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A BIOGRAPHY OF "FIELD MARSHAL" MUTHONI KIRIMA OF THE
MAU MAU MOVEMENT, 1930- 2015



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A Thesis Submitted to the Board of Post Graduate Studies in Partial Fulfillment of
the Requirements for the Award of the Master of Arts Degree in History of Egerton
University



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DECLARATION AND RECOMMENDATION

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This thesis is my original work and has not been presented for examination in any other Institution.

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this research work to my wife, Hilda Jebichii Kinyua, and daughter, Nini Wangui Kinyua, for their unwavering support and patience through the resource and time engaging research process.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I acknowledge the almighty God for his enormous blessings showered upon me and the guidance he has constantly given me. Secondly, I would like to acknowledge Egerton University for the opportunity granted to undertake my studies. I wish to express my sincere gratitude and acknowledge my supervisors: Prof. R. M. Matheka and Dr. B.K. Onyancha for their guidance and help throughout this research. The skills and knowledge that I have gained are things that I will take with me into my next professional endeavor. I look forward to whatever challenges that come my way knowing that I am prepared to take them on. Lastly, I appreciate Muthoni Kirima for allowing me to write her biography and all Mau Mau veterans who gave me invaluable information on my research subject.

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ABSTRACT

Many studies have been carried out on the Mau Mau Movement but women leadership in the movement has generally been overlooked. This biographical study of Field Marshal Muthoni Kirima aimed at filling the gender gap in studies on the movement's leadership. The main objective of the study was to examine Muthoni's life, emphasizing her role in the movement as a leader and combatant. The scope of the study was the colonial and post-colonial period in Kenya. Extensive literature review was done along the following broad themes: Muthoni's early life, her contribution to the movement, role of women in Mau Mau in general, autobiographies by former Mau Mau fighters, biographies on Kenya's historical figures and theoretical review of preceding studies on the Mau Mau. The study was informed by the Great Woman Theory, a variant of the Great Man Theory. The study used the Patriarchy Theory to examine the role of gender in role allocation among the forest fighters. Descriptive Research Design was used to collect data on Muthoni's early life, her contribution to the Mau Mau movement and her life after the movement. Primary data was collected through interviews with Muthoni, Mau Mau Veterans, family and other people with credible information about her; focused group discussion with Mau Mau veterans; as well as review of Mau Mau memoirs. Archival sources were used to corroborate field data. Secondary sources were used to complement primary data. Collected data was processed and analyzed through coding process, verification and conclusion drawing. Field research was carried out in Nyeri, Nyandarua and Laikipia Counties. The County of Nyeri was the main research area as it lies between Mount Kenya and Aberdares forests, the battle field for the Mau Mau and Muthoni's residence. The study found out that women contributed to Mau Mau leadership and in combat despite a strong patriarchal establishment that sought to keep them out of these roles through stereotypes and taboos related to the woman body. Although Muthoni is the only known female to have sustained the guerilla spirit until 1963, her claim to the rank of Mau Mau field marshal in her own right attracts sharp criticism from her contemporaries. The study found out that Muthoni was not a Mau Mau Field Marshal in real sense but believes she deserves the title for her service to the movement up to 1963. Nonetheless, she is a true Mau Mau heroine and a patriot worth emulating. The findings were disseminated descriptively.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS

AIPCK	African Independent Pentecostal Church of Kenya
DO	District Officer
ICFTU	International Confederation of Free Trade Unions
KAR	Kings African Rifles
KAU	Kenya African Union
KCA	Kikuyu Central Association
KFRTU	Kenya Federation of Registered Trade Union
KLFA	Kenya Land and Freedom Army
KNA	Kenya National Archives
KNHREC	Kenya Human Rights and Equality Commission
KNLS	Kenya National Library Services
LSK	Law Society of Kenya
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
PCEA	Presbyterian Church of East Africa
ZANU	Zimbabwe African National Union

DEFINITION OF TERMS

- Biography:** Study of the life of a person with emphasis on a particular event.
- Field marshal:** The highest rank in the Mau Mau movement. It was borrowed from the British military organization in which it was second only to the commander-in-chief. Promotion to this rank required extraordinary military achievement, especially wartime, by a general.
- Mau Mau:** A guerilla movement that fought for independence in Kenya. Some members of the movement prefer the military title Kenya Land and Freedom Army (KLFA). Some scholars claim that Mau Mau was an anagram of *Uma Uma* (which means get out! get out!). Today the movement is popularly known as the Mau Mau, a word that has no meaning in Kikuyu.
- Movement:** A social movement that seeks enhanced political autonomy.
- Pseudo-gangs:** A group of former renegade Mau Mau who were used by the colonial government to infiltrate the movement. These were Mau Mau who either surrendered or were arrested by the colonial forces.

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background to the Study

In the year 2013, the British Government accepted responsibility for the atrocities committed by its colonial administration in Kenya against the Mau Mau and agreed to compensate the victims. This triggered activity at the grassroots with the Mau Mau veterans regrouping themselves in anticipation of benefiting from the payout. The veterans have revitalized the existing Mau Mau veterans' offices and also opened new ones. This is especially so in Central Kenya and other parts of the country with high concentration of the Kikuyu community. There have been concerns from the British Government on the actual number of rightful beneficiaries even as "It offered Shs. 2.5 billion for compensation of 5,228 Mau Mau survivors".¹ The figure has been challenged by the veterans as low considering the damages meted to them. For the second time in history, Mau Mau veterans have united against the British, this time round the war is on the court floor rather than in the Aberdares or Mount Kenya forests. This development has also triggered contests between professional bodies such as the Law Society of Kenya (LSK) and the Kenya National Human Rights and Equality Commission (KNHREC) with the former accusing the latter of having "purported to practice law or giving legal services in Kenya without a valid permit".²

The Mau Mau compensation saga has also reawakened the interest of scholars and journalists in various aspects of the movement. One of the veterans often interviewed by these groups for insights into the movement is Field Marshal Muthoni Kirima. The interviews on the whole have focused on her opinion about treatment of Mau Mau veterans by the government in the post-independent era and the compensation issue. Important questions about her life and her role in the movement have not been asked. Although pieces of information about her often surface on the media and books, nothing substantive has been discussed.

¹ Abiud Ochieng, "Lawyers Battle it out for Mau Mau Billions," *Daily Nation*, 16 February 2015
Retrieved from www.nation.co.ke on 20 February 2015.

²Ibid.

The first attempt to write the life story of Muthoni was by Ruth Karani. Karani's story depicts Muthoni as a brave person not only in battle field but also in her childhood when she supposedly killed a rhino to protect her father's goats. The story however does leave gaps on her early life, marriage, motivation for joining the KLFA, her rise through ranks, leadership, challenges as a female leader in a male-dominated guerilla movement, her life in the forest between 1956(when Mau Mau was defeated) and her leaving the forest in 1963, or even her life after the Mau Mau movement to this date.³ Like other women leaders of the Mau Mau, her role in the movement has been generally ignored.

There exists a knowledge gap on women and leadership within the Mau Mau movement. Members of the Mau Mau were predominantly Kikuyu. In the traditional set up, "Kikuyu women had no political right".⁴ This was caused by the sexual division of labour which put political power in the hands of men. During the pre-colonial period, women played little role in Kikuyu military organization too. In 1952, this status quo was challenged as the Kikuyu women who took up arms in a guerilla war against the British alongside men. What led to the radicalization of Kikuyu women to the extent of fighting in a guerilla war? The interplay between the traditional Kikuyu way of life and the establishment of the colonial rule in Kenya had profound impact on Kikuyu girls. The livelihood of the pre-colonial Agikuyu was based on land. Food production was in the hands of the community's women. The pioneering activities of the British in Kenya such as building centres of administration as well as building transport and communication lines directly infringed on the role of Kikuyu women in feeding their community. Their land was also suitable for European settlement and farming. Thus in terms of land alienation "the chief losers were the Agikuyu".⁵ Throughout the colonial period, loss of land remained a major grievance for the Agikuyu.

³ R. W. Karani, *Field Marshal Muthoni Kirima: Mau Mau Heroine* (Nairobi: Sasa Sema Publishers, 2005)

⁴ L. S. B. Leakey, *The Southern Kikuyu before 1903* Vol III (New York: Academic Press, 1977), p.9

⁵ A. A. Boahen, (Ed.) *General History of Africa, Vol. VII: Africa Under Colonial Domination, 1880-1935* (Paris: UNESCO, 2000), p.386.

The years after the Second World War saw a renewed wave of nationalism in Africa. In Kenya the British had recruited Kikuyu men as soldiers, porters and scouts promising them land and other “privileges” not enjoyed by Africans then. After the war, the colonial authorities refused to compensate Africans for their war effort. The disappointed soldiers joined hands with radicals within Kenya African Union (KAU) and members of the Kikuyu community who had been displaced from their land to form the Kenya Freedom and Land Army (KLFA). KLFA staged a guerilla war against the British between 1952 and 1956. Some fighters like Muthoni remained at the battle front up to 1963, seven years after the end of Mau Mau war. Young men and women mainly from Central Kenya fought against the British for freedom and land. Although they lost the war, their effort speeded up the pace of decolonization in Kenya. Today, KLFA is popularly known as the Mau Mau.

There were many preludes to the Mau Mau movement in which women took a lead role in the struggle against colonial oppression. Their contribution prior to the movement was as follows: They led wars of resistance at the time the British were establishing their rule. They were outspoken in efforts to preserve their culture. Women mobilized communities for peaceful protests against unjust economic activities such as forced labor, taxation and confiscation of their livestock. They were also involved in running of political associations and when they felt male dominance was standing in their way, they formed their own associations. Women were also unrivaled in their calls for the release of arrested and detained African leaders. The fore-mentioned activities were the precursor to the Mau Mau movement as such women expected to have played a much more active role in leadership of the movement.

Ironically, after decades of scholarly work on the Mau Mau movement, women are still portrayed as having been a mere support wing to the male fighters. The few studies on women and Mau Mau have paid little attention to their role in leadership. “These studies on the whole deal with the question of women on a general basis”.⁶ Biographers have

⁶ W. O. Maloba, *Mau Mau and Kenya: An Analysis of a Peasant Revolt* (Nairobi: East African Educational Publishers, 1994), p.177

also been reluctant to study the lives of women leaders in Mau Mau movement. Female leaders alongside thousands of other Mau Mau women are the muted lot; they remain hidden from history. These women are not known apart from mention of a few names in scattered texts.

The study used Muthoni as a 'window' to answer the following questions: How was the life of Kikuyu girls and young women like before the Mau Mau movement? What was the role of women in Mau Mau leadership? What has been the experience of Mau Mau veterans (especially women) in post-Mau Mau Kenya?

1.2 Statement of the Problem

Women made an important contribution to the Mau Mau movement. However, little is documented about women leadership in the Mau Mau as this aspect of the movement. This study collected relevant data on the role of Field Marshal Muthoni to fill this knowledge gap.

1.3 Objectives of the Study

The objectives of the study were as follows:

1. To analyze the early life of Muthoni Kirima.
2. To examine Muthoni's contribution to the Mau Mau Movement.
3. To outline Muthoni's life in the post-Mau Mau era.

1.4 Research Questions

The study attempted to answer the following research questions:

1. What was the early life of Muthoni Kirima like?
2. What contribution did Muthoni make to the Mau Mau Movement?
3. How has life been for Muthoni in the post- Mau Mau era?

1.5 Justification of the Study

Women were active leaders and combatants from the formation of the Mau Mau movement to the end of the war in 1956. Women like Muthoni Kirima were part of the

group of Mau Mau that remained in the forest up to 1963. However, these women remain hidden from history. In addition, the misconception that women were a mere appendage to the male fighters has long been perpetuated in literature on the movement. This study puts women and leadership in the Mau Mau movement into perspective by chronicling the life of Muthoni Kirima. The study provides answers to important questions such as: Who were the women leaders? What was their role? What was considered in elevating women to leadership positions? What was the gender relation in the movement and within its leadership? The findings of the study contribute greatly to bridging the knowledge gap on the Mau Mau with respect to women leadership. It has shed light on women roles among the remnants of Mau Mau between 1956 and 1963. It also focuses on reintegration of Mau Mau women into the society by studying how Muthoni fitted back into the society. Lastly, the study demonstrates Muthoni's contribution in the Mau Mau movement. It adds knowledge to women history which is still at its infancy as well as enriches women biographical studies in Kenya.

1.6 Scope and Limitation

The study covered the period between 1930 to 2015. It follows the life of Muthoni from the time of her birth to the year 2015 when the study was conducted. The major limitation of the study was in finding Muthoni's contemporaries to corroborate her narrative. Most of them have passed on and the few alive are in their twilight years and thus they do not remember important details about her. Although the researcher to some extent tells Muthoni's story as narrated by her, deliberate efforts were made to identify inconsistencies between life as told by Muthoni and life as it was lived. This was accomplished through in-depth interviews with other Mau Mau veterans, particular attention being given to what was possible for a woman to accomplish in the guerilla movement and what was not.

1.7 Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

1.7.1 Literature Review

Mau Mau historiography largely ignores the role of Kikuyu women in the movement's leadership except for a few generalizations. Early histories occasionally mention women leaders but seldom detail what their leadership entailed. Women were part and parcel of the liberation process. Women used other mechanisms in the decolonization efforts. "They used protest action, membership in national liberation wars and use of autonomous women's organizations to advance their political status".⁷ This section reviews literature along the following themes: women and liberation struggles in other parts of Africa, historiography on women and liberation struggles in Kenya, biographical studies in Kenya, women and Mau Mau, and theoretical framework.

Women's role in armed struggle for independence in some African countries has been overlooked by scholars. Studies on guerilla movements in: Zimbabwe, Mozambique, Cameroon, Guinea Bissau and Namibia among others, have not only assigned women to non-combat roles but also relegated these roles to a secondary position. This is despite the centrality of roles such as gathering intelligence, acquisition of weapons and food as well as sources to the actual freedom fighters. Histories of these movements have been written from the male point of view and "despite the central role that women played in the decolonization process, their voices have not been heard".⁸ In Cameroon, for instance, despite women playing a cutting edge role in Western Grassfields liberation struggle,

Existing literature has not placed women as a central factor in the liberation struggle. The common missing link in these works is the failure to discuss women in coordination, organized and efficient leadership as well as symbolism playing crucial roles in the western Grassfields of Cameroon.⁹

⁷ Kombo, "Women in National Liberation Wars", p.ii

⁸ Z. M. Roy-Campbell "Pan African Women Organizing the Future: the Formation of the Pan African Women's Liberation Organization and Beyond" *Journal of Political Science New series Vol. 1*, 1996 p.46

⁹ H. K. Kah "Women's Resistance in Cameroon's Western Grassfields: the Power of Symbols, Organization, and Leadership 1957-1961", *African Studies Quarterly Volume 12, Issue 3*, 2011 p.71

Like in other places in Africa, the Zimbabwean war of liberation has been defined from the male point of view. Although men and women came under the same attacks, literature has drawn different frontlines for men and women. Consequently, the stereotype that men went to war while women were left at home away from conflict has persisted. In reality, women fought side-by-side with men for Zimbabwe's independence. Women played a central role and as such "The story of liberation cannot be complete without an analysis of the role women play in guerilla warfare".¹⁰

The trend is similar in the historiography of Eritrea's war of liberation between 1961 and 1991. Women in Eritrea Liberation Front (ELF) proved themselves by participating in the front as fighters or by taking up roles previously reserved for men such as truck and tank driving, mechanical work, political decision-making. Documentation of their role has however "positioned women in the ELF as powerless and almost totally confined by feudalism and tradition".¹¹

The contribution of women in the long struggle for independence _ from the period of colonial invasion to 1963 _ has been overlooked. Despite this fact, scholars have appreciated the contribution of a few outstanding women. For instance, Mekatilili wa Menza is portrayed as a brave and charismatic woman. Studies have appreciated her significance in rallying the Giriama community to resist the British efforts to recruit Giriama young men as porters in the First World War. She also rallied members of her community to oppose erosion of their culture, forced labour, taxation, and land alienation among other grievances. She helped raise the consciousness of the whole community to colonial injustice. The Giriama rallied behind her in the armed struggle that ensued. Although the British exiled her to Kisii alongside Wanje wa Madorika, a male leader of

¹⁰ P. Chogugudza, *Gender and War : Zimbabwean Women and Liberation Struggle*. Retrieved from www.brunel.ac.uk/-data/assets/pdf-file/009/185922/ET62ChogugudzaED.pdf, p.31. April 17, 2015

¹¹ C. Mason , *Gender, "Nationalism and Revolution: Re-Assessing Women's Relationship with the Eritrean Liberation Front"* (Working Paper #274). Retrieved from <http://gencen.isp.msu.edu/documents/working-papers/WP274.pdf>. March 28, 2015

the Giriama resistance, Mekatilili goes down in history as a central figure in the Giriama's campaign against colonialism.¹²

In 1922 when Harry Thuku, the founder of the East African Association (EAA), George Mugekenyi and Waiganjo wa Ndotono were arrested and detained in the Kingsway Police Station (now Central Police Station), Muthoni Nyanjiru led the push for their release. She challenged African men who were rather indecisive till then to act. These were her words "oh come on. You cowards take off your trousers and give them to us and take our skirts and we will go in there and bring him out without your assistance."¹³ These words charged the crowd which rushed towards the station. She was killed alongside other Africans when the colonial police and settlers who were at the Norfolk Hotel opened fire indiscriminately. Nyanjiru left an important mark in Kenyan history. Many scholars appreciate her action as a demonstration of the ability of Kikuyu women to stand against the odds and mobilize masses into action.

Other writings on women and the struggle against colonialism include those on Syotune Kathukye and Moraa Ngiti. Scholars appreciate Syotune's role in mobilizing the Akamba to protest against the British confiscation of their cattle. In 1905, Moraa led the Abagusii against the British. Moraa was consequently arrested and imprisoned. Scholars admit that there were numerous defiance campaigns against the British in Kenya which were either led by women or tied to women issues. Women among the Agikuyu, Aembu and Ameru for instance, women performed *Muthirigu* dance to protest against missionary and colonial government's attempts to interfere with the practice of female circumcision.¹⁴ In Murang'a, women protested against forced labor between 1947 and 1951 by "arranging work stoppages".¹⁵ However, women-led events have not received much scholarly attention like men led events.

¹² W. Kihoro, *The Price of Freedom: The Story of Political Resistance in Kenya* (Nairobi: Mvule African Publishers, 2005), p.17.

¹³ Kaggia, *Roots of Freedom* p.70.

¹⁴ L. M. Thomas, *Politics of the Womb: Women, Reproduction and the State in Kenya* (Kampala: Fountain Publishers, 2005), p.1.

¹⁵ C. A. Presley, *Kikuyu Women, the Mau Mau Rebellion and Social Change in Kenya* (Colorado: West View Press, 1992), p. 69.

Women fought dual oppression: on one side against colonialism and on the other against the patriarchal oppression in their community. They were active in the formation and running of political associations in the colonial period and rejected men's attempts to relegate them to second place in this arena. For instance, "more and more women became enchanted with their status and reached a turning point in 1930. Kikuyu women split from Kikuyu Central Association (KCA) and formed their own organization - the Mumbi Central Organization."¹⁶ However, little is known about Mumbi Central Organization such as its organization, leadership, achievements and challenges among other aspects. Nonetheless, the mention of these examples is a demonstration of the level of political consciousness of women and their active role in the fight against injustices in colonial Kenya contrary to the views of some scholars. Unlike their male counterparts, women nationalist have received comparatively less attention. It is important to note that, due to colonial oppression, women's political consciousness progressively increased and motivated them to participate in the liberation wars. They played more of an active than supportive role especially in the Mau Mau. Whether formally organized as was the case with Mumbi Central Organization, or spontaneous reactions as was the case of Nyanjiru Nyamarutu, acts of defiance led by women directly challenged the notion of the passive African woman, unconscious of her political, social and economic rights.

David Throup documented the 1947 to 1951 Murang'a women protests against forced labour. Women were arrested for refusing to work on a grass planting scheme among other works. It was an example of women protesting the appropriation of their labour for the colonial economy. They thought that the time they were spending on planting grass would be of no benefit to them. Women were henceforth exempted from terracing work in the district. As important these protests were, Throup limited his inclusion of women to a single protest.¹⁷

Many scholars on the Mau Mau have probed women role in the movement. These scholars and their works are discussed in this section. Carl Rosberg and John Nottingham

¹⁶Ibid, p.118.

¹⁷D. Throup, *Economic and Social Origins of Mau Mau* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1988), pp.155-157.

considered the general role of women in Mau Mau. They remarked that Kikuyu women had a political power that was underestimated by the authorities. They also commented on the government's belief that rehabilitation was more important for women because they had such influence over their families and were often the main force behind the Mau Mau movement in the villages. They revealed that women had a keen interest in the nationalist movement. They however failed to acknowledge the leadership role of women in Mau Mau.¹⁸

Frank Furedi observed that forced labor for women in Bahati settlement scheme was one of the main reasons squatters began to organize politically as well as joining the Mau Mau movement in large numbers. Life in the scheme removed women from their traditional roles of growing and making food for their families and sent them to public works projects. The squatters resented the idea of turning their wives and daughters to rural labourers who were constantly moved from one project to another.¹⁹

Tabitha Kanogo carried an in-depth research on Agikuyu squatters in Nakuru region and their role in the Mau Mau movement. She notes that women's place in the movement was of great importance although she only mention of a few women. She notes that there were cases when the wife would be the first to join the movement and her husband had to either take an oath along with her or remain silent about her affiliation to the movement. Some women who joined went to the forest and eventually became fighters. Women who were unshakable in their commitment to Mau Mau oaths were inducted into the Inner Secret Council, formerly open only to men. Kanogo mentioned one woman in particular, Wanjiru Nyamarutu, who was known to be a "hard core" Mau Mau. She was in charge of the oath administration in Nakuru and Njoro, distribution of food and gathering of intelligence. Her role changed in the way Mau Mau leaders viewed women.²⁰

¹⁸ C. Rosberg, J. Nottingham. *The Myth of Mau Mau: Nationalism in Kenya* (New York: Frederick Praeger, 1966)

¹⁹ F. Furedi, *The Mau Mau War in Perspective* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1989), p. 196.

²⁰ T. Kanogo, *Squatters and the Roots of Mau Mau* (Nairobi: East African Educational Publishers, 1993), pp. 143-149.

