

THE ROLE OF KIKUYU WOMEN IN THE MAU MAU

BY

MARGARET WANGUI GACHIHI

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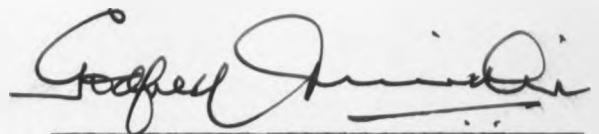
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A B S T R A C T

THE ROLE OF KIKUYU WOMEN IN THE MAU MAU.

This study was undertaken in Mathira and Tetu Administrative Divisions of Nyeri District. These areas were chosen because they were, throughout the years of the Emergency, a hotbed of Mau Mau activities.

The study is on the role that Kikuyu women played in the Mau Mau struggle for Independence. It argues that the role of women in the movement has been seriously neglected in spite of the fact that oral data from actual participants convincingly show that women featured prominently in the movement. The study, therefore, analyses the various ways in which women were actively involved in the Mau Mau and indicates that women were in fact a critical and decisive element in the shape that the Mau Mau assumed. It is further contended that without their active co-operation and assistance Mau Mau would certainly not have been as effective, or survived, as long as it did.

The study underscores that Mau Mau broke out in 1952 because of the various colonial frustrations that

faced Kenyans and the Kikuyu in particular. And with regard to women, it attempts to explain why they were so zealously drawn into the Mau Mau. This zeal is explained within the context of the changing role of Kikuyu women. It is contended that such factors as education, Christianity, employment, petty businesses, among others, had an important impact on Kikuyu women during the colonial period. Because of them, women were edged into roles hitherto regarded as the preserve of men. The colonial view, that women were ardent supporters of the Mau Mau because in it they had been accorded some status in a society where hitherto they had little significance, is shown to be grossly erroneous. Such a view not only underestimates the influence of women in the traditional society but also fails to consider factors that changed their traditional status over the years.

Furthermore, it is shown that women featured prominently in the organizational network between the fighters in the forests and the reserves. The study analyses this network and its importance as the life-link between the fighters and the reserves. It is shown that so important was this link in sustaining the movement that Government's strategy to herd people into the Mau Mau villages in 1954 was an attempt largely

aimed at breaking up this support. But the versatility of women activists in the Mau Mau is seen in that, although villagisation was a great blow to the supply lines, women were still able to devise ingenious methods to support the fighters.

The role of women in the courier service is also discussed in this study. The service is shown to have been crucial as the only reliable means of communication for the freedom fighters. A number of cases are cited to show that women were invaluable as couriers and that sometimes their efficiency averted disasters which would otherwise have wiped out individual groups of freedom fighters.

Finally, the study shows that the greatest contribution of women to the Mau Mau was outside the domain of actual combat. Nevertheless a few women took to the forests as support wings and acted as the transport, signals, medical corps and ordnance to their male counterparts. These eased the very difficult conditions that fighters faced in the forests. The study also suggests that a few individual women merit the term, Itungati, the reference term used for actual fighters, for their contribution in actual combat.



# C H A P T E R I

## INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 LITERATURE REVIEW AND STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Inquiries that were commissioned by the Colonial Government to look into the origins of the Mau Mau - particularly the Corfield Report, the Carothers inquiry and even the Lyttleton Commission - and with access to all the necessary data came out, surprisingly, with reports that merely reflected the official mind. These reports are generally agreed that the roots of Mau Mau were neither economic nor political in nature but "the result of profound mental instability springing from the abrupt collision of two civilizations".<sup>1</sup> In the Corfield version of the origins of the Mau Mau, the Kikuyu had failed to absorb modernizing influences which had been imposed on them rather too suddenly. This strain, the report added, had led them to resort to the Mau Mau. Explaining this, Corfield asserts that "the failure of the Kikuyu to adjust themselves to the needs of this sudden change, together with planned exploitation of the attendant strains were

the primary causes and origins of Mau Mau."<sup>2</sup> In this way, the report sought to exonerate the Administration from the responsibility of the outbreak of the Mau Mau. At no point does the report come out clearly to admit that it was the failure of the Colonial Government, rather than the failure of the Africans, that led the latter to resort to violence.

Carothers, in his attempt to analyse the psychology behind the Mau Mau, arrived at the conclusion that Mau Mau arose from the shock of drastic change in the Kikuyu way of life brought about by such factors as missionary influence, education, commercial enterprises and European farming. In the face of this change, he stated, the Kikuyu's cultural machinery had collapsed and Mau Mau was, therefore, the result of this inability to sustain the conflict. Summing up the factors that gave rise to the Mau Mau he says:

"It arose from the development of an anxious conflictual situation in people who, from contact with an alien culture, had lost the supportive and constraining influences of their own culture, yet had not lost their 'magic' mode of thinking."<sup>3</sup>

He further saw the whole Mau Mau situation, as did many others in the colonial circles, as a

tribalistic outbreak where a few "newly - risen egotists"<sup>4</sup> had manipulated the society. And the Lyttleton Commission came out with the findings that Mau Mau had no real economic or political grievances and neither was it intended or designed to improve them. Equally, terms like "retrogression", "debasement", "witchcraft" and "black magic" are freely used in these studies to describe the nature of the Mau Mau struggle for Independence.

It is quite evident in the literature that the missionaries produced on the Mau Mau that their interpretation was closely allied to the official version. Studies such as Bewes' Kikuyu Conflict: Mau Mau and the Christian Witness, Beecher's Christian Counter - Revolution to Mau Mau, or Wiseman's Kikuyu Martyrs, are in general agreement that Mau Mau was an anti-Christian movement that had reverted to tribal atavism, paganism and cultural barbarism. Some studies, however, went a step further to show that the Government had to take some blame too for the outbreak of the Mau Mau. Canon Bewes, while recognizing that the Government had been slow in responding to African grievances and particularly to the land issue, still asserted

that Mau Mau had blown the issue out of all proportions. He condemned it as an evil movement reflecting the deeply ingrained paganism in the Kikuyu. Likewise, L.S.B. Leakey, while totally unsympathetic to the Mau Mau itself and taking a fairly close stand to that of the missionaries, at least made an attempt at delving into the historical grievances of the Kikuyu.<sup>5</sup> This in itself shows that he did not totally dismiss the view that the Mau Mau had genuine grievances. With respect to the missionaries, one can say that at least they recognized that there was need to improve the living and working conditions for the Africans. Before this could be done, however, the Kikuyu needed a spiritual revival and re-establishment of Christian values. This was the missionaries answer to the Mau Mau.

Reports on the Mau Mau by settlers, who had vested interest in the perpetuation of the status quo in Kenya, were in close agreement with that of the Administration and primarily justified British position in Kenya. They showed particular hostility to the Mau Mau fighters who had made settlers the prime targets of physical attack throughout the

Emergency period. To them, therefore, Mau Mau was nothing more than a barbaric movement bent on imposing a reign of terror in the country. This was particularly meant to discredit the call by Mau Mau for "Land and Freedom". Lipscomb, for example, widely regarded as a leading advocate for the settler community in Kenya documented these strong racist sentiments in his books White Africans and We Built a Country. Huxley's Race and Politics in Kenya or Blundell's So Rough a Wind give a useful insight into settler thinking. Mau Mau was seen as a desperate bid by the Africans to revert to their pre-colonial situation. The settlers thus suggested, as a remedy, a more cautious approach in introducing Africans to Western civilization. They went further and suggested that this could only be realized if the European entrenched themselves more deeply in Kenya in order to perpetuate their rule, a view that was totally unacceptable to the Africans.

After the Mau Mau War was over and with the advantage of hindsight, the historiography of the Mau Mau took on a new turn as writers began taking seriously the political and economic objectives that the struggle had set out to achieve. The seriousness with which the movement had been taken in

Central Kenya, the Rift Valley and other parts of the country plus the high death casulty clearly showed that the demands which the movement was making could not be taken lightly. Rawcliffe, though writing in 1954<sup>6</sup>, strongly advocated constitutional reform in Kenya. Notable figures in the British opposition party, the Labour Party — such as Fenner Brockway who had written on Mau Mau in 1953 attacking British policies in Kenya — also strongly advocated self-rule in Kenya. However, a breakthrough in the Mau Mau literature came in the 1960s when a few of the Mau Mau fighters began documenting their experiences. An outstanding fighter, Karari Njama, was among the first to give an account. This he did in Barnett's study on the Mau Mau.<sup>7</sup> Waruhiu Itote, a former Mau Mau 'General', also wrote giving an insight into the war as it was fought in the forest in his publication, Mau Mau General.<sup>8</sup> Several other accounts by Mau Mau fighters were published in this period giving Mau Mau literature a new perspective.

Another milestone in this historiography came with the publication of The Myth of the Mau Mau.<sup>9</sup> Apart from the detailed history of the development of nationalism in Kenya, the study became important

because of the authors' radical interpretation of the Mau Mau. They argue persuasively that the outbreak of violence in Kenya in 1952 occurred primarily because of European, rather than African, failure. All the labels and descriptive terms given by the Colonial Government to the Mau Mau movement were seen as constituting a "myth". The study offered an alternative explanation—that Mau Mau was the inevitable consequence of the long history and development of nationalism in Kenya. Several other studies, characterized by this shift of interpretation of the Mau Mau movement, came up throughout the 1960s.

Intensive local studies by Kenyan historians on the movement, covering a wide range of issues and historiographical problems, were also carried out particularly in the 1970s. In this period, too, more personal accounts by Mau Mau fighters appeared.

Surprisingly and significant for this study, very little has been written on the role of women in the Mau Mau in these accounts. This absence, or perhaps more accurately incompleteness, of such a

study cannot be adequately justified in view of the fact that oral data from actual participants, both men and women, convincingly show that women featured prominently in the Mau Mau movement, and that they were in fact a critical and decisive element in the shape that the Mau Mau assumed. Hence the attempt to relate their activities in this study. As Santilli rightly points out in her article on Kikuyu women in the Mau Mau, their role has been seriously underplayed. She attributes this, rightly again, to the one-sided view that most first-hand accounts on Mau Mau have given. She contends that the Mau Mau forest fighters were "unable to address the issue of female organizational patterns, simply because of their limited exposure to them. In addition, certain male perspectives hamper their discussion of the females involved in the Mau Mau Revolt".<sup>10</sup> The problem, in my view, is not really that male fighters have underplayed women's role out of their ignorance of the women's organizational patterns. After all these were not two groups essentially opposed to each other but people who worked in conjunction for a common aim—the success of the struggle. Rather, what one finds in the accounts given by freedom fighters is a certain



reluctance to accord women, and especially women fighters, an equal status. Could this reluctance perhaps be evidence of the resurfacing of views on the traditional role of women? The famous Mwathe meeting, convened by Mau Mau leaders in the Nyandarua and Mount Kenya forests on 18th August, 1953, seems to support this view. Duties allocated to women were purely of a domestic nature. The woman fighter was constantly referred to as a Ka-batuni, the diminutive of Batuni, the reference term for a member of a platoon. Some of these accounts dismiss women in a paragraph or two or as a mere reference in passing. Where they are consistently referred to, this is usually as a way of exemplifying the activities of male fighters.<sup>11</sup>

Autobiographies, with the exception of a few, are especially revealing in this respect. Their reference to the role of women has focused on only a few and, perhaps, not their most significant activities. They dwell considerably on what they call 'liaisons' between female and male fighters at the expense of actually relating the roles assigned to the women in order to further the

cause of the movement. They do not, for instance, tell us much about the operations of the organizational network between the Kikuyu in the reserves and the fighters in the forests. Yet, before the construction of the Emergency Villages, this network was an important feature in the Mau Mau and was dominated by women.

In his autobiography<sup>12</sup> Gucu frequently refers to the tasks performed by women who were in the Mau Mau in conjunction with its other members. In his story, one woman, Nyagiko, features throughout his account as one of the most fearless and trusted women that the Mau Mau had in Murang'a. Besides acting as a contact, she lured several men who were 'wanted' by the Mau Mau for undermining the movement.

Equally, Kaggia, in The Roots of Freedom<sup>13</sup>, also mentions some of the girls who operated in the Mau Mau as spies and couriers in Nairobi and its environs. He mentions in particular Wangui Kamau, Njeri (Wa Njumbi), Njeri Mwaniki, Njeri Munyuiriri, Wanjira Gitau 'and many others' who worked for the Mau Mau. Clearly the Mau Mau operations in Nairobi had incorporated women

as an integral part of the movement.

Thus although the historiography of Mau Mau reflects the keen interest it has aroused in the history of Colonial Kenya, it is quite apparent that some important aspects of the movement have been appallingly neglected. The focal aim of my thesis, therefore, is to make a detailed analysis of the various ways in which Kikuyu women participated in the Mau Mau Movement and what the outcome of this was. This has been done with a specific focus on Mathira and Tetu in the Nyeri District, an area which was a stronghold of the Mau Mau. Some of the outstanding women activists such as Wamuyu Gakuru, better known among her fellow fighters as "Cinda Reri", "Marshall" Muthoni, and Wanjugu Gituku, among others, hailed from this area. These women were assigned duties that were decisive in engagements between the Mau Mau fighters and the well-armed British forces and especially in rallying the support of fellow women. Thus in the Mau Mau there emerged women leaders who organized fellow women to act as contacts with the other fighters. Zealous Mau Mau supporters were also found in the bulk of peasant women who

shouldered heavy burdens and executed dangerous tasks in the name of the movement. These are the women who fed and supplied Mau Mau contact groups with weapons and other provisions usually purloined or wrenched from the enemy. Other important tasks that these women carried out for the movement included smuggling such vital provisions as medicine and clothing while acting at the same time as couriers of information through many hazardous routes.

Others indeed took up arms and joined the ranks of fighters in the forest zones, particularly in the Nyandarua and Mount Kenya regions. Contrary to the popular belief that those women who joined fighters in the forest only had domestic duties assigned to them, some did, as is shown later in the study, rise to influential positions of leadership and had assigned to them duties that called for some military know-how and especially the handling of guns. Some of the women in the forest had assigned to them duties which were in keeping with the traditional tasks performed by women in the home. These are the women who helped transport luggage in the thick undergrowth and difficult

forest terrains, collect firewood, fetch water, and helped to cook and clean camps. These are some of the activities that women performed throughout the war years and which must be studied if one is to assign women their rightful place in the Mau Mau struggle for independence. When one talks of women who went into the forest, however, one must keep in mind that they were few in number and their contribution to the movement must therefore be seen and assessed in the same light.

The mistake has often been made of identifying the Mau Mau movement with only the group that actually took up arms to fight it out in the forest against the colonial authorities and their African collaborators. Whereas this approach does not exclude women, and especially as supporters, one must bear in mind that, in reality, freedom fighters probably never exceeded twelve thousand at any one time, a very small fraction of the Kikuyu, Embu and Meru societies, the main group involved in actual combat. Besides these fighters, the bulk of the membership of the Mau Mau which supplied and carried underground activities for the movement pervaded every sector. Among the urban dwellers were to be

found zealous Mau Mau followers comparable to the squatters in European farms. Supporters of the movement infiltrated right through the Police Force and even the notorious Home Guards. Young boys and girls were recruited from the ranks of the Independent Schools that were managed by the Kikuyu Independent Schools Association, a factor that led to the closure by Government order of thirty one such schools on 19th November, 1953<sup>14</sup>. Wives and daughters in Emergency villages became vital providers of food, shelter and information. All these people formed a formidable support group which nurtured the comparatively small number of combatants in the Nyandarua and Mount Kenya forest regions. Indeed, the Colonial Government realized that to crush out Mau Mau meant crushing out this support. The Government, therefore, adopted a broad policy in the Kikuyu reserves "to force, entice, the passive element into a change of heart".<sup>15</sup> As a tacit conspiracy between the supporters and the fighters had already been firmly established, there was little prospect that the Government would succeed by enticement, and consequently, a lot of force was used. It is this support group behind the Mau Mau which reveals, to a great extent, why

such a relatively poorly-equipped group of freedom fighters under such stringent conditions and pressure from the Government were able to sustain the struggle for at least four years. It is from this support group that I have identified women in this study as having played a very vital role. Indeed, it is my contention that they were, in fact, the real backbone of the Mau Mau that formed the major link in the underground network of the movement. This study further proposes the hypothesis that without women's active co-operation and assistance, Mau Mau would certainly not have survived as long as it did.

I have further proposed, in this study, that there are more fundamental reasons that explain why Kikuyu women were so zealously involved in the Mau Mau than the array of reasons colonial observers have given. Their views can be generally classified in two main categories; namely the official view and the missionaries' view, both of which seem to have been influenced by what they saw as the place of the Kikuyu woman in the traditional society. This centred around the notion that women were accorded little or no recognition in their society and that there was no history of a Kikuyu woman ever having a

hand in politics. Consequently, these observers concluded that the Kikuyu society was in every sense male-dominated. So, how can one explain this sudden fanaticism amongst the women in such a fiery political issue? What precedent could one point at? Was Mau Mau not attracting women because it offered them some status in a man's world? Weren't women taking the oath just as the men were, contrary to all traditional customs? All these questions seem to have been the principal considerations among the colonizers in their bid to explain why women had come to play such a central role in the movement. That the role of women in the traditional social structure was grossly underrated among the colonial circles is dealt with in more detail in Chapter 3. Suffice it to say here that this was a grossly erroneous view. Kikuyu women always had an important influence within the community and especially on matters related to the home and economic life. What's more, they also played a fairly significant role in sacrificial and religious life.

An alternative argument has been that women had, at the onset of the Mau Mau, realized that as a corporate group in society, they had been



left too far behind by men. True, they had never been on an equal footing, they argued, but it looked like the colonial situation was drawing the men more and more from the traditional home. Lady Sidney Farrah, speaking to the East African Women's League at a Nyeri Branch meeting, expressed the view that, "Kikuyu women, trying to draw their men back to the primitive way of life so that they would not be left behind, were largely at the back of Mau Mau".<sup>16</sup> Dailies such as the East African Standard, and racist monthlies such as the East Africa and Rhodesia ran typical racist commentaries on the role of women in the Mau Mau. To gauge by popular sentiment at this time, letters to the editor were published in the dailies to whip up mass condemnation against the Mau Mau. One such letter, typical of many others, expressed the sentiment that although it was evidently clear that women were the real hardcore in the Mau Mau, more savage than the men, the Government had failed to curb their activities and had gone soft on them by not imposing the death penalty as they were doing on the men. This savagery, the commentary added, was the result of women being afforded "status" in a community where otherwise they had

little influence in the tribe.<sup>17</sup> One does not have to look far in the colonial literature on the Mau Mau to find other numerous, but rather flimsy, suggestions as to why women had been drawn so ardently into the Mau Mau movement. Lieutenant Crocker, for example, made the outrageous suggestion that it was for lack of something better to do that had led women into the core of the movement. Subsequently, he dismisses their involvement as an expression of the need for excitement and amusement. He makes the comment:

"Now that the government has banned tribal dances and songs, in fact all the erstwhile amusements of the Africans, there is nothing left to do in the dreary hours of darkness when no work may be done." 18

A cursory glance at the brutality, loss of life and property, and the terrible conditions created by the State of Emergency in Kenya hardly renders such a suggestion worthy of note for its veracity. The very idea that people could go to the extent they did in pursuit of 'amusement' is indeed frivolous and an attempt to belittle the fact that Africans were capable of fighting for their rights or being effective custodians of their Independence. Far from being an excitement -

generating situation, the Mau Mau was an excruciating experience which left an indelible mark in the lives of many Kenyans.

Indeed there are several precedents in colonial history that offer proof that women, in Central Kenya, had a history of protest against the atrocities of colonialism and that they readily sought redress as a corporate group. In perhaps the most memorable of these events, over two hundred women featured prominently in the crowd that had gone to demand the release of Harry Thuku in the 'Harry Thuku riots' of 1922. Among those singled out for special mention is Mary Nyanjiru, a woman from Murang'a who led the others in challenging the 'cowardly' behaviour of men for their failure to secure Thuku's release by force. Nyanjiru was the first to die in the indiscriminate shooting that followed from the colonial police.

Women were to feature prominently again in the land terracing fracas of the 1940s in Central Province. One of the hot spots was Murang'a where women, who made up more than 50% of the work force, simply downed their tools in 1947 bringing the work virtually to a standstill. With the support of local politicians women launched strong protests against the forced communal labour which involved toiling for long hours beside men in unpaid labour twice a week. Obviously,

this massive terracing programme affected women more adversely than any other group as it kept them away from their shambas and household duties, particularly looking after the young children. In August 1947 the men followed suit and decided that all work should stop. These activities, coupled with riotous demonstrations forced the Government to submit.<sup>19</sup> In this protest which was raised and sustained by women, it is clear that the protest was not merely against terracing only but the deeper issue that had caused erosion — the congestion in farming land in Central Kenya as more and more land was appropriated by the Europeans.

In 1951, women were at the forefront again when the Government gave orders that all cattle belonging to Africans must be inoculated against rinderpest. Massive anti-inoculation demonstrations were organized when the inoculated cattle begun dying. Inoculation centres were stormed and cattle bomas burnt. In Murang'a, for example, large numbers of women from seven locations banded together in a strong protest against this whole programme and actually ended up burning down eleven cattle bomas that were being used as centres of inoculation. According to the official records, these women were "finally dispersed by the police and over 500 of them were convicted, many to a term of imprisonment".<sup>20</sup>

Women outside the Central Province have also their record of protest against what they felt to be unjust treatment by the colonialists. In 1934, for example, thousands of Abothunguci women are recorded to have mobilized themselves and marched to the Meru administrative station to demand the exhumation of corpses buried in accordance with an order under the Native Authority Ordinance but against Meru customs. According to the protesting mass of women, this desecration had led to failure of the rains and subsequent famine that ravaged their country.<sup>21</sup> In 1939, Igembe women, pressed by economic hardships and what they saw as sheer exploitation, looted an Indian store as a protest against its owner whom they felt was not giving them a fair price.<sup>22</sup> Such instances show that women did not merely look on when they saw injustices perpetrated against them but instead mobilized themselves speedily to take action. Indeed there are several other instances where women can be singled out as having firmly stood

as a corporate group against the enslavement perpetrated by colonial rulers. A classic example is the women's war in Igbo among the Aba people of West Africa that took place way back in 1929.<sup>23</sup> A huge gathering of women massed and successfully invaded the colonial office demanding political and economic reforms. The 'success' of this invasion lay in the fact that henceforth, the administrators closely monitored women's activities to see that no acts were perpetrated against them that could spark off riots. Women, were singled out, as potential trouble makers.

By 1955, even the Europeans had changed their original opinion that women had joined Mau Mau blindly. They realized that they had underestimated women's sensitivity to the political situation in Kenya. The Government War Council noted with concern in that year that not all women were innocent sufferers from the emergency and that "very many were as implacably Mau Mau as the men". They further noted that Kamiti Prison and Detention Camp alone held "925 Mau Mau female convicts and 1,174 female detainees— all bad cases".<sup>24</sup> Based on such observations, the Government decided that it could only deal a mortal blow to the Mau Mau

movement if women could be deterred from joining it and instead be persuaded to "fight the influence of Mau Mau and to maintain law and order".<sup>25</sup> Hence, the whole of the emergency period was to witness use of massive brute force by the Colonial Government against Kenyans demanding "Land and Freedom".

## 1.2 METHODOLOGY

One does not have to look far in the existing Mau Mau Literature to see that one of the areas that has hitherto been appallingly neglected is the role that women played in the Mau Mau movement. A tentative survey before this research was done indicated that a lot of useful data can still be gathered from actual participants given that the Mau Mau struggle is still a fairly recent phenomenon and therefore still fairly fresh in the minds of many people in Kenya today. Actual field work confirmed this and the central exercise, therefore, in this study was the collection of data from informants in the field.

The specific area of research for this study was carried out in Mathira and Tetu administrative divisions of Nyeri District. These two areas were

chosen because of specific advantages as far as the study was concerned. First and foremost is the fact that Mathira and Tetu were throughout the years of the Emergency a hotbed of Mau Mau activities and therefore a target of Government reprisals. At the very outskirts of these places lie Mount Kenya and Nyandarua forests where actual fighting raged between the Government forces and the Mau Mau fighters. In fact, Nyeri Town for four years was to become the centre for planning and co-ordinating the efforts of the security forces in the Central Province against the Mau Mau. To the older generation in this area, therefore, Mau Mau was very real, and a painful experience that affected all their activities for the worse from 1952 right up to 1957. This factor alone makes Mathira and Tetu a reservoir of detailed information on the activities and organization of the Mau Mau movement.

Another advantage afforded by these two areas, in a research of this nature, is that since the study focuses on women, the majority of whom were in the reserves, it was imperative to identify an area where an intensive study could be made on a rural community to elicit their everyday activities



during the emergency years and how these activities were conditioned by the circumstances created by the struggle. A wide range of such information was available here and, particularly and of great importance, on the link between the activities of fighters in the forests and their supporters in Mau Mau villages. Everyone, so to speak, has a story to tell. A few women, admittedly few in comparison to the number of male fighters who were in the forest, also took to the forests. Some of these women are also to be found in this general area. Nevertheless, the majority of women here experienced to a great extent the hazards posed by their proximity to the forest. It is also to the advantage of the researcher that except in rainy seasons, various parts in each of the divisions are fairly accessible. Ruguru, Konyu, Iriani, Magutu and Kirimukuyu, for example, all in Mathira Division, are in relative proximity to the main arteries of communication.

An attempt to get information from the local district headquarters, however, did not yield much. The Law Courts in particular, where I hoped to get some important information on the proceedings of Mau Mau trials and convictions and the kind of crimes people were arrested for, proved fruitless.

Mau Mau documents had over the years been sifted, some burned and others had been taken to the National Archives for storage. The National Archives, as I have stated below, posed its own problems as far as retrieving information by the researcher on the wide subject of the Mau Mau is concerned.

Collecting oral data in the field began in February 1981 and continued for a period of four months up to May. Unfortunately the period of long rains began while I was still in the field making some roads in the two divisions, especially Mathira, impassable. This factor made it necessary for me to go back to the field again in August of the same year to interview some of the informants whom I could not interview in the first exercise at the beginning of the year. This revisit afforded me a very good chance to corroborate and verify some of the information I had already gathered but which was not clear and needed to be re-evaluated.

The actual exercise of collecting data was done through oral interviews with the help of questionnaires. These interviews were conducted in two ways. One was with individual informants

and, on a few occasions, it was possible to interview two or three informants at the same time. This latter method proved very useful in streamlining controversial information and sequence of events at the time and place where they occurred. One appreciates the importance of this in a place, as I mentioned above, where information on the activities of the Mau Mau is not restricted to a small number of people. For the same reason, I also interviewed some male informants in an attempt to balance and compare their views on the role of women in the Mau Mau. In other words, one wants to see the role of women in the Mau Mau not just the way they viewed themselves but also how other members of the community viewed them and how they evaluated them in the movement. This was particularly important on the subject on women and how they related to the forest fighters and, more specifically, the role of those women who took to the forest. This is dealt with in Chapter 5.

Although I had established specific questions on a questionnaire for use in oral interviews, I found that it was not always possible to use this questionnaire systematically primarily

because informants would at times choose to relate events as they remembered them and not necessarily in a time sequence. Such information, therefore, has been considerably re-arranged and is found in scattered parts of this study except in instances where I have reported verbatim an individual's story as related.

