The Lanet Incident, 2–25 January 1964: Military Unrest and National Amnesia in Kenya

By Timothy Parsons

During the last week of January 1964, the armies of Tanganyika, Uganda, and Kenya struck in rapid succession. Bound together by a common legacy of service in Britain's East African colonial army, the King's African Rifles (KAR), the soldiers demanded higher pay and the removal of expatriate British officers from the newly established national armies. In Kenya, the men of the 11th Battalion of the Kenya Rifles broke into the armory at Lanet Barracks and demanded a meeting with Prime Minister Jomo Kenyatta to discuss their grievances. Although the askaris (Swahili: soldiers) made no direct attempt to seize power, the governments of all three East African nations needed British military aid to restore order. At the Lanet Barracks, British forces easily disarmed the rebellious soldiers. Only one askari was killed during the operation. However, Kenyatta's reliance on British troops exposed the fragile and uncertain nature of the postcolonial Kenyan state.

The Lanet incident is more than just a case study of civil-military relations in early postcolonial Africa. The new African rulers of Kenya considered it vitally important to create viable national memories after Uhuru (independence) in December 1963. With the transfer of power, they inherited a former colonial state that had come into being by conquest rather than the consent of the governed. Faced with the necessity of making a clean break with the colonial era, political elites had to find new sources of legitimacy for the independent African nation. Casting aside marginally relevant precolonial political institutions, they tried to create national identities based on a selective recollection of the past. Kenyan politicians and intellectuals based these identities on core myths that manipulated and smoothed over contentious memories of the colonial era. National myth making was therefore an explicitly political procedure that made the process of remembering a potentially subversive act as African leaders sought to suppress recollections that questioned their right to rule.¹

¹ For the most part, Africanist scholars have been more concerned with the influence of memory and orality on the formation of individual and group identities than its role in the formation of collective identity on a national scale. This may be due in part to the disjointed nature of civil society and the relative weakness of nationalist sentiment in postcolonial Africa. Historians of nationalism in other parts of the world have grappled extensively with the link between national identity and national memory. See Benedict Anderson, Imagined Communities.
The military unrest at the Lanet barracks threatened to subvert Kenya's new unifying ideology by exposing cracks in the nation-building process. Angered by the realization that control of the army would pass to better educated men from rival ethnic groups, the *askaris* of the 11th Battalion struck to challenge the new government's division of the post-independence spoils. In doing so they expressed grievances felt by many poor and disadvantaged Kenyans who expected *Uhuru* to bring land, jobs and better access to education. Kenyatta was concerned that the insubordinate *askaris* would undermine his new legitimizing ideology of inclusion by becoming spokesmen for popular discontent, and was determined to ensure that the Lanet incident would be remembered as an isolated soldiers' strike rather than a politically motivated mutiny. The contested representations of the Lanet troubles show how political stability and national consensus in postcolonial Africa often came at the cost of authoritarianism and repression.

**Making National Memory in Kenya**

In 1964, both local and international observers perceived the Lanet incident as a serious crisis. Yet the barracks revolt has essentially been deleted from Kenya's national memory. The collective amnesia regarding the mutinous behavior of an entire battalion of soldiers when the nation was in its infancy offers important insights into the nature of national memory in postcolonial Africa. Efforts to fashion national identities in newly independent African countries often involved the suppression of potentially subversive memories arising from the fractious history of the colonial era. European powers conquered and ruled African societies by exploiting ethnic and social divisions to convince select groups of Africans to participate in the colonial enterprise. It has therefore been difficult for the peoples of postcolonial Africa to romanticize an immediate past where acrimonious charges and counter-charges of "collaboration" and "resistance" with western colonialism remain dangerously submerged in the collective memories of formerly subject peoples.

Yet in the Kenyan case, society and the state, dangerously fractured though they may be, have proved to be comparatively cohesive in the decades since independence. Kenyatta became more authoritarian as his regime grew increasingly alienated from the general population, but his ability to fashion a

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2 At a time of mounting cold war tensions it was easy for foreign and local observers to imagine that the problems at Lanet were part of a larger conspiracy by either western colonialists or eastern-bloc communists.
relatively durable national identity helped hold Kenya together. As the country’s first Prime Minister and then President, he accomplished this by using national myths based on selective memory and amnesia to create an effective governing ideology. As was the case with most new African nations in the early 1960s, Kenya owed its existence as a territorial entity to colonialism. Kenyatta’s challenge was to craft a new national identity based on a shared set of values and memories that was relevant to all Kenyans regardless of their race, religion, regional origin, ethnicity or social class. He had to knit together diverse local communities that had remained relatively isolated under British rule. He also had to bridge both the chasm that had grown up between the city and the countryside, as well as the gulf that separated an educated political elite from its largely non-literate constituents. The precolonial memories and institutions of Kenya’s indigenous peoples were too diverse and esoteric to serve as a unifying national model. Kenyatta and his contemporaries therefore had to lean on Kenya’s colonial legacy in fashioning a new national identity.

Kenyan Africans did at least share the common experience of being disenfranchised subjects—“protected persons”—of the British Empire. Although the 1923 Devonshire Declaration affirmed Britain’s commitment to protecting Kenya’s “native races,” the European settler community was the dominant political force in the colony. Settlers used their influence to appropriate the most productive land in Kenya. The colonial state’s primary economic function was to mobilize African labor for settler farms, public works, and capitalist enterprises and to coerce the African peasantry into producing primary products for export. Colonial authorities often used aggressive taxation and outright compulsion to achieve these goals. Africans had no political rights. The western ideals of popular sovereignty never applied, and British colonial rule in Kenya rested ultimately on state coercion rather than the consent of the governed. Yet the survival of the colonial regime depended on the cooperation of African intermediaries (chiefs, clerks, policemen and soldiers) and at least the tacit consent of relatively privileged segments of African society.

