

# MAU MAU'S ARMY OF CLERKS: COLONIAL MILITARY SERVICE AND THE KENYA LAND FREEDOM ARMY IN KENYA'S NATIONAL IMAGINATION\*

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## Abstract

Scholarly and popular histories of Kenya largely agree that African Second World War veterans played a central role in the Kenya Land Freedom Army. Former African members of the colonial security forces have reinforced these assumptions by claiming to have been covert Mau Mau supporters, either after their discharge, or as serving soldiers. In reality, few Mau Mau generals had actual combat experience. Those who served in the colonial military usually did so in labor units or support arms. It therefore warrants asking why so many Kenyans accept that combat veterans played such a central role in the KLFA and in Kenyan history. Understanding how veterans of the colonial army have become national heroes, both for their wartime service and their supposed leadership of Mau Mau, reveals the capacity of popular history to create more useful and inclusive forms of African nationalism.

## Key Words

Kenya, East Africa, historiography, independence wars, military, nationalism.

Dedan can change himself into anything – a white man, a bird, or a tree. He can turn himself into an aeroplane. He learnt all this in the Big War.<sup>1</sup>

In boasting that Dedan Kimathi escaped capture by masquerading as a European policeman in the novel *Weep Not, Child*, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o gave voice to the commonly held Kenyan assumption that the famed Mau Mau general acquired his military expertise and guile in the British military during the Second World War. From late 1952, when he fled into the forests of central Kenya to take up arms against the colonial regime, until his arrest in the fall of 1956, Kimathi's fame grew as he taunted the Kenyan government in a barrage of letters that claimed credit for the Kenya Land Freedom Army's (KLFA)<sup>2</sup> success in standing up to the military might of the British Empire. The colonial security services burnished his reputation by singling him out as the leader of a daring raid on a

\* Thanks to John Lonsdale and Derek Peterson for comments on this article. To the memory of John Nunneley, David Kimonyi Muoki, Stephen Savano Maveke, and all the other East African veterans of the Burma Campaign. Author's email: tparsons@wustl.edu

1 N. wa Thiong'o, *Weep Not, Child* (Oxford, 1989), 68.

2 According to Maina wa Kinyatti, the KLFA was the military wing of the [Mau Mau] movement, see M. wa Kinyatti (ed.), *The Dedan Kimathi Papers* (Nairobi, 1987), 2.

Naivasha police station that released 150 prisoners, killed six constables, and seized fifty rifles and light machine guns. Ian Henderson, who made his reputation by tracking down and then interrogating Kimathi, further elevated the Mau Mau leader's stature by dubbing him a Kikuyu Hitler.<sup>3</sup> Kimathi went to an unmarked grave after the colonial regime hung him in 1957, but his fame as a patriotic martyr grew substantially after Kenyan independence in 1963. Much like Robin Hood, and actual rebels like Michele Pezza, the 'brother devil' (*Fra Diavolo*) who early nineteenth-century Calabrian peasants similarly credited with the ability to fly and shapeshift, Kimathi became a popular hero by defying imperial power.

In time, Kimathi's status as a veteran of the Second World War became a central part of Kenya's populist national narratives. While several authors, including Henderson, described Kimathi as a willful and defiant youth, in most accounts his military service explained his bravery, resourcefulness, and charismatic leadership. More broadly, many scholarly and popular historians of Kenya have come to agree that African Second World War veterans dominated the KLFA's leadership and rank-and-file. In the post-colonial era, many former members of the King's African Rifles (KAR) reinforced these assumptions by claiming to have been covert Mau Mau supporters, either as veterans after their discharge in the late 1940s or even as serving *askaris* (African soldiers) during combat in the Kenyan forests in the 1950s.

In reality, however, very few of the Mau Mau 'generals' that are the heroes of nationalist Kenyan narratives had actual combat experience. The KLFA men who had served in the colonial military usually did so in labor units or support arms where their literacy and comparatively advanced education had value. While many specialist historians of the Emergency are aware that links between the colonial military and the KLFA have been largely overstated, novels, textbooks, and even scholarly historians of Kenya still state this connection as an established fact. It therefore warrants asking why and how so many Kenyans and Kenyanist historians came to believe that Second World War veterans played such a central role in Mau Mau and in Kenyan history in general.

While a few senior KLFA commanders had formal military training, the ex-serviceman turned Mau Mau fighter is largely a figment of Kenyan nationalist imagining. Several distinct factors account for this misconception. In the late 1940s, the colonial authorities openly worried that demobilised African soldiers would challenge British rule in Kenya. These fears, coupled with the ex-servicemen's relative wealth and sophistication, made Second World War veterans widely respected figures in their home communities. Consequently, aspiring Mau Mau leaders had a strong incentive to invent or overstate their military credentials. After the outbreak of the Emergency, colonial civil and military authorities, abetted by the Western press, explained their inability to suppress the revolt by similarly crediting the KLFA leadership with having formal military training. The link between Mau Mau and colonial military service became explicit in the 1960s when the surviving KLFA men began to publish their memoirs.

3 P. Hewitt, *Kenya Cowboy: A Police Officer's Account of the Mau Mau Emergency* (Johannesburg, 2008), 135–6; I. Henderson and P. Goodheart, *Man Hunt in Kenya* (Garden City, NY, 1958), 17.

This, then, is the story of how a popular belief became embedded in both scholarly histories of Kenya and Kenya's nationalist imagination. Clarifying this misconception is not just an exercise in historiographical precision. Documenting the actual influence that veterans, particularly that of educated soldiers with clerical training, had on the KLFA provides a more nuanced understanding of the origin, character, and legacy of the insurgency. It also helps to explain how contemporary Kenyans have come to regard both Mau Mau fighters and colonial soldiers as heroes whose brave struggles with a foreign colonial regime helped to bring forth a new Kenyan nation.

There can be little doubt that African veterans played a role in the Mau Mau Emergency. At the very least, many of the nearly 19,000 rank-and-file Kikuyu, Embu, and Meru soldiers who served in the Second World War must have been passive supporters of the insurgency. This is not particularly significant given that the colonial authorities estimated that 90 per cent of the entire Kikuyu population had taken at least one Mau Mau oath.<sup>4</sup> But the over-emphasis on combat in popular Kenyan narratives of Mau Mau obscures the most significant influence that Kikuyu ex-servicemen had on the KLFA. By assuming that all Kenyan soldiers were infantrymen, popular and professional historians alike have failed to realize that most Kikuyu veterans actually served in labor and specialist units. This meant that their main contribution to the KLFA was clerical and logistical rather than tactical. While literacy and accounting did not necessarily win battles, these skills were essential to building and motivating armies.

Distinctions between the combat infantryman, the army clerk, and the military laborer have blurred in popular Kenyan imaginations, as have distinctions between the askaris who served the colonial regime and the KLFA men who fought them, to the point where a more inclusive form of Kenyan nationalism is emerging. After independence, Jomo Kenyatta's declaration that 'we all fought for *uhuru*' (freedom) allowed KAR askaris, KLFA fighters, and even the 'loyalists' who had rejected the Mau Mau call to arms to become citizens in good standing. The pride of place assigned to Second World War veterans in Mau Mau narratives helped paper over the inconvenient reality that, as Daniel Branch has noted, 'as many Kikuyu fought with the colonial government as did those against it'.<sup>5</sup>

While historical precision is important, there is not much to be gained in exposing the fictive nature of Kenyan nationalist narratives. Popular nationalism is, by its very nature, an exercise in creative imagining. Even as early as 1963, Ali Mazrui fully understood this reality: 'The idea of a Nation can sometimes be a little too abstract, and hence a little too cold. . . . To give the idea of a Nation warmth, it is often necessary either to personify it metaphorically or, more effectively, to give it specific human form in national heroes.'<sup>6</sup> Understanding how veterans of the colonial army have become national heroes, both for

4 Kenya National Archives (KNA) DEF 1/130/33, Memos on Manpower Demobilisation and Reabsorption, 1946-7; The National Archives of Great Britain, London (TNA) WO 276/516, Appreciation on Future Military Policy in Kenya, 1954.

5 E. S. Atieno-Odhiambo, 'The invention of Kenya', in B. A. Ogot and E. S. Atieno-Odhiambo (eds.), *Decolonization and Independence in Kenya, 1940-93* (London, 1995), 303; D. Branch, *Defeating Mau Mau, Creating Kenya: Counterinsurgency, Civil War, and Decolonization* (Cambridge, 2009), xii.

6 A. Mazrui, 'On heroes and Uhuru worship', *Transition*, 11 (1963), 24.

their wartime service and their supposed leadership of Mau Mau, reveals the capacity of popular history to create more useful and inclusive forms of African nationalism.

## MILITARY VETERANS AND MAU MAU MYTHS

For both Kenyan nationalists and the colonial regime itself, military training in the colonial forces explained how an outnumbered and poorly equipped guerrilla force could hold the British Empire at bay for more than three years. Tom Mzungu, who served in the East African Army Medical Corps during the Second World War, was certain that military service nurtured Kenyan nationalism.

It was during the Second World War that the African became more aware of his place in overall human society. He became much more aware of his contribution to world affairs and the part he was playing in the liberation of individual and national freedom.<sup>7</sup>

These sentiments became deeply embedded in Kenyan nationalist narratives. One of Ngugi's ex-serviceman characters confidently declared: 'We carried guns and we shot white men. . . . They are not the gods we had thought them to be. We even slept with their women.'<sup>8</sup> *Weep Not, Child* is fiction, but the sentiments expressed in the novel reflected the widespread belief that military service taught askaris that they had nothing to fear from Europeans. The ex-Mau Mau supporters who Lauren Huttenbach met in Meru District were certain that their agemates who fought in the 1944–5 campaign against the Japanese in Burma returned braver and more aggressive. 'We had big people there who were majors and sergeants. They learned to use guns. . . . When [they] were fighting [alongside Europeans], they called [them] "Mister", not "Boy".'<sup>9</sup> The image of Burma as a crucible that incubated Kenyan nationalism has even been written into Nairobi's built environment. Much like the way the First World War-era Carrier Corps base became the Kariokor neighborhood, the city's Burma market was either a place where soldiers marshaled to deploy to Southeast Asia or gathered when they returned.<sup>10</sup>

The fundamental flaw in the widely-accepted centrality of the Second World War and military service in Mau Mau historiography and popular nationalism is that most key Mau Mau figures had little military experience. Dedan Kimathi only served in the colonial military for a few months in 1941 before deserting. The authors who note this reality generally attribute it to an insubordinate refusal to accept military discipline and dissatisfaction with his uniform and terms of service. Henderson claimed that Kimathi threw peanuts at a corporal, while Joseph Karimi depicted him defiantly slapping his commanding officer when ordered not to smoke.<sup>11</sup> Either way, it is highly unlikely that Kimathi learned anything of military value during this short term of service, for what little training

7 Interview with Tom Mzungu, June 1994.

8 Ngugi, *Weep Not, Child*, 9–10.

9 L. L. Huttenbach, *The Boy is Gone: Conversations with a Mau Mau General* (Athens, OH, 2015), 43.

10 D. Anderson, *Histories of the Hanged: The Dirty War in Kenya and the End of Empire* (New York, 2005), 36; (<http://www.nation.co.ke/lifestyle/DN2/The-big-dirty-meat-market-in-the-city/-/957860/1411148/-/view/printVersion/-/ngqeonz/-/index.html>).