The choice of informants was made in various ways. As a first step, a clear identification had to be made between the rank and file of women who took the Mau Mau oath and who, therefore, claim to have been active members of the Mau Mau and those who actually joined the fighters and had specific duties to carry out. In any case, the population at large did take the Mau Mau oath without necessarily going beyond the oath in aiding the cause of the Mau Mau. Social workers in Nyeri were helpful in this respect. The problem of identifying and resettling families which were displaced or torn apart during the Mau Mau has been one of the tasks the social welfare officials have concerned themselves with. As such, they can easily identify individuals and families who were actively involved in the movement or those who suffered directly as a result of the Mau Mau activities. My initial

contact with some of the outstanding women in the Mau Mau was therefore made in this manner. Women like Wamuyu Gakuru, Grace Nyaguthii, Habiba Ali and others were among my initial contacts. In any case once a few of these women were contacted, it became fairly easy to establish other contacts through them. Those who took to the forest, for instance, because they were few are well known in this community and, in turn, they remember others who were in the forest with them. Besides women leaders, there were many, many others who quietly worked for the Mau Mau in Emergency villages as contacts and suppliers of provisions. Information relating to the activities that went on in Mau Mau villages, the terrible hardships encountered in these villages, and the organizational network between those in the reserves and the forests fighters is widely remembered in varying versions. On the whole, I interviewed a cross-section of about forty women and men while there were many others who contributed to this study by way of their remarks.

That the whole subject of the Mau Mau is still a sensitive subject came out clearly in the course of this research. Various individuals and

families who were 'Loyalists' during the emergency and those in the Kikuyu Guard are still remembered as such, and a lot of ills are still blamed on the activities they were engaged in during the Mau Mau. Loss of land, for instance, is a very real grievance for some of those who were active members of the Mau Mau because such land went to individuals and families considered loyal to the Government. The researcher in the field has to be careful that such bitterness does not override the truth as to what happened and why, although it is quite obvious that some are bitter with good reason.

The issue of the Mau Mau oath is another case in point. Although informants would generally talk about the oath and the meaning or reason behind each oath, it was quite difficult to get an informant to relate the actual events or the ceremonies as they were actually performed. Several times I had to resort to whatever colonial accounts were available on the actual Mau Mau ceremonies as related by 'those who had had a change of heart'. But, even, then, there is no reason to suppose that these are accurate accounts.<sup>26</sup> The fear of the oath was clearly taken very seriously. One of the gaps quite discernible in this study, therefore, is whether women took all the oaths that men

took, particularly the Batuni oath that sanctioned killing, and whether this issue of the oath, therefore, limited their activities in the movement. This is reflected in Chapter 5.

Another difficulty encountered in this study was the availability of primary sources on the Mau Mau. Whereas periodicals and dailies were largely available, some important primary documents in the Kenya National Archives were not as yet available to the researcher on certain aspects of the Mau Mau. The thirty-year ban placed on some documents on the Mau Mau is only being lifted this year (1985) and quite evidently sorting them out will take quite some time. Other documents are still being retrieved from London. In the period of this research, therefore, a lot of information from 1952, the actual start of the emergency, was unavailable. Consequently the background information to this study was largely compiled from the more established sources on the Mau Mau movement for Independence. I would, however, like to state here that even though I sought an extension in order to look through the released official Mau Mau documents, I found that most of these had little relevance to my study. This is with the

exception of War Council Papers which had some information on the Council's deliberations on policies adopted to fight the support group in the Mau Mau. It is my hope that the availability of these sources to the researcher here in the country, where these events took place, will in future go a long way towards giving the historian a more accurate basis of research work in this very important period of our history.

I would also like to state here that the long delay in the completion of this study has been due to several factors. Although I began my research and preparation of this thesis in 1981, field work, as I mentioned above, took much longer than I anticipated due to adverse weather.

At the end of 1981, there was an administrative delay in extending my scholarship by Kenyatta University College due to loss of the relevant correspondence between the University of Nairobi and Kenyatta University College. In 1982, it became very difficult for me to concentrate on my work due to the death of my father in September and that of my child in November of the same year. Equally, my scholarship came to



an end in the same year and I found it necessary to take up a full-time teaching job with the Teachers Service Commission. This, again slowed down the rate of my work considerably.

To crown it all, I have further been hampered by the fact that in the aftermath of the 1982 attempted coup, my original supervisor left the country and in 1983 I had to be re-allocated a new supervisor, whom I have worked with until the completion of this study.

FOOTNOTES

1. R. Buijtenhuijs, Mau Mau Twenty Years After: The Myth and the Survivors, The Hague, Mouton, 1971, p. 44.
2. I.D. Corfield, Historical Survey of the Origins and Growth of Mau Mau, CMD 1030, London, 1960, Preface.

I.D. Corfield, who was appointed by the colonial Government on Oct. 17, 1957 to carry out an inquiry into the origins of the movement traced the name "Mau Mau" to police discussions with witnesses in a case brought against Kikuyu farm labourers at Lord Egerton's Ngata Estate in Njoro in March, 1946. However, the actual origin and meaning of the term 'Mau Mau' is obscure. The words themselves have no meaning in any known African language and the explanations offered by various writers cannot claim absolute certainty. One of the more plausible explanations is that Mau Mau was a name coined by the colonists to designate what they imagined was an organized secret society intent on their destruction. The forest fighters, however, preferred to call themselves the Land and Freedom Army and in fact looked upon the name 'Mau Mau' as a term of ridicule and abuse.

There is also the possibility that the words 'Mau Mau' originated from the transposed Kikuyu word 'uma', meaning 'get out' which was used to warn people to get out of clandestine meetings. Others argue that it means "Mzungu Aende Ulaya, Mwafrika Apate Uhuru."

"Mau Mau" is now commonplace in History books and is used to refer to the violence that convulsed Kenya in the 1950's.

3. J.C. Carothers, The Psychology of Mau Mau, Government Printer, Nairobi, 1954, p. 15.
4. Ibid., p. 13.
5. See L.S.B. Leakey, Mau Mau and the Kikuyu, London, Methuen, 1953.
6. D.H. Rawcliffe, The Struggle for Kenya, London, 1954.

7. <sup>D</sup> R.L. Barnett and Karari Njama, Mau Mau from Within: Autobiography and Analysis of Kenya's Peasant Revolt, New York, 1966.
8. Waruhiu Itote, Mau Mau General, Nairobi, E.A.P.H, 1967.
9. C.G. Rosberg and J. Nottingham, The Myth of "Mau Mau": Nationalism in Kenya, Nairobi, 1966.
10. K. Santilli, 'Kikuyu Women in the Mau Mau Revolt: A closer look,' Ufahamu, Vol VIII, No. I, California, 1977, p. 147.
11. See, for example, E.G.H. Wachanga, The Swords of Kirinyaga: the Fight for Land and Freedom, Nairobi, East African Literature Bureau, 1975.
12. Gucu G. Gikonyo, We Fought for Freedom, Nairobi, E.A.P.H., 1979.
13. B. Kaggia, Roots of Freedom, 1921 - 1963: The Autobiography of Bildad Kaggia, Nairobi, E.A.P.H. 1975.
14. History of Loyalists: Colony and Protectorate of Kenya, Government Printer, Nairobi, 1961, p.21.
15. Kenya National Archives (hereafter KNA), War Council Papers (reel I), WC/CM/1/1.
16. East African Standard, Sept. 9, 1953.
17. Ibid., Nov. 5, 1954.
18. H.E. Crocker, 'Women and Mau Mau', Kenya Weekly News, No. 1424, May 14, 1954, p.17.
19. KNA, /DC /FH /1 /26, pp.1-3.
20. KNA, /DC /FH /1 /30, p.1.
21. H.E. Lambert, Kikuyu Social and Political Institutions, London, 1956, p. 100.
22. Ibid., p. 100.
23. J. Van Allen, 'Aba riots or Igbo "Women's War?": Ideology, Stratification and the Invisibility of Women' in Hafkin and Bay (eds), Women in Africa: Studies in Social and Economic Change, Stanford University Press, Stanford, California, 1976, pp. 59-85.
24. KNA, War Council Papers (Reel 1), minute 174/55.
25. Audrey Wipper, 'The Maendeleo ya Wanawake Movement in the Colonial Period,' Rural Africa, 1974-75, Michigan University, p. 200.

C H A P T E R 2

BACKGROUND TO THE MAU MAU

When a State of Emergency was finally declared in Kenya on October, 1952, a definite pattern of organization geared towards political violence against British rule in Kenya had began to emerge. What had hitherto been underground subversive activities, coupled with sporadic acts of violence, escalated to a fully organized confrontation as directed by the Mau Mau Central Committee operating under the umbrella of the Kenya African Union but different from KAU's Central Committee.

This struggle that culminated in Mau Mau had its roots entrenched in deep and frustrating social and economic conditions that Africans suffered under colonial rule. This is in spite of the protests from the colonial officials that Mau Mau was neither a political nor an economic protest but primarily a barbarous, atavistic and anti-European tribal cult whose leaders planned to turn Kenya into a land of "darkness and death".<sup>1</sup> Others chose to see it as a 'Kikuyu civil war between modernists and debased

traditionalists of religious fervour.<sup>2</sup> The Carothers' inquiry, a highly esteemed document in the official circles, concluded that, the pressures of the modernizing process and the disruption caused by the contact with an alien culture had created a conflictual situation which the African was not well fitted to sustain. Hence, the Mau Mau.<sup>3</sup> Missionaries, like the administrators, expressed views that ignored the political implications of the Mau Mau putting it down as an anti-Christian movement and the resurfacing of the primitive past of the African and especially paganism and cultural barbarism.

In short, the European community was generally agreed that Mau Mau had nothing to do with politics, nationalism or economic grievances. Yet, it was quite apparent that the African masses remained politically and economically oppressed and exploited. What the colonialists were really denying was that the African population in Kenya was capable of effectively organizing itself to demand their rights, certainly, not on the scale of the Mau Mau which they saw as too complex "to have originated from a primitive mind".<sup>4</sup>

From the founding of Harry Thuku's East African Association (EAA) in 1919, to the time that violence broke out in the form of Mau Mau, political protest in Kenya had failed to bring about any substantial improvement in the lot of the Africans or to jolt the Europeans out of their complacency. The era of Thuku right through the formation of Welfare and local associations, the Trade Union Movement and Kenya African Union (KAU) did however play a crucial role in arousing political consciousness among the Africans. However, as it became increasingly evident that a new way of fighting colonialism had to be devised, violence became a viable alternative to achieve what political associations and deputations to London had failed to achieve. The Mau Mau was a manifestation of this violence.

Thuku's East African Association was successfully dismantled in 1923 as the colonial officialdom waged a successful war against organized political growth among the Africans. A lot had happened between its inception and demise that laid the groundwork for the future course of politics in Kenya. The Europeans, on the other hand, were openly out to consolidate their power

and they hoped to do this by edging the Africans into servitude through total economic control. Asians were grudgingly given a few concessions that were considered as no threat to the European dominance and which, the Europeans hoped, would keep them from co-operating with Africans. The question of Kenya's economy dominated the scene. With colonialism, a new economic order was established as Europeans alienated the best farming lands for themselves, with settler farming becoming a dominant feature. The aim of the European settlers was to inject money into Kenya with very heavy subsidy from the Colonial Government. This was not in any way intended to help the Africans. The huge margins of profit would go to the Europeans, but this could only be achieved if cheap labour was available. Europeans automatically turned to the rural areas as their reservoir for cheap labour. With the help of African chiefs and headmen, Africans were conscripted to work on European farms for next to nothing.

To tighten this exploitation of African labour, numerous land and labour laws were enforced to ensure the constant supply of labour and to keep the Africans from being competitors

in any way in the economic field. Between 1918 and 1920 several laws previously passed were amended. The Native Authority Ordinance of 1912, for example, was amended in 1920. This law gave chiefs and their headmen - who owed allegiance to the Government - power to forcibly recruit African labour for public works. For three months in a year, any man could be called upon to engage in public work unless he was otherwise employed in wage labour.

The Native Registration Ordinance of 1915 was amended in 1920.<sup>5</sup> This dealt with the despicable Kipande system. Although the law had been passed in 1915, it had not been enforced, hence the need for this amendment. Each man over 16 years had to have his finger prints taken once he left the reserves as a measure to catch deserters from European labour. This was one of the strongest grievances of all political associations until its abolition after the Second World War.

Along with these laws were others such as the Resident Natives' Ordinance whose aim was really to legalize the squatter system in Kenya. It was



also meant to entice Africans to emigrate from the reserves to become labour tenants on European farms. All these laws were left to the chiefs to enforce. Harsh methods of recruitment became rampant and a lot of hatred was generated between these local authorities and the African masses in the reserves at large. Even the women were not exempted. With the authority from the District Commissioner to supply a certain number of labourers, chiefs and headmen just went from home to home picking their choice of women, usually young girls.

The result of all these labour laws was that a lot of discontent among the rural Africans became discernible and continued to ferment as the laws were tightened. This, coupled with the illogically increased taxation from sixteen shillings per head while wages were reduced by a third, pushed the Africans further and further into economic servitude. The picture of the political economy in Kenya during the early 1920s was that Africans in their own land had become poor peasants or squatters living in squalor. On the other hand, Europeans had strongly consolidated their power and protected it with these laws thereby ensuring white supremacy. The outlook for

Africans was bleak. With the Crown Lands Ordinance of 1915, they could not even hope to reclaim their lost lands from Europeans by buying it back. The law prohibited any European selling land to non-Europeans. Neither could a non-European live in the Kenya Highlands which were leased for 999 years. Discontent among the African masses in rural areas grew to a point where some outlet had to be found. Large numbers of Africans moved from their reserves into European farms as squatters or into urban areas to escape political and economic harassment. These places, they found out, were no better than the reserves that they had come from. Other avenues of protest began to come up with the formation of political associations in 1921.

For several reasons, the Kikuyu came out more strongly than other ethnic groups in protest. It is true that other ethnic groups had lost large tracts of their land to the Europeans. The Kamba, for example, had been confined to Kitui and Machakos Districts, the Maasai had lost even more land in terms of acreage than the Kikuyu, and the Nandi and the Kipsigis had been confined to designated areas. The Kikuyu, however, felt the land pressure more than any other ethnic group. They had lost

some of the best farming lands in the Kenya Highlands leading to serious economic hardships. As far back as 1919, the population density in Central Kenya was high. In Kiambu, for instance, the density was about 154 to the square kilometre, and about 72 per square kilometre in Nyeri and Murang'a. Although this was not the highest—Bunyore Location in North Nyanza stood at 386 per square kilometre—it clearly indicated the inadequacy of farming land for the Africans, the average European farmer had at least two hundred hectares of land in 1925 and only 9 per cent of the White Highlands was under cultivation.<sup>6</sup> Besides the land issue, the settler centre, Nairobi, was on the periphery of Kikuyuland. This meant that the Kikuyu were more exposed to modernizing influences and urbanization which brought with it a lot of unrest. They keenly followed the developments in politics, thus heightening their political consciousness.

On 10th July, 1921, Harry Thuku formed the Young Kikuyu Association (YKA), possibly influenced by urban aggressiveness. Young Kikuyu Association made strong demands that forced labour and Kipande be abolished. It called for better wages for

Africans, the reduction of Hut and Poll Tax and further demanded Government sponsored education. After the Government paid no attention to it, YKA made a sharp turn to become East African Association (EAA). This gave it, at least in outlook, a trans-tribal character and what the Europeans had feared, that Indians and Africans might cooperate against them began to appear in EAA. M.A. Desai, for instance, allowed Thuku to use his Chronicler as a mouthpiece to air Africans grievances. It was the fear of this alliance which led the leaders of the Protestant Alliance to form the Alliance High School in order to withdraw the educated Africans from the political scene. Thuku tried to use modern methods in his political approach. He hoped to rally the African masses in protest by means of demonstrations and petitions. This strategy did not work because the Europeans were not ready to listen. EAA was banned in 1923 and Thuku locked up. The first serious clash between the Africans and the Europeans over political associations came in the "Harry Thuku riots" when a mass of African men and women attempted to secure Thuku's release by force. Many lost their lives, a reflection of the radical turn that politics in Kenya had begun to assume.

What was the position of Indians in Kenya at this time and how did they influence the trend of politics? The settlers planned to turn Kenya into a "Whiteman's Country" and the Indians were not included in this plan. The Crown Lands Ordinance of 1915 had made it clear that British rule in Kenya would be based on segregated communities. This frustrated Indians who felt they had as much right to be treated equally in Kenya as the British. Indians had fought and died in the First World War fighting for the British and they felt that they should be accorded equality. With the support of the Indian Government, they plunged full scale into a struggle to gain equal treatment with Europeans in Kenya. Indian grievances were not only political in nature but social and economic as well. The Indians wanted equal representation with the Europeans in the Legislative Council, elimination of racial segregation, removal of restrictions to Indian immigration to Kenya and that the Kenya Highlands should not be arrogated to Europeans alone. In this struggle, which became widely known as the 'Indian question', the Africans, being discriminated against both the European settlers and the Indians,

were forgotten or more precisely used as pawns in a political game. They were used to secure the Europeans against the Indians. Thus, the settlers argued, the increase of Indian influence in Kenya would be detrimental to African interests. The Kenya Economic Commission, appointed in 1917 and reporting in March 1919, declared that having Indians in Kenya was "Obviously inimical to the moral and physical welfare and the economic advancement for the native."<sup>7</sup> With the administration, and in particular Governor Northey backed by missionaries, openly defending the European community's predominance in Kenya, Indians did not get very far. A second Indian deputation in London in March 1920 did not solve any problems for them either. Their demands, particularly that the Kenya Highlands should be open to them, were again rejected. The Secretary of State, Lord Milner, upheld the policy of segregation between the three races. He stated that "Asians were found physically fit to settle in other areas from which Europeans are by nature excluded."<sup>8</sup>

With Churchill's take-over as Secretary of State in 1921, the Indians hoped that there would be a wind of change. Settlers were, however, hostile

to Churchill's seemingly liberal attitude towards Indians, a fear that proved to be unfounded since by 1922 he had accepted the settlers' demands with regard to land ownership in the Kenya Highlands. This shattered any hopes that the Indians harboured of being granted equality. They did not, however, give up and the wrangles between them and the Europeans in Kenya continued. This resulted in an apparent settlement between them in the form of the 'Devonshire White Paper' of 1923. The European team, led by Lord Delamere and Governor Coryndon sat with Indian delegates in London to have the British Government sort out their problems. Both sides got concessions which they considered unsatisfactory. Indians were granted five representatives in the Legislative Council. The settlers won on the issue of the Kenya Highlands which was confirmed as being exclusively theirs but lost on their demand for self-government, restriction of Indian immigration to Kenya and segregation in urban areas. Surprisingly, it is the unrepresented Africans who featured 'prominently' in the outcome. It was declared that 'African paramountcy' must be of the first consideration in Kenya. Kenya belonged to the Africans, the British Government asserted, and it was only ruling Kenya

in trust for the Africans. Clearly, the "Devonshire White Paper" did not help ease racial conflict in Kenya. Neither of the three parties was satisfied, least of all the Africans who emerged "paramount". The very sensitive land question remained unfavourable for the Africans and it became clear that no economic or political concessions had been granted to them. The paper had only helped strengthen the settlers' position in Kenya. It brought closer together the Colonial Government and the settlers, both having realized the futility of collision. The Africans continued their protests in political associations.

The Kikuyu Central Association (KCA) took over from the East African Association, ushering in a new era of organized political opposition. During the inter-war years there was, apart from the KCA, a mushrooming of various political and welfare associations indicating a general widening of political consciousness among the Africans. For whatever reasons these associations were formed, they linked, at least in purpose, the various ethnic groups. This in itself helped greatly in the growth of politics that had a concern beyond the tribal context.



The young Kavirondo Association was founded in 1921 and by the end of that year had attracted more than 2,000 members from the Luo and Abaluyia communities. Like other political and welfare associations mushrooming in the country at that time, this association strongly presented its demands to the Government. The leaders were particularly concerned with the issue of territorial alienation with the move to change Kenya from a protectorate to a colony status. Resolutions were passed in their meetings. Such resolutions were, for example, to have a separate legislature with Nyanza as a separate unit. Other resolutions, however, reflected wider concerns similar to those stipulated by other associations elsewhere in the country. In this vein, the young Kavirondo Association made several demands. It demanded the reduction of Hut and Poll tax, the dissolution of labour camps, and that people should be given individual titles deeds for their land. The association further demanded that Kenya should revert from colony to protectorate status. Tensions ran high as these resolutions were totally rejected but in 1922, the leaders managed to see the Governor. Although none of the resolutions were conceded to, the association had demonstrated the ability to mobilise mass feeling and political awareness. When the presidency went to Rev. Owen,

the title of the association changed to the Kavirondo Taxpayers Welfare Association. The aims too radically changed. The association now set as its aims: better clothing, planting trees, not to get drunk and such other resolutions that expounded 'Christian virtues'. This religious inclination that the association acquired tempered it considerably. In case of problems, Rev. Owen advised the members to write a memorandum. The Kavirondo Taxpayers Welfare Association became a classic example of European brokerage.

Other areas in Kenya had similar associations. Among the Kamba, the Ukamba Members Association formed in 1939 seriously took up the issue of de-stocking which was being forced on the Akamba by the Government. In the Coast region, the Taita came up with the Taita Hills Association also formed in 1939. Right in Mombasa was the Mombasa Dockers Union formed to safeguard the workers' interests. These, and others had a common denominator—to improve the welfare of the African population. The greatest shortcoming in all of them was that there was no serious endeavour to create an effective common front that would make the African voice stronger. The "tribal reserve system", which the

British Government encouraged, restricted Land Rights to local areas so that each "tribal" group could be contained. This factor made a strong contribution to the fragmented character of African politics, leading to uneven response to European domination in various parts of the colony.

Among these associations, the KCA assumed a relatively radical leadership and especially in its organization. Its leaders—notably men like Joseph Kang'ethe, Jesse Kariuki, and James Beauttah — steered the organization to a more open confrontation with the colonial authorities. Displaced labourers, victims of land alienation, clustered around the KCA and, with this widening support in Kikuyuland and among the Kikuyu squatters in the Rift Valley, group discipline in the Association became a very vital element. The oath was used in the KCA to weld leaders together but, more importantly, to maintain discipline among its members. Much later in the late 1940s the oath was to be effectively used to gather in hundreds of KCA members into the Kenya African Union (KAU).

The uneven patterns of social change that developed due to geographical conditions conditioned,

to some considerable extent, African response to colonial rule. The KCA being overwhelmingly of Kikuyu membership and the proximity of its members to administrative centres, and particularly Nairobi, made it a more politicized party than the others. It made attempts at overcoming the parochial nature of African politics by liaising with other organizations flung country - wide, such as the Taita Hills Association, the Kavirondo Taxpayers Welfare Association, the Ukamba Members Association, and with the Trade Union that was establishing itself as a strong force in Kenya. This fraternity was not always successful. Some very strong issues, such as the land question which was the most pressing political grievance in Central Kenya and the Rift Valley, could not, for instance, be taken up as strongly in Western Kenya. The Kenya African Union, for example, had become moribund by 1945 in Central Nyanza District because by then its leaders had achieved their goals and had no burning political grievance such as the land grievance to keep KAU alive.<sup>9</sup> This reflects how geographical location was an issue in the political response of particular areas to colonial rule. Among the issues that the KCA took up strongly were those related to land alienation and the subsequent labour laws to safeguard European interests. The KCA called

for a complete overhaul of the land policy and not a mere modification - such as non-Europeans being allowed to farm in the Kenya Highlands. It also strongly spoke against the exploitation of African workers, and called for the abolition of the Hut and Poll tax and the Kipande enforced in 1920 for "controlling movements of African labourers and for locating and identifying them".<sup>10</sup> When the Governor, Sir Robert Coryndon visited Murang'a in 1925, the KCA local branch leaders requested, among other things, the release of Harry Thuku, the election by people of a Paramount Chief, a Government school and training facilities for hospital orderlies. These requests show that besides political demands, the KCA was also concerned with the social welfare of the Africans.

African dissatisfaction with the colonial situation in Kenya was heightened with the accession to power of the Conservative Government in 1927. Even though the stated African paramountcy of 1923 had not so far been seen in practice, the Conservative Party revealed its negative attitude to Africans by restoring "White Supremacy" by issuing a new "White Paper" which also recognized the permanency of

European settlement in Kenya. Thus assured of support by the new Government, settlers concentrated on consolidating their power in Kenya. Faced with so many odds, the KCA in the same year (1927) asked Jomo Kenyatta to become the Association's Secretary and in 1928, he took up the post. Kenyatta had received his early education at the Church of Scotland Mission in Thogoto near Nairobi and thereafter worked in various places in Nairobi. He was young and dynamic and he tried to build grassroot support for the KCA largely through Muiguithania, the monthly paper that the KCA produced under his editorship. The paper told riddles and proverbs as one way of hitting at the Colonial Government and of encouraging Africans into political activity. It also sent a delegation to the Hilton Young Commission in 1929 to air African land grievances.

The KCA, like the EAA, was seen as a threat to the existing colonial policies in Kenya. On May 20 1940, the Government raided KCA headquarters in Nairobi hoping to find proof of 'treasonable activities'. Even though no actual proof was obtained, KCA was banned a few days later and warrants issued for the arrest and detention of its leaders. In the subsequent arrests that followed, two important KCA leaders, James Beauttah and Jomo Kenyatta escaped detention. Beauttah had managed to escape actual arrest while Jomo Kenyatta was still in London where he had been sent by the Association. Kenyatta was to re-emerge again in the Kenya African

Union that was formed in 1944, four years after the ban of the KCA. The Government, ever on the lookout for budding political Associations, warned against the development of the African agitator, 'who must be distinguished from the great backward masses of ignorant tribesmen'.<sup>11</sup> Ironically for the colonial Government, the so-called "ignorant tribesmen" became the staunchest supporters of the Mau Mau after the detention of political leaders in the operation "Jock Scott" of October 1952. The majority of women in Mau Mau as with most of the other members were uneducated and therefore fell under those branded as ignorant tribesmen. No woman, for example, was prominent enough in KAU leadership to merit detention in "Jock Scott". Yet, as one woman leader put it in reference to the Mau Mau leadership,

"It seems that Mau Mau leaders realized that the main problem was not so much sending people to the forest as securing regular supplies for carrying out sustained resistance."<sup>12</sup>

She thus summarizes in a nutshell the role of women in the Mau Mau.

The nomination of Eliud Mathu as the first African unofficial member of the Legislative Council on October 5, 1944, was a step taken to appease the rising agitation among the Africans, and not as a step towards either self-rule or an equal representation in the Legislative Council. As far as the

Colonial Government was concerned, "Africans would not be fit to rule themselves for a hundred years to come."<sup>13</sup> The settlers were quite serious about this as is evidenced by their entrenchment in Kenya in the 1939 - 1945 period. Yet out of Mathu's nomination was a positive outcome in that Africans felt the need to form a trans-tribal organization aimed at maintaining a national front to give Eliud Mathu support. In this spirit, the Kenya African Union was founded in October 1944 to create in Corfield's words a "Congress organization to cover the Africans of the whole colony"<sup>14</sup>. From Nairobi, the union had spread to the Central, Coast and Rift Valley province, with a deeper penetration in the Central Province where it had several branches— Uplands, Ruiru - Thika, Fort Hall, Nyeri Town, Karatina and Othaya<sup>15</sup>. KAU at its formation met with little success in Central Nyanza because, among other reasons, suspicion was rife "that KAU, like KCA, was primarily a Kikuyu organization"<sup>16</sup>. In November of the same year of its inception, KAU was forced by the Government to change its name to the Kenya African Study Union (KASU) in the hope of striking off its political stance. KASU did not attract many members outside the class of educated Africans and in February 1946,



under the leadership of James Gichuru, who had replaced Harry Thuku as President, KASU dropped the "study" from the title of the organization becoming once more KAU.