Thus, Kenya’s colonial past embodied a number of divisive memories that had the potential to thwart Kenyatta’s attempt to build a postcolonial national consensus. The most potent of these recollections were of the bloody Mau Mau Emergency in the early 1950s. Although the forest fighters killed a number of European settlers, their main targets were the Kikuyu chiefs, commercial farmers, businessmen, and committed Christians who had grown wealthy through their association with the colonial state. In one sense, the conflict was a protest against social differentiation in the Kikuyu reserves. David Throup argues that as a Kikuyu intellectual, Jomo Kenyatta tacitly endorsed this process by championing
a “Kikuyu sub-nationalist ideology” that legitimized the accumulation of land and capital by Kikuyu proto-capitalists. Thus, in addition to being an anti-colonial uprising, the Mau Mau Emergency had the characteristics of a Kikuyu civil war."  

The British Army and *askaris* of the King’s African Rifles defeated the guerillas in the forests, but the most divisive legacy of Mau Mau was the civil policy of punishing suspected rebels by seizing their land and turning it over to “progressive” Kikuyu “loyalists.”

Kenyatta favored social stratification in the Kikuyu Reserves, but his intense criticism of the colonial state made him extremely popular with Africans throughout the colony. British officials wrongly concluded that he was the leader of Mau Mau and held him in detention and internal exile until 1961. With Kenyatta conveniently out of the way, African political elites invoked his name to win popular support. They were united in their opposition to British colonial rule, but fell out over the division of the spoils of independence. Fearing domination by the larger Kikuyu and Luo ethnic groups, representatives of smaller communities joined with Asian and European leaders to form the Kenya African Democratic Union (KADU). They sought a federal constitution that would protect the rights of ethnic minorities. Kikuyu and Luo politicians, acting in the name of Jomo Kenyatta, opposed the KADU plan by forming the Kenya African National Union (KANU) to promote a centralized unitary government. Kenyatta was careful to position himself above this political conflict. Casting himself as the father of the nation, he told a mixed delegation of KADU and KANU politicians who visited him in detention that “I speak as a general with two armies—one in each camp.”

The tensions between KADU and KANU appeared to center on a basic philosophical disagreement over the virtues of federalism. P. Anyang’ Nyong’o, however, argues that the conflict between the two parties was an “inter-bourgeois struggle” between regional party bosses competing for power and influence in the postcolonial state. The often bitter and personal confrontation between the two factions created a tense political backdrop for Lanet, especially given that most of the Kenyan Army came from KADU-affiliated ethnic groups.

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6 *Africa Digest* 9, 1 (August 1961).

KADU won only twenty percent of the popular vote in the 1961 elections that granted Africans responsible self-government as a transitory step towards independence. Nevertheless, British officials helped KADU form a ruling coalition after KANU insisted they free Jomo Kenyatta as a precondition for its participation in the new government. Not unlike Nelson Mandela in South Africa, Kenyatta’s popularity grew while he remained in detention. In August 1961, colonial officials gave into the inevitable and released him. Under the terms of the 1962 Lancaster House constitutional conference he shared power with KADU until elections in May 1963 gave him a decisive political victory. KANU fought the election by promising free hospital treatment for all citizens, seven years of free education for all children, jobs for African workers, and an agricultural revolution for Kenyan farmers. Kenyatta took this landslide as a popular rejection of KADU’s regionalism and ensured that when Kenya gained full independence, on 12 December 1963, it was governed by a strong centralized state firmly under his control.

Casting himself as the personification of the Kenyan nation, Kenyatta depicted himself as above politics and therefore beyond criticism. He invoked the ideology of *harambee*, a Swahili term for pulling together or mutual cooperation, to urge all Kenyans to unite in building the nation. Yet although he declared “we all fought for *Uhuru*,” he passed over the ex-forest fighters and Mau Mau detainees when forming his new government in favor of influential former Kikuyu “loyalists.” Meanwhile, he allayed concerns about the predominance of Kikuyu in his new government by liberally sharing the economic fruits of *Uhuru* among ethnic and regional power brokers from the rest of the country. More importantly, by emphasizing economic continuity and respect for private property, Kenyatta made it clear that there would be no radical redistribution of wealth in postcolonial Kenya. He was committed to a program of capitalist economic development. Saddled with the neo-mercantilist economy of the colonial era, KANU did not have the resources to make good on its election promises. Most of the new nation’s revenue went to keeping the government running and building a ruling coalition. Kenyatta won the support of the regional bosses with civil service appointments, jobs in parastatal organizations, low-interest loans and generous land grants.

With KADU vanquished and its members co-opted, the only criticism of these policies came from KANU left-wingers who claimed to represent unemployed and landless Kenyans. Oginga Odinga and Bildad Kaggia, who spoke for the “radical” faction of KANU, called for *Uhuru na Mashamba* (freedom with

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land) and Uhuru na Kazi (freedom with work) to aid those who had been impoverished by the old colonial regime. Although the colonial government created a Land Development and Settlement Board in 1961 to redistribute land left by departing settlers, only “progressive” African farmers were eligible to participate in the program. The “million-acre scheme,” which the colonial government created one year later in response to the threat of popular unrest over landlessness, loaned over thirty thousand squatters, peasants, and ex-detainees money to purchase some of the less productive land in the central highlands. Christopher Leo argues that this program, which was continued by Kenyatta’s government, was “grossly inadequate” and imposed “unconscionable burdens of debt” on those who managed to receive some land. The real winners in these settlement schemes were wealthy Africans who used political connections to secure loans to purchase productive farms at favorable rates.