Caroline Elkins wrote a monograph about detention camps created by the colonial authority to confine and rehabilitate Mau Mau adherents. Women made up a large portion of detainees in these camps. Elkins discusses in detail women experiences in the “pipeline,” a term used by the government to refer to the detention camps throughout Kenya. She used oral accounts of the detainees to reconstruct their experiences. She reckons that official records did not reflect the extent of torture and intimidation women endured in the camps. Early in the Emergency, specifically starting with Operation Anvil, the government cleared African sections of Nairobi and other cities of anyone suspected of being connected to Mau Mau. These people mostly comprised of Kikuyu. The prison guards made sure that all detainees suffered constantly so they would be more likely to renounce their oath. They kept them at the edge of starvation. Starvation was the cause of death for many women and children. Others died at the hands of the prison guards. Various torture methods used to extract information from the women or intimidate them into confessing to be Mau Mau. Women endured rape and sexual abuse. They had to bury their own dead, and while burying them, were often forced to chant: “This is independence,” a constant reminder that death was their only hope for freedom. This work demonstrates that women were closely connected to the Mau Mau movement.²¹

Wangui Gachihi studied the role of Kikuyu women in the Mau Mau movement. She reflected on the role of women who remained in the villages and those who joined the guerillas in the forest. Women outside the forest were closely watched by the loyalists. Nonetheless, they carried out treacherous roles of gathering and delivering intelligence and supplies such as food and weapons for the forest guerillas. Those in the forest assumed various roles ranging from domestic roles such as cooking to becoming companions to male leaders. There were those who fought alongside men, with some proving to be as good as men in the art of war. On women leadership, she mentions that some women would have groups of women fighters under their command. She gives examples of women such as Cinda Reri, who commanded a platoon of over two hundred women. She notes that a few women were promoted to higher ranks after proving

²¹ C. Elkins, *Britain's Gulag: the Brutal End of Empire in Kenya* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2005)

themselves in battles. Gachihi however, concludes that women rarely rose to the highest levels of leadership.²²

Wunyabari Maloba carried out a survey of approaches used by scholars to study the Mau Mau movement. He seeks to correct misinterpretations about Mau Mau in earlier studies. Maloba criticizes the overgeneralization of women roles in the movement and points to the need for precision in explanations and clarifications. He insists that historiography on the movement must include the views of Mau Mau women. He further calls for comparative studies with other guerilla movements in Africa such as comparing the role of women the Mau Mau movement with roles played by women in other liberation movements in Africa.²³

Shamsul Alam offered a narrative analysis of the transformation that Kenya women's lives have gone through under the impact of British colonialism. He explored female commercial sexual activities brought about by the new economic production introduced by the British that fundamentally altered women's role in colonial Kenya. On women and Mau Mau, Shamsul observes that female participants spent years in the forest as *Itungati* (combatants). They had to learn the basics of warfare like handling and cleaning of the gun in order to survive in the forest. Women were also involved in intelligence work and maintenance of forest camps. To debunk the myth that women in colonial situations were merely sexual objects, "autonomous gender subjectivities" need to be incorporated while writing the history of the Mau Mau movement. He challenges the perception that women were passive participants in the movement.²⁴

Studies such as those by Gachihi and Kanogo emphasized the participation of women in the Mau Mau uprising. The studies have highlighted the following contributions: participation in the armed struggle against the British, spying for the fighters, composition of songs to mobilize support for the Mau Mau movement and taking part in

²² M. W. Gachihi, "The Role of Kikuyu Women in Mau Mau" (M.A Thesis, University of Nairobi, 1986)

²³ Maloba, *Mau Mau and Kenya*

²⁴ S. M. Shamsul, *Rethinking the Mau Mau in Colonial Kenya* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), pp. 71-99

the oath-taking ceremonies. Women leadership in the movement has not been subjected to scholarly study. As a result there exist many inconsistencies on the role played by women leaders. The following review puts into perspective the inconsistency in existing literature on Mau Mau with regard to Muthoni's leadership and that of other women.

Biography is an integral part of history. The relationship between history and biography goes back to Classical Greece and Rome. Classical biographies by scholars like Plutarch have been accepted by historians as important sources of history of the Classical period. The nineteenth century French wars of expansion could not be fully understood without studying the character of Napoleon Bonaparte. Likewise, it is important to understand the character and ambitions of leaders such as Hitler for a comprehensive understanding of the Second World War. Indeed, "Some thoroughly researched biographies yield a lot of information that is central to historical information."²⁵ In Kenya, scholars have identified women like Marshal Muthoni, Wamuyu Gakuru and Njoki Waicere as lead combatants during the Mau Mau war yet little is known about them or their leadership. Ochieng failed to include a single biography on female Mau Mau in his collection of biographies in Kenya.²⁶ *The Kenya History and Biography Company* also overlooked Mau Mau women in its coverage of Kenya's historical personalities.²⁷ Likimani lamented the absence of serious literature on female Mau Mau warriors: "I note with special interest, that the role women played in the bitter and costly struggle for Kenya's independence has not been highlighted. To me women freedom warriors are unsung warriors."²⁸ Some are reviewed below to help put this study into perspective and also expose the gender gap on biographical studies of women nationalists.

M. W. Wanyoike describes Wangu wa Makeri, the first Kikuyu woman to become a 'headman' in the colonial government, as a beautiful, hardworking and ambitious woman. She was able to assume a role that had long been a preserve of Kikuyu men.

²⁵ Maloba, *Mau Mau and Kenya*, p6.

²⁶ W. R. Ochieng, *Place of Biographies in Kenya, 1904 -2005* (Kisumu: Mountain View Publishers, 2005)

²⁷ "Makers of a Nation: the Men and Women in Kenya's History", *Kenya History and Biography Company Ltd*, 2007

²⁸ M. Likimani, *Passbook Number F. 47927: Women and Mau Mau in Kenya* (Nairobi: Noni's Publicity, 1984), preface.

Although her ascend to 'headman ship' is associated with her sexual relations with Paramount Chief Karuri wa Gakure, her hardworking character played the bigger role. Wangu demonstrated that women were capable of formal administration responsibilities even in the early years of colonialism in Kenya. Her fall from the position came after a community dance in which she is said to have stripped while drunk. Her opponents successfully pushed for her sacking after the incidence.²⁹

Tabitha Kanogo describes Dedan Kimathi, the overall leader of the Mau Mau, as a fearless and visionary leader. He was born and brought up in a peasant family. As a young boy he sold tree seedlings and taught other children to raise money to keep him in school. As a young man he was enlisted in Kings African Rifles (KAR) during the Second World War but was soon expelled on disciplinary ground. Kimathi became a committed follower of KAU while he worked in Thomson area (today's Nyahururu) and Olkalou. In 1952 he and others in KLFA started the guerilla war against the British. In 1953 he assumed overall leadership of the movement. He is remembered for his leadership and commitment to the liberation struggle. His arrest and execution in 1956 was a big blow to the Mau Mau.³⁰

General Mathenge was the overall leader of Mau Mau up to 1953. During this time he was the chief judge and law giver to all the guerillas. He was a good military organizer evidenced by many successful raids on the enemy. His leadership was short lived as Kimathi usurped his power in 1953. Kimathi took advantage of his writing and rhetoric skills to outplay Mathenge in the power game. Leadership feuds between the two saw Mathenge flee the battle front and is rumored to have settled in Ethiopia.³¹ In 2003 attempts to repatriate a man believed to be Mathenge from Ethiopia were futile as DNA test would latter prove otherwise. The media described the efforts as "Kenya's diplomatic shame".

²⁹ M. W. Wanyoike, *Wangu wa Makeri* (Nairobi: East African Educational Publishers, 2002)

³⁰ Kanogo, *Squatters and Roots*. . .

³¹ P. Mwaniki, *Six Mau Mau Generals* (Nairobi: Gazelle Books Company, 1977), pp. 51-74

Despite serving alongside Mau Mau leaders and fighters for over a decade Muthoni, has not been the subject of a scholarly study. She is the only female Mau Mau to use the title of field marshal. Although Muthoni's name is mentioned in studies on the Mau Mau, she has received comparatively lesser attention from scholars than male leaders. The following section probes what studies on Mau Mau say about Muthoni's role in the movement and the intricacy surrounding her claim to the title of a Mau Mau field marshal.

In 2007, Marjorie Macgoye and Naomi Shitemi included a narrative by Muthoni on her life in the Mau Mau in their article. It begins with Muthoni's description of her ordeals at the hands of home guards shortly before joining the forest guerillas. This ordeal motivated her to join the fighters in the forest. The narrative quickly shifts to Kimathi as the central figure and her role in the movement fades away. Two things in this narrative point to Muthoni's leadership role. One, she sat in the Mau Mau parliament although her role is not elaborated; neither is that of other women. Two, on behalf of the last Mau Mau group to leave the forest in 1963; she contacted the first African president of Kenya, Jomo Kenyatta, in Nairobi to ascertain that Kenya was finally independent before they could leave their hiding.³² Like Karani's story, this narrative leaves many questions on Muthoni's role in Mau Mau unanswered.

By 1956 when Field Marshal Dedan Kimathi (the overall leader of Mau Mau) was arrested and executed by the British Muthoni had risen to the rank of Field Marshal. The Second World War ex-soldiers brought their experiences from the war. They adopted the British military organization by using ranks ranging from constable to Field Marshal. Existing literature does not walk us through her journey from an inexperienced young woman to a Field Marshal, the highest rank in the Mau Mau movement. Did she serve in other ranks apart from the Field Marshal? If yes, what were these ranks? What were the powers and duties of each rank she served? How was she promoted through the ranks? What characteristics were considered in the promotion of women to positions of

³² M. O. Macgoye and N. L. Shitemi, *Women Writing Africa: The Eastern Region* (New York: Feminist Press, 2007) pp.316- 323.

leadership? Scholars have given conflicting reasons why women such as Muthoni were promoted to positions of leadership. "Kimathi for example, lived throughout with a young woman, Wanjiru whom he elevated to the rank of a colonel."³³ This suggests that sexual relations earned some women promotion. Muthoni gives the following explanation on her promotion,

Another day Kimathi called a meeting to discuss how we were going to fight. Things again were not easy and a meeting was dangerous. The forest fighters did not attend the meeting, only Dedan Kimathi and I came, and then I was promoted to General.³⁴

This explanation contradicts Khasiani's record of Muthoni's promotion to the same rank,

Our army had finished their food, we had nothing to eat. People were waiting to die in hunger, hunting of wild animals became impossible but I just tried my luck which was dangerous. I got out of the forest, walked through the farming areas and came back heavily loaded with plenty of food . . . they promoted me to the rank of General.³⁵

Scholars have disagreed on the question of women and overall leadership within the Mau Mau movement. This study has revealed that women headed platoons of up to 200 women. Whether women headed mixed gender platoons remains contentious. Some hold that,

Women rarely rose to positions of leadership. Nevertheless, groups of women had their own leaders, representative of women's interests especially in general meetings [with regard to Muthoni] there was no distinction between the tasks she performed and that performed by the other male fighters.³⁶

³³ M. W. Gachihi, *Women in the Mau Mau*. A conference on Mau Mau: Forty Years Later, Kisumu p23.

³⁴ M. Likimani, *Women of Kenya: Fifteen Years of Independence* (Nairobi: Giant Publishers, 1979), p.213

³⁵ S. A. Khasiani and E.I Njiro. *The Women's Movement in Kenya* (Nairobi: AA WORD Kenya, 1993), p.26

³⁶ Gachihi, *Women in the Mau Mau*, pp. 197, 237

There is a compelling need to investigate what it really meant to be a female leader within the movement.

Oathing was central to the Mau Mau movement. Leaders administered oaths in secrecy to unite the fighters and ensure their commitment to freedom struggle. Men and women took similar oaths. However, it is not clear whether women administered oaths. Scholars such as Gachihi and Kanogo have contradicted on women role as oath administrators. Gachihi states that “although women, like men, took the Mau Mau oath, they were never at any one time oath administrators.”³⁷ Kanogo on the other hand gave an example of a woman, Wanjiru Nyamarutu who “As a recognized leader among the Olenguruone people, she had overseen the administration of the Mau Mau oaths both in Nakuru and Njoro.”³⁸ Gachihi carried out her studies in Central Kenya while Kanogo carried hers in the Rift Valley. Were there different rules with regard to administration of oaths by women among Mau Mau supporters in the two regions? As a field marshal, was Muthoni an oath administrator? There is need to investigate the extent to which women such Muthoni were involved in oath administration.

Mau Mau had a court within the forest where they disciplined those who went against laid down rules and also made major decisions on the movement’s activities.³⁹ Existing literature does not spell out the role played by women in this court. Although Muthoni was a member of this ‘court’, little is known of her contribution and influence in this arm of the movement. This study sought answers to questions regarding the Mau Mau parliament: What was its structure? What was its gender composition? What role did Muthoni play in it?

By 1956 Mau Mau had lost most of its top leadership through arrests, execution and surrender. Dedan Kimathi, the overall leader, was arrested and eventually hanged. General Waruhiu Itote surrendered to the British and was involved in persuading Mau

³⁷Ibid, p.115.

³⁸Kanogo, *Squatters and the Roots*, p.144.

³⁹ Karani, *Field Marshal*,

Mau fighters to surrender. General Stanley Mathenge was believed to have fled to Ethiopia after disagreements with Kimathi. Loss of the top leadership weakened Mau Mau movement. The colonial government also turned Mau Mau who were either arrested or surrendered into pseudo gangs. The pseudo gangs knew all the secrets and hideouts and “By 1957 the pseudo gangs in the forests were eliminating the rebels, not taking prisoners”.⁴⁰ The pseudo gangs dealt the last blow to the Mau Mau. By the end of 1957 the Mau Mau war was over. Nonetheless, groups of Mau Mau men and women remained in the forest up to 1963. Among those who remained in the Aberdare forest was Muthoni. This group was able to out-manoeuvre the combined forces of colonial police and the pseudo gangs. Scholars have taken little interest in this group. Was it a defining moment in women leadership where Muthoni, the only Field Marshal within the group, assumed overall leadership? Did a new crop of leaders take over instead of being led by a woman? How many women were left in the forest? There was need to probe deeper to answer the above questions. Studying the life of Muthoni would shed some light on Mau Mau leadership between 1957 and 1963.

1.7.2 Theoretical Framework

This study employed the Great Man Theory of history that emphasizes individual actions of the “great men and women” in the society. The ‘great men’ are highly influential individuals who, due to their personal charisma, intelligence or wisdom, utilized their power in a way that had a decisive historical impact. The actions of heroes dictate historical direction of the society. The theory was popularized by Thomas Carlyle, a Scottish essayist and biographer who lived between 1795 and 1881. Carlyle argued that heroes shape history through the vision of their intellect, the beauty of their art, the prowess of their leadership and, most important, their divine inspiration. Here is how he underscores the importance of heroes in history,

Worship of a hero is transcendent admiration of a Great Man. I say great men are still admirable; I say there is, at bottom, nothing else admirable! No nobler feeling

⁴⁰D. Anderson, *Histories of the Hanged: Britain's Dirty War in Kenya and the End of Empire* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 2005), p.290.

than this admiration for one higher than himself dwells in the breast of men. . .
History is the essence of innumerable biographies.⁴¹

The theory holds that leaders are born and not made and that great leaders will arise when there is a great need. This view drew sharp criticism from Herbert Spencer, a sociologist who argued that the men Carlyle called great were merely products of their social environment. The society makes the hero and not the hero making it. Spencer stated that,

You must admit that the genesis of a great man depends on the long series of complex influences which produced the race in which he appears, and the social state into which that race has slowly grown. Before he can remake his society, his society must make him.⁴²

Andrew Flescher shared Spencer's idea that heroes are not born but made. They are born ordinary but the societal experiences transform them into heroes. Heroes are indebted to the society and that's why they are "oriented to the communal. They see themselves as connected to and responsible for those around them... because they remember what it was like to be merely ordinary."⁴³ They are a reflection of the history of their society. A study of these exemplary lives must begin with examination of the circumstances that surround 'heroes' historical background and their rearing. Modern day scholarship holds that historical events would happen with or without heroes.

The Great Man theory was also criticized for its over emphasis on political history and for leaving out women in the study of history. "Carlyle sees no room for women in his essays; there is only the great men and the rest of the world."⁴⁴ The theory has had a profound impact on the writing of biographies on Mau Mau veterans. The biographies

⁴¹Covert, R. Bryce, *Masculinity in Thomas Carlyle's On Heroes, Hero-Worship and the Heroic in History*, Brown University. Retrieved from <http://www.victorianweb.org/authors/carlyle/heroes/covert17.html>
February 10, 2016

⁴² Herbert Spencer as cited in D.R Sorensen, B. E Kinser (eds) *On Heroes, Hero-Worship and the Heroic in History* (Connecticut: Yale University Press, 2013)

⁴³ D.R. Sorensen ,B. E. Kinser (eds) *On Heroes, Hero- Worship and the Heroic in History* (London: Yale University Press, 2013)

⁴⁴ Ibid.

written are entirely on Mau Mau males and have almost entirely been written by males. Mau Mau heroines have been left out. The study holds that great women just like great men are born with the potential for greatness and only require the nurturing of their community to actualize greatness. A society produces as many heroines as it does produce heroes since men and women are brought up together. The same societal circumstances that produce great men also produce great women. The great men of the Mau Mau war were born out of colonial oppression on the Kikuyu community and the desire to regain freedom and land from the British. So were the great Mau Mau women. They were victims of colonial economic exploitation, social discrimination and political subordination. The study starts with the analysis of Muthoni's early life to establish the experiences that shaped the person she became later on in life.

To deal with the shortcomings of the Great Man Theory, the study adopted the historical biography approach which is rooted in events larger than the individual subject.

A historical biography can also be written as a prism in which the light of history is refracted and the perspective raises the central figure as a representative of a time, a historical situation, a type, a social phenomenon or a culture.⁴⁵

The study was not born of the need to simply chronicle the life of Muthoni but rather use her to illuminate the role of Mau Mau women in combat and in the movement's leadership. This approach sets apart the study from Carlyle's emphasis on worshipping and celebrating heroes for the sake of it.

The theory is applicable to this study on the following basis: First, it allows one to view Muthoni's radicalism as a product of her society's suffering from oppression and dispossession by Europeans. The desire to change the plight of her society turns her to a great woman who risked her life fighting on her behalf and for communal good. Second, if indeed she was a Mau Mau Field Marshal, she must have greatly inspired men to fight

⁴⁵ B. Possing, *The Historical Biography: Genre, History and Methodology in Writing Lives in Sports* (Aarhus: University Press, 2004), p.8.

against colonialism. It also would have changed men's notion that women were incapable of combat and of taking challenging positions within a guerilla movement. Muthoni serves as a perfect 'window' for: analyzing how the life of Kikuyu girls and young women was like before the Mau Mau movement, examining women leadership in the movement, and analyzing the experience of Mau Mau veterans (especially women) in post-Mau Mau Kenya.

The study also employed the theory of patriarchy to examine patriarchal tendencies among Mau Mau fighters and the extent to which they defined the role of women. The concept of patriarchy is defined differently by thinkers. The point of convergence of these definitions is the existence of male dominance and female subordination both in public and private spheres. Feminists define patriarchy as "a system of social structures and practices in which men dominate, oppress and exploit women".⁴⁶ This definition rejects the notion of biological determinism in role allocation or "the notion that every individual man is always in a dominant position and every woman in a subordinate one"⁴⁷

Proponents of male supremacy believe that men are born to dominate and women to be subordinate. They believe that this hierarchy has always existed and will continue. For instance, Aristotle propounded theories that asserted the biological inferiority of female. In his view, the biological inferiority of woman makes her inferior also in her capacities, her ability to reason and, therefore, her ability to make decisions. Because man is superior and woman inferior, he is born to rule and she to be ruled. He said "the courage of man is shown in commanding of a woman in obeying"⁴⁸ Sigmund Freud believed that "women anatomy is destiny and that normal human was male".⁴⁹ Feminists challenge theories of male supremacy by observing that biological differences between men and women should not form the basis of a sexual hierarchy in which men are dominant. Since the theory appreciates the fact that not all women are in a subordinate status, it allowed for an investigation of the role of women in combat and leadership within the movement.

⁴⁶S. Walby, *Theorizing Patriarchy* (London: Blackwell Publishers Ltd, 1990)p. 20

⁴⁷Ibid

⁴⁸G. Lerner, *The Creation of Patriarchy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989)pp. 8-11

⁴⁹ Ibid

In conclusion, the following gaps have been exposed in the literature and theoretical review. One, there is little literature on the early life of Muthoni. Two, scholars have given conflicting reasons why Muthoni joined Mau Mau fighters in the forest. Three, her promotion through the ranks to become a Field Marshal has not been studied. Four, scholars have differed on women overall leadership in the movement. Five, her role in oath administration has not been studied. Six, her role in Mau Mau forest court has not been highlighted. Seven, her role in Mau Mau between 1956 and 1963 has received no attention from scholars. Eight, the process of reintegration of Mau Mau women back to the society has been overlooked. Nine, there are no autobiographies and biographies on female Mau Mau. Ten, theoretical approaches in previous studies have been general in approach to women role in the movement. The findings of this study bridges the above knowledge gaps on the role of Mau Mau female leaders in general and that of Muthoni in particular.

1.8 Research Methodology

This section details the research methodology by explaining the research design adopted, sampling procedure, the research area, data collection and data analysis.

1.8.1 Research Design

This study used descriptive research design in reconstructing the life and contribution of Muthoni. Descriptive research focuses attention on the following: formulation of research objectives, methods of data collection, selection of sample, analyzing the data and reporting the findings.⁵⁰ The study was based on the following objectives: to analyze the early life of Muthoni Kirima, to examine Muthoni's contribution in the Mau Mau Movement, and to analyze Muthoni's life after Mau Mau. Primary data was collected through personal interviews, focused group discussion, Mau Mau memoirs and examination of archival sources. Snowball method of purposive sampling was used in selecting respondents. Secondary data was sourced through library search. Data was analyzed through coding process. The findings of the study were reported descriptively.

⁵⁰ C. R. Kothari, *Research Methodology: Methods and Techniques* (New Delhi: New Age International Limited, 2004), p.37.

1.8.2 Sampling

The researcher interviewed thirty knowledgeable people, ten female and twenty male respondents. Four interviews were conducted with Muthoni on face to face basis and four conducted via the telephone because she was the focal point of the study. Purposive sampling method was employed targeting informants with required information on Mau Mau forest operations and about Muthoni. Through snowballing, interviewees were requested to lead the researcher to other Mau Mau veterans. The targeted sample included Mau Mau veterans (those who served with her in the same platoon and others from different platoons), siblings, business associates and other acquaintances.

1.8.3 Study Area

Field research was mainly carried out in Nyeri County. This area was suitable for the study because it is Muthoni's residence and also lies between Mount Kenya and Aberdare Ranges forests which were the main battlegrounds during the Mau Mau war. (See fig. 1.1) It was therefore expected to generate knowledgeable people for interview. The study also made an allowance for knowledgeable informants who reside outside the county, especially in Nyandarua and Laikipia counties which are home to many former Mau Mau fighters who moved out of place like Nyeri and Kirinyaga after their farms were confiscated for remaining in the forest after July 1956. These veterans bought land cheaply in the two counties through cooperative societies.

