

CHAPTER EIGHT

All *askaris* are family men: sex, domesticity and discipline in the King's African Rifles, 1902–1964¹

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Until recently, most combatants in modern militaries have been adult men; it is, however, a fallacy that armies are exclusively masculine institutions. Military planners have long recognized that soldiers' families can strongly influence discipline, morale and effectiveness. In British East Africa, where the coercive force of the King's African Rifles (KAR) underpinned colonial authority, the reliability of rank-and-file *askaris* (African soldiers) was a serious concern. With the exception of both World Wars, no British metropolitan infantry battalion was stationed in East Africa until the Mau Mau Rebellion in 1952, and Europeans rarely constituted more than three per cent of a 600-man peacetime KAR battalion. Since British soldiers were thin on the ground in East Africa, the creation of a stable and contented African soldiery was a strategic imperative. As they were often assigned tasks that ran counter to their natural allegiances, KAR *askaris* had to be isolated from the greater African population. Furthermore, the regimentation of military families linked access to women with reliable service, and enabled the KAR to inspire a high level of discipline in its African soldiers.

During peacetime, every KAR battalion had a substantial complement of African women and their children. In 1949, approximately 75 per cent of the regiment's 5,428 rank-and-file soldiers lived with their families, which meant roughly 4,000 women were living in military camps throughout East Africa.² There were, however, few formal guidelines for the family policies of the KAR. The regiment was governed by a set of regulations and ordinances established by East African colonial governments, in consultation with the Colonial Office and the Inspector General of the KAR. These formal rules had little to say about the families of African soldiers, and in most cases, it was individual battalion commanders (usually Lieutenant Colonels) who instituted the Standing Orders and informal unit traditions which set out

the family policies of the KAR. During peacetime the regiment was comprised of roughly seven battalions (the exact number varied) recruited in Nyasaland, Uganda, Kenya and Tanganyika. It was also affiliated with the Northern Rhodesia Regiment (NRR) and the Somaliland Camel Corps (SCC), all of which fell under the jurisdiction of the KAR's Inspector General. Family policies varied by battalion and territory, and there was no single, comprehensive set of rules which governed the treatment of soldiers' families.

Generalizations can, however, be made about the KAR's policies before and after the Second World War. From the regiment's founding in 1902 until 1939, the KAR followed an informal approach to military families. In 1930, the Standing Orders of 6 KAR declared that: 'Every endeavour will be made to encourage NCOs and men to be lawfully married.' But in practice, the KAR cared little about the precise marital status of soldiers' women, and an *askari* could designate virtually any woman as his military 'wife'. The army accepted little responsibility for the support of these women, and it was generally up to individual soldiers to look after the needs of their families.³ Only after the Second World War, when the KAR battalions were integrated under the East Africa Command (EAC), did the regiment formally accept the support of soldiers' families as a military responsibility. General W. A. Dimoline, the commander of the EAC in the late 1940s, argued that family welfare policies improved morale and military efficiency:

Practically all [*askaris*] are family men, with at least one wife, and regard it as a matter of supreme importance that they shall have children. Separation from their families is a much greater strain to them than it is to Europeans, and they find it acceptable only when there is some clear-cut over-riding reason, such as war conditions.⁴

After 1945, *askaris* enjoyed a family support allowance, modern married quarters, free medical care and low-cost education for their children. Since most KAR officers in this period were allowed to marry, much of the responsibility for African family welfare was assumed by British wives. Thus in peacetime, the KAR subscribed to a paternalistic ideal that the families of British officers and African enlisted men were part of a larger 'regimental family', bound together by ties of loyalty and affection, in addition to military discipline.

When the KAR expanded during both World Wars, it became impossible to accommodate the families of rank-and-file soldiers. In 1939, most African families in military housing were sent home, and *askaris* required special permission from the army to live with their wives. In a sharp break with established policy, military authorities discouraged African soldiers from marrying.⁵ Yet even in peacetime, military fami-

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lies could be a liability for a unit in the field. In 1948, when 2 KAR was deployed in Somalia, the battalion had to devote too much effort to looking after soldiers' families. 'The Battalion contains more African wives and children than it does *Askari*, and this long tail is slowly strangling us. Companies cannot move anywhere without leaving an appreciable proportion to guard women and children.'⁶ Military families, however, could not be ignored. When *askaris* were without their families on active service, they remained concerned for the welfare of their wives and children, and the KAR had to devote much effort to ensure that soldiers' families were adequately cared for. Moreover, the British authorities believed that long-term separation from their families caused *askaris* to seek the company of 'unsuitable' females, whom they considered to be sources of physical disease (usually venereal) and political subversion.