Similarly, jobless Africans who hoped that independence would bring employment were equally disappointed. Between 1954 and 1962, Kenya experienced population growth rates of almost seven percent per year, while paid employment expanded at an annual rate of less than one percent. In 1960, the Dalgeish Report concluded that there was little chance of finding suitable work for either the 100,000 men in detention for Mau Mau offenses or the 100,000 primary and secondary school graduates who entered the labor market each year. Many Africans thought that independence would create jobs by forcing Europeans and Asians to leave Kenya. In January 1964, approximately five hundred unemployed laborers marched on the Kenyan Parliament to demand work in return for their support in the 1963 election. Yet Kenyatta clearly favored the interests of capital over those of Kenyan workers. KANU’s 1963 election manifesto openly declared: “The Marxist theory of class warfare has no relevance to Kenya’s situation.” Although Kenyatta brokered an agreement with private employers to increase their labor force by ten percent in return for a ban on strikes and a year-long freeze in wages, this only had negligible impact on a growing problem of unemployment.

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11 B.A. Ogot, “The Decisive Years, 1956–63,” in Ogot and Ochieng, Decolonization, 50, 64; and Christopher Leo, Land and Class in Kenya (Toronto, 1984), 77, 87, 144.

12 M.J.V. Bell, Army and Nation in Sub-Saharan Africa (London, 1965), 2; Sir Patrick Rennison to F.D. Webber, 18 July 1960, Public Record Office (PRO), Great Britain, CO/822/2851; and Note for Secretary of State for the Colonies, Unemployment in Kenya, October 1960, PRO/CO/822/2851.

13 Nation, 18 January 1964.

In postcolonial Kenya some Kenyans were more equal than others. Kenyatta won over ethnic and regional elites by giving them a share of the economic and political spoils of independence. He built his legitimacy on a national identity that blunted popular criticism of the controversial policies that facilitated the creation of this governing coalition. His emphasis on political stability and economic continuity left him vulnerable to accusations of enriching his friends and allies at the expense of the poor and disenfranchised.

First and foremost, Kenyatta had to answer the charges of the Mau Mau fighters who claimed that the nation owed them a debt for driving the British from Kenya. Five hundred armed guerillas left the forests on the eve of the transfer of power in December 1963. Although they grudgingly acknowledged Kenyatta’s authority, they threatened renewed violence if he did not take up the cause of landless Kikuyu squatters. Marshall Clough points out that the Emergency developed into the central reference point for political discourse in postcolonial Kenya. “[T]he memory of Mau Mau,” he observes, “became a touchstone for political leaders who wished to claim authority and legitimacy and for dissidents who wished to draw attention to poverty and social injustice.” Kenyatta’s innovation of the myth of a common struggle was intended to blunt the forest fighters’ moral demands on his regime, by emphasizing that no single group could claim a monopoly on political legitimacy for its role in the anti-colonial movement.

Kenya’s ruling elite had to suppress memories of the colonial past that threatened this interpretation of recent historical events. A governing myth was manufactured by invoking the rhetoric of forgiveness and reconciliation and turning the coercive power of the state against those who refused to surrender their dissonant recollections. In a “Kenyatta Day” address on 20 October 1964 Kenyatta declared:

There have been murmurs here in Kenya about the part played by one set of people, or another set of people, in the struggle for Uhuru. There has been talk of the contribution made, or refused, by this group or that. There has been—at times—vindictive comment and a finger of scorn has been pointed at some selected race, group, or tribe. All this is unworthy of our future here.... Let this be the day on which all of us commit ourselves to erase from our minds all the hatreds and the difficulties of those years

15 Africa Digest, 11, 6 (February 1964), 99.
which now belong to history. Let us agree that we shall never refer to the past.17

Kenyatta and his fellow nationalists had generated popular support for the anti-colonial struggle by pledging to improve markedly the basic standards of living for common Africans. These social welfare promises were virtually impossible to keep given the limited financial resources that KANU inherited from the colonial state. Unable to build a governing consensus through widespread economic largess, Kenyatta used the myth of a common struggle against colonialism to create a unifying national memory that emphasized that no single class or ethnic group received special consideration.

More than just a product of popular sentimentality, national myths are potent political tools that provide authority and legitimacy for political elites.18 Ultimately, core national myths rest on collective memory, and attempts to reformulate national memory based on adding or erasing contradictory recollections have highly political connotations. These close links create a powerful incentive for political elites to guard jealously their power to forge national memories. National myth making in Kenya required coercion and sometimes even violence to expunge contradictory memories that questioned the "truths" of the officially sanctioned history of the colonial past. The Lanet incident highlighted some of these difficult and contradictory memories. The barracks revolt undermined the effectiveness of Kenya's unifying national myth by suggesting that common Kenyans, as represented by rank-and-file African soldiers, questioned and rejected Kenyatta's division of the spoils of independence. The grievances of the Kenyan soldiery reflected mounting popular social discontent in the nation as a whole. Just as squatters wanted land and the urban unemployed wanted jobs, the askaris wanted better pay and the Africanization of the officer corps. Their collective insubordination raised the possibility that the army might ally with the KANU left-wingers, thereby threatening the survival of Kenyatta's regime. Although he downplayed the seriousness of the Lanet incident, Kenyatta sought to impose his own interpretation of the unrest on the nation to ensure that memories of the barracks protest did not jeopardize Kenya's new core myths.


