

Viewing Guide for *The Kitchen Toto*

The Kitchen Toto is a 1987 feature film, a tragic drama conceived, written and directed by Harry Hook. Reared and educated in Kenya, Hook focuses on the impact of the Mau Mau rebellion, which began after World War II and resulted in a State of Emergency in British-controlled Kenya colony in the early 1950s. The story follows the experiences of a 12-year-old Kikuyu boy, Mwangi Moses Kariuki. When Mwangi's family's compound is attacked by guerrillas and his father is killed, he is placed by his mother in the household of a British police officer, John Graham. He is the assistant, or kitchen toto, to Mugo, the "houseboy" or head servant in the household. Graham's son, Edward, who is the same age, is companion and tormentor to Mwangi, while Graham's wife, Janet, proves to be unfairly demanding. Meanwhile, the area is increasingly threatened by the Mau Mau "terrorists."

As in the case of *Mandabi*, your challenge as a budding film critic is to write both about content and form in this film.

Content:

The nature of Mau Mau has been contested for 50 years. The name Mau Mau has no meaning in the Kikuyu language or in Swahili, the lingua franca of Kenya. Was it a nationalist movement of protest against colonial rule? If so, why were only the Kikuyu peoples of the central highlands involved? Was it a protest over the confiscation of Kikuyu land by white settlers? But that had been happening over the course of the entire 20th century. Was it a civil war between Kikuyu without access to land and Kikuyu who had succeeded in the emerging modern state? Maybe, but then why were some whites attacked?

The film focuses on the Thenge Oath. Oaths were a common way of ensuring solidarity in Kikuyu culture. Like oaths taken in courts of law, individuals promised something on pain of religious sanction. The Thenge Oath in the film is slightly exaggerated for dramatic effect.

As you watch *The Kitchen Toto*, notice the ways in which the various groups of characters are represented: the whites, the Kikuyu, the guerrilla fighters, and other Africans (specifically the Maasai). How do relationships among those groups change over the course of the film? What would you say is the overall argument/lesson of the film? Notice how Christianity and African Christians are represented (this will be important when we read Ngugi's novel). In writing about the film you may want to contrast the looks of landscape, dress, and architecture with what we've studied in West Africa.

Form:

What are the artistic elements that Hook employs to tell his story effectively? How is the viewer's impression of the guerrilla movement made? How does music affect the mood of the story and foreshadow different happenings? What does Hook do to suggest that Mwangi has been reborn into white society? Look for other patterns or signals that underscore the action in the film (for example, keep an eye on babies, both black and white!).