MAGICAL WATER VERSUS BULLETS: THE MAJI MAJI UPRISING AS A RELIGIOUS MOVEMENT

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ABSTRACT
This article argues that the Maji Maji Uprising was a religious movement that utilized the power of religious beliefs as a vehicle for mobilization, transformation, and universalization. After examining its background, the social and political structures of the peoples in the key areas of the uprising in south eastern Tanzania, this paper analyzes the religious beliefs that pre-dated the Maji Maji Movement and the influence of the ‘maji’ (water) phenomenon. The article concludes that movements (whether political or civil, moderate or extremist) that acquire their inspiration from religious beliefs and convictions, often unite the masses and command widespread support in a way that purely ‘secular’ political movements cannot. It is hoped that this article will highlight the role of African religious beliefs in the political aspirations of Africans during the colonial period.

KEYWORDS: Maji Maji Uprising, religious movement, Kinjikitile, religious beliefs, cult, spirit, colonial.

INTRODUCTION
Most studies, though acknowledging the role of magical water in the Maji Maji Uprising, on the whole, regard the Maji Maji Uprising as a purely political resistance against the Germans from 1905-1907. Certainly, most Tanzanians would concur, hence their use of the name ‘the Maji Maji War’ (Swahili, Vita vya Maji Maji). The Germans called it ‘rebellion’ – a name signifying a biased colonial view of what it was.

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Of course there are some studies\(^3\) which note the role of religious beliefs in Maji Maji. However, these studies do not necessarily regard Maji Maji as a religious and prophetic movement in its own right, like other movements with millenarianist elements.

In my view, Maji Maji was a religious and prophetic movement which was universalized and sustained by religious beliefs. This is a major reason why it spread so fast and covered the whole of the southern and south-eastern parts of Tanzania, and challenged the might of a major colonial power – Germany. It took the colonial power two years (from July 1905 to July, if not, August 1907) to defeat poorly armed rural Africans.

I will examine four aspects to substantiate that Maji Maji was indeed a religious movement. First, the background of the Maji Maji movement, and the social and political structures of the peoples in the areas of the outbreak. This will help explain what did not give rise to the uprising. Secondly, I will analyse the religious beliefs that gave rise to Maji Maji. Thirdly, I explore the influence of the Maji (water) phenomenon and how this phenomenon helped to universalize the movement and sustain it for two years. Lastly, the human loss during the movement is described.

THE BACKGROUND OF MAJI MAJI AND WHAT DID NOT CAUSE IT

\(a\) Forced and Unpaid Labour

G. C. K. Gwassa\(^4\) and John Iliffe\(^5\) point out that when Maji Maji started, especially in the Matumbi and Ngindo outbreak areas, there were peasant grievances against the German colonial government. A notable grievance is related to the unpopular cotton scheme. Gustav Adolf von Götzten (the colonial governor at the time)\(^6\) introduced an agricultural scheme whereby people were required to cultivate cotton for export. They did so in communal plots of land in the south-eastern areas of Tanzania, including Matumbi Hills. The colonial government ordered each village headman to ensure that each male adult worked on the communal cotton plot.

The scheme interfered with, and disrupted the subsistence farming of the preferred crops and affected the traditional economy. What was most disturbing to the people concerned was that the scheme was implemented through forced and unpaid labour. Similarly to other forms of forced labour during the German colonial period, such as road or railway construction, the cotton scheme was administered in a brutal way under severe conditions. Some of the conditions were socially unacceptable, including for example, making the proud and powerful Ngoni men work side by side with the slaves they had captured during their warfare with the weaker tribes of the south.\(^7\)

It is important to note that other parts of Tanzania had also experienced forced labour and oppressive policies of the colonial government. In fact, some of the grievances led to armed confrontations between the local chiefs and the German colonial administration: the Wahehe of Iringa (southern highlands) under


\(^5\) Iliffe, *Tanganyika under German Rule*, p. 23.

\(^6\) Götzten was governor from 12 March 1901 to 22 April 1906. He was succeeded by Albrecht von Rechenberg who was governor from April 1906 to April 1912.

their powerful Chief Mkwawa, 1891-1894; the Wanyanyembe of Tabora (mid-western Tanzania) under Chief Isike in 1892; and the Chagga in the north under Chief Meli also in 1892, are the leading examples.