The Lanet incident occurred primarily as a result of the new Kenyan government’s inability to maintain the delicate balance between repression and accommodation that underpinned discipline in the old colonial army. The King’s African Rifles was a regionally based regiment that linked territorial battalions raised in Kenya, Uganda, Tanganyika (Tanzania), and Nyasaland (Malawi). In the KAR unskilled Africans were transformed into disciplined soldiers by manipulating their ethnic identity, social relations, and economic opportunities to make military service appealing. Britain’s reliance on African soldiers posed some risks as askaris were the only trained military force in British East Africa. The colonial army secured their cooperation by isolating them from the wider population and encouraging soldiers to see themselves as superior to African civilians. British officers maintained discipline by balancing the relative rewards of military service with strict discipline and close supervision.19

Although they were often treated severely, the shared hardships of military service created a sense of exclusivity and esprit de corps among the colonial soldiery. According to Nico Keijzer, military discipline depends ultimately upon the creation of a closed world where a soldier’s peers reinforce proper standards of behavior. In East Africa, askaris did not submit to KAR discipline out of loyalty to the colonial state but because they did not want to face recrimination from their comrades for violating accepted standards of behavior in their immediate social group.20 This helps to explain why African soldiers served alien colonial regimes that denied them the right of citizenship. Keijzer goes on to argue that military unrest takes place when the values of these small groups conflict with the values of the military hierarchy or society as a whole.21 This came to transpire in Kenya in January 1964, when East African soldiers lost faith in both their expatriate officers and their newly elected civilian masters. As was the case with the ex-Mau Mau fighters, the askaris did not accept the validity of the new regime’s division of the independence spoils.

The Kenyan rank and file faced an uncertain future in the early 1960s. On the positive side, Uhuru offered hope for better terms of service and increased promotions. Yet the askaris grew increasingly restive and impatient as military wages failed to keep pace with inflation. Oginga Odinga took up the cause of military pay and warned the Kenyan Legislative Council in 1961 that there would be trouble in the army if the government did not address these grievances. The

19 For more on the King’s African Rifles, see Hubert Moyse-Bartlett, The King’s African Rifles (Aldershot, U.K., 1956); Anthony Clayton and David Killingray, Khaki and Blue (Athens, Ohio, 1989); Timothy Parsons, The African Rank-and-File (Portsmouth, N.H., 1999).
21 Ibid., 57.
army introduced a pay raise in January 1962, but rising inflation and the introduction of a graduated poll tax wiped out most of the increase. As a result, *askaris* brooded over the government’s unfairness and hoped *Uhuru* would correct these injustices by bringing in a more sympathetic regime.22

Yet independence also posed new risks for the common soldier. The end of colonial rule brought to power African politicians who had little inclination to preserve the privileged status of the military. Faced with the difficult task of delivering on grand campaign promises, they focused on education, health, and economic development. Improving the terms of service for the rank-and-file soldiery was a low priority. Moreover, Kenyatta and his allies planned to transform the King’s African Rifles into a more representative national army, thereby creating jobs for their constituents. As unemployment mounted in the years leading up to independence, soldiering became one of the most coveted employment options for unskilled Kenyans. It was not unusual for recruiting drives to attract three to four hundred applicants for less than thirty positions.23 Many of these new would-be recruits came from groups that had been officially barred from serving in the King’s African Rifles by the colonial government on the grounds they were too educated and/or insufficiently tough to make efficient soldiers. KANU politicians, most of whom were from “non-martial” ethnic groups themselves, pressed the army to broaden its recruiting base to reflect more accurately the ethnic makeup of Kenya.24

Meanwhile, in addition to creating jobs for unemployed constituents, Kenyan political elites viewed the army as a potential source of political leverage. No party or ethnic group was willing to let its rivals gain a dominant position in the armed forces. As a result, veteran *askaris* worried that politically connected soldiers would replace them. Most of the “martial races” that comprised the old colonial forces were not part of KANU, and many Kikuyu openly referred to the KAR as the “KADU army.” In 1959, the Kalenjin, Kamba, Samburu, and Northern Frontier pastoral communities supplied approximately 77 percent of the total strength of the Kenyan KAR battalions.25


24 Motion by Oginga Odinga, KAR Commissioned Ranks: Africans, 13 December 1962, Kenya Legislative Debates, Volume 90.

Similarly, although askaris had hoped that the drive to “Africanize” senior positions would open the way for their advancement, this process was complicated by various factors. The British had introduced universal primary education for the African soldiery in the 1950s. However, there were very few infantrymen with a secondary education in January 1964. This shortage of qualified soldiers delayed the Africanization of the officer corps. In December 1963, British officers still constituted just over fifty percent of the KAR’s officer and non-commissioned ranks. The new Kenyan government simply did not have enough suitably qualified African soldiers to run its modern army without British assistance. African askaris became frustrated by delays in the Africanization process on the eve of independence. Meanwhile, once in power KANU politicians caused further ire by appointing educated men from their own ethnic groups as officers.

