নৃবিজ্ঞান পত্রিকা, সংখ্যা ১৩, পৃ : ১৫-৩৮

Struggle of Their Own: Women and the Mau Mau in Colonial Kenya[i]

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On March 14, 1922, a crowd of approximately 7,500 people, including 150 women, assembled in front of the Nairobi Central Police Station. They were protesting the arrest of Harry Thuku, a Kikuyu nationalist leader, and demanding his release. Some African male leaders tried unsuccessfully to get Thuku released while others tried to persuade the crowd to disperse. In the crowd there was a woman named Mary Wanjiru. She was angry because Thuku was not being freed and because male nationalist leaders were compromising their stand on releasing Thuku. To emphasize her point and displeasure with male leadership, Wanjiru adopted a traditional Kikuyu insult, *guturama*, an act that entails showing female nakedness and insulting the manhood of the men in the audience. Mary Muthoni Wanjiru declared; "You take my dress and give me your trousers. You men are cowards. What are you waiting for? Our leader is in there; let us set him free" (Roseberg and Nothingham 1966: 52). Hearing this, the entire crowd surged towards the police station, and police guarding the station opened fire. Wanjiru's challenge and the women's ululations seemed to empower entire crowd, which refused to disperse. Meanwhile, nearby in the exclusively white settlers' Norfolk Hotel, white revelers watched the commotion and eventually opened fire on the fleeing crowd, killing 21 people (other reports indicate between 25 and 250 people were killed), 4 of them women, including Wanjiru. A great many were injured.

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This act of defiance was short-lived, and it failed to get Thuku released. However, some facts emerged from this spontaneous act of defiance. One such fact was that the leadership rested on a woman, who acted in opposition to men. Broadly speaking, this act showed that women could act decisively in a political situation. Significantly, it counters the myth that women in colonial societies are passive, docile, and submissive.

The colonial construction of the Kenyan woman as a "passive" sexual object and sight are intrinsic to colonial fantasy.[ii] Another example of female resistance against such colonialist stereotyping was the case of Mekatilili wa Menza, the leader of Giriama people of the coast. During the early twentieth century, she organized the Giriama revolt against the British, which took colonialists three years to subdue (Wa Thiong'o 1981: 46–48; Mugi-Ndua 2000; Johnson 1981). Mekatilili spoke of the theft of their land and humiliation by the British. In the Giriama territory, she established a parallel government and appointed Wanji Wa Mandoro to run it. The Giriama patriots fought bravely. The British, instead of recognizing sophisticated military strategy and the political character of the struggle, branded Mekatilili as a "witch" (Wa Thiong'o 1981: 47). Mekatilili and Mandoro were captured in November 1913 and were exiled in Gusiiland, far from the coast. On January 14, 1914, Mekatilili helped her fellow detainees escape from prison. Already an old woman, she walked all the way to the coast to resume resistance against the British. She was eventually captured on August 7, 1914, and detained. However, "She remained proud, defiant and unrepentant to the very end" (Wa Thiong'o 1981: 48).

The main objective of this paper is to further argue that women's participation in Mau Mau should be used to counter the representation and colonial construction of Kenyan women. The paper will argue that it is a mistake to confine women's role in Mau Mau to "passive participation" and points out that women were also active combatants.. Let us begin with the colonial construction of wome.

Colonial Construction of Kenyan Women

Let us start with the Belgian Congo. The narrator of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1975) describes a woman when he encounters her on the shores of the Congo River.

> She walked with measured steps, draped in striped and fringed cloths, treading the earth proudly, with a slight jingle and flash of barbarous ornaments. She carried her head high; her hair was done in the shape of a helmet; she had brass leggings to her knees, brass wire gauntlets to the elbow, a crimson spot on her tawny neck; bizarre things, charms, gifts of witch-men, that hung about her, glittered and trembled at every step. She must have had the value of several elephant tusks upon her. She was savage and superb, wild-eyed and magnificent; there was something ominous and stately in her deliberate progress. And in the hush that had fallen suddenly upon the whole sorrowful land, the immense wilderness, the colossal body of the fecund and mysterious life seemed to look at her, pensive, as though it had been looking at the image of its own tenebrous and passionate soul. (Conrad 1975: 87)

Here, according to Loomba (1998, 152), female bodies symbolized a conquered world. This symbolism was apparent in Kenya as well. In this section our primary objective is to offer a narrative analysis of the transformation that Kenyan women's lives have gone through under the impact of British colonialism. However, our emphasis will be to explore female commercial sexual activities, because the colonial discourse on women in Kenya always centers on this issue, making them an object of fantasy, surveillance, and control. Following Luise White (1990a: 35), we could argue that the impact of new means of economic production introduced into the conquered land fundamentally altered women's role in colonial Kenya and in turn compelled women to be engaged in commercial sexual exploitation.