KAU inherited all the old problems that KCA had contended with but it had the advantage of being strengthened by the great numbers of former KCA members who joined in to continue their political activities. In spite of the increased number of supporters, KAU tried to mobilize the masses by advocating constitutional means as opposed to revolutionary violence. In this way KAU, fearing Government crackdown, aroused high expectations but failed to fulfill them thereby leaving a big vacuum. The task of mobilizing the masses, therefore, fell on KCA which had gone underground after its ban. Thus while KAU was the official organ expressing African discontent, the infrastructure of political organization in Kikuyuland and the Rift Valley was still largely controlled by KCA leaders who embarked on political education and particularly and, as a first step, the removal of the fear of the whiteman. Kaggia stresses that in order to make any political advancement,

"the fear of the Mzungu among the uneducated masses had to be removed. People needed to be told that Africans were equal to white

that Africans given education and opportunity were capable of doing everything that the Mzungu could do."<sup>17</sup>

KAU took up the agitation that KCA had concerned itself with before its ban. The issue of stolen lands, improvement of African wages and working conditions, restrictions of licences for African trade, the Kipande issue, and greater African representation in the Legislative Council were taken up with new vigour in KAU.

Closely linked with KAU were Independent Schools which continued to play a significant role in political education. "The Kikuyu Karing'a Association", and the "Independent Schools Association" which had been formed after the breakaway led by KCA, consisted of a large body of the Kikuyu who fled from the established Christian missions after the controversy over female circumcision of 1928 to the 1930s. This breakaway reflected the strong political and cultural feelings of the Kikuyu. The Independent Schools developed close links with the KCA and at the outbreak of the Mau Mau, many of these schools were closed for their alleged active participation in organizing subversive agitation. From the ranks of these schools, many young men and women were recruited into the Mau Mau.

The Mau Mau leaders were particularly interested in women who had received some education no matter how elementary because they were very useful as couriers of information. Those who were literate therefore rated higher than other women in the Mau Mau organization and were given leadership roles as we shall see in Chapter 3.

While political agitation continued to gain momentum in Kenya, the settlers, backed by the Government, continued to consolidate their hold in Kenya and their influence was strongly felt under the dual policy of separate development—the indigenous people of Kenya on the one hand and the non-natives on the other. This separate development was a logical sequel to the policy of land reservation on tribal lines. According to Lord Delamere, the "Dual policy" was "based on a perfectly rational desire to protect a civilized standard of living from an economic competitor on a lower grade of life."<sup>18</sup> It was quite evident from the "Dual policy" that the settlers, backed by the Government, were not ready or willing to give up anything. They made it clear that Kenya was to be developed on racist lines. It was also clear by the same token that the Africans needed forums that were much more aggressive in order

to articulate their grievances and effect change.

KAU being a seemingly more radical organization, why did Mau Mau break out? So far, we have seen that up to the time of KAU's inception, political agitation had not brought about any appreciable change in the lot of the African masses and in fact, the Europeans had moved from strength to strength by consolidating their power in liaison with the Colonial Government. On the African scene, movement from rural to urban areas and to settler farms continued as the economic situation in the reserves worsened, creating a strong class of urban lumpen-proletariat and squatters in European - settled areas. Grievances related to land were as poignant in the 1940s as they were in 1914. To give just one example, the Kenya Land Commission of 1932, led by Morris Carter, had recommended the addition of only 2,629 square miles to the existing 50,000 square miles of the African reserves, an addition that was far inadequate for the economic needs of the rural population<sup>19</sup>. Besides the curtailment of agricultural land for Africans, the racial approach propagated by settlers, in league with the Colonial Government in the form of "Dual policy", denied Africans equal opportunities to develop in the economic field. Yet, Africans

continued to pay more in direct and indirect taxes in proportion to their resources. In 1936, for example, while the customs duty, the largest revenue for the Government stood at £775010, African Hut and Poll tax alone stood at £537219<sup>20</sup>. With the former, Africans in urban areas were contributing to this indirect taxation through their increased use of imported goods. Furthermore, the 'Dual policy' was laid out such that these taxes were directed to services that were by far more beneficial to the non-African communities. In education, for example, figures for 1938 show that only about 12~~4~~% of African children were going to school at all and even in this number, the education they were receiving was only aimed at merely producing clerks and other junior officials for the colonial administration. The Government was only spending 44 cents per head for African population in 1936 in education as compared to 800 Shillings for European children in 1930. This gross inequality was reflected in other fields too. On the question of African representation, all these years of political agitation had yielded only one representative and even then, a Government nominee.

The years 1939 - 45 saw European influence in Kenya escalate to an alarming degree. In the crisis of the war, the settlers made a tremendous economic expansion which gave them a lot of influence and security. At the same time, a total ban on African political activity was declared, which meant that the Europeans could now simply concentrate on entrenching themselves by seeking greater control over the machinery of the Government. This European influence was particularly strong in the Executive Council and on various committees and statutory boards.

The question of agriculture was paramount. The Government, faced with an acute shortage of food and curtailment of food imports due to lack of shipping space, coupled with drought and the need to feed a large army, turned to the settlers. Generous offers were made to them in a bid to raise local food production. Generous grants with guaranteed minimum return were offered freely, labour was provided in plenty as large numbers of Africans were forced into conscripted labour on European farms. In March 1943, for example, there were more than 16,000 conscripted Africans in employment<sup>21</sup> with three quarters of them on 'private undertaking'-nearly

always as farm labourers. The Government had a perfectly good excuse that the colony had to meet the food supply requirement set out by the Government for the war effort. These labourers had a meagre pay of merely eight to ten shillings for long periods of service and personal gains for the farmers were therefore, extremely high.

With this new confidence in an economic boom, Europeans in Kenya made plans to increase white settlement in Kenya and therefore entrench themselves more deeply in the confidence of increased numbers. In June 1943, the Agricultural Production and Settlement Board was split into two functions. One would deal with agricultural production to make sure that Kenya did her part in the war effort. The other would concern itself with encouraging and planning for increased white settlement in Kenya. Cavendish - Bentick, a veteran settler, was entrusted with £1.5 million plan to settle more British ex-soldiers in the White Highlands. Not suprisingly the value of domestic exports nearly doubled during the war reaching an unprecedented £7.1 million in 1946.

The economic expansion enjoyed by Europeans in Kenya in the war crisis was coupled with major political gains. At the end of the war, the newly installed Governor, Sir Philip Mitchell, introduced a "membership system". This made it possible for European unofficial members of the Executive Council to hold portfolios, a tremendous victory for Kenyan settlers who had all along fought for increased influence at the official level. The first to receive these were staunch settlers and advocates of Kenya being a 'White Man's Country', like Cavendish - Bentick and C.E. Mortimer. The settlers now set as their target the limitation of direct influence and intervention of the colonial office in Kenyan affairs.

The Electors Union formed in March 1944 was left to deal with this. This settler body aimed at "achieving and maintaining European Unity in situations that might prove divisive and seeing to it that "leadership" remained in European Control."<sup>22</sup> Particular emphasis was laid on safeguarding the White Highlands to remain exclusively white. While admitting that there was need for some kind of African representation, settlers argued that this could only be "gradual" and "in accordance with the development of the African sense



Civic responsibility"<sup>23</sup>. Indian representation was also to be limited.

What we have in the war period then is an unprecedented consolidation of influence by the European population in Kenya, particularly the settlers. The Government justified the proposed large scale immigration on the grounds that this would lead to rapid development. Leases were made for 44 years, a period in which the Government guaranteed that there would be no fundamental changes adversely affecting the settlers' position in the political and social system. The Europeans were obviously basking in a state of well-being, at the expense of the Africans.

In response to this new threat from the European population in Kenya, the African political scene became really hectic and more radical culminating in the violence unleashed by the Mau Mau. The alternative after the war was really for the Africans to either take a more radical stance or be doomed to stay oppressed. This is what an inner core in KAU realized. The more radical of its members organized a secret underground movement to prepare for an open confrontation with Europeans in Kenya.

KAU had become highly optimistic of a positive change in colonial policy when the Labour Party won in the General Election of 1945. The party was ready to look at decolonization. The Settler clique in Kenya, anticipating this wind of change, thwarted African hopes by launching an all-out strategy to entrench themselves even more firmly in Kenya. In September 1949, they launched the notorious 'Kenya Plan' and intensified White nationalism. The 'Kenya Plan' clearly stated as its aim to have "a British East African Dominion" that would "bring lasting good to all of those who have their home in this territory". Kenya, they stated, was not just their home "but the home of their children and their children's children".<sup>24</sup> The 'Kenya Plan' was thus a total campaign by the settlers to stem the growing tide of African nationalism in Kenya by increasing their numbers and by totally controlling Kenya's economy. It was further a warning by the settlers to the home Government that they intended to stay whatever the Government's policies. One sees, therefore, the growth of a political crisis in Kenya precipitated by the worsening conditions for the Africans, on the one hand, and the settlers fighting to maintain their supremacy, on the other. In the highlands, Europeans continued to expand, creating

in the process a greater problem for the squatters. Conditions for African Workers in Nairobi and other towns continued to deteriorate with rising prices, stagnant wages and appalling housing and social amenities. These problems were compounded by the lack of response by the Government to political agitation and thereby prepared the background for the use of violence in place of deputations to London. There was no sign that there was any change of attitude of mind among the Europeans that Africans were capable of controlling their destiny. In fact, all indications were to the contrary. Typical of the racist commentaries of the time, Bishop Walter Carey, writing on the topic of 'Christian Common Sense on Mau Mau and Colour Bar,' and purporting to express the general feelings of the whiteman in Kenya in 1953, wrote:

"All the talk of votes and Nationalist resurgence and trade unionism is just folly and blindness as yet. In fifty years or a hundred years it may be possible: Not now. The utter problem is to turn savages (in the mass) into law-abiding, hardworking, social minded, yes and Christian people!"<sup>25</sup>

This kind of attitude goes to show just how far the African cause for self-rule had been taken to heart by the white overlords, whether Christian or not.

The return of World War II veterans coupled with the return of Jomo Kenyatta in 1946 heightened the militancy in the African political arena. Kenyatta, who was an old and familiar landmark in KCA which had sent him to London as its General Secretary, imbued the old KCA members, some of whom were now in KAU, with new confidence when he took over KAU's presidency in 1947. Besides, he was able to convince many of the old KCA members who had not joined KAU to do so, thus swelling its numbers and energizing its waning popularity. On this strength, KAU began a campaign to intensify its activities nationwide. This drive to take the association to the people was best achieved in the Central Province and to a lesser extent among the Kikuyu workers in the Rift Valley where underground KCA activities were still particularly strong and where the 'party' to them still meant the KCA. KAU's popularity among the squatters in the Rift Valley had met with several setbacks since its inception and particularly in 1946 when some KAU branch Chairmen in the area had conducted a campaign urging squatters to sign the "squatter work agreements". Many had refused to sign, thus refusing to renew their labour contracts and opting instead to go back to the reserves as a result of further curtailment of their farming

lands and miserable wages which averaged five shillings a month.<sup>25</sup>

Beyond the Kikuyu, Meru and Embu people, it was quite evident that KAU's original aim of being a truly countrywide party representing African grievances had not matured. It had not managed to create an effective alliance with, for instance, other associations particularly those in Luyialand-The Kavirondo Taxpayers Welfare Association, and the North Kavirondo Central Association. I have noted elsewhere that in Central Nyanza, KAU's expansion was really hampered by the inability of Nyanza's branch to sustain political grievances at the same level as the party's other branches in the Central Province simply because the most pressing problem, land, taken up fervently by KAU was not as relevant there. Their most pressing problems they felt, could be better expressed elsewhere and not necessarily in KAU. This lack of effective countrywide acceptance was indeed one of the major shortcomings in the history of KAU. It had even failed to enlist a large number of the 'educated' Africans, particularly those in the civil service, whose support would have given it more credibility. A good number of the 'educated' Africans in fact

disengaged themselves from KAU politics in order to safeguard their posts in the Government. It was a common conception that the future of an able African seemed to be outside politics.

The ex-servicemen too came out more militant than KAU allowed for. Most of them were bitter on coming back home to be discriminated against, having virtually undergone the same war experiences alongside the whites. Their European counterparts had been highly rewarded by getting large tracts of the best farming lands in the Kenya Highlands and this made the ex-servicemen very bitter. They thus channeled their energy in various directions; some were organized into action groups such as the '40 Group', Anake a 40, while others joined trade unions, attracted by its militant and revolutionary activities. In the reserves, the defiant attitude of ex-servicemen was manifested in their refusal to join the communal work of trench-digging that was supervised by Chiefs. Most however were more interested in enhancing their economic status and those that had saved money in service therefore ventured into businesses rather than politics. Nyeri District was an exception; the first post-war KAU Chairman and his successor were both ex-soldiers.

KAU, however, managed in 1946 and 1947 to set rolling a new political tide with party officials setting out to revive its activities by touring the country and holding political rallies. The officials emphasized KAU's aims as fighting for "legitimate African grievances such as non-racial laws, good schools, and equal schooling for all races."<sup>27</sup> Unity was propounded as a first step to root out not just the Kipande system but the whites as well. Similar meetings were held in Luyialand and Luoland in a bid to infuse new life into the union. Hectic association activities in the Central Province dominated the scene in the last three years of the 1940s. A flare-up of the question of land conservation led to resolutions against the employment of women in the making of terraces. In Murang'a, soil conservation communal work came virtually to a standstill. Similar protests occurred in Nyeri and Kiambu and KAU officials, fearing confrontation with the Government which saw the events as the result of "the activities of agitators who largely emanate from Nairobi", tried to temper the tide. This constant backing down of KAU leaders in the face of confrontation with the Government was indeed one of the major reasons why there grew a need for a more revolutionary body to handle the worsening

situation. It became clear that the established KAU leaders, fearing Government crackdown, were none too willing to cross swords with the Government, choosing instead to follow "proper channels". KAU leaders raised high expectations but failed to fulfil them by following the path of moderation. Thus the need for violence became viable as the masses became more militant than the KAU leadership.

The impact of KAU was further lessened by the fact that while calling for radical changes in African representation in the Legislative Council, and in the restoration of the 'stolen lands', it never really worked out an alternative programme which would be effected should the Colonial Government give in to its demands. In other words, there was no concrete course of action planned should the stolen lands be returned or more African representation granted. That peaceful political agitation could not be successful continued to be proved, for example, when the Government, even up to 1952, continued to dismiss land petitions as it had persistently done from the days of the East African Association and the Kikuyu Central Association.



Another facet of the prelude to Mau Mau was the growth of militant and revolutionary spirit in the trade union activities under the veteran and radical trade unionist, Makhan Singh. The role of the trade unions was significant because KAU had faced a succession of failures in its bid to effect change. Out of this failure was created the Central Committee by men who interpreted this failure to mean that much more than a reformist approach had to be adopted. Radical Africans looked to the progressive and anti-imperialist trade union movement as a viable alternative because of its national outlook and the ability to deploy workers.

Trade unionism among the African workers grew as a result of the appalling conditions that these workers found themselves in. The need arose to form a strong front that could represent the workers' interests effectively. In 1947, the African Workers Federation was formed under the presidency of Chege Kibachia, an African veteran trade unionist. Sporadic strikes continued right through 1947 with demands for better working conditions for African workers. These protests were flung countrywide, unlike other associations whose influence would only be strong locally. In that year, for instance, Mombasa was paralysed when the entire African labour force downed its tools in a strike.

This spate of strikes in 1947 was felt throughout Kenya, creating in turn, radical leadership for the workers in various urban centres. One of the advantages that the Mau Mau organizers received from this was the growth of the organizational ability among men who were to become chief architects of the Mau Mau movement - men like Fred Kubai, J.M. Mungai, Bildad Kaggia and others.

This radicalism in trade unions was not at first taken as an ominous sign by the Administration, but was rather regarded as a nuisance to the smooth running of state affairs. Instead of recognizing this for what it was - a militant growth of African Nationalism, - they saw, instead, the growth of 'abnormal' behaviour among the Africans. Africans were **not** supposed to be capable of effectively organizing themselves. Corfield, for example, did not believe that Africans could have formed or joined trade union movements or political movements as an expression of political and economic protest. Instead, in his insecurity, the African in transition "craves to belong once more to a collective organisation hence the great attraction of trade unions and political movement."<sup>28</sup> Carothers was to conclude later, even after the eruption of the violence of the Mau Mau, that all this happened

because the Africans, and especially the rural Kikuyu, could not handle the pressures of the modernization process. The contact with an alien culture had created a disrupting influence on the African culture, beliefs and customs and the weak African mind could not withstand this for long. Hence, the Mau Mau.

The change of policy from petitioning to violence came with a militant, younger and uncompromising leadership that had begun to emerge in the ranks of KAU, having realized the futility of peaceful negotiations. This corresponded with the ban imposed on trade union activities in 1950 after a general strike. Many staunch trade unionists found in KAU a venue to vent their energy and militant attitude formerly exercised in trade union activities. They revived KAU's Nairobi branch and its activities countrywide. From this there developed a very intricate relationship between KAU and Mau Mau. An important development in the party occurred with these new and militant supporters who called not just vaguely for 'Independence', but "Independence now!" Three notable trade unionists-namely Fred Kubai, Bildad Kaggia and J.M. Mungai - stood out

and were easily chosen to lead the Nairobi Branch of KAU with Kubai as the Chairman, Mungai as the Vice Chairman and B. Kaggia as its Secretary. These men were to bring with them into KAU's new phase the discipline and trade union tactics that they were so familiar with. Violence, long simmering in African circles, began to find a new venue in KAU. Clandestine oathing ceremonies that had started in the Rift Valley, where the squatters had sharply felt the effects of colonial rule, began to spread in Nairobi and its environs, taking an increasingly important role in the union's main branch in Nairobi. This oath was different in the sense that it was different in form and context from the traditional oaths or those taken by the KCA members. In Olenguruone, this "new" oath called for "freedom" and participants were thoroughly lectured on the purpose and meaning of the oath. KAU militants aimed at harnessing all oathing activities and, as a first step, intensifying it in the African locations in Nairobi and its environs. The decision by F. Kubai and Mungai to take the oath and to bring some of their 'most trusted associates'<sup>29</sup> was significant in the development of the Mau Mau in that from this group was to be formed the 'Action group'. The so -

called "trusted associates" were at first ten in number and later 24 trade union leaders saw the founding of the Action Group. With the formation of this group, one begins to see organized violence and acts of terrorism. Particular groups of people were oathed and commissioned to carry out particular tasks. Taximen, for example, were used for ferrying people to and from oathing places. Arms collection began to be accelerated and according to F. Kubai, even Nairobi prostitutes had their role to play. He says, "some four hundred prostitutes from Nairobi African areas of Pumwani and Eastleigh were oathed and told to collect whatever information would help the movement."<sup>30</sup>

Although the oath spread in scope and context after these new elections in KAU's Nairobi Branch, the leaders as yet did not want it to spread out of control. Hence, the formation of another inner group, Muhimu, in early 1951, as a central committee whose aim was to control the oathing that was getting out of the grip of KAU's Nairobi Branch officials. Muhimu, meaning "important" in Kiswahili, originally comprised of two representatives of each district and two from Nairobi. This soon increased to six

members from each district. Muhimu became an important organ in the organization of the Mau Mau. Most of its members were also KAU members, with Eliud Mutonyi as Chairman and I. Gathanju as Secretary. This Mau Mau committee was a militant wing that was willing to employ direct violence against the British Government. The activities of this group, and especially in matters related to oathing, increasingly took the upper hand in the political arena in 1951 and 1952.

As militancy spread underground in guise of KAU activities, the Central Committee, to save KAU from being banned, set up another secret group to co-ordinate activities, particularly those pertaining to the oath, between the Central Committee, the districts and locations. The group supposedly derived its name, the "30 group", from its numerical membership. The activities of this group in matters related to oathing became rife. The members of the 30 group were not KAU office holders, a move intended to protect the legitimate activities of KAU by insulating it from the daily and direct dealings in the oath, and collection of arms. This indeed explains why the core group that organized the activities

of the Mau Mau escaped arrest in Operation Jock Scott of October 1952. Thus, Mau Mau grew under the umbrella of KAU although they were not synonymous. In other words, although many KAU members became members of the clandestine Mau Mau movement, there were many others who joined the Mau Mau without necessarily being KAU members. As Kaggia, a staunch member of KAU and office holder who was also in the inner committee organizing Mau Mau, notes, "KAU took its orders from its central committee, Mau Mau had a separate committee."<sup>31</sup> It is quite clear then that what the Mau Mau Central Committee did was to use KAU, as KAU was a legally sanctioned body. The Mau Mau Central Committee could not, for instance, organize public rallies but when KAU convened its public rallies, which were often heavily attended, Mau Mau organizers would use the occasion to spread propaganda and to incite the masses through freedom songs and the use of proverbs and riddles. One such KAU meeting was the famous one held in Nyeri on 26th July 1952 and attended by about 25,000 people. Many Mau Mau songs spread throughout Nairobi and Central Province through such meetings legitimately convened by KAU. Efforts were made to revive KAU not just in the

Central Province and the Rift Valley where its activities were now widespread, but also in non-Kikuyu areas particularly in North Nyanza. In 1952, KAU opened a branch in Maragoli area and at the Coast where party activities had been defunct since 1947.

The newspapers also played their part in the radicalisation of African politics. Newspapers, in vernacular, were used very well to awaken and educate Africans politically after 1945. Most of these were more widely distributed in Kikuyu than in other vernaculars, such as Luo, Kamba and Luyia. In the 1950s, these papers played a central role in keeping up the militant spirit in African politics especially in Nairobi. One of the most influential papers, Mumenyereri, edited by KAU's assistant General Secretary, Henry Muoria, had a weekly output of about 10,000 copies. Given that each copy would be read by a whole family or would be passed on to four or five people, then it becomes evident that the weekly readership was very high. Other papers well known for their radical political stance were Inooro ria Gikuyu, established in November 1951, Uhuru wa Mwafrika, launched in August 1952, Mugambo



wa Mu-embu, which appeared in 1952 and Afrika Mpya. The wide circulation of these papers contributed significantly to political awakening. As Rosberg and Nottingham have noted:

"Inevitably at KAU's meetings in Nairobi, Central Province and Rift Valley, great use was made of issues, slogans, songs, symbols and values derived essentially from Kikuyu experiences."<sup>32</sup>

In the process, Mau Mau adherents and recruits developed a complex of ordinary words to indicate other things than what they seemed to mean. And under the very noses of the Government, Mau Mau grew in membership and strength.

Only after acts of violence against individuals loyal to the Government increased in 1951-2 did the Administration begin to sense the serious nature of the situation. By then it was too late. Sporadic political murders, glum silence among the African masses in Nairobi and an intensified campaign to obtain weapons characterized the situation. The British Government met the seriousness of the situation by declaring a State of Emergency in Kenya, two weeks after Chief Waruhiu was murdered in broad daylight. Action swiftly followed with the arrest of leading political figures like F. Kubai, B. Kaggia,

Jomo Kenyatta, Paul Ngei, Achieng Oneko, among others in Operation Jock Scott of October 1952. The colonial tentacles tightened, clamping down on the publication of vernacular newspapers. Licences for public meetings were cancelled, and several Independent schools closed for their alleged subversive activities against the Government. The Kikuyu, Embu and Meru, driven to desperation, resorted to Mau Mau. The organization that was to emerge was complicated but efficient. The next chapter concerns itself with the changing role of Kikuyu women and their recruitment into this organization.

FOOTNOTES

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3. J.C. Carothers, Op. cit., p. 6.
4. I. Leigh, In the Shadow of the Mau Mau, London, W.C. Allen, 1955, p. 17.
5. B. Ogot, 'Kenya Under the British, 1895 to 1963' in B.A. Ogot (ed), Zamani: A Survey of East African History, Nairobi, 1974, p. 267.
6. Ibid., p. 273.
7. See Economic Commission Final Report, Part I, Nairobi, March 1919.
8. Official Gazette, August 18, 1920.
9. J. Spencer, The Kenya African Union 1944 - 1953. A party in Search of a Constituency, Ph.D. thesis, Columbia University, 1977, p. 174.
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13. Kaggia, Op. cit., p. 65.
14. Corfield, Op. cit., p. 49.
15. Spencer, Op. cit., p. 160.
16. Ibid., p. 174.
17. Kaggia, Op. cit., p. 65.
18. Cited in Ogot (ed), Op. cit., p. 278.
19. Kenya Land Commission Report, (Sept. 1933) CMD 4556, 1934.
20. Zamani, Op. Cit., p. 278.

21. Ibid., p. 283.
22. Rosberg and Nottingham, Op. cit., pp. 196 - 7.
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24. See East African Standard, Sept. 9, 1949.
25. Walter Carey, Crisis in Kenya: Christian Common Sense on Mau Mau and Colour Bar, London, A.R. Mowbray, 1953, p. 17.
26. Spencer, Op. cit., pp. 184 - 5.
27. Ibid., p. 208.
28. Corfield, Op. cit., p. 9.
29. Spencer, Op. cit., p. 237.
30. Cited in Spencer, Ibid., p. 237.
31. Kaggia, Op. cit., p. 113.
32. Rosberg and Nottingham, Op. cit., (Nairobi Publication), p. 22.

C H A P T E R 3

THE CHANGING ROLE OF KIKUYU WOMEN AND RECRUITMENT  
INTO THE MAU MAU

3.1 THE CHANGING ROLE OF WOMEN

As indicated in Chapter 1, colonial observers have given an array of reasons as to why Kikuyu women got so zealously involved in the Mau Mau. Put together, the basic assertion seems to be derived from the colonialist view that women in the traditional Kikuyu society were totally oppressed and, therefore, bound to welcome anything that would deliver them from this situation, violence included. According to this theory, women found a "place to feel at home" in the Mau Mau since they were readily accepted on an equal basis as the men because of the great need for Mau Mau to swell its numbers and from this, they derived "some status in the world".<sup>1</sup> Closely related to this argument is the explanation that women were left so far behind by men, in the sense that men were more exposed to new ways that had come with Western civilization, that in the Mau Mau, the explanation goes, women found a change to "draw

their men back to the primitive way of life".<sup>2</sup> Similarly, other absurd reasons were given such as that women were drawn into the Mau Mau movement because it offered some excitement and amusement in a world that had been dulled by Western civilization.

These reasons, in my view, are erroneous in more than one sense. Not only have they underestimated the influence of women in the traditional society considerably and, therefore, arrived at an erroneous explanation but also, and more importantly, have failed to take into account some fundamental factors that influenced change in the traditional role of women during the colonial period. It is my contention in this chapter, therefore, that such factors as education, Christianity, employment and petty businesses, among others, had an important impact on Kikuyu women during the colonial period. Hence, they were readily drawn into the movement. It is this failure, on the part of the Europeans to take such factors into consideration, that led them, at least in the first few years of the Mau Mau, not to take women's participation in it seriously. The Government later realized that women were taking a very active part

in the Mau Mau and that the quick end to the movement could only be realized if the women could be persuaded to desist from helping their menfolk.