1.8.4 Data Collection

The study utilized both primary and secondary data. Primary data was sourced through personal interviews, focused group discussion with Mau Mau veterans, archival sources and memoirs written by the Mau Mau survivors. Secondary data was sourced from books; theses and dissertations; conference papers; articles in journals, newspapers and magazines; as well as internet sources. Field research was carried out in Nyeri, Nyandarua and Laikipia counties where personal interviews with Muthoni, Mau Mau veterans, Muthoni's family members and people who have interacted closely with Muthoni were recorded on a voice recorder. The interview schedule was made up of open-ended items to allow new ideas to be brought up by the interviewees. Interviews

with different informants were conducted until no new information was forthcoming. The researcher also conducted two focus group discussions with Mau Mau veterans: one at Wamagana Mau Mau office in Nyeri County and the other at Ndaragwa, Nyandarua County. The groups were made up of female and male veterans and the discussion centered on women leadership as well as Muthoni's role in the movement. Interviews and focus group discussions were conducted in Kikuyu then transcribed to English. Evidence in the form of photographs and other artefacts were also collected for analysis. Additional primary data such as government documents from the colonial period were sourced from Kenya National Archives (KNA). Secondary information was sourced from various libraries and recorded in the form of notes. Internet sources such as scholarly journals articles were also used. Recorded interviews were transferred to a computer then to labeled DVDs.

1.8.5 Data Analysis

Data was analyzed through constant comparative method (CCM). CCM involves joint coding and analysis during the continual review of data to gradually form categories. Recordings of the Interviews and focused group discussion were transcribed then analyzed. Other primary sources included archival sources and artifacts such as photographs. The transcriptions were checked for accuracy before coding begun. Coding is the process of generating ideas and concepts from raw data. The researcher derived codes directly from the data. Initial coding involved the researcher reading raw data line-by-line to identify ideas and concepts without concern for how they relate. The researcher looked for information of interest to the study while at the same time keeping an open mind for relevant information that might arise. Code labels were attached to occurrences and events. Similar events and occurrences were grouped together to discover broad categories and their properties. Initial coding continued until nothing new emerged from the data while at the same time refining categories and themes. In the process, some categories were subsumed into others.

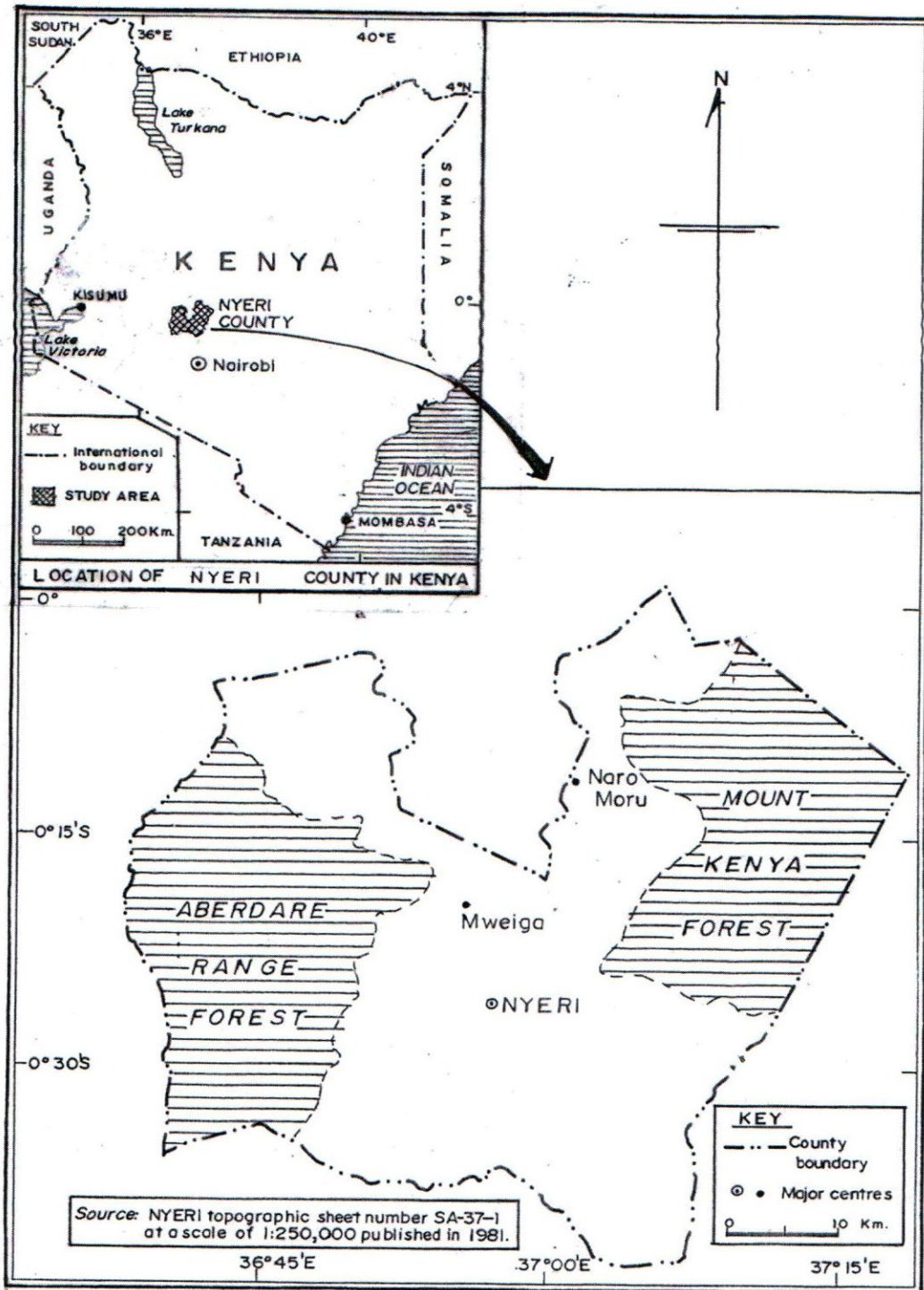


Fig. 1.1: Map of Nyeri County

Prepared by Mr. Ojode, Department of Geography, Egerton University

Initial coding was followed by axial coding. Axial coding involves narrowing down to and refining more specific categories and their properties, examining one at a time. The last step in the coding process was selective coding. This is the integrative process in which the researcher focused on particular links and relationship among a few chosen categories. The researcher identified categories and themes that are central to the topic of study and thus key to integrating others and those concepts that were to be subsumed by others.⁵¹ Coding enabled the researcher to interpret data and draw conclusion.

1.9 Ethical Considerations

Major ethical considerations during the course of the study were confidentiality and consent. Confidentiality entails non-disclosure of certain information so as not to cause harm to the participant. The damage might be of the person's reputation as well as legal. The researcher agreed not to reveal information that may cause harm or damage to the reputation of the main respondent. The researcher and the respondents also came to an understanding on what the latter was agreeing to consent. There was certain information that the main respondent did not reveal to the researcher due to its sensitivity. The respondents also requested certain information about them to be left out of the study report. However, such information was not central to this study.

⁵¹ A. A. Berger, *Media and Communications Research Methods: Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches* (London: Sage Publications, 2000), p.121.

CHAPTER TWO

MUTHONI'S EARLY LIFE

2.1 Overview

This chapter analyzes the life of Muthoni Kirima to reflect on the life of Kikuyu girls and young women and the effects colonialism had on their lives. It looks at the conflict between traditional life and life under the colonialism and how this conflict led to the making of heroines who in the 1950s fought alongside their brothers during the Mau Mau war for land and freedom.

2.2 Colonialism and the Making of Mau Mau Heroines

The completion of the Uganda Railway in 1901 was a major administrative and economic turning point in colonial Kenya. It facilitated administration through fast movement of the British troops to the breadth and length of the colony. It made accessibility of the interior of Kenya easy, thus serving as a major incentive for the migration of European settlers to the colony. Establishment of the colonial state and settler economy completely distorted the life of the Agikuyu. Settlers, who were encouraged to settle in Kenya to help the economy meet the cost of administration through development of the export sector, settled in large numbers in Kikuyuland. Their migration immediately created the problem of labour. The colonial government undertook to procure cheap African labour for them through,

Imposition of constraints on land which led to a shift in the proportions of the fundamental factors of production in the agrarian economy, land and labour. People became relatively abundant and land became relatively scarce. This shift was to give rise to fundamental political changes and to the major tensions which sparked the Mau Mau rebellion.¹

¹ R. H. Bates, "The Agrarian Origins of Mau Mau: a Structural Account" *Agricultural History* 61, 1987, p. 8.

This was how Kikuyu girls thus found themselves dragged into state sanctioned child labour.

Loss of land and imposition of taxation forced the Agikuyu to seek wage employment to feed their families as well as shoulder the tax burden. Central Kenya was suitable for most settler activities such as growing of coffee, tea and pyrethrum among other activities. Women spent most of their time in a year working on European farms and little on their small plots that were barely sufficient for family subsistence. Throughout the colonial period there was an ever growing need for Agikuyu labour. To sustain the flow of labour to the settler farms, more legislations that took away Africans' right on land were made in the Legislative Council (Legco) which was dominated by white settlers. The tax regime on Africans was also intentionally made rigid for the same purpose.

At the beginning, Kikuyu girls accompanied their mothers to settler farms and would sometimes be paid small wages. As the demand for cheap labour increased "child labour became more systematic... and was enforced by Employment of Women, Young Persons and Children Ordinance".² Under this ordinance, girls and boys as young as ten years were dragged into the oppressive forced labour. Like their mothers, these girls worked between eight in the morning to five in the evening on each working day. The little time left between five and dusk was used for tilling their small plots of land, looking for food, firewood and water as well as walking back to their homes, some of which were far from their white master's farm. This practice continued unabated throughout the colonial period.

Colonial chiefs and headmen were assigned the responsibility of recruiting African labour by the government. To do this, they sometimes used girls as baits to lure men into working on communal projects. They turned these girls to sex slaves for the 'greater good' as these projects were instituted ostensibly to help the Africans. This evil practice angered the locals. They used all means to voice their opposition, including petitioning

² H.D. Hindman, *The World of Child Labour: An Historical and Regional Survey* (New York: ME Sharpe Inc, 2009) p. 271.

the Provincial Commissioner (PC) for Central Province to stop it forthwith. One such petition read,

I beg to inform you that forced labour is being carried out on Kikuyu girls and men for cultivation at Mwea by Chiefs and Headmen. It is very bad indeed that girls should be forced to work with men in order that men should be kept at work because they (men) live with the girls. I hope that you will issue your orders to discontinue this forced labour.³

The response from Nyeri PC steered clear of addressing the concern on forced labour of girls and their use as bait for men labourers. It was utterly dismissive of the existence of this evil practice,

In reference to your letter of March 19th 1935, I am still of the opinion that planting of cotton in Ndia will bring great economic advantage to Ndia and that the great majority of people of Ndia desire to try out this crop in their country. Unless you and your friends wish to keep Ndia area in a very backward state of progress it is the wisest course to give cotton planting a good trial. I am quite prepared to admit possibly that your interpretation is the one the framers of the Ordinance (on compulsory labour) had in mind. But there is great confusion of terms. . . such work [intended to benefit an area] is excluded from the definition of compulsory labour.⁴

The working environment at the European farms was far from acceptable. Flogging was the most common form of punishment used by the European masters and it was executed with utmost cruelty, leading to death of some workers.

Settlers punished their labourers and domestic staffs with *kiboko*, a whip made of rhinoceros hide. Floggings on the farms were part and parcel of the African

³ KNA/5/1212/21/18, Compulsory Labour for Famine Relief and other Public Utility Purposes 1929-35.

⁴ KNA/5/1212/21, Compulsory Labour for Famine Relief and other Public Utility Purposes 1929-35

worker's experience. By the early 1920's, the deaths of several African servants' from beatings at the hands of their European masters earned Kenya's white settlers an inevitable reputation for brutality.⁵

Although the African girls were spared the flogging in settler's farms, watching their fathers getting flogged and humiliated was horrifying. However, these girls were subject to constant verbal aggression. These experiences played a significant role in the resolve of Kikuyu women to fight in the Mau Mau war of independence.

Between 1929 and 1932, the colonial government decided to fight the practice of female circumcision. Leading this was the Church of Scotland, today known as the Presbyterian Church of East Africa. However, this effort was met with strong resistance by the Agikuyu, Aembu and Ameru under the guidance of the Kikuyu Central Association (KCA). A big number of Kikuyu women stood with KCA as they believed the campaign to be an onslaught on their culture. There were protests against the onslaught by the three communities. Women performed *muthirigu* (song dance) to ridicule the uncircumcised girls and the Church of Scotland.

maitu ni muruu na baba ni muruu

*Ngwiro ngure kirigu ng'ondu itangirutwo igongona*⁶

Translation

"My mother is circumcised and my father is circumcised

Why do they tell me to marry an uncircumcised girl, a sheep that cannot be offered as a sacrifice?"

To this group a *kirigu* (uncircumcised girl) was unclean. She was unacceptable to God and ancestors and as such marriage to one would be unsanctified. This is the reason why the protest against anti- female circumcision campaign received much backing from

⁵ Anderson, *History of the Hanged*, p.78

⁶ Gachigua Wahome, interview by researcher, Mung'etho, Nyandarua, September 1, 2015

members of the Agikuyu who held tight by their traditions. Kikuyu girls found themselves at the centre of what started as a noble social drive by the Church of Scotland but which took a dramatic political turn during the struggle for independence. They became persons of interest, both protagonists claiming to act in their best interest.

Loss of land, child labour and the female circumcision controversy demonstrate the socio-economic impact of colonialism on Agikuyu girls and young women. The harsh realities of the colonialism made them politically conscious. Like their male counterparts, Kikuyu girls and young women questioned the ills committed by the Europeans as well as any discrimination by Kikuyu men. They were part of the long process of the fight against colonialism. They attended political rallies which were instrumental in raising political awareness of the Africans. They also joined political parties and even formed their own, Mumbi Central Association, when the men attempted to sideline them.⁷ When the community needed them to take up arms to drive out the enemy once and for all, these young women did not hesitate. Between 1952 and 1956 they fought a guerrilla war against the British and some, like Field Marshall Muthoni, sustained the guerrilla spirit up to 1963 when Kenya attained independence.

2.3 Muthoni's Childhood

Muthoni was born in 1930 at Nairutia along Nyeri- Nyahururu road as Muthoni Waihuini. The Agikuyu had a predetermined naming pattern which is followed to this date. The family's identity is preserved from generation to generation by naming the children in the following way: the first boy is named after the paternal grandfather, the second boy after the maternal grandfather. The first girl is named after the paternal grandmother and the second after the maternal grandmother, subsequent children are named similarly after the paternal and maternal uncles and aunts eldest to the youngest, alternating from the father's to the mother's side. As the second daughter, Muthoni was named after her maternal grandmother, Waihuini. Her father was John Kirima Nguya while her mother was Margaret Wanjira Kirima. (See figure 2.1) Muthoni had eleven siblings, most of whom are now dead. Her two older brothers are in their twilight years

⁷ Presley, *Kikuyu Women*, p.118.

but their last born, Mukami, born after Muthoni had been married, is in her sixties. Muthoni grew up in a polygamous family. Her step mother had eight children. The children from the two wives grew up together and referred to each other as brother and sister.⁸

By the time Muthoni was born, African migratory labour patterns had taken root among the Agikuyu. Her parents moved from Nyeri to Nairutia after the birth of the second child. Her father worked as a herdsman at a settler's farm in Nairutia. Muthoni was still very young when her father decided to move his family again in search for a better life. This time the family moved to Karing'u near Rurii, about 15km from Nairutia. They walked on foot. She remembers the tiresome journey. The mother would not carry her



Fig. 2.1 Muthoni's parents: John Kirima Nguyo and Margaret Wanjira Kirima
Source: Muthoni's photo album

⁸ Muthoni

Since she did not have saddles the ride would become so uncomfortable after sometime she alternated between riding and walking till they reached Karing'u.

The choice of Karing'u was strategic. It was on the fringes of the Aberdare forest and thus allowed Kirima to keep a big heard of sheep contrary to the law on the size of stock an African was allowed to keep. "The colonial government limited the size of stock Africans kept following advice from the Agricultural Commission. In some places like Ukambani, the move was arguably made to curb the effects of over grazing on land".⁹ In central Kenya, it was a deliberate move to keep the Agikuyu impoverished so that they would continue to supply labour to Europeans. The meager earning from the settler farms was used to sustain their families as well as pay tax. Kirima built his new home away from the settler farm and near the forest for two reasons. One, it allowed his sons to hide his big heard of sheep and goats at the forest during the *kifagio*'s (confiscator's) visit to their village. An African was not supposed to keep a heard of more than fifteen sheep and goats combined. Two, he did not want his master to know that he kept a large heard besides working for him. For the Agikuyu heard size was the measure of family's wealth.

It was at Karing'u where Muthoni first learnt of Christianity. The Consolata Mission established by the Italian missionaries at the beginning of 20th century in Nyeri trained African converts whom it sent on outreach missions to the rural areas to spread Christianity. When one such a convert arrived at Karing'u, Muthoni was among the curious kids who cared to listen. He made a small hut in which he lived and every morning, he would tell people about God. The village kids went in numbers to his hut (a church of some kind) and eventually adults started going too. "Within no time he had a big following and even men who had *miano* (beads used in witchcraft) brought them and as we burnt them they exploded like bombs."¹⁰ And so, at the age of about eight years Muthoni started her long service to the church. Her association with the church will be expounded on in chapter four.

⁹E. Frankema, E. Green and E. Hillbom, "Success and Failure of European Settler Farming in Colonial Africa" African Economic History Working Papers Series No. 16/2014, P.18.

¹⁰ Muthoni

The area around Rurii did not receive enough rainfall. A few years after the Kirimas moved to this place, they were forced to move out by prolonged drought. The earning from the settler farm after taxation could barely support the ever expanding family. The Agikuyu had a habit of giving whites Kikuyu names or corrupting their English names, especially those difficult to pronounce. They would also assign derogatory names to the brutal whites. Muthoni's uncle worked for a white man nick named *Kanini* by the locals at Endarasha. Upon learning the plight of the Kirimas, Muthoni's uncle assisted them with food from his small piece of land. Unlike Rurii, Endarasha was not affected by the drought. Kirima requested the white man to release him on the pretext of providing care to his ailing and widowed mother who lived at Nyeri. Securing a job at a settler farm in Endarasha was not hard for Kirima as by this time a number of his children were teenagers and thus 'ripe' for labour. The many small kids from the two wives assured the white man of a future supply of labour. This is how Muthoni became a victim of state sanctioned child labour.¹¹

At Endarasha, Muthoni and her siblings began working for the settlers. At this farm, the girls played a number of roles. They harvested pyrethrum, which was laborious and tiresome work. Harvesting season was followed by the land preparation season. Since Muthoni's master was one of the poor settlers, land preparation on his farm was not highly mechanized. The ox-drawn plough was used to till land. During ploughing, Muthoni and other children led the oxen through the desired path with just a few metres of rope between them and the animals while an adult held the plough behind the oxen. This was tiresome as the child had to keep pace with the animals and the adults. It was also risky "because sometimes the oxen got agitated and angry so they ran towards us and threw us up tearing our clothes".¹² These children were known in this context as *shika kamba* (Kiswahili for hold the rope). Muthoni was sharp and trustworthy and therefore the settler used her to sort out coins when paying his workers.

¹¹ Ibid

¹² Muthoni Kirima, interview by researcher, Nyeri, February 27, 2015.

Muthoni was a victim and witness to the many forms of violence meted out to Africans. Lashing was common place. Although women and girls were rarely whipped, they were often victims of sexual violence. African males and females were subjects of verbal aggression. Naturally, violence makes one feel “less of a person, it diminishes a person’s sense of identity, dignity and self-worth”.¹³ However, these experiences created in Muthoni the resolve to fight for personal freedom and independence for her country. She records,

I decided I would rather die than live my life under the white. We used to leave the settler’s farm at five in the evening then head to our small *shambas*. They would not let us till large pieces of land to grow extra to sell yet we were in our own country. In the evening we passed by these plots to look for French beans, potatoes and arrowroots. We reached home at night because we lived far from where we worked. My mother worked late into the night cooking for us.¹⁴

When missionaries introduced Western education to Africans, they emphasized on technical and agricultural skills as the African was thought to have no mental capacity for higher education. Despite facing numerous challenges, African education improved tremendously from the 1940s throughout the rest of the colonial period. This was in terms of quality and accessibility. The independent churches and schools afforded more education opportunities for the African child. A handful of Africans received higher education within East Africa and abroad. Although limited in numbers, this group of educated elite had profound impact in the politics of decolonization. They participated in the formulation of the Independence Constitution, represented Africans in the legco and in international forums, and ran trade unions among other activities. Throughout the colonial period education for many Kikuyu girls remained a pipe dream. There were misconceptions about girls’ education that made many parents refuse to take them to school. Some parents felt that educating girls was a waste of resources since they would

¹³ Vancouver costal health: promoting wellness, ensuring care
www.vchrent.ca/read_physiological.htm.retrieved on 3rd October, 2015).

¹⁴ Muthoni

eventually get married, taking with them the knowledge and the resources used on them. Parents thought it was better for girls to help with family chores before they got married.

For Muthoni however, it was a case of cultural conflict. Her father took his sons to school but not the daughters. "My father could not allow us. He used to say that those girls in school were prostitutes. Any time you dressed in school attire you were branded a prostitute".¹⁵ Her uncle thought it wise to educate his daughters. Like many girls, Muthoni was eager to learn. Her determination to attend school made her one day decide to run away to this uncle's place. This strained relations between her parents as the father blamed the mother for failing to advise her daughter accordingly. When her mother eventually went for her from the uncle's place, she had no choice but to oblige. She feared losing the father's blessings if she stood her ground on going to school. It would seem her father's desire to protect Kikuyu culture overrode Muthoni's right to education.

