. For example, Carothers states that there were four oaths, all of which had various meanings that misled the "bulk of the Kikuyu population," and were often taken reluctantly.⁶ On the other hand, Itote depicts only two kinds of oaths, the general one depicted above for the majority of regular people to support Mau Mau, and the "forest or *mbatuni oath*" administered to the forest fighters so that they "would understand the responsibilities of leadership," be well versed in "the practical skills of war," and be molded into one group that was loyally fighting "for each

² J. C. Carothers, *The Psychology of Mau Mau* (Colony and Protectorate of Kenya, 1954), 15-18.

³ Waruhiu Itote (General China), "'Mau Mau' General," *The Journal of African History* Vol 9 (January 1968): 49-55.

⁴ Itote, "Mau Mau's General," 50-53.

⁵ Itote, "Mau Mau's General," 50-51.

⁶ Carothers, *The Psychology of Mau Mau*, 17-18.

other and the Mau Mau cause.”⁷ This key information was completely left out of ChatGPT’s description.

Aside from the fact there were very noticeable shortfalls in details and a few minor historical inaccuracies, ChatGPT also introduced very prominent historical and conceptual inaccuracies. One such example is ChatGPT’s claim that Mau Mau “galvanized the indigenous people, giving them a sense of pride and identity.” To really expound the deceptive nature of this claim, it is paramount to divide this quote into two parts. The first deals with the word “indigenous” because that employs an insensitive nationalist sense to Mau Mau, which was not really a nationalist conflict in the first place. This is further explained when taking into account that national sentiment has been traditionally “expressed in opposition to some other national or religious group,” which the Mau Mau uprising could be seen as from a bird’s-eye view but is not quite the case.⁸ Although it does embody pieces of nationalist intent, it was instead an ethnic conflict between the Gikuyu and the British colonial government. The claim of galvanizing the indigenous people, when it was not a struggle that involved all types of indigenous people, but rather only *one* indigenous people embodies this problem. Gikuyu, Christians, the Home Guard, Loyalists, and many others found themselves caught in the middle of a conflict they wanted no part in.⁹ ChatGPT’s politicization of Mau Mau’s history—both in calling it a “nationalist revolt” and hinting at its supposed homogeneous ethnic nature—depicts the coupling of nationalism with “racial assumptions” including that of “naturalizing Africa as a unit, obscuring the continent’s vast linguistic, religious, and cultural differences.”¹⁰ In the case of ChatGPT, the practice of using the terms “African” and “indigenous peoples” as one race interchangeably with the Gikuyu tribe is problematic because it is partly this twisted application of nationalism to an ethnic conflict that resulted in Mau Mau being considered a nationalist revolt.

⁷ Itote, “Mau Mau’s General,” 49-53.

⁸ Sarah Maza, *Thinking About History: The History of Where?* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2017), 47.

⁹ Caroline Elkins, *Imperial Reckoning: The Untold Story of Britain’s Gulag in Kenya* (New York, NY: Henry Holt and Company, 2005), 121-190, 232-274.

¹⁰ Maza, *Thinking About History*, 48.

The first part of ChatGPT's quote introduces its falsehood, but the second part solidifies its canon of historical inaccuracies. The second part deals with "giving [the indigenous people] a sense of pride and identity." This whole narrative of creating unity, pride, and national identity in Kenya appears to go along with a widely spread political play put forth by the Gikuyu to boost their support both nationally and internationally once Kenya gained its freedom from British colonial rule. Aside from this, it also hints at a false assumption that there was no identity before Mau Mau. There was, in fact, a Gikuyu ethnic identity and a sense of pride in being Gikuyu even before the Mau Mau uprising. Mau Mau certainly did not make these identities, but in a way emerged out of those identities in a self-reinforcing way. Through Mau Mau, and therefore through the already present Gikuyu identity, people found purpose in fighting against the British colonial government and more ethnic cohesion despite Mau Mau's ultimate failure as a movement. Despite the fact there was some kind of ethnic cohesion, it was not very prominent given the fact that many Gikuyus did not agree with Mau Mau in the first place. It appears that ChatGPT, by using the nationalist framework leniently and by representing the ethnicity and identity of the Gikuyu people in respect to Mau Mau in an insensitive way, has fallen into the same trap of prejudice and racism offered by some of the earliest scholars of Mau Mau, namely the very preliminary descriptions of Mau Mau by L.S.B. Leaky, and the stereotypical descriptions of Dr. J.C. Carothers' *Psychology of Mau Mau*.¹¹ Taking into account all of ChatGPT's inefficiencies, the future of ChatGPT does not look so bright.

