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# “Wakamba Warriors Are Soldiers of the Queen”: The Evolution of the Kamba as a Martial Race, 1890–1970

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**Abstract.** British colonial officials considered the Kamba to be the premier martial race of Africa. The Kamba themselves appeared to embrace this label by enlisting in the colonial army in large numbers. This article explores the processes that transformed certain ethnic groups into martial races during the colonial era. It argues that the designation *martial race* had little to do with specific cultural characteristics or precolonial military traditions. Martial stereotypes were an index of the changing political economy of recruitment. The willingness of an ethnic group like the Kamba to serve in the army was based on the extent of its integration into the colonial economy. African societies were most martial when in a transitional stage of economic development, operating under the constraints of colonial rule.

After confidently describing the Kamba serving in the King’s African Rifles (the KAR, Britain’s East African colonial army) as loyal “soldiers of the Queen” during the Mau Mau Emergency, a press release by the East Africa Command went on to characterize the Kamba as a “fighting race.” These sentiments were echoed by other colonial observers in the early 1950s who deemed the Kamba a hardy, virile, courageous, and “mechanically-minded tribe.” Considered by many officers to be the “best [soldierly] material in Africa,” the Kamba supplied the KAR with *askaris* (soldiers) at a rate that was three to four times their percentage of the overall Kenyan population.<sup>1</sup>

Interestingly enough, many Kamba appeared to embrace the British assertion that they were a martial race. Most Kamba veterans of the colonial army recall their military service with pride and take credit for the success and efficiency of the Kenyan battalions of the KAR. As one informant put it, “Being a soldier was an honor and [the Kamba] believed in doing a job well.”<sup>2</sup> Over the course of the colonial era, the Kamba devel-

oped a strong sense of entitlement toward military service. On the eve of independence, a Kamba politician E. N. Mwendwa attacked a motion in the Kenyan legislature to open the new national army of Kenya to all ethnic groups: "There are only two important jobs which the Akamba have to do: one is to keep cattle; the other is to go into the army. We are prepared to accept the Kikuyus and Luos as teachers, but we ask them to accept the Akamba and Kalenjin as army people. We are going to defend them."<sup>3</sup> The question therefore arises as to why the Kamba accepted the British assertion that they were the best soldiers in East Africa. More important, how did the Kamba themselves define what it meant to be a martial race?

Ethnic military stereotypes of this sort were hardly unique. Most imperial powers in Africa and Asia believed that certain sections of their subject populations had inherent combative and militaristic qualities that made them naturally suited for military service. In recruiting for their West African colonial army, the *Tirailleurs Sénégalais*, French commanders believed the primary West African "martial races" were the Tukolor, Malinke, Wolof, and, most important, the Bambara.<sup>4</sup> Even the United States, which certainly had a colonial relationship with its indigenous population, recruited Native Americans during World War II on the assumption that they possessed superhuman courage, endurance, tracking, and fighting abilities.<sup>5</sup>

In the case of the British Empire, the tendency of colonial officials to assign martial stereotypes to specific ethnic groups was primarily an outgrowth of the policy of indirect rule, which divided subject populations into tribes, clans, and castes for administration purposes.<sup>6</sup> Scottish Highland soldiers developed a strong martial reputation over the course of the eighteenth century, but the most influential ideologies of martial race were developed and codified in nineteenth-century India. Pradeep Barua has argued that the identification of specific ethnic groups as martial grew out of the "Victorian mania for scientific classification." David Omissi believes that Indian martial ideologies originated in utilitarian and Christian evangelical thought that depicted Indian society as primitive, but these ideologies were reformulated after Indian soldiers mutinied in 1857, and again in the 1880s in an effort to recruit better soldiers to meet the threat of Russian expansion on India's northwest frontier.<sup>7</sup>

After the mutiny, British officers concluded that prosperity made the commercial and urban classes of India unfit to be soldiers. As a result, recruiters developed a detailed system of ethnographic classification that identified certain rural ethnic groups, religions, and castes with the specific biological and cultural attributes of a martial race. In explaining the underlying causes of the military's intervention in postcolonial African politics, Anthony H. M. Kirk-Greene has argued that British officers from the In-

dian Army introduced these martial stereotypes to Africa when seconded to serve with the embryonic Royal West African Frontier Force and the KAR: "Unconsciously, Africa had clasped an Indian asp to its bosom."<sup>8</sup>

Martial stereotypes were more than just products of the racial prejudices of Britain's military classes; they had considerable practical value. In addition to conferring elite status on the British officer corps as commanders of what Omissi has termed "near-perfect soldiers," martial ideologies also provided a legitimizing ideology for the Raj itself. As George MacMunn put it: "Great Britain has just as much right to rule in India as any other of the conquering races that form the martial classes, in view of her conquests."<sup>9</sup> Finally, martial stereotypes made colonial rule easier by helping British officials reorder and divide non-Western societies into more intelligible and manageable units.

The value of these stereotypes to Britain, however, does not begin to explain why ethnic groups like the Kamba were willing to identify themselves as martial races during the colonial era and continue to do so to this day. Much of the literature on martial races, particularly works that deal with India, fail to pay sufficient attention to this question. One possibility is that the martial races truly were martial. Omissi has argued that martial stereotypes had some basis in the "customs and self-image of Indian communities who had a martial tradition quite independent of the colonial encounter." He cites the soldierly role of the Kshatriya caste and the militarization of Sikh society in the seventeenth century as evidence. Similarly, Ali Mazrui has argued that the British valued East African Sudanic and Nilotic peoples as soldiers because they possessed a "warrior tradition."<sup>10</sup>

Yet most scholars have also acknowledged that precolonial military prowess was no guarantee of martial status under British rule, and as in the case of the Kamba, many martial races did not distinguish themselves as soldiers in the precolonial era. At first, colonial officers even dismissed the more commercially inclined Kamba as having no soldierly potential. In other cases, acknowledged military powers like the Maasai of East Africa refused the mantle of martial race by rejecting all British attempts to recruit them.

In his insightful studies of the Nepalese Gurkhas, Lionel Caplan has simply dismissed attempts to determine what the Gurkhas were "really like" as irrelevant. Concerned primarily with "British military discourse," he convincingly argues that the Gurkhas were a product of the British "military imagination," which created a body of "warrior gentlemen" and "honorary Europeans," who, rather than being a colonial "other," were valiant allies of the equally brave and martial British officer class. Caplan reminds us that "the Gurkhas" are not a Nepalese ethnic group; rather, it is a de-

scriptive term for the linguistically and culturally diverse segments of Nepalese society favored by British military recruiters.<sup>11</sup> But the focus on British texts about Gurkhas rather than on the individual soldiers themselves, even if examined within “the politico-military settings in relation to which they are produced,” does not produce a satisfying explanation for why large numbers of Nepalese enlisted in the service of a foreign power, or why Gurkha soldiers have won thirteen Victoria Crosses, Britain’s highest military honor, since World War I.<sup>12</sup>

More significant, the Kamba are a recognized ethnic group in modern Kenya and not an imagined product of British military discourse. Therefore, it is more useful to focus on their individual experiences and perspectives. Martial stereotypes had little meaning unless they were accepted by the ethnic group in question. Kirk-Greene has correctly argued that the martial reputations of subject peoples were built primarily on their willingness to follow orders and accept military discipline rather than on their valor or fighting ability.<sup>13</sup> In this light, it is important to ask why large numbers of young men from a given society were willing to enlist as common soldiers in the army of a foreign power, thereby earning themselves the designation of a martial race.