Gavin Kitching (1980) has argued that during the period of 1905–18, while Britain established its foothold, the Kenyan social structure went through a rapid transformation. Kitching's main objective was to show, quantitatively and historically, the emergence of a new class in Kenya, which he identified as the "petty bourgeoisie," as an integral part of colonial transformation in Kenya (Kitching 1980 : 16–17). In precolonial times, the African labor force was engaged in

agricultural activities: livestock raising, hunting, and traditional economic activities. British colonialism changed all this. It created a new labor force associated with the colonial administration, including various kinds of service works like teaching, as well as semi-skilled and unskilled activities in the transportation sector. These new occupations, according to Kitching (1980: 120), further linked the new labor force to the newly installed colonial educational system. Kenyan agricultural land was now alienated from the native population and controlled by European settlers. Many in the new Kenyan agricultural labor force (squatters) were permanently settled on large European farms and were contractually obliged to live and work within the farms.[iii] British colonialism also transformed Kenyan businesses and the trade labor force. It undermined nineteenth-century caravan trading and introduced "new" forms of tradition, like the retail sale of food and drink. All of these changes had a definite impact on Kenyan women's lives and economic positions. In precolonial times, women's economic activities included engagement in household economies, as well as both local and regional trade, and played a primary role in food production (Presby 1986: 256). All this changed with the arrival of colonialism. Colonialism introduced a new economy with widespread use of money and commercialization that transformed production not only for market, but production for surplus. It also introduced a new view of women's life and work.

> Thousands of Kikuyu women became involved in new forms of agriculture, labor, and the double burden of indigenous agricultural production and labor for European farmers became part of the economic realities of their lives. (Presby 1986: 258)

Kanogo (2005) in her recent studies of Kenyan women under colonialism argues that colonial law played an important role in the construction of women, which "boiled down to the issue of control" (Kanogo 2005: 33). Indeed, the imposition of new colonial law lent a veneer of "improving" women's status, but in reality it was an attempt to control women's employment and health, as well as an attempt to prevent the movement of girls and women to both urban and rural areas (Kanogo 2005: 33). To colonial authorities, "flight to Nairobi (on the part of Kenyan women) was perceived as an obvious

route to prostitution" (Kanogo 2005: 33). We will return to this issue later in this section.

Another aspect of the process noticed by Norman Leys is that during the early phase of colonialism in Kenya, colonial authorities made every effort to "make him [the male wage laborer] leave home to work for alien and often absentee landlords" (1926: 306). These wage-earners, according to Leys, quite often failed to return home, and this led to the abandonment of tribal and village ties (1926: 308). At the same time, the colonial authorities adopted various draconian laws to make sure that male wage earners returned to work to ensure proper collection of taxes. This attempt was not entirely successful, but the process of forced recruitment of laborers continued (Van Zwanenberg 1975: 167). This process of the emergence and recruitment of wage earners has significant impact on the sexual construction of women in colonial Kenya. The emergence of Kikuyu women as wage earners in British agriculture plantations and the failure of male wage-earners have greatly facilitated the emergence of commercial sex workers in Kenya (White 1990, 37).[iv]

Closely related to the process of the emergence of wage earners is the young men's access to cash with which they could purchase cattle as payment for bride wealth. With the increase of bride wealth, the price and demand for cattle also rose. Fathers increasingly felt that daughters would bring more livestock into the family, so the daughters were married off to suitors who could provide more cattle. For a young man, the only way to acquire bride wealth was through wage labor that the British introduced. This process however, was often lengthy and cumbersome.

According to White, this helped bring about "entrepreneurial prostitutes" who used their earnings from the repeated sale of sexual relations to acquire livestock (White 1990: 37). This connection between the colonial construction of sexuality and prostitution is further elucidated in Nairobi during the last century.