Moving on to the third and final of the major areas where ChatGPT underperforms, it is important to point out how ChatGPT fails to provide various perspectives to explain the multiple causes for Mau Mau. One important perspective left out is that of the Marxist "people's history" perspective and its narrative of "historical materialism" that would partially explain the economic and social origins of Mau Mau.¹² To best explain this cause, it is necessary to set the framework of what Marxist history is.

¹¹ L.S.B. Leaky, *Defeating Mau Mau* (London: Methuen & Co. LTD, 1954), 21-31, 41-52.

¹² Anna Green and Kathleen Troup, *The House of History: A Critical Reader in Twentieth-century History and Theory-Marxist Historians* (Washington Square, NY: New York University Press, 1999), 33-35.

Marxist history, grounded in “historical materialism,” is the belief “that the economic structure of a society forms the base upon which all other aspects of society rested... identifying the way in which human material needs are met as the most important influence in human history.”¹³ ChatGPT states that “at the heart of the uprising was the issue of land ownership”—which is correct in the most broad sense—but lacks nuance and depth. ChatGPT merely provided two minor paragraphs introducing the controversy regarding land ownership since the early 1900s, the seizing of land for “white settlers,” the practically forced labor for “indigenous” people on these farms earning little wages, the demand for land, and the creation of reserves of infertile land for the “indigenous” people to live on, in turn solving the demand problem for the white settlers. A historian would have been able to apply the lens of Marxist history in ways that ChatGPT could not, which would allow for more complexity and nuance.

Before the British arrived, the Gikuyu, and arguably most of present-day Kenya, was an extremely agrarian and ‘peasant’ society, as it is often referred to in Marxist texts. Since the very beginning of the British arrival in Kenya, tracing all the way back until 1902 when “settlers had first pegged out claims [to land] in the fertile hills around Nairobi, the seizure of land by European settlers had been a bone of contention.”¹⁴ European colonizers took large plots of land away from the Gikuyu and other ethnic groups all over central Kenya, but it was not until the fluidity of these land seizures ended with the “hardening of boundaries between settler farms and African land, the building of fences around settler properties, and the drastic population increase” of Gikuyu and other ethnic groups around the early 1930s, that the issue of land first became extremely prominent.¹⁵ As a result of the end of this pseudo freedom that they still had, despite the fact their lands had been stolen for a few decades or so already, and the increase of hunger and landlessness due to the expanding population, Gikuyu began to express their social, political, and economic grievances.¹⁶

¹³ Green and Troup, *The House of History*, 34-35.

¹⁴ David Anderson, *Histories of the Hanged: The Dirty War in Kenya and the End of Empire-The Hidden History of an Anti-Colonial Rebellion* (New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company, 2005), 10.

¹⁵ Anderson, *Histories of the Hanged*, 10.

¹⁶ Anderson, *Histories of the Hanged*, 10.

This socioeconomic land problem only continued to worsen as the grip around squatters, reservations, newly enforced “soil-conservation regulations, and communal terracing” ordinances tightened.¹⁷ This all began as early as 1918 with the settlers “attempt to ‘regulate’ squatter labor and how the squatters reacted with the help of the colonial government.”¹⁸ This attempt was known as “The 1918 Resident Native Labourers Ordinance (RNLO),” which legitimized “the institution of squatterdom and provided a legal framework for its social control.”¹⁹ Squatterdom was the alternative to the despised “waged labor,” and was a fickle category of labor-tenant/servant workers consisting of Gikuyu and other ethnic people that could work on settler farms for a better living than if they cultivated their own infertile land. Squatting offered the possibility for upward mobility, but as worsening material conditions and labor inequality became more prevalent due to the state’s attempt to protect the interest of capital owners and control the perceived “rowdiness” of the laborers, a new kind of class consciousness was born. This was followed by a class conflict and resistance provoked by the laborers (squatters) themselves.