11 Henderson, *Manhunt in Kenya*, 17; J. Karimi, *Dedan Kimathi: The Whole Story* (Nairobi, 2013), 15–17.

he received was as a ‘sweeper’ (latrine orderly) in the East African Military Labour Service (EAMLS) and not as an infantryman in the King’s African Rifles.<sup>12</sup> Nevertheless, both contemporary and historical sources routinely depict Kimathi as a brave and decorated veteran. A 1953 article in an Australian newspaper described him as a KAR signaler who ‘won some renown as a jungle fighter in Burma’. In 2010, John Nottingham, the influential co-author of *The Myth of ‘Mau Mau’*, gave a witness statement in the lawsuit brought by Kenyan Mau Mau torture victims that labeled Kimathi ‘one of the few Mau Mau leaders who had seen military service with the King’s African Rifles’.<sup>13</sup> Similarly, David Njagi turned Kimathi into a Burma veteran and made him an officer: ‘Having been a Major in the British Army, he was a good fighter.’<sup>14</sup>

Some key Mau Mau personalities were indeed veterans of the Second World War. Waruhiu Itote, aka ‘General China’, was a Burma veteran, and Gakaara wa Wanjau, one of the most literate inmates of the Mau Mau detention camps, was a military clerk. Bildad Kaggia and Paul Ngei, two members of the ‘Kapenguria Six’ who the colonial regime convicted along with Jomo Kenyatta on the charge of ‘managing the Mau Mau’, were both ex-servicemen. Kaggia was another clerk, and Ngei served in the East African Army Education Corps. While Ngei was a Kamba, not a Kikuyu, he defiantly admitted shouting at a district officer: ‘All you bloody Europeans will soon be killed by Mau Mau. ... We will drive you out of the country. I am Mau Mau.’<sup>15</sup> These celebrated figures, however, were not representative of the larger group of Kenyans who served in the Second World War.

The Kenyan authorities and the East Africa Command (EAC) never kept precise or complete ethnic recruitment records for the entire war, particularly because civil and military recruiters could never be absolutely certain about the ‘tribal’ origins of African soldiers.<sup>16</sup> Today, Kenya’s colonial era military personnel files are incomplete and largely uncatalogued. This may be due to simple mismanagement in the 1960s or colonial service records may have been swept up in the British government’s attempt to remove politically sensitive archival material before the transfer of power. Alexander Moradi used the ‘attestation records’ of 1,667 Kenyans for his study of the comparative health of African soldiers and civilians during the colonial era. None of the key Mau Mau figures are listed in his dataset.<sup>17</sup>

12 H. K. Wachanga, in R. Whittier (ed.), *The Swords of Kirinyaga: The Fight for Land and Freedom* (Nairobi, 1991), 26; Karimi, *Dedan Kimathi*, 15–17.

13 Anonymous, ‘Bulldozers in haunts of Mau Mau gunmen’, *The Mail* (Adelaide), 10 Oct. 1953; J. Nottingham, ‘Witness statement, claimants Ndiku Mutua & others and defendant Foreign and Commonwealth Office’, 10 Nov. 2010, ([http://www.leighday.co.uk/LeighDay/media/LeighDay/documents/Mau%20Mau/Witness\\_Statement\\_John\\_Cato\\_Nottingham\\_10-11-2012.pdf?ext=.pdf](http://www.leighday.co.uk/LeighDay/media/LeighDay/documents/Mau%20Mau/Witness_Statement_John_Cato_Nottingham_10-11-2012.pdf?ext=.pdf)).

14 D. Njagi, *The Last Mau Mau Field Marshals* (Limuru, Kenya, 1993), 82.

15 P. Evans, *Law and Disorder: Scenes of Life in Kenya* (London, 1956), 113. Some three years into his detention Ngei did, however, petition the Kenyan governor to release him on the grounds that: ‘I did not participate in any way or form knowingly in assisting in the management of Mau Mau.’ See TNA FCO 141/6797, P. J. Ngei to Kenya Governor, 2 Jan. 1955.

16 T. H. Parsons, *The African Rank-and-File: Social Implications of Colonial Service in the King’s African Rifles, 1902–64* (Portsmouth, 1999), 89–91.

17 D. Anderson, ‘Guilty secrets: deceit, denial, and the discovery of Kenya’s “migrated archive”’, *History Workshop Journal*, 80 (2015), 142–60; A. Moradi, ‘Towards an objective account of nutrition and health

Demobilization records, which provide the most accurate data on military service in East Africa during the Second World War, suggest that of the approximately 100,675 Kenyans who served in the war, roughly 18,950 of them were from the Kikuyu, Embu, or Meru communities.<sup>18</sup> While this figure confirms that almost 19 per cent of Kenyan ex-servicemen were from core Mau Mau constituencies, the vast majority of these men served in non-combatant technical and support units. This meant that most of them would not even have left Kenya during the conflict, much less received significant combat training. Enlistment figures from 1942, which are relatively accurate and capture the peak of Kenyan service in combat arms, show that Kikuyu, Embu, and Meru soldiers represented just 4.3 per cent of the Kenya-based KAR infantry battalions. Moreover, only two Kenyan KAR battalions (5 and 11 KAR) took part in the celebrated Burma campaign.<sup>19</sup> Thus, even if a significant number of Kikuyu ex-servicemen did fill the ranks of the Kenya Land Freedom Army, it was unlikely that their wartime training and experiences would have been of much tactical value. Moreover, the biographical details of key Mau Mau figures reveal that many would have been too young for service in the Second World War.<sup>20</sup>

The colonial regime itself helped foster the misconception that African ex-servicemen played a central role in Mau Mau because it openly distrusted Kenyan veterans. As Kenya's Principal Reabsorption Officer stated in 1946:

We are about to go through the most difficult period in the history of European/African relationships in the Colony, and we have the new factor of the highly intelligent and educated ex-soldier to contest with. . . . With his opposition, which is only too easy to come by, and which is capable of unlimited exploitation by those who wish us ill, we shall indeed go through a bad period.<sup>21</sup>

These fears proved groundless, and military intelligence estimates from the 1950s make little mention of the military backgrounds of KLFA members, regardless of sensationalist press reports about Kimathi's experiences in Burma. Moreover, the first published memoirs of security service personnel in the early 1960s portrayed Mau Mau fighters as gang members and fanatics rather than disciplined soldiers.<sup>22</sup>

The Mau Mau fighter as the Second World War veteran was most likely woven into Kenya's popular nationalist narrative by John Nottingham and his East African

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in colonial Kenya: a study of stature in African army recruits and civilians, 1880–1980', *Journal of Economic History*, 69 (2009), 724; A. Moradi and S. Mylavarapu, 'Men under arms in colonial Africa: East African forces', 2008, database available by request to Alexander Moradi.

- 18 The Kenyan authorities regarded the Kikuyu, Embu, and Meru as a single community in keeping military recruiting statistics. KNA DEF 1/130/33, Memos on Manpower Demobilisation and Reabsorption, 1946–7.
- 19 KNA PC NZA 2/3/84, Kenya Natives in Military Service, Analysis by Unit, 30 Apr. 1942; TNA WO 172/6484, 11 (EA) Division Order of Battle; H. Moyses-Bartlett, *The King's African Rifles* (Aldershot, UK, 1956), 575, 663, 673.
- 20 For example, Mohamed Mathu and Elijah Kinyua Ngang'a, aka General Bahati, were in their early teens during the war. Gucu Gikoyo was only five years old in 1939. See M. Mathu, *Urban Guerrilla: The Story of Muhamed Mathu* (Richmond, BC, 1974), 11; E. Kinyua Ngang'a and D. Magu Ngumo, *A Walk in the Fire: A True Story by General Bahati* (Nairobi, 2003), 14; G. Gikoyo, *We Fought for Freedom: Tulipigania Uhuru* (Nairobi, 1979), 1.
- 21 KNA DEF 1/130/1, Memorandum to Standing Finance Committee on Man Power, Demobilisation and Training, by E. M. Hyde-Clark 30 Apr. 1946.
- 22 F. Kitson, *Gangs and Counter-Gangs* (London, 1960), 15–16; D. Holman, *Bwana Drum* (London, 1964), 12–13.

Publishing House in the immediate aftermath of independence in 1963. In their highly influential *The Myth of 'Mau Mau': Nationalism and Colonialism in Kenya*, Nottingham and his co-author Carl Rosberg challenged the Corfield Report, a semi-official British government publication that characterized the Mau Mau Emergency as an 'atavistic tribal uprising', by arguing that: "'Mau Mau" was indeed an integral part of an ongoing, rationally conceived nationalist movement."<sup>23</sup> While George Bennett's suggestion that most of the East African Publishing House's memoirs of key Mau Mau personalities were ghostwritten is questionable, Nottingham unapologetically saw his press as a means of imaging a Kenyan nation that embraced the populist ideals of the Kenya Land Freedom Army.<sup>24</sup>

Some reviewers criticized Rosberg and Nottingham for their lack of documentation and simplistic depiction of Mau Mau as a nationalist movement, but their book became a central reference for the next generation of scholars and popular writers. The assumption that veterans filled the ranks of the KLFA originated with *The Myth of 'Mau Mau'* and the Mau Mau memoirs that Nottingham helped publish.<sup>25</sup> Many of the stories and claims that Mau Mau fighters were Second World War veterans first appeared in Rosberg and Nottingham's book. These include accounts of Waruhiu Itote's radicalization in India, Bildad Kaggia's experiences in the Middle East, and Dedan Mugo Kimani's service as a Army Hygiene and Swahili-language instructor. More significantly, the authors explicitly stated that Burma veterans trained the KLFA's first recruits. Rosberg and Nottingham are almost certainly referring only to Itote when making this claim, but their ambiguous assertion that 'several' ex-servicemen were involved, reinforced by Itote's own memoir *'Mau Mau' General*, suggested that most senior forest fighters were veterans. Similarly, their listing of soldiers who had 'campaigned in Ethiopia, Madagascar, India, or Burma' alongside hardcore non-veteran militants like Fred Kubai and Eliud Mutonyi as members of the Nairobi-based Forty Group created an impression that most of the members of this radical urban faction were also ex-servicemen.<sup>26</sup>

*The Myth of 'Mau Mau'* had a particularly strong influence on Okete J. E. Shiroya, one of the first generation of Kenyan historians, whose 1968 Michigan State dissertation focused exclusively on the Kenyan Africans who served in the Second World War. Shiroya combined Rosberg and Nottingham's characterization of the KLFA leadership as veterans with the colonial regime's depiction of African veterans as potential radicals in asserting that ex-servicemen played a central role in a Kenyan nationalist movement.