In the case of the Kamba, military service offered distinct economic and social rewards that many individual soldiers tacitly accepted as adequate compensation for the personal hardship and loss of individual freedom that came with military discipline. The colonial army offered the highest wages for unskilled African labor; as armed government servants, African soldiers received certain forms of preferential treatment from the colonial administration, and in most martial societies the relative wealth and experience of askaris earned them a high level of deference and respect in their home societies.

Yet the benefits of military service were relative. In East Africa, for example, the KAR only appealed to those ethnic groups whose economies were in the process of being restructured by colonial rule. In comparison, the immediate neighbors of the Kamba—the Maasai and the Kikuyu—never became martial races because they had more lucrative alternatives to military service. The Maasai retained enough land to preserve their precolonial pastoral economy, while the Kikuyu had better educational opportunities and a more viable base for commercial agriculture. These factors also explain the shifting martial reputation of the Kamba. In the early days of British rule, the KAR had little appeal because the Kamba’s precolonial economic institutions remained largely intact. It was only as a result of the political and economic limitations of the colonial system in Kenya that the Kamba came to see military service as sufficiently lucrative and appealing.

The Kamba's internationalization of their status as a martial race can be attributed to several factors. Cynthia Enloe has coined the term "the Gurkha syndrome" to explain how poorer ethnic groups that profit from military service tend to make it a defining feature of their communal identity. By this argument, men from impoverished rural areas made the best soldiers because their dependence on the army for their livelihood made them "amenable to discipline," to use a standard British military phrase.<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, historians have long recognized that traditions and ethnic stereotypes are often products of deliberate invention. Leroy Vail's assertion that ethnicity can be a "consciously crafted ideological creation" illustrates how British officers played the role of "cultural brokers" by reserving the lucrative field of military service for ethnic groups who had demonstrated a willingness to accept military discipline.<sup>15</sup> In other words, those Kamba who wished to serve in the army had every incentive to play upon their reputation as a martial race.

This article also demonstrates that the British and the Kamba had entirely different concepts of what constituted a martial race. To British officers, soldiers from a martial race were masculine, tough, and, above all, obedient. Most Kamba askaris, however, believed that their status as a martial race enhanced their status in colonial society, and they expected specific considerations from the colonial government in return for their service. Thus the evolution of the Kamba into a martial race offers important insights into the inherent tensions arising from the ongoing reformulation of ethnicity that took place during Africa's colonial era.

### **The First Brush with Colonialism, 1890-1918**

During the colonial era, British officials restricted the Kamba to "Native Reserves" in a pair of districts in central Kenya (called Machakos and Kitui, after their largest towns). Machakos District, although roughly one-third the size of Kitui District, was more prosperous because of favorable climate and proximity to Nairobi. Most of Ukambani, as the combined Kamba areas are also known, is semi-arid. While the higher northwestern sections of Machakos can receive up to two thousand milliliters of rain per year, much of the remaining Kamba territory averages as little as six milliliters and is covered with scrub vegetation best suited for rough grazing.

Unlike the more agriculturally oriented Kikuyu ethnic group, to whom the Kamba are culturally related, most Kamba relied primarily on pastoralism, bee keeping, and trade for their subsistence, for only the wetter regions near Nairobi were suited to extensive cultivation. Yet even the most prosperous Kamba were at the mercy of Ukambani's uncertain climate. The

systematic failure of the region's two unreliable rainy seasons produced seventy extended periods of drought since records began to be kept in the 1890s.<sup>16</sup> These shortfalls, coupled with a history of locust infestation, have subjected Ukambani to a series of devastating famines in the past two centuries. In precolonial times the Kamba dealt with these hardships by diversifying their economies through local and interregional trade.

Lacking institutions of centralized political authority, Kamba society in the nineteenth century was organized into a collection of autonomous and often mutually hostile clans, capable of only limited coordinated military action when threatened by an external enemy. Although they had an ongoing conflict with the Maasai over cattle raiding and engaged in occasional skirmishes with the Kikuyu, the Kamba relied primarily on trade rather than conquest.<sup>17</sup> During particularly severe famines, bands of Kamba refugees traveled as far afield as the East African coast and the Tanzanian highlands in search of food. These diasporan communities allowed the Kamba to develop extensive trading links throughout the region.

The Kitui Kamba in particular were adept elephant hunters who monopolized the lucrative northern ivory trade in the mid-nineteenth century. By comparison, the Machakos Kamba allied with Zanzibari traders and prospered by supplying food to the caravans that linked the East African interior with the coast. The explorer Ludwig Krapf is reported to have described the Machakos Kamba as the wealthiest people of Eastern Africa.<sup>18</sup> Thus, although the Kamba were accomplished individual fighters and hunters who were renowned for their skill with a bow and poisoned arrows, they were primarily a commercial people and not an established precolonial military power.<sup>19</sup>

As a result, the first recruiters for the KAR were not particularly impressed with the Kamba, preferring instead to rely on foreign-born Sudanese soldiers. The Kamba themselves had scant interest in military service and little need for money or wage labor before the Native Poll Tax of 1910. The army recruited a few Kamba on an experimental basis, but in 1912 the inspector general of the KAR deemed them "a waste of money." Their company commander acknowledged that while these Kamba were well behaved, they were better suited to manual labor.<sup>20</sup>

During World War I, the Kamba continued to show no great interest in military service and actively resisted conscription into the ill-fated Carrier Corps, a military labor unit. When colonial officials resorted to conscription in 1916 to meet the army's growing demand for porters, entire Kamba villages "took to the bush" to escape recruiting parties. By 1917 desertion became such a problem that some men were recaptured as many as three times and sent back into service.<sup>21</sup> This opposition was largely pas-

sive, and the Kamba were relatively obedient once they were in the army. The KAR made no effort to recruit them directly during the war, but many Kamba porters joined the KAR when manpower shortages forced military officials to allow nonmartial races to transfer from the less prestigious Carrier Corps.

Almost every Kamba man was affected in some way by the war, and colonial officials in Machakos and Kitui estimated that despite widespread Kamba opposition to military service, roughly three-quarters of all eligible men in Ukambani had been conscripted by 1918.<sup>22</sup> The Kamba experience with army life was undeniably harsh, and many men wanted no further contact with wage labor or the military. Yet there were also Kamba veterans who returned home enriched by their accumulated wages and their experiences in distant lands. The status of these men set the stage for the acceptance of military service as a favored occupation in Ukambani.

### The Preference for a Uniform, 1918–1939

One of the primary reasons for the changing Kamba attitude toward military service was the gradual economic transformation of the Kamba Reserves during the 1920s. Throughout East Africa new commercial opportunities and an appetite for material goods—coupled with rising bridewealth costs, the imposition of hut and poll taxes, and a growing land shortage—led to increased interest in money and wage labor. During the relative prosperity of the 1920s, most Kamba fulfilled their material needs through the sale of cattle and honey, or in the well-watered areas of Machakos District through the commercial production of poultry and vegetables for Nairobi markets. As a result, the Kamba entered the labor market selectively, and throughout the decade district commissioners complained of their unwillingness to work on government projects and settler farms. Even many young, unestablished men avoided wage labor because their fathers paid their taxes, thereby outbidding the government and settlers for their labor.<sup>23</sup>

Nevertheless, the KAR began to have greater appeal to less established Kamba men. Although army wages were not very attractive in the more prosperous regions of Kenya, in Ukambani these wages were considerably higher than the going civilian rate for manual labor. Throughout most of the 1920s, wealthy Kambas easily paid their taxes, but when young unskilled men without means found themselves in need of cash, the KAR became a preferred occupation because of its relatively high pay rates and its prestige as a “manly” occupation. Carrying a gun marked a man as a privileged government servant, and many Kamba recruits believed that women were attracted to the uniforms and higher pay that came with military ser-



vice. As one former sergeant recalled, "The army gave us a chance to challenge [ourselves] and others as men."<sup>24</sup> As a result, although the flow of civil labor from the Kamba Reserves was uneven and unreliable, the KAR and the police became the most popular form of paid employment by the end of the 1920s.

