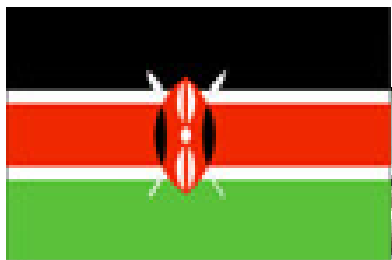


## The Mungiki: Cult, Street Gang or Political Force?

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Time Magazine

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## The Mungiki

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The “Mungiki” are an enigmatic group active in Kenya, who are variously described as a cult, a new religion, a street gang or a political force with roots back to the Mau Mau movement. In many ways, all of these descriptors are true, although the overall purpose or direction of the Mungiki is at best unclear. Mungiki is a Kikuyu word meaning “multitude” or “a united people.” The Kikuyu tribe form the largest single tribe in Kenya, and have historically been one of the most economically and politically active groups.

The Mungiki are believed to have formed in the late 1980s, during the reign of President Daniel Arap Moi, allegedly as an underground opposition movement or possibly as a Kikuyu centric political party. One theory holds that their roots reach back farther still, to the Mwakenya movement, formed in 1979 to oust the Kanu regime.

The Mungiki movement was banned in March, 2002 after being linked to a number of knife and spear killings in the capital. Despite this, the Mungiki have become increasingly bold as of late, and recently claimed a membership of over 2 million people (although this is impossible to verify), including members of the government, police and military. The majority of members, however, are drawn from the disaffected poor who fill the fringes of Kenya’s urban sprawl. Mungiki are known to be particularly strong in a part of the Mathare section of Nairobi known as “Kosovo.” Although all political parties deny supporting the Mungiki, allegations that they are backed by prominent government members to achieve political ends have been aired on international media.

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## Roots of the Mungiki: The Mau Mau Movement

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The “Mau Mau” Rebellion is the British name for what many Kenyans might describe as their fight for independence. The rebels themselves did not use the term *mau mau*, but variously described themselves as *Muingi* (The Movement) or the KCA (Kikuyu Central Association). The conflict was rooted in tensions that had existed over a long period – racial, economic, and social, but was sparked by issues related to the ownership of land. Through the early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Kikuyu tribes people in central Kenya were increasingly losing access to arable land that was consolidated in the hands of white colonists and a few Kikuyu who cooperated with the colonial administration. Many landless Kikuyu migrated to urban centers, where their prospects were grim.

The uprising lasted from 1952 to 1960, at which point it was crushed by the colonial police and military forces. Although many of the methods used were similar to the British counter-insurgency campaign in Malaya, accusations of atrocities and general heavy handedness were levied against the colonial forces. Notwithstanding the end of the insurgency, Kenya became independent in 1963.

The Mungiki portray themselves as the political successors to the Mau Mau movement, although this link is not supported by surviving members of the insurgency. The Mungiki, however, suggest that the gains made by earlier rebels have since been lost, that the Kikuyu people were betrayed after independence, and that another uprising is required to right past wrongs.

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## Mungiki and Kenyan Politics

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Despite the high profile violence attributed to the Mungiki, many prominent Kenyan politicians have been largely silent on the group. This is unusual, in that the expected position for most politicians on any armed group involved in extortion and murder would seem to be clear.

It is commonly believed that the silence amongst politicians in the central province is because of their involvement with Mungiki, either currently or in the past. Both the government and the opposition are believed to have courted the group as a means to capture a segment of the voting population, especially with elections coming up later this year. Police have made statements to the media indicating that captured Mungiki suspects and documents claim links to the same prominent politicians again and again, suggesting a certain amount of truth. Recent controversial arrests of current and former politicians suspected of involvement with Mungiki would seem to support this view.

Mungiki itself has made a recent half-hearted attempt to change its face to a political one, with the creation of the Kenyan National Youth Alliance (KNYA). This front organisation has also been targeted by police operations.

Given the gruesome crimes committed by the group, if there are political backers of Mungiki, it is likely that it has grown beyond their control.

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## Leaders of the Mungiki

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Maina Njenga (real name John Kamunya), one of the major leaders of the Mungiki movement and its self-proclaimed Chairman, claims to have had a vision from god (Ngai), telling him to unite the Kikuyu people and throw off foreign influence. In 2004, he was charged along with 32 others for having “administered an improper oath” (in a banned Mungiki ceremony) and for the possession of weapons. He escaped from custody and went into hiding along with another prominent leader, Ndura Waruinge.