23 F. D. Corfield, *Historical Survey of the Origins and Growth of Mau Mau*, Command 1030 (London, 1960), 220; C. Rosberg and J. Nottingham, *The Myth of 'Mau Mau': Nationalism and Colonialism in Kenya* (Nairobi, 1985), xvii, 378.

24 R. Glazier, 'Review: *The Myth of "Mau Mau"*', *Journal of Modern African History*, 4:3 (1966), 387; L. Mair, 'The myth of Mau Mau', *International Affairs*, 43:4 (1967), 775; G. Bennett, 'Review: *General China*', *The Journal of African History*, 9:1 (1968), 179; J. Nottingham, 'Establishing an African publishing industry: a study in decolonization', *African Affairs*, 68:271 (1969), 139.

25 In addition to East African Publishing House books like Waruhiu Itote's *'Mau Mau' General*, Nottingham also helped produce earlier key work's like *'Mau Mau' Detainee*. G. Bennett, 'Review: *The Myth of "Mau Mau"*', *The Journal of African History*, 8:3 (1967), 562; J. M. Kariuki, *'Mau Mau' Detainee* (Oxford, 1963); W. Itote, *'Mau Mau' General* (Nairobi, 1967).

26 Rosberg and Nottingham, *The Myth of 'Mau Mau'*, 192–4, 240, 297.

His primary source for this claim was Fred Majdalany's *State of Emergency*, which was a thinly disguised gloss of the Corfield report.<sup>27</sup>

*The Myth of 'Mau Mau'*, coupled with Shiroya's dissertation and subsequent book, led future authors to assume, rightly or wrongly, that many KLFA men were ex-servicemen, if not veterans of the Burma campaign. Paul Maina's *Six Mau Mau Generals*, which began as a journalism school exercise, lists Kariuki wa Chegge Ruathi, aka General Kago, as a Forty Group member and KAR veteran whose 'organizational ability and remarkable knowledge of military tactics won him a lot praise from his followers'.<sup>28</sup> Most of the second wave of scholarly work on Mau Mau published in the late 1980s and early 1990s noted the presence of veterans in Forty Group but did not necessarily inflate their overall role in the KLFA.<sup>29</sup> By comparison, popular authors, particularly in Kenya, tended to unquestioningly embrace the trope of the militantly nationalistic veteran. The novelist Sam Kahiga created a fictitious Mau Mau General Kabuku who, after having 'seen the Irrawaddy [in Burma] and coloured it red with the blood of the Japs', became a heroic KLFA leader by virtue of his combat experience.<sup>30</sup>

By the turn of the twenty-first century, academics and non-specialists alike tended to accept the colonial military origins of the KLFA as fact. Caroline Elkins's *Imperial Reckoning* suggested that ex-servicemen played a central role in Forty Group, and David Robinson and Joseph Miller asserted in their introduction to *The Boy is Gone: Conversations with a Mau Mau General* that many veterans turned their 'military experience into armed struggle and "went into the forest," the vernacular term for the Mau Mau Rebellion'.<sup>31</sup> In setting the political scene for her autobiography, the Nobel Prize winner Wangari Maathai credited ex-servicemen with playing a central role in the KLFA: 'Many of the organizers of the Mau Mau ... were ex-soldiers who had fought for the British in Somalia, Ceylon, and Burma. ... The insurgency skills they learned ... in Burmese jungles gave them the expertise to resist a military assault'.<sup>32</sup> Even actual veterans like the clerk Gakaara wa Wanjau, who did not actually serve in Burma, came to assume that most Mau Mau combatants learned their skills in the colonial military: 'A good number of these people, I being one of them, had been in the Second World War and had acquired good experience in jungle warfare in the forests of Burma and in the Ethiopian highlands of Gonda [*sic*].'<sup>33</sup> Quite understandably, non-specialist textbook authors have come to take these assumptions as fact. The East African Publishing House's survey of Kenyan history for secondary school students declared that 'the ex-servicemen formed a large group of unemployed and disgruntled people who were ready to join other nationalists to demand reforms', while Macmillan's undergraduate history survey *Making of the*

27 O. J. E. Shiroya, *Kenya and World War Two: African Soldiers in the European War* (Nairobi, 1985), 144; F. Majdalany, *State of Emergency: The Full Story of Mau Mau* (London, 1962), 23.

28 P. Maina, *Six Mau Mau Generals* (Nairobi, 1977), 35.

29 D. W. Throup, *Economic and Social Origins of Mau Mau* (Nairobi, 1988); F. Furedi, *The Mau Mau War in Perspective* (Nairobi, 1990); T. Kanogo, *Squatters and the Roots of Mau Mau* (Nairobi, 1993).

30 S. Kahiga, *Dedan Kimathi: The Real Story* (Nairobi, 1992), 96–7.

31 C. Elkins, *Imperial Reckoning: The Untold Story of Britain's Gulag in Kenya* (New York, 2005), 25; Huttenbach, *The Boy is Gone*, xv.

32 W. Maathai, *Unbowed: A Memoir* (New York, 2008), 63.

33 wa Wanjau, *Mau Mau Author in Detention*, vi.

West similarly asserted that ‘Mau Mau bands’ were ‘composed mostly of war veterans from the Kikuyu ethnic group.’<sup>34</sup>

While these misconceptions largely resulted from understandable historical mistakes, some individuals most likely invented military backgrounds to gain the status and respect associated with wartime service, much like the American impostors who claimed to have fought in the Vietnam or Iraq wars. The authors who exposed fake American veterans in the book *Stolen Valor* advised that the ‘easiest way to spot phonies’ is to note incompatibilities with their medals and alleged service details.<sup>35</sup> This is a worthwhile exercise in the Kenyan context, where both specialist historians and ordinary Kenyans remain confused over the difference between British campaign medals, which were earned for serving in a specific theater of operations during the war, and decorations for heroism and bravery. According to Kenyan government documents, soldiers active in the Horn of Africa north of the Kenyan border during the Ethiopian campaign earned the ‘Africa Star’, those in uniform at any point during the conflict received a ‘War Medal’ and a ‘1939–45 Star’, while those who served in any part of Burma, Assam, or Bengal received the ‘Burma Star’. Many scholars and ordinary Kenyans take the Burma Star as proof that a man had combat experience, but as a semi-official history of the Burma campaign has pointed out: ‘As many were awarded the Star for service in Calcutta and places which saw no fighting, some resentment arose amongst those who had endured the hardship of jungle warfare.’<sup>36</sup> Moreover, there was a strong incentive to appropriate medals from legitimate veterans in the years after the war because of the status that they conferred. By the 1950s, a Second World War-era decoration was definitely not sufficient evidence to assume that the holder was an ex-serviceman, much less that he was a combat veteran. This accounts for some of the confused press reports that portrayed Kimathi as wearing the Burma Star and the over-inflation of the military credentials of key Mau Mau figures.<sup>37</sup>

In East Africa, historically inaccurate or outright fraudulent claims are most easily recognized by simply noting where, when, and how an ex-serviceman was supposed to have served. Ngugi wa Thiong’o lists his character Boro as having fought in Jerusalem, Egypt, and Burma, while Joseph Karimi has Kenyan soldiers fighting in Libya, Mozambique (which he most likely confused with Madagascar), Ceylon, India, Burma, Malaya, and Singapore.<sup>38</sup> Widely-read early books on Mau Mau like Majdalany’s *State of Emergency* further confused popular nationalist narratives by making basic mistakes. Majdalany, who covered the 1943 Italian campaign as a journalist, mistook Sotho

34 E. Maina, W. Oboka, and J. Makong’o, *History and Government Form 3 Pupils Book* (Nairobi, 2004), 116; L. Hunt, T. Martin, B. Rosenwein, and B. Smith, *Making of the West, Volume II: Since 1500: Peoples and Cultures* (New York, 2012), 933.

35 B. G. Burkett and G. Whitley, *Stolen Valor: How the Vietnam Generation Was Robbed of Its Heroes and Its History* (Dallas, 1998), 352.

36 KNA DC TAMB 1/9/16/146, African Eligibility for Service Medals & Stars; M. Osborne, *Ethnicity and Empire in Kenya: Loyalty and Martial Race among the Kamba, c. 1800 to the Present* (Cambridge, 2014), 234; D. Smurthwaite, *The Forgotten War: the British Army in the Far East, 1941–5* (London, 1992), 167.

37 Paul Ngei, for example, most likely embellished his military credentials in his testimony at the Kapenguria Six trial. The Trial of Jomo Kenyatta and 5 Others, v. III, 1759–60, RR 9/15. See also KNA MAA 2/3/10/III/16d, South Kavirondo District Annual Report 1944; Anonymous, ‘Bulldozers in haunts of Mau Mau gunmen’.