What was the place of women in the traditional society? As a rather general outline, the most important institutions in the traditional Kikuyu society were the generation sets and age sets. The generation sets were based on the general division referred to as Mwangi and Maina (or Irungu). These were the ruling generations and each set became the ruling generation after a span of about thirty years when a ceremony known as the Ituika would be held and the ruling generation would relinquish power. According to Kenyatta, it is the elders who decided when the Ituika ceremony was due.<sup>3</sup> However, the actual handing over of power would take years to complete. Explaining how the time for the Ituika was arrived at, Lambert says that "When most of the first-born grandsons have been circumcised it is felt that the time is approaching to relinquish power, so that normally the gap between two official generations is much the same as the gap between the averages of a man and his first-born son"<sup>4</sup>. Thus if the father was

in the Mwangi generation, his son would automatically be of the Maina generation. The importance of <sup>the</sup>/Ituika ceremony is evident in the fact that there was a special advisory council to advise on the ceremony. For our purposes, it is interesting to note that women had their own advisory councils where they could air their views, although women were not classified in the age-grade system known as riika. This women council featured significantly in the Ituika ceremony.

The family unit, both extended and immediate, was a very important institution in Kikuyu society and division of labour was clearly defined according to sex. Agriculture and animal husbandry were the chief economic occupations and every member in the family unit had specific tasks to perform. Most of the housework, for instance, was left to women. Chores here included cooking, fetching water, gathering firewood and even the bartering of food-stuffs. The efficiency with which a woman performed these tasks indeed determined her social status within the family circle and in the society. Thus, "a wife who manages efficiently the economic affairs as well as other duties in her family group is highly respected not only by her group but by



the entire community".<sup>5</sup>

Outside the homestead, women also contributed to the agricultural economy by performing various tasks. While the harder tasks on the farms - such as breaking of land, felling trees, planting certain crops such as yams, sugarcane and bananas - were left to the men, women were expected to plant and care for certain basic subsistence crops such as millet, maize, beans, sweet potatoes and so on. At the same time, women were expected to participate in joint ventures such as brewing beer, trading, harvesting, house building, and other tasks which both men and women would perform together.

Another way in which women contributed to the economy of the family was in trade. Bartering of foodcrops was largely carried out by women in the market places. In this way, the surplus food produced by a family was exchanged for those items that the family needed or those produced by special craftsmen such as pottery and iron implements. Bartering of foodstuffs was also carried out with neighbouring communities and especially during times of famine. Thus although the Southern Kikuyu, for

instance, often went to war with the Maasai, they would also trade with them in peaceful years as the Maasai territory abutted on that of the Kikuyu with only a narrow fringe of forest between them. The Kamba, who were friendly neighbours, would also exchange goods with the Kikuyu. Women, escorted by men, would carry heavy loads over long distances in this trade. These activities show that women were fully integrated and in fact were a vital element in the economic management of the society.

It is tempting to dismiss women as having had no influence whatsoever in the political and military system of the Kikuyu since the membership of those institutions was thoroughly male - dominated. A closer look, however, reveals that although women did not wield any formal political power and certainly not in any leadership capacity, their influence was undoubtedly felt indirectly. This is especially true when one considers the fact that political and religious matters were closely inter-related and there is no doubt that women featured prominently in religious rites and, in fact, at times they took matters into their own hands.

The system of the Kikuyu Government constituted five principal Kikuyu councils. At the bottom was the council of junior warriors, that was made up of young men who became members soon after circumcision. Next in rank was the council of senior warriors, who would in turn graduate with age to be the council of junior elders. Next was the council of peace and on top was the highly revered religious and sacrificial council. This was the highest and most honourable status that a Kikuyu elder could attain in life. All the members of these five councils - the junior warriors, senior warriors, junior elders, council of peace and the religious and sacrificial council - came from the male population.

Military organization was set up according to the age-grade system known as riika and, therefore, was closely related to the set-up of the five principal councils mentioned above. Although women had no riika and, therefore, were not incorporated into the military organization, Njama ya Ita, they had an important role to play and especially when warriors went to war with the neighbours, almost always the Maasai. Food for warriors, for instance, could only be prepared by the warrior's mother or a woman who was very closely related to his mother.

A married warrior had his food prepared by his wife.<sup>6</sup> Foodstuffs for war included roasted sweet potatoes, roasted green bananas or irio, bananas and maize cooked together. If the duration of a combat was protracted, it was the duty of the women to deliver these foodstuffs to the warriors at the frontier. Convoys of food bearers would be well escorted as women were a valuable possession in war and could be easily taken captive by the warring neighbours. Thus, although women did not act as warriors, they played an important role in keeping up the morale and therefore preserving the society's social standing with the neighbouring tribes.

It is in the religious ceremonies where the influence of women was perhaps strongest. Women featured prominently in religious rites. One such ceremony was the ceremony of purification when there was a rain shortage or after a bad crop. If the elders showed no sign of taking action, or were slow in doing so, the senior wives of the men of the ruling generation would summon a women's meeting. Delegates would be appointed to take action, which meant going through all the villages of the territory 'demanding small goats and sheep' from the elders.

According to Lambert, it is the 'older women in a body' who would demand a sheep from the head of a homestead who had not yet paid if it was not readily forthcoming. It was the business of the women to see that this sheep, called Mburi ya aka, ("goat of the women") was sacrificed to appease God. This ceremony was called the ceremony of Kwohora atumia (literally means "to untie women") and the purpose was to free them, or untie them from any accidental ritual uncleanness that might be the cause of trouble.<sup>7</sup>

It is also quite clear that there were assemblies attributed to women, Ndundu ya atumia<sup>8</sup> and that they were responsible for directing such activities. Their roles however varied and included offering advice to elders on matters of societal importance. In the Ituika ceremony, for instance, this advisory council would offer advice on matters pertaining to this very important ceremony especially on the religious rites that accompanied it. The basic role of the women's advisory council, however, was, first and foremost, to safeguard and direct women's activities in domestic affairs, regulate and take disciplinary actions in matters pertaining to the

social life of girls and women in society. The council also dealt with agricultural matters related to food crops and "the use, not ownership, of land".<sup>9</sup>

The role of the diviners in the religious life of the Kikuyu society was regarded highly. There were professional diviners, Andu ago, who were entrusted with "unravelling" those mysteries beyond the human mind by mediating between man and the "spirit world". Although women did not normally become Andu ago, a woman 'could be seized' with prophecy and become famous as a prophetess, seer or a healer by magical means<sup>10</sup>. In the Mau Mau, the role of seers—and this included women seers—was seriously taken and fighters would often consult a seer on matters related to the success or failure of intended combats with colonial troops or on the safety of movement from one camp to another.

In legal affairs, the code of tribal law and justice safeguarded the interests of women in one way or the other. Leakey in his study, The Southern Kikuyu before 1903, outlines legal matters as it affected individual members of the society. Crimes were severely punished. Rape, for instance, was

punishable by a heavy fine of "three stall-fed" rams. This fine could not be paid to the father or the husband of the offended party as a measure of discouraging cases of false accusations for gain. Thus it was paid to the council of elders. A further fine of a ram had to be paid by the offender to the medicineman for cleansing the offended woman. In special circumstances, a woman could also initiate legal proceedings either to seek redress or make a claim. Widows had this right, otherwise a woman's interest would be safeguarded by her father or her husband. Other offences, such as beating someone else's wife, fathering a child with an unmarried girl, could be redressed legally. This freedom to instigate action shows that women were not in the least disregarded in society.

What I have attempted to do so far is to establish that Kikuyu women in the traditional society had the means and will to mobilize themselves and were well incorporated into the mainstream of social affairs and in fact wielded considerable informal power in the society. To suggest, therefore, that they joined the Mau Mau struggle simply because it offered them some 'status in the world' is obviously

erroneous and therefore misleading, if only because it grossly under estimates the influence of women in the traditional society. The radical outlook reflected by women in the Mau Mau was, however, to a great extent, the result of changing attitudes and roles through the colonial years due to the influence of various factors, such as wage employment and the consequent rural - urban migration, petty businesses, Christianity and its apparent contradictions, education and the generally worsening conditions prior to the declaration of a State of Emergency in 1952. The violence unleashed by Mau Mau alone put women in Central Kenya in terrible hardships. With crime, communal punishment and murders rampant, and with no place to seek refuge, women were inevitably drawn into active participation in the Mau Mau. I shall examine briefly here some of the factors that had an important impact on Kikuyu women during the colonial period leading to a remarkable change and modification of their traditional roles.

Increased congestion in the Kikuyu reserves, coupled with increased population, was an important, although not the only, reason for emigration from the reserves over the years of colonial rule. One of the direct and most adverse result of such



migration was the loosening of the cohesion in the traditional society. Family units were particularly affected and the need for modified roles became apparent. By the time the Mau Mau struggle broke out, it was clear that, although the strength of the traditional division of labour was evident, new patterns of this division emerged conditioning, to some extent, various tasks allocated women. The seriousness with which division of labour, according to sex, was held in the traditional society had been considerably eroded through new experiences during the colonial years. The migration of male population from the reserves, in particular, had forced women to engage in tasks otherwise considered to be in the male domain.

There were three distinct groups of migrants from the Kikuyu reserves. First were the urban residents who had migrated to Nairobi and other urban centres in quest of wage employment. Others left the reserves to become resident labourers on European farms and plantations, while others still left to become squatters in other African reserves. Employment was thus seen as an outlet for the surplus population on the land. By 1931, it was estimated that

110,000<sup>11</sup> Kikuyu were living outside their reserve. Land holdings continued to shrink as more and more land was appropriated by the settlers. By 1948, for example, there was less than 1 acre per head of population, or the equivalent of about 5 acres per household in the Kikuyu land unit. Taking into consideration that even this average was unevenly distributed, with some families having large holdings and others disinherited, families in the latter group had to seek other ways of survival outside the reserves. The fact that the majority of the migrants were men often had adverse effect on the family unit and women were left to fill in the space of the head of the household and therefore to hold the family together. Fending for the family was not an easy task, as the returns of Kikuyu agriculture through the 1930s and 1940s were pitifully meagre and up to the end of World War II, the growth of cash crops, such as coffee, that could bring in valuable cash was prohibited. In 1947, 78% of the Nairobi African population was male. Most of these had left their families back in the reserves while others were young unmarried men. Other figures show that by 1948, there were 28, 886 Kikuyu living within the municipality of Nairobi, a number that

constituted 45% of the total African population in the city.<sup>12</sup> The predominance of Kikuyu migrants was also reflected in other smaller towns in Central Kenya such as Thika, Nyeri and Nanyuki. Of this Kikuyu population in Nairobi, 23,354 were males and only 5,535 females<sup>13</sup> and of these women, only 8% were in wage employment. Again, wages in urban centres were meagre as most of the Africans were in unskilled or semi-skilled labour and only very few in white collar jobs. Whole families could, therefore, not afford to stay in urban centres due to the low wages and relatively high cost of living. As of 1947, the minimum wage in Nairobi for unskilled labour was 38 shillings a month, and even this was not usually implemented<sup>14</sup>. In Sorrenson's own words, family separation due to these circumstances caused "social instability both in the towns and the reserve".<sup>15</sup> Very little could be repatriated back to the families in the reserves and consequently, many Kikuyu women were left not only to perform their traditional subsistence - oriented activities, but also to carry out tasks hitherto carried out by their husbands, brothers and sons. Behind the refusal to terrace their land was the fact that, "the bulk of agricultural labour fell on the shoulders

of women who were unable and often unwilling to adopt progressive farming methods,"<sup>16</sup> Besides the migration from the reserves to urban centres by employment seekers, the years between 1939 and 1945 had been years when a large section of able-bodied men were forced to join British troops locally and abroad, leaving again a wide gap to be filled by women in the home.

These factors had an important impact on women's outlook and performance. Women began to engage in small businesses in an effort to subsidize their husband's meagre wages and inadequate farm produce. This was often in petty business, mainly in food items such as vegetables, poultry and eggs which were sold in the local market. Education was also seen as a means of boosting family income and women had to work very hard to raise the school fees and to encourage their children to go to the schools. Such social and financial strains that women had to contend with over the years heightened their political consciousness and discontent in the years before the Emergency. Thus, in spite of the fact that they were largely cut off from the stark politicizing experience of the urban economy, women strongly felt the effects of urbanization and the

colonial economy. Women who were in wage labour were usually found on European plantations but also as ayahs in European or Asian households.

Resident labourers on European farms at times comprised whole families unlike among urban residents. In 1945, the labour census revealed that there were 101,038 Kikuyu resident labourers and their families on European farms and plantations<sup>17</sup>. Families worked from dawn to dusk in an effort to boost family resources. Wages here were extremely poor, ranging from 5 to 12 shillings per month. Not surprisingly, the first official report of the Mau Mau oath-taking ceremonies pointed at squatters on European farms in the Rift Valley as early as in 1948.

Those Kikuyu who moved from their reserves to become squatters in other reserves were often resented by the local population. Thus they lived precariously. In 1941, for example, complaints by local people, supported by the Tanganyika Government led to the repatriation of more than 500 Kikuyu from Moshi and Arusha. Also in 1947, a batch of Kikuyu migrants was repatriated from Meru after local chiefs applied pressure.<sup>18</sup> The choice was either to resettle the repatriates in the already overcrowded reserves

or find alternative land for them in other areas as was the case of those who were settled in Olenguruone on the Southern slopes of the Mau plateau. Thus, the grievances that exploded into the Mau Mau were not alien to the women population and this is particularly true of the land grievances where women, as the men, had felt the pressure of diminishing land. Those families that were repatriated back to the overcrowded reserves lived a life of bitterness and became a perfect reservoir for recruitment into the movement. They really had nothing to lose by joining the Mau Mau movement.

Although women on the whole were disadvantaged in the education sector throughout the colonial years, it would not be true to say that education had no impact on the role they played in the freedom struggle. Traditional beliefs that the place of the women was the home partly explains why families were reluctant to send girls to school, at least at the same rate as they did the boys. This was the case with the exception of a few pockets where missionary influence was strongly felt, and education taken up seriously. Thus, for instance, in and around Tumutumu near Karatina Town in Nyeri

the female population in school was relatively higher than other areas that were not as strongly influenced. This was also true of other mission stations such as Mathari in Nyeri, Kahuhia in Murang'a and Thogoto in Kiambu. Christian parents discriminated less as to who should receive formal education in the family. This notwithstanding, as late as 1954, women constituted only 26% of African primary school enrolment.<sup>19</sup> This low exposure of women to formal education through the colonial years to some extent explains the lack of women in leadership roles in the political field and especially in the various political associations that mushroomed throughout the country in the 1940s. It is interesting to note, however, that the women who took up leadership roles in the Mau Mau were usually those who had had some basic formal education, no matter how rudimentary. One would therefore conclude that education, no matter how basic, must have changed considerably the outlook of those who received it. The role that Independent schools played in instilling a sense of nationalism in its pupils cannot be underestimated. In fact it becomes difficult to divorce the role that the Independent schools and churches played in changing people's

outlook from the role of political associations. After the issue of female circumcision had come to a head in 1929, young men and women in Government-sponsored schools were drawn more and more into the vortex of political activity.. In November 1929, for example, over 2,000 young men and women at the Kabete Native Industrial Training Depot (KNITD) sang the prohibited Kanyegenuri, a political song first sung after the "Harry Thuku" riots of 1923 to commemorate the heroic role of the Nairobi women in this incident.<sup>20</sup> The breakaway of independent churches and schools was an expression of cultural nationalism that also fired the younger generation in schools. Leaders of the breakaway churches and schools were at pains to explain that they were not rejecting God but missions and the uncritical adoption of the Western Civilization that rejected totally the validity of African traditions. The revolt against missionary-controlled education was inexplicably tied up with political agitation and by the 1940s and 1950s, the Kikuyu Independent Schools Association strongly supported militant nationalism. Thus, when Nyaguthii Theuri burned her bible and dropped her Christian name in 1953, she did so not as a rejection of the Christian faith, but because



to her, these two features also symbolised what colonialism stood for at that particular time in the given circumstances.<sup>21</sup> Thus, although the majority of women in the Mau Mau were illiterate, one can draw from this rank and file a number of women who, although they had received some formal education, became ardent Mau Mau supporters and a valuable asset to the movement because of their ability to read and write. Again in the Mau Mau organization, the fact that those who were in the inner core of organizing the movement and who had had some "education" realized the potential of women in the movement, therefore, disregarding the traditionally accepted ideas of the "place of women", surely shows that education in itself had gone a long way in changing attitudes.

It is in the light of the changing role of Kikuyu women in society that the roles they took up in the Mau Mau should be seen. Clearly, women in the 1950s were living in a society that was rapidly losing the concept of "tribal cohesion" and, therefore, strictly prescribed roles. This does not, however, mean that they were easily accepted on an equal basis with the men. Forest fighters, for

instance, were notorious for relegating women to second position, as is quite evident in most of the personal accounts of freedom fighters. Most of them place an undue emphasis on the conflicts that the presence of women in the forest caused, usually due to the liaisons between them and male fighters. Others give an impression that women did not at any one time operate as actual fighters, Itungati, and had purely domestic duties allocated to them. In the same breath, these accounts tell of "women leaders" and "women commanders", which is a clear indication that their roles were not purely or necessarily domestic. Thus, in the rank and file of women oath-takers were those who were actually part and parcel of the fighting force. My argument here, therefore, is that, outside the protection of tribal cohesion, women over the colonial years were forced to move into roles hitherto regarded as the preserve of men. They were part of a dispossessed generation faced with a new way of life. Surely the generation of the young women in the Mau Mau had gone through a very different period of time from their parents. They were in a world where men and women were forced into wage labour to supplement family income, thus creating

a new set up in the differentiation of roles.

It is in this light that I would like to see their participation in the Mau Mau movement.

### 3.2. RECRUITMENT INTO THE MAU MAU STRUGGLE.

In the Mau Mau, as in other freedom struggles, the success or failure of the movement depended on the degree of unity that could be forged among her members. The clandestine Mau Mau oath that began as far back as 1947 in the Rift Valley but which the majority in the Central region of Kenya only took in 1952 was to become the strongest binding factor that created a common bond of secrecy and defiance among those who took part in it. From the early beginnings of the 1950s, the Mau Mau central organizing committee, under the umbrella of the Kenya African Union (KAU), had begun to prepare for an eventual confrontation with the colonial Government, thereby challenging settler domination in Kenya. It is doubtful, however, whether the core group of Mau Mau organizers in the central committee—men like Fred Kubai, Bildad Kaggia, Eliud Mutonyi and Isaac Gathanju—anticipated the force and the violence that was unleashed with the Declaration of a State of Emergency in October 1952 and the

simultaneous detention of these leaders. It appears more probable that these organizers and the widespread contacts planned on a strategy that would buy them more time in which the masses could be recruited into the Mau Mau, more weaponry obtained and a fighting force prepared. This is supported by the fact that, up to 1952, all that had been collected in terms of weaponry as a preparation in case of war was an assortment of guns and ammunition largely stolen but also bought by Mau Mau contacts from the army and the police. Women played a significant role in the acquisition and smuggling of such arms. In Nyeri, arms and ammunition were purloined from Kiganjo Police Camp. Not only were the arms far from adequate, but there was also no effective fighting force to speak of in 1952. In the face of such inadequate military preparations, the Mau Mau leaders concentrated on mass recruitment into the struggle among the Kikuyu, Meru and Embu peoples and to a lesser extent, the Kamba. These people were in relatively close proximity to Nairobi, an important aspect as Nairobi was the nerve centre of colonial rule followed by settler population spread throughout the best farming lands in the Rift Valley.

What role did the Mau Mau oath play as an instrument of recruitment? The rank and file of women who became members of the Mau Mau were initiated into the movement through the administration of the oath. Among this group, some took the oath voluntarily to show that they were ready to fight for freedom. Others, however, were intimidated into taking the oath as it became increasingly dangerous for those who had not taken it as this was equated to being anti - freedom struggle. Although I have said that the oath alone was a sign of membership into the Mau Mau, this does not mean that one necessarily became an active member of the movement after taking the oath. From this rank and file was the core group of active Mau Mau members who carried out the actual resistance. It is from this broad spectrum of 'members' through the administration of oath that recruitment was carried out in the urban, as well as the rural areas, among the squatters in European farms, in villages, in Government offices and in European households, in the police and military force and even among the ranks of the infamous Home Guards.

Behind the actual force that developed, therefore, can be identified two groups. First, the mass who had

been recruited through the oath and secondly, active participants who had also been oathed but whose commitment to the movement was much stronger. Roles were assigned accordingly. It is quite apparent that not everyone who took the oath was assigned some active role to play. Acquiring vital information on Government strategy, recruitment of couriers of this information, acquisition of weapons and other much needed items such as police uniforms medicine, faked or blank pass books, hiding and smuggling wanted activists were only entrusted to those considered committed. This was the support group in the Mau Mau often erroneously referred to as the passive wing for the reason that they did not actually take up arms to fight in either of the two forest zones. When one assesses their activities, it stands to reason that there was nothing passive about those who kept the movement alive through material as well as moral support for at least five years. In fact this was the group that the Government found most difficult to deal with as they could not be as easily traced and eliminated as the actual Mau Mau fighters could. As Matenjagwo, a renowned Mau Mau fighter and leader in the forest, noted, the active

participants in the Mau Mau were expected to take on any task as the situation demanded. He has this to say,

"We are the aircraft and armoured cars, we are also food carriers and ambulances, but where unity exists and nobody considers himself better than others surely victory must come".<sup>22</sup>

When one talks of recruitment of the Kikuyu women into the Mau Mau, one is not talking as though this was a separate exercise from the recruitment of other members into the movement. The question here really is how were women who joined the fighters chosen and why? Were they in fact chosen or just volunteers? The basis of all membership into the Mau Mau movement began with the administration of the oath. Most women, the rank and file, remember being recruited into the Mau Mau through the oathing ceremonies just as the men were. When recruitment began in earnest after the declaration of the State of Emergency, oathing ceremonies were organized in isolated areas and groups, in different parts of the country. Hitherto the oath had been administered only in isolated cases here and there mainly by the organizers. However, as the underground activities

of the Mau Mau spread, oathing ceremonies were stepped up with oathing administrators infiltrating the African locations in and around Nairobi. The aim of the oath in terms of recruitment was not only to forge unity among the new recruits, but also to create a central rallying point of loyalty in the movement by bridging the gaps that social fragmentation had created. It is worth noting here that in administering the oath to women and children, the Mau Mau movement was clearly transcending traditional customs and taboos. In the traditional society, oath was generally not administered to women and children. I say generally because Lambert maintains that women in the traditional society had their own special forms of oath, which according to him "may be sworn by a woman against herself in evidence that she is telling the truth or that a claim of hers is just."<sup>23</sup> Kenyatta in Facing Mount Kenya stresses that the oath, of whatever kind, was never administered to women and children. The sacredness with which the act of giving and taking an oath was held and the overwhelming moral and religious force associated with it was considered too strong for women. He further notes that instead of women taking the oath



in circumstances where it was absolutely necessary that they swear, "Their sons and husbands took the responsibility, for women were not considered fit mentally and bodily to stand the ordeal which involved not only the individual going through it but the whole family group".<sup>24</sup>

In an attempt to explain why women and children were given the oath in the Mau Mau, Louis Leakey says that the only reason why this was done was because the Kikuyu still firmly held the belief that once an oath was given to one member of the family then the whole family became affected and if the oath was broken then a calamity would befall the whole family.<sup>25</sup> The administrators of the oath and its organizers, therefore, felt that all the members of a family should take the oath lest those who did not give away those who had taken it. The single most important aspect that linked the Mau Mau oath to the Kikuyu traditional oath was this fear and apprehension that followed with the breaking of an oath. In the Mau Mau, the member of a family, who had taken the oath, took it as a duty to persuade the other family members to do the same. If persuasion failed, then they would often be

tricked into it. This was done out of fear that those who had taken the oath might be given away by those who had not or should one break the oath, that the curse would befall the others too.

Although some took the Mau Mau oath out of their own conviction, it is plain to see that there was a very strong element of fear of supernatural reprisals just as in the traditional oaths. This fear was reinforced by the Mau Mau leaders and oath administrators in order to keep the oath a secret. The element of fear was also used as a subtle way to get the whole family group to be initiated into the Mau Mau because a member who betrayed the oath was not only jeopardizing his own life, but that of his whole family as well. There is ample evidence for this. Some of the most active members of the Mau Mau, for instance, were the wives of the Home Guards who were in an advantageous position of getting to know what Government plans were. Those Home Guards whose wives were in the Mau Mau rarely reported the activities of their wives or other members of their family to the authorities for fear of the oath that they had taken and also for the sake of keeping the family group together. Even men and

women, who professed Christianity, were very cautious and often hesitated to betray those members of their family who had taken the oath.

Although women, like men, took the Mau Mau oath, they were never at any one time oath administrators. C.J.M. Alport in his report "Kenya's answer to the Mau Mau challenge" erroneously observed that women also administered the oath.<sup>26</sup> Actual participants in the movement strongly refute this. Among the women I interviewed some, who were veteran fighters and others who had taken the oath for up to three times, emphasized that women did not administer the oath. The closest that women got to it was through 'women seers' who were often called upon to prophesy on whether it was safe to hold oathing ceremonies in a certain place at a given time. The death of Arundel Gray Leakey, better known as Murungaru among the Kikuyu, was prompted by a woman seer called Waruguru from Githini in Nanyuki, who prophesied that the Mau Mau fighters could only win if a European was buried alive together with a black goat.<sup>27</sup> General Tanganyika executed the prophesy in October 1955 on the urging of a medicineman who confirmed the 'accuracy' of

the prophecy. Several battles were also postponed or avoided by the Mau Mau fighters after being advised against them by these seers. It is also known that, as part of its intelligence work, the Colonial Government used the same strategy of Arathi to gather plans and strategies prepared against the Government.<sup>28</sup> This was especially effective in the forest where fighters had grown accustomed to being informed beforehand what was likely to happen, for instance, where and when Government forces would strike. The work of the seers, therefore, was to steer the fighters clear of likely traps and unprecedented losses on their side. The Government planted "prophets" and "prophetesses" as Government spies who provided wrong information as to where and when the Government troops would strike. For their own safety, they would alternate accurate "prophesies", for the benefit of the Mau Mau fighters, but often give deliberate misinformation that led to disastrous defeat on the part of the Mau Mau in crucial encounters.

In a further attempt to explain why the Mau Mau leaders let women take the oath, Alport alludes

that the main occupation of Kikuyu women being tilling land and bearing and rearing children, they would feel particularly attracted to the Mau Mau oath because of the use of blood and soil as the basic symbols of the oath, symbols that had acquired supreme value with the dispossession of land. According to Alport, therefore, as long as the Mau Mau was a movement that demanded back stolen land, women would continue to support it. He argues:

"In so far as it is based upon a wish for additional lands, and the women were interested in possessing land because it was their contribution to the maintenance of the family, Mau Mau appealed to women".<sup>29</sup>

Limiting this to women makes it a far-fetched explanation. One could argue, with equal force, that the attraction to the movement, as long as it called for the restoration of "stolen lands," was in no way an exclusive preoccupation of any one special group and not, particularly, a sex group. The importance of land as a source of livelihood and indeed identity, and the fact that its inadequacy affected the whole family group made it a concern for everyone. It would not have been so much the mystique attached to the soil and child bearing that made the Mau Mau appealing to women but more because these symbols were very effectively used

to bind the individual to a larger group, in this case, the Mau Mau. After all, one may argue that relying on symbols as the basis for recruiting women into the Mau Mau is an over-simplification of a complex issue and therefore an inadequate explanation.