> When we went to pick beans, we sometimes found these Kibura men, so it was extra money; we went to pick beans and had a man in secret. Sometimes a woman would go there just for the men, she would take a *gunnia* (gunny sack) so that no one would be suspicious, it looked like she

> was going to pick beans but she would use the *gunnia* as a blanket [...]. When they saw a woman lying on her *gunnia* they would take out their money, and she would motion for him to lie down with her. They paid us and sometimes they gave us babies, so we were rich, we had money and babies that way. (White 1990a: 41)

We began this section by pointing that "conquering land" by colonialism is equated with "conquering women's bodies;" hence controlling them. Thus, the management of colonized land involved domination and control. This, as Ann Laura Stoler informs us, was "fundamental to the colonial order of things" (1995: 4). This "colonial order of things" in Kenya was constructed according to particular relations of ruling that involved forms of knowledge and an institutional structure of sexual, racial, and class regulation and domination, which in turn shaped its resistance and subversion. In other words, a large part of the ideological construction of the *colonial order of things* designated white masculinity as the norm, with the corresponding racialization and sexualization of colonialized people (Mohanty et al. 1991: 15).

The colonialist project and *colonial order of things* were fundamentally of the patriarchal/masculine Europe self. This masculine "self" penetrated the colonial world, thus masculinizing colonization. This binary relationship between the colonial and colonized leads to particular relations of rule and forms of knowledge. The forms of knowledge are based on rigid and hierarchical division between the colonizers and the colonized. The physical, symbolic, and sexual relations between colonial master and the colonized subject were essential in maintaining social distance, power, and authority over the latter, that is, colonized subjectivity. The colonial master is represented as an "English gentleman" who embodied authority, discipline, fidelity, and chastity, as well as being one born to govern. Within these rigid social and sexual boundaries, the colonized were described not as simple and innocent but—especially in the case of colonized women—as promiscuous, loose, and immoral. This is the fundamental idea of the colonial construction of women. This explains the almost paranoid colonial

obsession regarding prostitution and venereal diseases and the colonial state's stern warning against soldiers and administrators consorting with native women.

Helen Callaway (1987) reports that in 1909 Lord Gewe issued a confidential circular regarding "proper behavior" of colonial officers in Africa; the circular, known as the "concubinage circular," warned white colonial officers against socializing with native women because it would later affect their effectiveness as rulers. This is a good example of constructing and regulating sexuality of native women by dichotomizing between the "available native women" and "colonial administrators" or "white men." This dichotomy, once again, is created in terms of the overall colonial project. However, the colonial construction of sexuality in Kenya was also relayed through official attitudes towards prostitution and venereal diseases, which White (1990a) calls "a colonial obsession"(37). This connection between venereal disease and prostitution worried the colonial military authorities greatly.

A military intelligence report of October 1942, issued by the Central Province Provincial Commissioner's office, reported that:

> An unfortunate rumor went round two locations during the month that young native girls were about to be conscripted for immoral purposes into the military; as a result some 30 to 40 girls were reported to have bolted to Nairobi. A rescue party of one Tribal Police man and 2 Njamas has set out to find them and return them. (KNA/PC/CP/13/1/1)

The "obsession" with venereal disease was clearly a high priority on the colonial agenda, since venereal disease was seen as having a negative effect on the military, and the military was the main vehicle for maintaining colonial authority. Thus the 1942 military Intelligence Report by the Central Province's Provincial Commission's office read, "Venereal disease at Nanyuki continued to attract attention. The military have undertaken the treatment of women during the month and the results on the troops have been highly satisfactory" (KNA/PC/CP/ 13/1/1). And again,

> The problem of venereal diseases among the troops has been tackled during the month [October 1942]. The administration made available a plot in the native village, and a temporary E. 1. [emergency clinic] has been erected where the military treat the local prostitutes with drugs supplied. The incidence of the disease has been found to be appalling and

> once more this emphasizes the urgency for better medical facilities at. Nanyuki (KNA/PC/CP./13/1/1)

During the Mau Mau period, prostitution was connected with "law and order." Various attempts have been made to show that prostitutes, especially around the Nairobi area, were helping Mau Mau. In a letter to Nairobi's Commissioner of Police, an informer who identified himself/herself as "Jamay" wrote:

> I wish to inform you that near the post-office, Limuru, live some common prostitutes with their male friends. They sell Kikuyu Beer in great quantities and commit adultery with any one they find. One of the prostitutes is called Joyce. She lives with a Jaluo friend named Samuel. The other is called Valeli and she lives with a Jaluo named Otieno. Besides these two, there are many other Kikuyu prostitutes who also live there. The two prostitutes Joyce and Valeli are members of the Mau Mau Movement and supply Mau Mau gangsters with some foodstuff and that is why they are selling liquor in great quantities. (KNA/AM /1/13)

This is once again an attempt to connect sexuality, and specifically prostitution, with "law and order" in colonial Kenya, as combating the Mau Mau menace to the colonial authorities was definitely a "law and order" issue.