This legal framework for the control of labor was further formalized in 1919 with the introduction of the “*kipande* system where laborers were required to carry an identification certificate (*kipande*)” in order to continue working or find a new job.²⁰ This new system was “a vicious imposition on ‘native’ labor for it kept squatters’ salaries static and turned the laborer into a virtual prisoner until such time as his contract came to an end.”²¹ The *kipande* system alongside the RNLO resulted in the end of the mutual and civil agreement of squatterdom, and made it a “publicly supervised and enforced enterprise.”²² Furthermore, the Gikuyu peoples were “squeezed and even ‘proletarianized’ as the cost of one acre of land increased tenfold

¹⁷ David Throup, *Economic & Social Origins of Mau Mau 1945-53* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 1987), 140.

¹⁸ Tabitha Kanogo, *Squatters and the Roots of Mau Mau 1905-63* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 1987), 35-37.

¹⁹ Kanogo, *Squatters and the Roots of Mau Mau*, 36-37.

²⁰ Kanogo, *Squatters and the Roots of Mau Mau*, 38-39.

²¹ Kanogo, *Squatters and the Roots of Mau Mau*, 38-39.

²² Kanogo, *Squatters and the Roots of Mau Mau*, 38-39.

between 1939 and 1952,” while also dealing with the enforcement of newly created soil-conservation and communal terracing regulations aiming at reversing the depletion of fertile lands on Gikuyu reserves.²³ These new orders were enforced mostly by chiefs loyal to the state because they did not want to jeopardize their wealth and status.²⁴ All of these factors put together acted as catalysts in creating a proletariat class consciousness and the “popular discontent” that evolved to become the Mau Mau uprising.

Continuing with the third area of ChatGPT’s underperformance, another perspective focuses on gender roles in the uniquely blended Gikuyu and British colonial society as a major factor in the social origins of Mau Mau. Despite the fact this is a key perspective for the origins of Mau Mau, ChatGPT does not mention women, men, or the gender politics of Mau Mau at all. The notion of gender is vital in Mau Mau. Gender roles concerning what it means to be a man, what it means to regulate the role of women with regard to men, and likewise the British colonial government’s active problematizing of men were significant contributing factors. Furthermore, “Mau Mau issued many more statements about the nature and proper organization of marriage than it did about land and freedom,” which pushes the importance of gender relations for Mau Mau.²⁵ It is quite possible that gender played a role just as large—or even larger than—Marxist class conflict in the origins of Mau Mau.

This problematizing of men as the breeding grounds of revolution and criminal activities when left with too much time on their hands and without feeling “fulfilled and complacent,” prompted the British to essentially create “two forms of manhood deployed in urban life, possibly even two male genders.”²⁶ These were the “respectable working class and the mass of laboring poor, both of whose literacy, skills, or lack thereof, informed the ways they conducted themselves as men.”²⁷ In doing this, the

²³ Throup, *Economic & Social Origins of Mau Mau*, 140-141.

²⁴ Throup, *Economic & Social Origins of Mau Mau*, 139-141.

²⁵ Luise White, “Separating the Men from the Boys: Constructions of Gender, Sexuality, and Terrorism in Central Kenya, 1939-1959,” *The International Journal of African Historical Studies* Vol. 23, no. 1 (1990): 10.

²⁶ White, “Separating the Men from the Boys,” 4-9.

²⁷ White, “Separating the Men from the Boys,” 9.