38 Ngugi, *Weep Not, Child*, 26; Karimi, *Dedan Kimathi*, 13–14, 377.

members of the African Auxiliary Pioneer Corps (AAPC) for Kenyans in listing Italy as a place where Kikuyu ex-servicemen learned to be militant.<sup>39</sup>

While Kenyans troops were indeed in Southeast Asia and the Middle East during the war, it was highly unlikely, if not impossible, for an individual soldier to have served in both regions because units did not shift between the two theaters. And substantive East African units were never in Mozambique, Malaya, or Singapore. Using the filters of time and place of service it becomes easy to see that the Obama family history incorrectly recalled Hussein Onyango, former US President Barack Obama's grandfather, as a combat veteran of Ethiopia, India, and Burma.<sup>40</sup> The vast majority of Kenyans who served in the Middle East were members of the AAPC, not the colonial infantry. Only a handful of these labor companies were attached to the East African combat formations that fought in Burma, and the East Africa Command recruited these select units specifically for service in South East Asia rather than redeploying AAPC companies from the Middle East. Moreover, only a single East African infantry battalion, 23 KAR, served in the Middle East during the Second World War.<sup>41</sup> Equally important, the vast majority of Kikuyu ex-servicemen had no combat experience or even conventional military training. Most Kenyan askaris never left Eastern Africa during the war, and, as already noted, the vast majority of Kikuyu soldiers that did go abroad served in non-combatant labor and support units.

It thus bears asking why populist narratives of Kenyan history give Kikuyu ex-servicemen pride of place in the Mau Mau revolt and assume that they were combat veterans? Mau Mau did not originate in the colonial army, and for the most part the KLFA men did not utilize conventional military skills in the Kenyan forests and Nairobi slums. Of course this is not to say that there were no ex-servicemen among the KLFA's ranks. In addition to well-known figures like Waruhiu Itote, there were less celebrated veterans like Stephen Savano wa Maveke, a Kamba school boy turned signaler who colonial officials press-ganged from the Government African School in Machakos. 'I joined politics in 1948 and became an activist because we were treated badly by white people. . . . I took the Mau Mau oath in 1952 fully knowing the reason behind it.'<sup>42</sup> Many ex-servicemen shared Savano's frustration with postwar Kenya, but the colonial regime's demobilization and reabsorption policies, which largely succeeded in returning them to their rural homes, blunted their impact on Kenyan politics. This is also why they did not play a central leadership role in Mau Mau.<sup>43</sup>

39 B. Gray, *Basuto Soldiers in Hitler's War* (Maseuru, 1953), 54–6; Majdalany, *State of Emergency*, 23.

40 Moreover, the Obama family history has Onyango enlisting at the age of 47 and returning home early from the war in 1941. As East African units did not begin fighting in Burma until 1944, it is highly unlikely that he could have served there. P. Firstbrook, *The Obamas: The Untold Story of an African Family* (New York, 2010), 161–2.

41 Along with a battalion of the Northern Rhodesia Regiment, 23 KAR was on garrison duty, most likely in Syria, Iraq, or Iran. TNA WO 193/121, WO to CnC ME, 9 Mar. 1940; TNA WO 253/7, East Africa Directorate of Labour; TNA WO 169/18211, EAC conference minutes, 25 July 1944.

42 Interview courtesy of Victoria Mutheu and Sagwa Chabeda, Washington University African Oral History Project, Aug. 2015.

43 D. Killingray, *Fighting for Britain: African Soldiers in the Second World War* (Rochester, NY, 2010), 206–7; Parsons, *The African Rank-and-File*, 259–60.

Nevertheless, most Second World War veterans agreed with Shiroya that they contributed to Kenya's national liberation by sharing the worldliness and political sophistication they had acquired in the army with the civilian population.<sup>44</sup> The willingness of rank-and-file soldiers in the KAR battalions, most of whom were not Kikuyu, to fight against the Kenya Land Freedom Army in the Mau Mau war has largely been forgotten in postcolonial Kenya. Ordinary Kenyans took pride that an earlier generation had been part of the Allied victory in the Second World War, even though they had little love for the British Empire. It was easy to believe, particularly when the details and geography of this service were hazy, that these same veterans would later fight for freedom and nationalism against an oppressive colonial regime. Over time, the respect accorded to Second World War veterans has merged with the recollections of the Mau Mau Emergency as an anticolonial revolt in popular Kenyan nationalist narratives.

## THE REALITIES OF KENYAN MILITARY SERVICE IN THE SECOND WORLD WAR

There has been significant room for creative nationalist imagining in Kenya because scholarly and popular narratives of Kenyan history both tend to assume that the King's African Rifles was the sole military formation in colonial East Africa during the Second World War and that every African who served in the military during the war received some form of combat training. These are entirely understandable assumptions. During the interwar era, the KAR was indeed the de facto colonial army in the region. Consisting of lightly equipped infantry battalions recruited in Kenya, Uganda, Tanganyika (Tanzania), and Nyasaland (Malawi), its primary mission was internal security and, after the Italian invasion of Ethiopia in 1935, limited border defense. Most all KAR askaris during this period were infantrymen, apart from the handful of better educated men in rudimentary medical, transport, and signaling sub-units.

During the Second World War, the War Office took over the KAR battalions from the Colonial Office and made the newly constituted East Africa Command responsible for organizing them into fully-equipped infantry brigades and divisions. Colonial administrators were responsible for recruiting African soldiers in their respective territories. These thoroughly modern formations required a full range of specialists and laborers to enable the more celebrated infantrymen to fight. Thus, in addition to the KAR battalions, East African veterans could have also served as drivers and mechanics in the East African Army Service Corps (EAASC), radiomen in the East African Signal Corps, nurses and dressers in the East African Army Medical Corps (EAAMC), and instructors and teachers in the East African Army Education Corps (EAAEC). There were also a host of smaller and more obscure units like the East African Army Chaplain's Department, the East African Electrical and Mechanical Engineers, and the East African Armoured Corps.<sup>45</sup> More significantly, the East Africa Command, in cooperation with the East African

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<sup>44</sup> Shiroya, *Kenya and World War Two*, 124, 154–6.

<sup>45</sup> For the most complete, but still not definitive list, of East African wartime units, see Ministry of Information, *East Africans at War* (Nairobi, 1944).

colonial governments, raised the East African Military Labour Service and East African companies of the African Auxiliary Pioneer Corps (which also included units recruited in West Africa and the High Commission Territories in southern Africa). These labor units were entirely distinct and separate from the EAC's combat formations.

While popular Kenyan nationalist narratives tend to gloss over these distinctions, the substantive differences in how the civil and military authorities recruited and trained East African soldiers had a direct impact on the capacity and inclination of Kenyan ex-servicemen to play a role in anticolonial struggles. As previously noted, most of the men who served in the better known KAR battalions were Ugandans, Tanganyikans, and Nyasalanders. This is not because there were insufficient recruits in Kenya. Rather, Kenyan colonial officials and settlers used their political influence in London to push the burden of military recruiting onto neighboring territories in the later years of the war.<sup>46</sup> Pointing out that the East Africa Command drew heavily on local manpower reserves in the early years of the war because Kenya was the springboard for the campaign to drive the Italians from Ethiopia, the Kenyan settlers secured favorable legislation that gave them privileged access to African labor via civil conscription and strict limits on military recruiting.<sup>47</sup> The Kenyan authorities, who were generally sympathetic to the settlers' demands, also sought to ensure that mass recruiting and overseas service did not expose African soldiers to anticolonial nationalism and unsuitable social influences.

These factors determined how individual Kenyans experienced military service. There were only a handful of frontline Kenyan KAR battalions by the end of the war, but Kenyans comprised the bulk of the East African Military Labour Service, the East African Army Service Corps and most of the other East African specialist units.<sup>48</sup> While substantial numbers of them volunteered to serve, by 1942 the Colonial Office allowed colonial governments to conscript men when necessary. Tanganyika had blanket conscription, but the official policy in Kenya and Uganda, which did not always hold in practice, was to only conscript men for the theoretically non-combatant units like the EAMLS and AAPC.<sup>49</sup>

In addition to husbanding their African labor reserves, the Kenyan authorities were equally determined to prevent Kikuyu, Embu and Meru men from serving in combat units. Leaning heavily on the premise that some 'tribes' were more 'martial' than others, civil and military officials agreed that the Kikuyu lacked the character, if not biological constitution, to be effective soldiers. A 1937 military report sweepingly declared that their 'poor physical' made them only suitable for non-combatant labor duties. Well aware of this slur, Kikuyu newspapers called for the government to change its recruiting

<sup>46</sup> Parsons, *The African Rank-and-File*, 73–7.

<sup>47</sup> In 1943, the East African Governor's Conference chastised Kenya for attempting to shift even more of its military recruiting obligations to Uganda and Tanganyika. KNA DEF 9/4/167, Defence (African Labour for Essential Undertakings) 1942; KNA DEF 15/27/12, Chief Secretary East Africa Governors' Conference to Chief Native Commissioner Kenya, 9 Nov. 1942.

<sup>48</sup> Kenya's recruiting quota for the KAR in 1944 was zero. KNA DEF 15/28/74, Executive Circular on African Manpower, 21 Oct. 1943; KNA KSM 1/22/14, Order of Precedence for KAR Battalions 1945; KNA DEF 15/29/87a, EAC HQ to Chief Secretary Kenya, 18 Jan. 1945.

<sup>49</sup> KNA MD 4/5/140/65a, CSEAG to Chief Secretaries Uganda and Tanganyika, 14 Feb. 1942; TNA CO 820/48/12, CSEAG to Under Colonial Secretary, 19 Feb. 1942.

policies when the war broke out in 1939. The EAC, however, refused to budge, and pointed to rumors, later repeated by the Corfield Report on Mau Mau, that the KCA was stockpiling arms to support an Italian invasion as justification for preserving the ban on recruiting Kikuyu for the KAR.<sup>50</sup> The Chief Native Commission blanched at making this accusation public and recommended telling Kikuyu leaders that ‘we do not want Kikuyu because “their stomachs are not suited to Army service”’, rather than admitting that ‘they are not wanted because we suspect their loyalty’.<sup>51</sup>

This explains why Kikuyu askaris constituted only 4.3 per cent of the Kenyan KAR battalions in April 1942, while 77 per cent of Kenyan infantrymen were from the supposedly more martial Kamba and Kalenjin communities. It is important to note that these statistics reflect the assumptions of civil and military officials, who, despite their claims of ethnographic expertise, often were not able to distinguish between one African community and another. In the Kikuyu case, it is entirely possible, if not likely, that some men joined the KAR by claiming to be Kamba.<sup>52</sup> Overall, however, colonial recruiters channeled most Kikuyu volunteers and conscripts into labor, support, and clerical jobs (where their superior educational credentials were an asset).<sup>53</sup>

These realities shaped the wartime experiences of key Mau Mau personalities that popular Kenyan nationalist narratives identify as ex-servicemen. Most of the scholarly and popular sources that offer specific details on Dedan Kimathi’s military service agree that he detested being treated like a ‘scavenger’ while digging and cleaning latrines and hated having to wear short trousers and a ‘closed collar jumper-coat’. This was the standard uniform of the East African Military Labor Service, which suggests that Karimi, who has Kimathi working at the Italian prisoner-of-war camp at Ndarugu, was wrong to say that upon enlistment he was taken to ‘the King’s African Rifles base’ on Waiyaki Way for induction and military training.<sup>54</sup>

More likely, Kimathi was swept up in the 1940 through 1941 military labor recruiting dragnet (which included both volunteers and conscripts). Members of the EAMLS were under military discipline but received virtually no combat training. Instead, they built roads and military installations and served as dockworkers, maintenance men, personal servants, and sweepers.<sup>55</sup> Kimathi was undoubtedly a sweeper, which was the popular

50 Great Britain, War Office, *Kenya Military Report* (London: War Office, 1937); KNA PC CP 4/3/2, Central Province Annual Report 1939; KNA CNC 10/129/4, Secretary to Chief Political Officer to CNC, 26 Mar. 1940; Corfield, *Historical Survey of the Origins and Growth of Mau Mau*, 47–8.