The northern and north-eastern parts of Tanzania also experienced forced labour because they were the focus of the early projects of the German colonial government. The first state school in Tanga (north-east) in 1892 and the Usambara railway from June 1893 are examples of some of the early projects implemented by the German colonists through forced and unpaid labour.

Yet, despite all the fierce resistance in the areas mentioned above, such resistance did not spread beyond the areas concerned. Therefore, the dissatisfaction with the cotton scheme in the south-eastern areas of Tanzania per se could not have led to such a dramatic response to the colonial injustice by the local people in the Maji Maji outbreak area and beyond.

b) Social and Political Organisation of the Matumbi and Ngindo Peoples
With the exception of the Ngoni and Yao, most peoples of southern and south-eastern Tanzania were organized in smaller decentralised clans. Michael Adas observed that the Matumbi and Ngindo peoples, where the Maji Maji movement started, did not develop centralised states or large scale military systems. They were decentralised, and remained in their customary clan-based units, with loose localised chieftainship. It follows that the basic responsibilities of the clan leaders, such as the mediation of disputes and allotment of clan lands were localised too.

Given their decentralised nature, and supposed ‘inferiority’ of the Matumbi and Ngindo, compared to some of the powerful giants such as the Ngoni, these smaller ethnic groups could not inspire nor unite over 20 ethnic groups. This in an area over 100,000 square miles, nearly a third of Tanganyika (now Tanzania mainland) and make them take part in the Maji Maji movement.

RELIGIOUS BELIEFS BEFORE AND DURING THE MAJI MAJI
A full analysis of the beliefs before and during the Maji Maji movement is not possible in a short article of this nature. However, a brief analysis of three key aspects of those beliefs will give a picture of how they gave rise to the Maji Maji movement. These aspects are the ‘hierarchy of force’, spirit possession and the Bokero cult (centred on the ancestral spirits).

a) Belief in the ‘Hierarchy of Force’
In the initial uprising areas affected by the Maji Maji, there was a belief in the Supreme Being, the creator. The creator was the source of all power and could enable a human being to have as much power as he (the creator) wished. Next below him were the ancestors. One of the roles of the ancestors was to influence posterity. After the ancestors, there were immediate dead members of the family who had immediate influence on their living offspring. Finally, in the hierarchy there were the living oldest members of individual families.

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8 Variant ‘Siki’.
10 Adas, Prophets of Rebellion, p. 31.
11 The railway line reached Moshi near Mount Kilimanjaro in September 1911.
The belief in the ‘hierarchy of force’ relates to the Maji Maji movement in that the people involved were taught that the resistance against the Germans was commanded by the Supreme Being, the creator. The ancestors who had received the ‘vital force’ from the creator would return to assist the living warriors of all clans. The dead members of individual families had no decisive role to play because the resistance against the Germans was to be organized from clan level and beyond. The living oldest members were significant, because as expected, it was from among them that the clan war leaders were to be chosen.

b) The Belief in Spirit Possession

The people in the areas affected by Maji Maji did not only believe in the ‘hierarchy of force’. According to G. C. K. Gwassa, in general, the peoples of southern and south-eastern Tanzania believed that spirit possession gave someone access to supernatural powers. For example, the Matumbi and the Ngindo in the Maji Maji outbreak area believed that a person could be possessed by Lilungu (possessed by a spirit). Such a person could walk naked without being punished, sleep in the open (at night) without being harmed by man-eating lions, could refrain from eating but was free from hunger, and hunted witches down until he killed all of them because they stank before him. They further believed that all this was possible because such a person was a medium through which the Supreme Being or his given spirit operated. A person who was possessed by Lilungu had a ‘vital force’ that was greater than the greatest possible force in a normal human being.