Thus the colonial construction of Kenyan women has two important aspects to it. First, the transformation of the colonial social structure transformed many women, especially Kikuyu women from Central Province, into wage laborers in white-owned farms; second, the creation of women wage earners also made numerous women, especially in urban areas like Nairobi, enter prostitution (White 1990). Thus, wage workers and sex workers are the two most important aspects of the colonial construction of women in colonial Kenya.

Women of Fort Hall, Central Province

Located a mile from the Mathioya River in Murang'a District of Central Province, the Fort Hall area is an important area of Central Province. It was established by a colonialist pioneer named Francis E. Hall, who in 1900 left Machakos with 40 armed porters and a company of East African Rifles to found a station to which he eventually attached his name. In 1902 Fort Hall was connected with other parts of Kenya when 100 miles of road were constructed

linking Fort Hall with the Thika River and Tuso, Kiongu, and Mozera. Another road connected Fort Hall with Nairobi via Kiambu. Trouble started in Fort Hall during the 1930s. In 1934, three people belonging to a secret society known as watu wa Mungu were killed by the colonial police. Although not much was known about the society, it could be argued that the society was aimed at establishing a covert political movement against the colonial authorities' soil conservation policies in Central Province, which included terracing, intercropping, and planting trees on steep slopes. In 1934, an Annual Report by the District Commissioner (DC) of the Fort Hall area described the society in this manner:

> Enquiries carried out in Fort Hall District showed that though the movement was confined to a fractional proportion of the population, it had shown signs of a revival during the early part of the year. Steps were taken to quell the movement in the two locations to which it was confined. It is unlikely that this movement, which is a subject for division by the majority of the population, would even attract a large membership. (KNA/DC/FH/6/1)

Women's participation in Watu wa Mungu was not documented, although it can be safely argued that various soil conservation works initiated by colonialists adversely affected their lives. Both men and women were forced to work long hours with little pay. Moreover, because up to 50 percent of Kikuyu men were short-term migrant laborers, and so not always available to work on family plots, the bulk of the additional labor fell on women, and women's labor hours were dramatically increased (Kanogo 1993: 83).

Perhaps the first rebellion against this situation started on July 20, 1946, when a large meeting in the Fort Hall area was organized by the Kenya African Union (KAU).

> It was decided in the meeting that in future no women would take part in the terracing work of the district. This was unfortunate, since amongst the very considerable bands of persons who dug and conserved their soil, more than 50 percent were women. On Monday, July 21st, no women came to work and the men were left to carry on by themselves. It was obvious by the middle of August that not only did the men not wish to do so but also had generally decided that all work would stop. (KNA/DC/FH 1/26, Fort Hall Annual Report 1947, 1)

Various "harsh measures" were taken to ensure resumption of

terracing activities, and by October and November, the District Commissioner reported that work had started but "the women had not returned" (1). This work stoppage continued in 1948, a year that the DC, in his Annual Report of 1948, described as the year of "the revolt of the women (KNA/DC/FH1/27. Fort Hall Annual Report, 1948: 1). In this particular Annual Report on Fort Hall, some interesting facts emerged.

First, the report indicated collaboration of colonial chiefs with the colonial authorities in the policy of the colonial state; second, it detailed defiance by women of the colonial authorities. Chief Ndungu of Fort Hall area managed to persuade his "recalcitrant females to return" to work (KNA/DC/FH1/27. Fort Hall Annual Report, 1948, 1). It was also decided at a local native council (a colonial organ mostly organized by the state) that women "should return to soil conservation work" (KNA/DC/FH1/27. Fort Hall Annual Report, 1948, 1). Women, however, felt otherwise.

> On the 14th April, 2,500 women arrived in the station from Chief Peterson's location and danced and sang and informed everyone that they would not take part in soil conservation measures mainly because they felt that they had quite enough to do at home. (KNA/DC/FH1/27. Fort Hall Annual Report, 1948: 1)

The situation deteriorated rapidly. In early May of that year, women decided not to plant grass for purposes of soil conservation. Losing patience, colonial Chief Petersen arrested the women who refused to work.