51 CNC/10/129/5, CNC to Secretary to Chief Political Officer, 30 Mar. 1940.

52 In Nyasaland, civil authorities had to remind military recruiters that the supposedly martial Nguru and non-martial Ampatola were actually from the same community. Social scientists who try to use colonial-era tribal recruiting quotas as datasets would do well to note this reality. Malawi National Archives (MNA) S41 1/20/4, Minute to Chief Secretary Nyasaland, 8 Apr. 1943; KNA PC NZA 2/3/84, Kenya Natives in Military Service, Analysis by Unit, 30 Apr. 1942. For a more detailed discussion of martial race theory and imperial recruiting, see T. H. Parsons, ‘“Wakamba warriors are soldiers of the queen”: the evolution of the Kamba as a martial race, 1890–1970’, *Ethnohistory*, 46 (1999), 672–4.

53 KNA MAA 12/3/16/III/42, EAC HQ to Chief Secretary, 20 May 1940; KNA DC NYI 2/10/1/109, Central Province Intelligence Report, Apr. 1942.

54 Wachanga, *The Swords of Kirinyaga*, 26; Karimi, *Dedan Kimathi*, 15–17.

55 KNA MD 4/5/135/61a, ‘Report of committee in respect of Native Labour’, 12 Aug. 1940; TNA WO 106/5099, Notes for WO Liaison Officer (EA), 5 May 1942.

term for a 'Class III Sanitary Orderly'. As such, his duties would have included digging and operating latrines.<sup>56</sup> Given the unappealing nature of this assignment, it was small wonder that he was insubordinate. While Kimathi's military career lasted only three months, some sweepers did actually see combat. In 1960, the Executive Officer of the African Section of the British Legion reported that he met a group of Embu ex-sweepers who, as members of an advanced surgical unit, had fought off a surprise Japanese attack in Burma.<sup>57</sup>

Deedan Kimathi never had this experience as a military laborer, but Waruhiu Itote did. While Itote was unquestionably part of the Tanganyikan 36 KAR battalion in Burma, he was not, contrary to the popular nationalist narrative and his own autobiography, an infantryman. John Nunneley, who commanded a platoon in the battalion, distinctly recalled him as a mess steward.<sup>58</sup> Itote wrote in his autobiography that he enlisted in Nairobi in 1942 and received three months' preliminary training at the military camp at Ruiru. This was the main EAMLS depot where recruits learned military discipline before being assigned to specific labor duties or passed on to other units to fill basic support and labor roles. This is how the aforementioned EAMLS sweepers ended up in Burma. In Itote's case he was probably assigned to 36 KAR battalion to provide domestic comforts for European officers while it was training at Yatta in preparation for deployment overseas.<sup>59</sup>

As one of only nine Kikuyu askaris in the almost entirely Tanganyikan battalion (the other eight men were probably also transfers from the EAMLS), it seems highly unlikely that Itote was, as he later claimed, a member of the battalion's intelligence section, the unit led by Captain Nunneley. Still, this did not mean that Itote did not face combat. 36 KAR was under considerable pressure in Burma because the battalion had relatively poor senior officers. The unit took high casualties in intense jungle fighting during the summer and fall of 1944 and was eventually shifted out of the front lines to become 11 (EA) Division's headquarters defense battalion by the end of year.<sup>60</sup> This meant that Itote would have had plenty of opportunities to come under fire while the battalion was on the front lines. Nunneley recalled a fellow officer teaching Itote how to use a submachine gun even though he was a mess steward because 'every man-jack fought if need be and certainly, when battalion headquarters was attacked by Japanese night-raiding jitter parties, there were no non-combatant duties'.<sup>61</sup> Itote was almost certainly embellishing when he wrote about the 'white heat of battle' blistering away colonial racism during intense jungle combat, and the chronology of his service in '*Mau Mau*' *General* does not fit with 36 KAR's actual deployments, but it seems certain that he did experience combat in Burma.<sup>62</sup>

56 TNA WO 106/5102, Trade Test for Class III Sanitary Orderlies, 1943.

57 KNA OPE 1/7/112/1, Safari Report by Robertson-Glasgow, 26 May 1960.

58 Oxford Colonial Records Project (OCRCP) Weston Library, Bodleian Libraries, Oxford (WL) Mss.Afr.s.1715/24, Captain John Nunneley; Interviews with John Nunneley Oct. 1994 and June 2004.

59 Itote, '*Mau Mau*' *General*, 23; M. Osborne (ed.), *The Life and Times of General China: Mau Mau and the End of Empire in Kenya* (Princeton, 2015), 146.

60 OCRP WL, Mss.Afr.s.1715/176, Lieutenant Colonel C. G. Robson; OCRP WL, Mss.Afr.s.1715/203, Nunneley; Michael W. Biggs Private Papers, Lieutenant Colonel M. W. Biggs to General Mansergh, CO 11 (EA) Division, 3 Jan. 1945; Interview with Michael W. Biggs, Nov. 1994.

61 J. Nunneley, *Tales from the King's African Rifles* (London, 1998), 67.

62 Itote, '*Mau Mau*' *General*, 27.

Bildad Kaggia was not a combat veteran, but he did serve as an African Auxiliary Pioneer Corps clerk in the deserts of North Africa and Cairo, and even in Britain. The details of Stanley Mathenge's service are extremely sketchy, but it seems most likely that he was also a member of an AAPC company in North Africa. Like the EAMLS, the East Africa Command intended the AAPC to be a non-combatant labor unit. The difference between the two wartime formations was that the AAPC was to work behind the lines in combat theaters, while the EAMLS was for domestic East African service only. 'Auxiliary' pioneers from throughout the empire, including the West Indies, India, Palestine, and West and southern Africa, provided the manpower and logistical support that allowed Britain to wage war on a global scale.<sup>63</sup> In 1941, the Middle East Command asked the East African governments to provide non-combatant labor to free more European troops for combat duties. The East African civil and military authorities cooperated because the victory over the Italians in Ethiopia had reduced demands on the EAMLS. This explains why North Africa, not Burma, should figure more prominently in Kenyan nationalist narratives. By the end of the war, the East African AAPC consisted of 55,452 men, 22 per cent of whom were Kenyans.<sup>64</sup>

While the Middle East Command assured the colonial governments that the East African AAPC companies would be solely for guard and construction duties, in reality these askaris often saw more intense combat than their more celebrated counterparts in Southeast Asia. This was particularly the case after the German capture of Tobruk in 1942 when 1823 Company ran into a German ambush during the disorganized British retreat from the fortified Libyan port. Over two hundred men died, while roughly fifty more became prisoners-of-war. This was not an isolated case. In another instance four AAPC companies suffered heavy losses when an Axis bombing raid on the Abu Hagag railway station touched off a literal fire storm.<sup>65</sup> It is little wonder that veterans of the AAPC, several of whom sustained debilitating wounds, bitterly recalled losing comrades to enemy fire with little or no military training to prepare them for the rigors of combat.<sup>66</sup>

Bildad Kaggia did not experience this sort of trauma during his service in North Africa. He was, however, acutely aware of the Middle East Command's substandard training and treatment of the East African AAPC companies. He enlisted because he could not afford the fees for the prestigious Alliance High School and because, as a devout Christian, he heard that soldiers on leave could visit Jerusalem. Kaggia wrote in detail about these war-time experiences in his autobiography, also published by Nottingham's East African Publishing House, *The Roots of Freedom*. A keen political observer, he took note of the

63 For the most comprehensive history of the AAPC to date, see A. Jackson, 'Supplying the war: the High Commission Territories' military-logistical contribution in the Second World War', *Journal of Military History*, 66 (2002), 719–60.

64 KNA MD 4/5/137/10, East Africa Governors' Conference Notes, Future of EAMLS, 10 Apr. 1941; KNA MD 4/5/117/III/8, General Routine Order 1842, African Auxiliary Pioneer Corps, 6 Oct. 1941; KNA DEF 15/29/87a, EAC HQ to Chief Secretary Kenya, 18 Jan. 1945.

65 KNA MD 4/5/66/26a, Report by J. E. V. Ross, AAPC Welfare Officer, 27 July 1942; KNA PC NZA 2/3/97/1, Ross to Director of Pioneers and Labour MEC, July 1942.