This belief is relevant to the Maji Maji movement in its connection with Kinjikitile Ngwale. Kinjikitile was a charismatic and prophetic leader who was thought to be possessed not only by Lilungu, but also by Hongo, a snake spirit from a superior divinity known as Bokero. The title ‘Bokero’ was later applied to Kinjikitile himself as a title of rank, especially outside the outbreak area. His followers would never mention his real name.

c) Belief in the Bokero Cult

As it may be observed, there is a hierarchical relationship between Bokero, Hongo, and Kinjikitile, and this was extended to Kinjikitile’s assistants and the people. In order to understand the nature and power of Kinjikitile who was possessed by both Lilungu and Hongo (a Bokero spirit), it is important to examine the Bokero cult, because it was from Bokero, the superior divinity, that Kinjikitile received his Hongo (snake spirit).

The Bokero cult centre at Kibesa (outside the Maji Maji outbreak area) was well known to those who were involved in the initial stages of the outbreak, especially the Matumbi and the Ngindo because it was located in the Rufiji Valley. It developed out of ecological concerns of the people who lived in the valley. At the times of the floods, people raised their houses several yards above the ground and could only move from one house to another in canoes. The same people were threatened by famine when the waters were too low due to poor rainfall. Therefore, people addressed Bokero, the supreme deity and his fellow deities Ulilo and Nyamguni. Annual pilgrimages were made to the Bokero cult centre at Kibesa where people prayed mainly for rain, the fertility of the land and other blessings.

The shrine at the cult centre was controlled by a medium-priest known as Kolelo (variant Kologelo). Kolelo’s task was to receive the offerings from the pilgrims and give them water from the pool for

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sprinkling over their land, using it as a panacea. It is said that Kinjikitile Ngwale was associated with the cult centre at Kibesa. Later on, he started his own cult centre at Ngarambe and borrowed many elements of the Bokero cult centre.

Martin Klamroth, a Lutheran missionary who lived in Maneromango and worked among the Zaramo people west of Dar es Salaam, has alleged that Kolelo departed from his traditional religious role and concerned himself with politics and warfare, starting in 1905, the year of the outbreak and resistance against the Germans. Klamroth further claims that Kolelo forbade people to pay tax to the colonial government and told them that a great flood and seven lions would come and swallow all white people and their followers. Also, the earth would open up its ‘mouth’ and swallow the white people, but Kolelo would spare his children. Furthermore, Klamroth argues that Kolelo became influential in a wide area and that is why the Zaramo people participated in the Maji Maji movement.

G. C. K. Gwassa objects to Klamroth’s direct linking of Kolelo with the Zaramo’s participation in the Maji Maji. Although Gwassa accepts that there existed a Kolelo cult centre at the Uluguru Mountains, he argues that there is no convincing evidence to support the claim that there had been a connection between that centre and the Zaramo’s participation in the Maji Maji. Moreover, there was also a Kolelo cult centre among the Wadoe people of the Nguu area in the modern Morogoro region. Yet the Wadoe did not take part in the Maji Maji movement. Therefore, Gwassa maintains that there was no direct involvement of Bokero (the supreme deity) or Kolelo (a medium priest) with politics, as suggested by Klamroth. In his opinion, it is only Kinjikitile Ngwale who utilised and universalised the beliefs involved and started his own centre at Ngarambe. No other cult centre in or outside the outbreak area inspired the outbreak of the war. This argument seems to be more plausible than Klamroth’s. Though Gwassa’s viewpoint is convincing, Klamroth’s view is useful in a different way. It confirms that cult centres existed among the Zaramo and others who lived in the Rufiji complex area.

d) Belief in the Ancestral Spirits (Mahoka)
The Matumbi and the Ngindo (in the Maji Maji outbreak area) had a Kijumba-Nungu (house of god). Each head of the family made an offering to his ancestors and put it in the Kijumba-Nungu. When Kinjikitile started his shrine at Ngarambe, he also built a Kijumba-Nungu, but a larger one. He insisted that all pilgrims should make an offering of rice, millet, salt or give money instead. Pilgrims were supposed to do this even before they greeted him. They were astonished (or rather impressed) that their offerings had disappeared the following morning. Kinjikitile’s assistant told them that the rapid disappearance of the offerings was a sign that the gods were very pleased with the people and their offerings!