This interest, however, did not lead to an immediate and significant increase in the number of Kambas in the military. As is the case with most military institutions, the KAR distrusted innovation, and 1920s recruiting quotas still reflected the prewar ethnic composition of the colonial army. This meant that even though the Kamba were increasingly interested in military service, there were only sixty-five Kamba askaris in 3 KAR (the only battalion recruited in Kenya at that time) in 1927, which amounted to roughly 7 percent of its overall strength.<sup>25</sup>

Kamba enlistment figures in the army did not begin to rise significantly until the 1930s. From 1928 through the mid-1930s, both Kamba districts experienced severe famine resulting from locust plagues and the interruption of established rainfall patterns. To make matters worse, the Depression stagnated trade and virtually eliminated the demand for beeswax, honey, and other locally produced commodities. As a result, the Kamba sold most of their stock to buy food and pay taxes, which in turn led to a sharp plunge in the value of cattle. These climatic and economic disasters drove large numbers of Kamba into the labor market, a trend accelerated by a nearly 30 percent jump in Ukambani's population during the interwar era.<sup>26</sup> Where the Kamba had relied on interregional trade and migration to cope with famine in precolonial times, the restrictive native reserve system under British rule forced them to stay put and accept wage labor. Thus government service in general, and the KAR in particular, became increasingly popular in the 1930s. District commissioners in both districts noted that although the Kamba still disliked manual labor, there was a sharp rise in the number of applicants for the few available openings in the KAR. In addition to providing a reliable source of income, military service also granted askaris an exemption from taxation and forced labor.<sup>27</sup>

Furthermore, the ongoing transformation of the economy of northern Machakos District had a number of significant social repercussions. Gavin Kitching has observed that the production of vegetables for Nairobi markets created a class of prosperous farmers able to exploit the opportunities offered by plow cultivation.<sup>28</sup> These successful farmers were comprised primarily of mission-educated men and a few long-service veterans of the police and the KAR. They used their wages to start businesses and cultivate large tracts of land, which they would not normally have been able to claim under Kamba custom.<sup>29</sup> As their holdings increased, these Kamba farmers were frequently at odds with district administrators, who complained that

they cultivated their own good land in the hills and sent their cattle to the less productive lowlands to “eat other people’s grass.” By 1937 there was almost no unclaimed land left in the district, and more and more young, unestablished men were forced to turn to paid employment and military service.<sup>30</sup>

In comparison, the Maasai—the Kamba’s pastoral neighbors—remained aloof from the army. In precolonial times the Maasai and their kin dominated the Rift Valley, and British recruiters hoped to harness their martial expertise for the KAR. Tall and muscular, these proudly militaristic pastoralists fit the ideal British stereotype of a martial race. Yet the Maasai had the luxury of rejecting military service because their precolonial pastoral economy remained largely intact. Treaties with the British government gave them sole legal title to their sizable reserve, and in 1933 the Kenyan government estimated that almost fifty thousand Maasai owned an average of seventy-four head of cattle per household. As a result, the Maasai could easily pay their taxes and provide for their material wants by selling cattle.<sup>31</sup>

Yet the Samburu, the pastoral cousins of the Maasai occupying the northern end of the Rift Valley, had no such legal protection and faced a growing land shortage that put them in a similar position to that of the Kamba. With no recognized claim to the Leroki Plateau, their grazing lands were threatened by the expansion of Somalis, Turkana pastoralists, and British settlers. Although the Samburu adopted a number of tactics to resist this threat, including the alleged murder of British settlers, by the close of the 1930s they had little recourse but to turn to wage labor and military service to supplement their pastoral economy.

Yet the KAR was still not convinced that formerly resistant groups like the Samburu and the Kamba were valuable soldiers, and Kamba recruiting quotas remained low in the early 1930s. Senior military officers had a strong bias against Bantu-speaking agriculturalists and would have preferred to recruit pastoralists for the Kenyan KAR battalions. In 1930 most of 3 KAR was still recruited from outside of Kenya, with the largest portion coming from Nilotic-speaking peoples in northern Uganda. Of the Kenyan ethnic groups that were recruited, the army considered the Luo, Nandi (Kalenjin), and Somalis to be more martial, and thus more desirable, than the Kamba. It was Sir Joseph Byrne, the governor of Kenya, who pushed for a change in the KAR’s recruiting policies.<sup>32</sup> During the lean Depression years, military service helped stabilize the native reserves by providing lucrative employment and disciplining rootless young Africans. Byrne’s pressure on the army to recruit more Kenyans brought a steady increase in the number of Kamba in the KAR throughout the 1930s.

When the KAR expanded after the Italian invasion of Ethiopia in 1935,

the Kamba provided the largest number of recruits. There were only 79 Kamba askaris (9.7 percent of the total strength) in Kenyan KAR battalions in 1931, but by October 1939 the number had risen to 230, 30 percent of all Kenyan askaris. This was in comparison to the more populous Luo at 18 percent and the supposedly more martial Nandi at 9 percent. Furthermore, of the 230 Kamba in the KAR at this time, 185 were from Machakos. While numerically the largest Kenyan community in the colonial army, Kamba askaris were, for the most part, the youngest and least senior soldiers in the KAR. Only 14 percent of African noncommissioned officers were Kamba, and excluding the drum major, there was only one Kamba sergeant.<sup>33</sup>

The Kamba's martial reputation improved as they constituted a growing percentage of the KAR. British officers described them as "intelligent and virile," and the *Kenya Military Report* noted that "they have a mechanical turn of mind, readily respond to technical education and make good mechanics and artisans. Few will consent to work as porters and being such valuable soldiers they would be wasted as such."<sup>34</sup> These new mechanical stereotypes were most likely inspired by the Government African School in Machakos. Founded in the early 1920s as one of the few state-supported educational institutions in Kenya, the school was intended to provide basic technical training for African craftsmen.

But the Kamba had little opportunity to pursue a literary education. When the Protestant missions responsible for the majority of African education in Kenya divided the colony into informal spheres of influence, the Kamba districts were assigned to the African Inland Mission (AIM), which shared the districts unofficially with the Roman Catholic Church. This was unfortunate for the Kamba, as the Catholic missions were underfunded and disorganized, and the AIM was more concerned with evangelism than primary education.<sup>35</sup> Ethnic groups are not intrinsically mechanical; the Kamba's technical reputation merely stemmed from their exploitation of the most viable educational option.

