

The Backbone of the Mau Mau: Female Contributions to the Kenyan Emergency of the 1950's

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The Mau Mau rebellion in Kenya during the 1950s was an uprising of the Kenyan Kikuyu people against the oppressive British colonial government that had encroached upon their fertile native land. Mau Mau historiography often neglects the vital roles that women played in the Mau Mau Movement. Accounts often portray women as victims, as servants, and as prostitutes, or simply do not mention them at all. *Mau Mau's Daughter: A Life History* by Wambui Waiyaki Otieno is the first memoir written by a female Mau Mau forest fighter and Kenyan politician and refutes the previous portrayals of the conflict as a man's war. It was published in 1998, after numerous male authored memoirs of Mau Mau had been released. This paper will examine the roles women played in the military side of Mau Mau and the hardships that they endured, their perception throughout history by the British and by male Mau Mau leaders, and discuss Otieno's memoir in relation to the two other female authored accounts of the conflict. Though forgotten in much of the historical record, Kenyan women were actually the backbone of the Mau Mau movement, as their efforts were essential to the forest fighters; The loss of these female contributions lead to the eventual British victory over the Mau Mau forces.

The Mau Mau war was a civil conflict in Kenya, and began as a response to the oppressive British colonial regime that had marginalized many of the Kikuyu people since 1902. The Mau Mau movement originated in the early 1950s with poor Kikuyu peoples who had been forced to leave their native land, the fertile white highlands in the Central Province of Kenya. This land was essential to Kikuyu culture because in order for men to take brides they had to produce a bridewealth of cattle, which was impossible to do without sufficient land ownership or wealth. It was a guerrilla movement fought mainly from the forests surrounding the highlands, and was composed of Kikuyus who were poor, displaced from their land, uneducated, and spoke almost no English. The War was not simply a conflict of the British against the Kikuyu, but a civil conflict as many Kikuyus chose to join the British effort as Loyalists. These Loyalists were upper middle class Kikuyus who were able to succeed under the colonial regime and were predominantly

English speaking Christians. In the early 1950s, Mau Mau soldiers began attacking wealthy Kikuyus who they viewed as traitors. In 1952, the British declared a State of Emergency in which martial law took effect. During this time, the British detained between 80 and 90 thousand Kikuyu peoples in detention and rehabilitation camps, in which the Kikuyu people suspected of supporting Mau Mau were subjected to regular torture and violence. Over a million Kikuyu were also forced into enclosed villages where they endured extremely harsh treatment.¹ During the conflict, only 32 Europeans were killed by Mau Mau. The number of Kikuyu killed is disputed, but is estimated to be greater than 50,000.² The Mau Mau movement was joined by Kikuyu men and women as a way to fight back against the British colonial regime that had stripped many of them of their homeland, and the violence continued until 1960 when the Movement was defeated.

Many women, including Otieno, contributed directly to the Mau Mau effort by joining the guerrilla camps in the forests and performing essential tasks for the militant forces. Women took Mau Mau oaths alongside the men, pledging their allegiance to the fight for Kenyan freedom. Otieno herself claims to have taken nine oaths, an exceptional number in comparison to many other fighters.³ Women joined Mau Mau to “gain economic status, gain access to the political process, get more education, and regain alienated land.”⁴ Some women joined male Mau Mau fighters in the forest camps where life was “precarious at the best of times.”⁵ In these camps, women performed traditional roles such as caring and cooking for the soldiers there. Though few in number, women were also involved in the combat and fought alongside the men. Some women maintained their roles as wives and mothers, raising families in houses built entirely out of scavenged junk. Most women who went to the forests were single or widowed and therefore able to leave their familial ties in villages to join the Movement.⁶ Women were sometimes leaders of forest units and were able to hold rank up to a colonel.⁷ However, the roles that women played in the forests still remain “ambiguous” and there

¹ Marshall S. Clough, *Mau Mau Memoirs: History, Memory, and Politics* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 1998), 178.

² John Blacker, “The Demography of Mau Mau: Fertility and Mortality in Kenya in the 1950s: A Demographer’s Viewpoint,” *African Affairs* 106 (2007), 225.