66 Interviews with Okong'o Ounya, Barnabas Mochoge, and Ahmed Ali Mohammed, Mar.–Apr. 1994.

underlying causes of the unrest that seemed to plague the East African units, particularly cases where askaris used the threat of violence to win better working conditions.<sup>67</sup>

There is virtually no specific information on Stanley Mathenge's military service. Gucu Gikoyo, Henry Kahinga Wachanga, Paul Maina, and most other Mau Mau chroniclers recall Mathenge as an infantryman and Burma veteran who won a senior leadership role in the forests by virtue of his superior military training. Wachanga wrote that he claimed to have served in India, Madagascar, the Middle East, Burma, Rangoon, Kalewa (a major battlefield in Burma), Singapore, Ceylon, Egypt, Ethiopia, and Jerusalem, while the novelist Sam Kahiga's fictitious Stanley Mathenge declared:

[The British] knew we were good fighters but no black man was made a General although those white soldiers who were supposed to lead us preferred to stay in the rear and leave us to die at the front. We saw all those tricks, and from them, we learnt a lot.<sup>68</sup>

Yet there is no surviving direct evidence that Mathenge was ever in the KAR or Burma. Unlike Itote, Kimathi, Kaggia, and Ngei, the colonial security services never had a chance to interrogate him, nor did he leave any written memoirs. Instead, he simply disappeared from the Kenyan forests in the mid- to late 1950s. While he most likely died in combat, many popular Kenyan nationalist narratives record that he escaped with a band of followers to Ethiopia.<sup>69</sup>

We will probably never know Mathenge's actual fate, but what seems most likely is that he was a member of one of the East African AAPC companies that deployed to the Middle East in 1942. Mathenge's wife Miriam Muthoni told interviewers that she met him in 1944 in the northern town of Kitale when he had just returned from Egypt and was en route to Burma. The East African combat formations were already in Burma by this time, and the East Africa Command did not redeploy Middle East AAPC companies to Southeast Asia. However, the Middle East Command did try to improve morale in the AAPC by granting East African soldiers leave. In many cases these leave parties traveled through the Sudan, and so if Mathenge was coming home on leave in 1944 he might well have passed through Kitale and met his future wife. This would also explain how, according to Wachanga, he could claim to have seen Jerusalem. Apart from the askaris of 23 KAR, no East African infantrymen would have had the opportunity to visit Palestine during the war.<sup>70</sup>

## SWORDS VS PENS IN THE MAU MAU WAR

While the precise involvement of Second World War veterans in Mau Mau is difficult to discern exactly, there is little doubt that the roughly 100,000 Kenyans who served during

67 B. Kaggia, *Roots of Freedom, 1921–63* (Nairobi, 1975), 22–7, 33–6.

68 Gikoyo, *We Fought for Freedom*, 295–7; Wachanga, *The Swords of Kirinyaga*, 172–3; Maina, *Six Mau Mau Generals*, 56–8; Kahiga, *Dedan Kimathi: The Real Story*, 140–1.

69 Republic of Kenya, The National Assembly House of Representatives Official Report, 'Whereabouts of Stanley Mathenge, Question No. 319', v. 8, 7 June 1963; Karimi, *Dedan Kimathi*, 383; 'Kenya's lost general: a case of mistaken identity', *The Economist*, 12 June 2003.

70 J. Awori and E. Mungai (eds.), *Kenya Women Reflections* (Nairobi, 1983), 164; KNA MD 4/5/137/144a, Report by Buganda Resident A. H. Cox, 15 Mar. 1943; KNA DEF 15/12/45a, Sidney Fazan, Report Visit to the East African Troops, 19 July to 20 Aug. 1944; Wachanga, *The Swords of Kirinyaga*, 24–31.

the war left the military with high expectations. Wartime propaganda told them repeatedly that they saved the world from tyranny, and it was understandable that they expected tangible rewards for their heroism. Noting the laudatory press reports of East African exploits in Burma, Jomo Kenyatta gave voice to these aspirations by asking: 'Surely [the soldiers] are entitled to a finer expression of gratitude from their British trustees?'<sup>71</sup>

Most East African veterans were disappointed by the colonial regime's failure to reward them for their service, but rarely did their grievances lead to significant unrest. The image of the worldly but angry African ex-serviceman was based more on colonial phobias than on actual instances of veteran political subversion. The Kenyan authorities recalled that many of the founding members of the Kikuyu Central Association had been in the Carrier Corps during the First World War, and the subversive activities of British First World War veterans in the immediate years after that war suggested that Kenyan ex-servicemen might become equally dangerous.<sup>72</sup> These fears became widespread among the Kenyan settlers as the Second World War drew to a close. In calling for special measures to discipline returning soldiers, a letter to the *The Times* warned that the return of a slouch hat-wearing 'undisciplined lout' (the slouch hat was part of the EAC's standard battle dress) to African villages 'may well jeopardize the whole fabric of indirect rule'.<sup>73</sup>

In practice, however, there were actually very few cases of organized unrest or resistance by ex-servicemen. This was due in large part to the Kenyan government's successful 'reabsorption' policies that provided vocational training to skilled veterans, while returning most illiterate infantrymen and military laborers to the countryside.<sup>74</sup> Yet, as Frank Furedi notes, the fall of Singapore to Japanese troops in 1942, the mass refusal of an entire East African infantry brigade to deploy from Eritrea to Madagascar that same year, and suspicions that African soldiers were picking up subversive ideas from South Asian nationalists and African American soldiers created a widespread perception that returning African troops would threaten settler colonialism in Kenya.<sup>75</sup> This was against the backdrop of much larger postwar anxieties about how Britain would retain its position as a global power and reestablish control over its empire 'east of Suez'.<sup>76</sup>

Widespread discussion of the dangers posed by African veterans in the press further reinforced these perceptions in both the public imagination and popular Kenyan nationalist narratives. Edward Grigg, a former Kenyan governor and Conservative member of the

71 J. Kenyatta, *Kenya: The Land of Conflict* (London, c. 1944), 19–20.

72 S. R. Ward, 'Intelligence surveillance of British ex-servicemen, 1918–20', *The Historical Journal*, 16 (1973), 184–5.

73 'The returned askari: the problem of demobilization in East Africa', *The Times* (London), 21 Aug. 1945.

74 KNA DEF 1/130/1, Memorandum to Standing Finance Committee, 30 Apr. 1946, by Kenyan Labour Commissioner; KNA MAA 2/1/49/187, Central Province Intelligence Report, July 1946; KNADEF 1/130/15a/1, Report on Demobilisation and Reabsorption for Period Aug. 1946–Apr. 1947; H. Brands, 'Wartime recruiting practices, martial identity, and post-World War II demobilization in colonial Kenya', *The Journal of African History*, 46 (2005), 124–5; Parsons, *The African Rank-and-File*, 259–60.

75 TNA WO/169/6965, Lieutenant Colonel R. E. Yeldham CO 2/3 KAR to HQ 25 Brigade, 17 Feb. 1942; F. Furedi, 'The demobilized African soldier and the blow to white prestige', in D. Killingray and D. Omissi (eds.), *Guardians of Empire* (Manchester, 1999), 182–4, 187.

76 R. Hyam, *Britain's Declining Empire: The Road to Decolonisation, 1918–68* (Cambridge, 2006), 94–7; C. Bayly and T. Harper, *Forgotten Wars: Freedom and Revolution in Southeast Asia* (Cambridge, MA, 2007), 6–7.

House of Lords, blamed 'demobilized askaris for spreading discontent everywhere', and the notorious Corfield Report attributed the Mau Mau revolt in part to 'thousands of the younger generation of Kikuyu, many of whom had traveled far afield and had tasted some of the less respectable fruits of civilization'.<sup>77</sup> On the opposite end of the political spectrum, the Kenyan nationalist historian Ali Mazrui came to a similar conclusion:

The war ... humanized white men in the eyes of their African comrades as they fought together in the Horn of Africa, North Africa, Malaya and elsewhere. To witness a white man scared to death under fire was itself a revelation to many Africans, who had previously seen white men only in their arrogant commanding postures as a colonial elite.<sup>78</sup>

There is actually little evidence that African soldiers were emboldened by the British Empire's wartime weakness, and most never accepted European claims of racial superiority, but these sorts of assumptions underpinned the stereotype of the racialized ex-serviceman.

To be sure, a great many veterans were embittered by the colonial regime's poor treatment of disabled comrades and its refusal to pay service pensions to healthy men.<sup>79</sup> Seeking to better their lives by making use of their worldly experiences and military training, many Kikuyu soldiers sought to organize themselves into trading cooperatives. Pooling their pay and discharge benefits, they planned to open bakeries and soap factories, launch bus and transport companies using surplus army vehicles, and even purchase a dried vegetable plant from the Kenyan government. Few of these projects ever came to fruition, much less were successful. In some cases, naive former soldiers lost their investments simply because they underestimated the expense and effort involved in launching a business, but the Kenyan government also played a direct role in thwarting their ambitions by refusing to issue transport and trading licenses. Claiming that the primitive economies of the 'native reserves' could not support too many entrepreneurial ventures, the colonial regime claimed that it was protecting veterans from the risks of free market capitalism.<sup>80</sup>

Frustrations over this self-serving paternalism compounded longstanding Kikuyu grievances over land and unemployment. While the government rewarded a relatively small group of trusted non-commissioned officers with chieftainships and other positions of responsibility, a great many, if not most, Kikuyu veterans sympathized with the angry young men who founded the Kenya Land Freedom Army. This is how the stereotypical frustrated ex-serviceman became linked with Kikuyu militancy in Mau Mau historiography.

However, it is difficult to determine exactly how many veterans were active in the radicalized urban 'crowd' of taxi drivers, petty traders, thieves, prostitutes, and unemployed laborers that Frank Furedi took to be the 'vanguard of nationalist movement'. Imprecise

77 Lord Altrincham, *Kenya's Opportunity: Memories, Hopes, and Ideas* (London, 1955), 230; Corfield, *Historical Survey of the Origins and Growth of Mau Mau*, 49.

78 A. Mazrui, 'Africa and the legacy of the Second World War: political, economic and cultural aspects', in *UNESCO's Africa and the Second World War* (Paris, 1985), 13–14.

79 T. H. Parsons, 'No country fit for heroes: the plight of disabled Kenyan veterans', in J. Byfield, C. Brown, T. H. Parsons, and A. Sikainga (eds.), *Africa and World War II* (New York, 2015), 127–43.