2.4 Muthoni during the Build up to the Mau Mau War

In 1948, while working at the settler farm, Muthoni found her love. This was in the name of Mutungi Gichuhi, a young man who worked as a cook in the same farm. Despite the limitation of time, the two were able to follow the full process of traditional kikuyu wedding. The wedding involved four main steps: one, *kuhanda ithigi* (planting the twig) where the groom and his age mates made a trip to the prospective father-in-law to state his intentions; two, *kumenya mucii* (knowing the home) where parents from both sides met and a date for dowry negotiations was set; three, *ruracio* (dowry payment) in which both parties appointed skillful negotiators to discuss on the mode of dowry settlement; lastly, *ngurario* which was the actual wedding. After the *ngurario*, Mutungi and Muthoni became husband and wife. The two were granted time off on a Saturday by their master for the occasion. Since Mutungi was not well-endowed financially, stable, he was allowed to pay the dowry in installments until the agreed number of goats (ninety-nine for every kikuyu girl) was reached. After their marriage, the young couple moved to

¹⁵ Ibid

Ihururu Sub-location of Tetu Location on the outskirts of Nyeri town to start their family away from the settler's farm.¹⁶

The establishment of settler farming turned Kikuyu women to labourers, taking away their right to engage in trade as they did before colonialism. Despite this, a few Kikuyu women engaged in trading activities _especially those living in or near urban areas. After accumulating small capital from working as a casual laborer at nearby farms, Muthoni and her husband started doing business in Nyeri. They kept chicken and sheep through zero grazing since they did not have much land. Everyday Muthoni woke up early to look for animal feed from the nearby forest and bushes as well as food waste from Nyeri market. At first she sold her products in Nyeri town but later realized Nairobi provided a bigger market and better prices. There was a market for sheep and cows at Kamakwa so she did not have to travel to Nairobi to sell hers. For the chicken though, once she established client links, she gave them to operators of a public service bus called *Muti Mukuru* (Old Tree) who sold them at Nairobi and brought her the money. She remembers making good profits from the business. "I used to be rich because not many people knew how to do business then."¹⁷

This sounds like a good start for the young couple. However, these were extra-ordinary times. It was a period when a section of the Kikuyu community was preparing to fight the British for land and freedom. Three years after marriage, the couple's life was disrupted for over a decade. By this time the tide was turning fast against European imperialism in Africa and Asia. It was a culmination of major developments happening after the Second World War shaking the British Empire to its core. Globally, the emergence of USA and USSR as the world's super powers completely shifted the balance of power from Western Europe. The destruction of western economies by war made colonial powers such as Britain and France increasingly dependent on the super powers. USA and USSR viewed colonialism as the major obstacle in their push for the control of the world market and sources of raw materials. The UNO viewed granting of independence as a major step

¹⁶ Ibid

¹⁷ Muthoni, August 20.

towards attaining world peace and security. Naturally, having relied on aid from USA and USSR to rebuild their economies, the colonial masters were obliged to cede ground on colonialism. The attainment of independence by India and Pakistan in 1947 and 1949 respectively inspired nationalists across Africa. It was evidence that independence, which was a mirage to many till then, was indeed attainable. The shifting of the activities of the Pan African Movement to Africa radically increased the pace of nationalism in Africa.¹⁸ Nationalists in Africa were now determined to bring colonialism to an end by all means necessary.

For the second time the hopes of the returning world war soldiers were dashed by an ungrateful colonial government. They fought for the British expecting to be rewarded like their white counterparts but they were not. There was also an ever increasing gap between the ordinary Kikuyu and those loyal to the British with the former reaping material benefits for their loyalty. The loyal Kikuyu angered the rest sometimes more than the settlers because the latter failed to understand why the loyalists turned against their own. As time went by, deteriorating relations in Kikuyuland made war almost inevitable. All that was needed was a trigger and there were many. The continued mistreatment of the Agikuyu squatters in Rift Valley serves a perfect example. In 1947 “the colonial government brutally evicted African squatters at the Olenguruone Settlement Scheme and forcefully settled them at the semi- arid Yatta region in Machakos.”¹⁹ The squatters lost property including crops that were still in the field.

At around the same time Kikuyu squatters were being brutally evicted from Rift Valley, KAU formed a central committee called *muhimu* which coordinated all Mau Mau activities such as oathing. The name is derived from Kiswahili word for ‘important’ because “Whenever the central committee organized a meeting, it would urge the members to turn up for a very important (*muhimu*) meeting”.²⁰ The formation of this committee was precipitated by growing numbers within the party’s radical wing who felt

¹⁸ F. Kiruthu, J. Kapiyo, and W. Kimori, *The Evolving World: A History and Government Course Form 3* (Nairobi: Oxford University Press, 2011) pp. 105-106

¹⁹ Kapiyo and Kimori, *Evolving World* p.122

²⁰ *Ibid*, p.110

time for negotiation with the British was over. Its leaders included Bildad Kaggia, Paul Ngei and Fred Kubai all of whom are remembered as Kenya's independence heroes. Oathing intensified after Kenyatta held his last public rally at Ruring'u, Nyeri before his arrest. In this meeting, Kenyatta said the following words "*Ningunyita bunda rwathatha, nimukwirira hati?*" (I will hold the donkey by the nostril; will you withstand its kicks?).²¹ He implied that since he had taken the war to the British government, the masses were supposed to prepare for the reaction of the colonial government which was almost certainly going to be through its ruthless security forces. Kenyatta was a shrewd and charismatic politician who commanded a nationwide following. He had a fever pitch effect among members of his community, the Kikuyu. According to many Mau Mau veterans, the mass responded "yes" to his question and that is when most men and women took the Mau Mau oath in earnest. Children below the age of ten were not left out. It was the responsibility of each parent to sensitize their children on what was going on during that time but most importantly, never to reveal the whereabouts and the secrets of Mau Mau to anyone. Justice was arbitrary and swift for anyone who dared reveal the secrets, even young children. They were either shot or dismembered. One young boy from Kiangai village, Kirinyaga, "told the *Kamatimu* (homeguards) that he had seen *Komerera* (a section of Mau Mau who operated from forested areas near villages) in the village. *Kamatimu* went in hot pursuit of the *Komerera*. Under the cover of darkness they came back and killed the boy and both of his parents".²² Such brutality worked in Mau Mau's favour in the short term as they were able to command near absolute secrecy from members and the civilian population. In the long run it turned part of the ordinary Kikuyu against the movement.

Who were the *Komerera*? This word literally means "lie low" in Kikuyu. In the context of the Mau Mau war, the word refers to a group of young men who left their villages during the time of the war but never took to the Mount Kenya and the Aberdare forests, the main battlefield of the war. They operated from the forested areas near the villages and thus had to remain on the lookout and hidden at all time from the colonial forces who

²¹ Macharia Mwangi, interview by researcher, Chaka, August 26, 2015.

²² Leah Kagendo Karani, interview by researcher, Kirinyaga, December 25, 2015.

regularly patrolled these areas, hence the name. This group was sometimes given orders to carry out executions of the colonial chiefs, loyal police and other sell-outs by Mau Mau leaders at the forest. However, majority of the Mau Mau guerillas were not in favour of this group. They viewed them as cowards driven out of the villages by fear of the colonial police rather than desire to fight for independence and thus could not be trusted. This group was seating ducks to the colonial forces and was soon decimated. Its remnants were the first group to be turned to pseudo-gangs, a group that proved a lethal weapon against the Mau Mau. They also committed atrocities on the villagers in the name of Mau Mau. They harassed women in the villages for food. They are also said to have raped young women and girls. For instance, "They came for me and two other girls and forced us to spend the night with them in the bush".²³ Although no major studies have been carried out on this group's operations to ascertain the extent of damage they caused, the group has gone down in history as renegade Mau Mau. Today, Mau Mau veterans make a clear distinction between themselves and the *Komerera*.

Muthoni took the first oath in early 1952 before the declaration of the State of Emergency by Sir Evelyn Baring, the then Governor of Kenya. As a trader in Nyeri, she made links with other traders in Nairobi who ardently supported the Mau Mau cause. From these traders, she got updates on the political developments in the country. In 1952 and 1953 she and her sister in-law, Wanjugu, were Mau Mau operatives who gathered information for those who were already in the forest as well as organize the oathing of other people. She took the oath before her husband but did not inform him. It was normal for a spouse to take the oath without informing the other. Children too could take the oath without informing their parents or siblings. The oath required absolute secrecy. By the time push came to shoving in 1952, Muthoni's husband had not taken the oath because he was still undecided about which side to join. According to Muthoni, he was one of the people Chief Muhoya of Nyeri had selected to join *kamatimu* (home guards) but in 1953 he finally decided to join Mau Mau.²⁴

²³ Ibid

²⁴ Muthoni

For Muthoni, the art of balancing between being a good Kikuyu wife and serving the Mau Mau was not an easy one. As a good Kikuyu wife, she was not supposed to join an underground movement let alone keep secrets from her husband. However, she was so far into the movement that in early 1952, just before declaration of the Emergency, Chief Muhoya arrested and locked her up at a small house in Kamakwa, Nyeri for her crime of adherence to the Mau Mau movement. She got information from contacts in town and relayed it to the forest fighters through other women supporters of the movement. She continued to play the role as a wife and to run the family business.

Keeping secrets from her husband was never an easy thing. She was so relieved on May 1953 when her husband finally made up his mind to join the forest fighters. He woke up one day and sang,

*Bururi uyu witu Gikuyu, Ngai niaturathimire na a kiuga tutikauma kuo.*²⁵

(This country of the Agikuyu God blessed us with it, and said we should never leave it.)

In a conversation that followed, Mutungi informed Muthoni of his desire to join the forest fighters if only he knew where to find them. The next day, Muthoni and Wanjugu took the goat which would be used for her husband's oath-taking to Mahinda's (her father-in-law's) place. The father-in-law lived near Kinaini forest. She then took word to her husband that he was needed in his father's place very early the following day. All this time her husband did not know what was going on. By the time he got to his father's place everything was ready and he was taken through the oath-taking process. After the process he did not go back home; he spent the night in the forest where he stayed until 1963. Muthoni went back home delighted that the burden of a non-Mau Mau husband was finally off her shoulder.

However, Muthoni's joy of her husband joining the forest fighters was short lived. A day after he left Chief Muhoya sent his men to check on his potential *Kamatimu*. When they enquired his whereabouts Muthoni told them she had no idea where he was. She told

²⁵ Ibid

them her husband had taken eggs to the market the previous day and had not returned home, after which they left. Three days later, the chief's men went back to her home. This time they had clues he had joined the Mau Mau guerillas. To extract the truth about his whereabouts they beat her senseless: "I was beaten up. They kicked me with their boots until I could hardly move. Blood oozed from my nostrils. They left me unconscious."²⁶ After they left her neighbors took her and nursed her for three days. This brutality made Muthoni decide to pursue the Mau Mau cause from the forest rather than from the village. She feared that as long as her husband was missing she would be targeted by the *kamatimu* who could eventually kill her. On the fourth day after the ordeal she took to the forest leaving everything behind. It took her a week to connect with the Mau Mau. She narrates how she survived alone in the forest for that one week.

At night I climbed trees that could not be felled by elephants. I had to come down from the tree at dawn before anyone could see me from far and walked again, trying to trace the steps of the Mau Mau. They (Mau Mau) got word from the village that I was already in the forest, so they started looking for me too. One evening we connected with my people (Mau Mau) and we were very happy. It took me several months before meeting that person (her husband). It took long for people to meet their spouses or relatives in the forest because we were never settled at one point but kept moving to evade the police and often dispersed when they attacked us. That is how I joined the forest.²⁷

2.5 Summary

To sum-up, the colonial economy laid the basis for the transformation of Kikuyu women from political passivity and compliance to active radicals who challenged the status quo. To meet the demand for African labor, the colonial government legalized the inclusion of African children into forced labour. The harsh realities of working in settlers' farms, communal projects, taxation, as well as social and political discrimination of the Kikuyu marked the turning point for the community's women. They were also influenced by the

²⁶ Muthoni

²⁷ Ibid

politicization spearheaded by the educated Kikuyu elite. Their lead role during work stoppages and defiant campaigns were precursors to the Mau Mau war. Women were active participants in the period leading to the war which was marked by massive oathing of Kikuyu men, women and children. Although women did not administer the Mau Mau oath, they were vital in its preparation and also linked those who were ready to take the oath with its administrators.

In conclusion, contrary to the opinion that Kikuyu women found themselves swept under the Mau Mau wave, they were key players in the long process of Kikuyu radicalization that culminated in the formation of the underground movement. This was occasioned by the colonial political, social and economic oppression of the entire community. Like the men, Kikuyu women deliberately took up arms against the colonial system. Both sexes were also forced to flee the villages by the harsh realities that followed the declaration of the State of Emergency. Muthoni was one of the many Mau Mau women. Her experiences while working as a child at a settler's farm had a big bearing on the person she became later in life. She was influenced by the Kikuyu business environment which was pro-Mau Mau when she took to business in Nyeri after her marriage.

CHAPTER THREE

MUTHONI'S CONTRIBUTION TO MAU MAU MOVEMENT

3.1 Overview

This chapter analyzes Mau Mau military organization and discusses the various factors that limited the role of women in the movement through the lens of the patriarchy theory. It also looks at the levels of women participation in the movement before examining Muthoni's contribution.

3.2 Mau Mau Military Organization

Mau Mau military organization was a blend of the traditional Kikuyu military organization and that of the British. As a decentralized community, the Agikuyu socio-political institutions were organized along territorial units, each consisting of one long ridge. Every territorial unit had its warrior group which was made up of two regiments: the senior and the junior. The senior regiment was composed of nine initiation age-groups while the junior warrior regiment consisted of more recently initiated groups and would become senior regiment only when nine such initiation age-groups had been formed. Once a senior regiment was formed, the previous one would be allowed to retire.²⁸ Although the fighting units among the Mau Mau were not organized along age-groups, the movement maintained territorial units. This division was necessitated by guerrilla tactics rather than continuation of the traditional organization. Mau Mau fighting units were referred to as the *bushi*, which implied an area of operation within the forest occupied by a single platoon and under command of one or more generals. The traditional ridge fighting units were further subdivided into smaller units comprising fighters from a few villages with their own leaders. Similarly, when Mau Mau platoons swelled in numbers, they were divided further and new leaders appointed to head them. The major point of departure between the traditional fighting units and the Mau Mau units is that the latter had women warriors, a fact unheard of in the former.

²⁸ L.S.B. Leakey, *The Southern Kikuyu before 1903 Vol. III* (London: Academic Press, 1977) p.1036

In the traditional military organization there “were *athigani* (intelligence gatherers) whose task was to scout in Maasai country and to lead the warriors to war. There were also *athamaki* (senior elders) who were responsible for giving instructions to the warriors. They acted after taking counsel together but in case of dispute the *athigani* were supreme.”²⁹ The Mau Mau adapted the British military ranking system. They had ranks such as major, captain, general and field marshal. This study reveals that there was a rather loose attachment to the British system since there was not major training prior to and after one joined the movement, save for simple shooting drills. Consequently, many of the fighters understood little what these ranks entailed and their hierarchy. It is hard for the veterans to tell the difference in terms of roles, powers and privileges of the ranks although insisted they were similar to those of the British military.

Religion played an important role in traditional Kikuyu military organization. For instance, prayers were conducted before any raid. They prayed to *Mwene Nyaga* (Kikuyu God) for protection, courage and victory in war. They also offered sacrifice to the ancestors to appease them. In addition to prayers and sacrifices, every *muthigani* (singular of *athigani*) had the *githitu* (a tool for performing magic) and a number of magic powders obtained from *mundu mugo wa ita* (the army’s medicine man). These magic powders were used for various purposes such as making a man invisible and making the armies fearless.³⁰ Prayers played a much bigger role among the Mau Mau because they faced mammoth challenges_ including an incomparably stronger enemy, acute shortage of supplies, and the pseudo-gang menace. They made passionate prayers to God and ancestors. “We prayed to God and told him if we lost the war it would be Him who would have been defeated and if we won it would be Him who would have won.”³¹ Prayers kept them hopeful of victory despite these challenges.

Dancing was part of traditional military organization. Warriors organized *kibata* (a song-dance) when they needed to discuss war plans. When planning *ita cia nyarurunga* (major raids) fighting forces from different territorial units would meet to lay down strategies.

²⁹ Ibid p. 1036

³⁰ Ibid

³¹ Mathenge Wang’ombe, interview by researcher, Leshau, Nyandarua, September 1, 2015.

This dance served to bring warriors from different territorial units together. During such meetings, decisions were made on plans of war and on who were to become supreme leaders and formation of a war council.³² During the Mau Mau uprising, songs and dance continued to play a pivotal role. “Women composed songs to mobilize support for the Mau Mau and also ridicule the homeguards and other African colonial agents”³³ for supporting the British in the war against the Mau Mau. These songs also inspired the warriors to fight with determination.

Espionage is a central component of military strategies. Kikuyu warriors were keen on gathering information before any raid. Intelligence gathering was so important that it was only entrusted top war leaders called *athigani* “who spent most of their time in Maasai territory spying and if they said there was good chance of a successful raid the warriors would start planning and let it be known along territorial units that a raid was being planned”.³⁴ It is important to note that during the Mau Mau war women led in this front. One male veteran observed, “They were the ones who would know when the guards are coming to look for us. They were the ones with the most difficult task especially those in the village”.³⁵ Their readiness to gather information contributed a lot in the success of the movement. They gave fighters the ability to discern potential danger and outmanoeuvre their enemies.

The sexual division of labour among the traditional Agikuyu excluded women in matters of war. Women worked in the farms to feed their families while men were in charge of defence and leadership. After initiation, boys joined the warrior group which among other responsibilities defended the community against external aggression. These male age-sets gradually transitioned to councils of elders. At the clan level was a council of elders known as *Kiama*. The head of this council was the *muramati* (senior elder of the clan council) who coordinated the activities of the clan. The senior elders from each clan formed a higher council called *Kiama kia athamaki* which acted as the highest court of

³² Leakey, *Southern Kikuyu*, vol. 3, p.1039.

³³ Kiruthu, *Evolving World* p. 125

³⁴ Ibid

³⁵ Kiragu Nyagugu, interview by researcher, Ndaragwa, September 2, 2015.

appeal and administered justice in the community. They also presided over religious functions and other community activities including initiation ceremonies. Colonialism completely changed the dynamics of sexual division of labour. It brought a new social and economic order.³⁶ Under the new order the community not only lost land but was also expected to provide cheap labour to the new land owners, the settlers. The colonial authorities crafted measures to make the Kikuyu community rely on wage labour in order to pay tax as well as take care of their families. Land alienation, forced labour, and taxation were among the numerous factors that bred bitterness among the Agikuyu.

For the women, there was a brighter side brought about by the colonial political order. The establishment of the colonial government meant that Agikuyu men lost their political authority enjoyed under the system of council of elders. The elders no longer sat to decide on important matters pertaining to their community. This responsibility was taken up by various organs of the colonial government. The establishment of the colonial security apparatus marked the end of the Kikuyu warrior class as it was no longer required to defend the community. Colonialism subjugated men and women alike. The desire to bring subjugation to an end started the long journey in the fight for independence which culminated in the Mau Mau war. Women were at the heart of every political development on this long walk to independence. They led from the front during defiance campaigns such as work stoppages in communal projects. They were unbowed by patriarchy and kept pushing for more space even in the running of African political organizations, one of the significant tools of nationalism in Kenya. These events prepared them for a much bigger role in the Mau Mau movement.

3.3 The Subordination of Women's Roles in the Mau Mau movement

The outbreak of the Mau Mau war in 1952 gave women an opportunity to join the world of warfare. For the first time in the history of the Agikuyu, women fought side by side with their menfolk. They went to the forest for similar reasons as men, fought for land and freedom as well as ran away from constant harassment by homeguards. The declaration of the State of Emergency and repatriation of the Agikuyu, Aembu and

³⁶ Kiruthu et al *The Evolving World* p. 66

Ameru from Nairobi made life unbearable in the reserves. The reserves became congested, putting a lot of strain on limited resources set aside for the Africans. (See fig.3.1) Some Mau Mau veterans admit that “Most men and women went to the forest after the declaration of the State of Emergency since they had no option.”³⁷ Ironically, most men interviewed during the course of this study suggested that women only went to the forest to escape harassment by homeguards while they (men) motivated by a nobler reason, to fight for land and freedom. Nonetheless, these men admit women made important contribution to the movement although not in actual combat. Apart from excluding women and combat in male accounts, some also fail to indicate the significance of the non-combat roles in the survival of the movement.

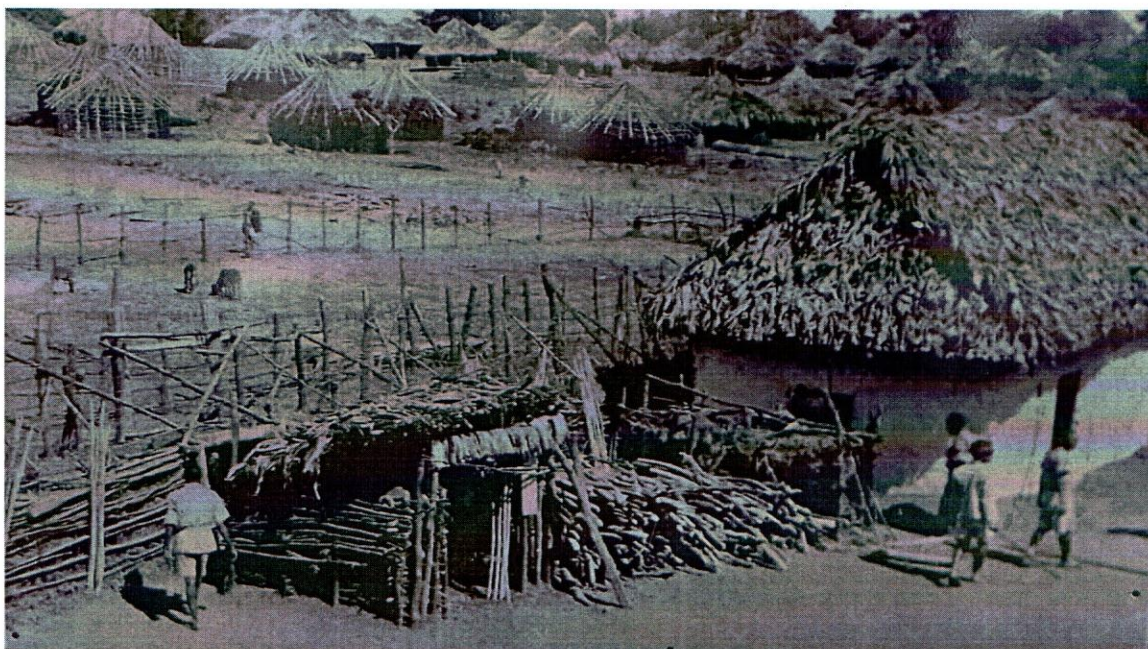


Fig. 3.1 Photograph of a Kikuyu Emergency village.

Source: Kenya National Museum, Nyeri.

Although the war provided women with a rare opportunity to prove themselves in battle, they soon found out that many men were uneasy with their inclusion. One male veteran admitted: “We did not believe that women could fight, leave alone lead”.³⁸ It is evident

³⁷ Kariuki Gachucha, interview by researcher, Ndaragwa, September 2, 2015.