³ Otieno, *Mau Mau’s Daughter*, 35.

⁴ Cora Ann Presley, *Kikuyu Women, The Mau Mau Rebellion, and Social Change in Kenya* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1992), 125.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 134.

⁶ Tabitha Kanogo, *Squatters and the Roots of Mau Mau* (London: James Currey Ltd., 1987), 146.

⁷ Macdonald, Sharon, Pat Holden, and Shirley Ardener, *Images of Women in Peace and War: Cross-Cultural and Historical Perspectives* (Madison, Wis: University of Wisconsin Press, 1988), 88.

is limited primary information available about this subject, not allowing them adequate credit due for their contributions.⁸

Though they composed only five percent of the guerilla combat fighters, the roles that women played in the Movement are significant because they provided important contributions during the Mau Mau rebellion of clandestine work and providing the line of supplies into the forests.⁹ In this way, women were integral to the Movement. British accounts of the War describe them as the “passive wing,” but this description does not acknowledge their importance to the military success of Mau Mau. Historian and author Cora Ann Presley instead calls them “non-combatant” forces because they provided assistance that helped make the Mau Mau forces a serious threat to the British and Kikuyu loyalists.¹⁰ When the Emergency was fully underway, it was more important for the Mau Mau military forces to get supplies to the forest than it was to get people there.¹¹ Women were the source of these supplies, retrieving firearms, information, food, and medicine, and ensuring they were delivered to Mau Mau guerillas.¹² The supplying of food to the forests has been called the “women’s war.”¹³ Women were enthusiastic to be a part of the Movement and in gaining their freedom from the British.¹⁴ It was not unusual for women of prominent Kikuyu families to be involved in the movement while their husbands and male family members were not.¹⁵ Women risked their lives in making these contributions and were the lifeline of the forests.

Mau Mau scouts were predominantly female because the European traditional ideal of women did not expect them to be involved in assisting such a violent conflict. Otieno describes her work at the center of organizing and performing scout work for the Mau Mau forces, and provides insight into the methods used to secure supplies. She rightly claims that “without scouts, no war would be waged or won.”¹⁶ She explains that women made the most successful scouts as they were more easily disguised than men and less likely to be suspected as a member of Mau Mau than men were. One method Otieno describes for retrieving firearms and information was through the use of young women who would seduce intoxicated Home Guard soldiers and accompany them back to their barracks where they were unsuspected as anything more

⁸ Clough, *Mau Mau Memoirs*, 139.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 141.

¹⁰ Presley, *Kikuyu Women*, 157.

¹¹ Kathy Santilli, “Kikuyu Women in the Mau Mau Revolt: A Closer Look,” *Ufahamu: A Journal of African Studies* 8 (1977), 151.

¹² Presley, *Kikuyu Women*, 130.

¹³ Kanogo, *Squatters*, 143.

¹⁴ Jean Davison, *Voices from Mutira: Change in the Lives of Rural Gikuyu Women* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1966), 184.

¹⁵ Presley, *Kikuyu Women*, 168.

¹⁶ Otieno, *Mau Mau’s Daughter*, 42.

than “mere prostitutes.”¹⁷ After guards had fallen into a drunken sleep, they would secure arms and information from the incapacitated soldiers. This allowed Mau Mau forces to know the positions and plans of British and loyalist troops.¹⁸ Otieno portrays herself as an essential organizer of female scout work that was critical to forest fighters. Tactics employed by the women of Mau Mau allowed the forest fighters to combat the British and Loyalist forces more effectively and readily.