It should be noted that these symbols of blood and soil were subjected to variation as the need arose, and as the freedom struggle intensified. The oath had many variations. KCA, for instance, had used the Bible, and a handful of soil way back in the 1920s to weld its members together and to signify and instil loyalty to the land and its people. In the post - 1945 years, a new oath, with goat meat replacing the Bible, was devised by the KCA leaders who had come from restriction at Kapenguria. The Batuni oath, the oath given to fighters and which sanctioned killing that began in the Rift Valley among the dispossessed squatters, marked an intensity hitherto unknown in the Mau Mau oath to match with the degree of violence that they advocated. Hence the accusation of "bestiality" accompanying this oath. Suffice it to say here that the express aim behind the oath whether administered to men or women was to forge unity and absolute commitment to

the Mau Mau cause - particularly the regaining of land and the attainment of freedom.

The Mau Mau leaders looked for other factors in recruiting women into the Mau Mau, apart from whether one had taken the oath or not, although it was absolutely necessary that one had done so. However, this did not automatically mean that one could be entrusted with carrying out various duties especially where secrecy was vital. This is because gauging commitment to the movement was very difficult. Most women, who had roles assigned to them in the movement, had taken more than one oath or rather had taken the oath more than once. It seems that the more oaths one had taken, the more this was seen as an expression of commitment to the movement, as the first oath merely initiated members without giving individuals particular tasks or roles. It had the important task, however, of making it clear, in form of political lectures, why it was necessary that violence be used.

Education, however elementary, was valued in the movement and women, particularly those who had some basic education, were often given leadership

roles after joining the movement. As mentioned elsewhere, Independent Schools, most of which were closed with the onset of the Mau Mau, had brought up a breed of young men and women whose political awareness had been sharpened and who were, therefore, readily absorbed into the Mau Mau activities. The education we are talking about here was usually very basic indeed. The fact that one could read and write meant that one could be entrusted with important messages and therefore could act very well as a contact. Cinda Reri, with her standard four education, played a very significant role as a contact in Nyeri Town before she moved to the forest. Besides, it was easier for someone who could read and write to acquire some kind of job in strategic places where vital information could be picked. Cleaners in Government offices, ayahs in European households and those at the telephone exchanges are some examples of some areas where 'education' gave added advantage to the Africans. Mau Mau women who had some education were indeed very few and far between, but it was a quality that recruiters definitely looked for.



The locality of a given place also determined how Mau Mau affected those therein. This also determined, to a considerable extent, the roles that women in a given area took up. In Mathira and Tetu, the dominating feature was the proximity of the Mount Kenya and Nyandarua forests, and here a lot of women volunteered to gather and to carry provisions to the fighters in those forests. As shown in more details elsewhere in this study, the Mau Mau fighters, wherever possible and mainly because of their own safety, preferred to deal with those who were working in the Mau Mau on a voluntary basis. Before security in Mau Mau villages was tightened, fighters would intermittently swoop on the villagers and would demand not only food but other much needed items, such as clothing. Moreover, according to an informant, the fighters sometimes 'captured' women during these raids forcing them to go to the forest with them usually as load carriers.<sup>30</sup> Once in the forest, they would prove useful in transporting provisions between various camps as fighters were often on the move.

As it became increasingly difficult to gain access to the villages and the reserves, fighters began depending more and more on what provisions

could be delivered to them, usually by small groups of organized women. To keep this organizational network secret, the actual number of those involved in it had to be limited and this is why force was generally not used to coerce unwilling members of the population to assist the fighters. For the same reason, fighters did not force members of the community to join them in the forest unless the continued stay of such members in the villages, the reserves or even urban centres endangered the lives of the fighters. In such cases, individuals would be abducted to "go and herd Kimathi's cattle" in the forest and usually that was the last they were heard of. Villagers surprised in oath-taking ceremonies at times fled together with the fighters into the "safety" of the forest rather than "face the music" at the hands of Government agents. Thus, although there was always the need to swell their numbers in the forests, fighters were wary of newcomers who, not only had to be recruited in a situation where provisions were meagre, but who could also considerably hamper operations by their lack of knowledge and skills of survival in the forest. There is evidence, however, that Mau Mau fighters would at times abduct those people whom they had reason

to believe had important information. Failure to disclose such information nearly always meant death. To emphasize how important the question of joining Mau Mau willingly was taken by the leaders of the movement, an intentional campaign went on in all oathing ceremonies to convince, rather than coerce, members of the community to give the movement their unqualified support. Joram Mwangi Kariuki, a veteran Mau Mau freedom fighter and a close ally of Mathenge Mirugi and Dedan Kimathi in the early years of the Mau Mau movement, was one of those entrusted with the specific duty of educating newly initiated members into the movement after oathing ceremonies. Women from Mahiga, Othaya, Chinga and Tetu remember him well in this capacity. He tells how he and others talked to large groups of people who were about to be initiated into the Mau Mau. The emphasis was on the purpose of the oath and the importance of not disclosing it. Joram Kariuki, and others like him, instilled a sense of conviction, courage and commitment, to men and women present in oathing ceremonies, that the Mau Mau movement was a justified cause.

Nyaguthii Theuri, alias Mwago, who took to the forest on March 17, 1953 to join one of Kimathi's

several platoons, remembers that, prior to 1952, her political awareness was indeed very low. Yet, Nyaguthii ended up as one of the staunchest fighters in the Mau Mau. Besides the fact that, like many other Kenyans, she was embittered by the loss of land and subsequent poverty, Nyaguthii attributes her strong involvement in the movement to the series of political meetings that she attended and the Mau Mau oath itself. Vivid in her mind is a rally she attended in Nyahururu in 1953 which the late Mzee Jomo Kenyatta addressed. The only reason why she attended was because she happened to be in Nyahururu. Yet, this was her turning point in the decision to join the fighters. She was particularly struck by the emphasis, made at this meeting, that Kenya, as a land of the Black people, had to be redeemed through shedding blood and that Christianity, as propagated by the colonizers, was self-defeating in that they did not practice what they preached. When she got back home, Nyaguthii burned her Bible and all that reminded her that she was a Christian to symbolize her rejection of the alien culture as enshrined in Christianity. Other meetings of a similar nature were held prior to the outbreak of the struggle throughout Central Kenya and led to an intensified campaign to enlist

support for the Mau Mau on a voluntary basis.

According to Njoki Wanjororo, a woman leader in the Mau Mau at Giakanja village and responsible for organizing collection of food from other women and dispatching it to the fighters, options were very few in the Mau Mau. One either volunteered to join the movement or was forced by circumstances to do so or had to be prepared to live under the constant threat of death, if the choice was not to join the Mau Mau. Women leaders had, besides the task of organizing of food supplies, other duties such as the task of recruiting as many women as possible. Young girls, for instance, who were preferred in transporting food to the fighters as they had the energy and relatively less ties to carry out such tasks, were usually recruited through women leaders at the local level. Controlling relatively small areas, the women leaders could easily identify the women and girls who could be trusted with the actual tasks to be carried out in the movement. Mama Habiba Ali, of Majengo area of Nyeri Town, had, for example, several young girls who reported their activities directly to her. She often hid the provisions these young women might have acquired for the Mau Mau.<sup>31</sup> Women who were

close to the Home Guards or Government Civil Servants would also be wooed to join or rather to work for the Mau Mau, since they could provide valuable information on Government operations. The balance here was delicate as new would-be recruits could easily turn against the recruiters, thus jeopardizing the movement's operations. To avoid this, therefore, the oath again was very well used for, if a new recruit was persuaded or tricked into taking the oath, then this minimized the chances of betrayal.

Once recruited into the Mau Mau through these various ways, women often carried out their duties very enthusiastically. This enthusiasm can, perhaps, be explained by the fact that once a member of the Mau Mau was entrusted with a mission, the penalty for not executing that task was heavy and death would often be a consequence of failure in a mission.

What options were there? One could choose to go back and renounce the Mau Mau oath and thus solely depend on what "protection" the Government could offer. Emergency villages were not always close to Government stations to ensure that members of

the community loyal to the colonial Government were always afforded protection. This task was usually left to the Home Guards. In any case, such "protection" did not deter Mau Mau fighters who were after the "traitors". In this same group, of those who looked to Government protection, can be included those who, right from the beginning, had not joined the movement. These were faced with the double hazard of being shunned by the majority of other villagers as well as living in fear for their lives. Thus the option of identifying with this group was hazardous.

If one chose to stay in the movement, then the expectation was that orders had to be obeyed unreservedly and often without any questions. This did not apply only to those who had specific duties. The rank and file, who had been initiated into the movement, was also expected to go along with the code of conduct set out and dictated by the circumstances created by the Mau Mau. Many in the movement did not need to be pushed, however, since the situation during the emergency was so bad that even those who had renounced Mau Mau were often caught in the cross fire between the fighters and

the Government. A lot of people, who were apparently for the Government, were often zealous supporters of the Mau Mau movement at the same time. They had, however, to maintain a delicate balance in order to survive. The day belonged to the Government, but at night reigned the Mau Mau.

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FOOTNOTES

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28. Interview with J. Wanjohi, April 1981, Nyeri Town.
29. Alport, Op. cit., p. 247.
30. Interview with Nyaguthii Theuri, Op. cit., See interview with Mwangi Kirira on 14 April 1981 at Nyeri Town.
31. Interview with Mama Habiba Ali, on 4 April 1981 in Nyeri Town.

C H A P T E R 4

THE ROLE OF VILLAGE WOMEN IN THE  
MAU MAU MOVEMENT

4.1. THE OUTBREAK OF MAU MAU WAR

"Our fight was not a single organized campaign carried out by a trained disciplined army. It was often disorganized and fragmented. People worked and fought independently but we were all driven by the same spirit and the same needs."<sup>1</sup>

This observation, by one of the well known Mau Mau stalwarts, Waruhiu Itote, refers particularly to Mau Mau armies but also aptly applies to the formidable support group in the Mau Mau that nurtured the comparatively small numbers of freedom fighters in the Nyandarua and Mount Kenya forest regions. Although the Mau Mau central committee in Nairobi had spread its organizational pattern into the rural districts of Central Province and parts of the Rift Valley by 1952, the majority of the Kikuyu population initiated into the movement in these places were not necessarily affiliated to any of the formally organized committees or councils. More than any other factor, the Mau Mau

oath and the fear of reprisals that went with it stood far above any allegiance to committees. This, however, did not stop the formation of various local executive committees to deal with the rural population. Each of the three districts of Kiambu, Murang'a and Nyeri, as well as Embu and Meru, had its own executive committee responsible for the co-ordination of Mau Mau activities in each of the districts, while at the same time acting as a link to the central Mau Mau Committee in Nairobi.<sup>2</sup> This was part of the very important underground organizational network, where the movement sought to establish a secret operation that would undermine Government efforts to crush out the Mau Mau. Besides these executive committees, that were established, at the district level, other minor committees, nearer to the people, whose aim was to enhance and co-ordinate the daily Mau Mau activities at the village and ridge level, were established. It was at this level that most women activists in the Mau Mau operated. In this chapter, therefore, I shall examine the support role of village women in the Mau Mau, with particular reference to Mathira and Tetu divisions of the Nyeri District.

The declaration of a State of Emergency by the Governor, Sir Philip Mitchell, on 20th October 1952 caught the Mau Mau unprepared. While it is true that the Mau Mau organizers were preparing for an open confrontation with the Colonial Government by 1952, there was not as yet a large-scale military front nor a military strategy that could in any way match the troops deployed by the Governor at the declaration of the emergency.

The Colonial Government had deployed troops in the belief, perhaps more precisely the misconception, that the Mau Mau had a "planned revolutionary movement," which was ready to attack. By then, Mau Mau was only preparing for the eventuality of a war. In the Central Province districts, the stark reality of the seriousness of the situation hit the people through the Mau Mau oaths and the intimidation that was being vented on those who refused to co-operate. True, sporadic acts of violence had begun to flare up, directed particularly at colonial agents, especially chiefs and headmen. Acts of arson, murder and mysterious disappearances of key Government witness or potential witnesses escalated in 1952. Yet, one does not see a clearly "trained or disciplined army". People were being prepared

for this final assault by these acts of violence by the Mau Mau. In the Thegenge Location of Nyeri, an area that was to become a hotbed of the Mau Mau, Senior Chief Nderi Wang'ombe was "hacked to pieces" in a banana grove by a crowd of "about fifty Kikuyu activists" on October 22, 1952. To the authorities, Chief Nderi had been murdered for his "courage and progressiveness". To the Mau Mau, he was a traitor. This was followed by a spate of killings of prominent Government agents not only in Nyeri but in various places in the country. On 18th January 1953, Headman Luberio of Aguthi Location in Nyeri with about three hundred men and women armed with simis and pangas was attacked.<sup>3</sup> Many murderous attacks on members of the Kikuyu Guard and their families were carried out. In Nairobi and its environs, prominent loyalists — such as Tom Mbotela, an ex-KAU Vice President and staunch supporter of Government policies, Michael Ofafa an ex-KAU Treasurer and others — met with the same fate. In the deaths of the latter two, one sees the division that had been created in KAU between the extremists, who sought violence, as opposed to those who felt that constitutional changes could be brought about through constitutional means.

While prominent loyalists were under assault in Nairobi and elsewhere, ordinary men and women in the Kikuyu reserves, who resisted the oath and therefore Mau Mau's course of action, were put in a very precarious situation. Occasional murders were carried out by the Mau Mau just to "teach others a lesson". Life was made generally very difficult for those who did not co-operate, in the hope of dissuading others from fighting the Mau Mau, or taking neutral positions. At the same time, movement into the forest zones by freedom fighters in the Nyeri area, the Southern slopes of Mount Kenya and in scattered areas in and around Kiambu that had begun as a trickle increased tremendously so that by 1953, the estimated number of dissidents in the forest reached 15,000 fighters.<sup>4</sup> As most freedom fighters recall, the entries into the forests were many and varied as were the reasons for taking to the forest. Groups or individuals went into the forests poorly-equipped, with no clear leadership nor particular strategy for fighting. Some were on the run from the reserves for crimes connected with the Mau Mau against the Government. Others were volunteers, who had decided to go in and fight. Most of those who

were on the run carried nothing with them. Others went in with nothing more than pangas, popularly known as Ka-Jehova—meaning Jehovah's Sword,—and a few other basic items such as blankets or pocket knives. None went in with the idea that the struggle would be so protracted. This was the general picture but there were some exceptions. Those, for instance, who took to the forest after they had successfully carried out the "Naivasha raid" on 26th March, 1953 and had captured a large quantity of firearms and police equipment and, therefore, went into the forests well-equipped. However, at this early stage, pangas and simis remained the principal weapons. After better organization in the forest was carried out, home made rifles, manufactured from stolen springs and piping, went into operation.

Between 1952 and 1954, the period before the massive villagisation project began, these fighters in the forest heavily relied on resources acquired from the Kikuyu reserves. They either came down for them or the villagers organized the delivery of provisions to the forest outskirts. This task fell largely on women and thus there emerged an organizational pattern between the reserves and



the forests that provided a life-link to the fighters in the first two years of the struggle.

#### 4.2. WOMEN LEADERS

For the general mass of ordinary women who had been initiated into the Mau Mau, roles were not compartmentalized. This means that there was no such thing as women being neatly slotted in, according to their tasks be it as couriers, food bearers and so on. Instead, any given woman, who had been initiated into the secrets of the movement through the Mau Mau oath, performed several varied tasks as time and conditions dictated. Naturally, the topography of a given area, to some extent, determined the roles that women in the area would perform. Those, for instance, in and around the vicinity of urban Nyeri had more access to information from Government offices and European households than those on the fringes of the forest, who were more adept at providing food and sometimes shelter to the fighters. In Mathira and Tetu as a whole, the series of long narrow ridges which run down from the Nyandarua and Mount Kenya meant that women were more in contact with forest fighters

and, therefore, their services to the Mau Mau had more to do with this group than any other.

The "woman leader" was of central importance in the reserves - forest link, acting as a co-ordinator. The female local leaders were found in each locality and a locality in this case sometimes comprised several villages. Women leaders worked in conjunction with the male guard commanders in their area. What tasks did the women contacts perform and what kind of women were they? The most important role that women leaders performed was that of organizing provision of food and the transportation of such provisions to reach the fighters. This meant that their homes would be used as a base from which Mau Mau operations in the reserves would be organized. For this reason, it was absolutely necessary that women contacts be trustworthy and not them alone, but the whole household or those who knew of their activities. Betrayal by any one person could mean Government retaliation and, consequently, bring very disastrous effects on a whole lot of other people, including the disruption of the organizational network that had been so meticulously arranged. Granted, the

task of choosing who could be absolutely trusted was not easy. Neither was the fact that one had taken the Mau Mau oath enough to make one a leader, though it was absolutely necessary that one had done so. Local Mau Mau leaders had to use other criteria for choosing their main contacts. The number of oaths one had taken in the Mau Mau was often used as a measure of the degree of loyalty to the movement. This is because the various types of the oath given had various objectives. In the first oath, for instance, the objective was to recruit the initiate into the movement and this is the oath the mass at large were given. One might be given another oath to commit them to a specific purpose. Thus, for instance, the Batuni oath was only given to fighters to commit them to military service. One could also be given a second oath as a graduation to a higher rank, such as being a minor committee member of the Mau Mau. Most of the women contacts I interviewed had taken more than one oath and through this expressed total commitment to their particular duties in the movement. It seems that the more oaths one had taken, the more reliable one was considered to be.<sup>5</sup> Some women, who had lost their husbands or other

members of their families early in the Mau Mau struggle, acted as excellent contacts, out of what seems to have been a drive by bitterness and spite against the Administration. The character of a woman was also used to judge her leadership capabilities. One finds that the women who became leaders were often influential and outspoken and could easily establish their authority and discipline over the others without attracting undue attention to their activities.<sup>6</sup>

Once established as a local leader, these women did not work in isolation. They were expected to work in collaboration with other leaders in the neighbouring locations in order to be kept informed on any new developments taking place, such as new strategies adopted by the Government to fight the Mau Mau or the movement of the Mau Mau fighters from one place to another. They were expected to pass on this information accordingly while delivering provisions. This placed the local women leaders in a very precarious situation for, while their allegiance to the Mau Mau was expected to be total, they were at the same time expected to be smart enough not to leave behind any trail that might betray them

and the fighters. This meant that they had to act in a way that would give the local authorities no reason to be suspicious of their activities. Keeping this balance was no mean feat.

With the women contacts established, a definite pattern of procuring food came into existence. Her most important allies were not the general mass of women in her village or location but some hand-picked fellow women who would be responsible for the actual gathering of provisions, especially food. As in the choice of women leaders, not every woman who professed to be a member of the Mau Mau was entrusted with this. In fact, Mau Mau fighters in the forest were very cautious about food provided for them for fear of poisoning.<sup>7</sup> They made sure that what food reached them was from loyal supporters of the movement. Thus, the number of women involved in the actual process of food collection and transportation had to be limited to minimize the danger of detection, as large numbers were bound to attract attention or betrayal. The basis on which this whole network, between the village women and fighters, operated depended on secrecy which meant

that those who had not taken the oath, or those suspected of colluding with the authorities, had to be kept ignorant of the actual process and operation of the network.

In the pre-villagisation period, there were two main ways in which provision of food was made to the fighters. It is, however, important to note here that these were not the only two ways that the fighters were able to use in order to acquire food. There were various other ways in which fighters made their sustenance, such as raiding settler farms and making off with cattle and sheep which they would slaughter in the forest. The forests yielded at times edible fruits, roots and wild game. The two ways mentioned below are those which involved the Mau Mau members in the reserves.

The first, which was common before the Government stepped up their vigilance on all Mau Mau activities in the reserves, depended on the ability of the Mau Mau supporters to collect food in the reserves and organize people to transport it to the fighters. This food was transported through specific routes only known to the contacts,

the actual transporters, and those at the receiving end. The second one involved prior arrangements being made by contacts so that food was kept ready but not in a central place until it was ready for collection. Storing food in a central place was avoided in case this attracted the attention of the local chiefs and headmen or those loyalists who informed on the Mau Mau. Each woman would, therefore, keep her contribution at her own house until an appointed day when she would transport it to the local leader's house at night. It was then disposed of that very night.

It was necessary to have an elaborate arrangement to avoid detection while making sure that the food was collected and delivered at once to its destination. This was achieved by having the women contacts notify fighters, or their emissaries, of the specific day, time and place through the male Guard Commander. An alternative plan was for fighters to send their own contacts with detailed information of what was needed, where and what time the delivery should be made. Nyaguthii Theuri tells of how in 1954, she was entrusted with a herd of goats which were in actual fact a

contribution from the Mau Mau supporters in Muringato, 2 kilometres from Nyeri town. She, along with others, had been sent from the forest to get food supplies for the fighters from Mau Mau supporters. The group on entering the inhabited area separated, each going their own way to avoid detection. Nyaguthii managed to take the small herd to the forest edge where she was met by fighters stationed to look out for those who had been sent out on this mission.<sup>8</sup> Forest fighters also took advantage of the fact that initially the Government did not suspect that women were ardent supporters of the Mau Mau entrusted with the delivering of messages and provisions. Thus those women, who were already in the forest in 1953 and 1954, would be more likely to be sent to make contact in the reserves and arrange for provisions more than the male fighters who were bound to attract more attention.

Fighters preferred foodstuffs that were dry rather than the easily perishable food unless it was to be delivered immediately. In the latter case, food was cooked and transported by a group of girls who would be escorted by sentries all the



way to the rendezvous, usually on the fringes of the forest. If the distance to the rendezvous was long, a relaying method was adopted whereby one group would carry provisions up to a certain point and another waiting group would take over. This called for co-operation and a high degree of co-ordination among the female local guards who had to organize groups in their locality to take over the task of transportation. The last group in this line would receive the provisions which were then finally delivered to the fighters. This was one of the most hazardous tasks that women performed for the Mau Mau.

These journeys had to be made at night to avoid detection and the secret routes were full of unknown dangers, the greatest of which was the unexpected confrontation with anti - Mau Mau guards, usually local people acting as Government informants. Some of these routes were merely unbeaten tracks which at times caused delay, thereby throwing the whole chain link into jeopardy. Carriers had to be back to their bases by dawn to avoid arousing suspicion in alien localities at daytime. Njoki Mutahi<sup>9</sup>, one such woman contact at Giakanja village in Tetu division, notes that in 1954, the Government being

strongly suspicious of the activities of women in the Mau Mau, but with no concrete evidence of such activity, stepped up vigilance, especially on all those areas on the fringes of Mount Kenya forest, thereby making the network almost impossible to manage. Women, however, always managed to beat the Government at its own game by devising new methods all the time to retain contact with the fighters.

In 1953, the Government had made it a criminal offence, punishable by death to supply food, drink, clothes or medicine to "terrorists". We should appreciate, therefore, that those women who braved the odds to feed the freedom fighters or offered them shelter were doing so at great risk to their lives. They need not have been taken to any court. Once caught in the act, they could easily be shot "while trying to run away".<sup>10</sup> Absolute secrecy was, therefore, necessary in this network. Yet, providing fighters with food was a common feature throughout the Central Province. In Kangema Division of Murang'a, for instance, food was collected and passed through the well established Kahuti - Kibutha - Kanyenyaini route up to Tutho, where fighters would be waiting for it.

At times, these provisions came from very far. The food shortage in 1954 and 1955, which came as a result of people being herded into Mau Mau villages, affected the food network adversely. Foodstuffs had to be brought miles from the Kikuyu reserves and, with all the restrictions on movement, this was a very difficult feat. The Kamba women are known to have transported food all the way from Kangundo to Thika on foot to deliver it to Kikuyu women, acting as Mau Mau agents, who would buy the food specifically as provisions for the Mau Mau. Thus, in spite of variations in the patterns of food provisions due to different circumstances, all had a common purpose of maintaining the life-link between Mau Mau supporters in the reserves and the freedom fighters in the forest.

#### 4.3 - VILLAGISATION AND ITS IMPACT ON THE ORGANIZATIONAL PATTERN BETWEEN THE RESERVES AND THE FOREST ZONES.

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The year 1954 marked a very definite change of pattern in the organizational network between the Mau Mau supporters in the reserves and the fighters in the forests. Although a few villages had been built in Kikuyuland when Mau Mau broke out, mass

villagisation did not start until the War Council met in 1954 and deemed villages necessary as a way of collective punishment of all those involved in the Mau Mau in rural areas. The first villages built by Government order were in Nyeri District, built as a control measure applied to "bad" locations.<sup>11</sup> This included Tetu and Mathira Division. On a larger scale, the Nyeri District Village Settlement Project was launched in 1954 accompanied by intensive propaganda on the social and economic advantages of village life. In this year, therefore, Mau Mau supporters in the reserves found it necessary to change or modify tactics used prior to the villagisation as a challenge to the Administration. Villages were laid out on an extensive scale and fortified by Guard posts. Everyone who was herded into the Mau Mau villages well knows that in spite of all the Government propaganda in praise of the social and economic advantages of village life, villagisation in Kiambu, Murang'a, Nyeri, Embu, Meru and the Rift Valley was specifically designed as a punitive measure, a collective punishment of what the Special Branch called the "passive wing" of the Mau Mau. The Government's aims were two; to protect the loyalists, and to keep a close check

on those providing information and supplies to the Mau Mau fighters. Concentrating people in a very small area made it much easier for the authorities to punish whole villages and especially when individuals could not be brought to book for their Mau Mau activities. Thus the site of each village would be chosen on security considerations, making sure that no food or other provisions reached the fighters. Food stores and communal cattle bomas were put up within the villages and placed under the care of the Home Guards. As one District Commissioner noted in his report in 1955, "In many cases, security considerations required the temporary removal of outlying schools, dispensaries and shops to new villages".<sup>12</sup> This means that a whole way of life was disrupted with the movement into the Mau Mau villages.

These villages were in a terrible condition. The huts, tightly squeezed together, became breeding grounds for rats and squalor and epidemics often broke out. By December 1955 in Nyeri District alone, for example, there were nearly 200 villages occupied by 165,000 people. By 1956, its population of 60,000 people was crammed into thirty villages

with the average number of occupants per house ranging from 15 to 27.<sup>13</sup> This drastic reduction in the number of villages was made by the Government in the hope that fewer villages would make their administration easier. The villagers themselves provided the materials and labour and built the villages and their defences - a tribal police of Kikuyu Home Guard post.

The short notice given to people to move into the villages meant that these houses and huts were very poorly built with little or no provision for sanitation. Again, herding large numbers of people, into fortified enclosures so speedily, created a shortage of building materials especially wattle poles and grass for thatching. Besides, the fact that security from the Mau Mau was considered first meant that villages were not necessarily moved to areas where such amenities as water and transportation were easily available. Some villages, therefore, had to contend with the problem of scarcity of water or polluted streams and roads that were inaccessible. Karari Njama bitterly notes that it is the terrible conditions in the Emergency villages that made the population lose the will to fight. He says,

"Though our fighters were still willing to persevere and continue the fight, more than half the people in the reserve had become tired and longed only for

peace. They had experienced dreadful torture, collective punishments, disgraceful and miserable life in the concentrated and insanitary camps in which hunger and starvation was decreasing our population at Government's supervision.<sup>#14</sup>

This is indeed an apt summary of the terrible conditions that characterized these villages.

Fortification in the villages was elaborate. A long trench of about five feet wide would be dug all around the village and spikes were planted at the bottom. Barbed wire would then be placed in and around the trench to foil any speedy escape should the Mau Mau fighters attack. A village had only one main entrance and here the Guard post was situated and beyond it was the "loyal area" where the families of the Guards would be housed to afford them better protection. The all night curfew and communal labour that began at six o'clock made it extremely difficult for Mau Mau suppliers in the villages to operate for two reasons.