The military view of women

The peacetime policy of regimenting the families of African soldiers was based on a number of racial and gender stereotypes inherited from the British military establishment. Many officers and colonial officials believed that lower-class men, particularly Africans, were governed by unquenchable sexual appetites. As the East African Political Liaison Officer warned: 'It would not be practical to keep the African troops entirely from women. If they are kept strenuously at work they think less of sex, but it is necessary for Africans' health and peace of mind that they should have access to women occasionally.'⁷ This derogatory racial stereotype fuelled the army's belief that *askaris* had to have women. It should also be noted that the stereotypical image of the African soldier was strictly heterosexual. While metropolitan military authorities worried that their men could turn to homosexuality if denied access to women, there was no similar concern in the KAR.⁸ Sexual relations between men were still treated as a criminal offence, but most KAR officers tended to attribute 'homosexual incidents' to 'mental instability'.⁹

The colonial military establishment saw the sexuality of African soldiers as a dangerous and volatile force which undermined discipline in two main ways – either by causing *askaris* to prey upon 'innocent' women who happened to live near KAR camps, or by allowing them to fall victim to unwholesome 'predatory' women. While aggression towards women has been an unfortunate reality in all military units, KAR officers believed that the 'natural' attraction of *askaris* to women had the potential to lead to violence. For example, in the Somaliland Camel Corps, two Yao *askaris* were charged with plotting to murder

their British company commander and his wife. Both men had lost wives in childbirth but were denied permission either to send for new women from Nyasaland or to marry local Somalis. During their court martial, it was suggested that the two *askaris* plotted to murder their commander's wife in retaliation for denying them access to women; or to put it another way, if they could not have a woman, neither could their captain.¹⁰ Many *askaris* considered the army's efforts to control their conjugal relations as a form of discrimination because they believed British officers could have women whenever they liked. African soldiers therefore reacted violently when military policemen tried to bar them from African townships and other areas where women congregated.¹¹

The determination of *askaris* to find female companions meant that women living near military bases were occasionally the victims of sexual assault by African soldiers. For example, members of the Ceylonese State Council protested against the stationing of East African soldiers on the island during the Second World War after two *askaris* were convicted of assaulting local women. When East Africans arrived in India and Burma in 1944, a number of cases of rape and sexual assault led to fighting between *askaris* and Indian civilians. Some of these incidents even included assaults on European missionaries and nursing sisters.¹² But, despite the stereotypes, *askaris* were no more inclined to sexual assault than other servicemen. Reports from the Southeast Asia Command (which included India and Burma) reveal that the incidence of disciplinary action (including rape) taken against East Africans was no higher than that against Indian or British troops.¹³ Incidents occurring in East African units tended to be more violent, but it is clear that the predatory reputation of *askaris* was largely undeserved. British officers attributed disciplinary problems in non-African units to a variety of causes, including boredom and homesickness, but colonial military authorities tended to blame African unrest on problems over women.

Yet if women were often seen as victims of unrestrained African sexuality, they were also portrayed by the army as predators who exploited men's sexual weaknesses. The relatively high pay of African soldiers made them a privileged segment of colonial society – even more so during wartime, when *askaris* were separated from their families, and civilians were often impoverished by famine and deprivation.¹⁴ While the colonial military establishment depicted women who had relations with soldiers as predators and harlots, it is more likely that economic hardship caused by war and wartime food exports drove them to seek out relatively affluent African servicemen. *Askaris* returning home to Kenya on leave often carried hundreds of shillings, and British

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observers were concerned that 'there were hordes of women waiting to get what they could'. The women frequented trains and ferries, and plied *askaris* with drink to rob them of their clothes and money. The army also blamed them for encouraging soldiers to overstay their leaves.¹⁵

Venereal disease

The co-option of soldiers' families in peacetime allowed the KAR a measure of control over the conjugal relations of *askaris*, but the unsuitability of these arrangements in wartime created a number of health and disciplinary problems. During the Second World War, the army saw uncontrolled women who had sexual relations with African soldiers as the primary vector of venereal disease in East Africa. An officer with 1/6 KAR in Ethiopia estimated that 350 of the 900 men in his battalion were infected, and the unit formed a special 'VD Company' to allow men to continue training while they received treatment.¹⁶ From June 1940 to May 1941, 5,461 *askaris* in the East Africa Command received treatment; from August 1941 to January 1942, the number mushroomed to almost 15,000 recorded cases, which represented a loss of manpower equal to an entire division of soldiers. The EAC's Director of Medical Services (DMS) estimated that these figures represented a total of 18,035,000 man hours lost to the 'devotion to Venus'. By the first quarter of 1944, the EAC had a VD infection rate of 471.8 per 1,000 men, and military authorities designated the control of VD a tactical military issue effecting overall unit efficiency.¹⁷

British officers found it virtually impossible to keep prostitutes away from their *askaris*. British medical authorities considered every woman in Ethiopia a 'potential prostitute and source of VD'. Lieutenant Colonel Michael Blundell was so frustrated with the women who beset his battalion that he rounded them up, stripped them naked and abandoned them twenty miles from the nearest town. In Addis Ababa, women crawled through barbed wire fencing to get into military camps, and at Gondar one officer likened them to rapacious crows. There were also a few near mutinies when *askaris* resisted attempts to deny them access to these women.¹⁸