The British, realizing that women were a substantial danger to their ability to control the Emergency, forcefully detained Kikuyu women in large numbers towards the end of the conflict, demonstrating how critical the female contributions to the Mau Mau Movement were with this focus on forced villagization in order to control them. The British viewed Kikuyu women with their own traditional ideas of female responsibilities, and perceived their participation in the Movement as “far more radical and fanatical” than the participation of men because they were acting in an extremely untraditional manner.¹⁹ British acknowledgement of the threat that women posed led to the forced villagisation programs in 1954 that aimed to contain women where they could be monitored by the Home Guard and prevented from supplying the forests. This program was fully underway by 1955, with 804 villages that housed 1,050,899 people, mainly women, children, and the elderly.²⁰ By containing the women, the government would “weaken the morale and resistance of [Mau Mau] gangs by a complete denial of food.”²¹ Women were forced to dig trenches around these villages that were then filled with sharpened bamboo sticks to prevent any access to forest fighters.²² The British also created the Maendeleo ya Wanawake clubs which were instituted with the goal of rehabilitating women from Mau Mau. Membership to these clubs was a matter of life or death in the reserves, as members were provided with food during times of famine. These clubs were also a way for the British to present anti-Mau Mau propaganda to women. The fact that the British devoted a large portion of their budget to implementing the villagisation program and Maendeleo clubs demonstrates their awareness of the essential role that women played in the Mau Mau movement. This increased detainment of women from 1954 to 1957 led to the military defeat of the Mau Mau, because the British recognized that the conflict could not be ended without first removing the female support from the Movement.²³

¹⁷ Otieno, *Mau Mau's Daughter*, 39.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Presley, *Kikuyu Women*, 157.

²⁰ Elkins, Caroline, *Imperial Reckoning: The Untold Story of Britain's Gulag in Kenya* (New York: Henry Holt, 2005), 235.

²¹ Kanogo, *Squatters*, 143.

²² Elkins, *Imperial Reckoning*, 247.

²³ Presley, *Kikuyu Women*, 165-167.

Women experienced acts of violence and sexual abuse at the hands of British and Loyalist guards while forced into villages and detainment camps, while having to worry about their own survival as well as the survival of their young children oftentimes detained with them. The forced villages were essentially “detention camps in all but name.”²⁴ They were created as a solution for the British to expand detainment of Kikuyu people and to solve the problem of Mau Mau without having to expand the system of labour camps that already existed. The women who the British determined as “hard-core” members of Mau Mau were admitted into the detainment camps, mainly at Kamiti camp, a camp created precisely for holding women, but some were also held in predominantly male camps in separate wings.²⁵ Of the 80,000 or more Kikuyus detained during the Emergency, 8,000 were women.²⁶ They endured the atrocities of the screening process as did their male counterparts, in which women were tortured physically and sexually. In these villages and camps, women faced inhumane treatment and starvation. They lived in constant fear of beatings and sexual assault and were forced into hard labour. Otieno experienced two periods of detainment due to her involvement with Mau Mau, and was detained with her three young children and therefore had to worry about their survival as well as her own, as did many other women.²⁷ She describes her time here as filled with long hours of interrogation, beatings, and sexual assault, in her case resulting in pregnancy.²⁸ Women were raped daily by guards, given the choice to comply or to be killed. Women in villages and camps were often there with their children, either ones that they had brought with them or had given birth to during detainment. Caroline Elkins estimates that 15 percent of four thousand camp detainees in Kamiti in 1955 had one or more children in the camp with them, an estimate of six hundred children.²⁹ They were not given extra food or supply rations for these children, meaning many of them died in the camps. Women felt more compelled to endure the beatings and rapes and to survive because the livelihood of their family depended on it.³⁰

The contributions and the sacrifices women made to Mau Mau were significant, but their portrayal in previous accounts of the Emergency rarely give them the credit they deserve due to the view of women at the time. They are often described as being the “passive-wing,” which suggests that they merely sat back and let men control their destinies. This is because the 1950s and 60s perspectives of women limited their inclusion in history, as traditional views held them as inferior to men. Women were seen as “weak and easily

²⁴ Elkins, *Imperial Reckoning*, 237.

²⁵ Santilli, “Kikuyu Women,” 151.

²⁶ Clough, *Mau Mau Memoirs*, 178.

²⁷ Otieno, *Mau Mau’s Daughter*, 64, 78.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 78-82.