> He (Chief Peterson) issued orders to certain women to plant grass on their own land and they refused. He proudly arrested them on May 4th and they were as quickly released by a large crowd of their own sex brandishing stickers and shouting Amazonian war cries. (KNA/DC/FH1/27. Fort Hall Annual Report, 1948: 2)

This is a remarkable incident. It began as a fairly innocent "work stoppage," a potent weapon for subaltern militancy, which eventually transformed itself into a frontal assault, that is, freeing comrades from detention. The strategy was not static—it changed when state repression, that is, the colonial Chief's method of striking women, changed.

The Fort Hall Women's revolt continued until 1951, about the same

time the Mau Mau rebellion began. At the beginning of the 1950s, colonialists began to inoculate stock against rinderpest. This might have been intended as a benevolent act on the part of the colonialist, but the villages from Fort Hall had a different interpretation of the situation because a large number of cattle began to die after they were inoculated.

> A particularly anti-government meeting was held in September and thereafter an anti-rinderpest inoculation campaign started. As a result large numbers of women from seven locations banded together to protest against inoculations during the first fortnight of November, ending up by burying 11 cattle carcasses. They were finally dispersed by the police and over 500 of them were convicted, many to a term of imprisonment. (KNA/DC/FH1/30. Fort Hall Annual Report 1951)

The anti-inoculation protest turned violent in Murang'a District, where hundreds of women descended on inoculation centers, burned down the cattle chutes, and chased away inoculation officials. Hundreds of women were arrested in the mêlée and scores were injured. However, colonial authority was always reluctant to give credit to women's political consciences and activism. Thus the DC in his report of 1948 argued:

> There can be no doubt whatsoever that they (women) did not do this on their own and were spurred on to the demonstrations by a small clique of young men usually resident in Nairobi, who were and still are, determined to prevent any real progress in an area which for a gross display of over cultivation, lack of fertility and over grazing can not be better any where in the district. (KNA/DC/FHII/27. Fort Hall Annual Report, 1948: 2)

The District Commissioner wanted to see women return to work and their political activism cease; however, women's participation in the Mau Mau revolt proved that women's political consciousness had, on the contrary, matured and expanded. This time their objective was bigger: the end of colonialism. To celebrate the Murrang'a (Fort Hall) women's protest against colonial authority, this song was composed:

> Women of Murang'a
> We, the women of Murang'a were arrested
> For refusing to have our goats and cattle poisoned.
> And because we rejected such colonial laws
> We were thrown into prison cells

And our children were wailing
Because they had no milk to drink. (wa Kinyatti 1990: 60)

Women's Participation in Mau Mau: A General Analysis

H. K. Wachanga (1999) in his autobiography described Mau Mau as a battle near Mount Kenya beginning late 1953. There a Mau Mau battalion was formed by Generals China and Tangauika and Brigadier Rui. The battalion camped in Kiriumukuyu near the Tumutumu Mission. The following morning, a young woman named Kanguniu warned the Mau Mau fighters that the British security were aware of their presence and were moving towards them. General China's battalion fought the British soldiers, who attacked with planes and long range artillery, but the Mau Mau fighters reached the Tumutumu Hill camp, and from there the safety of Mt. Kenya forest base. The Mau Mau lost 21 soldiers; the British lost 61. The report by the young girl Kanguniu saved more than a thousand lives (Wachanga 1975: 70). A song that the Mau Mau fighters wrote to commemorate the success goes in part,

Good luck came through one girl
Whose name was Kanguniu with her warnings to us.
She saved many of our lives. (Wachanga 1999: 70–71)

Kanguniu was not an actual combatant in the war, but her timely warning saved a thousand combatant lives, which is no less important than the actual fighting. While describing women's role in the Mau Mau revolt, this is a very important issue to keep in mind.
The prelude of any revolt against oppression starts with a great deal of organization and the accumulation of logistics like weaponry in a situation of armed struggle. Oathing was preparation for the Mau Mau. The clandestine Mau Mau oath, as Gachihi informs, began in 1947 in the Rift Valley, and the Central Province followed suit in 1952 (Gachihi 1986: 107). The oath, despite being described in colonial state propaganda as "vile savagery" with "disgusting perversions" was to become the strongest binding factor that created a common bond of secrecy and defiance among those who took part in it. And women of Central Province actively took part in Mau Mau oathing.

Women not only took an active part in these oath-taking ceremonies

but also were bound by them. The District Commissioner, Embu, records that the women took the oath in the Baricho area after all the men had done so (KNA/ARC/(MAA)-2/3/36VII Central Province Annual Report, 1953: 3).