While many officers blamed these problems on 'immoral' Ethiopian women, six years of Italian occupation and a year of fighting led to severe economic hardship which forced many women into prostitution. By the end of 1941, conditions became so desperate that the entire population was at risk of starvation. Some Italian mothers interned by the British Army after Mussolini's forces surrendered even sold themselves to those European soldiers and truck drivers who could produce

cans of condensed milk to feed their babies.¹⁹ In light of these conditions, it is not surprising that venereal disease became a problem in East Africa during the Second World War. African soldiers had no difficulty attracting women in areas troubled by poverty and famine, and often were the ones responsible for spreading VD among the local population. As more women became infected with the disease, they in turn spread it to other soldiers. Arguably, the colonial army was itself primarily responsible for spreading venereal disease during the war.

The EAC, however, concluded that the innate sex drive of African soldiers made abstinence impractical, and believed that attempts to deny *askaris* access to women had the potential to lead to grave disciplinary problems. As a result, military authorities tried to control the women who had sexual relations with military men. One prominent strategy was to pressure the colonial governments of East Africa to enact legislation similar to the Contagious Diseases Acts in Victorian Britain, which could force civilian African women to submit to medical inspections and treatment. During the Second World War, new legislation in most East African territories broadened the powers of the civil police to detain suspect women 'loitering' in townships or near military camps. Infected soldiers were required to name the women who had given them the disease so that magistrates could order their inspection and treatment.²⁰ Concerned that civil governments were not devoting enough effort to controlling the spread of VD near military bases, the EAC established its own clinics and often coerced women into accepting treatment. Women living near major military installations at Nanyuki in Kenya and Jinja in Uganda who refused to submit to monthly medical examinations had their residence permits revoked and, in many cases, their huts pulled down. In defending these draconian measures, a high-ranking military officer argued that 'there are times when the sanctity of the civil individual's rights cannot be allowed to militate against military interests'.²¹ Many colonial administrators, however, were uncomfortable with the extra-legal powers embodied in these regulations, and refused to grant Military Police authority to arrest suspected prostitutes.²² T. A. Austin, Nyasaland's DMS, particularly disliked the provision which required a patient to name the source of his infection:

[It is] an incredible piece of legislation, suggestive of the Gestapo ... It is likely to accomplish little other than to drive the native prostitute from the town where she has been plying her trade, back to her village in the Reserve, beyond the reach of an order issued either by a medical practitioner or magistrate. This may be what the Military Authorities hope to achieve.²³

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In actual fact, Austin's guesses were not far off the mark. Forced examinations did little to lower the incidence of VD infection, and were primarily intended to evict troublesome women. In 1943, the EAC's Senior Medical Officer in Uganda acknowledged that:

The scheme is officially an effort to improve VD treatment of Africans, but in practice it is an effort to control prostitution. Infected women will be cleared out unless they go into hospital for treatment. My reason for pressing the scheme was more to discourage the arrival of these people by making life as disagreeable as possible for them, rather than a belief in the prophylactic value of the medical examination.²⁴

Prostitutes responded to these inspection programmes in a number of ways. In the Kenyan towns of Kitale and Kisumu, they welcomed VD treatment centres and offered to help pay their rent.²⁵ Most women, however, resisted all efforts to force them to accept mandatory medical examinations. In Nanyuki, Muslim and Somali women locked themselves in their houses to avoid the inspections, and non-Muslims often bribed Muslim men to name them as wives so they too could secure exemptions. In other cases, Nanyuki prostitutes tricked *askaris* into sleeping with them by presenting a rented medical inspection certificate to prove they were free of VD. Conversely, some military women in Nanyuki saw the value of medical treatment, and demanded that the government stamp out these tactics.²⁶

Sanctioned prostitution

Since most military women refused to co-operate, the inspection and treatment programmes did little to check the spread of venereal disease. The military could employ coercive methods against soldiers' women only in cantonments like Nanyuki and Jinja. In most other cases, civil governments in East Africa were unwilling to allow the army to compel innocent women to submit to medical inspections. Furthermore, these measures were feasible only in British territory. When East African units were sent to the Middle East and Asia during the Second World War, it was politically impractical to force non-British subjects to accept involuntary examinations. As a result, a substantial segment of the British military establishment favoured regulated brothels to ensure that women who had sex with soldiers also had regular medical inspections by military doctors. Prevailing moral standards in Great Britain prevented the open adoption of officially sanctioned military brothels (on the model of the French *Bordes Mobiles de Campagne*), but in practice, the British Army adopted a *laissez-faire* approach towards military prostitution, allowing field officers a free hand.