First, contact with the fighters became very difficult. The fighters could not gain access to the villages easily due to the elaborate defence

although they did, at times, storm these villages to fight the Guards and destroy their posts. On the part of the villagers, restriction on movement with the Guards always hanging around meant that no effective supply system could be worked out.

Secondly, villagisation adversely affected food production so that the villagers could hardly sustain themselves, leave alone the fighters. As a punitive measure, villagers, under the supervision of the Home Guards, were forced out into communal labour from six o'clock in the morning to five o'clock in the evening, six days in a week and without pay or food. This work included hunting for Mau Mau "fugitives" in the outlying areas and clearing bush to deny the fighters any hideouts close to the villages. Men and women would, therefore, be seen leaving very early in the morning in large groups. Little children were often left to look after the still younger ones. At around five o'clock, an hour was provided for the villagers to rush to their shambas and obviously, very little work could be accomplished then. With so little cultivation going on, famine gripped the whole of Kikuyuland in 1955 forcing a dramatic decline of



supplies to the fighters and a mounting toll of death from starvation and related diseases among the villagers.

Besides, the Government began a deliberate campaign of using hunger as a weapon to punish the fighters in the forest, but more so those who continued supporting them in the reserves. In late July 1955, the Government issued an order in Nyeri and Murang'a that any crops that were a likely source of food for the Mau Mau fighters be destroyed. Consequently, such crops as bananas, sugar canes, sweet potatoes, arrowroots, cassava and maize plants that were in the Shambas and some, just at the point of ripening, were either mowed down or uprooted. Shambas were cleared of all such crops on the allegation that the Mau Mau fighters were hiding there. The situation was so desperate that some women resorted to actually begging for food from the Home Guards to feed their children. Emergency villages were, therefore, one long story of untold misery, suffering and humiliation. Merciless beatings, forced communal labour, rape and confiscation of property were rampant practices. In contrast, to be a loyalist meant to be afforded Government

protection from all these, as well as from Mau Mau fighters, a rather vague promise as this did not stop the Mau Mau fighters from executing reprisals on those villagers who were against the movement.

How did women in the Mau Mau fare in these circumstances? It is quite evident that although Government propaganda and collective punishment, in particular, made a considerable dent in the ability and willingness of the village population to aid the fighters, a large number of those who had taken the oath remained sympathetic to the fighters. Women leaders, in particular, reorganised and devised new methods to maintain links with the fighters and to deliver supplies when these were available. Women, who were in the Emergency village, tell of some of the ingenious methods devised to fool the Home Guards so that food — when it was available — could still be smuggled from villages and Shambas. Victuals were smuggled in baskets and gourds or under loads of manure, wood, potato vines or maize stalks in the one hour that villagers were allowed to go to their shambas. The biggest handicap was how to go out of the village entrance without arousing the Guards' suspicion that one was carrying

items that might be passed on to the Mau Mau fighters. Guards were not stupid either and searches were often carried out on villagers leaving the village precincts. Women with supplies had, therefore, to act as naturally as possible in order to fool the Home Guards. A woman carrying a huge load to and from the shamba was a common sight in Kikuyuland that would not arouse much suspicion. Under these loads, food or old blankets and Kabutis would be hidden. Once out of the village, the food or whatever item it was, would be taken to an agreed spot where the fighters could collect it at their convenience.

These methods had to be continually changed to throw off-track the Home Guards and the chiefs' retinue. This meant that new methods had to be continually devised. Food would be smuggled out of the villages even in the special clay water containers, Ndigithu. Its narrow mouth, specifically made so because it is only meant to be a water container would deflect Home Guards from inspecting its contents and in this way women would safely pass through. It must also be remembered that

during the Emergency, freedom fighters hid themselves in the many caves found alongside rivers and streams running down from the mountains. Injured fighters often hid there for many days with their only hope of survival being delivery of food from the villages. Secrecy, here again, was of the utmost importance as it was quite difficult to deliver food in the short time provided as this meant duping the Guards. When late to return to the forest with provisions, clothing, medicine, cigarettes or ammunition, fighters would hide these things in the caves. The caves were safe as they were entered through water, thus leaving no tell-tale footprints behind. During this time, women used to take food to those fighters and to receive any messages that needed to be delivered either to their families or to the male Mau Mau guard commanders back at the villages.<sup>15</sup> One can, therefore, say that, although villagisation affected the organizational network in Mau Mau so adversely, the strong spirit of selflessness did not die among the staunch supporters of the movement who braved the hazards to keep the Mau Mau alive.

The question of creating Mau Mau villages was also closely tied to the whole question of land. The state of the Emergency itself, plus the introduction of villages, accelerated the consolidation of land holdings. Land consolidation was meant to serve several purposes. The process itself involved bringing scattered strips of land to be registered under one title deed. This was the implementation of the recommendations of the East African Royal Commission of 1953-55 which had been commissioned to investigate how agriculture in African farms could be developed, among other things. This is in spite of the fact that land consolidation had started on a sporadic basis in the late 1940s. It was adopted by Hughes in Nyeri in 1953 and by Pinney in Murang'a in 1954 and in Kiambu in 1955, when consolidation got fully under way as a first priority in the rehabilitation programme for the Kikuyu country.

It is true that there were some very real benefits to be accrued from land consolidation. Foremost in this was the fact that it was obviously easier to take effective measures of soil conservation on consolidated holdings, as opposed to

scattered strips of land. This would, in turn, increase agricultural output in African holdings. Land consolidation, it was also hoped, would increase individual enterprise and, therefore, create employment for workers who had little or no land of their own and in the process lessen the impact of landlessness.

It is quite apparent, however, that land consolidation was not merely meant to improve agriculture in African holdings for its own sake. It was the hope of the Government that agrarian reform in Kenya would curb discontent that had manifested itself in various ways, but most poignantly in the Mau Mau. In fact it can be argued that political, rather than agricultural, considerations were overriding in hastening the programme itself. Land consolidation, for example usually began in those areas which had been consistently loyal to the Government and where there were outstanding loyal chiefs. The whole question of creating a "loyalist class" was, therefore, of paramount importance in the land consolidation. C.M. Johnston, Special Commissioner for Central Province and the man who took the responsibility of negotiating for Central Government approval of

the programme, stated in 1955 that the scheme would change the face of Kikuyuland and bring into being a middle class of Kikuyu farmers who "would be too busy on their land to worry about political agitation".<sup>16</sup> This was indeed a common view adopted by officials concerned with the programme. The argument was that, through land consolidation, the Government could easily create a class based on the loyalists, who would have a stake in the Status quo by awarding it larger and better holdings. This would, in turn, create a solid, middle class Kikuyu population, a class that would have too much to lose by reviving political discontent. It is evident, therefore, that the policy of reward and punishment was very well used during the land consolidation. For example, loyalists who had come out strongly on the side of the Government were evidently rewarded by getting larger and better holdings than they had before. In fact, the land consolidation committee at the local level comprised the chief or headman, a registrar and local elders, chosen on the basis of their loyalty to the Government. Indeed, many freedom fighters, who were in the forest, lost their land during the land consolidation. The

land of these fighters, the "rebels," would be confiscated as a lesson to the others. It would subsequently be thrown into a common pool during consolidation, an act that was meant to confirm the landlessness of the fighters and the plight of would-be future "rebels". When the surrender offer was made in 1955, one of the threats used was that those who did not surrender would automatically lose their land. Thus, although land consolidation had good intentions of improving agriculture in the African sector, it was also deliberately used to create a class of landed gentry, the yeomen, who would become "a bulwark of conservatism," and therefore have nothing to do with Mau Mau or any other Kikuyu nationalist manifestation.<sup>17</sup>

One sees in the villagisation and in the land consolidation a strong hope by the Government of winning over what they called "the passive majority of the Kikuyu", who were the real backbone of the movement, responsible for its sustenance and the major hindrance to counter-Insurgency. In Murang'a District, for instance, loyalty to the Mau Mau movement was divided into four categories according to official analysis. Ten per cent were looked



upon as active supporters of Mau Mau. In this group were the "terrorists," the suppliers, couriers, committee members, money collectors and oath administrators. Seventy per cent were grouped as passive supporters who aided and abetted the fighters but not as strongly as the first ten per cent. Another ten per cent were active anti - Mau Mau and they included the Kikuyu Guard, the tribal Police, and some Government servants and mission adherents. The other ten per cent were passively anti-Mau Mau, and consisted of those Africans who had acquired good jobs and positions of responsibility and did not want to jeopardize them.<sup>18</sup>

Obviously, such definite categorization of where each group stood, with regard to the Mau Mau, oversimplifies the complexity of the Mau Mau movement, making it seem as if each person could be easily slotted into these various categories. Allegiance to the Mau Mau was difficult to gauge. Some people, who were seemingly loyal to the Colonial Government, were some of the strongest supporters of the movement. This went for many others who found it necessary to operate incognito if they were to be of any use to the movement. Those who continued to aid the movement while in the Emergency villages

were in the latter group.

In conclusion, it is quite clear that the whole process of procuring and delivering victuals to freedom fighters was a most hazardous exercise that was made even more difficult by the effects of villagisation. It is also apparent that the organizational network did not involve everyone who had taken the oath. Among the wider mass of women supporters of the movement was an inner core group of women who liaised with the so-called guard commanders, on an equal basis, in providing these provisions. At times, this was not at all easy and involvement led to loss of life for some villagers. This happened when particular people decided to settle old scores by using this network as an excuse. It is known that some villagers, wanting to get rid of fellow villagers, reported that so-and-so, for instance, had vowed that nothing that belonged to him would find its way into the hands of the Mau Mau fighters. This did not take long to reach the ears of the fighters and, sooner rather than later, the accused would be whisked off to meet his fate. Without underestimating the Mau Mau trials that such people

were supposed to face, it is true that at times they were unjustly executed. At the same time, all those who were genuinely anti-Mau Mau and who refused to co-operate in any way were similarly dealt with. This is the dilemma that the villagers faced: On the one hand was the Mau Mau menace which they could not afford to ignore and, on the other hand, stood the Colonial Government which had vowed to wipe out the Mau Mau fighters and all those who supported them. As one woman put it, the daytime belonged to the Government as it was the force to be reckoned with; but at night lurked the Mau Mau, ready to strike at traitors. As in all warfare situations, a lot of opportunism went on, with the population identifying with the group that posed the immediate threat. In this case, it was either the Mau Mau fighters or the Colonial Administration. Being on good terms with the Home Guards, for instance, was very useful in order to make life in the villages bearable. Women who associated with Guards would often pass on any information gleaned from them to the fighters. Thus, fighters, lying low just at the village outskirts, nearly always knew well in advance when parties to track them down were to be organized.

Villagers would also loudly denounce the Mau Mau in the presence of the Guards which at times led to their being taken into confidence on anti Mau Mau operations that were in the offing. Guards could be very brutal or lenient to families, depending on the kind of relationship that existed between them and these families and it was sheer common sense, therefore, that one did not cross them unnecessarily. Thus the same villagers, who apparently supported the Government during the day, were the same people who fervently supported the Mau Mau at night. When the Government, therefore, talked about a "marked change of heart" among the villagers in 1955, one is tempted to see this in the light of opportunism and hazards facing the villagers. This is further elaborated below.

In the following section, we shall see how women fitted in the courier service acting at the same time as arms and ammunition bearers for the Mau Mau movement.

4.4. THE MAU MAU COURIER SERVICE: ARMS AND AMMUNITION BEARERS.

Of all the services rendered in support of the Mau Mau, the most efficient of all was perhaps the courier service. The most important use of this service was to transmit messages between the freedom fighters in the forest and their supporters in the urban and rural areas, especially on the movement and strategies that British troops adopted from time to time. This was obviously of crucial importance as the only means of communication for the freedom fighters depended on the couriers. The survival of the fighters depended on how fast they received such information because advance information gave them a chance to out-manoeuve the British troops tracking them down. Gucu Gikonyo, a veteran fighter, affirms that the Mau Mau had to do manually the equivalent of the tasks that aircrafts and armoured cars performed for the British troops.<sup>19</sup> They had also to act as food carriers and ambulance. The couriers in Mau Mau had, therefore, a very difficult role to play which called for elaborate planning. The result was an intricate network that infiltrated through all the zones in which the Mau Mau operated. It was the duty of anyone

who had taken the Mau Mau oath to convey any information deemed important and especially if such information could avert imminent danger for the Mau Mau.

In the famous battle fought at the banks of the Rui Ruiru river in Mathira Division of Nyeri,<sup>20</sup> Mau Mau fighters had trekked from Aguthi to Karuthi and were proceeding unsuspectingly to an ambush set up by the British troops. Undoubtedly, it would have been a very disastrous clash for the Mau Mau as they were quite unaware of it. Luckily, an elderly woman contact, hurried to the fighters with the news that British troops lay in wait. As it turned out, this was one of the most heroic engagements that the Mau Mau fought against the British. They emerged victorious at the end for they were fully prepared for it, thanks to the advance warning. This is an example that shows that every Mau Mau member, young or old, had a part to play.

Particularly outstanding in the courier service was the underground network between Nairobi and the fighters in the forest. The network was widely

known as Kenda Kenda, named after the fast moving police vehicles that normally answer emergency calls. This was particularly efficient in the pre-operation Anvil, between 1952 and 1954 and before the operation upset the network. Messages of importance, directives from the Mau Mau headquarters in Nairobi and provisions of arms, ammunition, and medical supplies were conveyed through this network. It was so efficient, in the early stages of the Mau Mau operations, that even one of the men, best known for his activities in hunting and routing out the Mau Mau, Ian Henderson, concedes that, "a terrorist who gave money to a courier in the forest could be almost certain of getting what he wanted from any shop in Nairobi".<sup>21</sup> The death penalty imposed, as part of the emergency regulations, could be carried out for among other things, "consorting with terrorists". Yet, couriers braved this danger in regularly coming to Nairobi to deliver messages to the organizers and returning with those things that the forest fighters needed. A written message that was seemingly meant for the fighters was enough to have its carrier executed. Thus to avoid the interception of written messages couriers would learn by heart all the information

that needed to be conveyed to and from the fighters. Where this was not possible or the message extremely important, a host of code words would be invented so that anyone intercepting the message would find it seemingly innocuous and therefore of no use to him. Code words had to be frequently changed before they acquired a permanent meaning so that informers could not decode them.

There are several examples of such code words. If an informer was, for instance, spotted in a group that was discussing Mau Mau activities, whoever spotted the informer would tell the others that the meeting place was swarming with ants, and the whole group would disperse. Market women also evolved their own words. They would loudly shout to each other that they had seen Wairire (the black one) and any Mau Mau activist in the vicinity and especially those wanted by police would know at once that British Askaris and especially the African soldiers who had black rolls of cloth (puttees) around their calves were on patrol. If the Mau Mau fighters wanted ammunition, they would send their contact to try and acquire Makara. Its normal meaning is charcoal but for the Mau Mau,



it denoted ammunition. Kamwaki referred to a revolver, and if they wanted a gunman they would ask for a Kihii, i.e. an uncircumcised boy and so on.<sup>22</sup> With the use of such code words, whose meaning changed constantly, the Mau Mau managed to get round the informers fairly well. Apart from maintaining links between the fighters in the forest and the outside world, the courier service was used to make and maintain contact with detained leaders in detention camps. New arrivals at these camps would freely use code words presumably also known to those already detained to inform them what was going on outside.

The force and thoroughness behind operation Anvil in March 1954 had devastating effects on the supply lines of this underground network. What particularly affected the supply lines was the restrictions on movement, the use of pass books and identity cards and the widespread sacking of the Kikuyu, Embu and Meru people from their jobs through which they could hitherto gain considerable access to information. Yet, these measures never fully succeeded in bringing to a dead halt the courier organization of the Mau Mau. New ways

were constantly devised to beat the system. The various systems of passes and identity cards and what the Government called "history of employment" designed to restrict movement and identify employees were usefully turned to the advantage of the Mau Mau. As a result,

"A special organization was therefore created, within the movement, to supply forged papers which could enable gunmen and gangsters to pose as genuine employees of reputable firms if they were picked up during screening operation"<sup>23</sup>

In this way, handpicked men and women in the Mau Mau managed to acquire forged passes indicating that they were employed as "chauffers", "houseboys" and "girls," and even as "police" and "Home Guards". This ruse worked because in the pre- Mau Mau years, the Kikuyu had supplied a very high proportion of employees in these categories, as opposed to other ethnic groups and, therefore, the Government found it very difficult to distinguish between the genuine loyalist and the spy. Unlike other tasks allocated to Mau Mau supporters, the courier service was the most difficult to suppress militarily. Although the colonial forces occasionally intercepted written messages, this was not too common

and conviction was therefore difficult to prove in a court of law due to lack of evidence.

Women performed excellently as Mau Mau couriers maintaining contact with fighters in the forest and acting as links between the urban and rural areas. Their prowess in this was especially significant in gathering information after spying out on locations where arms and ammunition were likely to be available. Various studies on the Mau Mau highlight at least the good work that women did as couriers. Kaggia, in his Roots of Freedom, frequently mentions various women who had been recruited as spies in the movement. He says that this was done as part of the Mau Mau policy to win over certain people who were considered potentially useful to the movement. He writes,

"It was the job of these recruiters to woo this person by any means possible. The girls would lie or even use their love to win them over... These methods helped the movement to penetrate all spheres of the government".<sup>24</sup>

Equally, Karari Njama in Mau Mau from Within, and Waruhiu Itote in Mau Mau in Action, also constantly refer to women recruits and couriers. Karari, for example,

talks of several episodes where women went into the forest sent from the reserves or by urban guerrillas to deliver messages to the forest fighters. He tells of one of the girls, Wamu, who joined the fighters to become a courier. With a school education of up to form I, Wamu was considered a valuable asset to the movement as were all the other women, even those with only a smattering of education, particularly if they could read and write. Of Wamu, Karari says,

"She was bright, expressive and fearless. She told us much about Mount Kenya and the possibility of meeting General Ndaya...."<sup>25</sup>

In Gikonyo's autobiography on his Mau Mau activities, examples abound on the use of women cadres as couriers. One woman, Nyagiko, features prominently throughout his story as a brave and a very trustworthy contact. There is a gruesome story of how Nyagiko was assigned the task of luring wanted Mau Mau enemies into a hut whereby other Mau Mau guerrillas would lie waiting to kill them. In his own words,

"We needed a hole large enough to hold eight people. There we lay in wait, armed with a cord, simis and a revolver. When the target was lured and was talking away unsuspectingly inside the house, we appeared as if from nowhere. With the cord, we strangled him...."<sup>26</sup>

"Matenjagwo", a renowned Mau Mau fighter explaining to his fellow fighters on the source of arms, acknowledged that,

"Some of these things had been obtained by Mau Mau female agents through seducing members of the government armed forces and luring them to houses where they were killed and their arms taken"<sup>27</sup>

After talking to some of the women in the Mau Mau courier service, one feels that an over-emphasis has been undoubtedly made on the women's use of their sexuality to obtain arms or information or to get an enemy killed. More than the use of this, a wide variety of other tactics were used to obtain information and material goods.

Certainly a lot of intelligence and proper planning was necessary to execute their tasks. There is the case of village women who were required to go to the Guard posts everyday to carry out domestic chores for the guard such as bringing in firewood, fetching water, cleaning the Guards' compound and so on. Loyal women supporters of the Mau Mau used this opportunity of their proximity to the Guards to gather any scraps of information that came their way, usually carelessly dropped by the Home Guards.

Others set out to shower guards with praise for their role in the encounters with the Mau Mau and when the guards mellowed in the praise, they would subtly endeavour to find out what other encounters the Guards planned to get involved in. Of course, it did not always work but at times it yielded valuable results.

Leakage of information to the Mau Mau became so alarming and a major cause of the defeat of various Government strategies that by 1954, the Government became actively involved in setting up a counter - Intelligence network. Butler, the District Commissioner in Nyeri, talking to the Nyeri African District Council in January 1954, emphasized that military manoeuvres, no matter how brilliant, would never fully succeed if important information went on leaking to enemy forces. Hence the need to set up an elaborate counter - Intelligence network. In his own words,

"There is a tendency now to think only about more soldiers, more aeroplanes, more rifles, more ammunition, and more barbed wire, when in fact the real answer to the quick end of the war is very simple, and that is more information  
.....28"

Not suprisingly, one of the major aims of Operation Anvil, apart from netting members of the Mau Mau, was to gather more information on Mau Mau operations. Through this operation, the Government amassed a lot of information on the underground operations of the movement through use of beatings, threats and torture. The courier service in the Mau Mau was badly disrupted and it became a battle of wits with the government. Little leniency was shown on a courier who failed in an important mission. Mau Mau courts of justice did not hesitate to condemn to death a courier who was considered not to have done his or her best in an important mission.

Particularly valuable in the courier service were young girls. Those with a little education were even more useful for the purpose of infiltrating the ranks of Government soldiers and the police as is evident in the activities of Wamuyu Gakuru, alias Cinda Reri, along with a group of other young, Mau Mau girl recruits in Nyeri. Educated up to Standard Four in her home village of Ngorano in Mathira Division, Wamuyu was considered a valuable asset to the movement which she joined in 1951 before she

had attained the age of twenty. She was, therefore, given the role of a scout and several other recruits, all young girls placed under her charge.<sup>29</sup> Their work in the Mau Mau was specifically to fraternise with the Kings African Rifle (KAR) soldiers in Kiganjo, a few miles East of Nyeri Town. Those who knew Wamuyu and her friends, but did not know of their involvement in the Mau Mau, often accused these girls of prostitution. However, her mission, with the rest of the girls was to try and extract useful information from KAR soldiers and when the opportunity arose, to steal arms and ammunition from them.

How would they accomplish such a formidable task? The first step was to befriend the soldiers at the base without rousing their suspicion about their connection with the Mau Mau. They would then try and get themselves invited by the soldiers to their camps. This was very important for the girls could then learn of the lay-out of the base and camp. Dances and other social events were used to socialise with the KAR and the Tribal Police Reserve (TPR). Once such progress had been made — without arousing any suspicion — this group of



girls, and this is why they would always operate in a group, would get one of their members to excuse herself. At an agreed rendezvous, the girl would meet an awaiting group of fighters to brief them on the other girls' progress. Late at night came the most dangerous part of the mission that the girls had to execute. This was to get any arms and ammunition available or the soldiers' uniform which would be useful to the fighters as they could pose as soldiers. This meant waiting for the soldiers, who would usually be drunk by then, to get to sleep. If the bid to acquire these things was successful, two of the girls would carry the loot while the other two acted as sentries for them., The last one in line would always be armed and know how to shoot just in case an alarm was raised or a chase ensued. These girls would then be met by a group of fighters waiting for them, who would then escort the girls out of the vicinity.

The risks involved in this kind of operation were many. First, the girls could not repeat such an operation at the same camp because they would obviously give themselves away. Secondly, the girls had to put on a really convincing act, for

the soldiers were always wary and the penalty heavy for any loss of arms, ammunition or uniform. At times, therefore, these missions yielded nothing not to mention that such girls, as Wamuyu and her friends, were often scorned for their 'promiscuous' behaviour. The greatest ally in such operations were the few African soldiers who, though in the colonial service, aided the Mau Mau. These men would often divulge useful information or help the Mau Mau obtain arms from their bases either by selling these to them or letting infiltrators, such as these young girls, carry out their work without undue interference.

Mama Habiba Ali, one of the staunchest Mau Mau contacts in the Majengo area of Nyeri Town then and now a councillor for the area, presently recalls with pride her activities in hiding provisions brought by girls from Kiganjo and how she often covered for them when the need arose. She often hid ammunition in barrels of dry maize and beans in her house, while waiting for a Mau Mau contact to come for them. Her close proximity to Kiganjo and the forests of Nyandarua and the fact that her husband was also a member of the Mau Mau helped

her to operate efficiently as an underground contact.<sup>30</sup>

Many other individuals in Nyeri are remembered for their active role in the Mau Mau. In this totally Kikuyu region, and where the Mau Mau struggle was fierce, was a Luo Kefa Odede, who did a lot for the movement as a contact. Kefa Odede was a train driver and as such was very useful for he could transport arms or other supplies for the Mau Mau between Nairobi and Nanyuki. Again, it was Wamuyu Gakuru who was his main contact at the Nyeri station, where he would often deliver medical provisions sent from Nairobi. From here, these provisions would be hidden in various hideouts until arrangements, for them to reach the fighters, were made. The arms and ammunition brought by Odede would either have been bought or stolen from Government armouries or from individuals, especially from settler homes which were often attacked and broken into. To the question as to why contacts risked smuggling arms in an area where the Government was extremely vigilant, with Nyeri Town being the centre for planning and co-ordinating the efforts of the security forces in the province against the Mau Mau, Habiba Ali stressed

that the situation was so bad in Nyeri anyway that most of the Mau Mau supporters had gone beyond the fear of death. In any case, night raids by Government Forces in the Majengo area of Nyeri Town, where a lot of ammunition and arms were hidden, were so frequent and beatings so brutal that it hardened the population. These raids were especially directed at those suspected of being Mau Mau but in the process, many other people, who had actively refused to have anything to do with the Mau Mau, were caught in the crossfire. Thus freewill, more than coercion, took over as the Government became more and more brutal.

#### 4.5. WOMEN AND THE HOME GUARDS.

Home Guards belonged to a semi-military organization formed and partly armed by the Government to aid in the maintenance of law and order in the Kikuyu, Embu and Meru reserves. They did this by policing their local areas and protecting those considered loyal to the Government. It was also their duty to arrest Mau Mau suspects and to obtain information on Mau Mau operations. As of 1954, the strength of the Kikuyu Guard was 20,000

and the number of posts constructed 320.<sup>31</sup> The Mau Mau fighters regarded Home Guards as their worst enemy, even worse than the white soldiers. In the villages, Home Guards were hated and scorned as traitors who had sold their country. Many songs were composed in the villages and in the forests deriding the Home Guards for having been 'bought' by the colonialists. One such song, for example, says:

And you traitors,  
Who have joined forces with the enemy  
You will never be anything  
But white mens' slaves,  
And when we win the war  
You will suffer for your betrayal.<sup>32</sup>

And the Mau Mau guerrillas sang thus;

You Home Guards should all be dead  
And get lost forever  
Why do you continue killing us  
When we are fighting for our land  
And freedom for all of us?<sup>33</sup>

This utter contempt, with which Home Guards were held both in the reserves and the forests, made it imperative for the Colonial Government to protect them from their own people, particularly from the fighters who had avowed to destroy them. Home Guards were, therefore, placed in special guard posts and their families housed next to the post

in a special area called the "loyal area" where they could be easily protected. Together with their wives and children, they would be permanently escorted in the course of their various activities. Children were escorted to school and women to and from their shambas. The Guards' wives were also exempted from communal labour which all the other women were forced into six days of the week. They also enjoyed other comforts. The other villagers, for example, were forced to carry out domestic chores in the guard posts. Village women were the victims here. They would be driven out to fetch firewood, clean compounds, carry water and various other duties for the Guards.