In late 2005, police mounted a raid on what they described as the “nerve centre” of the movement, a large home on the outskirts of Kitengela. Although 18 sect members were arrested, Njenga was not present at the time of the raid.

Maina Njenja was later captured and imprisoned, and renounced the Mungiki movement after his release. Maina Njenja was again arrested, and on 21 June, 2007, was sentenced to five years of imprisonment for possession of a firearm and 5 kgs of marijuana.

In addition to those persons listed above, it is widely believed that there are other Mungiki backers who do not participate directly in the day to day activities of the movement, but are involved in directing it from afar. In particular, a prominent member of Parliament from Central Province has been named in Mungiki leaflets and in interviews with local Mungiki leaders. The fact that there has only recently been action taken against those named as members of the Mungiki is a testament to the fear with which the group is regarded, and perhaps for the political and financial clout they wield.

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## Basic Tenets and Beliefs of the Mungiki

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The Mungiki are a Kikuyu-centric organisation that express a desire for a return to traditional values and practices. They reject Christianity and Western culture, and practice a version of Kikuyu cultural traditions along with animist religious rites. Mungiki refer to god as *Ngai* and pray facing Mount Kenya, where *Ngai* is believed to dwell. A key practice for Mungiki is the use of snuff, which has been likened in significance to the Christian holy communion. Many, though not all, members wear dreadlocks that are reminiscent of those worn by the “Mau Mau.”



Although many Mungiki prayers are held in natural settings near sacred forests and rivers, there have also been large ceremonies held in parts of Nairobi. A central practice is that of oath-taking – new members must swear seven oaths to join. Sworn members refer to each other as *jama* (insiders). Although the rituals are secret, one alleged ceremony involves male members standing in icy cold water, sniffing tobacco will being bathed in a mixture of goat blood, urine and tripe. The Mungiki are socially conservative, and have been known to intimidate people into adopting their cultural norms by actions such as stripping women in public who are seen wearing pants, and by forcibly imposing female circumcision.

A concept borrowed from Kikuyu culture and important to the Mungiki is that of *Itwika*, a word that describes the rightful transfer of power from old to young. Some Mungiki documents have used this concept to rationalize their own desire to seize power from the “old guard” (ie the current establishment).

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## Crimes attributed to the Mungiki

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Many violent crimes have been attributed to the Mungiki, who are likely used as a “catch all” by authorities. Some crimes, however, have become Mungiki trademarks, notably violent extortion and execution style murders, including beheadings. Many attacks on *Matatu* or minibus drivers have occurred over the past few years, as the Mungiki consolidated control over certain routes – notably Kayole routes 1960/1961, Dandora 32/42, Huruma 46 and Kariobangi 14, 28, and 40.

They are also well known for extorting money from people by “manning” public washrooms in various parts of the city where household plumbing is unknown. People living in areas controlled by the Mungiki are obliged to pay 30 Sh a month in protection money. In these areas, the Mungiki have also begun hooking up homes to existing power lines and then charging for the service.

In the Mathare district of Nairobi, Mungiki has been involved in fighting against a rival vigilante gang known as the “Taliban,” which is composed primarily of members of the Luo tribe. The violence between the groups is believed to have erupted after the Mungiki attempted to impose additional “taxes” on producers of a local bootleg alcohol known as *chang’aa*. *Chang’aa* is made from fermented water, molasses and cornmeal, and is quite potent – sometimes having ethanol added. Available from many small bars, *chang’aa* is occasionally deadly due to the use of ethanol as an additive by unscrupulous brewers.

Perhaps surprisingly, the Mungiki are not known to be involved in the drug trade.

The Mungiki Defence Council is an armed faction within the Mungiki who are often involved in revenge killings of former members.

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## Mungiki Defence Council

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The Mungiki Defence Council are a heavily armed segment of the Mungiki who are often involved in revenge killings of former members, and may be responsible for the trademark beheadings conducted by the group. They are reputedly lead by a team of five cousins.

The MDC have recently released a number of statements to the press, possibly indicating the amount of influence they have within the organisation. The Mungiki movement is not highly centralized, and it is possible that there are competing sub-organisations active within it. If so, the MDC may represent one of the most powerful sub-organisations.

Although the MDC are generally more heavily armed than other members of the Mungiki, armaments seen in use by Mungiki members include swords, machetes, knives, AK-47, G-3 and an assortment of pistols. Many of the firearms have been stolen from security forces, though some may also have been purchased on the black market.