Military service was very appealing to men from these limited educational backgrounds, and the growing number of Kamba in the army had a significant influence on daily life in Ukambani. Colonial administrators looked at well-disciplined Kamba askaris as potential allies and often chose respected former noncommissioned officers to be chiefs and headmen. It was an experiment that had mixed results. Political record books reveal that many veterans were removed within a few years of their appointments for embezzlement, failure to collect taxes, and simple ineptitude. There were some notable survivors, however. One of the most celebrated colonial chiefs in all of Kenya was a long-reigning Kitui chief and KAR veteran named Kasina wa Ndoo. A regimental sergeant major during World War I, Kasina was an aid to Major General (later Kenya governor) Sir Edward

Northey.<sup>36</sup> He was the prototypical colonial client who earned favor with the colonial administration by governing with an iron hand while using his authority to enrich himself in the process. Few KAR veterans were as successful, but Kasina's status demonstrated that loyal military service could bring considerable political power in the native reserves.

This process of personal enrichment also had social repercussions. As in many sedentary pastoralist societies, Kamba marriage practices included the exchange of cattle as a form of bridewealth payment. In most cases, the high value of cattle reinforced the authority of older men, as sons usually needed help from their fathers to acquire enough cattle to marry.<sup>37</sup> As with most forms of migrant labor in colonial Africa, service in the KAR disrupted this balance. The army clothed, housed, and fed a man, and if he was careful, most of his earnings could be converted directly into savings. In 1939 a private in the KAR earned twenty-eight shillings per month, and Kamba askaris sent home an average 12.67 shillings in family allotments per month.<sup>38</sup> These comparatively large sums of money sowed the seeds of a social revolution in Ukambani as Kamba askaris earned their own bride-wealth, thereby undermining the authority of their elders.

The growing economic and social influence of the Kamba military class substantially altered the political landscape of Ukambani in the 1930s. Military officials valued the Kamba as soldiers because they were largely untouched by the controversy stirred up by the alienation of land to European settlers in the White Highlands. In 1930 the district commissioner of Machakos boasted that the Kamba had no political organizations of their own and preferred to let the district administration protect their interests. This confident assessment changed eight years later when the Kenyan government, haunted by images of the American dust bowl, instituted a compulsory destocking and soil reconditioning program in Machakos District.<sup>39</sup> Blaming soil erosion in the district on overgrazing rather than on the native reserve system itself, the government attempted to cull the herds in Iveti, Kangundo, and Matungulu. When the Kamba refused to meet these quotas voluntarily, the government used forced cattle auctions in Kangundo and Matungulu to dispose of twenty-one thousand head of stock.

In Iveti wealthy Kamba refused to accept payment for twenty-five hundred head of seized cattle on the grounds that it constituted a mere one-quarter of the animals' true market value. When the government forced the sale of all cattle unclaimed after twenty-eight days, between fifteen hundred and five thousand (estimates vary) men, women, and children marched to Nairobi to petition Governor Sir Robert Brooke-Popham to halt the auctions. Once there, they camped near the racecourse grounds for six weeks (standing as a group to salute the governor whenever he passed) until the governor held a public meeting in Machakos Town to discuss their com-

plaints. Not surprisingly, Kamba members of the police and army sympathized with the protesters. As comparatively wealthy members of Kamba society, senior askaris had large herds, and the district commissioner of Machakos insisted that their stock be included in the forced cattle sales.<sup>40</sup>

Primary Kamba opposition to destocking was led by a group of wealthy farmers and merchants from Ngelani, a sublocation of Iveti. Their Ukamba Members Association (UMA) mounted a sophisticated passive resistance campaign against the colonial administration. With the assistance of sympathetic Indian lawyers, they brought their case to the secretary of state for the colonies and into the full light of British public opinion. Kamba veterans recall actively supporting the UMA with funds and technical assistance. As one former lance corporal recalled, "I was a member of the Kyama kya Ngelani [Ngelani Union] . . . I [worked] the telephones which kept us [in touch] with our supporters in London."<sup>41</sup> As a result, almost every major newspaper in the United Kingdom carried a story on the Kamba march on Nairobi, and the secretary of state found himself in the difficult position of having to explain why the British government was persecuting its loyal askaris and police officers. By targeting cattle, the colonial government was in effect undermining the loyalty of its soldiers by confiscating their savings.

The authorities in Kenya were certainly aware of this danger. In October 1938, Brooke-Popham declared a slowdown in destocking operations because of the crisis in Europe, and in November he exempted the herds of police and KAR askaris when the destocking program was resumed.<sup>42</sup> Ultimately, the Kamba agreed to voluntarily reduce their herds if the forced auctions were ended. The accord had little import, however, for the government had to return all seized cattle after legal reviews found that the law sanctioning the compulsory sales could not be applied retroactively. Although the colonial administration eventually shifted to a more gradual soil reconditioning program based on a policy of hillside terracing and encouragement of private land tenure, the nonviolent destocking campaign was a clear victory for the Kamba.<sup>43</sup> Most significant, the Kamba's exploitation of their reputation as a martial race and as "loyal servants of the Crown" forced the colonial authorities to back down and reinforced the status and importance of military service in Ukambani.

### The Best Material in Africa, 1939–1945

As military service emerged as the most popular form of wage labor in Ukambani in the 1930s, only the strict recruiting quotas of the peacetime KAR kept Kamba enlistment figures low. With the onset of World War II, the demand for Kamba soldiers finally matched the supply. As a result,

vast numbers of men from Machakos and Kitui joined the military. In 1942 the Kamba made up 30 percent of the Kenyan complement of the KAR, 32 percent of the East African Army Education Corps, 43 percent of the East African Corps of Military Police, 46 percent of the East African Artillery, 46 percent of all signalers, but only 13 percent of the noncombatant labor services.<sup>44</sup> According to the Kenyan Labour Department, nearly one-third of all employed Kamba males were in the military from 1943 to 1946. Or, to put it another way, by 1944 one in five Kamba men between the ages of fifteen and forty-five were in the army. In comparison, the enlistment figures for the more populous Luo and Kikuyu ethnic groups were 18 percent and 6 percent, respectively, while the percentage of the reputedly more martial Nandi and Kipsigis groups was only 10 percent.<sup>45</sup>

Colonial officials took this enormous interest in military service as evidence of African loyalty to the Crown, but in reality most Kamba had more practical reasons for joining the army. To be sure, many Kamba veterans cite Kenyan patriotism as their primary reason for joining the army. As one ex-serviceman recalled, "I didn't want my country taken by the Italians. . . . our teachers told us what would happen to us if Mussolini's soldiers came."<sup>46</sup> Others recount their envy of friends in the army, who were well-respected, had large amounts of disposable income, and were preferred by young women. In explaining his reasons for enlisting, one veteran said, "I wanted to join the army because women preferred to go with an askari in uniform."<sup>47</sup> Some Kamba, however, joined because they were indirectly coerced. A veteran from Iveti, which had taken the lead in opposing the Machakos destocking campaign, went into the army to escape an unpopular assistant inspector of police who was responsible for enforcing the new terracing and soil reconditioning program: "So many of us enlisted in the army to escape the wrath of [T. A.] Slatter."<sup>48</sup>

Other Kamba informants claim they were conscripted into the army. While the Kenyan government did impress men into the East African Military Labour Service and the African Auxiliary Pioneer Corps, it was contrary to official policy to conscript for combat units. In many ways, some conscription for the KAR was inevitable, however, given the fact that the government allowed district officers and chiefs to select recruits. Conversely, the government also conscripted educated men for the East Africa Army Service Corps (EAASC) and the Signal Corps. As the most "mechanically-minded" Kenyan ethnic group, the Kamba were the army's preferred choice for skilled positions. The high demand for signalers and technicians invariably led to conscription, as there were never enough educated Kamba to meet the army's growing needs.<sup>49</sup>

Most Kamba volunteers, however, were attracted by generous military wages. Almost every Kamba informant confirmed that the twenty-eight

shillings per month (plus food and clothing) earned by a newly trained private was substantially more than the six to eight shillings they could have made in unskilled civil labor. Moreover, the reasons why some young Kamba men did not enlist during the war are equally revealing. Civilian informants living in the relatively prosperous northwestern Machakos district recall that while they admired and respected soldiers, their families had enough livestock and land to allow them to resist the enticement of military service.<sup>50</sup>

There were a number of contributing factors that also made military service more appealing during World War II. The increasing social and economic differentiation of Kamba society in the 1930s was compounded by a severe wartime famine brought on by extended drought and locust invasion. Machakos District, which provided the majority of Kamba recruits, was especially hard hit because it had a higher population density and was more dependent on agriculture than Kitui District. From 1923 to 1962 the average annual rainfall was 35.8 inches in Machakos and 41.1 inches in Kitui.<sup>51</sup> In 1939 there were only 20.1 inches of rain in Machakos and 21.5 inches in Kitui. In 1945, Machakos received only 19.1 inches of rainfall. The rain that did fall there was uneven and unsuited to established planting patterns; Machakos did not return to its regular biannual rainfall pattern until 1946. It was therefore hard for Kamba civilians to pay their taxes, because many had to subsist on famine aid and food purchased at inflated prices from the Kikuyu Reserves.<sup>52</sup>

The Kamba survived this difficult period by relying on money soldiers sent home, which amounted to more than two million shillings in 1943. In Machakos the district commissioner worried that Kamba civilians were so dependent on these remittances that the district would not be able to survive another famine without them. "Apart from a few bags placed at the disposal of some Missions, no food was issued free of charge, and the Wakamba have honoured the understanding that in return for the reduced price they would carry their own poor. They have only been able to do so, however, on account of the large sums coming into the District from Family Remittances and askaris pay, which totalled £160,000. Had it not been for this temporary wartime income the Wakamba would have become a tribe of paupers."<sup>53</sup> In 1944 the military assumed responsibility for moving food aid into Machakos District. The morale of Kamba soldiers in the field depended on their confidence that their families were in good health. The wives of serving askaris were served first when food was distributed, and the Machakos famine is popularly known as the *Yua ya Makovo*, or "famine of the boots," in recognition of the soldiers' role in securing relief.<sup>54</sup>

While it is difficult to assess accurately the military performance of

a particular ethnic group, by all accounts the Kamba compiled one of the best war records of any East African community during World War II. They held 56 percent of the British Empire Medals earned by Kenyan Africans, 32 percent of all East Africa Force Badges, and 24 percent of all "Mention in Despatches."<sup>55</sup> These acts of bravery impressed British officers. The East Africa civil liaison officer concluded that the Kamba showed more courage than any other Kenyan ethnic group during the fighting against the Japanese in Burma. The Kenyan government's official report on the war agreed and labeled the Kamba the colony's best martial race in terms of courage and dependability.<sup>56</sup>

One of the most lasting impacts of the war was the extent to which it ingrained a respect for discipline and courage in the Kamba identity by linking ethnic pride with the values of a military culture. Yet the growing reputation of Kamba askaris for military valor did not mean that they obediently followed British policy in civil matters. In their eyes, being a martial race placed the government in their debt, and many continued to resist the destocking and soil reconditioning program. After civil officials sent a "levy force" under the previously mentioned T. A. Slatter to compel the residents of Iveti to accept terracing, the UMA reminded the colonial secretary of their military contributions: "We think that in the whole country of Kenya there is no other tribe which does the service for their King in the KAR as the Akamba tribe."<sup>57</sup> When Kamba chiefs visited 3 KAR in 1942, the soldiers strongly criticized the government's policies on destocking, and the chiefs and senior Kamba noncommissioned officers warned that the askaris' spokespeople were "dangerous rumour mongers" who were allied with the UMA leadership.<sup>58</sup>

### The Rewards of Military Service, 1945-1948

The political inclinations of Kamba soldiers alarmed civil officials, and even before World War II drew to a close, the Kenyan government began planning for the reabsorption of Kamba soldiers into their rural society. Worried that the Kamba had been "infected" by nationalism while abroad, civil administrators feared the widespread opposition to soil reconditioning in drought-ravaged Ukambani would provide a fertile breeding ground for unrest. While the war had established the Kamba as a "martial race," the Kenyan government feared that Kamba servicemen might use their training to undermine British rule.

These concerns were not without substance, for even before the conflict had ended, Kamba askaris signaled their intention to take an active role in local affairs. During the war, tensions in Machakos District had died



down gradually once Slatter was reassigned and the government adopted less invasive conservation measures.<sup>59</sup> This low-key approach changed in 1945, however, as the new governor, Sir Philip Mitchell, ordered the resumption of a more ambitious soil reconditioning program. In a number of public speeches, he referred to 1 January 1946, the date for the plan's implementation, as "D-Day." His choice of words was unfortunate, for Kamba askaris, familiar with the term's military connotations, took it to signal a renewed assault on their savings. Rumors circulated that when the war ended, the reserve was to be enclosed with barbed wire like a prisoner-of-war camp, and that on "D-Day" all Kamba would be expelled from Machakos to make way for more settlers.<sup>60</sup>

In response, Kamba askaris wrote threatening and insulting letters to the district commissioner, his African clerks, Kamba chiefs, and Tom Mbotela, the editor of *Mwalimu*, who had stressed the need for soil conservation. The tone of some of these letters was comparatively mild. Captain F. O. B. Wilson, a member of the European Committee of Advice in Machakos, received a letter from signaler Anakleti Mathuba: "You Europeans of Ukambani land why do you like to curse us black people? Why do you call us apes? Why Bwana Wilson, are the wages which you pay your servants so small? In what, Effendi, are you helping the native?"<sup>61</sup> Other letters, however, were considerably more threatening and abusive. James Munyao, a clerk to the district commissioner, received a letter from an askari that warned, "Don't you feel ashamed for inserting your finger in your anus? . . . I think you will soon be a dead body."<sup>62</sup> Clearly, the Kamba had their own ideas of what it meant to be a martial race in civilian life.

It is therefore understandable that the Kenyan government was concerned that the returning Machakos Kamba askaris might instigate unrest, a fear that was compounded by the fact that Machakos was a potential tinderbox during 1945 and the first half of 1946. The continued famine and rapid demobilization of Kamba askaris meant that the remittances on which the district had depended would soon come to an end.<sup>63</sup> Fortunately, the drought finally broke in September 1946. The Machakos ex-servicemen, for the most part, refrained from directly challenging the government. In Kitui District, which was largely untouched by the soil conservation campaign, the veterans were even less restive.

The failure of the expected unrest to materialize can only be partly attributed to fortuitous rainfall and the residual effects of military discipline. The stability of Machakos was primarily due to the Kenyan government's calculation that while it needed to pay careful attention to educated African veterans, it could safely ignore most rank-and-file ex-askaris. The demands of most unskilled ex-servicemen were, for the most part, nonpolitical. As

a martial race, they expected tangible rewards for their government service and lobbied for trade licenses and vocational training programs.<sup>64</sup> Yet the Kenyan government was unwilling and unable to meet these demands, and was only interested in courting skilled veterans whom it considered politically volatile. British officials expected uneducated infantrymen to return to the land, and the only real alternative to subsistence agriculture and simple pastoralism open to unskilled veterans was low-paying manual labor.

In an effort to provide acceptable employment for these untrained ex-servicemen, the government created a civilian labor organization called the Machakos Works Company to dig terraces for soil conservation projects. In theory, the scheme was to provide veterans with good jobs and set an acceptable standard for quality work and pay. In practice, the company was a total failure. Most of the unskilled Machakos ex-askaris were combat veterans of the KAR who despised its labor-style uniforms and pillbox hats. The pay of seventeen shillings per month was considerably less than the twenty-eight shillings that a private earned in the KAR. P. H. Huth, the director of the company, estimated that if he fired all of his inefficient men, he would have to sack 90 percent of the unit.<sup>65</sup> Thus very little was done to appease untrained Kamba ex-askaris. The government escaped trouble in Ukambani only because many veterans actually wanted to return to their land, while those who were discontented failed to find a suitable outlet for their grievances.

It was only the most educated and skilled Kamba ex-servicemen who actually reaped the rewards of being a member of a martial race. These sophisticated veterans expected increased trading opportunities and political representation and pooled their savings to create start-up capital for cooperative trading societies. The government's official policy was that trade and transport licenses had to be restricted to protect potential African businesspeople and their customers from the harsh realities of a market economy, which in most instances meant a limit of one trade license per five hundred Africans. In the case of the ex-askari entrepreneurs, however, the Provincial Trade Licensing Committee adopted an "optimistic" assessment of economic conditions in Ukambani to allow for more licenses.<sup>66</sup>

The government also met the political aspirations of individual senior askaris by co-opting them into the district administration as African reabsorption assistants and "supernumerary headm[e]n."<sup>67</sup> Almost all of these positions were filled by former noncommissioned officers, who received pay and prestige commensurate with their former military posts. Furthermore, as was the case after World War I, ex-servicemen were the preferred choice for vacant chieftainships and almost all tribal police post-

ings. Yet the major reason askari discontent failed to grow into open unrest was that veterans enjoyed a tremendous amount of prestige and respect in Kamba society. Civilians were grateful for their support during the wartime famine and looked up to them as the most worldly and experienced men in Ukambani.<sup>68</sup> As a result, Kamba veterans made an extremely strong showing in postwar Local Native Council elections in both Kamba districts. This was especially true in Machakos, where only three incumbent councilors were reelected in 1947, and none of them was a chief or “tribal elder.”<sup>69</sup>

An illuminating example of this sea change took place in Mbitini in 1947, when district authorities held a public meeting to select a replacement for a recently deceased chief. The two candidates were a tribal police officer named Muyombo son of Nzioki, the younger brother of the former chief, and William Muia, an African reabsorption assistant who had served for six years with the EAASC as a driver in Egypt, Ethiopia, Greece, and Syria. Muia’s discharge papers listed his military character as “very good,” and in addition to his duties as an African reabsorption assistant, he was a butcher and a member of the Mbitini Ex-Soldier Taxi Company. The older men in Mbitini preferred Muyombo because of his relationship to the former chief and because he was not mission-educated. Muia, an elementary school graduate, was the obvious favorite of the ex-servicemen, who used their taxis to bring enough voters to the meeting to ensure that their candidate was chosen.<sup>70</sup>

Although veterans were unable to mount a direct political challenge to colonial authority in Ukambani, their wealth and sophistication brought about significant changes in Kamba society. The colonial administration hoped that Kamba ex-servicemen would become a progressive progovernment force in the reserves by aspiring to maintain the more modern lifestyle they had learned in the army. While Kamba ex-servicemen refused to provide communal labor for conservation programs, their experience and technical skills accelerated the economic development of Ukambani. Veterans purchased plows after seeing them in Ethiopia and used “bench trenches” to grow vegetables after learning about them in India.<sup>71</sup>

Those veterans with the foresight to invest their accumulated wages and gratuities were substantially more prosperous than most of their civilian contemporaries. They tended to establish themselves as the type of progressive farmers that the government had hoped would support the soil conservation campaign.<sup>72</sup> The economic changes brought on by this new wealthy military class contributed to the further erosion of established societal norms. Young, experienced, and wealthy ex-servicemen saw little reason to defer to their elders, and military service, rather than age or tradition, became one of the main avenues to social status in postwar Ukambani.

The army's recognition of the Kamba as one of the preferred Kenyan martial races in the postwar KAR reinforced this social transformation. In revising the KAR's "tribal quotas," the East Africa Command decided that the Kamba would constitute 30 percent of the Kenyan battalions. This was roughly five times their quota only twenty years earlier, and almost three times their percentage of the overall African population in Kenya in 1948.<sup>73</sup> Recruiters had little difficulty filling these increased quotas. While civilian wages for skilled labor in other parts of Kenya had finally surpassed KAR wages, in Ukambani military pay was still lucrative, as civilian employers rarely offered more than ten to fifteen shillings per month for untrained workers. Moreover, Kamba recruits were attracted by the army's disability and death benefits. As one veteran explained, "The army paid compensation if you were hurt or injured . . . none of the [private European employers] would pay this."<sup>74</sup>

### **"Wakamba Warriors Are Soldiers of the Queen," 1948–1958**

One of the main reasons the Kamba became so highly regarded as askaris was their reputation for being unaffected by the growing nationalist sentiment among the better-educated Kenyan ethnic groups. While Kamba opposition to destocking and soil reconditioning demonstrates that this assessment was hardly accurate, most Kamba politics tended to be local. Apart from the politically sophisticated Ukamba Members Association, a substantial part of the Kamba population seemed to distrust the motives of other politically inclined ethnic groups. Although there was some support for the Kenya African Union (KAU) in northwestern Machakos, particularly because of anger with the Beecher Report's recommendation that opportunities for African secondary education be restricted, the nationalist leader Jomo Kenyatta and his allies in the KAU were not able to generate much overall support in the rest of Ukambani.<sup>75</sup>

There was one important exception to this generalization, however. The most influential Kamba member of the KAU, and the only Kamba veteran to hold a high leadership position in the Kenyan nationalist movement, was a former East Africa Army Education Corps (EAAEC) sergeant named Paul Ngei. As a warrant officer instructor in the EAAEC during World War II, Ngei taught Swahili to British officers and conducted elementary education classes for African soldiers. Although his discharge papers carried an exemplary service evaluation, Kamba askaris who served with Ngei recall that he taught them the importance of nationalism and political awareness.<sup>76</sup> After the war Ngei had an eclectic career before becoming a ranking member of

the KAU. He attended Makerere College, worked as a film actor, was on the staff of the newspaper *Baraza*, and attempted to establish a national veterans organization. As an organizer and promoter for the KAU, Ngei enjoyed some success in Machakos and was arrested in 1953 on the charge of being linked with the Mau Mau, an armed Kikuyu uprising against British colonial rule. On being arrested, Ngei allegedly yelled: "You fucking English, I hate you all. . . . You had better get out quickly before the Europeans are all killed. . . . To hell with the British Empire. . . . Mau Mau is going to drive you out of the country the same as you have been driven from India and the Gold Coast. . . . All you bloody Europeans will soon be killed by Mau Mau. . . . I am Mau Mau."<sup>77</sup>

While Ngei openly declared his involvement in the Mau Mau, it is much more difficult to assess the rebellion's overall influence among the Kamba. The Machakos Intelligence Summary for July 1953 estimated that a large section of the population passively favored the rebels; the summary partially attributed this support to a lack of recognition of the Kamba's contribution during World War II. There was a Mau Mau "Central Committee" for the Kamba in Nairobi, and by 1954 the government estimated that at least two thousand people in Machakos had taken a Mau Mau oath.<sup>78</sup> It is difficult to determine the veracity of these reports, however, as the government tended to consider most opposition groups in Ukambani to be linked to the Mau Mau.

To be sure, the East African Command and the Kenyan government considered it vital to prevent the Kamba from joining the Kikuyu in open revolt. General Sir George Erskine, the army commander, noted in his report to the War Office that "the Wakamba provide about 40 percent of the army and police and of course any spread to them would be serious."<sup>79</sup> This uneasiness about the reliability of Kamba askaris was also voiced in the popular press. In May 1954 the *Daily Telegraph* cautioned: "If it ever should come about that every Kamba was suspected of having taken the Mau Mau oath just as every Kikuyu is suspected to-day, the gravest possible situation would have arisen. The Kamba are far braver than the Kikuyu and [because] of the experience of so many of them with the forces, more skilled in fighting."<sup>80</sup>

In 1953, with these nightmares firmly in mind, the Kenyan government detached Machakos and Kitui districts from the three Kikuyu districts in Central Province and combined them with their old enemies the Maasai to form the new Southern Province. The army also discouraged Kamba askaris from marrying Kikuyu women and barred those with Kikuyu wives from bringing them home, on the grounds that these women had to be quarantined like cattle infected with hoof-and-mouth disease.<sup>81</sup>

The sentiments of individual Kamba askaris and veterans toward the Mau Mau rebellion is even more difficult to judge. On this score, accurate analysis is hindered by two widely held, but contradictory, traditions. Surviving British officers are firmly convinced that their Kamba soldiers remained absolutely loyal throughout the campaign, but it is an established tenet of Kenyan nationalism that Mau Mau military forces were led by ex-servicemen and supported by sympathetic askaris.<sup>82</sup> On closer inspection, neither of these standard interpretations appears particularly accurate. To take the nationalist tradition first, there is no evidence that any KAR battalion ever had to be withdrawn from active service during the campaign because it was considered unreliable. As for Kamba veteran support for the Mau Mau, relatively few veterans were arrested for Mau Mau activities. In Kitui District only one of the sixty-three Kamba in detention in 1956 for Mau Mau activities was an ex-askari.<sup>83</sup>

Yet, a Kamba corporal was sentenced to death for selling ammunition to Mau Mau guerrillas in 1955, and there is considerable oral evidence that other Kamba askaris were at least passive supporters of the Mau Mau. A Maasai education sergeant serving with 3 KAR maintains that the battalion was never kept in one location for more than three weeks because of its Mau Mau sympathies. But, according to archival sources, a delegation of district officers and chiefs visiting 3 KAR in July 1954 concluded that unit morale was strong and Kamba askaris were loyal.<sup>84</sup> Many Kamba ex-servicemen today, however, claim to have aided the Mau Mau while in the army. For example, a veteran of the 92 Motor Transport Company wrote threatening letters to the governor and assaulted an officer of the Kenya police reserve when ordered to drag the body of a dead guerrilla from behind a truck.<sup>85</sup> These conflicting stories highlight the difficulty of trying to reconcile oral and archival evidence, and it probably will never be possible to judge accurately how much Kamba askaris and ex-servicemen aided the Mau Mau.

It is more certain, however, that throughout the 1950s, Kamba askaris were much more interested in events in their own reserves. Although drought, locusts, and famine returned to Ukambani in the late 1940s, the Kamba were better able to cope because of the growing commercial value of cattle and African-produced sisal, a popular new cash crop in Machakos. While soldiers' remittances were still important, sisal fiber provided a largely drought-resistant income. These improved commercial opportunities made the Kamba less dependent on the army, and the district commissioner of Machakos worried that this "easy money" allowed "spivs and drones" to avoid wage labor and military service.<sup>86</sup>

Yet these new market opportunities also had some advantages for

the government. In Machakos they helped to create a class of wealthy Kamba more inclined to accept regular cattle auctions and less aggressive soil reconditioning measures. By the mid-1950s, the district was much better equipped to survive a drought. In 1957 the Machakos African District Council even passed a measure praising the government for its reconditioning efforts, and the district commissioner spoke of a “gradual agricultural revolution” that had taken hold in the district.<sup>87</sup>

As the growing class of prosperous African farmers in Machakos became more receptive to “progressive” farming measures, the government turned its attention to Kitui, where elements of an unregulated, semipastoral economy were much more entrenched. In 1955 the local administration began a “voluntary” destocking campaign, relying on mandatory auctions to reduce the cattle in Kitui. The program was far from popular and, as was the case in Machakos in 1938, fell heavily on senior askaris who were some of the largest stockholders in the district. In 1956 a pair of warrant officer platoon commanders in 3 KAR led a protest charging that soldiers’ herds had been unfairly singled out for culling.

The army was acutely aware of the need to guarantee the loyalty of Kamba askaris during operations against the Mau Mau. As almost every Kitui Kamba in 3 KAR owned cattle, the battalion’s officers worried these grievances would lead to an open political challenge to the colonial administration. The commander of 3 KAR wrote directly to the Kitui district commissioner to urge that if herds had to be reduced, his men should have a chance to sell their cattle on the open market.<sup>88</sup> This was not to be a repeat of 1938, however. The government had learned that it tampered with the savings of a martial race at its own peril. Kitui askaris received an exemption from culling for all of 1956, and the two warrant officer platoon commanders in question toured soil reconditioning projects in the district.<sup>89</sup> The very possibility of a Kamba flirtation with the Mau Mau made the authorities unwilling to alienate Kamba askaris by undercutting the rewards that underpinned their loyalty. Clearly, there were benefits to being a martial race.

This sensitivity was due to the fact that the Kamba continued to comprise the bulk of the Kenyan KAR battalions. Although the sisal boom and higher civil wages meant that military service was not as lucrative as it had been twenty years earlier, it was still the preferred form of wage labor for young unskilled Kamba men during the 1950s. For men from poorer and less developed regions of Ukambani, the army offered food, shelter, reasonable wages, and medical care. Informants who enlisted during this period tended to come from Kitui and the less commercially advanced parts of Machakos. Their reasons for enlisting included a lack of school fees, the

need for bridewealth cattle, and a desire to escape the unrest in Nairobi during the Mau Mau rebellion.<sup>90</sup>

In 1957 there were 2,351 Kamba in the army, which represented 41 percent of all serving Kenyans and 25 percent of all Africans in the entire KAR (including battalions recruited in Nyasaland, Tanganyika, and Uganda). Two years later the army reduced the Kamba quota to 34 percent of the Kenyan KAR battalions but could do little to change the fact that Kamba as-karis comprised 40 percent of army education instructors and 40 percent of the East Africa Electrical and Mechanical Engineers.<sup>91</sup> These figures illustrate the continued influence of military service on Kamba society. By the 1950s ex-servicemen were a dominant force in Ukambani by virtue of their wealth, sophistication, and sheer number.<sup>92</sup> It would be unwise to speak of them as a homogeneous body, given their differing origins, conditions of service, and social status. Yet it is safe to conclude that with a few notable exceptions like Paul Ngei, their common experience of military service and discipline made them a largely conservative influence in Ukambani. Civil officials certainly believed that the Kamba military class had limited the spread of the Mau Mau in the Kamba reserves.<sup>93</sup>

One of the most important and influential of these new leaders was former Regimental Sergeant Major Jonathan Nzioka, a former army education instructor during World War II, who was appointed chief of Kangundo in 1950. Although he had almost the same background as Ngei, Nzioka was considered one of the government's most "progressive" allies. In 1954 the Machakos district commissioner hailed Nzioka as one of the most effective Kamba chiefs: "Jonathan runs his advanced and populous Location by means of tact and good example, though he is not averse to using an iron hand if necessary. He has a width of view and a tolerance rarely met in Africans."<sup>94</sup> On the strength of this assessment, Nzioka went on to serve as the nominated Kamba representative on the legislative council.

The contrasting careers of Ngei, Nzioka, and World War I veteran Chief Kasina underscore the different roles of veterans in Kamba society. They could play the role of nationalist, progressive administrator, or conservative autocrat, but it was their shared military experience that gave them the influence, stature, and prestige to assume leadership roles in the Kamba community. While these positions were usually filled by educated clerks and traders in more prosperous and politically active Kenyan societies, limited educational opportunities in Ukambani meant that ex-servicemen assumed the leadership of the Kamba community on the eve of independence.



### Spivs, Drones, and the Shadow of Uhuru, 1958–1964

As British rule in Kenya drew to a close in the early 1960s, the Kamba reputation as a martial race began to weaken. While much of Ukambani remained poor and semipastoral, the steady commercial transformation of Kamba society contributed to the growth of the same politically sophisticated mercantile and clerical classes that had rendered other Kenyan ethnic groups “nonmartial” in the eyes of KAR officers. In Machakos, growing educational and commercial opportunities created a growing distaste for unskilled manual labor. In the late 1950s annual reports for both districts began to speak of a “political malaise” and a “doctrine of opposition” stemming from sharp criticism by educated Kamba of livestock controls and soil conservation measures. The gradual shift to capitalist forms of agricultural production and stock farming rendered the Machakos Kamba less suitable for military service, as tensions over land tenure and grazing rights put them in a more adversarial relationship with the Kenyan government. Many Kamba askaris were prosperous stock owners who chafed under the grazing restrictions in the government’s development plans.<sup>95</sup>

The uncertain political climate in Ukambani further complicated matters in the years preceding independence. Government allies like Jonathan Nzioka quietly dropped out of public life, but Paul Ngei’s years in detention did little to dampen his anticolonial fire. Upon Ngei’s release he gave a series of speeches calling for the expropriation of European land. Although there were no overt signs that this nationalist rhetoric influenced Kamba askaris, the East Africa Command worried about Ngei’s potential to incite unrest in the army.<sup>96</sup> This concern was shared by the governor of Kenya, Sir Patrick Renison, who urged the secretary of state for the colonies to make funds available to extend African settlement programs, originally designed for the more productive central highlands, to the Kamba and Kalenjin reserves: “You know that these two tribes provide more than half of the present strength of the Kenya Police and KAR and if we cannot demonstrate to them that the Government is determined to try and solve their land claims there is a definite possibility that they may turn sour on us. In our very difficult position in trying to preserve law and order, upon which really the whole future of Kenya depends, any large scale defection by these tribes could be a major disaster.”<sup>97</sup>

This political uncertainty caused some in the colonial administration to reevaluate the Kamba’s martial reputation and to question whether it was wise to have so many Kamba in the KAR.<sup>98</sup> While the army rejected this suggestion, it did become much more selective about which Kambas would be allowed to enlist. The East African Command’s new recruiting guide-

lines for 1958 called for recruits from “remote parts of districts because these men made the most loyal soldiers.”<sup>99</sup> In practical terms this meant that Kitui replaced Machakos as the main recruiting ground in Ukambani. By 1960, KAR recruiting safaris were warned to avoid the large numbers of “spivs” in Machakos and to carefully check the identity cards of potential recruits to screen out the “hordes of undesirables” coming into the district from Nairobi.<sup>100</sup> Since Kitui’s semipastoral economy was largely undisturbed, KAR recruiters were still able to find adequate numbers of uneducated young men attracted by the opportunity and status of military service.

### Conclusion

The Kamba’s long association with the King’s African Rifles provides a graphic illustration of the factors that influenced the evolution of an ethnic group into a martial race. This designation had little to do with any particular cultural characteristic or precolonial military tradition. Rather, it was shaped by a specific combination of geographic and climatic forces, coupled with the economic and political realities of colonialism. The Kamba saw military service as the most logical means of survival in a dry, impoverished region where economic opportunities were constrained by a colonial regime dominated by European settlers.

The gradual evolution of the Kamba’s martial identity was linked directly to the rate at which Ukambani was integrated into the colonial economy. In the early decades of the twentieth century, when their precolonial, semipastoral economy was still largely intact in Ukambani, the Kamba had little interest in the army and were not considered “amenable to discipline” by military recruiters. Taxation, destocking, and soil conservation—coupled with the advent of commercial agriculture that reduced the amount of open communal land—combined to push poor and unskilled Kambas into the army.

It is telling that when this level of differentiation reached an advanced stage in Machakos in the late 1950s, military officials concluded that the Machakos Kamba were too educated and politically sophisticated to serve. The resulting shift in focus from Machakos to Kitui, where the rate of economic transformation was considerably slower, seems to indicate that ethnic groups were most martial when the colonial system had disrupted their precolonial patterns of subsistence without providing them any alternative means of support other than unskilled wage labor. Military wages had little appeal to peoples like the Maasai, who were able to maintain their cattle-based economy throughout the colonial era. Conversely, when an

African society like the Kikuyu reached a more advanced stage of economic development, there were too many lucrative occupations competing with enlistment in the army. The shifting martial reputation of the Machakos Kamba demonstrates that it was only when a society was in a transitional development stage, operating under the political constraints of colonial rule, that an ethnic group embraced the label of martial race.

For the Kamba, being a martial race allowed them to exert effective pressure on the colonial government to reverse, or at least modify, unpopular policies. On an individual level, military service allowed unskilled Kamba to claim a level of prestige and status that would normally have been out of their reach in colonial society. These dual incentives provided the Kamba with a strong incentive to embrace the designation of martial race. British officers believed that the Kamba were martial because they were brave, manly, and “amenable to discipline,” but the Kamba accepted the label because it enhanced their social status and paid valuable political dividends while the British ruled Kenya.

The unwillingness of E. N. Mwendwa, the Kamba politician quoted at the beginning of this article, to accept the new African Kenyan government’s plans to broaden the recruiting base of the Kenyan army to include nonmartial races thus represents an attempt by the Kamba to retain the benefits of being a martial race in the postcolonial era. Kirk-Greene has observed that the legacy of martial recruiting created a dangerous ethnic imbalance in the new African armies, and Jomo Kenyatta’s Kikuyu-dominated government had little interest in preserving the martial traditions of the now defunct KAR.<sup>101</sup> As a result, the percentage of Kamba in the Kenyan army has gradually dropped to reflect their percentage of the general Kenyan population. Nevertheless, the army remains a popular form of employment for lower-class Kamba and aging Kamba veterans still consider their exploits in the colonial army to be a confirmation of their manhood and bravery. In other words, the Kamba have made their status as martial race a strong component of their communal identity.

## Notes

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