British also aimed at “rewarding” the respectable working class men with the ability to have families and thus the “companionship and support” of a wife and children through marriage that would in turn supposedly keep them out of trouble.²⁸ The mass of laboring poor workers would then see the prosperity of the respectable working class, or rather what the British deemed as being prosperous, and would strive to work hard to be like them, thus also keeping them away from revolutionary mindsets. Despite the British attempt at culturally reforming marriage in Gikuyu society through the problematizing of men, reforming the role of women, and the role of the physical household, Mau Mau experimented with and reconstructed these gender relations to create the exact opposite effect.²⁹ Mau Mau, in other words, effectively embraced the British reformations of gender and used them to their advantage during the uprising.

This occurred in many ways such as the drastic switch within the forest from polygamy to monogamous marriage—and in some cases eliminating traditional marriage, effectively taking “the allocation of family life [and marriage] out of colonial hands and into African control”—and the creation of both men’s and women’s councils where both genders would contribute to the Mau Mau cause.³⁰ Other ways Mau Mau reconstructed gender was through encouraging, and often forcing, the sharing of housework chores between both men and women, the redefining of “the definition of gender” further to include men’s ability to complete traditional “female tasks,” and lastly redefining of women’s roles as solely wives and not mothers, thus giving them a form of “autonomous sexuality,” who could be “warriors” alongside their “male partners.”³¹ Through this, there was a newfound partnership in arms between both Gikuyu men and women, infusing the relationship between men and women with a new power.³²

In realizing how their efforts to mold gender within the Gikuyu culture had failed miserably, the British again attempted to reconstruct gender in an extraordinarily complicated and intentional way to snuff out

²⁸ White, “Separating the Men from the Boys,” 4-19.

²⁹ White, “Separating the Men from the Boys,” 8-10.

³⁰ White, “Separating the Men from the Boys,” 11-12.

³¹ White, “Separating the Men from the Boys,” 13-14.

³² White, “Separating the Men from the Boys,” 13.

Mau Mau.³³ They did this through the creation of mass detention camps and pseudo-rural villages that were very different from what the Gikuyu people had lived in before (this process was known as villagization), both of which were aimed at “remaking [the Gikuyu people, but especially men’s] genders.”³⁴ In removing men from their families, “rehabilitating them,” and then returning them to their families as a “reward” for becoming virtually new people through hard work and a new sense of discipline, the British government hoped to create a vision of gender “without class division,” thus “dissolving the two [male] genders” they had created back in the 1930s.³⁵ Through the forced labor of completing tasks that were traditionally women’s, forced dormitory life away from their family, and even the continued regulation of men’s sexual lives, the British attempted to reconstruct Gikuyu manhood.³⁶ The reconstruction of gender roles was very different from what Gikuyu men and women had learned and become accustomed to in the forest and in their traditional cultures, thus “bringing new responsibilities and opportunities, and new, vigorous constraints” on top of the already traumatic reformation of their gender roles for the third time since British arrival to Kenya.³⁷ Knowing all of this, it is now evident that Mau Mau situated its revolt and its politics within the boundaries of everyday private life through addressing topics such as marriage and domestic chores, and in doing so, contested all aspects of life.³⁸ Thus, aside from a class conflict, Mau Mau also began with the reconstruction of men and women into a system of domestic work that aligned with British visions of a rigid social order and the productivity and tranquility of the colonized.

While scholars are fretful that AI software like ChatGPT will one day replace us, it thankfully does not appear competent enough for that to be the case. For historians, the devil is not only in the details, but also in the new ways of thinking about the past that represent the changing priorities of

³³ White, “Separating the Men from the Boys,” 17-18.

³⁴ White, “Separating the Men from the Boys,” 17-18.

³⁵ White, “Separating the Men from the Boys,” 19.

³⁶ White, “Separating the Men from the Boys,” 19-22.

³⁷ White, “Separating the Men from the Boys,” 24-25.

³⁸ White, “Separating the Men from the Boys,” 25.

the times, and the things that matter to us as a society. In using these new ways as lenses to view the past, as we simultaneously continue to move forward in the present while building our futures, we bear witness to just how quickly the field of history, and academia in general, is changing. Simply put, society, and perhaps the world, are changing too quickly for AI to keep up, and the field of history can rest assured that its role of sharing the most holistic truth of the past is not soon to be replaced by artificial intelligence.