Furthermore, and as a measure of converting hardcore women who continued rendering services to the Mau Mau movements, Social Welfare Clubs were introduced in some Emergency villages in 1954. The objectives of these clubs as stated by the Government were: to turn women from giving assistance to the Mau Mau, involving women more in social activities and building up a community life through women. The last was a hope by the Government that villages could become the centres for

a more efficient administration of health, education and community services.<sup>34</sup> It is quite significant in respect of these objectives that the organization, now called Maendeleo ya Wanawake, was the result of this drive at social reconstruction. It was an organization that the Colonial Government used very well in its attempt to fight what it called the influence of the Mau Mau among the villagers. Yet, no real patriots among the women were even tempted into joining forces with the Government. Instead, women members of the Mau Mau continued to infiltrate Guard posts to gather information for the Mau Mau. The fact that they were forced to work in Guard posts gave them a legitimate access to the posts. Such valuable information as intended raids by the Government were often picked from these posts. At the same time, most of the raids that the Mau Mau fighters carried out in destroying Guard posts were often planned and co-ordinated based on information acquired by village women while working in these posts. This is why Mau Mau fighters would storm a post and in most cases walk directly to the armoury or where other provisions—such as blankets, overcoats or boots—were kept because they had full

details of the lay-out of the post before the attack. Consequently by 1954, so many of the Kikuyu Guard posts had been destroyed that an order was issued by the Government to the effect that no persons other than the Kikuyu Guard should be allowed within the perimeters of the post. It was made absolutely clear that women in particular, and this included the Guards' wives, should not be allowed into these posts. Thus the posts were left the preserve of the Guards alone. Their families were confined in huts adjoining the post. Any person going into the post, including the so called "protected persons" had to be licensed by the District Officer in charge of the area and the Head Guard. This move on the Government's part shows that village women must have, with considerable success, infiltrated the ranks of the Home Guards.

There are a few, but interesting, cases whereby the wife of a Home Guard was a member of the Mau Mau. Such women were a valuable asset to the movement because of their proximity to the Guards. It was of course a very dangerous situation. Such women had to balance the conflicting loyalties, on the one hand, for the Mau Mau cause and, on the other



hand, loyalty to their families. For such a woman, openly siding with the Mau Mau was not possible because of her husband's position and the constant danger of the discovery of her actions. At the same time, being the wife of a Guard meant that she was more vulnerable than the mass of women in the Mau Mau. It is to their credit that such women maintained this double face and lived to tell the story of their contribution to the Mau Mau as it is quite apparent that split loyalties in a family caused a lot of strife, sufferings or death. Being a Guard's wife per se did not guarantee one unbounded protection for suspects caught in pro-Mau Mau activities faced the same fate. Indeed many families were broken up as a result of the split loyalties. As I have indicated elsewhere, this is why those who planned and executed the Mau Mau oath strongly insisted that all the members of a family unit must take the oath. The most obvious reason behind this seems to have been an attempt to avoid situations whereby some members betrayed others or the Mau Mau Movement.

Alongside women and, perhaps naturally, were children who in one way or another played a part

or were forced into Mau Mau activities by circumstances. School children, in particular, like other members of the movement became trusted allies and were found effective in, among other things, running errands or spying on the movements of colonial troops as well as Home Guards. It came out clearly, in the course of this research, that widespread administration of the Mau Mau oath was carried out among school-age children, while some informants insisted that even the very young children were also symbolically oathed. A Government's survey stated that, particular attention was devoted by oathing teams to ensuring that all school children had taken the Mau Mau oath. It further stated that, so successful were they that, at the declaration of the Emergency, practically all children attending schools of the Kikuyu Independent Schools Association or Karinga Schools, had done so, as also many of the children in Mission Schools.<sup>35</sup> The Mau Mau movement needed every recruit available, including children, hence the decision that they, too, should be incorporated into the movement and as a first step be given the oath. Evidence that the oath was given even to the very young came from mothers who went to oath ceremonies with babies strapped on their backs.<sup>36</sup> It was common

practice for the administrator to touch the lips of the very young with a finger dipped in the oath paraphernalia, a symbolic act to show that the child was expected to give support to the movement in future.

But what role did mothers play in influencing their children into supporting the Mau Mau? Children throughout the years of the State of the Emergency, and in the areas rife with the Mau Mau, were thoroughly drilled by their mothers and the older members of the society on the importance of never divulging any information whatsoever to authorities and to strangers in particular. The watch-word to every question in all these areas was "I do not know". Thus in a homestead, even the smallest child, who could talk, knew that the right answer to any question from a stranger was that they did not know anything at all. The need for secrecy had to be instilled in them for, of the whole cross-section of the community, children were the most susceptible to unwittingly divulging information that could lead to a lot of grief, imprisonment and even death to the adult members of the community.

Children were also very well used to run errands in the movement and it was usually left to the women to co-ordinate their activities. School children and herdsboys were used to spy and report on the movements and activities of the Home Guards whom they would "innocently" follow to and fro in an attempt to pick anything useful. Once in school uniform, a young boy, seemingly on his way to school, could follow troops or Kikuyu Guards without arousing suspicion that he was on a mission for the Mau Mau. Once he had learnt of the destination of the force, he would then race off and report this to the adults at home, usually the mother who would then endeavour to pass on the information to the Mau Mau contacts in the village. Youngsters in the Mau Mau were forced by circumstances to bear responsibilities that were far beyond their age. The normally care-free village boys, herding cattle or playing their daily games, would anxiously hover around Guard posts or conceal wounded fighters lying low in the village outskirts, spying for them until it was safe for them to move. It was virtually unheard of for children to report the activities of their elders to the authorities. This is to their credit that they could so well gauge the seriousness with which such

action would be regarded.

This recruitment of children into the Mau Mau by women shows a strong link with those activities that women carried out in the movement. Being closer to their mothers than to any other group, children were bound to receive their first awareness of the worsening political situation in Kenya from them more than any other source. The harsh reality of the bleak situation in the years of the emergency characterized by fear, hunger, family separation and disruption of normal daily activities also heightened political awareness among children. And as Crocker rightly pointed out, fighting the Mau Mau went further than fighting the guerrillas in the forest. Greater danger lay in the support group and children in particular, who were fast being educated by their mothers on the evils and totally unjustified colonial rule which had to be fought to the end. Even if the Mau Mau failed, therefore, the younger generation would take up the struggle at one point or the other. It was in this vein that Crocker advocated that,

"The problem of the Kikuyu children would require a solution in the near future for it is only to be expected

REFERENCES

1. ... they will imbibe Mau Mau teaching with their mothers' milk .....As Mau Mau adults are captured or killed, their children will grow up to take their place.<sup>37</sup>....."

This expressed the profound fear of the Administration that the Mau Mau movement would turn into a protracted struggle and that in it, as in any other aspect of the traditional society, children would be looked upon to carry on with the work that their elders had initiated. In this particular case, Kenyan children would reject, like their elders, colonial domination.

2. This was one of the most important reasons that the Mau Mau movement was so successful. It was a struggle for the survival of the Mau Mau people through a court of law, and the Mau Mau people were often killed in their protest.

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FOOTNOTES

1. Itote, Mau Mau in Action, Op. cit., p. 1.
2. L.S.B. Leakey, Defeating Mau Mau, London, Methuen, 1954, p. 37.
3. History of Loyalists, Op. cit., p. 20.
4. Rosberg and Nottingham, Op. cit., p. 20.
5. Interview with Njoki Wanjororo, on 30 March 1981 at Giakanja Village, Nyeri; See interview with Mwangi Kirira, Op. cit.,
6. Interview with Mama Habiba Ali, Op. cit.,
7. Interview with Mwangi Kirira, Op. cit.; See also interview with Wamuyu Gakuru, Op. cit.,
8. Interview with Nyaguthii Theuri, Op. cit.,
9. Interview with Njoki Mutahi, on 7 June 1981 at Mbogoini Village, Mathira Division, Nyeri.
10. This was one of the most dastardly methods that the British Colonial troops employed to eliminate Mau Mau suspects without the hustle of going through a court of law. Many innocent people were often killed in this manner.
11. History of loyalists, p. 58
12. O.E.B. Hughes, 'Village in the Kikuyu Country', Journal of African Administration, H.M.S.O., London, Vol VIII, No. 4, Oct. 1955.
13. Ibid., p. 171.
14. Barnett and Njama, Op. cit., p. 436.
15. Itote, Mau Mau in Action, Op. cit., p. 45.
16. Cited in Sorrenson, Op. cit., p. 171.
17. Sorrenson, Op. cit., p. 118.
18. Hughes, Op. cit., p. 106.
19. Gikonyo, Op. cit., p. 56
20. This battle was fought in 1953 on the banks of Rui Ruiru in Mathira Division, Nyeri.

21. I. Henderson, The Hunt for Kimathi, London, Hamish and Hamilton, 1953, pp. 18 - 19.
22. See, for example, Leakey, Defeating Mau Mau, Op. cit. and M. Kinyatti (ed), Thunder from the Mountains, Nairobi, 3ed Press, 1980 p. 114.
23. Leakey, Ibid., p. 38.
24. Kagia, Op. cit., p. 111.
25. Barnett and Njama, Op. cit., p. 111.
26. Gikonyo, Op. cit., p. 41.
27. Ibid., p. 41.
28. East African Standard, Jan. 6, 1954.
29. Interview with Wamuyu Gakuru, Op. cit..
30. Interview with Habiba Ali, Op. cit..
31. History of the Loyalists, p. 16.
32. Kinyatti, Op. cit., p. 44.
33. Ibid., p. 162.
34. See 'Handing over Report' O.E.B. Hughes to J.M. Butler, Dec, 1954 in KNA, DC/NYI/2/2 Minute 254/84.
35. History of Loyalists, p. 21.
36. This information was repeatedly given by women who attended oathing ceremonies carrying young children.
37. Crocker, Op. cit., p. 17.



C H A P T E R 5.

WOMEN MAU MAU FIGHTERS.

As early as 1953, the Colonial Government had realized that women were not only active members of the Mau Mau, who provided essential commodities or acted as food carriers, but also that some of them were actually part of the combatants in the Mount Kenya and Nyandarua forests, recruited to fight. In a Government press release quoted in the then most widely read daily, the East African Standard, a commentary, typical of many others which decried the active participation of women in the Mau Mau struggle, ran thus:

"Mau Mau women terrorists struck for the first time in Fort Hall reserve when a gang, of which they were members, killed three men, five children and a woman in a night raid in Muriani..... We have known for sometime that there are women terrorists just as bad as the men, operating with some gangs. They are real hardcore Mau Mau fanatics. This is the first time however we can definitely state that they have killed".<sup>1</sup>

Whereas it is undisputed that the Mau Mau fighters received substantial support from a large percentage of the population in the Kikuyu reserves, the contribution of the womenfolk in the struggle, as part and

parcel of the guerrilla forces in the forest, is controversial. One major reason for this is because generally, and in comparison to their male fighters, women fighters - those who actually went into the forest - were very few. It is in this light that one must assess their contribution.

Again not all women who took to the forest are considered to have been fighters. This arises from the erroneous assessment of fighters solely on the basis of their military prowess. Interestingly enough, it is the male fighters, in their accounts, who are ambivalent. They do not state clearly whether or not women were actually fighters. Instead, they relegate them to an auxilliary corp that only facilitated men guerrillas to fight more efficiently by carrying out largely 'domestic' duties in the forest. It must, however, be stated quite clearly here that women, regardless of whether they got into actual combats or not, had a very essential role to play as support wings engaged in such activities as transport, signals, medical corps and ordnance. Disregarding the importance of these tasks during the struggle is a serious omission which does great injustice to the role played by

women in the Mau Mau.

Besides the women in the support wings, it came out clearly in the course of this research that some of the women in the forest did actually engage in military combat. Actual participants tell of years spent in the forest, not just administering to the male fighting forces but as Itungati, the term used to refer to the actual fighters only. Varying versions of the usefulness of women in the forest have been given by their male counterparts. Karari Njama, for example, goes as far as saying that women, in fact, posed more problems to other fighters in the forest, by becoming more of a liability than an asset in the forest operations.<sup>2</sup> There are other cases where women are outrightly and totally dismissed as having been involved in any of the struggles. But this latter suggestion is immediately refuted by several sources of evidence and accounts of events that tell of some heroic deeds that women fighters engaged in. A lot of this evidence, for example, has been preserved in Mau Mau songs.

Individual women emerged as outstanding activists. A woman like Njoki Waicere from Murang'a, for example, was recognized among the fighters for her courage.<sup>3</sup> She, and some other five girls, had tricked Home Guards out of their guns in Uhuru Camp in Maragua, where almost two thousand fighters were detained. Njoki and her colleagues were consequently welcomed to stay on in the forest, where they took to the guns. In another incident, women in Kairo in Murang'a are recorded as having helped Mau Mau freedom fighters to escape by destroying a camp at Mathioya and razing it to the ground. They further destroyed a bridge to prevent Government soldiers from crossing the river.<sup>4</sup>

Renowned women fighters - such as 'Marshall' Muthoni and Cinda Reri - made a name for themselves as fighters. Marshall Muthoni, born in 1931, went into the forest in 1953 at the age of twenty two and remained there until 12th December, 1963. In her own words, she states that while she was in the forest, she did not think of herself as a woman but operated as the other fighters did - 'to fight and to struggle'.<sup>5</sup> In other words, there was no

distinction between the tasks she had to perform and what the other male fighters were doing. Another example is Cinda Reri. This courageous fighter is perhaps best remembered for her active participation in the great battle of Rui Ruiru river which made the enemy forces mistake her as the leader of the Mau Mau fighters because of her expert handling of the gun. These two women fighters and others are a clear indication that there were women in the actual fighting force.

Besides these prominent women, and equally important, were hundreds of others who though bare-handed bore the hazards of forest life, trying to make life easier for the other fighters. Cinda Reri, alone had two hundred women under her command, a fact that is easily verified by those who were in the forest with her.<sup>6</sup> Such women were allocated duties which ranged from transporting luggage, fetching firewood and water, mending clothes and delivering messages to the reserves. At times when the situation became desperate, they would also be sent to the reserves to collect food.

However, women in the forest were not of equal rank among themselves and neither were they given equal responsibilities. Some were leaders over others, entrusted to organize the rest into various activities. When food had to be collected from the reserves, for example, it was the duty of the leader concerned to choose her women and to detail them on what they were expected to do and to make sure that they looked "passable" in order to avoid being easily detected. She had also to discuss with them the safest areas to visit on such a mission before they were escorted to the forest fringes by other fighters. Before going into the actual evidence that indicates that there were indeed women combatants I should like to briefly mention some ways through which women got into the forest in the first place.

The circumstances in which fighters, whether in groups or as individuals, went into the forest varied considerably. For some, it was a voluntary movement. These were usually those whom the organizers specifically chose to go into the forest because they had expressed a willingness to do so and, therefore, could be relied upon. There were others who found life in the reserves unbearable due to the unending

harassment by the authorities and, therefore, decided to join the fighters. Some had to flee to the forest as a result of their activities in the reserves, which made them, in the Government's eyes, wanted "criminals". After the struggle had got underway and the fighters began to feel the pinch of a shortage of fighters and provisions, there were several cases of forcible recruiting and abduction by Mau Mau guerrillas of men and women whom they usually forced to carry provisions for them. Consequently, the women who were in the forest went there for a variety of reasons.

But all told, many of the women fighters fled into the forest after finding life in the reserves unbearable and especially those who were in the Home Guards' "bad books". Women in the Mau Mau villages were often beaten by the Home Guards and some of these who could no longer stand this chose to go into the forest. Home Guards were the women's worst enemies in the reserves and they did make life particularly difficult for those women they wanted. Women like Cinda Reri, Nyawira Githinji and Nyaguthii Theuri decided to flee to the forest after their

activities as contacts became known to the authorities. But a large group of both men and women also found themselves in the forest unwillingly. These are the ones who had been surprised by Government authorities during oath-taking ceremonies and had consequently fled into the forest to avoid the inevitable suffering that was sure to follow.

According to Nyaguthii Theuri, women in the forest were divided into various categories according to the circumstances under which they entered the forest. Some were considered lazy and incapable—mainly those who had been forced by circumstances to flee into the forest and who had no previous record of being actively involved in, or committed to, the movement. It is interesting to note that the Mau Mau organizers, both in Nairobi in the reserves, did not commission any women to go into the forest specifically to fight. They would, however, send couriers of information who after delivering messages decided to stay on in the forest.<sup>7</sup> Hardly were there any cases of women going into the forest to keep the family unit together by joining their husbands except for one case. When those fighters who were still in the forest came out to "surrender"



in 1963 at Ruring'u Stadium in Nyeri Town, there emerged a man, his wife (not married in the forest but before) and their child.

By whatever means and for whatever reasons women had gone into the forest, they had, if they were to survive, to learn some basic warfare and, more importantly how to adapt to the life in there. This, of course, was also true of the other fighters, since the role that women played was also closely related to those assigned to men. In other words, new recruits, whether men or women, learned some basic warfare and especially on how to handle and look after guns. Since not all fighters were involved in actual combat and, in any case, since guns were relatively very few, recruits were taught other skills, such as how to camouflage themselves and the art of hiding and erasing evidence of their presence to avoid detection. Women, in particular, were often given the job of clearing a camp and wiping off all traces of recent habitation before fighters left one camp for another. They would also learn, and this was very important, how to look after injured fighters in a camp, thus acting as a kind of medical corps.

After new recruits had learnt these lessons, they were incorporated into the several bands, called platoons or batuni, under various leaders. In whatever group the women were put, there would be a woman leader who, in turn, would be under the overall command of the platoon leader. While, therefore, there emerged some women Itungati, a reference term that strictly referred to actual fighters, the majority of the women, though unarmed, proved very useful as a support wing of the fighters. They also helped to boost the morale of the fighting force by singing Mau Mau patriotic songs which was, incidentally, also a very effective way of recording their activities. Several of these songs pay tribute to some heroic deeds that women in the forest performed. One such song, for example, ran thus:

Kimathi's wife was the secretary of the  
gallant fighting womens' wing  
Bren - gunned in their hideouts by the  
enemy.<sup>8</sup>

In this stanza alone, it is quite clear that there were, indeed, women activists in the forest comparable to men.

In the battle of Tumutumu Hill, the great victory of the fighters is attributed thus:

However, victory was with us  
Because Kongania, our woman contact,  
Brought us an important message  
And thus saved a thousand lives.<sup>9</sup>

This tribute to Kongania, as a courier, shows how important this service was as in this particular incident when her quick and timely action had averted a disaster for these fighters.

Besides composing songs to commemorate heroic deeds as well as tragic incidents, fighters also sang songs extolling the virtues of fellow fighters. In the process they also nicknamed some outstanding fighters as follows—Kimathi was referred to as the "fountain of Independence;" Kago wa Mboko as the great fighter who "shoots down the enemy warplanes"; General Ihuura, the "Great Patriot", and Gitau Matenjagwo is reputed to have clenched his fist, held it skyward before he died crying "I am dying a hero". My informants, particularly the women, are adept at these guerrilla songs and praise names of the Mau Mau heroes.<sup>10</sup> Besides, these songs often reminded them of some forgotten incidents in this period of the Emergency.

What were the actual roles played by the women in the forest and what experiences did they go through? The most crucial arena of the Mau Mau operations was the forest. The fact that the Nyandarua and Mount Kenya forests border the Kikuyu reserves gave the Mau Mau fighters an advantage over the colonial troops deployed to fight them. Men like Kimathi had been born and brought up in the vicinity and, therefore, knew the forest craft well. Local forces that were used to hunt the Mau Mau fighters, while well equipped, had little training in guerrilla warfare in the forest terrain and initially found it very difficult to rout out the fighters. Due to the very trying conditions which often hampered their progress—rain, hunger, inadequate clothing and constant movement—the Mau Mau fighters, for lack of an alternative, acquired incredible perseverance. Guns were made, makeshift "hospitals" and food stores set up and for three years they managed to keep the British troops busy, to the admiration and sympathy of the outside world. Removal of the frontline leadership in 1952 had left the onus, to keep the Mau Mau alive, on forest fighters supported by a wide cross-section of the population in the urban areas as well as the reserves.

Yet, traditionally women's involvement in wars only went as far as providing food for the warriors and the delivery of such victuals to the out-posts when the need arose. In the Mau Mau, however, it seems that as long as women served the Itungati while they were still in the reserves they conformed to their traditional roles. Thus a well known source on the Mau Mau, that denies the status of women as actual fighters, seems to have this view point in mind.<sup>11</sup> It is my contention, on the other hand that, the very fact that Mau Mau gave rise to women Itungati is an indication that the strength of the forces of nationalism in Kenya had transcended the traditional sex and social barriers. Indeed, the fact that women had been politicized to the extent of taking up arms demands that we look at the women fighters in the Mau Mau from the wider and overall effects of colonialism on Kikuyu society.

Grace Nyaguthii, alias "Mwago" who entered the forest on March 17, 1953, claims that even as early as this in the struggle, she found other women who had long been there. Mau Mau contingents in the forest were organized generally in platoons. Most

of the recruits lacked any military training, but some of the leaders were ex-servicemen and they therefore employed models drawn from their military and civil experiences.<sup>12</sup>

There were three main armies, one operating in and around Mount Kenya, the other one the Nyandarua range of mountains and the third in and around Nairobi itself.<sup>13</sup> Most of these recruits were young men, the youngest member ever caught being only eleven years old. In the Mount Kenya and Nyandarua forests, the leaders organized forest camps, each camp being identified by a specific number and thereafter referred to as "Bush, number such and such". Women who took to the forest were integrated into these camps and allocated specific tasks. Thus when Nyaguthii joined the fighters, she came under the overall leadership of Kimathi, but found herself in a smaller platoon where she became a Kabatuni or, more specifically, batwoman.

Posting to the various platoons was carried out by a Mau Mau committee. But the allocation of duties to group leaders was done by the platoon leader who would then issue commands to individual fighters.

In the camps where there were a sizeable number of women, one of them would be chosen as a group leader to represent the interests of the others and, more importantly, to co-ordinate their activities. According to this informant, duties in the platoon were allocated mainly according to the abilities of individual fighters regardless of whether they were men or women. A fighter had to prove himself to get any kind of rank above the others. Some women, therefore, got very demanding duties. Acting as sentries, is an example of such duties. This informant strongly emphasized, and this was supported by several informants, that those who were considered lazy or incapable would only be given duties which could not endanger the lives of the other fighters in the forest. Women who fell into this group were assigned such tasks as collecting firewood, cooking and cleaning camps. They were never, for instance, entrusted as sentries or in other essential duties that demanded total alertness.

Capable and keen women fighters were given tasks that called for greater responsibilities. Such women were considered at par with other fighters. I say at par with other fighters and not men because not

every male was considered capable enough to get leadership tasks. Nyaguthii recalls that she was one of those who shared duty as a guard with other fighters. Having attained basic knowledge of gun handling and bush craft—such as sending signals to others of impending danger without giving herself or them away—Nyaguthii felt confident in her new role. Her current knowledge of this particular role testifies to the fact that hers is a first hand knowledge. Sentries would form an outer ring around the camp so that they could easily spot any unusual happenings. Sentries would change guard throughout, especially at night, to make sure that they were fresh and alert all the time. Educated up to standard Four and being about nineteen years of age, she was considered fit to perform the duties of a sentry. Nyaguthii is popularly regarded today as a former ardent Mau Mau fighter and her role as a fighter is easily testified to by other former Mau Mau fighters.

Women also participated significantly in transport. This was done in conjunction with the men. Fighters were rarely idle in a camp. When they were not engaged in combats or raids for food in the reserves



or in the European-settled areas, they would be constructing hideouts or moving into new ones or cleaning their weapons. Medicinal preparations had to be somehow obtained and some camps had even their own "hospitals" stocked with drugs obtained from dispensaries and retailers where Mau Mau fighters had reliable allies. These also called for special care and women often aided the 'doctors' in not only looking after the stock but helping to nurse the sick and injured fighters.

When the time came to move camp, everything would be packed and women were often used to transport loads to the next destination. Most of the fighters, who were in the forest, best remember the activities of women in their role of transporting essential camp equipment. To avoid giving the impression that the decision on what job would be performed by whom was given arbitrarily I should like to state here that this was not the case. Each camp, which at times had as many as three hundred fighters, had to have a clearly laid out allocation of duties. Roughly, each camp would have one group entrusted with the few guns available. These would also engage in actual combat, as well as protect the

camp when in base or on the move. A gun was the most valuable possession a fighter could possess and looking after it, therefore, was taken very seriously. Then there were the sentries, who would often be armed in case of sudden attacks. The bulk of those in the camp clustered around the actual fighters as support wings. These got an assortment of duties according to the priorities of each camp. Thus there were the cooks, those who went on food gathering missions, couriers, transporters and so on. It seems, however, to have been common in all camps that the platoon leaders and other recognized leaders - like Kimathi, Mathenge, General China, Kariba and others - had assigned themselves special privileges. This included the services of a Kabatuni in carrying out various chores for them. The responsibilities of batwomen assigned to leaders included cleaning out their premises, washing and mending clothes and transporting the leaders' personal effects from one camp to another. Kimathi, for example, lived throughout with an eighteen year old girl, Wanjiru, whom he elevated to the rank of a colonel. Originally she was only his Kabatuni.

Karari Njama, one of the well known Mau Mau fighters, was also offered, at one of the camps under Kimathi the services of a batwoman. In his own words, Karari was told:

"This is your small platoon that you will have to command. She must be with you, in this room all the time. She will take care of you; make your bed, take care of your beddings, warm your bathing water, clean and mend your clothes, fetch firewood for keeping you warm, and it is her duty to entertain you in any way that pleases you".<sup>14</sup>

Certainly such instructions as Karari got while in Kimathi's camp seems to reflect some underlying intimidation of such tubatuni. Karari's Kabatuni allegedly replied:

"It is not much different from the work I did at home and the only work I know how to do....."<sup>15</sup>

Luckily, this one example does not seem to have been typical. Cinda Reri argues that women who found themselves in such situations were often willing allies. According to her, most women in the forest were tough and could not be used by other fighters against their will. Quite clearly arguments often arose among group leaders as to what the role of women should be: some felt that women should not have been allowed to stay in the forest in the first

place, while others felt that women were welcome to stay in the forest as long as they did so purely as support wings. The great Mwathe meeting of August 18, 1953, also mentioned elsewhere in this thesis, clearly reflects this conflict. Some of the fifty six leaders present demanded that chores allocated to women should be domestic. In their own words they said:

"Their work in camps would include fetching wood, cooking and serving the whole camp, cleaning utensils, mending warriors' clothes."<sup>16</sup>

Mathenge on the other hand came out with the proposal that no differentiation should be made between the male fighters and the girls. On the whole, it appears that camp leaders made independent decisions on how duties were allocated in their own camps.

Women in the forest certainly proved their worth in the efficiency with which they executed their tasks. Another of these areas was in the maintenance of security in the camps. The easiest way that the colonial troops could catch up with the fighters was by following trails that showed signs of recent habitation of an area. After the fighters had evacuated a camp, for one reason or the other,

therefore, it was important that all traces of previous occupation of that camp be totally wiped out. This applied more so in a situation when the fighters were being pursued by colonial troops. The quick action of Mau Mau fighters often saved them, Women and men who were unarmed, would be called upon to dismantle the camp and obliterate all signs of recent habitation. Given that some of these camps were rather elaborate with underground dugouts, fireplaces and stores, levelling it out was not such a mean task. Indeed, moving camps at a moment's notice became a common feature of life in the forest. Survival in the forest clearly depended on many factors and whatever role each member of a camp played was meant to be for the good of the whole camp and, in turn, the success of all the freedom fighters in their struggle for freedom.

Women rarely rose to positions of overall leadership. Nevertheless, groups of women had their own leaders. These women were useful as representatives of womens' interests especially in general meetings. This was very much unlike the situation in the reserves where women contacts and leaders were well established with equal responsibilities as their fellow male

commanders. Women leaders in both the reserves and the forests, however, had one thing in common - and that is, that they rose to positions of prominence in the movement because they had distinguished themselves in the tasks allocated to them. They were not usually nominated or chosen to positions of leadership by Mau Mau leaders but rather had risen to such positions by proving their capability. Courage, decisiveness and initiative were qualities sought after of women leaders. It was generally recognized that lack of these qualities could lead to a tragic end for many fighters.