²⁹ Elkins, *Imperial Reckoning*, 227.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 219-248.

manipulated,” and therefore incapable of possessing the qualities necessary to have any involvement in the battle against British Colonialism.³¹ Presley writes, “Historians of Mau Mau have treated women’s nationalism as incidental to the main currents of nationalism.”³² The Mau Mau war has been portrayed as a conflict between males, and held “gendered conceptions of deviancy,” where any female involvement was merely due to coercion by men.³³ The British held this idea for the rehabilitation of women, believing that they had been manipulated into Mau Mau and therefore could be manipulated again into renouncing the cause.³⁴ When hardcore women involved with the Movement refused to betray Mau Mau during in detention, they were viewed as “thugs and witches” who were merely mentally ill.³⁵ However, women were not insane or simply dull-minded puppets of the male Mau Mau members, but instead acted on their own interests and desire for Kenyan freedom. The women possessed similar nationalist sentiments to the men as they too felt the economic effects of British occupation. Many women were highly involved with agricultural production, at home on their own farms and on British owned coffee farms. The Mau Mau rebellion created an opportunity for women to assert themselves in politics and leadership.³⁶ It was not a war between African and European males, but instead, “largely a rural rebellion of minimally westernized Kikuyu men and women.”³⁷ The British perceptions of women at the time, in addition to the inaccurate portrayal of women in the memoirs of male leaders and the lack of memoirs authored by female forest fighters, mean that history has neglected to acknowledge the integral role that they played in the Mau Mau movement.

Memoirs written by male Mau Mau leaders often belittle the role that women played in the Movement. They often refer to women in the forests with the word “kabatuni” meaning “little platoon” or “little person.”³⁸ This name was intended to demean women as being simply personal servants for the male fighters. Leaders were “concerned with protecting the male Mau Mau warrior community in the forests from the negative influence of the female presence.”³⁹ They focus on the roles of women as mistresses, and “casually mention” the leadership roles of women both in the camps and on

³¹ Elkins, *Imperial Reckoning*, 222.

³² Presley, *Kikuyu Women*, 169.

³³ Katherine Bruce-Lockhart, “‘Unsound’ Minds and Broken Bodies: the Detention of ‘Hardcore’ Mau Mau women at Kamiti and Gitamayu Detention Camps in Kenya,” *Journal of Eastern African Studies* 8 (2014), 597.

³⁴ Elkins, *Imperial Reckoning*, 222.

³⁵ Bruce-Lockhart, “Unsound Minds and Broken Bodies.”

³⁶ Presley, *Kikuyu Women*, 147-149.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 150.

³⁸ Santilli, “Kikuyu Women,” 149.

³⁹ Clough, *Mau Mau Memoirs*, 140.

the non-combatant side.⁴⁰ Gucu Gikoyo's memoir describes his time as a Mau Mau guerilla fighter living in forests camps. He focuses on the strict ban on sexual contact with women in his camp and describes the work they did cooking and caring for fighters. He states that "girls in the *mbuci* [camps] who had taken refuge in the forest when they were discovered by the government to be Mau Mau agents" did the cooking and knitting for the males in camps.⁴¹ Though women did perform traditional roles in the forests, his focus on only these detracts from the critical contributions women made outside of camps. His revelation that these women were "Mau Mau agents" seeking refuge because they were discovered to be assisting the forests proves that they played more than just sexual and traditional roles in the Movement.

General Waruhiu Itote, a leader third in command in the Mt. Kenya forest, speaks of women in this way in his memoir, the first one released from the Mau Mau side of the Emergency. He mentions the issues that women posed in the forest because they disrupted the routine of Mau Mau fighters.⁴² There were many leadership meetings that discussed the treatment of women in the forests and the reserves, and leaders in the Mt. Kenya forests held the opinion that women were weak and "easily persuaded," and should therefore be kept alive only for reproductive purposes after the rebellion.⁴³ Itote also writes of the discretion encouraged for male soldiers in forming relationships with women, asking men to "restrict their relationships to women leaders only."⁴⁴ This brief mention of women not only suggests that they were not merely kept as sexual objects in the forests, but that they also held leadership positions.