³⁸ Macharia

that a strong patriarchal system established itself within the movement especially at the initial stages of the war. Men were not ready to share with women roles that gave them privilege and power within the traditional set up. However, things changed in due course. Women proved themselves useful in war, some becoming better fighters than some men. In some situations, women's resourcefulness became the lifeline for the Mau Mau. This turn of events did not only catch Kikuyu men by surprise; it also left Europeans "Struggling to reconcile female Mau Mau militancy and solidarity with their simplistic notions of a passive and compliant African womanhood".³⁹ It was never again taken for granted that men fought while women remained in the comfort of their homes waiting for their men to come back from war. Defending the community became the responsibility of the women as well.

Throughout the Kikuyu history, war was associated with masculinity. However, the entry of women into the Mau Mau war presented a challenge to this patriarchal notion. The conservatives felt that women would be a source of disruption. They gave numerous reasons to justify why women in the forest were supposed to continue with domestic chores as opposed to fighting. They wanted them to remain in forest camps and prepare meals for the men coming from raids. The following is a discussion on this conservative notion and how it affected Mau Mau women.

Mau Mau fighters believed that women menstrual cycles were the worst cause of bad omen. Consequently, measures were taken to protect the movement from this omen. Some of the measures were dehumanizing. For instance, "A woman was kept in a hut separate from the others with another woman to take care her and a man to guard the two until their days were over."⁴⁰ During this period, a woman could not be allowed to offer services such as cooking since it was believed everything she touched would become unclean, nor would she interact with the rest. It is hard to know what went on in the minds of women during such a time although it is safe to guess they must have felt rejected and lonely. After a woman's days were over, she was taken down to the stream

³⁹ Elkins, *Britain's Gulag* pp. 221-222

⁴⁰ Susan Mwangi, interview by researcher, Mutanga, Nyandarua, August 31, 2015.

to wash her clothes. Again, she could not be trusted to properly clean herself and her clothes. "Someone would watch her to make sure she cleaned well and that the water she used did not drain back to the river as this would expose the group to bad omen".⁴¹ Whether men believed in this omen or not, they used it against women. Since there was no telling when these periods would start, many men thought the best course of action would be for all women to remain in the camps as men went out to fight.

The debate whether women could be fighters did not start or end with the Mau Mau movement. Women have always been considered physically weaker than men. This obsession with physical strength went beyond the Mau Mau movement to the defence forces of independent Kenya. It was used to bar many women in the forest from accompanying men to raids. From 1971 to 2000, women served as a support wing to the male soldiers in the Kenyan Military. They belonged to the Women Service Corps whose role was to support fighting units during war by doing secretarial, clerical, logistical, medical and communication jobs. During peace time the wing was expected to perform administrative roles.⁴² These women accompanied men to battle but did not fight. Such was the case with Mau Mau. Patriarchy made it difficult for women to fight although, as will be seen later, women did actually fight. According to some male respondents, some platoons did not allow women to have guns unless every man had one_ in which case a woman just carried the gun but did not use it. Female veterans refute these claims, giving evidence that after a woman took the *ngero* oath (third Mau Mau oath) and trained on the use of the gun nothing held her back. They argue that in the forest there were no men or women; just fighters. Some women even led in battles. "There is one who led an attack at Kagunduini while another stormed a guard post at Kirurumi".⁴³ Mau Mau men were not alone in this denial. The colonial authorities were reluctant to accept that women could take up arms against them. However, they eventually did accept that women were not bystanders in the political play as evidenced by this admission,

⁴¹ Ibid

⁴² Kenya Defense Forces Act, 2012.

⁴³ Interview with Wangari wa Gathegi held on Aug 31, 2015 at Mutanga, Nyandarua.

The attitude of the women of the tribe towards the emergency has in general been particularly distressing perhaps owing to the divergence in educational standards between the sexes, the primitive and indigenous cult of Mau Mau has had for many a powerful appeal. There have been instances of female relatives being privy to the murder of their loyal men folk... Women are known to have operated with some of the gangs and harbored and encouraged the gangsters in the reserve. While the fighting continues there is no doubt that the Kikuyu female will continue to be an extremely tough nut to crack.⁴⁴

But even in this admission, women were believed to act out of influence by men rather than on their own volition.

The Mau Mau movement had a strict code regarding sexual relations within the forest. It was believed that such relations, unless they were controlled could bring bad omen to the movement as well as distract males who could not get sexual partners in the forest since women were fewer than men. As strict as it was, this code was sometimes broken. Some of those interviewed during the research reported cases where men fought and even killed one another over women. It is important to note that when sexual activities occurred they were blamed on women because men were believed to be infallible in sexual matters. Sometimes the Mau Mau court executed those accused of 'sexual offences'. With time this rule was relaxed and some women even became pregnant at the forest. The rules however, remained biased against women. If such incidences were reported, the women could be evicted from the forest without considering the dangers posed by homeguards and the colonial police for anyone associated with the movement. For instance, "A woman called Gacani was taken by a man we called Mwangi from Nakuru, she became pregnant in the forest and that is when she was kicked out of the forest".⁴⁵

There is little documentation on the role of Mau Mau women in combat and leadership. This study considers the following to be the explanation why the two women roles have

⁴⁴ KNA/XA.1/11/32, Fort Hall Annual Report 1953 p. 3

⁴⁵ Wang'ombe,

been overlooked in preceding studies. First, the number of women who went to the forest is inferior to that of men. This presents a big challenge to any researcher in terms of getting a sufficient number of female veteran combatants. This is further compounded by passage of time as many of the women have passed on and those alive are too old to accurately recall the events. Male Mau Mau veterans seem to have an agenda to suppress the role of women in combat and leadership. Their accounts write off women from these two roles and assign them the role of caregivers. This agenda was self-revealing during mixed gender focused group discussions where men tended to dominate. Men also dismissed recollections that seemed to elevate women's roles to leadership and combat. In such cases, the researcher was forced to arrange to meet women alone for more information.

Secondly, like their male counterparts, Mau Mau women were socialized in a male-defined value system and conducted themselves as such. They grew up in a traditional set up where women were subservient to men. During the war, some of them were contented with carrying out domestic roles in the forest. One woman stated, "Women only led in the villages. That place [forest] was led by men. A woman could not take a gun because she would die before the enemy. War is not a joke".⁴⁶ This is an account of a woman who went to the forest but she believed it was not her place to fight or lead. She saw no point in challenging the traditional social order. This phenomenon presented a challenge during focused group discussions as some women were ready to concur in order to avoid contradicting the opinions of male veterans.

Thirdly and perhaps the biggest impediment, is the depiction of Mau Mau women by scholars as invisibles. As a consequence, the role played by the women on behalf of themselves and of other women has rarely been considered a central theme in many studies on the Mau Mau movement. For instance, one study on women role in the movement avers that, "groups of women had their own leaders, these women were useful

⁴⁶ Muthoni Eliud, interview by researcher, Mathakwa, Nyeri, August 22, 2015.

as representatives of women's interests especially in general meetings".⁴⁷ The study does not elaborate on who such leaders were or what the women's interests were.

3.4 Levels of Women Participation in Mau Mau Movement

It is important to present a typology of women in guerilla organizations based on their levels of participation distinguishing among sympathizers, spies, warriors and Dominant Forces. Sympathizers are primarily camp followers who provide money, time, sewing, cooking and even sex to the male in the guerilla organizations. Spies are a more active group, serving as decoys, messengers, intelligence gatherers and contributing strategic support to the man as well. Warriors are more active participants who are recruited and trained to use weapons and devices in guerilla warfare. They may fight alongside their male counterparts but they are not allowed to become leaders and have little, if any, input in policy formation. The Dominant Forces participate at the highest level, providing leadership, ideology, strategy and motivation. These women often fill commando positions at the core of the group. Dominant Forces may engender more fear than men in similar positions because this powerful and violent status is so unlike the traditional female role. Dominant Forces expect to share fully in the benefits and changes wrought by the guerilla movement.⁴⁸ This study discusses women role in Mau Mau movement along the levels of participation.

The stalwarts or Mau Mau sympathizers, as they are sometimes called were women who remained in the villages while the guerilla war raged on. They included wives, relatives, friends and village mates of the forest fighters. This group bore the brunt of the State of Emergency and the brutality meted on the ordinary Kikuyu by the homeguards. Their services were primary to the survival of the Mau Mau. One colonial district administrator observed: "The gang supply chain has depended largely on women"⁴⁹ The operations of this group was very effective especially before colonial government ordered the digging of spiked trenches around the villages and the forests to cut off the supply lines to the

⁴⁷ Gachihi, *Women in Mau Mau* p 213.

⁴⁸ G. Perez (2006) "Guerrilleras in Latin America: Domestic and International Role", *Journal of Peace Research* vol. 43 no.3p.317.

⁴⁹ KNA/XA.1/11/32, Fort Hall Annual Report 1953 p.3.

Mau Mau. Their roles were as follows: First, by the time the State of Emergency was declared by the Governor Evelyn Barring, some Kikuyu men were already in the Mt Kenya and Aberdare forests preparing for war against the British. However, it was after the declaration of the Emergency that many men and women took to the forest. Some were motivated by the desire to fight for freedom and some because the forest was a safe haven from harassment by the colonial police on suspicion of association with the Mau Mau. Consequently, many men and women, especially the young joined the Mau Mau guerillas leaving behind their children, the old and the sick. The responsibility of taking care of these vulnerable groups fell in the hands of women stalwarts of the movement. This allowed those in the forest to concentrate on the cause, knowing their children and the elderly were in good hands.

Mau Mau fighters did not sufficiently prepare for the war. They did not have an elaborate strategy on food and other supplies to sustain the struggle for a long period. The movement's leaders probably did not foresee the war taking as long as it did. The influx of people in the forest after the Emergency piled pressure on the limited resources. The guerillas almost entirely relied on women in the villages for food. Years of economic deprivation of the community made acquisition of food a tall order. To feed the fighters, women came up with ingenious ways of sourcing and delivering food to them without detection by the colonial police. Villagers contributed food, while some was bought using money from well-wishers who included some Indians. The money was also sourced through the oath-taking process as "one contributed something when taking the oath".⁵⁰ The Achilles heel was its delivery to the forest. To beat the system, "Women concealed food under firewood and livestock feed and delivered it at designated collection points on the fringes of the forest."⁵¹ This arrangement applied to other supplies too.

Intelligence plays vital role in war. Credible information on the enemy has a big bearing on the outcome of any war, sometimes more than the actual combat. Intelligence gathering is a risky affair because one has live with the enemy. It demands selflessness

⁵⁰ Karani

⁵¹ John Miru, interview by researcher, Wamagana, Nyeri, September 9, 2015

for the greater good. Espionage has zero tolerance to errors since simple mistakes may lead to death of oneself and others. During the Mau Mau war, spying was almost entirely done by women. This marked a major point of deviation from the traditional Kikuyu military organization. These women went to great length to get information to help fighters plan their battles carefully. "If a man held a key position in government, girls would seductively win him over".⁵² Their sacrifice enabled the movement to sustain resistance against the mighty British military. One woman remembered: "We used to be sent out of the forest on risky ventures. That is how we were appreciated and some rewarded through promotion".⁵³ It is difficult to draw the line between the stalwarts and the spies within the Mau Mau movement. There was not specialization in their role perhaps owing to the fact that the movement did not train its spies like modern militaries do. Rural and urban women were involved in mobilizing supplies and information for Mau Mau fighters. Even without training and a clear of command, they maintained efficient supply chain despite of the complexities of the Emergency period.

Women fought alongside men. This was a substantial deviation from the traditional Kikuyu war practice. These women had a mammoth task because besides fighting, they continued with supportive roles such as cooking. Over time, they asserted themselves in the battle as well. They participated in both defensive and offensive operations. However, the accounts of male veterans wrongly portray women as reactive rather than proactive combatants. The reality of war lies in both defensive and offensive actions. Women were part of expeditions that targeted homeguard posts, their homes as well as settler farms. It is important to note that the search for food outside the forest was considered 'going to war' and with the ever worsening food situation, hunting for food became more rampant than the other forms of Mau Mau activities. This was especially so after the government successfully barred village women from supplying food to the guerillas. Women were at the heart of food search: "We went to get cows together with men. You know a woman

⁵² B. Kaggia, *Roots of Freedom 1921-1963: The Autobiography of Bildad Kaggia* (Nairobi: East African Educational House, 1975) p.111

⁵³ Wairimu

can carry more than a man?"⁵⁴ During the raids for food, men drove out livestock from settler farms while women carried other foodstuffs.

Women were part of the dominant force within the Mau Mau movement. Dominant forces in guerilla movements provide leadership, ideology, strategy and motivation. Involvement of women at the highest level of leadership faced challenges associated with patriarchy as discussed earlier in this chapter. Although women would bear titles such as general and field marshal, they did not enjoy the same power, privileges and responsibilities as their male counterparts in similar ranks. For instance, they were not part of the war council which was made up of "a group of old men who never left the forest but were the ones who told us what to do".⁵⁵ This group was headed by Kimathi and Mathenge and other generals. It was common for women and men to get ranks from services other than fighting. These services included sourcing food and coming up with ideas that were vital for the survival of their groups. A perfect example was when a group of Mau Mau fighters left Mount Kenya forest for a village in Mathira, Nyeri. In Mau Mau circles, this is the famous battle of Rui Ruiru (black river) in which Kanguniu, a young girl from the village warned the group of an impending ambush by *Kamatimu*. Although she was not a fighter, Kanguniu was given a title and a song was composed in her honour.

Munyaka muingi wonekanire kumana na kairitu kamwe
*Ritwa riako Kanguniu, gakhonokia mioyo ngiri*⁵⁶

A big fortune was realized from one girl
Her name was Kanguniu, she saved a thousand lives

Although women leaders were respected and obeyed by the men, they did not carry the same air of authority like their male counterparts in similar ranks. Overall, leadership by women remained a challenge throughout the war.

⁵⁴ Wangari

⁵⁵ Gachucha Kariuki

⁵⁶ Susan Wairimu, interview by researcher, Mutanga, Nyandarua, August 31, 2015

Ideology among the Mau Mau fighters came from their community's desire for land and freedom. After decades of economic deprivation and social and political discrimination, the community did not require much convincing on the need to take up arms against the colonizers. This was made easier by the failure of the constitutional reforms to realistically change the lives of the people. "It reached a point when it was decided that war must be planned because the white man was not listening to our grievances".⁵⁷ This implied that even after nationalists relentlessly aired the Africans' views, the status quo remained. Mau Mau ideology was thus to drive out the whites through violence. Men and women were in agreement on this particular issue.

The Mau Mau fraternity had various ways of motivating the fighters. First, its leaders led through example in the field of war. A leader was supposed to be a *jamba* (brave and fierce) in battle. Such leaders inspired fighters in the face of danger. Kimathi devised another ingenious way to keep the fighters motivated. He moved from one part of the forest to the other giving ranks and medals for outstanding performance both in battle and away from it. Those who offered outstanding services to their colleagues such as obtaining food and treating the injured were given ranks and medals. Since there were no salaries for the fighters, it did not cost anything to give ranks. This method was the most used. It perhaps explains why there are so many Mau Mau generals. According to one Mau Mau veteran, "People love leadership. If one wasn't given those ranks, would they not leave the forest? The honours were given in order to encourage people because there were no salaries."⁵⁸ Women leaders played no part in giving the ranks and medals as this was a preserve of the top male leadership, especially Kimathi. The fact that they went to war was challenge enough for men who had long considered women weak and therefore unable to fight.

The female dominant forces were excluded from strategies on war. Decisions on where, how and when to attack were made by Field Marshal Kimathi and his generals. However,

⁵⁷ Munene Gathigi, interview by researcher, Karundu, Nyeri, August 26, 2015.

⁵⁸ General Karangi, interview by researcher, Shamata, Nyandarua, September 7, 2015.

strategies such as acquisition of intelligence and supplies were almost entirely coordinated by women. Oathing, which was seen by the Europeans as atavistic, was essentially the single most important strategy of recruitment into the movement. It served to unite and make new recruits believe in the Mau Mau cause. Oath administration was primarily done by old men. Women did however make arrangements to bring candidates to the oathing sites.

3.5 Muthoni's Role in Mau Mau Movement

When Muthoni left her village for guerilla life in 1953, she had no idea what it entailed. She had no prior training or experience in warfare. Despite this, she survived to become the only woman among the last group of Mau Mau who did not leave the forest until 1963. Exploring her life helps illuminate the contribution of women in the levels discussed above, especially in leadership. The study utilized her recollections and those of other veterans as well as archival sources. There are some contradictions between what Muthoni claims to have done and what other informants believe to have been practical for a woman. Although this is a biographical study, hindsight makes it difficult for Muthoni to provide a clear chronological account of her life in the forest as well as her rise through ranks. This feature also lacks in the accounts of other informants. The problem is further compounded by the fact that most Mau Mau fighters were not adept at chronicling events in the forest. Although Muthoni claims records of all events were kept by educated Mau Mau such as the renowned Karari Njama, no such documents were available for review in the entire course of this study. Most of the events narrated are jumbled up with no clear dates. The narrative of her forest life will be presented chronologically and thematically accompanied by the researcher's interpretations. The narrative also brings to life contradictions between the story as told by Muthoni and the life possibly lived. It also investigates reasons for the contradictions. The role of Muthoni has been analyzed along four different levels, namely: as a stalwart and a spy, as non-combatant in the forest, as a combatant, and a dominant force.

When KLFA started recruiting through oathing in the late 1940s, it gained popularity among sections of the Kikuyu community in Nairobi such as petty traders. Muthoni was

among women who silently supported the cause of the movement long before she took the first oath. As a trader in Nyeri, she had contacts with traders in Nairobi who strongly supported the underground movement. She also remembers contributing money whenever Kikuyu nationalists such as those of KAU needed funds for their operations long before the war broke out.

This thing about independence started when we were very young kids. I used to keep what was collected because contributions were made even in the rural areas and in the white men's farms. It's something that was kept underground for long.⁵⁹

As a girl, Muthoni was already playing her part in the nationalist struggle.

Shortly after marriage, Muthoni took her first Mau Mau oath and her role changed from a mere supporter of the underground movement to a conduit of both information and supplies to the fighters who were by then in the forest preparing for guerilla warfare. From mid-1952, women intensified their intelligence gathering. At around the same time oathing hit its peak. Muthoni would wake up early and head to the forest to ostensibly get food for her goats while in reality she went to deliver information in partnership with other women. Carrying out this role "Was easy because the home guards didn't suspect we (women) intended any harm."⁶⁰ This was especially so before the war became full-blown. After conveying the information, Muthoni would head back home to her unsuspecting husband and continue with household chores. By keeping secrets of her adherence to the Mau Mau, Muthoni went against the convention of an ideal Kikuyu wife.

She continued to operate from the village until May 1953. Like many other villagers, she became a victim of brutality in the hands of the homeguards. It was common for the homeguards to victimize villagers whose relative were believed to be Mau Mau

⁵⁹ Muthoni

⁶⁰ Ibid

adherents. Her claimed detention by Chief Muhoya of Nyeri on suspicion of association with Mau Mau could not have made things any better for her. When her husband went missing early in May that year, the homeguards descended on her, kicking her with boots and hitting her with gun butts then left her for dead. She was still recuperating when she took to the forest. One veteran who saw her when she arrived at Mathaini *bushi* in May 1953 remembered vividly: "She arrived in the morning alone. She came because she had been beaten by the homeguards because her husband was missing and also because a person (probably a loyalist) had been killed in their village".⁶¹ From then on, her role changed from that of a conduit of information and supplies to the forest to that of a guerilla.

It the forest, she first joined the non-combat wing of women. Like other women, she cooked and looked after the welfare of others. She was not stuck in this role for long. After getting well, she began her long journey as a fighter. It is important to note that assumption of a new role did not mean that one stopped doing the earlier roles. Women multi-tasked, often offering services as cooks, spies, as well as sourcing guns and other supplies. Some trusted women who operated in the forest near Nyeri were sent to buy weapons from Africans working in the British military camps. "Those who cooked for the *jonnies* (white soldiers) were Kikuyu. People contributed money in the reserves and gave it to us. We paid the cooks to get us bullets, grenades and guns. We gave men the ability to fight because they were not able to go for the bullets and grenades from that place".⁶² The same respondent recorded that as a woman, she used to fight, get the weapons from the garrisons as well as carry out domestic chores in the forest. She went further to demonstrate to the researcher her shooting skills using her walking stick to clear any doubts as to whether or not she fought.

This study contends that expeditions for food and livestock in villages and settlers farms were considered 'going to war' by the Mau Mau and should be treated as such. These expeditions were high risk operations that required speed and precision in execution.

⁶¹ Wang'ombe

⁶² Wairimu

Women were significant in such operations because they were able to carry more food on their backs than men did on their shoulders. Muthoni claims to have taken part in many such operations. These expeditions became difficult with increased patrols by the colonial police and the construction of trenches to keep Mau Mau out of villages and farms.

Some veterans claim that Mau Mau sometimes raided settler farms with the intention of scaring the owners rather than kill them. Muthoni claims that she took part in such raids. "During the attacks we could threaten them and in return they would plead for their lives. We would ask them for guns and eat their food. We just wanted to pass a message that this is our land. After the invasions some *Wazungu* would move out the following day".⁶³ This study was not able to ascertain whether Mau Mau organized raids intended to simply scare settlers from their farms. However, it is difficult to buy the notion that Mau Mau hesitated to take such opportunities to slay the settlers who had caused them untold misery for decades.

Although women did not do sentinel work, it was everyone's responsibility to keep watch on the enemy. Women's ability to multi-task made them more suitable men in this role. The British military bombed Mau Mau hideouts using the Harvard aircraft. Initially, these bombings took a heavy toll on the fighters but they soon adapted to such invasions; "they soon learned how to evade this weapon."⁶⁴ Being watchful was a responsibility of all the Mau Mau. Women were exemplary in this. "We used to be very careful in the forest. There was this small aircraft we used to call *kamaumau*. (Probably it was small and searching for the Mau Mau). It was used to sport fires in the forest. We would hear it from far and we would shout *kari iguru* (it is up there). We then used soil to cover the fire. Isn't that fighting?"⁶⁵

Muthoni's platoon had a medical practitioner who treated the injured. When he died they turned to traditional medicine to treat casualties. She was among women who assumed this role. They used honey and traditional herbs to handle all medical conditions; "we

⁶³ Muthoni

⁶⁴ KNA/XA.1/11/32, Fort Hall Annual Report 1953 p.4.

⁶⁵ Muthoni

used herbs and honey, mostly honey. The injured was given honey in the morning and evening. We also used *mutundu* (*croton macrostachyus*) extracts which was put on the injury to stop bleeding.”⁶⁶ They were also masters of urotherapy, often using their own urine to disinfect wounds. Although they used unconventional methods, Muthoni and other ‘medical practitioners’ alleviated pain and helped reduce fatalities in their platoons.