In January 1964, the first full month of independence, askaris found themselves anxious and disoriented. Few understood fully what Uhuru would bring. Although the KAR had helped Britain suppress the Mau Mau Emergency, most askaris genuinely believed that they had played a leading role in the nationalist struggle by subverting oppressive colonial laws and military regulations and by acting as spokesmen for relatively uneducated rural communities. At the same time, they viewed themselves as the best disciplined and most experienced members of African society. Soldiers therefore had little use for the better educated graduates of mission schools that now constituted the nation’s political elite. They hoped that independence would redress their longstanding grievances over pay and promotions, but they were also anxious that the new politics would weaken their claim to the status and patronage that went with military service. Many poorer African civilians shared these hopes and concerns. However, African askaris were the one group—with the possible exception of the ex-Mau Mau fighters—with the means to back up their demands with military force.

The Lanet Incident, 24–25 January 1964

The spark that ignited the dispute in the 11th Kenya Rifles came from Tanganyika and Uganda rather than Kenya. Faced with many of the same problems that confronted Kenyan soldiers, Tanganyikan and Ugandan askaris won improved pay and the dismissal of expatriate British officers by essentially holding their


political masters hostage with the implicit threat of violence. On learning of these events, the Kenyan military authorities put all three battalions of the Kenya Rifles on immediate alert. Lieutenant Colonel G. W. Stead, the commander of the 11th Kenya Rifles, tried to reduce tensions by holding public meetings in the battalion to discuss the pay raises promised in Tanganyika and Uganda, but British intelligence warned him that "all was not well" in his battalion. Kenyan security officers detailed elements of the 3rd Regiment of the Royal Horse Artillery (RHA), part of Britain's remaining strategic reserve in Kenya, to keep watch on the Lanet armory.  

On the evening of Friday, 24 January, a number of askaris gathered to hear a broadcast by Kenyatta in which they anticipated the declaration that the Kenyan Government would match the pay increases awarded in Tanganyika and Uganda. When Kenyatta failed to announce a wage increase, they became angry and insubordinate. The KAR's old radio network was still intact, and they had monitored the events in Uganda and Tanganyika with great interest. As Jackson Mulinge, a new African officer and future commander of the Kenyan Army, explained, "we were all in the same army." Angered that they were being denied what constituted their entitlement, a group of askaris broke into the Lanet armory and dragged the rest of the battalion out of bed to join the protest. Alerted by sentries posted in the camp, the 3rd RHA quickly surrounded the Lanet Barracks while other British units secured strategic points in Nairobi. The RHA captured outlying sections of Lanet and easily isolated the rebellious soldiers by the morning of 25 January. RHA gunners fired on any askari who tried to slip through their lines, and in doing so killed army pay clerk Private Simon Kirpop. British and African officers used a loudspeaker to warn the askaris that the Royal Horse Artillery would sweep the camp with "maximum force" unless they set

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28 Report by Lieutenant Colonel G.W. Stead, 6 February 1964, Liddell Hart Center (LHC), Kings College London, Dimolene Papers (DP), XIV/F/10; and Uganda Argus (Argus), 11 April 1964.

29 Tanganyika Standard (TS), 20 April 1964 and Interviews, Informant #1, Samburu Private, June 1994; Informant #2, Kamba Sergeant, December 1993; Informant #3 Kamba Private, November 1993; Informant #4, Kipsigis Corporal, July 1998. Please note, these former members of the 11th Kenya Rifles asked not to be identified by name.

30 Interview with General Jackson Mulinge, Nairobi, March 1994.


down their arms. 33 Despite these threats, a committed group of askaris from “A” Company refused to give up their weapons.

When Kenyatta learned of the unrest he refused to follow the precedent set in Tanganyika and Uganda by negotiating with the rebellious soldiers. On the morning of Saturday, January 25, he issued the following statement to the press:

Those who took part in the Lanet incident have gravely broken military discipline and must be dealt with firmly. They will be dealt with according to military law. There will be no compromise on this, and I do not intend to meet them or to allow any of my Ministers to negotiate with them.... I must warn all our people most firmly whether they be in the Army, Police, youth wing, Members of Parliament, or just members of the public, that the Government will deal most severely with any breaches of the peace or acts of disloyalty and destruction. 34

Concerned that opportunistic politicians might use the Lanet incident for personal gain, he refused to acknowledge that the soldiers might have legitimate grievances. Oginga Odinga, the left-leaning Minister of Home Affairs, suspected that Kenyatta’s message was at least partially meant for him. By Odinga’s account, Kenyatta called him after the news of the unrest became public and asked him to stay home. “He seemed not to recover from the shock of the army mutiny and ... seemed to be plagued by a fear that the government was not safe from internal revolution.” 35 Although he had championed the interests of the African soldiery in the colonial Legislative Council, Odinga denied that he had anything to do with the problems at Lanet. He blamed malicious British intelligence reports for encouraging Kenyatta to suspect his loyalty.