Weapons typically used by the Mungiki.

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## Recent Government Crackdown

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Police have set up a new special unit to target Mungiki, replacing the discredited “Rhino Squad” set up for the same purpose but disbanded in 2005. This unit, numbering just over a hundred members, is particularly feared. The government has recently authorized a “shoot to kill” policy to be used against the Mungiki.

On 1 June, 2007 police arrested a staggering 2,464 suspected Mungiki members across Nairobi in reaction to the May beheadings of six people believed to be “defectors” from the movement.

In response to the killing of two police officers on foot patrol in Mathare district of Nairobi on 5 June, 2007, a large police operation was conducted over three days to disrupt the Mungiki hold on the area. The official reason for the raids was to recover the weapons stolen from the fallen police officers. It resulted in exchanges of gunfire between Mungiki and police, and over thirty deaths, some of which appear to have been executions by police.



AP Photo

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## Effect of the Mungiki on Humanitarian Operations

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Although the Mungiki have not intentionally impacted humanitarian operations to date, the very nature of their activities and government reactions to them are bound to have some effect.

Government crackdowns on the Mungiki are likely to create IDPs as people in the areas affected flee their homes. Those living in these areas are often already vulnerable due to poverty and other reasons.

As well, the anti western bias of Mungiki opens up the possibility of the group targeting NGOs in future, or more likely their national staff who may be perceived as being “rich” as well as tainted by contact with Westerners. This targeting may also take the form of various kinds of extortion or “taxation,” which may affect beneficiaries without the knowledge of humanitarian organisations.



As NGOs undoubtedly share “space” with Mungiki as both work within vulnerable communities, there is a need on the part of relief and development organisations to understand the Mungiki and carefully consider how to avoid creating conflict wherever possible. In any case, the presence of the Mungiki in programme areas creates concern for the safety of both beneficiaries and humanitarian organizations staff.

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## Recommendations



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- Realistically, it may not be possible to avoid poor urban areas such as Mathale, which along with organisations like the Mungiki, also contain large number of beneficiaries. As the areas where the Mungiki operate cannot be avoided, there is a need to mitigate the attendant risks.
- Good security practice, including effective use of communications, surveillance awareness, personal security drills, defensive driving and active collection of information of relevance to security will allow reduce vulnerability to risks arising from Mungiki activities. Attention should also be given to the need to “nationalize” programmes during periods of unrest or increased Mungiki activity. All these recommended practices will also likely reduce the exposure of the staff to the high existing levels of criminality in Nairobi. Indeed, carjacking remains a real threat for the entire humanitarian community.
- In addition, indicators of changing attitudes towards NGOs and their programmes amongst the Mungiki should be noted and monitored. Possible indicators would include actions by the Mungiki, stated attitudes to international NGOs in Mungiki pamphlets and literature, and information from members in the community. All of the above indicators should be incorporated into a security information collection plan. It should be remembered, however, that the Mungiki are not a monolithic organisation and so their attitudes and actions may be very difficult to predict.
- As the Presidential elections in December approach, it can be expected that there will be an increase in Mungiki related violence, either perpetrated by the Mungiki themselves or by police and security forces. Extra care should be taken during this period, and exposure in areas likely to be affected by violence should be reduced as much as possible and continuity plans to ensure permanent access to the beneficiaries throughout this period should also be considered.

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**Safer Access is a network of humanitarian safety expertise formed to better enable the provision of humanitarian and development aid. It is our overall objective to improve the capacity of relief and development organisations working in insecure and complicated environments to deliver life-saving assistance to those most in need.**

**Our work is first and foremost beneficiary-focused, innovative and aims to have an impact across the aid sector. Our belief is that the best way to ensure continued access to beneficiaries in even the most complex and fluid situations is for organizations to institutionalize effective security planning and procedures from the outset. Our intent is always to teach and facilitate best practises – practices which both safeguard staff security while also enabling access to those most in need. Our passion is to help enable safer and more effective operating practices, from those employed in management to those used by the teams in the field**

**We understand and are experienced in the challenges that aid workers, both national and international, face everyday. Safer Access is a platform for the collection and distribution of expertise and information to those that need it most. To that end, we are committed to the free and open sharing of critical information – including analysis and best practices – amongst humanitarian and development organisations so as to enable them to better manage their operating risks.**

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