Muthoni was among a group of women who broke the patriarchal rules that barred women from fighting alongside their male counterparts. The narrative on women and the combat role in war is presented differently by male and female veterans. When the question about women’s role in combat was put to the veterans, one woman veteran responded: “There was one woman called Muthoni, I was with her. She feared nothing. She used to go to war with men because she did not fear. She was a dangerous woman; even men feared her.”⁶⁷ When the question on Muthoni’s role in combat was asked to one of her male forest acquaintances, he answered: “I used to be with her. She was cooking at the kitchen”.⁶⁸ Why would these two accounts differ so sharply? Many male veterans utterly dismissed women’s role in combat. Could women veterans be exaggerating the role of their gender while the male folk seek to suppress it? The truth is somewhere in the middle. There were men who could not accept women as their equal in the battlefield. This was especially so at the initial stages of the war. With time however, some men came to appreciate the role played by the women in combat.

Muthoni sees no need to over-emphasize women’s role in combat. She views combat just as a part of warfare, one that should not be seen in isolation of other aspects. She argues that there were no men or women in the forest just fighters. What men did, women did too. What a man did, a woman did. She insists that women did go to battle just as men cooked sometimes. Her assertion is reinforced by documented evidence of groups of Mau Mau, including women, attacking various targets. For instance,

Mau Mau women terrorists struck for the first time in the Fort Hall reserve when a gang of which they were members killed three men, five children and a

⁶⁶ Ibid

⁶⁷ Wanjiru

⁶⁸ Nderitu Mukundi, interview by researcher, Wiyumiririe, August 26, 2015

woman in a night raid near Muriaini. Criminal Investigation Officers, including assistant superintendent from Forth Hall, stated yesterday that this was the first time that they had learned definitely that women hardcore terrorists had murdered. They strangled the woman with skin thongs as the male gangsters hacked the rest of her six children to death.⁶⁹

Muthoni was one of the female leaders in the Mau Mau movement. Although she does not remember chronologically her rise through the ranks, her accounts indicate that she was promoted from one rank to the next as a result of services other than actual combat. Mau Mau accorded ranks for any achievement to appreciate the particular person and encourage others. When obtaining food became a major problem, anyone who went out of their way and got food for the movement was highly regarded and promoted.

I became a leader soon after I joined the forest because of my work. When it got tough I could keep running, moving even when they shot at me. I could hear bullets whizz past my ears but my legs kept me going in search of food to feed the hungry warriors. When I came back they celebrated my achievement and I was promoted. My first rank was corporal but I don't remember the flow to the top.⁷⁰

She also claims to have been promoted for her role in treating the injured.

Her diligence earned her a couple of responsibilities. For instance, although Mau Mau movement did not have a strong financial foundation, it sometimes got donations in the form of money from villagers and some Indians. The movement also got funds from first time oath-takers as they were required to contribute a 'goat' (often in the form of money) as the fee for the oathing and a contribution in support of the movement. Mau Mau oaths were administered to both fighters and villagers, the latter pledging not to reveal the

⁶⁹ "Women gangsters in raid kill wife of a loyalist" *East African Standard*, Wednesday, 7 October 1953, p.

1.

⁷⁰ Muthoni

movement's secrets. They used this money to bribe the Africans working in British garrisons to steal bullets and grenades for them. According to Muthoni, Stanley Mathenge became the treasurer while she became his assistant. She claims that when Mathenge allegedly left for Ethiopia, he gave her a coin_ perhaps signifying that he had handed over the treasury to her for the time he was to be away. This brought her even closer to Kimathi whom she profoundly reveres. Prayers were an important part of their daily life and each platoon had prayer leaders. Muthoni and a man she only refers to as Kihonge from Murang'a led prayers in their platoon.⁷¹

Muthoni's claim to the rank of field marshal attracts sharp criticism from her contemporaries. Most veterans state categorically that she was not a field marshal; that no woman attained the rank. This is because, to be a field marshal, one must have been an overall leader of many battalions, each under own its general. It is unlikely that Mau Mau generals could have agreed to be subservient to a woman. Those in the Aberdare forest, where Muthoni spent her entire guerilla life, observe that there was only one field marshal, Dedan Kimathi. The next in line of succession for this rank were all male generals led by Stanley Mathenge and Ndungu Gicheru among others. One of them observed: "Leadership that time was hardly given to women. I do not know how a woman could get the chance although I could hear of a place where one woman was mentioned. But this was in far place".⁷²

The rank of a general was second to that of field marshal. To become a field marshal, one spent considerable time as a general. This time was used to solidify ones position by gaining loyalty from other generals and the rank and file. One would expect any general to vividly remember conditions surrounding their promotion to this rank, something missing in Muthoni's accounts. She has, in two preceding studies, given contradicting explanations for her promotion to a general as highlighted in chapter one. In the course of this study, she introduced another rank between that of general and field marshal. "After

⁷¹ Ibid

⁷² Munene Gathigi, interview by researcher, Karundu, Nyeri, August 22, 2015.

this general one, one became a *jenorori* _which was superior to general".⁷³ This is possibly a translation of the Swahili *jenerali*, which simply means a general in English. Could her lack of understanding of these ranks be a sign that she never attained them? This inconsistency casts doubts on her claims to the ranks of general and field marshal.

Her adoration of Kimathi's leadership is no secret. She tells narratives that place her very close to him, indicating she spent more time with Kimathi than either of them did with anyone else. For instance, "there are those we were with but did not know some things. Kimathi and I used to climb up the mountain to hoist the flag. It was hard work climbing the mountain. We used to anchor ourselves on to the rocks by our toes. The purpose of the flag was to emphasize that we could not be defeated and to encourage the fighters."⁷⁴ She claims to have made that flag which resembled Kenya's national flag. These narratives seem like a convenient version of history. They beg questions like: If hoisting the flag was meant to motivate, why would it be kept secret to the ordinary fighters? Did the hoisting of the flag take place, and if it did, did Muthoni take part? She seems to derive two benefits from such narratives. One, they allow her to be close to Kimathi, the center of power in the Mau Mau movement. Two, it allows her to create a distance between her and her husband who rarely features in her narratives. This second benefit will become apparent in the next chapter.

Throughout numerous meetings between the researcher and Muthoni, she seemed convinced she was a Mau Mau field marshal. This compelled the researcher to seek an understanding of her conviction. First, it is probable that Kimathi gave her the rank after cracks began to emerge between those loyal to him and those loyal to General Mathenge. The leaders differed in relation to peace talks with the British. The veterans recall an uneasy ceasefire in 1954 when talks were held between Mau Mau representatives and colonial officials with the aim of ending the war. It is believed that Kimathi was against such talks. Mathenge, however, was one of those who met the colonial officials on behalf of the Mau Mau fighters. After these talks failed, it was decided that no more talks would

⁷³ Muthoni

⁷⁴ Ibid

be held with the authorities. Some Mau Mau veterans argue that after this rift, Kimathi grew insecure, “he started using *ujanja* (tricks) to take our weapons to build a troop of people from his place. This weakened him. It finished him and that’s why he was arrested alone.”⁷⁵ To reward his loyalists, “Kimathi gave out ranks to all and sundry.”⁷⁶ It is possible that this is how Muthoni got high ranks owing to the fact that she came from Ihururu, the same place as Kimathi.

“Anyone who will not surrender, get arrested or killed in the forest will become a field marshal.” According to some Mau Mau veterans, these words were uttered by Kimathi. Some say they were uttered by Mathenge. Whoever said these words, and if they indeed said them, must have had a figurative impression that a true Mau Mau hero is the one who would fight to the end; one who would never surrender to the authorities or get arrested. If the words are anything to go by, they would vindicate her claim to the title of field marshal. In one interview, she asked the researcher “Between those of us who stayed up to 1963 and those leaders who were killed or turned against us, who is better? Who is the *jamba* (hero)?”⁷⁷ Since she could not become a field marshal by commanding the movement and its generals, this statement allows her free usage of the title.

Muthoni was present during the ceremony to confer Kimathi the rank of field marshal. During the ceremony, an elderly couple anointed him with oil to signify his cleansing and blessing by God and the ancestors. After the anointment, “The rest of us (fighters) shot in the air, a sign of military honor.”⁷⁸ Muthoni claims to have been the chief witness to this anointment and for this role, Kimathi gave her the rank. After the ceremony Kimathi might have said to her, casually perhaps, ‘you are a field marshal too.’ She gives this as the reason why she lays claim to the title to this date. However, her explanation is watered down by the accounts of another eye witness of Kimathi’s anointment. This witness was part of Kimathi’s security detail. He asserts: “There is no such a thing. She

⁷⁵ Munene

⁷⁶ KNA/XA.1/11/34, Fort Hall Annual Report 1955 p.8

⁷⁷ Muthoni

⁷⁸ Ibid

(Muthoni) was there but didn't play any role."⁷⁹ Even without the benefit of a second eye witness, her explanation is rather simplistic and convenient. Is it possible that Kimathi called her field marshal jokingly in the context of a friend to another?

It is important to note that though she insists she was a field marshal since Kimathi's reign, Muthoni does not make claim to any military responsibility related to the title. She does not claim to have led any group of Mau Mau generals or any platoon of her own, whether made of women or of mixed gender. Most accounts of her promotions are premised on acts of bravery and resourcefulness during times of dire material needs, especially food. Her understanding of a field marshal is that of a true hero, one who never wavered in the fight for freedom and land. Her true heroes did not give up the fight after 1956 when the Mau Mau war was officially declared over. They remained in the forest with the hope of rebuilding the movement to drive white men out of the country once and for all. These were the last Mau Mau. It is worth noting that Muthoni is not the only one of Mau Mau remnants to claim the rank of field marshal or general. Others who adopted the rank included Mwariama, Mutungi Gichuhi (Muthoni's husband), and General Karangi Munene among others. (See figure 3.2) It is unlikely that the movement had so many field marshals. Some veterans believe that the last group of Mau Mau gave themselves the titles after everyone else left the forest. One veteran stated the following about Muthoni's rank: "There is no such a thing. She called herself field marshal because she was the last to leave the forest with her husband Mutungi."⁸⁰

⁷⁹ Ibid

⁸⁰ Mukundi

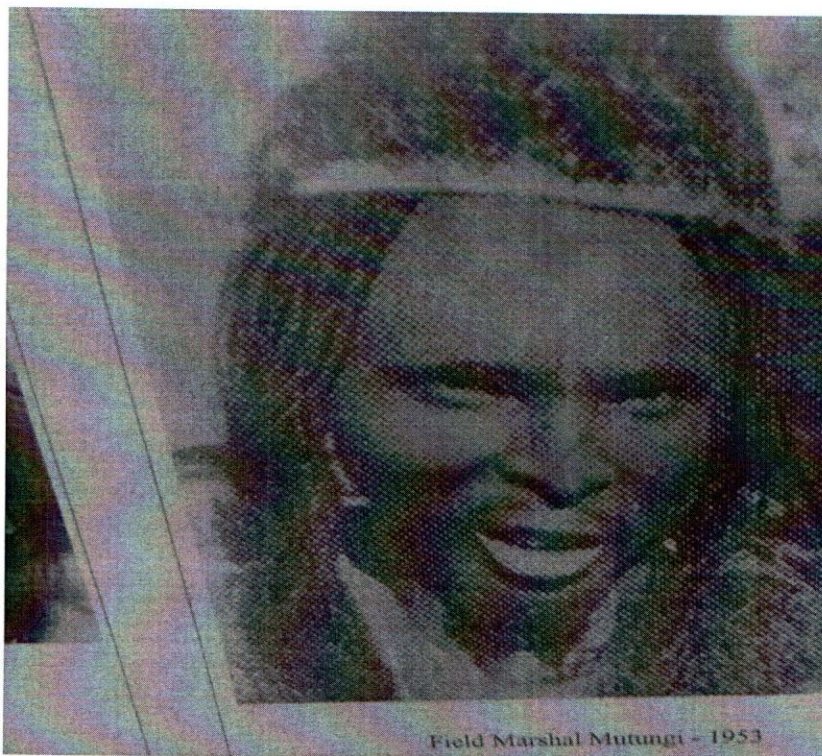


Fig. 3.2: Late Field Marshal Mutungi, Muthoni's ex-husband
Kenya National Archives, Nairobi

Muthoni was among the few women who were included in Mau Mau forest court. Not many women, even those with ranks, were trusted enough to sit in the court. Other women made a choice not to play any role in the court since it was extremely harsh on offenders, most of whom were executed. These women could not be party to the execution of some of their colleagues. "When you were taken to the Mau Mau court the outcome was mostly death, even for minor offences. I hated to see such injustice on our people. Women leaders like Muthoni took part in the court"⁸¹ Muthoni was a pacifist in this court. She opposed acts of violence on fellow Mau Mau brought before it. Her most memorable intervention was during the trial of Stanley Mathenge. He was summoned to the court for meeting with the whites for the first time. At the trial,

⁸¹ Wanjiru

It was ruled that he should be killed for revealing our secrets and meeting with the colonialists. I raised my hand and said I did not support the decision to kill him since it was his first offense. That he should be warned and set free. The group was then asked what they thought and they said I had ruled and they could not appeal.⁸²

That's how she stopped the execution of the once top leader of the movement. However, some veterans cast doubt about the fate of Mathenge and seem to believe he was assassinated later on by Kimathi. One veteran observed:

The person in charge was Mathenge. When Mathenge was given the mantle to lead, Kimathi was teaching at Karagoini, Nyahururu. Kimathi wanted to get this leadership. I know Kimathi killed Mathenge.⁸³

In mid-1956, Muthoni reunited with her husband who had by then become a general in his own right. "He headed a platoon together with Wambugu Gathuya."⁸⁴ Prior to this date, the couple rarely met in the forest since they were in different platoons according to Muthoni. However, some of those who knew her in the forest indicate that she lived with her husband since she joined the forest in 1953. However, it is a fact that the two are the only ones known to have remained in the Aberdare forest after 1956. There is a further twist in her accounts of life between 1956 and 1963 because she introduces a third person, General Karangi, who is today married to her younger sister, Mukami. In his accounts, Karangi states categorically he never stepped foot in the Aberdare but spent his entire Mau Mau life among the Ameru on the Eastern side of Mount Kenya. This group was led by Field Marshal Mwariama and General Baimungi. They numbered about sixteen according to him. In an effort to rebuild, they are rumored to have abducted villagers in Meru and forced them to fight for their cause. The effect of this group was felt in 1960 after they grew in numbers. Their activities led the colonial government to

⁸² Muthoni

⁸³ Waigwa

⁸⁴ Wang'ombe

admit that “there was a scare among the colonialists in the eastern Mount Kenya region and in the Meru reserve.”⁸⁵ Karangi’s narrative leaves Muthoni and her husband as the only two in the Aberdare forest after 1956. Indeed, accounts from other informants further attest to the fact that the couple were the only freedom fighters left at the Aberdares. One veteran who kept closer contact with Mutungi after the Mau Mau era observed: “There was no other Kikuyu who spent eleven years in the forest apart from Mutungi and his wife Muthoni.”⁸⁶ For the two, the prospects of rebuilding an army were minimal. They had neither enough material nor human resources to start the rebuilding process.

For the two, life was reduced to basic survival, what to eat and stay safe from dangerous animals and the colonial authorities. Unlike the earlier period when there was good supply of necessities such as food from the villages, the two had to survive through hunting and gathering. No one cared about them because the government was successful in using propaganda that made people in the villages view them as villains. Those who were arrested or surrendered turned against them. The fact that they knew all the secrets and hideouts made those who turned a nightmare to the last Mau Mau. Those who might have cared about them were serving terms at the detention camps. Early in 1963, Muthoni left her husband in the forest for Nairobi to meet Jomo Kenyatta who was poised to become the first African prime minister. She went to confirm word that Kenya was on the verge of gaining independence so that the two could make a decision to finally leave the forest.

3.6 Summary

In summary, the Mau Mau military organization was a blend of the old Kikuyu military organization and that of the British Military. This organization limited the role of women to support services, especially at the initial stages of the war. To subordinate the role of women, the male folk advanced a number of stereotypes about women that portrayed them as unfit for leadership and combat. These stereotypes included: associating women

⁸⁵ D. Njagi, *The last Mau Mau: Heroes or Villains?* (Meru: Kolbe Press, 1991) p. 6.

⁸⁶ Wang’ombe

menstrual periods with bad omen, that women were weak and cowardly in nature, that women were more vulnerable to sexual temptations than men and would therefore influence men into sexual relations. Sexual intercourse by a warrior during times of war was considered a taboo by the traditional Kikuyu and was believed to cause defeat to their warriors if it were to be committed. Indeed, when such sexual activities occurred between the Mau Mau guerillas it was the woman who carried the blame and was consequently evicted from the forest while the man continued with the cause of the movement. Women did however, overcome the prejudice resulting from these unfounded beliefs and stereotypes. They became useful at all levels of service to the Mau Mau movement, as sympathizers and spies for the movement, as the non-combat wing offering support services to the fighters, and as fighters as well as dominant forces who were involved in the movement's leadership.

In conclusion, despite facing numerous challenges in their effort to serve the Mau Mau in combat, women did go to war alongside the men folk. Some of them proved better fighters than some men. However, the assumption of overall leadership by women remained a major challenge. Nonetheless, a handful of women rose through the ranks to serve in circles previously reserved for men such as the Mau Mau court. Field Marshal Muthoni is one of these women. Although her claim to the rank of a field marshal is contested by many Mau Mau veterans, the discussion of her role helped illuminate the contribution of women in combat and leadership. Under the circumstance of a strong patriarchal establishment within the Mau Mau, it was difficult for a woman to become a field marshal; a leader of Mau Mau fighters and their generals.

CHAPTER FOUR

MUTHONI'S LIFE AFTER MAU MAU WAR

4.1 Overview

This chapter begins with an analysis of the process of reintegration of Mau Mau fighters back into the society after years of guerilla life. It also touches on Mau Mau fighters who remained in the forest up to 1963. The chapter then discusses in detail Muthoni's struggles and triumphs in family, business, the church and politics after independence.

4.2 Reintegration of Mau Mau Women into Society

The end of Mau Mau war presented numerous challenges to the Mau Mau veterans who were restarting life after several years of guerilla warfare. The gravity of these challenges made life daunting for them. Six decades after independence, little has changed for many as they have remained impoverished. However, there are a few who defied these challenges to afford modest lives. One such veteran is Muthoni Kirima. She is a living embodiment of a life lived defying all these challenges to afford a fulfilling life, relatively speaking.

The first challenge Mau Mau women faced after they left the forest was subjection to life in detention camps. These were concentration camps in which Mau Mau adherents were subjected to untold suffering. They were subjected to physical and mental torture accompanied by hard labour, all of which were aimed at decontaminating them from the 'demon' of Mau Mau. Europeans viewed the movement as a return to barbaric savagery and as such they were brutal in dealing with members of the movement. One woman recalls her experiences in these camps: "I was arrested in Murang'a and brought to Ruring'u where people were worked on (beaten) thoroughly. Men were hit with boots on their private parts. Some were crippled and some of those who became impotent hanged themselves."¹ She reveals the severity of life at the detention camps.

¹ Gathebi

Restarting marriage life for women who had been married before going to the forest was riddled with challenges. It took time to know the whereabouts of their spouses who were either dead or serving time in detention camps. After reconnecting, some found out their husbands had been badly injured in war or at the detention camps, making them dependants and, or impotent. It was the same for the male spouse. Most of these marriages broke up or just survived for the sake. Men whose wives were impaired by war married others while some women were forced to bear children with other men despite maintaining their marriages. One such wife whose two children were killed during the war admitted:

Since he came we have never been sexually intimate because of the way he was beaten. It took me a long time before I decided to get other children. He could not give me any. After a while we decided I get children anyway. I decided to persevere than leave him like other women were doing.²

These men had no choice but to bear the pain of bringing up children who were not their own. For many, life after the Mau Mau war was an emotionally damaging.

The war was more damaging to young women who had not married before joining it. On one side, they wanted nothing to do with men who did not fight for the Mau Mau cause. "Those we were with in the forest did not want men remained in the village. They considered them cowards and traitors."³ On the other hand, Mau Mau women were not favourable bride choices to men who did not join the war. They were vilified as forest whores. "Many wrongly thought that these women went to the forest to sleep with men."⁴ This was never the case for the Mau Mau were very strict on sexual relations and those accused of promiscuity could sometime be killed. Nonetheless, their decision to fight in a guerilla war made them misfits in the eyes of some members of the society. They lived with this stigma for a long time.

² Esther Kanyari, interview by John McGhie, Kenya White Terror, BBC Documentary, November 2, 2002

³ Gachucha

⁴ Wang'ombe

The ex-Mau Mau faced even daunting experiences economically. Kikuyu loyalists controlled the means of production in the villages. The colonial government had in 1956 announced that “Land belonging to those who remained in the forest after July 10th would be confiscated. This was what the loyal Kikuyu wanted _ the complete alienation from the reserves of all who were still stubborn to capitulate.”⁵ Those who left the forest after 1956 found their land taken and homes destroyed. Most of them were not educated and had no skills to enable them secure jobs in the post-colonial era. They also had no capital to enable them start businesses. The old communal way of life had been replaced by self-centered capitalism and therefore the villagers did not take care of the displaced. Others were maimed by the British bullets and bombs turning them to dependants. Having been involved in the struggle for independence, the ex-Mau Mau expected reward from the Kenyan government and reparations from the British government _ which proved elusive. The veterans express bitterness about the failure of the post-colonial regime to uplift their living standards.

The political development in Kenya independence has been unfavorable to the Mau Mau. After 1957 it became apparent that the British had to grant Kenya independence sooner rather than later. The British government then prepared Kenya for self-determination through constitutional reforms and familiarizing the Africans on various aspects of government. The provincial administration and Administration Police fell in the hands of loyalists and homeguards at independence and remained so for many years. For the ex-Mau Mau it was a bitter reality, a constant reminder of how things remained the same despite the country attaining independence. Moreover, the colonial government regarded the movement as a terrorist group and outlawed it. It remained outlawed until the year 2003 when the ban was lifted by the Kibaki government. The political arena has been more than hostile to the veterans. Very few of them have been elected to either parliament or local authorities. As a result, their impact on policy formulation has been negligible. The political class has remained indifferent in addressing their plight.

