

## “A Far Cry from Africa” by Derek Walcott (Analysis)

(Go through the site [encyclopedia.com](http://encyclopedia.com) for a stanza-wise analysis of the poem. Also go through the pdf document analysing several of Walcott’s poems.)

The wind “ruffling the tawny pelt of Africa” refers to the Mau Mau Uprising that occurred in what is now independent Kenya, roughly from October 20, 1952, to January of 1960. During this span, the white government called an emergency against a secret Kikuyu society that came to be known as Mau Mau and was dedicated to overthrowing the white regime.

The **Mau Mau Uprising** (1952–1960), also known as the **Mau Mau Rebellion**, the **Kenya Emergency**, and the **Mau Mau Revolt**, was a war in the British [Kenya Colony](#) (1920–1963) between the Kenya Land and Freedom Army (KLFA), also known as *Mau Mau*, and the British authorities.<sup>[5]</sup>

Dominated by the [Kikuyu people](#), [Meru people](#) and [Embu people](#), the KLFA also comprised units of [Kamba](#) and [Maasai](#) peoples who fought against the white European colonist-settlers in Kenya, the [British Army](#), and the local [Kenya Regiment](#) (British colonists, local auxiliary militia, and pro-British Kikuyu people).<sup>[6][7]</sup>

The capture of rebel leader, Field Marshal [Dedan Kimathi](#), on 21 October 1956, signalled the defeat of the Mau Mau,<sup>[8]</sup> however, the rebellion survived until after Kenya's independence from Britain, driven mainly by the [Meru](#) units led by Field Marshal [Musa Mwariama](#) and General Baimungi. Baimungi, one of the last Mau Mau generals, was killed shortly after Kenya attained self-rule.<sup>[9]</sup>

The armed rebellion of the Mau Mau was the culminating response to colonial rule.<sup>[26][27][28]</sup> Although there had been previous instances of violent resistance to colonialism, the Mau Mau revolt was the most prolonged and violent anti-colonial warfare in the British Kenya colony. From the start, the land was the primary British interest in Kenya,<sup>[29]</sup> which had "some of the richest agricultural soils in the world, mostly in districts where the elevation and climate make it possible for Europeans to reside permanently".<sup>[30]</sup> Though declared a colony in 1920, the formal British colonial presence in Kenya began with a proclamation on 1 July 1895, in which Kenya was claimed as a British [protectorate](#).<sup>[31]</sup>

Against the backdrop of a cruel, long-lasting British colonialism erupted the more short-term cruelty of Mau Mau insurrection. While some versions have it that Mau Mau was put down by 1953 and others by 1956, the government kept the state of emergency in place until the beginning of 1960. It is the violence of Mau Mau that most disturbs Walcott, apparently because it makes Africans look even worse than their British oppressors. There were many stories of Mau Mau violence directed at whites, the animals owned by whites, and at other Kikuyus who refused to join Mau Mau. The violence was especially grisly since many of the Kikuyus used a machete-like agricultural implement, the *panga*, to kill or mutilate victims after killing them. One such murder—one that Walcott could be describing in “A Far Cry from Africa”—was reported of a four-and-a-half-year-old white child. And on March 26, 1953, in the Lari Massacre, Mau Maus killed ninety-seven Kikuyu men, women, and children, apparently for collaborating with the British. But it was not only the violence of insurrection that terrorized animals, whites, and Kikuyus, but also the reportedly gruesome Mau Mau oath-taking ceremonies in which initiates pledged allegiance to the Mau Mau cause. A Kikuyu schoolmaster gave this account of a ceremony initiating seven members: “We were ...

bound together by goats' small intestines on our shoulders and feet.... Then Githinji pricked our right hand middle finger with a needle until it bled. He then brought the chest of a billy goat and its heart still attached to the lungs and smeared them with our blood. He then took a Kikuyu gourd containing blood and with it made a cross on our foreheads and on all important joints saying, 'May this blood mark the faithful and brave members of the Gikuyu and Mumbi [analogues of Adam and Eve] Unity; may this same blood warn you that if you betray secrets or violate the oath, our members will come and cut you into pieces at the joints marked by this blood.'" Before Mau Mau, one gets the impression that Walcott was not so torn between Africa and Britain; he may have viewed British colonialism as arrogant, ignorant, and cruel, and Africa as victimized. But then, when Africans themselves turned violent, Walcott was torn and could not so easily side with Africans against the British.

"A Far Cry from Africa" by Derek Walcott therefore deals with the theme of split identity and anxiety caused by it in the face of the struggle in which the poet could side with neither party. It is, in short, the poem is about the poet's ambivalent feelings towards the Kenyan terrorists and counter terrorist white colonial government, both of which were 'inhuman' during the independence struggle of the country in the 1950s. The persona, probably the poet himself can favour none since both bloods circulate through his veins.

The title of the poem involves an idiom, 'a far cry' meaning an impossible thing. The title may suggest that the poet is writing about an African subject from a distance. Writing from the far-off island of St. Lucia, he feels that he is at a vast distance-both literally and metaphorically from Africa. "A Far Cry" may also have another meaning that the real state of African 'paradise' is a far cry from the Africa that we have read about in terms of gorgeous flora and fauna and interesting village customs. And the third level of meaning to the title is the idea of Walcott hearing the poem as a far cry coming all the way across thousands of miles of ocean. He hears the cry coming to him through the wind.