As it turned out, Kenyatta’s public rejection of negotiations took the steam out of the unrest. Most askaris, fearing they might be shot, agreed to return their weapons to the armory if British soldiers withdrew from the camp. However, twenty hardcore soldiers tried to shoot their way to freedom. The breakout failed, and after receiving reinforcements from Nairobi, the RHA stormed the camp with a Ferret armored car. The remaining askaris put up little resistance in the face of this superior firepower, and the British secured the camp on Saturday afternoon. Kenyatta was kept fully informed and personally authorized the British Army’s actions. 36

33 TS, 11 April 1964.
34 Argus, 28 January 1964.
The Lanet Court Martials

As British troops disarmed the remaining askaris, Kenyatta faced the difficult task of explaining why the men of the 11th Kenya Rifles defied his authority. The British military intervention removed the physical danger to his regime, but the mass insubordination at Lanet barracks posed a potentially serious political threat to his fragile ruling consensus. The Lanet incident took place against the backdrop of an internal struggle within KANU between left and right wing factions over the shape of the new nation. As calm returned, Odinga and his leftist allies charged that expatriate British officers had deliberately provoked the askaris to create an opportunity for British forces to intervene, thereby strengthening their influence in the Kenyan Army. Meanwhile, the British tried to use the Lanet incident to push Kenyatta further to the right by suggesting that Odinga and his fellow KANU left-wingers had conspired to sow unrest in the army. According to this version, the askaris at Lanet spoiled a much more serious plot by Odinga and his communist backers by acting prematurely. Kenyatta refused to lend public credence to either interpretation. He needed to balance KANU's left and right wings until he had a stronger hold on power and could not afford to let the barracks revolt turn into a national crisis.

In this sensitive political context the terminology used to describe what occurred at Lanet was of key importance. The unrest could be portrayed as either a strike or as a mutiny. Each label implied a particular causation and suggested appropriate responses. A strike was a civilian matter. Mutiny was a challenge to lawful, military, and ultimately political authority. Depicting Lanet as a mutiny threatened to make the army an overtly political institution that might take sides in the new nation's political struggles. Although Kenya could easily forget a minor internal military squabble over pay, a mutiny was a dangerous act of political defiance. Kenyatta had to control the interpretation of Lanet to preserve his authority over the armed forces without exposing internal divisions within his ruling coalition. Utilizing his monopoly of the media and official political discourse he dismissed the unrest as the work of a handful of disaffected askaris. He depicted Lanet essentially as a strike, and told the press: "I think some silly fool heard of the situation in Zanzibar and perhaps those in Tanganyika thought they could do a little better. When Kenya heard about Tanganyika somebody got it into their minds that perhaps they could do a little better than Tanganyika." After the bloody mutiny by the Congolese Force Publique in 1960 and the

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38 C.H. Imray to J.K. Hickman, East Africa Political Department, CRO, 25 January 1964; and HCK to CRO, 29 January 1964, PRO/DO/213/54.

Zanzibar Revolution in early 1964, he needed to reassure local and international observers that Kenya was still a safe place to live and invest. The Kenyan government had to demonstrate that it had full control of its armed forces. More importantly, by interpreting the Lanet incident as a strike, Kenyatta tried to preserve the myth that he governed as the paternal head of a united Kenyan nation.

Although Kenyatta downplayed the Lanet incident for public consumption, however, the serious nature of what had occurred necessitated firm action against those askaris involved. British military authorities in Kenya justified their use of force in retaking the Lanet Barracks by suggesting that the revolt might have spread. This explanation fueled popular speculation that the unrest was part of a larger plot by unnamed conspirators to use the army for political purposes. Rumors flew in Nairobi that askaris in other units met during the troubles at Lanet to discuss the “security situation” in Kenya. Former members of the 3rd Kenya Rifles recall completing an unofficial “questionnaire” on whether they wanted Kenyatta to continue to rule. The Kenyan government therefore had to treat the Lanet incident as a potential political plot. In private, many senior cabinet ministers expressed their concern that the unrest was indeed part of a larger conspiracy to destabilize Kenya’s new government. Kenyatta may have publicly portrayed the unrest as a strike over wages, but he was well aware of the potential repercussions of Lanet and treated the unrest as a mutiny and a potential coup. Therefore the army began court martial proceedings against the insubordinate askaris.

Kenyan security services divided the men of the battalion into three categories based on their involvement in the insurrection. Investigators classified 99 men as “red,” 158 as “yellow,” and 340 as “green.” Kenyatta disbanded the entire 11th Kenya Rifles, but allowed soldiers in the “green” category to join the new 1st Kenya Rifles. The government ensured that the men in the “yellow” category remained quiet by discharging them and confining them to their home districts under police surveillance. Prosecutors charged the 99 “red” askaris with mutiny under the Kenya Military Forces Act. Seventy-six of them were privates and most had served for less than seven years. They reflected the overall demographic profile of the army and no single ethnic group was over-represented among these “ringleaders.”


41 Mutiny with Violence Contrary to Section 24 (1) of the Kenya Military Forces Act, KNA/AG/5/143/7; Log Sheet, British Land Forces Kenya, 29 January 1964, PRO/WO/276/373; Assistant Director of Legal Services to Kenya Army Commander, 22 February 1964, KNA/AG/5/143/24; TS, 13 March 1964.
Although the army charged all of the men in the “red” category with mutiny, it prosecuted just thirty-three of them in two separate court-martials during April and May 1964. The government’s prosecuting council for both trials was K. C. Brookes. Byron Georgiadis, a prominent local attorney, defended the soldiers. Faced with the problem that there were no African commanders of sufficient rank to preside over a court-martial, Kenyatta promoted Joe Ndolo, one of the most senior African officers in the Kenya Rifles, to serve as President of the Court. Allowing expatriate British officers to run the trial would have made it difficult for him to control the proceedings and left his government open to the charge that Kenyan citizens were being judged by foreign officers.