⁵ KNA/XA.1/11/35, Fort Hall Annual Report, 1956 p.26

4.3 Mau Mau Remnants

16 December 1963 will forever linger in the minds of Muthoni and the group of Mau Mau who remained in the forest till then. The newly installed African government invited them to a ceremony to lay down their weapons at Ruring'u stadium, Nyeri. They went to the stadium donned in their guerilla outfit and guns and their characteristic dreadlocks. After over a decade of what they believed to be duty to the country, these patriots were full of expectation. They expected a heroic gala from the state and civilians. Instead, the government provided them with tents from which their relatives and friends visited. After they handed over their weapons to the authorities, they were left to fend for themselves. Anger and frustration took over when they realized the occasion was meant to disarm rather than honor them. Muthoni was no exception. Mukami, her younger sister, captures Muthoni's frustration and anger as she recalls the first impression of a sister she was meeting for the first time. "I feared her when I saw her. She had a certain look that seemed scary. I felt like I didn't like her until my mother told me she was my sister who had been married and went to fight in the forest."⁶ After three months of pitching camp at Ruring'u, Muthoni and the other Mau Mau remnants gave up any hope of aid from the government. For the three months they were fed by their families and a few well-wishers. The group dispersed after police were sent to evict them from the stadium. There were three groups of the Mau Mau remnants: one from Meru led by Field Marshal Mwariama and General Baimungi; a small group from Embu; and another from Central Kenya made up of Muthoni, her husband General Mutungi and General Karangi. The first two groups went back to their home districts while the third decided to start a new life in Nairobi.

The third group, just like the rest of the Mau Mau remnants, faced a daunting task restarting life. Nobody remembered or cared about them. "People did not want us. They did not help us."⁷ This is probably the main reason why Muthoni, her husband Mutungi and their friend Karangi left Nyeri for a fresh start in Nairobi. When the trio arrived in Nairobi on March 1964 they had no place to stay. Mbiyu Koinange, the then Minister of State in the Office of the President gave them a room to stay in for a number of days on

⁶ Mukami Karangi

⁷ Karangi

the second floor of his building near Jeevanjee Gardens. However, their stay was short-lived as this was a busy office building and soon they had to vacate so as not to disrupt operations longer than was necessary. Out on the streets with no money, the three spent several nights in public toilets. “We spent nights leaning on toilet walls.”⁸ This should not have been a major problem after surviving years of guerilla life, but the condition of the dirty city council toilets was unbearable. Out on the streets they literally begged for money to buy food. They later approached an old friend from Nyeri who then lived in Nairobi, Kiraguri, who gave them a small room in his plot at Majengo Estate. They spent one night in a room which was very small, its door swung from outside to give space for the bed which had been forced to fit in. Later that night they realized that Kiraguri’s place was a brothel. “I found a woman’s legs wide open. We had not realized the place was a brothel. It was in the slums. I told Mutungi I did not want to witness such things and so we left.”⁹ Their scruples could not allow them to spend one more night at a place where sex trade was being conducted. The following day they were out on the street again.

The Mau Mau remnants felt left out in Mau Mau historiography. Driven by desire to tell their version of Mau Mau history, they decided to publish a book. They were led by Field Marshal Mwariama “Who approached retired President Moi to fund us in publishing our book. Moi promised him Ksh 200,000 for the project but he was advised against it by some people. He never gave us the money.”¹⁰ They did not give up on this quest. They contributed money to fund the project and hired the expertise of David Njagi who then worked as an editor with the Nation Media Group. The book was published in 1991. (See figure 4.1) This book tells the history of the group through biographies of the group leaders. Njagi elaborates on the lives of men like Mwariama and Baimungi before, during and after the Mau Mau war. Like many preceding works on the movement, the book does not do justice to the role of women. Muthoni, the only woman in the group features in the final few paragraphs. The few paragraphs only mention that she remained in the forest until 1963. They also briefly mention her life after the Mau Mau war. She is depicted as “invisible and voiceless”.

⁸ Ibid

⁹ Muthoni

¹⁰ Karangi



Fig 4.1 Seated L to R Field Marshals Mwariama, Field Marshal Muthoni General Karangi and an unidentified woman. Standing from L to R unidentified Mau Mau veterans after Publication of the book, *Last Mau Mau: Heroes or Villains?* Muthoni's photo album

4.4 Muthoni's Family Life

Living in poverty while those who didn't fight occupy positions of power is deeply troubling for the ex- Mau Mau fighters. Those interviewed in the course of this study seemed to have resigned to their situation as evidenced by the use of this phrase "we have left them (leaders) to God", implying that only God can deal with the leaders for ignoring the veterans' plight. They are poor and desperate. However, from this rubble of hopelessness emerges one woman who defied all odds to afford a modest life. Muthoni seems to have found answers to most, if not all, of the challenges the ex-Mau Mau fighters had to endure after the war.

At the age of 85, Field Marshal Muthoni lives in Pembe Tatu, a high class suburb of Nyeri town. When one walks through the gate to her home, one is greeted by an exquisite bungalow, two vehicles (a well maintained 1970 Mercedes Benz and Chevrolet Pick-up) packed in her garage _ all signaling good living. This was not always the case for Muthoni. How did she fit back into a society that had mixed feelings about her ilk? How

At the age of 85, Field Marshal Muthoni lives in Pembe Tatu, a high class suburb of Nyeri town. When one walks through the gate to her home, one is greeted by an exquisite bungalow, two vehicles (a well maintained 1970 Mercedes Benz and Chevrolet Pick-up) packed in her garage _ all signaling good living. This was not always the case for Muthoni. How did she fit back into a society that had mixed feelings about her ilk? How did the community, made up of the former colonial chiefs, homeguards and civilians whom the fighters had sometimes raided for food, view this female ex-guerilla? How did she overcome the trauma of the long period of war? How did she restart socio-economic life after years of disruption by the war? What was the effect of the war on her marriage and family life?

Muthoni brooked nothing less of full benefits for her contribution to the attainment of independence. Although the Mau Mau did not form the government once the Europeans left, she believed it was their war that drove the Europeans out of Kenya. Her determination to enjoy the fruits of independence led her to the doors of those in authority to demand her fair share of the national cake. That is how she started to take charge of the trio's rather desperate situation. Several days out in the cold after Kiraguri's place, she walked to the office of Charles Rubia, the then Mayor of Nairobi. Her husband and General Karangi had no idea where she had gone or what she was up to. "We had no idea she had gone to see Rubia about a house".¹¹ She had become impatient with her situation of struggling with basic needs while those in government enjoyed the fruits of independence. When the secretary insisted on office protocol, Muthoni admits she became so rude to her that she was allowed to see the mayor immediately. She was not prepared to leave his office until he solved her problem. "When I walked to his office I didn't first talk to him, I just lay down on the mat. He rose up and asked me what my problem was. I told him I was not going to leave until he gave me a place to stay and if none was available he was to leave me sleeping on his office mat as he went home."¹² Although the researcher was not successful in getting the former Mayor's side of the story, it would seem from the foregoing that Muthoni was both dramatic and firm in

¹¹ Karangi

¹² Ibid

her pursuit for a place to live. After a few calls, the mayor found a city council house for her in Kaloleni estate. Although they had no income to sustain the rent, she found a solution for their housing problem. The mayor solved their housing problem. However, sustenance remained a big challenge for the trio. Muthoni always found a way to deal with every hard ball that life threw to the three. Again, “The person who fed us was Muthoni. When she went out and was given something or made some sales, unlike us men, she shared whatever little she got”.¹³

In 1965 cracks had begun to appear among the trio. The first step was breaking ranks with Karangi. Karangi lays the blame on Mutungi: “Men are useless! He did not want me. He started doing things I did not understand and so I walked away.”¹⁴ Mutungi must have been disturbed by the presence of another man in the couple’s life. He married a second wife, their house girl, and insisted the three share the same roof. Since Muthoni understood she was barren and the natural desire for every man and woman to get children, she tolerated the second wife for some time. However, hell broke loose one day in 1966: “She had left them in their shop to go for ivory. When she came back the door was not opened for her. She spent the night in the vehicle with her ivory. This angered her so much she quit the marriage.”¹⁵ Later in the same year a court annulled their marriage. Karangi on the other hand went on to marry Mukami, Muthoni’s younger sister. Today, the two live in Shamata, Nyandarua. Unlike Muthoni’s marriage, theirs has stood test of time. They have also been blessed with nine children.

What was the real cause of the breakup of Muthoni’s marriage? There are four probable reasons that strained their relationship leading to the eventual break up. It is possible that her husband grew impatient with the lack of children in their marriage. He could also have grown insecure because of her outgoing character and the fact that she had made connections with powerful men within the government, including President Kenyatta. On the other hand, Muthoni could have become fed up with a lethargic husband, one who was comfortable sitting at home while his wife was out creating wealth for the family.

¹³ Ibid

¹⁴ Ibid

¹⁵ Mukami

There is another side to their breakup. Muthoni's detractors accuse her of infidelity. They premise their argument on the fact that Mutungi wished no woman would view his grave during his burial. One Mau Mau veteran and personal friend to Mutungi pondered:

I have no idea what made that man so angry. After they left the forest, they were given work by Kenyatta to collect ivory and animal skin. After they were given, you know women are weak, I don't know if she slept around or what. They hated each other after they were given this work.¹⁶

True to his wish, no woman went to his grave yard when he died in the late 1990s. He was still evidently unhappy with women, especially with Muthoni. This argument is supported by several male veterans who attended his burial at Marmanet, Laikipia, such as Kariuki Gachucha and Ndiritu Mukundi. It is hard to know the exact reason or reasons for their divorce because Mutungi is not alive to tell his side of the story.

4.5 Muthoni's Life in Business

Months after arriving in Nairobi, the trio started selling cereals with Muthoni at the centre of operations. For the first time her gender worked to her benefit and not to her disadvantage: "A woman is not like a man, sometimes her cereals could sell fast, other people could feel mercy and give her things"¹⁷ Muthoni was not satisfied with life at the mercy of well-wishers or with the meager sales from their cereals business. To boost their earning, she went back home and borrowed a piece of land from a neighbor on which she planted sweet potato. She then went back to Nairobi, leaving her mother to take care of the vines for her. The proceeds from the sweet potatoes were used to expand the cereals business as well as diversifying it. They started selling oranges and lemons. She sourced the mangoes, lemons and beans from farms formerly owned by white settlers in Kieni and supplied to traders in Nairobi on wholesale basis.

¹⁶ Wang'ombe

¹⁷ Mukami

Muthoni was not contented with life as a petty trader in Nairobi. She kept pushing the authorities for opportunities and late in 1964, “The government listened to her. She was given a permit to sell ivory and so the three of us teamed together”.¹⁸ She secured this deal with Kenyatta, the first African president of Kenya. “I approached Mzee and requested him to give me permission to retrieve ivory from the forests because we used to eat elephants during the Mau Mau war and hid the tusks. The tusks were therefore still in the places where we hid them and needed to be retrieved”.¹⁹ This deal forever changed the course of her life. Trade in ivory was legal in Kenya by then and remained so up to 1976 when it was banned. However, the ban did not stop the well-connected like Muthoni from continuing with the trade until Daniel Moi became the president of Kenya in 1978. The permit allowed her to collect and transport ivory in the country. She incorporated her husband Mutungi and Karangi into the business. For the first time in their lives they got a real opportunity to empower themselves economically. The ivory business was lucrative but also demanding and so abandoned business of selling cereals. They also shifted back to Nyeri town from Nairobi. According to Karangi, Muthoni was very passionate about this job that she did it almost entirely on her own. She went as far as Tana River where elephants died in large numbers during the dry season. (See figure 4.2)

Ivory products have always sold at high prices outside the African continent. As a result, the Kenyan government has always had a keen interest on the trade. Even in the pre-colonial period, Seyyid Said, the sultan of Zanzibar, controlled ivory trade as far as what is now the Democratic Republic of Congo: “Seyyid organized and gave security to the traders to penetrate the interior.”²⁰ Similarly, Kenyatta was at the centre of the ivory trade and people like Muthoni were mere collectors. After collecting enough ivory from the locals, Muthoni drove to the nearest police station or DC’s office for its weighing and safe keeping. She would then take the figures to Nairobi where she was paid through Kenya Commercial Bank (KCB) at the rate of Ksh 10 per kg. In the 1970s Ksh 10 was a

¹⁸ Karangi

¹⁹ Muthoni

²⁰ Kiruthu, *Evolving World*, p. 101

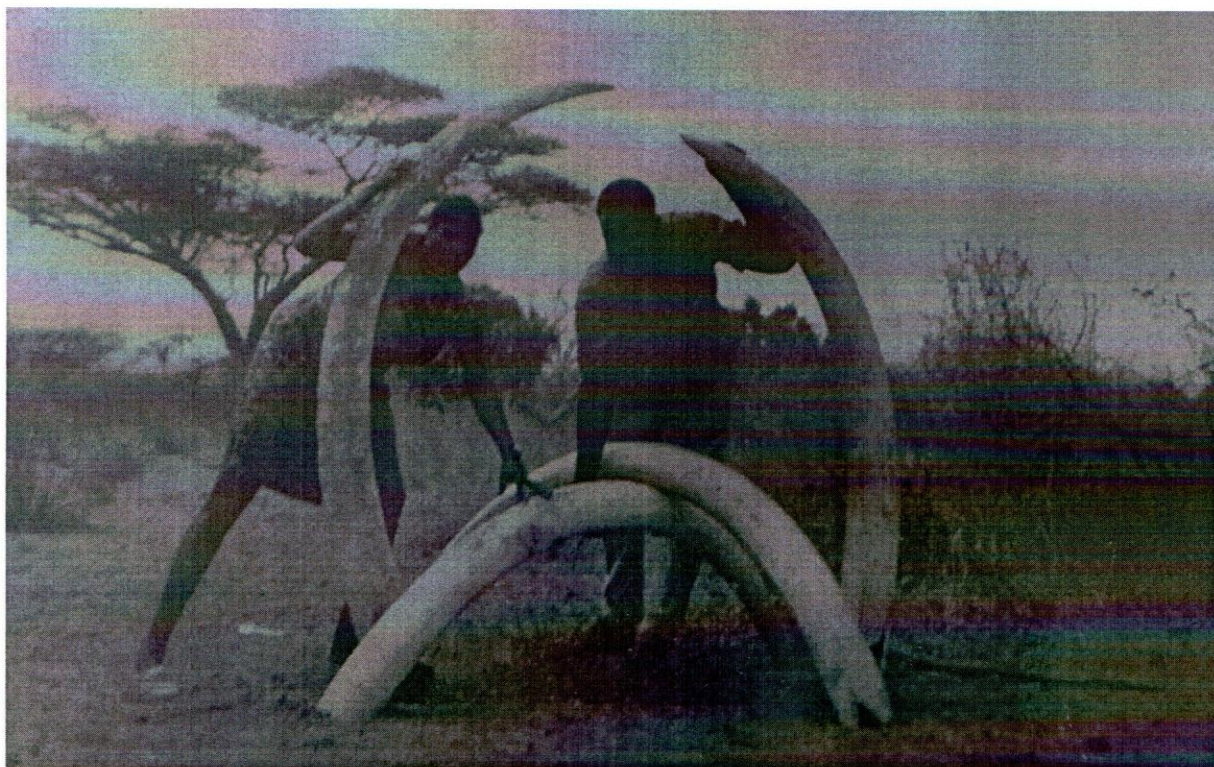


Fig. 4.2 From L to R, Muthoni and one of her workers in ivory search at unidentified place in Tana River District.
Muthoni's photo album

lot of money and so she made a fortune. She however avers that the product sold for up to Ksh 400,000 in the European and Asian markets. Since the state controlled the export of the product she had no choice but contend with playing the role of a collector in a much bigger syndicate. Once she weighed them, “They now became Mzee’s. He decided what was to be done with them”.²¹ Ironically, his son Uhuru, the fourth president of the republic of Kenya, is leading the fight against poaching from the front. On 22 March 2015, during the burning of illegal ivory in a joint effort by the East African countries to fight the poaching menace, Uhuru promised to burn the rest of the stockpile by the end of the year.²²

Ivory trade had a ripple effect on Muthoni’s business career. After the divorce, she carried on with ivory trade since the permit from Kenyatta was hers. The trade also

²¹ Muthoni

²² www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-31716134 Retrieved on 7/12/2015

opened avenues for other businesses. She opened a restaurant in Hola and in the late 1960s she acquired an agent permit from Kenya Breweries Limited (KBL), Hola Sola Distributers, to supply alcohol from Malindi to the rest of the North Coast all the way to Garissa. KBL gave her a medal for reaching Ksh 1,000,000 sales that year. She made good profits from the business. She encouraged provincial administrators in the area to take advantage of the lucrative business. "I told Mahinda, the then Garissa DC, not to fear selling alcohol in those sides".²³ Managing the expanding business empire was always going to be challenging. Monitoring the employees was a problem and sometimes she could find her supply vehicles parked on the side of the road while the drivers and salesmen drunk *mnazi*, a local brew at the Coast. "If they were too drunk to continue with the business of the day, I did the deliveries myself. I drove my vehicle to the nearest police station and took charge of the lorry to deliver the supplies to my clients."²⁴

The ivory business was not without its challenges. To make more money meant spending more time in the field than with family and in other activities. It was also risky. The risk is exemplified by Karangi's explanation for quitting the business shortly after acquiring his own permit: "I worked for some time and saw the job was too risky and would have led to my death, so I stopped. The person who continued with it was Field Marshal Muthoni. That is how she got the financial muscle she has today".²⁵ Muthoni is never the kind that runs away from challenges. She soldiered on with the trade despite fears of reprisals from Arabs at the Coast whom she successfully threw out of the ivory trade in parts of Tana River District. The fact that she was a freedom fighter endeared her to the locals. She always made a point to take to the locals products such as maize flour, tea leaves, bananas, sweet potatoes and sugar and gave them out free of charge. These commodities were readily available in central Kenya but priceless in the semi-arid areas of the Coast. For this gesture, they preferred to sell the tusks to her rather than her competitors.

²³ Muthoni

²⁴ Ibid

²⁵ Karangi

Muthoni continued with the ivory trade with even more determination until 1978 when Kenyatta died and Moi took over the reigns of power. Following the ban on ivory trade Muthoni went back to agri-business, growing a variety of crops in various pieces of land she had accumulated over the years. She also disposed her property at the Coast and permanently settled in Nyeri. She also ventured into tea farming after inheriting part of her father's estate in 2002 in "Her capacity as an administrator of the deceased's estate,"²⁶ eleven years after the father's death. She also started a security firm with offices in Nyeri town. She hired the expertise of an ex-Kenya police officer who operated a similar business to train her guards. She denies any input from retired President Moi in starting this business contrary to what has been reported in part of the Kenyan press. She recently gave the firm to her sister's grandson. The security firm is still in operation although it's not as vibrant as it used to be.

4.6 Muthoni's Political Life

When she wasn't at the market or up country sourcing her merchandise, Muthoni took time to make political connections. She attended meetings organized by former KCA men near the Hindu crematorium in Nairobi. During one such a meeting, the members chose her to deliver a letter to President Kenyatta since only she knew how to get to him. There was a sad twist when she went to see Kenyatta. She bumped into him while she walked into parliament buildings. It was Kenyatta who initiated their conversation by asking her, "*Nyakinyua* (a respectable women) when did you get here?" She answered that she just did and had a letter to deliver to him from the former KCA men. The president was leaving parliament for his Harambee House office so he agreed to meet her there shortly. After that agreement Kenyatta boarded his vehicle to the office while Muthoni walked the short distance to Kenyatta's office. When she got to the Harambee House, the president was already busy in his office. His guards, led by a man she only identified as Wanyoike, prevented her from seeing the president. When she persisted, they dragged her down the stairs while she made a scene by destroying telephone lines to the office. Kenyatta did not get to know what had ensued until a later date upon which he invited her to his office again where he apologized to her and sacked four of the guards who had

²⁶ The Kenya Gazette Notice no. 396, 25th January 2002.

harassed her. Kenyatta also promised her land in a place of her choice although she says he never fulfilled the promise.²⁷

Muthoni also had a short stint in politics. As noted earlier, she found ways to get to senior politicians including the first president of the Republic. Although her earlier relations were concentrated on acquiring means to economic empowerment, she would later develop some interest in active politics. She was part of Mau Mau delegations that visited president Moi several times in pursuit of compensation by the government. She also visited the president in her own capacity cementing a personal relationship that culminated in her nomination as a councillor in the Nyeri County Council between 1988 and 1992. (See fig.4.3)

Her efforts in the liberation struggle have not gone unnoticed. Retired President Moi recognized her effort in 1998 by awarding her the Medal for Distinguished Service. In the year 2014, President Uhuru awarded her the Head of State Commendation and during Mashujaa Day (Heroes Day) celebrations he recognized her as an independence heroine alongside Dedan Kimathi and Paul Ngei.²⁸ (See figures 4.4 and 4.5) Muthoni says President Kibaki did not recognize personally her role in the struggle for independence although he did well to repeal the legislation that had outlawed the Mau Mau movement in 2003. These commendations and the nomination as a councillor make her among the very few Mau Mau veterans to have earned recognition. She also boasts of a street named after her in Nyeri town. Although she was able to make wealth for herself, she laments the plight of her colleagues, many of whom have either died or continue to live in abject poverty. The enactment of the Heroes Act has done little to change the lives of these heroes. This is despite Section IV sub section 25 (f) of the laws of Kenya which states that “heroes will be accorded financial assistance where their economic circumstances warrant such assistance.”²⁹

²⁷ Muthoni

²⁸ *The Standard*, October 21, 2016, p. 5

²⁹ The Kenya Heroes Act 2014 p.82



Fig. 4.3 Councillor Muthoni leading prayers during a public holiday at Ruring'u stadium, Nyeri.
Muthoni's photo album



Fig. 4.4 Head of State Commendation.
Source: Muthoni's collection



Fig. 4.5: Medal for Distinguished Service Muthoni's collection.



Fig. 4.6 Muthoni donned in AIPCK patroness attire with Archbishop Kiongera Muthoni's photo album

4.8 Mau Mau Veterans and the Quest for Compensation.

Today, Mau Mau veterans are united in their quest for compensation by the Kenyan government and reparation by the British government. However, a closer interaction with the veterans reveals that they are a disunited lot. They are sharply divided into three major groupings, namely: the detainees who form the bulk, those who left the forest by 1957 either through arrest or surrender, and the Mau Mau remnants who are an extreme minority. Led by Gitu wa Kahengeri, the former detainees have asserted their authority in the Mau Mau Veterans Association and lead the front as the beneficiaries of British government compensation. Mau Mau actual combatants are split into two groups: those who left the forest by 1957 on one side and those who left in 1963 on the other. In fact, the latter expresses bitterness towards the former because they believe that the government turned them into the pseudo-gangs which caused the eventual defeat of the Mau Mau. "The surrenders wiped us out. In Embu, only three survived while in Meru and the Aberdares about sixteen and two respectively survived."³⁰ Muthoni is embroiled in this disunity. She cannot share space with those she considers traitors or surrenders whom she accuses of exposing Mau Mau secrets to the enemy _ thereby causing suffering to the Mau Mau remnants. Her suspicion of this group is rife to this day and she fears some of them would want her dead.