The story of Wamuyu Gakuru, alias Cinda Reri, also quoted elsewhere in this study is an example of a fighter who became recognized through her acts of courage which earned her the leadership of over two hundred women in the forest. Details of her life in the forest reveals that her involvement in the Mau Mau had begun way back in 1951 when she became a Mau Mau contact in Nyeri at Kiganjo. Prior to this she had acted as a contact in Karatina, a few miles from her home village where she received supplies for the movement from a Luo sympathiser, Odede, who was a train driver and who helped smuggle

provisions for the Mau Mau from Nairobi. She became an even more established activist in the movement when she decided to take to the forest. This decision was partly made for her by circumstances as she increasingly came under pressure when the authorities became suspicious of her activities. Her entry point into the forest was at Kiganjo, Nyeri, in 1953. According to her, her greatest political education was acquired mainly in the series of Mau Mau oaths that she participated in, among other sources. In the first oath, which she took in 1951 and which aimed at initiating recruits into an understanding of the history of the land, particularly how the land was appropriated by the whitemen, Wamuyu was convinced that it was necessary, in fact vital, that force should be used to regain the stolen land. The oath tried to provide some rationale behind the use of violence, forging political unity and mobilizing the masses. Initiates were taught the rightful political boundaries of Kenya and how these boundaries had been usurped by the Europeans. The concept of freedom was thus very strong and quickly sank into the minds of a dispossessed generation. Above all, the oath emphasized unity and discipline among the Mau Mau members.

In the real sense, the Mau Mau oaths seem to have been primarily three. There was the first, mentioned above. The second came into existence in the wake of increased use of violence in the Mau Mau and which was administered to leaders of Mau Mau committees, forest leaders and affiliated Mau Mau groupings. And finally the so-called seventh oath. Seven was only a symbolic Kikuyu number, an unlucky number, Mugwanja Muuru. Other versions of the oath were devised giving the impression that there were innumerable kinds of oaths in the Mau Mau, an impression strengthened by the fact that the first oath could be taken over and over again by the same person. It is also symbolic that, in the oath, seven vows were made and various other acts, such as going through a banana arch seven times. For our purposes here, we should note that some women did also take this third and most potent oath, the fighters' oath — known as Muuma wa Ngero, or the "B" Batuni oath — which, both in content and form, proclaimed the need for commitment to violence.<sup>17</sup> Chesterton, the editor of Candour Supplement while writing on the subject of oaths and "B" Batuni oath, in particular, made the deduction that:



"We are now faced in Kenya with a terrorist organization composed not of ordinary human beings fighting for a cause but of primitive beasts who have forsaken all moral codes in order to achieve subjugation of the Kikuyu tribe and the ultimate massacre of the European population in the colony."<sup>18</sup>

Carothers says that this oath was mainly, if not wholly, confined to men.<sup>19</sup> This might have been true of the earlier phase of Mau Mau but, as oral evidence has it and this is the clearest proof we have, women were recognized as being on an equal basis with their men counterparts in the forests. Wamuyu claims that, since this oath was only given to the fighters and those who could be called upon to fight at any time, then women who went to the forest had actually merited the responsibility that went with the oath. Very few admit having taken it and it was, admittedly, an oath that committed individuals to carry out acts of extreme violence, as the whole Mau Mau situation demanded. It sanctioned murder, not as Chesterton had it on 'European population', but on those who stood against the fight for freedom, regardless of their race. Besides the actual forest fighters, those who had leadership roles, delegated to them back in the villages or towns, were also given this particular oath. With these credentials behind her,

it is not surprising, therefore, that Wamuyu had the task of organizing other girls and representing their interests at leaders' meetings allocated to her. This was in the Hika Hika Battalion in the Mount Kenya forest under General China. Her task included organizing other girls and allocating duties to them according to the capabilities of each one of them. She was also responsible for overseeing that the two hundred girls under her command did not get into trouble with the male fighters. As a platoon leader, she was directly answerable to General China, who generally outlined what the women in the battalion were expected to do. After she crossed to Nyandarua in 1955 to team up with Kimathi's fighters, after General China was arrested, she attended a leaders' meeting, called by Kimathi, in her capacity as a representative of the women's group to air their views on conditions in the forest. Although I have quoted Wamuyu Gakuru's activities extensively, she was not a typical woman in the forest but she stands as a good example of the few outstanding women fighters who emerged in the Mau Mau movement.

It is quite evident, however, that for the majority of women who went to the forest, and owing

to their relatively few numbers, their contribution to the effectiveness of the movement was not so much in the battle field but rather in the selfless sacrifice as support wings. Women who helped transport military supplies and victuals, those stationed to look after the sick and wounded, or those who delivered messages, thus providing a link between the forest and the reserves or between the various camps, surely were performing as important a task as the actual combatants in Mau Mau. The problems that might have arisen over their relationship with the male fighters were not so significant as to have been detrimental to their assigned tasks. In any case, it was inevitable that such friction should arise considering the fact that all these fighters lived as one entity in the forest. Above all, conflict between male fighters was just as rampant as there were so many grounds for friction. Equally, evidence from all my informants strongly refutes Karari Njama's assertion that seven out of ten of all women in the forest had been lured or abducted by Mau Mau fighters and that their presence there was more detrimental to the cause than it was positive.

Elsewhere in this study, I mentioned that there were women seers in the traditional society. In the Mau Mau, seers became prominent for their alleged uncanny foresight in guiding fighters in combats. Obviously not all seers were genuine nor is it easy to assess the significance of those "prophecies" the Mau Mau fighters acted upon. Great seers like Cege wa Kibiru, had foretold with remarkable accuracy of the impending invasion of the whiteman to colonize African peoples. It is interesting to note that in the Mau Mau there was an emergence of women seers whose role was taken seriously by the fighters. Apparently, Mau Mau fighters placed a lot of faith in seers just as they did on the power of prayer before and after military operations. As already mentioned above, the killing of Leakey in 1953 had been carried out at the express instructions of a woman seer, Waruguru, from Githini village in Nanyuki. Another woman, famed for her "prophecies" in Nyeri, has this recorded about her:

"Rhoda was a remarkable woman. Like Sergeant Githukia, she possessed vast reserves of courage. She did not take any active part in fighting but her contribution to the work of Mau Mau can never be forgotten. She was a psychic. She would warn the forest fighters not to approach a

certain spot as the enemy was patrolling. Her predictions were always right..... She was an important asset to the Mau Mau. We always went for her advice..."<sup>20</sup>

The fact that fighters resorted to seers, whether male or female, is further evidence that the aim of the movement was victory, regardless of where the support was derived from. For this reason also, women, alongside the menfolk, took up the Mau Mau struggle. Their contribution in various capacities was recognized in the movement as being equally important if success was to be achieved. The goal was to regain Land and Freedom by whatever means and through whomever, be it men or women.

FOOTNOTES

1. See East African Standard, Oct. 7, 1953.
2. Barnett and Njama, Op. cit., p. 240.
3. Itote, Mau Mau in Action, Op. cit., pp. 139 - 49.
4. Ibid, p. 117.
5. Kibaara Kabutu, Jinsi Kenya Iliyookolewa, Nairobi June 1964, p. 93.
6. Interview with Nyaguthii Theuri, Op. cit.,
7. Interview with Wallace Mwangi, 8 May, 1981, at Karatina Town.
8. Kinyatti, Op. cit., p. 103.
9. Ibid, p. 109.
10. Women contributed heavily in composing Mau Mau songs, especially in the villages to express spite against the despicable actions perpetrated against them by the Home Guards. Those who went to the forests often sang praise songs for the heroic acts by freedom fighters.
11. Barnett and Njama, Op. cit., p. 297.
12. Rosberg and Nottingham, Op. cit., p. 297.
13. Alport, Op. cit., p. 957.
14. Barnett and Njama, Op. cit.,
15. Ibid., p. 242.
16. Ibid., p. 240.
17. Women who took the "B" Batuni Oath were extremely reluctant to talk about it. Hence, most of my sources on this oath was from written record. The Supplement Candour attached in Appendix contains 'purported' confessions by men and women who took the oath.
18. See CANDOUR Supplement, Croydon, Surrey, 22 July, 1960, MAC/RED/215/1.15/1
19. Carothers, Op. cit., p. 17.
20. J. Kiboi and P. Ndoria, War in the Forest: an Autobiography of a Mau Mau Leader, Nairobi, 1971, p. 240.

C H A P T E R 6

CONCLUSION

In this study I have attempted to analyse the role—more accurately, the series of roles—that women performed in the Mau Mau struggle. The study shows that though the activities of women, which were indeed heroic, do not feature prominently in most Mau Mau accounts, it is quite indisputable that women were, throughout the years of the war, the backbone of the resistance movement.<sup>1</sup> The activities of women were many and varied but the most crucial ones were providing and transporting essential commodities particularly food, acting as couriers of information thereby creating a life-link between the fighters and the rest of the population and smuggling the vitally needed arms from the suppliers, in both urban and the reserves, to freedom fighters in the forests. On a much smaller scale, others joined the fighting bands of freedom fighters by taking up military duties. These activities formed the core of the Mau Mau operations and the success of the movement was dependent on them. It is not an exaggeration, therefore, to say that were it not for women's resourcefulness and boldness the Mau Mau movement would certainly have not been as effective as it eventually proved to be.

That an "uprising", which the British Colonial Government initially thought could be swiftly quashed, ended up being a protracted struggle with serious ramifications throughout the country was mainly the result of the support that the movement received from the population at large but, more importantly, from an inner core whose loyalty and commitment to the cause was absolute. Clearly, not all those branded as "Mau Mau" by the Government gave active support to the movement. Not even all those who had taken the Mau Mau oath can be counted as having had an active role to play in the movement. After all, there were many different reasons why individuals took the Mau Mau oath and this ranged from having done so voluntarily to coercion, or even being tricked into it. The women discussed in this study are mainly those who were in the inner core - that is, those who had specific tasks to perform.

Arguably, the success of the movement, especially in the early years, can be attributed to the effectiveness of its organizational network. Women were the main link in this network performing the various tasks mentioned above. This was especially true in the underground network between the Kikuyu reserves and the forest zones. So crucial was this forest - Kikuyu reserve supply route that the marked decline in the forest fighters' operations outside the forests



coincided with the severing of this link. This occurred when the Government herded the Kikuyu, Embu and Meru rural population into Mau Mau villages in the massive villagisation scheme in 1954, thereby effectively clamping down on this "life - line." In the pre-villagisation period, the role of women was very crucial and, as Muthoni Likimani has so aptly put it, "without women's contributions in hiding and feeding the freedom fighters, nothing could have been achieved"<sup>2</sup>.

The courier service was of fundamental importance to the movement and women were the chief participants. For various reasons, women in particular excelled in its operations, often showing great ingenuity and daring in obtaining and passing on information.<sup>3</sup> Many of the successes and failures of the fighters were directly attributable to how reliable their means of communications were at a given time and place. As the study has shown, the fighters, for example, only managed to escape from many tight corners due to prior knowledge on the intended operations of the colonial troops supplied by women couriers. Again, raids were usually only mounted, unless in a situation of complete desperation, when enough "inside" information had been acquired.

In view of the heavy penalty imposed by the Government on those caught "consorting with terrorists", the sacrifice called upon in a courier was great.

Equally, a courier who failed in a "mission" stood to face the wrath of the Mau Mau leaders. Thus the status of the courier was, to say the least, a precarious one. Yet, the death threat notwithstanding, young girls and women were easily recruited as spies and couriers and performed very well, often managing to infiltrate into Government ranks where vital information could be acquired. Not surprisingly, the Mau Mau accounts, that accord credit to the women's activities in the movement, highlight their usefulness and efficiency as couriers. It is such courage and selflessness that makes the role of women in the movement memorable.

Compared to the role played by women in the reserves and in the urban areas, there is no doubt that the forest was overwhelmingly a male domain. Nevertheless, a study of the activities of those women who took to the forests shows that many performed duties that were essential to the war as it was fought in the forest. Besides, one can easily single out individual women who made a mark by distinguishing themselves as fighters who took part in actual combat.

This study has also shown that whether women were a liability in the forest or not, as some accounts argue,<sup>4</sup> does not detract from the fact that they

played a crucial role as support wings. My argument has been that, if they posed certain problems in the forest, their usefulness out-weighed this drawback. For example, among the more important tasks performed by women in the forest were as transport, medical corps looking after the sick and the injured and even the very demanding task as Scouts and spies.

An account by a 17 year old Kikuyu girl who scouted for the Mau Mau (initially against her will) and subsequently lost a leg in these operations gives an idea as to how vital the role of the scout was. According to her, she was required to travel several miles ahead usually in the company of another woman or a young boy every time before the army unit, to which she was attached, made a move. She would then walk back again with a report advising whether it was safe or not for the army contingent to move on. The account adds: "this way, the fighters would cover miles each day until they reached their destination or returned home."<sup>5</sup> To other scouts death obviously lurked in every corner as indeed is shown when this girl was later shot and left for dead. This underscores my conclusion in this study that it was not the actual numbers of women who went into the forest that is important as the nature of the work that they performed.

Although a few women fighters became leaders -usually over other women - in the forest, it is evident that leadership roles were almost always the exclusive preserve of the male fighters. This is quite obvious from the number of "Generals" that one hears about in Mau Mau accounts. Although this may be attributed to the numerical ratio between male and female fighters in the forest, sex bias also seems to have contributed to this lack of many women in positions of leadership. Surely the traditional influence that had kept women out of the battlefield would give even less allowance of them in leadership roles there.

It is tempting to conclude that in spite of the importance of the work performed by women in the forest, they do not seem to have been accepted by their male colleagues as comrades, as equals. In her study of revolutionary women, Mullaney observes that as activists, women tend to be self-sacrificing and self-effacing. She further notes that they share a "common hostility to power politics"<sup>6</sup> and that when they fill positions of authority, it is in an egalitarian way. In the Mau Mau situation, there is no reason - looking at the calibre of some of the women there - why they could not have performed equally, if not better than some of their male colleagues. In this sense, therefore, male dominance and perhaps the underplaying of womens effectiveness as leaders

contributed to this state of affairs. Equally, what Mullaney calls "self-effacing" of women activists is true of Mau Mau women fighters. They did not fight for recognition as leaders - at least not at the rate that the male fighters did.

Mau Mau is indeed only one example of a revolutionary situation where the role of women has been underplayed. In most studies of revolutions the "invisibility" of women in historical accounts often comes through or their activities only emerge hazily. This is indeed a rather unfortunate state of affairs that does not do justice to women's contribution in their own societies. A look at African societies, for example, shows that women have not only had an important role in the economies of their societies but also have made important contributions in times of major historical crises. This has been the paradox in many African societies. Traditionally women were expected to play an inferior role but at the same time they informally exercised varying and sometimes extensive degree of power.

There are many examples which show that women often react forcefully to the political crises affecting them. Women in South Africa and Mozambique, for example, have been at the forefront of the struggle to liberate themselves from the yoke of

colonialism. Equally, in the Biafran War of 1966 Igbo women made strong demonstrations in the streets to protest against massacres, to urge secession of war and later to protest Soviet involvement in the war.<sup>7</sup> During the war itself, the women's market network and other women's organizations were very well used to maintain a distribution system for what food there was and just as in the Mau Mau, to provide channels for the passage of food and information to the army. In addition, women also joined the local civilian-defence militia to form a women's front. This again is evidence that women have been "actors" in the affairs of their own societies and that they are highly sensitive to the political crises in their own countries.

There is need, therefore, of not only more women studies but, more importantly of women studies that bring out more positively and gives more balanced interpretations of women's political and economic activities in and out of their traditional societies. It is true that the "invisibility" of women is being corrected in the growing field of women history but much more needs to be done to create a history that views women meaningfully as "participants in the political processes that affect their lives and livelihood and respondents to the forces of the colonialism

and modern economic development."<sup>8</sup> This study on the role of women in the Mau Mau has been made with that aim in mind.

FOOTNOTES

1. Muthoni Likimani's account on women and Mau Mau, Passbook Number F. 47927, was published in 1985 as I neared the completion of this thesis. The author, with the great advantage of having been personally involved in the struggle, vividly recounts from her observation and that of her family friends the impact of Mau Mau in Kenya in the 1950's on women's daily lives. She shows the ordeal that women, and their families, had to go through while yet aiding their communities in the political struggle. Prominence has been given to problems faced by women in the acquisition of passbooks, communal labour and their suffering in detention camps. She also gives an account of the great contribution made by women, particularly in sustaining the freedom fighters in way of feeding and hiding them.
2. Muthoni Likimani, Passbook Number F. 47927: Women and Mau Mau in Kenya, Nairobi, 1985.
3. See, for example, Gucu Gikonyo and Kaggia, Op. cit.
4. Karari Njama in particular argues that women in the forest hindered the male fighters in his account Mau Mau from within, Op. cit.
5. Micere Mugo, "The Role of Women in the Struggle for Freedom," in Achola pala, T. Awori and A. Krystal (eds), The Participation of Women in Kenya Society, Nairobi, 1978, pp. 215 - 218.
6. Marie Marmo Mullaney, Revolutionary Women: Gender and Socialist Revolutionary Role, New York, praeger, 1983, p. 252.
7. Hafkin and Bay (eds), Women in Africa, Op. cit. p. 84.
8. Ibid., p. 18.



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## MAU MAU OATHS CEREMONIES

IN view of the recent launching by Mau Mau of a campaign to re-oath its adherents and to enclose in its net an ever-greater number of African followers, not only of the Kikuyu tribe, and in view also of the increasing bestiality of the oath ritual, it is timely and necessary to appreciate anew the significance of Mau Mau ceremonial practices and to review the extent and type of atrocities perpetrated by members of the movement.

Much has been written from time to time about the significance of tribal oaths, some seventy in number, in the life of the Kikuyu, still held as he is in the grip of pagan superstitions and ideologies. The originators of the Mau Mau movement chose the more powerful features of those many oaths to ensure that the Mau Mau version was supremely powerful — as it has since proved to be, despite the fact that in three ways it transgresses Kikuyu custom, which prohibits the administration of oaths by night, by force, and to women.

The original aim of Mau Mau, as expressed in the words of the oath, was secretly to unite, discipline and foster political consciousness among the Kikuyu, with the ultimate object of satisfying the political aspirations of its leaders, if necessary by force. The terms of the original oath were as follows:

- (a) If I ever reveal the secrets of this organisation, may this oath kill me.
- (b) If I ever sell or dispose of any Kikuyu land to a foreigner, may this oath kill me.
- (c) If I ever fail to follow our great leader Kenyatta, may this oath kill me.
- (d) If I ever inform against any member of this organisation or against any member who steals from a European, may this oath kill me.
- (e) If I ever fail to pay the fees of this organisation, may this oath kill me.

## NEW CLAUSES

As the Mau Mau campaign gained strength and the advocates of violence came to the fore, the terms of the original oath were amended to include the following new clauses, *inter alia*:

- (a) If I am sent to bring in the head of any one and I fail to do so, may this oath kill me.
- (b) If I fail to steal anything I can from the European, may this oath kill me.
- (c) If I know of any enemy to our organisation and I fail to report him to my leader, may this oath kill me.
- (d) If I ever receive any money from a European as a bribe for information, may this oath kill me.
- (e) If I am ever sent by a leader to do something big for the house of Kikuyu, and I refuse, may this oath kill me.
- (f) If I refuse to help in driving the Europeans from this country, may this oath kill me.
- (g) If I worship any leader but Jomo, may this oath kill me.

With the advent of these new terms there came an increase in acts of violence by Mau Mau.

The oath so far described is the general, or 3rd grade, oath from which no Kikuyu man, woman or young person is exempt, and which may be taken again and again by the same person. Its effect has been to create a mass of violent-minded, often bewildered people, chained by superstition and fear to the commands of their unscrupulous leaders. In the early days the ritual was primitive but not bestial, its symbolism alone being sufficiently powerful to bind initiates to the terms of the ghastly oath. In more recent times bestial practices and numerous stages of ceremonial have embellished the ritual in certain areas, particularly Meru.

With the launching of the violent campaign came the need for leaders of gangs, committees and other Mau Mau organisations. To them was administered a stronger, or 2nd grade, oath in the following terms:

- (a) If I fail to lead the children of Mumbi in a proper manner, may I die.
- (b) If I fail to support the Independent School movement, may I die.
- (c) If I betray the leaders of the Kenya Africa Union, may I die.
- (d) If I fail to support this organisation until the day of independence, may I die.
- (e) I must sacrifice my blood and the blood of Kikuyu for freedom.

There is a third, or 1st grade, oath taken only by leading political agitators. The terms of this oath are political and vary from time to time in accord with circumstances. It is significant that no instances have come to light of its being administered since the declaration of the state of emergency when the principal political agitators were arrested and detained on account of their complicity in the Mau Mau movement.

## BATUNI OATH

Apart from these three basic oaths, two new versions have been devised to meet the needs of the terrorist campaign. The first, called the "Githaka" or "Forest" oath, is administered by forest gang leaders to their followers; the second, the "Batuni" or "Platoon" oath, the most recent innovation, is gradually being administered to all Mau Mau "soldiers" and "soldier recruits". By taking the "Batuni" a man becomes a full-blooded terrorist. The following are some of the common features of the "Batuni":

- (a) To burn Europeans' crops and kill European-owned cattle;
- (b) To steal firearms;
- (c) If ordered to kill, to kill no matter who is to be the victim, even one's father or brother;
- (d) When killing to cut off heads, extract the eyeballs and drink the liquid from them;
- (e) Particularly to kill Europeans.

It must be seen from the foregoing that the terms of the Mau Mau oath have become increasingly more violent and bloodthirsty, envisaging even the killing of father by son and brother by brother. It is not perhaps surprising, therefore, that with this increased emphasis on brutality and murder in the words of the oath, a corresponding increase in bestiality should have invaded the ritual of oath ceremonies, thus forcing the initiates to reach the necessary pitch of blood lust and degradation to make it possible for them to pronounce the ghastly words of the oath itself.

The only possible deduction to be drawn from the details of the bestiality and perversion connected with the ceremonies is the horrible one that we are now faced in Kenya with a terrorist organisation composed not of ordinary human beings fighting for a cause but of primitive beasts who have forsaken all moral codes in order to achieve the subjugation of the Kikuyu tribe and the ultimate massacre of the European population of the Colony.

That these terrible rituals and oaths drive the participants to honour their vows is only too apparent from the lurid list of atrocities committed by Mau Mau. Such atrocities include:

- (a) The Lari massacre;
- (b) Decapitation and general mutilation of victims;
- (c) Bodies bound up in sacks and dropped into wells;
- (d) Torture before murder;

- (e) Exhumation of bodies and eating the putrified flesh;
- (f) Drinking of human blood — (ex-chief Luka's child was cut in half, its blood drunk, and the two halves of the body were flung at the mother, who was then killed);
- (g) Death by hanging;
- (h) Pregnant women split open along the stomach;
- (i) Victims held down while their heads are slowly sawn off with pangas;
- (j) Maiming of cattle by hamstringing;
- (k) Cutting off the ears of persons who have not taken the oath so as to identify them in the future as Government loyalists.

These and other similar atrocities have been perpetrated against people of all races in Kenya.

Growing up side by side with and immersed in these horrors is the new generation of Kikuyu youth, which ever since reaching the age of reason has been indoctrinated, largely through the Kikuyu Independent Schools, with a hatred of the European, a fanatical admiration for Kenyatta, and a disregard for parental and tribal authority. These young men are the backbone of Mau Mau terrorism, and they owe no allegiance to the ordinary dictates of either Christian or pagan ethics.

Such then is the problem of Mau Mau. The gradual extermination of terrorists will in the end undoubtedly sway the majority of the Kikuyu tribe against terrorism as a means of achieving an end. There will remain, however, the need to lead the debased and unruly youth of the tribe to a better way of life. There is now, also, the need to dissuade the youth of other tribes from following the downward path of their Kikuyu counterparts. Normal means of rehabilitation are unlikely to succeed until the common law of discipline has been instilled and is obeyed.

#### HORRIBLE CEREMONIES

The following confessions given by Kikuyu who have taken these degrading oaths are quoted individually. It will be seen that the confessions give certain details that appear throughout.

Extract from statement by KARIOKI s/o NJEROGE to South Kinangop Screening Team:

"I was made to pay Shs. 10/0 to Mweru s/o Rugo. I took this oath along with: Mbae s/o Kanyi Karanga s/o Matitika Gachomo s/o Njiru Kamau s/o Munyau Gatete s/o Njuguna Karanja s/o Ngutu and Mungai s/o Kamau.

"my right hand I took a small stick about 6" long and poked it through the meat at the same time eating a small piece.

"This performance was repeated seven times and each time with a new stick. Each time the oath was taken the oath ran as follows:

1. Should I be ordered to burn the European crops I will do so and not turn back.
2. Should I be ordered to kill cattle I shall do so and not turn back.
3. Should it be possible for me to steal a firearm I will do so.
4. If I am ordered to kill, I will, no matter who it is.
5. In the event of me killing anyone I will cut their heads off, extract the eyeballs, and drink the liquid from them.
6. Should a gangster from the forest come with blood-stained clothing I must take them and supply him with new ones.
7. When I go to kill someone I must take with me a strangling rope, a small knife to extract the vic-

tim's eyes and a handkerchief to cover my hands against fingerprints.

"The above are the only oaths I know of that are given at a 'Platoon' ceremony."

Extract from a statement made by THEMU MAGU to J. M. HARVEY and R. S. HENDRY:

"I found a circle of bababa leaves, potatoes and sugar cane leaves and sorghum leaves. There was a girl there and Karanja. The ram which was used had been killed yesterday at General Charles' camp, and had been used for the fourth oath there.

arts were eaten by each man taking the oath. ... heard that she has taken five oaths. She was not a prostitute, but is one now.

"When I took the fourth oath three others took it, Wachira Gathuke, Magugu Githaiga and Gudo Mwasia.

"I was made to swear:

1. I was not to tell anyone about this oath.
2. To hate my father and mother.
3. To steal arms or anything else which would help Mau Mau.
4. Not to fall out with any Mau Mau.
5. To kill Europeans or Kikuyu if so ordered.
6. To steal money from Europeans.
7. To refuse orders from Europeans.
8. To kill any European."

#### PLATOON OATH

Extract from a statement made by THICA s/o MAKUTHA to South Kinangop Screening Team:

"This was a 'platoon' oath. No one wore any clothes and in the hut stuck to the floor with a stick was a bit of gristle from behind a goat's neck (Ngata in Kikuyu). Also seven sticks which I rubbed in the gristle as I took the oath. Also a piece of fatty meat which runs under the neck of the goat (Gisuir in Kikuyu). Into one end of the 'Gisuru' I inserted my penis while I chewed the other end of the 'Gisuru' and repeated these words:

1. If I do the platoon wrong they will kill me.
2. If either my wife or child does the platoon wrong, they will take either their heads or mine.
3. If I am told to kill a European I will do so, or be killed.
4. If I am told to burn a farmer's wheat or destroy his maize I will do so or die.
5. If I am told to kill or maim a farmer's cattle or sheep I will do so or lose my head.
6. If I am told to help release prisoners from jail, I will do so or this oath will kill me.
7. If the platoon wants my wife for any reason I will give her to them or they will take my head."

Extract from statement made by WAWEFI s/o CHUGU to R. K. S. Hendry:

"The fourth oath is taken as follows: