

Women in Colonial Liberation Movements in Kenya: The Contribution of Women in Mathira in the Mau Mau Rebellion, 1952-1963

Murage Charles Wambugu¹ and Dr. Ngari Lazarus Kinyua^{2*}

¹Graduate Student, Department of Security, Diplomacy and Peace Studies, Kenyatta University, Kenya

²Senior Lecturer, Department of Public Policy and Administration, Kenyatta University, Kenya

*Corresponding Author

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ABSTRACT

The study explored Agikuyu women's participation in the Mau Mau colonial liberation struggle in Nyeri County, Mathira sub-County between 1952 and 1963. This study was informed by the gender analysis theory. Gender analysis considers the role of social systems in the arrangement of gender relations. The gender analysis theory argued that economic and social relations, politics, and ideology affect gender relations. This study was in the form of a historical research design. Both secondary and primary data sources were used in the study. Semi structured interviews were used to collect primary data. The interviews contained open ended questions to facilitate collection of detailed information. Key informants included assistant chiefs, chiefs and community leaders such as religious leaders and village elders. Focused group discussions were organized, bringing together women from the Mathira community who could provide insights into the changing roles of women. The changing roles of women, with women taking up men's roles, have culminated in conflicts, especially at the family level, as wives attempt to wrestle the control of the family from their husbands, resulting in physical confrontations and, at times, ending up tragically.

INTRODUCTION

African societies have traditionally been characterized by patriarchal norms whereby men dominated ownership and control of crucial resources that include land, cattle and labor (Tamale, 1999). The institution of colonialism and the subsequent integration of African into colonial capitalism marginalized both men and women from their main economic resources land included. African women suffered most marginalization by colonial capitalism as compared to men. Colonial land and labor policies tended to place African men at an advantaged position as compared to women. As women gradually lost control of their productive and reproductive labor, the individualization of customary rights during eroded traditional obligations and social security for women (Rugadya, 1999; Shivji, 1998).

British colonial rule in Kenya was characterized by unfair labor practices, structural racism, and forced resettlement based on the desires of the colonial settlers. Beginning the 1950s, disillusionment with continued alienation of African native lands led to an uprising by the Land Defense Force known as the Mau Mau rebellion. The Mau Mau uprising significantly challenged colonial oppression and marked a crucial phase for women's empowerment (Nissimi, 2006).

Like their male counterparts, women actively participated in the Mau Mau rebellion playing diverse roles that challenged traditional gender norms. Women provided logistical support, acted as intelligence gatherers, and

even took up arms in some instances (Muthoni, 1998). The involvement of women in the revolt challenged societal expectations and opened up new avenues for women's involvement in the public sphere.

Kikuyu women from Mathira sub-County Nyeri County were actively involved in the Mau Mau insurrection. The Mau Mau rebellion profoundly impacted the rural communities of Nyeri County, Mathira sub-county. Mathira became a significant center of Mau Mau activities with women making immense contribution (Irungu, 2014). In the course of the rebellion, women challenged traditional gender roles and contributed to the establishment of new family dynamics.

Despite the crucial work that women got involved in during the revolt, the post-independence era brought challenges. Even though Kenya became independent in 1963, the changes in women's roles were limited and often did not translate into lasting societal transformations. Traditional gender roles and inequalities persisted, and women faced barriers to accessing education, economic resources, and political representation (Oloo, 2014). These challenges hindered the realization of full gender equality and women empowerment that the revolt promised initially.

The roles of women from Mathira were shaped by patriarchal norms and further reinforced by colonial capitalism that tended to further marginalize African women. The Mau Mau uprising challenged existing societal norms that allowed women to break free from traditional gender roles. This study aims to explore women participation of women in the Mau Mau revolt in Mathira sub-County.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

In contrast to predominantly patrilineal societies of traditional African culture, the gender roles within the contemporary Kikuyu community in Central Kenya appear to lean towards a more matrilineal system (Adeoye, 2018). This shift is particularly noticeable in the high level by which women take part in various roles in the family and society. Notably, Central Kenya also saw significant involvement in the Mau Mau Revolt. The aim of this research is to examine the potential historical connections between the participation of women in the Mau Mau Revolt and the subsequent transformation of gender roles. Specifically, it seeks to understand the extent to which the participation of women in armed conflicts, such as the Mau Mau Revolt, has influenced their contemporary status and roles within the family structure. By exploring the role played by women in armed conflicts, the aim of this research is to explore the paradigm shifts in the position and status of women within contemporary African societies.

OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

The Contribution of Women in Mathira in the Mau Mau Rebellion, 1952-1963

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Mau Mau warriors were made to take oath as a sign of unity among the Kikuyu community (RH.Mss.Afr.S.424, 1954). Despite the oath administrators' being men, women engaged in activities such as candidate arrangements according to sex and intimidating and beating candidates to unity as well as inability of betrayal (Nyamarutu, 1984). Men did not allow women to enter the forest initially because they believed the latter could not withstand the harsh conditions including cold and torrential rains. They also believed women were not able to fight when the enemy came. Further, men believed that women would be eating food but do nothing in return, which was wasteful. There was also fear that men could fight over women especially then the women would be few inside the forest.

The role of women in the forest was ambiguous since they were not allowed to engage in warfare traditionally (Barnett and Njama 1966). Initially, women were allowed to engage in domestic work including cleaning, washing, cooking, and fetching firewood. Even so, when the war continued to lengthen, the role of women shifted. Male leaders chose women whom could help them address their needs and sexual desires. Such women

were referred Kabatuni (Barnett and Njama, 1966:242). Some women engaged in minor military tasks such as asking of weapons and cleaning of guns. Some women became fully-fledged fighters who could fight alongside men. Women who were able to fight were commissioned to a higher rank of 'Colonel'; this was decided in the meeting held at Aberdare forest in August 1953 (Barnett & Njama 1966:227).

Like the traditional Kikuyu community that made only male leaders, the guerrilla councils consisted on men initially. However, women who proved to be able to engage in Mau Mau tasks efficiently too up leadership positions. As such, joint men and women councils were developed. The voices of women were heard as they were made to engage in decision-making. Unlike the earlier women who only executed decisions made by men, women in the Mau Mau assisted with the decision-making processes (Gitahi 1984). The Mau Mau war allowed women and men to be leaders and the fighters welcomed and embraced female leadership (Gitahi 1984). Women fighters were called ka-batuni, meaning Batuni the diminutive of Batuni, which is used to refer to a platoon member (Wachanga 1975). Some of the bills created those bills make women to be on a lesser social class than men. While women are not referred to many times as men, the performed greater tasks in the Mau Mau war just as men did (Wachanga 1975).

Autobiographies, apart from a few, are in particular revealing on this recognize. Popular mention to the work of girls does not mention their entire work in the family and community or during the Mau Mau war. The literature only references a few role of women during the war even though the women greatly engaged in various activities. They do not paint a clear picture as to what women did especially the Kikuyu women who were in the forest during the war while facing the opponents. The warriors formed networks that were able to be led by women during the Mau Mau prior to being changed into emergency villages (Gikonyo 1979).

Guru wrote an autobiography that explained the role of women during the Mau Mau. He provides an example of women named Nyagio whom he described as fearless and reliable during the Mau Mau. She played a key role of being a contact between the warriors. She as well lured men to participate in the war, making them able to effectively participate in the war. The lady was from Murang'a. Kaggua (1975), in his book the Roots of Freedom, highlights girls who were very instrumental at making the Mau Mau fighters successful. The girls acted as spies in Nairobi and its Suburbs. Some of the girls named in the book are Wanjiru Gitau, Njeri Munyuiru, Njeri Mwaniki, Wangui Kamau, and Njeri (Wa Njumbi). They labored to ensure the fighters are successful. Girls played a crucial role during the Mau Mau.

Girls engaged in the war as warriors particularly within the Mount Kenya and Nyandarua. The girls engaged in the war and took up leadership positions contrary to the view that they engaged in domestic tasks only. Some girls acquired military knowledge that made them be at the forefront in fighting the opponent. They coped with the weapons. Some women as well engaged in traditional women roles within the forest such as luggage transportation through the thick forest, fetching firewood, cooking, and cleaning camps. The military and non-military tasks that women engaged in during the Mau Mau war should be studied to allow women be in the right place during the fight for independence. Even though the women played important tasks during the war, they were few in number but their role should be visible (Allen 1929).

Women were instrumental at fighting for freedom while operating from various places including European settler farms and urban townships. Colonial leaders made women to freely move compared to men. They also prevented women from being harassed by security forces (RH Mss Afr.S.596 Box 38A, 1953). The women helped with mediation, firearm carriers, food carriers, and intelligence providers (RH Mss Afr.S.596 Box 38(A), 1953).

The main logistics during the Mau Mau was food collection and delivery to the freedom fighters. Women leaders were assigned the task of gathering what the fighters required directly or indirectly (Mbutu 1984; Nyamarutu 1984; Gitahi 1984). The information gained could be utilized to mobilize other women to collect and deliver food to the fighters. The women who delivered the food had taken the oath and were able to do so without others knowing (Gitahi 1984). The women used the Kikuyu ciondo and ndigithu to carry and deliver the food. The women delivered them to the edges of the forest or other venues without being suspected or seen

by home guards that were loyal to the colonialists. The food could be concealed by being covered by manure from goats. The women could bring carry vegetables while returning so people could believe they went to pick the vegetables (Mbutu 1984).

The Mau Mau movement meant that women had to adapt to new roles. The women also developed novel social networks and bases of groups as the movement dictated. For example, women who engaged in Mau Mau issues had their garden dug by other women who remained behind (Ndungi 1984). Mau Mau women who remained in the village helped with the digging and gathered money to ensure the families of women who are to the forest have enough supplies. However, homes of anti-Mau Mau women could suffer because of lack of cooperation with the Mau Mau women. At the same time, women who were unable to continue working for Mau Mau fighters due to illnesses also had their homes and families suffer (Gitahi 1984). During the war, the traditional Ngwatio system was changed.

The mentioned cases indicate that role of women evolved during the Mau Mau fighting. They shifted from the traditional domestic work to performing the war duties. They shifted from the traditional male stereotype that women cannot engage into war but only do domestic work. The women took the chance provided by the war rise to the occasion and become leaders in the community. The women showed that they can do the tasks that were traditionally left for women to take leadership positions. The participation of women in the military made them show that they are able to fight for their rights through competence and dedication. They thus, engaged in the fight for liberation of Kenya from the British rule.

Women were able to fight for land during the Mau Mau war. They were among the freedom fighters in the forest. Some women became commanders of the fighters. Literate women were allowed to be fighters by Kimathi, the leaders of the warriors (Kimathi in Kinyatti 1986). Some women who feared that their fathers may sell them to colonialists as wives joined the forces and became freedom fighters (Kimathi in Kinyatti 1986). Women provided medical care and supplies, refuge, food, runners, and intelligence especially those in squatter villages. They sometimes did not accept to pick coffee and tea as a way of making the British to suffer. Prostitutes in cities provided refuge or safe houses to Mau Mau fighters. They also provided them with arms or intelligence to the fighters. The traders communicated through the railroad and markets.

Kinyatti(1986) indicates that women were made forced laborers especially those in the concentration camps. The colonialists started organizations for women with the help them counteract Mau Mau. The women organizations were managed old by European women from middle and upper-class. The women aimed to inculcate the Christian values to the women following the organization. Women on the farms decided to practice their traditional values and culture as they did prior to the emergency. The ex-squatters went back to the lands they originally owned before they were removed from the Highlands. Landless Kikuyus were helped by their prior neighbors to resettle. Women were hospitable and welcomed the evictees back to the society where they belonged before.