However, it should be pointed out that oathing does not translate into participation in actual combat. Some of the women were further categorized and assigned to different tasks in the movement:

> 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. (Gachihi 1986: 109)

Recruitment and participation of both women and men in the revolt should be categorized as follows: (1) recruitment through oathing; (2) oath takers who showed considerable commitment to the cause were given active roles including participation in combat duties. This distinction between the "passive wing" (support wing) and the "military wing" should be seen in this conceptual distinction in recruitment and participation. At the beginning of the chapter we provided an example of women's political agitation in colonial Kenya, long before the outbreak of Mau Mau. This political agitation against different policies of colonialism continued and finally culminated in their participation in Mau Mau. Indeed, women's participation in both combat and support wing were vitally important in the guerrilla war situation. However, women's participation in Mau Mau can be seen through different conceptual lenses. In any military campaign, there are two interrelated strategies: (1) actual combat or frontal assault of the enemy with armed cadres and (2) network or support systems. The latter usually involve intelligence gathering (especially on enemy troop movements), providing shelter and food, and other logistics. In guerrilla war situations, that often involves ambushing and hit-and-run attacks. The importance of this second strategy cannot be overestimated.

Women and the Passive Wing of Mau Mau

Santorou (1996: 256) distinguishes the women who participated in the Mau Mau revolt in two categories, as discussed above: the passive wing and the military wing. "Passive" is essentially a term that colonialists used to identify and describe women's participation, meaning the network that was established among the population to give support to the "military wing" that did the actual combat.

The colonial government was informed about the activities of the "passive wing." "The part played by women to aid the terrorist was considerable. [...] [They] carried food to gangs in the forests and some were caught dressed as *askaris*" (KNA/ARC/(MAA)-2/3/36. Central Province Arrival Report, 1953). And again, "In September, the Chura location appeared to become a center of the Mau Mau central committee, and every Itura had its own sub-committee, nor did they lack a women's section. The latter [...] may well be described as 'the eyes and ears of Mau Mau'" (KNA/AR/326/KBU/44. Annual Report, p. 1).

Though the government was quite aware of women's role in Mau Mau, it was unable to pinpoint exactly what role they played in the revolt. Quite a number of women were identified as "spies" and "couriers" and the "eyes and ears of Mau Mau." That might be so because quite a few women were also active in the military wing as well. In the Mwathe meeting at the Aberdare forest in August 1953, it was decided that women should be commissioned "up to the ranks of colonial women officers" on the basis of their abilities as warriors, which they were henceforth to be considered, along with the men (Barnett and Njama 1966, 227). As early as 1953, the colonial government had realized that women were not only active members of Mau Mau, providing essential commodities or acting as food carriers, but also that some of them were actually combatants in the Mount Kenya and Nyandarua forests. In a government press release quoted in the then most widely read daily, the *East African Standard*, a commentary, typical of many others that 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. (*East African Standard* October [date], 1953)

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 women in the struggle who were part of the guerrilla forces in the forest should not be overemphasized. The major reason for this is that 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.

Not all women who took to the forest were considered to be combatants. This arises from the mistaken assessment of fighters solely on the basis of their military potentialities. 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 auxiliary corps 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 that women, regardless of whether they entered into actual combat, played an essential role in support activities such as transport, signals, medical corps, and ordnance. Disregarding the importance of these tasks to the struggle is a serious omission that disregards the role played by women in Mau Mau and thus undermines the role they played in the revolt. Presley argues,

> Women did, indeed, provide a backbone for Mau Mau. Since the women's chain of command had been established as early as the 1940s, the leadership in the hierarchy knew the degree of commitment of women in the entire district and had an efficient means of increasing the numbers of women who were associated with Mau Mau. (Preseley 1992: 131)

The so-called passive wing of Mau Mau women includes their participation in transportation activities as well. Women did this in conjunction with the men. Combatants 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. Medical provisions had to be obtained somehow. Some camps even had their own hospitals full of drugs obtained from drugstores where Mau Mau fighters had reliable allies. Women often aided the doctors by not only looking after the stock but also by 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; many forest fighters remembered women transporting essential camp equipment. The bulk of women in the camp clustered around the actual fighters as support wings. They had an assortment of duties according to the priorities of each camp. There were cooks, those who went on food-gathering missions, couriers, transporters, and so on.