For Kenyatta, the primary purpose of the court-martials was to embed the interpretation of Lanet as a minor disciplinary incident in Kenya’s national memory. More specifically, the tribunal used the regimented military justice system and the dictates of national security to limit public disclosure of the internal unrest in the Kenyan Army. The court-martials strengthened the official version of the Lanet incident by preventing alternative interpretations of the unrest from being disseminated amongst impoverished and potentially restive communities in the urban slums and the Kenyan countryside. The judges did not seek to uncover the “truth” behind the barracks revolt, but to ensure that the nation remembered the unrest as an internal disagreement within the army over pay.

There was no single authentic narrative of the Lanet incident. Rebellious askaris, British officers, local and foreign journalists, and Kenyan political elites all experienced and interpreted the events of the evening of 24 January 1964 in subtly different ways. The Lanet court-martials’ primary function was to reconcile and edit the diverse and conflicting recollections of the mutiny into a single sanitized version. This proved difficult because the local and international press took great interest in the court-martials despite the government’s attempt to manage the flow of information from the courtroom. During the course of the trials, the askaris’ defense counsel freely invoked the very conspiracy theories that the Kenyan government had hoped to suppress. Faced with overwhelming evidence that his clients had taken up arms without orders, Byron Georgiadis suggested that the men of the 11th Kenya Rifles had been duped. Although he had no clear evidence that the askaris were acting under the direction of others, Georgiadis based his defense on the suggestion that they were pawns in a larger plot. He did not accuse Oginga Odinga directly, but his defense strategy clearly suggested that KANU leftists were behind the revolt.42

This strategy embarrassed the Kenyan Prime Minister. Although western diplomats were convinced that Odinga and his leftist allies threatened his

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42 Interview with Byron Georgiadis, September 2000.
government, Kenyatta never acknowledged the conflict in public. Depicting himself as a national leader who spoke for all Kenyans, he preferred to deal with internal challenges to his rule in private. Georgiadis’ defense threatened to drag the divisions within his government into the open. Yet the army had the final word on what could be discussed publicly at the trial. On 28 April, Ndolo cleared the court of newsmen when security officers testified about calls the askaris made to the police and other Kenya Rifles battalions.43

Georgiadis of course did not succeed in convincing the judges that outside conspirators were responsible for Lanet. Although press reports quoted his statements at length, few Kenyans outside the circles of power were aware of the implications of his arguments. The officers of the court were inclined to treat the incident as an internal army matter and not a political attack on the state. As career military men they were not receptive to suggestions that the loyalty of the entire Kenyan Army was in question. Moreover, the tribunal members were unwilling to accept a defense that would expand the political scope of the investigation to dangerous proportions. They convicted the men identified as “ringleaders” of “mutiny with violence,” and handed down sentences ranging from five to fourteen years imprisonment.44 Kenyatta made no effort to intervene in the proceedings or to reduce or commute the sentences of the convicted mutineers.

Nevertheless, the Prime Minister did tacitly, if not publicly, address the underlying grievances of the convicted soldiers. He used the ongoing border war with Somalia to restore the reputation of the Kenyan Army as the defenders of the nation. This allowed him to improve conditions in the army without appearing to have given in to the “mutineers.” His government raised the pay of the military, police, and prisons staff substantially in April 1964.45 Lanet also accelerated the rate of Africanization in the military. Although Kenyatta retained a British general as army commander-in-chief for two more years, by the end of 1964 Africans held all of the executive positions in frontline units. Kenyatta expanded his control over the army by ensuring that most of these new officers were Kikuyu rather than members of the KAR’s old guard. As a further safeguard, 160 British officers remained attached to the Kenya Army in an advisory and training capacity for several more years.

Public and Private Memories of Lanet

Although the individual participants in the Lanet unrest were quickly forgotten, the same could not be said for larger questions raised by the incident. Were it not

43 TS, 29 April 1964.
44 TS, 6 May 1964; and Argus, 29 May 1964.
45 TS, 17 April 1964.
for British soldiers, the men of the 11th Kenya Rifles could have overthrown the newly elected government of Kenya had they managed to persuade their comrades in other battalions to join them. Kenyatta’s use of British troops to put down the unrest avoided a potentially fratricidal clash between loyal units and the insubordinate askaris, but his reliance on Kenya’s former colonial rulers damaged the new nation’s prestige. The incident seemed to confirm both the European settler community’s assertion that Kenya was not ready for independence and the charges of left-wing African politicians who claimed that Kenyatta had not made a clean enough break with the colonial past. Even more serious, the problems at Lanet, sparked at least in part by grievances over pay and slow promotions, could be interpreted as a popular rejection of the policies of the new regime. As was the case with other marginal groups in the new Kenya, the askaris made economic and political demands that Kenyatta had neither the ability nor inclination to meet.

Yet the trial did not attract the attention of the general public. Most Kenyans lived in the countryside or in urban slums in 1964 and, despite a hard fought election in 1963, were not well informed of elite competition within the centers of political power. Literacy was limited and stories of the Lanet incident did not have a chance to spread because quick action by Kenyatta and his British allies ended the unrest almost as soon as it began. British forces kept a low profile and were under orders not to carry their weapons in Nairobi during the daytime. The Kenyan Army was a closed group at the time and largely remains so to this day. Kenyatta was thus able to shape public perceptions of the unrest by controlling the release of information. More importantly, media coverage of the court-martials had little impact on local communities removed from the political center. Denied the chance to interact with people possessing firsthand knowledge of the revolt, the average Kenyan gained little awareness of the problems at Lanet. Slum dwellers and simple farmers never made the connection between the askaris’ revolt and their own dissatisfaction with KANU’s failure to make good on its promises to improve the social welfare of the nation.