Women at the grass-root level worked together with KANU, which by that time implied that it aimed to ensure every person gets free land (Furedi 1989:168). KANU could hold meetings outside the city where women among other party members sung. Women were not able to get husbands that could allow them access to and despite the increasing landlessness. The women migrated to the cities to be domestic workers. They sold food, provided domestic services, sold changaa, and offered sex as they struggle to ensure their children are educated.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study was informed by the gender analysis theory. Gender analysis considers the role of social systems in the arrangement of gender relations. The gender analysis theory argued that economic and social relations, politics, and ideology affect gender relations. It was further argued that the Kikuyu patriarchal system favored men at the expense of women. I spite of the restrictions placed on women by traditional culture and British

colonial policies, Kikuyu women were able to transcend this and engage actively in the Mau Mau liberation war.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study was in the form of a historical research design. This involved collecting and analyzing historical data to understand women's roles in the Mau Mau rebellion in Mathira between 1952 and 1963. Both secondary and primary data sources were used in the study. Semi structured interviews were used to collect primary data. The interviews contained open ended questions to facilitate collection of detailed information. Key informants included assistant chiefs, chiefs and community leaders such as religious leaders and village elders.

Focused group discussions were organized, bringing together women from the Mathira community who could provide insights into the changing roles of women. Respondents were organized in focus discussion groups which were facilitated in giving responses by research assistants drawn from the area due to their familiarity with the local dialect as well as the topography of the locale of study. The group discussions were conducted, allowing participants to share their thoughts and experiences openly. Notes were taken, and recordings were made (with consent) to ensure accurate data collection. Data saturation was reached when the data became repetitive, redundant, or no longer made substantial contributions towards the research objective. This was after interviewing 50 women who were involved in the Mau Mau armed conflict as well as the contemporary women in the Central Kenya.

MATHIRA WOMEN PARTICIPATION IN THE MAU MAU LIBERATION STRUGGLE, 1952-1963

This section is structure in a chronological order. It begins examining the role played by women in the Mau Mau struggle and the subsequent parts analyses the contribution of women after independence and in the political and social economic sectors.

When the Mau Mau struggle began, novel patterns of division of labor became evident even though the strength of the labor remained steady. As a result, women found themselves performing new tasks. New experiences bought about by colonialists did away with the traditional division of labor among women (Barnett and Njama, 1967). Women were made to engage in tasks that were traditionally considered for men after men shifted from the reserves. The reserves contained three groups of migrants: the residents who migrated to the city of Nairobi and other towns to look for employment; laborers' who assisted the Europeans to work in farms; and squatters who decided to stay in reserves owned by Africans. Basically, the migrants sought for places they can be employed. The migration made about 110,000 Kikuyus to migrate from their reserves by 1931. Shrining of land holdings was evident as more settlers settled on them (Muruiki, 1974).

The shrinking of land holdings made the Kikuyu land to have about 1 acre in every head of population or 5 acres in every household. The Kikuyu land was not evenly shared, making some to have large pieces while others small pieces or no land. Those with no land were forced to find means to survive outside the reserves (Muruiki, 1974).

The Kikuyu traditional norm that women were home-keepers made many girls not to be taken to school in the past like boys were taken. However, this excluded places where missionaries greatly influenced education. Therefore, places such as Mathira in Nyeri have high number of girls seeking education because of missionary influence. Parents who were Christians have limited say as to who joined school and who does not. Despite the missionary efforts, only about 26% of women were enrolled in primary schools in Africa by late 1954.

The lack of making women be exposed to school during the British rule indicates the reason women were not actively involved in leadership positions especially politically. The women were least involved in political associations that emanated during the 1940s. Yet, women who were leaders during the Mau Mau revolt had

some basic education even if it was very elementary. In this regard, it is prudent to conclude that education was important at shifting the perspective of people towards British rule.

Independent schools were instrumental of promoting a notion of nationalism. They also worked closely with the churches to change the mindset of people regarding the role of political associations. The issues of female circumcision made many men and women to consider themselves as real community members making those in schools that were sponsored by the government to engage in political activity (Hughes, 1966).