The two acts, of going to Ngarambe before Maji Maji started, and of making offerings to the Mahoka (ancestral spirits) were consistent with the existing traditional religious belief, but now the visits to Ngarambe were attracting more people. This was one of Kinjikitile’s universalizing elements.

Kinjikitile went even further. As a medium priest of Bokero (the supreme deity) at Ngarambe, he promised people that god would show them their ancestors and insisted that the ancestors were not dead. Instead, god was taking care of them. And he claimed to possess a powerful medicine that would give people immunity against witchcraft and weapons of the white people. Kinjikitile mocked the whites,
referring to them as ‘utupi ukere’ (red potter’s clay) or liyombo lya masi (ugly fish of the sea) and he taught new songs that emphasised that all Africans were one, and free people, not slaves.  

THE MAJI (WATER) PHENOMENON AND ITS INFLUENCE

The activities at Ngarambe, a place where Kinjikitile’s own shrine was located, had centred on the magic water medicine (maji). The water medicine was used as a panacea. The belief was that the crops would flourish if the water was sprinkled over the fields. Equally, the fields would be protected from wild pigs and other animals. People who drank and anointed themselves with this water would enjoy many blessings including good harvest, health and wealth. They would be immune from witchcraft and the weapons of the enemy in the time of war – indeed any enemy.

The idea of maji as a war medicine is of interest. Gwassa argues that this idea of war medicine was not altogether new among the peoples of south-eastern and southern Tanzania. According to his field informant, Mzee Ambrose Ngombale Mwiru, there were two types of war medicines: Nduguru and Kalumbe. Nduguru caused weapons to be deflected away from the person who is the target. Should a shot from a particular weapon (for example spears, arrows, knives and bullets) reach a warrior’s body, Kalumbe would prevent its penetration especially if a warrior is carrying the same kind of weapon. However, these traditional war medicines were only used locally during the clan clashes.

Kinjikitile transformed the idea of maji as a medicine and universalized it at Ngarambe. For him, it was no longer just as a panacea, but a war medicine. In addition, maji acquired a ‘national’ status in that it could be used by all people in their fight against the common enemy - the Germans. Moreover, its power superseded all the previous war medicines because its owner, Kinjikitile, had been associated with the shrine of the supreme deity Bokero, located at Kibesa. Equally, the circumstances surrounding Kinjikitile’s spirit possession indicated that he must have received a snake-like spirit from Bokero himself, the superior deity. Apparently, it was this snake spirit that vanished into a river at Ngarambe that was not far from the pool into which Kinjikitile disappeared, and emerged days later. Kinjikitile’s maji acquired a new and inspiring ideological content. News of this ideological content spread among the Matumbi and the Ngindo, and other peoples in the south-eastern and southern Tanzania through a secret communication network called Njwiywila.

Apart from the promise of freedom from oppression, the communication network also promised people that if they went to Ngarambe they would be shown their ancestors, for they were alive! Consequently, great crowds of people, some as large as 300 people in single groups, started making their way to Ngarambe – the location of Kinjikitile’s shrine. They went openly and unconstrained.

The pilgrims were led by their clan war veterans, with each clan group becoming a detachment known as litapo. When people arrived at Ngarambe they sang war songs and performed a war dance known as likinda. They did this in their own litapo. The next morning they received the medicine, maji. Each person was given a small amount of maji to drink. This was followed by sprinkling over the body (head, chest and feet) four times. The clan leaders were confirmed by Kinjikitile and given better maji so that they could have better protection against the enemy. After the ministration of maji, all people were asked to

28 Iliffe, Tanganyika under German Rule, p. 23.
32 Listowell, The Making of Tanganyika, p. 36.
return home. Those who wanted to take some *maji* with them were given it, if only they paid a small amount of money.

The payment of money for *maji* was significant because most African traditional medicines are believed to have their full potential and efficacy if a client gives something in return. The practice of giving something in return for *maji* also helped the secret message spread better. Those who had paid money at Ngarambe were eager to recover it by passing on the secret message to others. After receiving the message and *maji*, a person was asked to give something in return for the sake of the efficacy.