Anna Wamuyu Kabubi, alias Cinda Reri, argues that women who found themselves as a part of the passive wing 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, and some felt that women should not have been allowed to stay in the forest in the first place. Others felt that women were welcome to stay in the forest as long as they did so purely as supporters. The great Mwathe meeting of August 18, 1953, clearly reflects this conflict. Some of the 56 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" (Barnett and Njama 1966: 240). Mathenge, on the other hand, proposed that no differentiation be made between the male fighters and women participants. On the whole, it appears that camp leaders made independent decisions on how duties were allocated in their own camps.

Another passive role that women played in the struggle was in the security of the camps. The easiest way that the colonial troops could catch the fighters was by following trails that showed signs of recent

activities in an area. Therefore, after the fighters had evacuated a camp, for one reason or the other, it was important that all traces of previous occupation in that camp be totally wiped out. This applied more so in situations where 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, leveling it was not such an easy 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 played contributed to the good of the whole camp and, in turn, to the success of all the freedom fighters in their struggle. Indeed, in the Mau Mau struggle the activities of the "passive wing" were as vital as those of the military wing for the survival of the revolt itself.

Women and the Military Wing of Mau Mau

As the following interview with Cinda Reri in the next section will reveal, alongside the women in the support wing were some women in the forest who did actively engage in military combat. Actual participants tell of years spent in the forest, not just as supporters of the male fighting forces but as *itungati* (warriors), the term used explicitly to refer to the actual fighters. Their male counterparts have given varying versions of the usefulness of women in the forest. Karari Njama, for example, goes as far as saying that women, in fact, posed problems for other fighters by becoming more of a liability than an asset in the forest operations (Barnett and Njama 1966: 240). There are other cases where it is outright denied that women had been involved in any of the skirmishes. This latter suggestion is immediately refuted by several sources of evidence and accounts of events that tell of some heroic deeds in which women fighters were engaged. Much of this evidence has been preserved in Mau Mau songs (wa Kinyatti 1990). In one such song, for example,

> "Kimathi's wife was the secretary
> Of the gallant fighting women's wing

Bren-gunned in their hideouts by the enemy." (wa Kinyatti 1990: 103)

In this stanza alone, it is quite clear that there were women combatants in the forest comparable to men. Indeed, individual women emerged as outstanding fighters. A woman like Njoki Waicere from Murang'a, for example, was recognized among the fighters for her courage (Itote 1979, 139, 140). She and five other young women had tricked the Home Guards out of their guns in the Uhuru Camp in Maragua, where almost two thousand fighters were detained. Njoki and her colleagues were consequently welcomed to remain with the forest fighters, where they took weapons and fought many battles. As mentioned earlier, women in Kairo, Murang'a, 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 colonial troops from crossing the river.

Renowned women fighters—such as Marshal Muthoni and Cinda Reri—made names for themselves as combatants. Marshal Muthoni, born in 1931, went into the forest in 1953 at the age of 22 and remained there until December 12, 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."[iii] In other words, there was no distinction between the tasks she had to perform and what the 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 the Rui Ruiru River, in which the enemy forces mistook 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.

Cinda Reri alone had 200 women under her command, a fact that is easily verified by those who were in the forest with her. Such women were allocated duties which included 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.

Many of the women fighters, however, fled into the forest after finding life in the reserves unbearable, especially those who were in the Home Guards' "bad books." Women in the Mau Mau villages were often beaten by the Home Guards. Those 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 made life particularly difficult for women they were attracted to. 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 colonial authorities during oathing ceremonies and had consequently fled into the forest to avoid the suffering that inevitably followed.

By whatever means and for whatever reasons, women had gone into the forest. If they were to survive, they had to learn some basic warfare and, more importantly, how to adapt to life there. This, of course, was also true of the other fighters, since the roles that women played were also closely related to those assigned to men. New recruits, whether men or women, learned basic warfare, especially how to handle and clean guns. Not all fighters were involved in actual combat. Since there were relatively very few guns, recruits were also 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 eradicating 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. For example, 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 generally organized into platoons. Most of the recruits lacked any military training, but some of the leaders were ex-servicemen, and they therefore employed the model drawn from their military and civil experiences (Roseberg and Nottingham 1966, 297).

Women rarely rose to positions of overall leadership; nevertheless, some groups of women had their own leaders. These women were useful as representatives of women's interests, especially in general meetings. This was unlike the situation in the reserves, where women contacts and leaders were well established, with equal responsibilities equal to their male fellow commanders. Women leaders in both the reserves and the forests, however, had one thing in common: they rose to positions of prominence in the movement because they 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 in women leaders. It was generally recognized that lack of these qualities could lead to a tragic end for many fighters.