Disunity among Mau Mau veterans is not limited to the three groups. With the hope of compensation in sight, many Mau Mau veterans' offices have cropped up at the local level, with meetings held at least once every week. There is a sharp division between these groupings, each claiming to be the genuine Mau Mau veterans and doing everything to discredit the others. In Nyeri town for instance, there are three Mau Mau offices two of which are adjacent to each other next to Nyeri Museum. Some members of the two groups don't see eye to eye. Muthoni's office at Nyeri CBD, which also doubles up as the office for her security firm business, makes the third office for Mau Mau although it is utterly dormant for lack of members. During the opening of this office, she invited Mau Mau leaders such as General Ndungu wa Gacheru but none turned up. Although underrepresented in Mau Mau Veterans Association, a glare of hope for the Mau Mau

³⁰ Karangi

remnants came when lawyer Cecil Miller asked Muthoni for the names of their members. On her behalf, Karangi went to Meru and Embu in their search. They are yet to receive any compensation.

Today Muthoni lives a quiet life at her home in Pembe Tatu, Nyeri. To fill the void left by the divorce, she “adopted” a young mother of one son to be her heir. This young woman later gave birth to a girl who was named after Muthoni. This “adoption” did not work out. Muthoni declined to disclose more information about this “adoption”, including the name of the adopted daughter. In the year 2013, Muthoni invited the grandson of her younger sister, Karangi, who lives in her servant quarters with his wife and child. She gave them the security firm for their upkeep. She doesn’t lament about her inability to get children for two reasons. One, these grand and great children keep her company in what would otherwise have been a lonely life. Second and the most important to her, she takes pride in her role in the fight for independence. This is her most treasured ‘child’ because she believes it gave birth to modern Kenya, which is free from colonial bondage.

Like soldiers from other parts of the world, Muthoni does suffer from the psychological effects of war. The effects of war are still hard on her. Both the colonial and independent governments did not put up any programme to help the ex- Mau Mau fighters to overcome the emotional damage caused by the war. Some of these challenges resulted from watching their colleagues die from colonialists’ and bombs as well as from diseases owing to lack of medical care from qualified personnel. They were also traumatized by loud shelling from British guns and bombings. Muthoni admits she sometimes get panic attacks at night. Her post-traumatic stress often results from the memories of the fallen as evidenced in the following emotional recount:

I requested the government to allow us to go to Mount Kenya and the Aberdares once per year to honor the bones of the people who died and we were not able to bury them. Some after being shot hid in different places where they died. We placed little soil on those who died in our company as a symbol of burial because

there was no time for proper burial. They also held soil in their hands to mean that they had died in the fight for land. Today we dishonor them. We do not value our heroes, unlike in other countries.³¹

As noted earlier, Muthoni is disturbed by the plight of many of her colleagues who today live in abject poverty. She is also angered by the fact that the independent government abandoned the families of the Mau Mau who died in battle. Most of these families made up a sizeable percentage of the landless Kikuyu at independence. Towards the end of the Mau Mau war, the colonial government announced that any Mau Mau who did not abandon the guerilla life would be considered as having forfeited his or her land rights. There was no attempt to make a head count on those Mau Mau who surrendered and those who did not. Anyone who was not accounted for by the end of the amnesty period was considered to have chosen to continue with the war against the British. Many who died in the forest were considered to be those who rejected the offer to abandon the struggle for land and amnesty and, as such, they were left with nothing to live on.

At the age of 85 years, Muthoni takes care of herself and personally does all her domestic chores. She scrubs the floor and keeps her house sparkling clean. She also manages her farms within and outside Nyeri. She underwent surgery on both her eyes in 2001 and as such she doesn't drive herself but hires a driver when making trips to her various farms. Age has not taken away her desire for knowledge and she keeps herself updated of what is trending in the country and beyond. When one visits her, she often engage them on current issues on governance, corruption and morality, among others. She is irked by immoral issues such as transsexual relations, rape and defilement. She often receives visitors such as scholars and journalists who go to her for lessons on issues like culture and Mau Mau history.

4.9 Summary

The reintegration process for the Mau Mau women was riddled with challenges. These challenges included negative societal perception of their guerilla life, poverty, dead or

³¹ Muthoni

mained husbands were Mau Mau, lack of requisite skills to fit in the post-colonial economy and unattended post-traumatic stress among others. Muthoni is the only woman known to have been part of the Mau Mau remnants, a small group of the fighters who remained in the Aberdare and Mount Kenya forests till independence. The post- Mau Mau era for Muthoni has been characterized by triumphs rather than failures. The biggest blow to this success story is perhaps the collapse of her marriage to Mutungi. The Marriage was disrupted by the outbreak of the Mau Mau war in 1952 all the way to 1963. The last nail to the coffin was the painful divorce in 1966, just three years after re-union following eleven years of guerilla life. Undeterred by the divorce, she concentrated on business _ diversifying from ivory trade, to hospitality, alcohol distribution, agri-business, real estate and security. Muthoni's has also had a stint in politics as a councillor in the Nyeri Municipal Council. She has also continued her spiritual journey that started in childhood. Muthoni is a strong follower of AIPCK and has even constructed a church as a sign of her dedication to God.

Many Mau Mau veterans have found it difficult to overcome the challenges they faced restarting civilian life after years of participating in guerilla warfare. To date, many Mau Mau veterans and their families have remained in poor. Mau Mau has also left a divided legacy. This disunity has been revealed during their quest for compensation by the British Government. The end of the Mau Mau war left veterans divided into two groups: detainees on one side and forest combatants on the other. The latter group is divided further into those who left the forest by and those who continued with the guerilla life up to independence in 1963.

CHAPTER FIVE

SUMMARY, CONCLUSION, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Summary

This study was based on the following research objectives: to analyze Muthoni's early life; to examine Muthoni's contribution to the Mau Mau Movement; and to analyze Muthoni's life in the post-Mau Mau era. The first chapter of the thesis was devoted to demonstrating the knowledge gap on women and leadership in Mau Mau historiography and the methodology used. Furthermore, the chapter demonstrated how the study intended to use Muthoni Kirima as a 'window' to understanding the life of Kikuyu girls and young women during the colonial period; contribution of women in Mau Mau leadership; and the life of Mau Mau veterans (especially women) in the post- Mau Mau era. Chapter Two was based on the first objective, Muthoni's early life. It examines the experiences of Muthoni and other Kikuyu girls in the colonial setup and how those experiences contributed to the making of great Mau Mau women who fought alongside men in the guerilla war between 1952 and 1963. The main aim of Chapter Three was to investigate the contributions of women in the movement's leadership. It revolves around the second objective: Muthoni's contribution to the Mau Mau movement. The chapter analyses Mau Mau military organization, subordination of women in the movement, levels of women participation, and Muthoni's role in the movement. Chapter Four, Muthoni's life after the Mau Mau war, examined the life of Mau Mau veterans (especially women) in the post-colonial era under the following headings: the reintegration of former Mau Mau fighters back into the society; Mau Mau remnants, Muthoni's family life; Muthoni's life in business; Muthoni's spiritual life; and Mau Mau veterans and the quest for compensation.

5.2 Conclusion

The primary aim of this study was to examine the contribution of women in Mau Mau leadership. The study used the life of Muthoni as a 'window' in understanding the role of women in Mau Mau leadership. In the first objective, the study concludes that the early life of Kikuyu girls under colonialism prepared them for participation in Mau Mau

guerilla movement. They were directly affected by the colonial political economy which was characterized by various forms of exploitation such as land alienation, forced labour and taxation. Kikuyu girls were dragged into forced labour. Their enslavement in settlers' farms and communal projects, which were notorious for poor working conditions, was formalised by colonial laws. At the same time, the girls were part of the community that was increasingly becoming aware of its rights as a result of the politicization spearheaded by educated Kikuyu elite. The politicization culminated in members of the Kikuyu community taking arms against the colonial regime. The oppressive conditions brought about by colonialism and the resultant politicization were the conditions responsible for making the great women of the Mau Mau movement. They shared their community's aspiration for land and freedom, the ideology behind the formation of the Mau Mau movement.

In the second objective, the study concludes that women served the Mau Mau movement across four levels, namely: stalwarts and spies, the non-combat wing in the forest, the combat wing, and the dominant forces. A strong patriarchal establishment that limited the contribution of women in combat and leadership evolved within the movement. Not many women occupied high ranks that would enable them to have a big impact as dominant forces. A few women who lay claims to high ranks within the movement did not have as profound impact as counterpart male leaders.

For the third objective, the study concludes that the post-Mau Mau era has been problematic for many Mau Mau veterans. Many left the forest to find their property taken by loyalists leaving them with little to restart life with. The veterans also faced numerous social challenges. Women in particular were forced to live with a social stigma for their role in the Mau Mau movement. Furthermore, Mau Mau veterans have been sidelined by the political class. Many of Mau Mau veterans have not been able to overcome these challenges and as such, life for many has been almost static. They have lived in abject poverty and seem forgotten. Muthoni is among a small group of Mau Mau veterans who have managed to overcome the challenges of the post-Mau Mau era to make an impact in the social, economic and political fields in Independent Kenya.

5.3 Recommendations

The end of the Mau Mau war and the subsequent return of the guerillas to their villages marked the beginning of a troubled new life for many of the veterans. After years of guerilla life, it was difficult for Mau Mau veterans to return to “normal” life. The colonial government had in 1956 confiscated their property and used it to reward loyal members of the community. The DDR (disarmament, demobilization and reintegration) process spearheaded by the colonial government succeeded in disbanding the movement and disarming its members. However, it was a complete failure in terms of helping the Mau Mau guerillas to restart life. The abject poverty in which many Mau Mau veterans live brings to light the failures of economic reintegration. The colonial government’s plan for the transition from war to peace emphasized disarmament and disbandment of the Mau Mau movement. The economic woes of the Mau Mau fighters have been captured in many studies. However, the social reintegration of the Mau Mau guerillas has not received much scholarly attention. These questions should form an important part of such a study: How did the veterans deal with psychological trauma and health issues affecting them upon return to civilian life? To what extent did the rest of the society assist them in dealing with these issues? What were the experiences of the Mau Mau ex-combatants in dealing with these social issues? How did the returnees relate with other villagers, especially the loyalists?

This study has briefly touched on the involvement of the state in ivory trade. It proposes deeper probing into the question of state involvement in ivory trading and illegal hunting of game in post-colonial era.

Finally, this study has used the biography of Muthoni to shed light on the role of Mau Mau women in leadership and combat. The study recommends further to investigations into the various gender issues affecting Mau Mau women during and after the war.

SOURCES

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Name	Sex	Age	Occupation	Place of Birth	Date of Interview
Gachigua, Wahome	Male	87	Mau Mau veteran	Nyeri	31-08-15
Gachucha, Kariuki	Male	84	Mau Mau veteran	Nyeri	02-09-15
Gachui, Patrick	Male	45	Museum Curator	Nyeri	22-08-15
Gathebi, Wangari	Female	84	Mau Mau veteran	Nyeri	31-08-15
Gathigi, Munene	Male	88	Mau Mau veteran	Nyeri	22-08-15
Gichohi, Murichu	Male	80	Mau Mau veteran	Nyeri	22-08-15
Guama, Mutahi	Male	90	Mau Mau veteran	Nyeri	22-08-15
Itegi, Wanjugu	Female	81	Mau Mau veteran	Nyeri	09-09-15
Kagendo, Leah	Female	78	Mau Mau sympathiser	Kirinyaga	25-12-15
Kang'eta, Mwangi	Male	54	Muthoni's acquaintance	Nyeri	11-11-15
Karangi, Mukami	Female	68	Muthoni's Sister	Nyeri	07-09-15
Munene Karangi	Male	33	Muthoni's nephew	Nyandarua	08-09-15
Karangi, Wahito	Female	27	Muthoni's niece	Nyandarua	08-09-15
King'ora, Mwangi	Male	85	Mau Mau veteran	Olenguruone	02-09-15
Kiragu, Nyagugu	Male	91	Mau Mau veteran	Nyeri	02-09-15
Kirima, Muthoni	Female	85	Mau Mau veteran	Nyeri	20-08-15
Mathenge, Daniel	Male	89	Mau Mau veteran	Nyeri	22-08-15
Mathenge, Wang'	Male	83	Mau Mau veteran	Nyeri	01-09-15
Miru, John	Male	83	Mau Mau veteran	Nyeri	09-09-15
Mukundi, Ndiritu	Male	86	Mau Mau veteran	Nyandarua	26-08-15
Munene, Karangi	Male	84	Mau Mau veteran	Nyeri	07-09-15
Muthoni Eliud	Female	86	Mau Mau veteran	Nyandarua	26-08-15
Muthoni, Loise	Female	88	Mau Mau veteran	Nyeri	22-08-15
Mwangi, Macharia	Male	87	Mau Mau veteran	Nyeri	26-08-15
Mwangi, Wairimu	Female	86	Mau Mau veteran	Nyeri	31-08-16
Ndiritu, Wambui	Female	82	Mau Mau veteran	Nyeri	09-09-15
Ndonga, Munene	Male	79	Mau Mau veteran	Nyeri	22-08-15
Njuiri, Kanyaga	Male	82	Mau Mau veteran	Nyeri	09-09-15

Waigwa, Meshack	Male	81	Mau Mau sympathiser	Nyeri	22-08-15
Wang'ombe John	Male	87	Mau Mau veteran	Nyeri	22-08-15

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APPENDICES

Appendix I: Portrait of Field Marshal Muthoni Kirima



Source: Researcher, August 20, 2015

Appendix II: Interview Guides

Interview Guide for Muthoni.

Name _____ Sex: _____ Age _____

Sub County: _____ Occupation _____

Date of interview:-----

Early Life

1. What is your full name?
2. When and where you were born?
3. Tell me the names of your parents and siblings.
4. What can you tell me about your parents and siblings?
5. What position were you born in your family line up?
6. What roles did you play in your family in respect to your gender and position in family line up?
7. What roles did the other siblings play in your family?
8. What activities did your family do together?
9. Describe your neighborhood.
10. What did your parents do for a living?
11. What was your parents' religion?
12. Were your parents involved in any political activities? If yes, describe their involvement.
13. Did you go through formal education?
14. Describe your life as a teenager.
15. When did you get married? Describe your marriage life.
16. Who was your husband?
17. Did you have any kids before the Mau Mau? If yes, tell me about them.
18. What did your husband do for a living?
19. Was your husband involved in any political activities prior to Mau Mau war? If yes, describe
20. Were you involved in political activities before the Mau Mau? If yes, describe how.

21. Were you involved in Mau Mau activities before the outbreak of the war in 1952? If yes, describe.
22. Is there anything more you would like to about our childhood and life before the Mau Mau?

Contribution during the war

1. When did you join the Mau Mau in the forest?
2. What made you join the Mau Mau?
3. Describe the events immediately after joining the Mau Mau fighters.
4. Is it true that you followed your husband to the forest? If yes did you find him?
5. If yes in 4 above, did life in the forest change your relationship as married couples? If yes, how did it change the relationship?
6. How did you learn to fight the guerilla war?
7. What weapons did you use in the war?
8. How did you obtain weapons?
9. Did you possess gun handling skills in the forest? If yes, when and how did you learn to handle the gun?
10. Describe the role you played immediately after joining the Mau Mau guerillas.
11. What was the success and challenges in playing the above described roles?
12. What was your first rank? Why were you promoted to this rank?
13. What were the roles in this rank?
14. At this rank did you head a platoon or platoons? If yes, what was the gender composition of the platoon or platoons?
15. What challenges did you face while carrying out the role of this rank or ranks?
16. What were your other ranks and their roles?
17. Why were you promoted to these ranks?
18. What were the challenges of these ranks?
19. What was the gender composition of those under you in each of the rank?
20. What were the powers of each rank?
21. Did other women occupy similar positions? If yes, describe these women.

22. What was there a difference between your leadership and that of men? If yes, describe.
23. Any success stories for each of the ranks you served? If yes, describe.
24. Were you involved in administering Mau Mau oaths? If yes, describe.
25. Were there other women oath administrators? Describe them.
26. Describe the Mau Mau parliament. What was its structure? What were its functions?
27. What was the gender composition of the parliament?
28. Were you involved in Mau Mau forest court? If yes, describe.
29. It is argued that the role of women in the court was to present women issues to Mau Mau leaders, what were the women's interests?
30. Describe to me the top leadership of the movement? Who were the top leaders?
31. Describe your relationship with other Mau Mau generals.
32. Why did Mau Mau administer oaths?
33. Were there different oaths? If yes, describe them.
34. Were there different oaths for men and women? If yes, describe them and why they were different?
35. Who administered your oath /oaths?
36. What was the purpose of that oath/oaths?
37. Were you involved in administering of oath? If yes, what oath and to who?
38. Were there other women oath administrators? Describe a few of them.
39. What was Mau Mau court? What were its functions and powers?
40. Were you a member of the court? If yes, what role did you play?
41. Were there other women in this court? Who were they, what did they do?
42. Describe the events after 1956 arrest and execution of Dedan Kimathi, arrest, surrender and of Mau mau leaders.
43. How did his arrest and executions affect you as a person and the movement's leadership?
44. Who was left in position of overall leadership after 1956?
45. Did new leaders crop up to fill the top leadership?
46. Describe your life as a Mau Mau between 1956 and 1963?
47. Describe Mau Mau leadership between 1956 and 1963.

49. Describe the gender relations within the movement.
50. Any success stories you can share with regard to your battles and leadership?
51. Describe the difficult moments of the forest life.
52. Is there anything more you would like to share about your life and that of other women in the Mau Mau?

Life after Mau Mau

1. Describe the events at Ruring'u stadium in 1956.
2. How was it to walk out of the forest to an independent Kenya?
3. What changes did you find in the society after 11 years in forest?
4. How did the people receive you and other female Mau Mau?
5. How easy was it to restart life after 11 years in the forest?
6. Did you face any challenges restarting life after war?
7. Have you overcome the war trauma? If yes, how did you overcome it?
8. Did you reconnect with every member of your family (parents, brothers, sisters, other relatives, husband and kids)
9. How did you relate with former loyalists, home guards and colonial police and chiefs?
10. Tell me about your marriage life and family after the Mau Mau.
11. What economic activities have you engaged yourself with since independence? Describe each.
12. Have you been involved in political leadership after independence? If yes, how?
13. Have you been involved in social development after independence (church, education among others)?
14. What can you tell me about Mau Mau Veterans Association?
15. Are you involved in Mau Mau veterans association? How?
16. How have you related post-colonial governments in Kenya?
17. Describe the interest you have had from the media and scholars?
18. Have you been invited to give speeches locally and internationally? Describe where and what the occasions were about?
19. What ups and downs have you faced since independence?
20. Is there anything more you would like to share about your life after independence?

Interview Guide for Mau Mau veterans

Name _____ Sex: _____ Age _____

Sub County: _____ Occupation _____

Date of interview:-----

1. How did you participate in the Mau Mau war?
2. Did you hold any rank? If yes, tell me about your role in the rank/ranks.
3. What was the role of women combatants in the movement?
4. What can you tell me about women leadership in the Mau Mau?
5. What was the role of women in Mau Mau oathing ceremonies?
6. What was the role of women in Mau Mau forest court?
7. What was considered in promoting women to leadership ranks within the Mau Mau?
8. What can you tell me about women overall leadership within the movement?
8. What can you tell me about Field Marshal Muthoni?
9. Why was she promoted through ranks?
10. What was her role in Mau Mau oathing?
11. What was her role in Mau Mau "court"?
12. Was Muthoni an overall leader (leader of men and women)?
13. How can you describe the character of Muthoni as a Mau Mau leader?

Interview Schedule for other informants (relatives, friends and acquaintances)

Name _____ Sex: _____ Age _____

Sub County: _____ Occupation _____

Date of interview:-----

1. Do you know Muthoni?
2. Did you interact with her as a child?
3. What can you tell me about Muthoni before joining the Mau Mau?
4. Why did Muthoni join the Mau Mau?
5. What do you know about Muthoni's role in the Movement?
6. How would you describe the life of Muthoni after the Mau Mau?
7. What has been the social, political and economic contribution of Muthoni to the independent Kenya?
8. How would you describe your relationship with Muthoni?
9. What more can you tell me about Muthoni

Guide for Focus Group Discussions

The discussion will center on the following questions:

1. What was the role of women in oath administration?
2. How were women promoted through ranks?
3. What was the role of women in Mau Mau forest court?
4. Did women assume overall leadership?
5. What was the role of women in leadership between 1957 and 1963?
6. What was the gender relation within Mau Mau leadership?
7. Were there denominations that supported the Mau Mau?

Appendix III: Glossary of Terms

Batuni:	Platoon.
Bushi:	An area of the forest occupied by a Mau Mau platoon
Anake a 40:	a translation of Forty Group, young Kikuyu men who served the British Crown during World War II.
Itungati:	A Kikuyu noun derived from the verb <i>tungata</i> which means serve. In the context of the Mau Mau the <i>Itungati</i> implies combatants.
Jonnies:	A word used by the Kikuyu to refer to the British military officers
Kamatimu:	Home guards (called <i>kamatimu</i> , since they used to carry <i>matimu</i> , a word that means spears in Kikuyu, before the colonial government issued guns to them)
Kifagio:	A colonial officer who confiscated “excess” African livestock
Kirigu:	Uncircumcised girl
Kuhanda Ithigi:	A kikuyu marriage practice in which parents of both sides met to discuss on the mode of dowry
Kumenya Mucii:	Practice in which a Kikuyu groom and his age mates made a trip to his soon to be inlaws.
Miano :	Beads used in witchcraft
Muthirigu:	a tradition dance –song which ridiculed the missionaries and the Uncircumcised girls among the Agikuyu, Aembu and Ameru in colonial Kenya.
Ngurario:	Traditional Kikuyu Wedding.
Ruracio:	Dowry
Wazungu:	The whites

Appendix VI: Research Permit

THIS IS TO CERTIFY THAT:

**MR. PATRICK KINYUA KIRAGU
of EGERTON UNIVERSITY, 945-20300
Nyahururu, has been permitted to
conduct research in Nyeri County**

**on the topic: A BIOGRAPHY OF FIELD
MARSHAL MUTHONI KIRIMA OF MAU
MAU MOVEMENT, KENYA**

**for the period ending:
9th March, 2017**

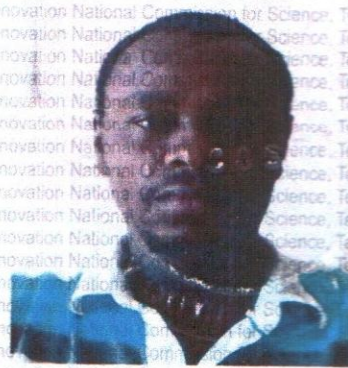


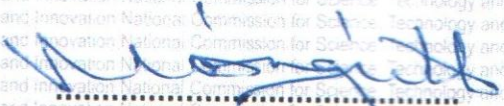
**Applicant's
Signature**

Permit No : NACOSTI/P/16/97397/9823

Date Of Issue : 9th March, 2016

Fee Recieved :Ksh 1000





**Director General
National Commission for Science,
Technology & Innovation**