80 Liddell Hart Centre for Military Archives (LHC) DP/IX/3, Brigadier H. H. Dempsey General Dimoline, 14 June 1945; KNA CNC 10/68/46a, o/c 1851 (EA) Garrison Company to Kenya Information Office, 29 July 1945; KNA DEF 10/63/12, Kenyan Secretariat to Director of Man Power, 3 Oct. 1946.

wording in *The Myth of 'Mau Mau'* suggested that the leaders of these radicals were ex-servicemen. After defining Forty Group as 'largely but not exclusively composed of ex-servicemen of the age group circumcised in 1940', Rosberg and Nottingham then provided a list of its leading figures, thereby incorrectly suggesting that that key figures like Fred Kubai and Charles Wambaa were veterans. Waruhiu Itote reinforced this perception by claiming a leadership role in Forty Group and describing the rest of its senior members as 'young ex-Army Kikuyu NCOs whose whole outlook had been changed radically by their service overseas'.<sup>81</sup> Many later historians took these claims as fact. According to Wunyabari Maloba, disgruntled veterans were part of the 'angry, embittered, urban unemployed', while Kanogo observed that this group of 'disappointed' former soldiers was 'an easy target for political mobilization'.<sup>82</sup> On the other hand, Sidney Fazan, a senior colonial official, questioned these assumptions in his memoirs:

It is not true, as it is sometimes stated, that many of [the radicals] had served in the East African forces overseas and had returned disaffected with the war. They may have served in the forces in Kenya at the very end of the war, in some cases, but few had seen service overseas.<sup>83</sup>

Fazan was probably right about this, but, as noted, almost 19,000 Kikuyu, Embu and Meru young men did serve in the East African forces during the Second World War. Thus, given that the colonial security services came to believe that virtually the entire Kikuyu community was complicit in Mau Mau, it is logical to assume that a good many of these veterans supported the Kenya Land Freedom Army in one way or another. While they may not have served in combat units, their familiarity with military discipline and knowledge of the wider world had value to men with no military training whatsoever. Therefore Itote's claim to have played a central role in training KLFA recruits in 1952 is plausible, although his assertion that he did so under the direct orders of Kenyatta is harder to believe.<sup>84</sup> While he was enlisted as a mess steward, his service with 36 KAR in Burma would have given him some grounding in basic tactics and jungle fighting. Similarly, even if Stanley Mathenge had served with an African Auxiliary Pioneer Corps company in North Africa, not in Burma as most popular Mau Mau histories claim, he too would have acquired a basic knowledge of military discipline and methods. This probably explains why the KLFA adopted so many of the colonial army's institutions and traditions. Karari Njama recalled that Mau Mau generals were addressed as 'Abandi' (a version of the KAR's 'Effendi') and were summoned to meals with shouts of 'Officer's Mess! Officer's Mess!'<sup>85</sup>

81 F. Furedi, 'The African crowd in Nairobi: popular movements and elite politics', *The Journal of African History*, 14:2 (1973), 284-4; Rosberg and Nottingham, *The Myth of 'Mau Mau'*, 240; Itote, *'Mau Mau' General*, 38.

82 T. Kanogo, *Dedan Kimathi: Makers of Kenya's History*, No. 3 (Nairobi, 1992), 12; W. Maloba, *Mau Mau and Kenya: An Analysis of a Peasant Revolt* (Bloomington, IN, 1993), 36. See also Maina, *Six Mau Mau Generals*, 13; D. McIntyre, *The Commonwealth of Nations: Origins and Impact, 1869-1971* (Minneapolis, 1977), 415; Killingley, *Fighting for Britain*, 223.

83 S. H. Fazan, in J. Lonsdale (ed.), *Colonial Kenya Observed: British Rule, Mau Mau and the Wind of Change* (London, 2015), 189.

84 Itote, *'Mau Mau' General*, 46, 51.

85 D. L. Barnett and K. Njama, *Mau Mau from Within* (London, 1966), 235-6.

The loss, or intentional destruction, of most colonial-era military personnel records make it virtually impossible to determine where and when Kenyan Second World War veterans actually served. This allowed surviving KLFA men like Itote and later generations of nationalist historians to inflate the military credentials of the Mau Mau 'generals'. Yet this military myth making, which was hardly unique to Kenya, tends to obscure evidence, which suggests that relatively ordinary Kikuyu ex-servicemen, some who were indeed veterans of Burma, played some role in the KLFA. In the summer of 1945, Fazan, who was then the East African Political Liaison Officer, took note of Kikuyu soldiers serving as clerks, signallers, servants, and medical dressers in Burma. Some 14 years later, the executive officer of the African Section of the British Legion, who was the former battalion commander of 36 KAR in Burma, reported that a significant number of the Mau Mau fighters and sympathizers in detention were ex-servicemen.<sup>86</sup>

It is difficult, however, to assess published claims that these relatively ordinary veterans enhanced the combat capacity of the KLFA because the Mau Mau leadership, the colonial security forces, and nationalist historians all shared an interest in overstating the KLFA's combat capabilities. We do know, however, that it was not easy to defeat the insurgency. Against the active forest fighters, whose strength historians have put 12–35,000 men and women, the British government deployed 12 infantry battalions (six KAR and six British Army), armored cars, artillery batteries, engineering units, and medium bombers.<sup>87</sup> The insurgents were armed with homemade guns and a few stolen rifles and submachine guns. In 1954, the East Africa Command's *Handbook on Anti-Mau Mau Operations* concluded that the KLFA's immediate aim was to 'expand the security threat to an extent which will be beyond the capacity of the [Kenyan] Government to contain', but it dismissed the guerrilla bands as more effective in 'intimidating the population' than in actual combat.<sup>88</sup>

Be that as it may, it took nearly four years to break the rebel's will to resist. In 1952, the security forces struggled to protect the settler population during operations that Huw Bennett has deemed 'quite seriously flawed'.<sup>89</sup> Faced with questions in Parliament and the British press as to why it was so difficult to defeat such a lightly armed force, the British military commanders cast the rebels as proficient jungle fighters. A 1953 briefing by the Director of Operations declared: 'Good initiative is displayed by the leaders and the gangs are well disciplined. Their training is not to be despised, except in musketry', and the EAC's anti-Mau Mau operations handbook similarly praised the KLFA's ability to maneuver in the forests: 'The Mau Mau are fleet of foot, silent in movement, highly experienced in fieldcraft.'<sup>90</sup> These excuses helped substantiate assumptions that senior KLFA leaders were Second World War veterans.

86 KNA DEF 15/12/80a, East Africa Political Liaison Officer, Report on a Visit to the East African Troops in SE Asia, 30 June 1945; KNA OPE 1/7/72/2, Report of Safari by Robertson-Glasgow, 2 July 1959.

87 Anderson, *Histories of the Hanged*, 244; G. Lathbury, 'The security forces in the Kenya Emergency', in F. S. Joelson (ed.), *Rhodesia and East Africa* (London, 1958), 37–8; S. Durrani, *Kimaathi: Mau Mau's First Prime Minister of Kenya* (Middlesex, UK, 1986), 9.

88 East Africa Command, *A Handbook on Anti-Mau Mau Operations* (Nairobi, 1954), 3–4.

89 H. Bennett, *Fighting the Mau Mau: The British Army and Counter-Insurgency in the Kenya Emergency* (Cambridge, 2013), 13.

90 OCRP WL, Mss.Afr.s. 1580/12, Major-General William Hinde, Brief for C-in-C, 5 June 1953; East Africa Command, *A Handbook on Anti-Mau Mau Operations*, 11.

In reality, the forest bands suffered horrific casualties once the colonial forces developed counterinsurgency measures that negated the insurgents' superior 'bushcraft'. This did not deter the relatively untutored Mau Mau generals from crediting their forces with inflated, and sometimes fantastic, victories over the security forces. Elijah Kinyua Ngang'a (aka 'General Bahati'), who claimed to have commanded 10,000 troops, recalled that 'the "Johnnies" [British troops] were young and could not withstand our fire.'<sup>91</sup> Henry Kahinga Wachanga, the KLFA's self-described 'Senior Medical Officer' and 'Colonial Secretary of the States', recounted his unit downing 17 British bombers by climbing trees to shoot their fuel tanks. He also asserted that the KLFA inflicted so many casualties on the 'Royal Fusileers' that the unit was withdrawn to Britain because the survivors refused to re-enter the forests.<sup>92</sup> Later generations of historians have given credence to these rather fantastic claims. While justifiably asserting that the Kenyan government underestimated the 'strength and shrewdness of Mau Mau', Elkins further burnished the KLFA's military credentials by claiming that: 'Mau Mau became one of the first armed struggles of the twentieth century where superior Western firepower was no match, at least initially, for local knowledge of difficult forest terrain, or for the insurgents' use of hit-and-run tactics.'<sup>93</sup>

These narratives are difficult to reconcile with the Mau Mau generals' relative lack of actual combat experience. Rank-and-file forest fighters most likely held the better equipped colonial forces at bay for so long because they were organized, brave, and enjoyed the support of the majority of the Kikuyu community. The nationalist historiography's attempt to portray the KLFA as a powerful conventional military force obscures one of its greatest strengths, namely that its leaders were, as Tabitha Kanogo rightly notes in her biography of Dedan Kimathi, more proficient with the pen than the rifle.<sup>94</sup> As Derek Peterson has pointed out, literate Kikuyu partisans turned Western bureaucratic rules and rituals to their own ends. In 'contracting colonialism' they blunted the force of foreign rule by creating rival independent churches, schools, sports leagues, cooperatives, and other civil institutions. During the Mau Mau war, the KLFA leaders similarly used their literacy and understanding of bureaucratic conventions to mobilize the Kikuyu community and publicize their cause at home and abroad. Using registers, inventories, and war diaries, Dedan Kimathi and his lieutenants established a rival government in the forests.<sup>95</sup>

More nuanced histories of the Kenya Land Freedom Army describe tensions, if not outright antagonism, between a 'literate' Kimathi and an 'illiterate' Mathenge over the leadership and direction of the movement.<sup>96</sup> Kanogo's Kimathi used his bureaucratic skills to supplant his rival by transforming his position as Mathenge's aid and the secretary general of the 'Supreme War Council' into president of the Kenya Defence Council and the

91 Ngang'a and Ngumo, *A Walk in the Fire*, 22, 31.

92 Wachanga, *The Swords of Kirinyaga*, 72, 76.

93 Elkins, *Imperial Reckoning*, 43.

94 Kanogo, *Dedan Kimathi*, 8.

95 D. Peterson, *Creative Writing: Translation, Bookkeeping, and the Work of Imagination in Colonial Kenya* (Portsmouth, NH, 2004), 138, 203–5.

96 J. Lonsdale, 'Moral and political argument in Kenya', in B. Berman, D. Eyoh, and W. Kymlicka (eds.), *Ethnicity and Democracy in Africa* (Oxford, 2004), 87.