Kenyatta therefore had a strong incentive to ensure that former members of the 11th Kenya Rifles could not offer an explanation for their actions. The men in the “red” and “yellow” groups were scattered throughout Kenya and kept under close watch by the security forces. Even today few will readily identify themselves as participants in the uprising. They are now in their sixties and can only be found by chance or through an introduction by another former askari. Many remain legally confined to their home districts, and are understandably reluctant to discuss their role at Lanet. Kenyatta largely succeeded in depicting them as disloyal and greedy. Few received a pension or other benefits. The wife of Private Simon Kirpop, the only askari to be killed by British soldiers was also denied these entitlements. In most cases, they have sadly accepted the fact that they have been cast as villains in Kenya’s national memory.
Those who will talk about Lanet, on the other hand, maintain they were the defenders of Kenyan sovereignty. A former battalion signaler explained that “we took action against British aggression and not against Kenyatta.” Yet their account indicts Kenyatta implicitly for tolerating neocolonial conditions in the new Kenya. The askaris believed British officers and NCOs were plotting to stay in Kenya to escape mounting unemployment in Great Britain. As the only Kenyans with access to weapons, the men of the battalion felt they had no choice but to take matters into their own hands. With some justification, they point to the fact that their actions increased the rate of Africanization in the army and paved the way for officers like Joe Ndolo and Jackson Mulinge to be promoted to senior ranks. Yet their version of the incident has been forgotten. Their memories of Lanet are personal ones shared only with their immediate friends and family. Popular national histories of Kenya and Kenyan history curricula make only passing reference to the Lanet unrest and almost invariably describe it in Kenyatta’s terms. They make no reference to the widespread sense of unease that the soldiers’ protest spread throughout East Africa in the first half of 1964. Lanet and the other barracks revolts have largely been consigned to larger studies of African military insecurity that usually list them as “plots” or “failed coups.”

The Lanet revolt played out more than forty years ago. Kenyatta’s suppression of the painful and discordant incident was part of a larger national amnesia that has been both a blessing and a curse for Kenya. His success in defending the national myth of an inclusive struggle against colonialism silenced his critics and solidified his hold on power. Kenyatta bought the support of ethnic and regional elites by allowing them to enrich themselves through their control of the levers of the state. By casting himself as the father of the nation, Kenyatta set himself up as the mediator between an increasingly isolated state bourgeoisie and the general population. The result was an authoritarian presidency and a legacy of repression that has stifled political discourse in modern Kenya.

Moreover, the authoritarian Kenyan state’s reliance on the collective memory of a mythic grand anti-colonial struggle for its legitimacy has made remembering the past a potentially subversive act. Alternative recollections of Lanet and other key incidents in Kenyan history were dangerous and had to be suppressed. On the other hand, Kenyatta’s success in controlling how the nation remembers or forgets the revolt in the 11th Kenya Rifles allowed the Kenyan

46 Interviews: Informant #1, Samburu Private, June 1994; and Informant #2, Kamba Sergeant, May 1994.
48 Nyong’o, “State and Society,” 231–32.
Army to develop an apolitical role. Once soldiers gain influence over civil authority they are loath to surrender it. The tragic cases of Uganda, Nigeria and other African nations show that one coup tends to lead to another. By making sure that Lanet has been remembered as a pay strike rather than a mutiny, Kenyatta helped ensure no precedent was set for future military interventionism. Even Joe Ndolo’s forced resignation for allegedly plotting a coup in 1971 did not diminish the reputation of the Kenyan Army.

Beginning with Kenyatta, the Kenyan political elite has supported the army’s apolitical status because it has not been able to turn the military into a reliably partisan institution. Yet it must be acknowledged, however, that the army’s tolerance of the increasingly repressive behavior of the Kenyan state was a political act in itself. Nevertheless, Kenyatta and his successor Daniel arap Moi relied on the police, the civilian security services, and the paramilitary General Service Unit as government agents of coercion. None of these organizations has had the capacity to seize power by themselves. As a result, Kenya has been spared from the succession of coups and counter-coups so prevalent in much of postcolonial Africa.

Varying territorial responses to the askari mutinies of the early 1960s provide a point of reference for comparing the political unrest and social tensions that shaped the development of modern East Africa. Nyerere disbanded the Tanganyika Rifles entirely and replaced them with a new army recruited largely from members of the Tanzanian African National Union’s Youth Wing. Tanzania and Uganda both raised military pay and ended their primary military ties to Britain. In contrast to Tanzania and Kenya, though, Uganda alone allowed most mutineers to stay in the army. This unfortunate decision appeared to legitimize the army’s intervention in politics and was in part responsible for military instability under Idi Amin. In comparison, although Kenyatta’s suppression of alternate memories of the Lanet incident contributed to the authoritarian Kenyan presidency, the nation’s ability to forget the soldiery’s flirtation with mass insubordination has made Kenya one of the more comparatively stable countries in Africa. Yet one should not assume that Lanet has been permanently forgotten. If questions were to arise suddenly about the political reliability of the Kenyan Army people might well begin to remember the Lanet incident as a mutiny. Recollections of Lanet expose the uncertain and contested nature of national memory in postcolonial Kenya. Competing interpretations of the incident and the efforts of Kenyatta to erase it from the national memory were bound up in the struggle to appropriate the symbols of political legitimacy by defining Kenya’s national identity.

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49 For a more detailed analysis of the differing legacies of the East African responses to the barracks unrest, see Timothy Parsons, *The 1964 Army Mutinies and the Making of Modern East Africa* (Westport, Conn., 2003).