People began to revolt against education system that was supervised by missionaries because it was linked to political protests. The Kikuyu Independent Schools encouraged militant nationalism by the 1940s and 1950s as a result of the revolt. The Kikuyu women changed their roles during the Mau Mau, making their new tasks to be evident. It is apparent that the 1950s' women lived at a time that tribal cohesion was eroding and their roles were changing. But the men did not easily accept the changing roles. For example, the Mau Mau fighters always considered women lesser than them as they individually accounted. Most of the fighters indicate that women caused conflict in the forest as they liaised with the male fighters (Hughes, 1966).

Women played various roles during the oath taking ceremonies in preparation for Mau Mau struggle. The roles included providing the menstrual blood needed for the activities, presenting themselves as tools of intimidation and threats and old women were used as oaths administrators especially to the younger generation. The activities of women during the oath administration exercise included harassing the reluctant youths who were afraid to take the oath and forcibly mobilizing women to the oath administration dens. Women who took the oath were fewer than the men.

Their contribution to the fight was acknowledged, which made Mau Mau leaders to give them allowances and promote them to colonel rank. They could also be made among the members of the inner security council where high level of secrecy regarding Mau Mau activities was required or discussed. Nonetheless, they were made to take the oath three times before the admission to the council. They could rise in higher leadership ranks of the group as they were taken to be loyal and committed to the movement (Wangari wa Kaguta – Interview 17/02/2016).

As much as women played a part in Oath taking process it has been argued that the involvement of women in oath taking is believed to have caused tension in families where only the women took oath while excluding men. This was because the oath required that no one was expected to reveal their oath to another. This was much easier in the Agikuyu community because men were expected to not reveal everything to their wives, the same was not expected of women who were viewed as property of men and as such were required to reveal everything, including oath taking. Even in cases where both husband and wives had taken oath, tension did arise in families, particularly in cases where the woman had risen in position in the movement (RH Mss Afr.S.1676, 1953-1963 1966).

The movement as well changed the Kikuyu social structure. Particularly, many women who were recruited to the movement decided not to be married after the struggle because they were not able to be subordinates of men as the tradition of the Kikuyu required (Wambura wa Muchiri – Interview 17/03/2016).

Women had different ways of administering oath during the traditional Kikuyu society (Lambert, 1987). They could swear the oath against themselves. On the other hand, women and children were excluded from swearing the oath (Kenyatta, 1965). Kenyatta (1965) adds that the oath taking was considered very sacred. At the same time, the oath was carried with it a strong belief in religion, making women not able to take it. Kenyatta (1965) add that in cases that it was very essential that the women take the oath, their husbands and sons took it on their behalf. The women were taken not prepared to take the oath mentally and bodily. They could also be able to bear the ordeal that the oath comes with especially with regard to the family (Kenyatta, 1965). On the other hand, Furedi (1974) asserts that women took the Mau Mau oath but were prohibited from administering it. Women seers were able to determine the safeness of taking oaths as specific places and times (Frates (1993).

Related to oath taking was the emergence of passive participation by women in Mau Mau struggle as indicated by a woman who took part in the Mau Mau war. She was tasked with the role of supplying the warriors with food while in the forest. She narrated that in addition to the supplying of food, they were involved in recruiting many other women in the struggle (RH Mss Afr.S1676, 1956). However, the nature of the passive role was not clear except for their role of supplying food to fighters. These was affirmed through the findings of Santoru (1996) whereby it was established that women supplied food to the opponents in the forest and some were dressed in police uniforms and to encourage these women had sub-committees in every location where women engagement in Mau Mau was mobilized. Likewise, women acted as spies during the Zimbabwean liberation (Lyons, 2004).

The role of women in the Mau Mau revolt was also to oath children who were used as channels of taking food to the warriors. The women used the services of children who were very young, about eight years and above, to reduce the level of suspicion by the colonialists. The oath of Mau Mau was also used to recruit women. The oath allowed women to be recruited into the movement and became adherents. Even though the oath was voluntarily taken by some women, some took it after they were intimidated. The women who took the oath involuntarily did so because they feared being labeled anti-freedom fighters. The oath was a sign that a person became a member of the movement but was not a show of being an active member of the group. Administration of the oath was done at both urban and rural areas. It was also done at the European firms and households, government offices, villages, Home Guards, and military and police force.

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