The secret message had other elements of a prophetic movement such as code names. For example, ‘red earth’ for Europeans, ‘moths’ for *askaris* (soldiers), ‘sheep’ for lions, ‘cat’ for leopard, ‘creeper’ for snake, ‘tree’ for bird, and *vigoli* (young girls) for baboon. Among the Ngindo in the outbreak area, the code name for going to war was *kuchecha yihinga*, that is, ‘to dance a dance of the women folk’. The code name for Kinjikitile himself was ‘Bokero’, a title or rank for the superior divinity! He was also referred to as ‘Nyangumi’ (whale). The password that was used throughout the wartime was ‘Sayid’, and those who failed to name it were regarded as allies of the Germans, and were killed.

There were rules to be observed. For example, it was commanded that no warrior could sleep with a woman on the eve of the battle. Doing so would break the spell of *maji*, thus removing its power to render bullets into water. Another rule was that before going off to battle, each man must pray to his ancestors to invoke their blessing. In addition, he should shout out the words ‘*mbiyu litupe likere mbiyu*’, which means ‘the red earth (Europeans) shall be dealt with accordingly’. As he enters the fight itself, a warrior must shout ‘Hongwe Hongwe’. Apparently a variant of ‘Hongo Hongo’, the ‘snake’ spirit from Bokero who possessed Kinjikitile. After firing a weapon, especially an arrow, each man should shout ‘*maji, maji*’ (water, water).

Although these rules were given at Ngarambe by Kinjikitile’s commissioned assistants and spread through the secret communication network (*Njwijwila*), people were told to continue to be loyal to the Germans while waiting for the declaration of war. Unfortunately, further pilgrimage to Ngarambe was made difficult or almost impossible due to heavy rainfall in Matumbi and Ngindo areas, not long before the outbreak of war in July 1905. Therefore, Kinjikitile had to send out his assistants to various places to distribute *maji*.

People became over-excited and even impatient when the assistants were distributing *maji*. They asked, “This *Mganga* [medicine man, Kinjikitile] said he would declare war. ... Why is he delaying? When will the Europeans go? After all, we have already received *dawa* [medicine, *maji*] and we are brave men. Why should we wait?”

It should be noted that although the clan war leaders were commissioned by Kinjikitile at Ngarambe, when they returned home they continued to operate within clan structures that lacked a coherent control. Consequently, the military initiative to attack the German soldiers did not lie with Kinjikitile, but with clan war leaders. Under these clan leaders, the people in the Matumbi and Ngindo areas started to uproot a few shoots of cotton from the plantations at Nandete and Kibata. This took place towards the end of July 1905. It was a declaration of war and colonial government stations were attacked.

The *Maji* Uprising was different from the other African resistances in Tanzania that preceded it. Here, the Africans – motivated and mobilized through a universalized religious belief – took the initiative to provoke the enemy. As the uprising spread into other southern areas, and as time went on, the character

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of the Maji Maji movement changed significantly. This is common within millenarian and prophetic movements. In some places, Maji Maji appears to have merged with witchcraft eradication movements, and became a challenge to the established authority of the chiefs.38 For example, in Uvidunda area Kinjikitile’s assistant who distributed maji, instructed people to remove all kinds of charms and medicine from their houses and destroy them. All the warriors had to use the magical water only and rely upon it. Whoever refused to take maji was regarded as a witch or supporter of witchcraft, therefore an enemy, even if he was a village chief. Ngwira, the chief of Uvidunda was ousted because he opposed Maji Maji, and was only restored later when people realised that maji was failing against the enemy bullets. In other places, for example in Ubena lowlands, a powerful ruler called Kiwanga, a supporter of the German colonial government, also resisted Maji Maji. He executed all warriors who were operating in his chiefdom. He was killed later by a rebel group that regarded him as a traitor.39

THE HUMAN LOSS DURING THE MAJI MAJI MOVEMENT

Sadly, contrary to the excitement and belief that the warriors had, the magical water did not actually turn bullets into water. Each person who was hit by a German bullet was either wounded or killed. In fact, Kinjikitile was one of the first victims of the German counter-offensive. He was captured and hanged on 4 August 1905.40 His younger brother Njugwemaina took over the administration of maji, immediately after his death.41

It is estimated that over 120,000 died during the Maji Maji uprising.42 Westerlund (apparently going by the official figures given by the colonial government) gives a lower figure of 75,000.43 Gwassa estimates that the deaths are between 250,000 and 300,000. The exact figure may not be known, however, given the size of the area of the uprising (almost a third of Tanzania), and given the duration of the conflict, it is likely that the deaths could be higher than 300,000.