East African *askaris* were not the only soldiers provided with military brothels. Venereal disease was not a specifically African problem, and all British imperial troops had access to inspected prostitutes in the Middle East and Asia. In East Africa, there is strong evidence that British troops had extensive contacts with prostitutes, although there are only tenuous suggestions of the existence of brothels specifically reserved for their use. There is also little evidence of officially sanctioned brothels for African soldiers in the British East African territories. There were, however, unofficial brothels in Nairobi operating out of private houses, and military authorities in Nanyuki uncovered informal brothels in schools, Public Works Department lines, a European hotel and a cemetery.²⁷

Military brothels were possible only when East African units served in foreign territory. In Ethiopia, the alarming rate of VD infection among *askaris* was a primary factor in their creation. Field brothels were usually begun by junior officers, staffed by Ethiopian women and inspected by military medical personnel. It is hard to tell if Ethiopian women took a willing part, but at least one attempt to set up a unit brothel failed because the women in question preferred Italian truck drivers to African soldiers.²⁸ In the Middle East, brothels sprang up near leave camps frequented by the East African members of the African Auxiliary Pioneer Corps (AAPC), and the army tolerated 'black brothels' for African soldiers in Alexandria, Egypt. In 1942, a few KAR battalions also set up informal unit brothels in Madagascar.²⁹ In Burma and India, conversely, *askaris* usually found their women through Indian pimps, but African ex-servicemen also claim that British officers supplied women. One veteran described how medical officers in Burma brought them 'very brown, elegant and beautiful ladies' and apportioned them by giving each woman the regimental number of the man with whom she was to have intercourse.³⁰

An additional advantage of sanctioned prostitution was that it gave military authorities some control over the women who came into contact with African soldiers. The social and political realities of colonial rule made it desirable to segregate KAR *askaris* from the greater population of East Africa. During the Mau Mau Emergency in the 1950s, Kikuyu women lured *askaris* into compromising positions in order to buy or steal their weapons, and official investigations traced much of the ammunition captured from the guerrillas back to the KAR. A secret army circular blamed the isolation of *askaris* from their women, and suggested that the best way of stemming the flow of ammunition to the Mau Mau was to establish military brothels (although acknowledging that 'obviously this baldly-stated suggestion would have to be camouflaged in some way').³¹

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When military brothels were established, prevailing British moral standards forced such arrangements to be made at unit level. They were rarely discussed in official military channels. The informal nature of sanctioned prostitution meant that ranking officers and governmental officials could confidently deny its existence. In 1945, Sir Geoffrey Northcote, the Principal Information Officer for the EAC, emphatically declared that there was:

no truth in the belief, which is occasionally expressed and may be fairly widely held, that the Army Authorities tolerate prostitution provided that the men concerned are protected from infection with venereal diseases; on the contrary, all arguments appealing to the moral and social instincts and principles of African soldiers [are] frequently and forcibly put to them.³²

There were also many in the British military establishment who opposed military brothels, and it was not unusual for a moralistic senior officer to overrule the efforts of his more pragmatic subordinates. The army's willingness to sanction sex outside the bounds of Christian marriage especially troubled military chaplains, who blamed the promiscuity of African soldiers on the 'brothel habit' acquired in the army.³³ Other officers doubted the utility of organized prostitution. Many army doctors believed that prophylaxis was the best protection against VD, and correctly pointed out that, in spite of frequent medical inspections, many women in military brothels remained infected. Furthermore, many East African soldiers disapproved of military prostitutes, and abstained on religious and moral grounds.³⁴

Finally, military prostitution raised the fear that sexual relations between non-African women and *askaris* would undermine the racial hierarchy of colonial society. In wartime Asia, the army tried to prevent East Africans from having relations with Indian women, and *askaris* complained that local women were told that Africans had penises 'down to their knees' that would kill anyone who had sexual intercourse with them.³⁵ Military and colonial authorities were particularly concerned when they caught *askaris* with 'prurient picture magazines' showing non-African women, and introduced a special pin-up series featuring clothed African women in *Heshima*, a magazine for African soldiers.³⁶ Additional cause for concern came from censored letters which revealed African soldiers considered Middle Eastern and Asian prostitutes to be 'white'. A Ganda driver in Ceylon wrote: 'We are having enjoyment with white ladies. We pay 7½ rupees to have a go with them.' In the Middle East, a Kamba corporal added:

There is no difference between black and white here. We go to the bar together, among white girls, who much prefer us to them. They long to

be with us all the time and although we used fear them at home, we are playing with them here. They cost sh.5.³⁷

Egyptian entrepreneurs exploited and nurtured these perceptions. For a fee, they would provide a light-skinned women to pose for pictures with *askaris*.³⁸

Many African soldiers saw no reason why they should not be allowed to have relations with European women. In one case, a Ugandan storeman sent to Britain with an East African detachment to help repatriate liberated AAPC prisoners of war had an affair with an English woman. *Askaris* representing the KAR at the Coronation parade in 1937 and the Victory parade in 1946 had relations with British prostitutes. These soldiers embarrassed colonial officials by bragging about their exploits when they returned home, and military authorities took steps to isolate *askaris* from such 'unsuitable' British women when another contingent of East Africans represented the KAR at the Coronation in 1953.³⁹ Commentators in the settler press feared that sexual contacts with 'white women' overseas would lead *askaris* to have 'unwholesome ideas' about European women in East Africa, but there is little evidence that these feared events ever come to pass.⁴⁰

Categories of soldiers' 'wives'

In peacetime, when it was possible to accommodate the families of *askaris* in KAR barracks, the conjugal relations of African soldiers were much less of a problem. From the British standpoint, the incorporation of women and children into the KAR's 'regimental family' had a number of advantages. General Dimoline strongly believed married *askaris* were more stable and easier to discipline:

When their families are present with them, [*askaris*] are contented and of good nature. The reverse applies when separated, and they tend to get into mischief. The morale of the unit is directly dependent (in normal peace conditions) upon whether families are present.⁴¹

In 1946, a Historical Report for 2 KAR observed that 'by the end of the year there will be 100% married families in barracks. This will mean that petty crimes such as AWOL and breaking out will cease entirely.'⁴² KAR officers also believed that a married soldier was less likely to become drunk and that a wife improved his overall health. Not only could she be examined to ensure that she was free of disease, but she also looked after her husband's domestic needs. African wives cooked and cleaned uniforms, equipment and barracks. Between the wars, the KAR was so dependent on the domestic labour of women that African NCOs often hired women to care for young, unmarried *askaris*.⁴³

This offers an important clue as to how the KAR secured the relia-

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bility of its African soldiers. Many pre-modern military organizations rewarded obedient rank-and-file soldiers with women. During the early nineteenth century, British West Indian Regiments purchased slave women to serve as wives for loyal soldiers, who were themselves ex-slaves; and, at the end of the century, French officers delayed the occupation of Chad to allow their West African soldiers to capture over 600 women.⁴⁴ These practices were also common in East African military units before they were amalgamated into the KAR, and officers of the Uganda Rifles often treated captured women as booty: 'In the evening the question of the looted ladies had to be decided, and finding no better solution, I served them out to the most deserving of my men. In those climes marriages are quickly arranged, and the preliminary love-making is perhaps too hurried to suit our tastes.'⁴⁵ While these arrangements could scarcely be termed 'marriages' by Western standards, they offer a more realistic picture of the role of women in early colonial military institutions.

Once the KAR was established, it was harder to treat females blatantly as property. Yet the regiment still used women both to attract recruits and to reward loyal service. British rule put an end to communal warfare, and many *askaris*, who would have been warriors in pre-colonial times, saw enlistment in the KAR as an opportunity to prove their 'manhood'. They believed bearing arms conferred special status with women and were unwilling to serve in non-combatant labour units. British recruiters exploited these gender identities by encouraging young men to believe that women would mock them if they refused to become soldiers.⁴⁶ Once a man enlisted, the KAR reinforced this militaristic definition of masculinity by ensuring that he had access to women. In 1946, the NRR induced *askaris* to re-enlist by offering them married quarters, and in 1951 new KAR recruits were promised the right to have a woman in the barracks after completing nine months of training.⁴⁷

In many East African societies, a young man could not marry without first paying his in-laws a gift of cattle or, in some cases, of labour. This system of bridewealth enabled older men to control their sons and nephews because few young men could afford to pay for a wife without help from their relatives.⁴⁸ Military service in East Africa was a form of age-based migrant labour in which demobilized soldiers returned to the rural areas from which they were recruited, and their accumulated wages often made them wealthy men in their home regions. As with civilian systems of African labour migration, this wealth allowed them to circumvent institutions which had compelled them to work for their elders to earn enough bridewealth to marry. In an effort to retain their authority, older men sought to increase bridewealth prices.

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This was especially the case after the Second World War, when *askaris* returned home substantially enriched by back pay and demobilization benefits. Among the Kipsigis of Kenya, bride prices quadrupled over the course of the war, and, in Uganda, Acholi veterans complained that elders conspired to appropriate their savings by making it more costly to marry. By the close of the war, military censors noted an increase in the number of *askaris* complaining about inflationary bride prices, and educated Kikuyu veterans formed an 'Anti-Dowry Association' to eliminate the practice altogether.⁴⁹ These efforts were largely ineffective, however, as young *askaris* did not have the prestige or the authority to resist their elders. Brasher African soldiers, however, circumvented the bridewealth process entirely. *Askaris* often simply 'eloped' with their prospective brides, and relied upon their status as government servants to protect them from prosecution in Native Tribunals for 'abducting' women. In many cases soldiers were forced to return these women, but in others, KAR officers loaned their men enough money to allow them to keep their wives.⁵⁰

Officers in the early KAR encouraged *askaris* to establish semi-permanent relationships with women out of necessity, but the military establishment did not concern itself with the origins and marital status of these women until the very end of the colonial era. Thus the labels of 'wife' and 'family' within the context of the 'regimental family' of the KAR acquired ambiguous meanings. While the KAR was fully aware that its soldiers came from cultures in which polygamy was common, it maintained the fiction that each *askari* was monogamous. The Standing Orders for 6 KAR explicitly stated that: 'No native is allowed to have more than one wife in the barracks and no native rank is officially recognized as having more than one wife.'⁵¹ British officers, however, were not too concerned with the precise marital status of military women, and it was common for *askaris* to change their 'wives' after returning from leave. As one officer who served with the NRR in the 1930s put it:

A recruit, after his initial training, was allowed to send to his village for his wife. The District Commissioner would then look for the designated female and she would be sent into Lusaka whether [or not] she had been properly married to the man by tribal custom. Then, when a man went on leave, he would frequently return with yet another female whom he claimed to be his wife.⁵²

The colonial military endorsed an *askari's* marital traditions, but it was equally willing to sanction any relatively stable relationship, no matter how brief. In many cases, soldiers' 'marriages' were quite temporary and amounted to little more than an extended form of contrac-

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tual prostitution.⁵³ The one rule strictly enforced in all KAR battalions was that no unapproved women were allowed in the barracks. Every woman who lived in the KAR lines had to be endorsed by a district officer, medical officer and trusted African NCO to ensure she was healthy and of good character. The army severely punished *askaris* who secreted unsanctioned women, and sent away wives who arrived in the lines without proper authorization. Yet in spite of these regulations, soldiers often succeeded in acquiring extra wives or concealing unapproved women in nearby villages and towns.⁵⁴

In some KAR battalions, the fiction of 'marriage' wore thin, and African NCOs simply hired women to tend to the sexual and domestic needs of African soldiers. In one sense, these hired women could be termed prostitutes, but an important difference from officially sanctioned military prostitution was that a soldier chose his own woman. As one officer put it 'an *Askari* sometimes preferred to take a local woman, declare her as his wife and set her up in married quarters. It was of course quite impossible to check upon the legality of the woman since African tribal marriages are not registered'.⁵⁵ During the 1930s, KAR garrisons in Kenya's Turkana District simply passed on their women to the men who relieved them.⁵⁶ These temporary wives were particularly common in inhospitable places where regular wives refused to go, and were blamed for much of the unrest in the Somaliland Camel Corps in the 1930s: 'They are of bad character and their readiness to live with other men during the absence on duty of their "husbands" is, I think mainly at the root of the trouble.'⁵⁷ Temporary wives were also often abandoned in considerable hardship when their 'husbands' moved to new postings. By the end of the Second World War, the problem became so pronounced that the EAC issued orders freezing the pay of discharged *askaris* until they first made arrangements to support their women.⁵⁸

After the Second World War, the desperate plight of abandoned wives, coupled with the need to ensure that family benefits were not squandered, forced the KAR to pay closer attention to the marital status of African wives. British military authorities were unwilling to expend limited resources on temporary wives, and it became necessary to confirm that *askaris* were formally married to the women with whom they were living. Native authorities and District Commissioners were asked to certify that the marriages of African soldiers were either sanctioned by a Christian church or had taken place 'according to tribal law and custom', and by the early 1960s, *askaris* had to produce a marriage certificate to apply for married quarters.⁵⁹

Most African ex-servicemen enjoyed having their families with them in the KAR lines, and viewed the army's family benefits as a valu-

able reward for military service. Others, however, disliked having their women paraded for undignified medical inspections, and found that life in the barracks taught their children to drink and smoke at an early age. Moreover, as African soldiers were denied pensions, it was essential that they maintain strong ties to their rural homes. A man's farm was often neglected when his wife joined him, and many veterans believed that only wealthy men with multiple wives could really afford to keep a wife in the barracks.⁶⁰

Life in the King's African Rifles barracks

Once a woman received formal permission to live with an *askari* in the KAR lines, she became a junior unofficial member of the regiment and was subject directly to military discipline. Many wives joined their men in the KAR when they were still in their early teens, and District Commissioners often complained that these adolescent girls were not prepared for army life. In 1938, the DC of Elgeyo-Marakwet District refused to send a young Elgeyo woman to join her husband in the 5 KAR lines without an escort. 'She is not capable of coming to Meru by herself,' he wrote. 'She is a complete *Mschenzi* [rustic], wears skins, cannot speak a word of Swahili, and has never left the Reserve before.'⁶¹ The youth and inexperience of most military women made them receptive to new ideas, and life in the regimental lines introduced them to a distinct military culture with its own values and social norms. As soldiers' wives, young African women adopted clothing, hair styles, perfume and cosmetics linked to a Western conception of 'femininity'. When the first Africans were commissioned in the early 1960s, British officers' wives helped develop a YWCA course to explain to the new African officers' wives that they were expected to regularly use bras, deodorants and contraceptives.⁶² Just as African men were trained to be efficient *askaris*, young African women were indoctrinated to play the role of docile and obedient soldiers' wives.⁶³

As previously noted, *askaris*' wives were unofficially responsible for supplying domestic labour to the early KAR. This was their sole obligation until the close of the Second World War, when military authorities took steps to improve their quality of life. British post-war military doctrine held that family welfare had a positive influence on morale and military efficiency. Furthermore, the KAR also needed to compete with civilian employers, who had begun to offer better pay and benefits for unskilled labour. In 1949, the commander of the KAR's Northern Brigade appealed to the Kenyan Government to help fund a series of social welfare courses to train military women in cooking, home-crafts, hygiene and child care.

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Brigadier Jackson is very anxious to introduce homecrafts amongst [soldiers' wives] so as to help them to be well and usefully occupied. It is, of course, very important for the morale of the *Askaris* that their wives should be trained in homecrafts, etc, and know how to look after their babies and be hygienic in their methods and in the running of their houses and children.⁶⁴

By the late 1950s, most KAR battalions supported a chapter of the *Maendeleo ya Wanawake*, an African women's club which served a similar function. While these programmes were certainly beneficial to military families in general, their main function was to teach wives to care for African soldiers.⁶⁵

Women and children living in the barracks also received free medical care because colonial military authorities learned through experience that *askaris* held the army responsible when their immediate families became ill. Moreover, British officers worried that childhood infections and diseases like colds and chicken pox could spread to African soldiers and thereby undermine the overall efficiency of the colonial military.⁶⁶ In the early KAR, civil medical officers or visiting nursing sisters treated soldiers' families; wives usually went home to have their babies. After 1945, military families were cared for in special wards of civilian hospitals or in military hospitals when civil facilities were unavailable. Most battalions established family clinics staffed by a trained African midwife, and 4 KAR's clinic recorded 140 births in a single year. The army's pre-natal care programmes ensured that these children were generally healthier than their civilian age-mates.⁶⁷

The difficulty of locating large numbers of surviving ex-military women precludes drawing definitive conclusions about the female perspectives on army life. Soldiers' wives in the early KAR would probably have been unwilling to praise army life, but few archival records deal even indirectly with their opinions and aspirations. In comparison, the women who lived with *askaris* in the late 1940s and 1950s generally appreciated the colonial military's family welfare policies. Most were formally married, and chose to join their husbands in the army. They considered the barracks a relatively good place to live despite the loss of personal freedom inherent in military life.⁶⁸

As junior members of the KAR's 'regimental family', soldiers' wives experienced a level of discipline which made them subordinate to *askaris*. The army required them to wear an identity disc bearing their husband's regimental number, and disciplined them through a hierarchical system of authority which paralleled the command structure of the KAR.⁶⁹ The wife of the senior African NCO was usually responsible for discipline among the women of the battalion; she usually wore a military sash or chevrons as a badge of rank and often carried a

kiboko (a rhino hide whip).⁷⁰ In the 1920s, the wife of a Company Sergeant Major in 6 KAR was designated the 'ex-officio beater-in-chief of troublesome wives'.⁷¹ Beating a wife without official permission was punishable, however, and British officers banned the practice altogether after corporal punishment was abolished in the KAR after the Second World War. Troublesome women in the post-war KAR were simply sent home. In the 1950s soldiers' wives enjoyed considerable benefits and amenities while living in the barracks, so expulsion was usually an effective deterrent to misbehaviour.

Yet many servicemen's wives were strong-willed individuals who exerted a significant influence on the colonial soldiery. An officer in the early KAR described the wives of Sudanese *askaris* as having 'a powerful physique and of villainous temper' which intimidated their men. They had a reputation for looting, and on at least one occasion, 4 KAR had to mobilize its *askaris* to put down a 'wives' riot'. Some Sudanese women also had a reputation for practising witchcraft. While overt acts of female resistance disappeared over time, African wives often chafed under their subordinate status and found ways to challenge the army's patriarchal system of authority. In 1938, the wife of a 3 KAR *askari* robbed her husband of his accumulated pay and fled the battalion lines by train.⁷²

Many military women did not consider themselves formally 'married' and therefore insisted on the right to choose their own partners. Occasionally a woman found a particular soldier too stingy or abusive, or perhaps she simply preferred another man. While military authorities usually gave women a free hand in choosing a 'husband', they were unwilling to let them readily switch mates within a particular unit because competition between *askaris* over women often led to serious violence. Adultery, or the 'seduction of the wife of a comrade', was a grave offence. One of the most notorious incidents in the inter-war KAR was blamed on a soldier's wife. An African Sergeant in 6 KAR 'ran amok' after discovering another *askari* having intercourse with her. He shot and killed several soldiers and threatened to kill the local District Commissioner before he was eventually captured. Adulterers were also flogged during the inter-war era, and this incident was used by the commander of the Southern Brigade to mount a general defence of corporal punishment:

The importance of a sufficient punishment for adultery cannot be overstressed, since experiences of this offence clearly prove, that unless full justice is given in the form of a heavy punishment, and the native considers a whipping a just punishment, the dire trouble that may ensue is a very pertinent danger: in other words the injured party will take the matter into his own hands, usually with murderous intent.⁷³

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While British officers generally held that *askaris* were the masters of their wives, these incidents demonstrate that neither the KAR nor African soldiers could fully control military women.