The memoir of Karari Njama, Mau Mau Field Marshal Dedan Kamathi's secretary in the Aberdare forests, describes women as detrimental to male fighters and as being concerned with their own personal safety above the Mau Mau cause. He believed that women joined the forests not to fight for freedom as the men did, but instead to their desire to be free from the brutality of the Home Guard they would face if they remained in the villages.⁴⁵ Njama's memoir presents his personal views that rejected female contribution to the military side of the Movement. He emphasizes the domestic and sexual roles that women played in the forests, and describes the female contribution of supplies and weapons as being "payment to prostitutes who later sent them

⁴⁰ Santilli, "Kikuyu Women," 148.

⁴¹ Gucu G Gikoyo, *We Fought For Freedom* (Nairobi: East African Publishing House, 1979), 60.

⁴² Clough, *Mau Mau Memiors*, 140.

⁴³ Waruhiu Itote, *"Mau Mau" General* (Nairobi: East African Publishing House, 1967), 78.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 281.

⁴⁵ Santilli, "Kikuyu Women," 147-149.

to our warriors.”⁴⁶ However, his views differed from those of other Mau Mau leaders who embraced female assistance. Njama describes one leadership meeting in which male guerillas described the brave acts and contributions of women, and urged that they should be considered as important as any other warrior. Njama spoke out against this, saying that women caused more harm than help, but was refuted by Kimathi himself, who agreed that female warriors were equally as beneficial to Mau Mau military efforts as men.⁴⁷ The leaders’ emphasis on the sexual exploitation of women in the camps detracts from the female impact on the war effort. A close reading also reveals contradictions in their personal views of women and the actual roles women played in the forests.

The opinions of women expressed in male memoirs varied and developed over time, which makes the study of women’s roles through only these sources difficult, but demonstrates the changing dynamic of gender roles of the time. The Mau Mau rebellion was an opportunity for women to prove their ability and dedication to Kenyan Liberation. One change in gender roles was the oath-taking of women, and women administering oaths to men and women.⁴⁸ Women were not deterred by the prejudice they experienced from men in the forest, but instead proved their trustworthiness and loyalty to Mau Mau, earning them more authority in the Movement. As the war continued, ideas of gender began to change and, “once people had proved themselves trustworthy through acts of bravery, secrecy, or dedication, then ‘there was no man or woman leader,’ for gender was immaterial. Merit was more important and ‘Mau Mau would not oppose what a woman leader said.’”⁴⁹ Women inarguably proved themselves by risking their lives to get supplies to the forests. Women were condemned from camps because they were thought to be untrustworthy, but Itote also writes of the importance of female efforts.⁵⁰ He says, “Over and over again, during the Emergency, I noticed that a woman could keep a secret much better than a man; even under interrogation, relatively fewer women than men would break down and reveal information.”⁵¹ This idea is mirrored in Otieno’s memoir as she claims to have refused to denounce Mau Mau or give up information, even through two terms of detainment and enduring beatings and brutal rapes.⁵² Women proved that they could act as mothers and wives, but also could assist in a military revolt against the colonial forces, an idea that was not accepted in traditional views of women.

⁴⁶ Donald L. Barnett and Karari Njama, *Mau Mau From Within* (London: Modern Reader Paperbacks, 1966), 208.

⁴⁷ Barnett, *Mau Mau from Within*, 247-248.

⁴⁸ Presley, *Kikuyu Women*, 161.

⁴⁹ Kanogo, *Squatters*, 147.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 148.

⁵¹ Itote, “*Mau Mau*” *General*, 105.

⁵² Otieno, *Mau Mau’s Daughter*, 80.