Indeed, many people died after the operations of the Maji Maji movement had stopped. The German colonial government destroyed villages, crops and food sources in order to suppress the movement and win the war as quickly as possible.44

The German soldiers, including some commanders, for example Lieutenant Gustav von Blumenthal, and the African members of the armed forces serving the colonial government also died. It is reported that 15 German and 382 African soldiers died. The number could be higher because nations and armies often tend to give lower numbers of their casualties for political reasons, sometimes to avoid a public backlash against the war agenda.

The Christian missions in Tanzania also felt the impact of the Maji Maji movement. Apart from the burning of the Benedictine Catholic Mission Stations at Nyangao and Lukuledi north-west of Masasi, and the killing of Bishop Caspian Spiss (variant Cassian Spiess), two monks and two nuns were also killed at Mikukuyumbu as they travelled to Peramiho.45

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38 Westerlund, Ujamaa na Dini, p. 35; Iliffe, Tanganyika German Rule, p. 25.
40 Some give 5th August as the date of Kinjikitile’s death. The difference is insignificant.
43 Westerlund, Ujamaa na Dini, p. 34.
44 Iliffe, A Modern History of Tanganyika, p. 199.
Maji Maji movement and the fighting did not disrupt the work of the Anglican Church Missionary Society (CMS) that operated in central Tanzania. Earlier in the crisis, the CMS missionaries considered leaving the country to take refuge in Kenya, until the situation became normal. However, the German colonial authorities could not guarantee their safety and complete security along the Kondoa route, fearing that they could be mistaken for German soldiers and be ambushed along the way. Instead, the authorities ordered CMS missionaries to leave all the mission stations and take refuge at Kiboriani sanatorium that had been built by the CMS mission in Tanzania near Mpwapwa. Kiboriani was suitable because it was high up on the hill top and close to the Mpwapwa German fort. CMS missionaries took refuge at the Kiboriani sanatorium from November 1905 to May 1906. The executive committee of the CMS mission held a meeting at Kiboriani and appointed senior African teachers to become quasi-pastors and put them in charge of the mission districts for an indefinite period to look after the churches, pending the cessation of hostilities.

CONCLUSION

In this article, I have indicated that though there were grievances over the colonial cotton scheme in the Maji Maji outbreak area, such grievances alone could not have unified so many people in an area that is almost a third of mainland Tanzania. I have also pointed out that the Matumbi and Ngindo social and political organisation was decentralized, if not weak. For that reason, these small ethnic groups could not influence other tribes such as the giant and powerful Ngoni and the Yao of the south.

While it is true that the character of Maji Maji changed as time went on, nonetheless, the single element that linked diverse and previously disunited people in a large area was maji, a powerful magical water medicine. Maji Maji owed its origin to the religious beliefs that pre-dated it. These were transformed, ‘synthesized’ and universalized by Kinjikitile, the medicine man of Ngarambe. Through this act of transformation and universalization, so many peoples of southern Tanzania were inspired to take part in the resistance against the Germans.

Unlike other radical religious movements that have caused much anguish in modern Africa, such as the Lord’s Resistance (Northern Uganda) and Boko Haram (North-east Nigeria), Maji Maji was a necessary resistance against the tyranny of the German colonists, that ruled Tanzania (then German East Africa) with an iron fist.

Like other prophetic movements that acquire their inspiration in religious beliefs and convictions, whether moderate or extremist, ancient or modern, Maji Maji commanded widespread support among the masses and could only be ignored by opponents at a cost.

46 Adas, Prophets of Rebellion, p. 31.
47 Wright, Encyclopedia of Religion, p. 337.