The story of Cinda Reri is an example of a fighter who became recognized through her acts of courage, which earned her the leadership of over 200 women in the forest. Details of her life in the forest reveal that her involvement with Mau Mau began as far back as 1951 when she became a Mau Mau contact in Nyeri. 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 sympathizer, Odede, who was a locomotive 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 because she came under increasing 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 in the series of Mau Mau oaths that she participated in.
In an interview Reri said,

> When Kenyatta returned home from London in 1946, there were many political activities taking place, and lots pf people were taking the oath. I took oath in 1948 and was among the first group of people who took oath. In my group there were many girls who took oath. That was essentially a

> KAU (Kenya Africa Union) oath. It was not a call for arms oath. The main objective of the oath was to recruit other girls into the movement and get them to take the oath. It was to create a political consciousness. The oath was administered differently based on what specific role an individual was assigned to play in the movement. My role was to recruit girls for the movement.

On the issue negative portrayal of oathing by the colonialist, Reri defended the practice this way.

I understand the whole topic of the oath is very controversial, and colonialists tried to belittle the Mau Mau movement by using the oath as a weapon. But to me the oath was very important for the movement. It was meant to bind people together around a political cause. It was a binding force to create a sense of solidarity and friendship among the people. After the first oath, which Reri took in 1951 and which aimed at initiating recruits into an understanding of how the land was appropriated by the white men, Reri was convinced that it was necessary—in fact, vital—to use force to regain the stolen land.

After the first oath, which Reri took in 1951 and which aimed at initiating recruits into an understanding of how the land was appropriated by the white men, Reri was convinced that it was necessary—in fact, vital—to use force to regain the stolen land. The oath was an effort 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. Owing to their relatively small numbers, the contribution to the effectiveness of the movement of the majority of women who went to the forest was not so much in the battlefield but rather in their selfless sacrifice in the support wing. Women who helped transport military supplies and victuals, those stationed to care for the sick and wounded, and 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. Sometime women's participation in revolt transformed from "passive wing" to combat position, as illustrated by Cenda Reri's case.

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, because all these fighters lived as one entity in the forest. Conflict between male fighters was because there were so many grounds for friction. Gachihi (1986), by interviewing many female Mau Mau combatants, forcefully refutes Karari Njama's assertion that 70 percent of all the women in the forest had been lured or abducted by Mau Mau fighters and that their presence was more detrimental to the cause than it was positive. Indeed, the following interview with Mau Mau commander Cind Reri will further refute Njama's assertion and prove that women's presence in the revolt was very much an asset for the cause.

Conclusion

For any revolutionary movement to succeed there must be plans both organizational and military. Mau Mau was no exception. It was a revolutionary movement against colonial oppression. The first phase of the movement involved establishing a network, contacts and a support base. Afterwards, the revolt was gradually transformed into a military campaign. These two phases are inseparable. Indeed, the success of the latter depends on the former. Women participated actively in both phases of the movement. The rigid distinction between the so-called "passive wing" and the "military wing" may be misleading, since women participated in both of these activities.

In a way, the women's role in the revolt is more prominent and noteworthy because they were active in both the passive wing and the military wing, as suggested by Cenda Reri's testimony. They carried guns and fought, and they were also involved in the intelligence work, as well maintenance of the forest camps, thus debunking the persistent colonial myth that women in colonial situations are merely sexual objects. I believe Cenda Reri's testimony shows the need for the construction of "autonomous gender subjectivities" that need to be incorporated while writing the history of Mau Mau.

Notes

i. Materials for the article was collected when the author was a Fulbright Senior Fellow in Kenya during 2000-01 and 2001-2002 and again as a Fulbright Senior Specialist (June-July 2003).

ii. For an analysis and photographic representation of colonial (native) women as a sexual fantasy for the colonialist, see Malek 1986.

iii. A squatter as understood in South Africa was an African permitted to reside on a European farmer's land, usually under the condition that he work for the European owner for a specified period. In return for his services, the African was entitled to use some of the settler's land for the purposes of cultivation and grazing (Kanago 1987, 10).

Kanago (1987, 10) further argues that by July 1910, 11,647 Kikuyu squatters on the Kiambu-Limuru area were cultivating 11,300 acres of white plantations, land that was once owned by the squatters themselves.

iv. For a detailed analysis of Marshal Muthoni's experience in the Mau Mau revolt, see Njagi 1993.

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