Otieno's memoir provides insight into the women's struggle for freedom, but has to be read with care. Marshall Clough emphasizes the need for critique and cross checking when reading all Mau Mau memoirs. This book is one of three memoirs written by women affected by the Mau Mau Movement, but is the only one written by a female involved in the forest fighting and organization of Mau Mau. Otieno, like other authors, has personal intentions for publishing her story. Her memoir is not a diary and is therefore not written from the time of occurrence of the events she details. She also places herself at the center of the story of Mau Mau, understandable as she is telling her life story, but the reader needs to keep in mind that actual events of Mau Mau did not actually occur with her as the central figure.⁵³ She writes as if Mau Mau would not have happened without her organization skills and contributions. She also spends a large portion of her book writing about the fight for her husband's burial, which she refers to as the "burial saga," suggesting that she was largely motivated to write this book in order to publicize to the world what she felt was a great injustice against her.⁵⁴ Still, Otieno was detained as a hard-core Mau Mau and involved in the leadership of prominent political organizations. Her book demonstrates her exceptional ability to "endure her traumatic experiences and remain active in Kenya's political scene after independence."⁵⁵ Though Otieno may exaggerate in her memoir, the importance of *Mau Mau's Daughter* for understanding the women's role in the movement is not compromised. Otieno writes with a desire to memorialize those who played a role in the fight for Kenya's freedom, especially the women who were so often "abandoned and neglected" in history prior.⁵⁶

The account that Otieno provides is exceptionally important as the two other female authored Mau Mau memoirs do not compare to Otieno's in regards to content. The first was written by Charity Waciama, who describes her life in colonial Kenya and how the Emergency affected her and her family.⁵⁷ However, this memoir is "written almost exclusively from a child's point of view and does not yield the kind of reflection and analysis of mature women."⁵⁸ Waciama was only school-aged when the Emergency was occurring, and was never involved in the forest. She focuses on the turmoil that Kikuyus faced as they transitioned to the modern and European ways of

⁵³ Clough, *Mau Mau Memoirs*, 16-21.

⁵⁴ Otieno, *Mau Mau Memoirs*, 157.

⁵⁵ Pamela Wadende, "Women and War: A Kenyan Experience" In *Narrating War and Peace in Africa* ed. Toyin Falola et. al. (New York: University of Rochester Press, 2010), 103.

⁵⁶ Otieno, *Mau Mau's Daughter*, 107.

⁵⁷ Charity Waciama, *Daughter of Mumbi* (Nairobi: East African Publishing House, 1969).

⁵⁸ Otieno, *Mau Mau's Daughter*, 1.

life.⁵⁹ She also discusses her life in the forced villages and communal labour she performed there. Her memoir reveals the hardships that Mau Mau created for families who were torn apart and affected economically by the loss of jobs on European estates. Waciuma's family supported Mau Mau but was never involved directly with it. She chose Christianity over the Movement, as she felt there was no possibility of moderation between the two.⁶⁰ The other female authored source written by Muthoni Likimani also addresses the roles of women in Mau Mau.⁶¹ She discusses the activities and ideas of women in this conflict and their contributions to Kenyan nationalism. However, this book is a collection of short stories. They are written with real experiences and observations of the author, but still do not provide the detailed life history and firsthand account of scout work, forest fighting, and political activism that Otieno does. Otieno's memoir is unparalleled and is the primary source for understanding the involvement of female Mau Mau freedom fighters.

The Emergency ended in 1960 when the British determined that the Mau Mau Movement was disabled. Kenya would still go on to gain liberation in 1963 after the British left the country and an independent government was formed. Otieno was involved in politics during the next 30 years and continued to push for the rights of Kenyans, especially those of women. Mau Mau provided an opportunity for women to assert themselves in Kenyan politics. Otieno is an example of one of the exceptional women who assisted the Movement, and of the essential work they did as freedom fighters.

Through providing the lifeline of supplies and information to the forests, women became the backbone of Mau Mau. The loss of the vital contributions that women made to the Movement meant that fighters could no longer continue the military battle against the British. Without their help, as Otieno proves, the war could not be won. The strength demonstrated by both the men and women of Mau Mau paved the way for liberation and an independent Kenyan government.

⁵⁹ Waciuma, *Daughter of Mumbi*, 30.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 109-113.

⁶¹ Muthoni Likimani, *Passbook Number F.47927* (Eastbourne, UK: Praeger Special Studies, 1985).