Line boys and army children

In peacetime, the children of African soldiers were considered valuable military assets. The KAR's policy towards children was based on a long-standing tradition in the metropolitan British Army that military children were future soldiers or soldiers' wives.⁷⁴ In the early KAR, African boys (including many sons of *askaris*) were enlisted as drummers and simple labourers. These 'band boys' and 'line boys' were subject to military discipline and were trained as fully fledged soldiers when they came of age.⁷⁵ Furthermore, children constituted a form of old-age insurance for career *askaris* who lacked a pension, and the KAR rewarded the reliability of its soldiers by providing them with an opportunity to father children.

Colonial military authorities worked to make soldiering a family tradition, and organized boys' platoons and Scout Troops to introduce soldiers' sons to discipline at an early age. As a result, boys who grew up in the barracks often chose the army as a career. Many officers preferred to enlist the sons and nephews of serving *askaris* or veterans on the grounds that they already understood the military culture of the KAR. Men often served alongside their sons, and most KAR battalions gave special preference to recruits whose relatives had belonged to the same unit. While some officers held that growing up in the barracks made the sons of *askaris* too worldly to be good soldiers, most believed that a family tradition of military service fostered discipline and loyalty.⁷⁶

Since military children had value as future soldiers, the peacetime KAR devoted much effort to their education. Before the Second World War, most officers preferred to recruit non-literates, and believed that it was unnecessary to educate the children of *askaris*, but 4 KAR had a unit school to train soldiers' sons as clerks and artisans.⁷⁷ With the increased attention to family welfare after the Second World War, the EAC took a direct interest in the primary education of military children. Whenever possible, it preferred to send the children of *askaris* to civilian primary schools, but when distance or overcrowding made this impossible, the army established its own battalion-level schools. Some were staffed by teachers seconded from civilian Education Departments, while others were run by the East Africa Army Education Corps. The army subsidized school fees, and the KAR's involvement often meant that their schools were better equipped than their civil counterparts.⁷⁸ For most Africans, primary education was expensive

and difficult to come by, and the army's primary education programme constituted a valuable privilege linked with military service. Reliable African soldiers were assured that they would have relatively prosperous children to support them in their old age.

Finally, in the later years of colonial rule, the British military authorities looked on the sons of African soldiers as potential commissioned officers. After the Second World War, political pressure in Britain and East Africa to commission Africans into the KAR inspired a number of proposals to create cadet battalions and young soldiers' platoons, as a means of training future African officers.⁷⁹ Political tensions and economic constraints prevented these proposals from being implemented until 1957, when the KAR established a Junior Leader Company (JLC) to train promising boys to serve as senior NCOs and potential candidates for Sandhurst.⁸⁰ Each year, fifty fourteen-year-old African boys were admitted to a four-year programme which combined military training with a standard secondary school education. Recruits were chosen on the basis of ethnic background, educational qualifications, physical fitness, character, political reliability and recommendations from their DC and school principal. The sons of serving *askaris* or African veterans received special preference, but were rejected if they did not meet the JLC's minimum educational requirements.⁸¹ The Junior Leader Company was exclusive and prestigious, and it was widely understood that successful graduates would receive commissions. Most recruits passed their secondary school examinations, and in 1958 the Company ranked thirteenth in order of merit among fifty-three African secondary schools in Nairobi.⁸²

The impact of the KAR's family policies

The KAR's practice of co-opting and regimenting the conjugal family had several consequences. The regiment's family policies created a distinct culture which isolated African soldiers, reproduced successive generations of trustworthy *askaris*, and shaped and codified martial stereotypes used to determine which ethnic groups were best suited to serve in the KAR. While British military authorities tended to believe that the specific militaristic qualities which set 'martial races' apart from the greater East African population were primordial, it is much more likely that the desirable traits of courage, toughness and obedience were, at least in part, distilled and reinforced through the recruitment of *askaris* from successive generations of African military families. Soldiers' wives were indoctrinated with martial values while living in the KAR lines, and their children imbibed them while they were growing up.

Yet African military women were never simply the pawns of the British military establishment in East Africa. The KAR's co-option of conjugal families gave the wives of *askaris* considerable influence. While the KAR attempted to impose a patriarchal system of authority, military women were able to retain some degree of individuality and, to some extent, leave their mark on the military culture of the regiment. British officers learned through experience that African soldiers expected access to women as a condition of their employment, and the establishment of long-term conjugal relationships with *askaris* gave military women a degree of influence. Soldiers' wives could push their husbands to disobey regulations, and had the potential to cause serious unrest through their actions. Thus, while African females were unofficially regarded as little more than property by the KAR, in reality its family policies were a product of negotiation and accommodation. British military authorities were forced to acknowledge that matters relating to marital status, housing, diet, family health and child care were often tactical considerations that had the potential to influence the KAR's military effectiveness.

Notes

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