'Kenya Parliament'.<sup>97</sup> Mathenge, conversely, is celebrated in nationalist narratives as an untutored but crafty military tactician. In fact, there is no direct evidence that Mathenge's battlefield heroism had anything to do with colonial military service. It may simply be that he was more willing to take a direct leadership role in the campaign against the colonial security forces while Kimathi was a more conventional political leader and statesman. It is also understandable that KLFA soldiers and later nationalist historians looking for battlefield heroes would attribute Mathenge's more aggressive role in the revolt to an imagined background as a KAR infantryman in Burma. This may also explain why Gucu Gikoyo recalls that Mathenge's rival Dedan Kimathi burnished his own military credentials by recounting 'his [Kimathi's] experiences in the Second World War'.<sup>98</sup>

Mathenge most likely died in combat, and the KLFA stood little chance of driving the British from Kenya by military means. On the other hand, the flood of letters and petitions that Kimathi sent to chiefs, colonial officials, Western newspapers, metropolitan parliamentarians, sympathetic socialists, and international leaders had practical value.<sup>99</sup> The Mau Mau generals may have lacked conventional military expertise, but their literary skills gave them the means to organize an opposition government in the forests. By framing their cause as a struggle for land, justice, and the right of self-determination they also made it difficult for colonial apologists to justify the slaughter of 'British protected persons', particularly after the security forces's human rights abuses came to light in the late 1950s. While the KLFA was not a particularly potent conventional military force, their leaders' success in contracting colonialism gave their movement coherency and meaning, which helped ensure that the colonial regime could not 'win' the peace that followed its military victory over the insurgents. At the very least, Kimathi and the Mau Mau memorialists succeeded in supplanting the unflattering colonial depictions of their movement that were embodied in the Corfield Report.

Moreover, literacy did have military value. Many senior KLFA men and Mau Mau sympathizers like Bildad Kaggia, Gakaara wa Wanjau, and Elijah Kinyua Ngang'a were effective leaders and organizers precisely because they were former clerks. The Kenyan administration's reliance on educated African bureaucratic labor was a clear vulnerability. In the late 1940s, Kikuyu storemen working in the EAC's main armament stores at Gilgil organized the theft of thousands of rounds of ammunition.<sup>100</sup> General Bahati gained access to important government documents while doing clerical work at the Jeanes School, which was a significant intelligence outpost during the Mau Mau war. Similarly, the African staff of the government-sponsored Swahili-language newspaper *Baraza* helped African clerks in the Secretariat smuggle 'top secret' material to the insurgents.<sup>101</sup> Some of this material most likely had tactical value, and the activities of this literate 'fifth column' probably played a role in the KLFA's ability to acquire weapons and avoid potentially decisive pitched battles against the better-equipped security forces.

97 Kanogo, *Dedan Kimathi*, 20–1.

98 Gikoyo, *We Fought for Freedom*, 76.

99 wa Kinyatti, *The Dedan Kimathi Papers*, viii, 189–90.

100 '76,000 rounds of ammunition lead to prison', *East African Standard* (Nairobi), 5 Apr. 1949.

101 Ngang'a and Ngumo, *A Walk in the Fire*, 12; Interview with Tom Mzungu, June 1994.

## CONCLUSION

The over-emphasis of the military origins and expertise of the Kenya Land Freedom Army in nationalist Kenyan historiography has overshadowed the value of literacy and clerical expertise in the Mau Mau war. The Second World War and colonial military service in general did not initially figure particularly prominently in popular narratives of Kenyan history. Instead, the need to create nationalist narratives at various tense periods in Kenyan history inspired historians, novelists, and playwrights to pay much greater attention to Mau Mau as a unifying narrative. In time, the two conflicts and the men who fought in them began to merge in the Kenyan nationalist imagination in a single narrative of colonial exploitation.<sup>102</sup> In both fiction and historical narratives, authors burnished the military credentials of Mau Mau generals, while veterans of the KLFA and the King's African Rifles told stories of mutual support and comradeship during the vicious fighting in the forests of central Kenya. Itote claimed to have been fed, clothed, and ultimately rescued by KAR infantrymen who had served with him Burma. In the 1990s, several ex-servicemen similarly told stories of intentionally sparing KLFA men in fire fights and challenging British officers who abused African prisoners. While some of these claims can be substantiated, others cannot.<sup>103</sup> Either way, expressions of loyalty or sympathy for the colonial regime drop out of these narratives, which is hardly surprising given its ultimate fate. Popular nationalist narratives also downplay the presence of Second World War veterans among the ranks of loyalist chiefs and Home Guardsmen for similar reasons.<sup>104</sup>

In time, as Evan Mwangi has observed, Mau Mau has become 'the ultimate symbol of ordinary people's bravery and resolve to wrest power from colonialists toward ultimate political self-determination'.<sup>105</sup> While both Jomo Kenyatta and Daniel arap Moi looked upon ex-forest fights with suspicion because they represented a populist challenge to elite narratives of Kenyan history, there is now a major street in Nairobi named after Dedan Kimathi because their political successors had use for him as a unifying nationalist figure. Kimathi's street is graced with a statue of him standing in a defiant pose, but the bronze Kimathi holds a rifle and long knife instead of a pen and note book, which were his most effective weapons. Similarly, popular hopes that Stanley Mathenge had escaped to the north convinced a group of Kenyan journalists that an Ethiopian farmer named Mena Ayamu was in fact the famed former Mau Mau general.<sup>106</sup>

102 A. Coombes, L. Hughes, and K. Munene, *Managing Heritage, Making Peace: History, Identity and Memory in Contemporary Kenya* (London, 2014), 59.

103 Itote, 'Mau Mau' General, 85–90; Interviews with Matthew Kipoin and Peter Ingoli, Mar.–Apr. 1994; A. Clayton, *Counterinsurgency in Kenya: A Study of Military Operations Against the Mau Mau, 1952–60* (Manhattan, KS, 1984), 19–20.

104 KNA DC MUR 1/4/6, Record Book of Chiefs and Headmen, Fort Hall, 1937–54; D. Lovatt Smith, *Kenya, The Kikuyu and Mau Mau* (Herstmonceaux, UK, 2005), 183.

105 E. Mwangi, 'The incomplete rebellion: Mau Mau movement in twenty-first-century Kenyan popular culture', *Africa Today*, 57:2 (2010), 88.

106 Branch, *Defeating Mau Mau, Creating Kenya*, xii–iii; Karimi, *Dedan Kimathi*, 383.

Just as the glamor and prestige of national sacrifice has motivated individuals in Western countries to pose as military veterans, older Kenyans now have tempting inducements to burnish their Mau Mau credentials. As Annie Coombes notes:

Even if some may want to argue for a more nuanced representation of the role of those Kenyans who worked for the British colonial state as soldiers, police or civil servants, there are others who feel that it is reasonable for the Mau Mau veterans to insist that the government recognize the sacrifices and life-threatening hardships they endured in the cause of independence.<sup>107</sup>

The British government's decision to pay compensation to over 5,000 victims of torture in the Mau Mau detention camps has further inspired groups of KLFA veterans, both real and imagined, to step forward as nationalist heroes.<sup>108</sup> Similarly, surviving veterans of the colonial army continue to hold out hope that Britain will make good on unkept promises, promises that do not appear in any British military archive, to pay pensions and other service benefits in recognition of their role in the Allied victory in the Second World War.<sup>109</sup> The role of the King's African Rifles in defeating the KLFA drops out of these narratives and recollections, and Mau Mau compensation and unpaid military pensions blur together to become reparations for British imperial rule.

This has particularly been the case after 2003 when President Mwai Kibaki finally revoked the official ban on Mau Mau membership. Seeking to salve, if not mend, the deep social and communal divisions that emerged during the violent 2007 elections, Kenyan political elites have looked to a heroic anticolonial past to create a more nationally harmonious present.<sup>110</sup> The preamble to the 2010 constitution explicitly stated that the people of Kenya intended to honor 'those who heroically struggled to bring freedom and justice to our land.'<sup>111</sup> Consequently, Kenyan now has 'Heroes' Acre' to honor its national founding fathers and martyrs and a 'Heroes' Day' as a national holiday.<sup>112</sup> The leaders of the Kenya Land Freedom Army predictably have pride of place in this new national pantheon, but in the course of these popular and state-sponsored national imaginings younger generations have begun to view colonial soldiers alongside Mau Mau fighters as a group of brave men who heroically endured exploitation and racial discrimination.<sup>113</sup> This narrative replaces collaborator/resistor binaries to imagine that all Kenyans,

107 A. Coombes, 'Monumental histories: commemorating Mau Mau with the statue of Dedan Kimathi', *African Studies*, 70:2 (2011), 204.

108 'UK to compensate Kenya's Mau Mau torture victims', *The Guardian*, 6 June 2013; H. Ayodo, 'LSK raise fresh concerns over Mau Mau claimants', *c.* July 2013, (<http://lsk.or.ke/index.php/component/content/article/1-latest-news/273-lsk-raise-fresh-concerns-over-mau-mau-claimants>).

109 Interviews with Barnabas Mochoge and Ishmael Mugona Osoro Mar. 1994; Interviews with David Kimonyi, Munguti wa Kieti, and Philemon Mudamba Eboyi, courtesy of Victoria Mutheu and Sagwa Chabeda, Washington University African Oral History Project, Aug. 2015.

110 L. Hughes, "'Truth be told": some problems with historical revisionism in Kenya', *African Studies*, 70:2 (2011), 183.

111 National Council of Law Report. *The Constitution of Kenya*, rev. edn, 2010, (<http://kenyaembassy.com/pdfs/the%20constitution%20of%20kenya.pdf>).

112 N. Carrier and C. Nyamweru, 'Reinventing Africa's national heroes: the case of Mekatilili, a Kenyan popular heroine', *African Affairs*, 115:461 (2016), 604.

113 Forthcoming documentary *Askari* by Victoria Mutheu and Sagwa Chabeda. For a preview, see (<http://vimeo.com/73128531>).

regardless of ethnicity, class, or occupation, suffered under colonial rule and played a role in the creation of the Kenyan nation.

As with most national myths and collective memories, many of the central features of popular narratives of the Second World War and Mau Mau do not stand up to historical scrutiny. Few, if any, Mau Mau generals served in the combat arms of the colonial army. Their leadership and heroism stemmed not from their military expertise but from their willingness to pit their literary expertise and rudimentary tactical skills against a larger and better-equipped Western army. Similarly, the King's African Rifles battalions that helped defeat the KLFA were effective fighting formations because their African troops largely obeyed orders and killed forest fighters, even though some soldiers may have sympathized with the KLFA's cause. But it is not particularly useful to dwell on such realities outside of conventional historical monographs and scholarly journals. To be sure, it is worthwhile to guard against allowing nationalist histories to legitimize corruption and authoritarianism. But, in an era when every election cycle threatens to turn violent, and struggles over land and patronage continue to divide Kenyans, popular narratives that now recall Mau Mau fighters and KAR askaris as nation-builders who shared the common experience of oppressive and exploitive foreign colonial rule can help new generations embrace a shared and unifying history of struggle, sacrifice, and heroism.