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African Women and the Mau Mau Struggle: Recovering Overlooked Roles in Kenya's Liberation

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to recover and critically analyse the overlooked and undercounted roles that African women played in the Mau Mau struggle for land and freedom in colonial Kenya (1952–1960), addressing the problem that dominant historical narratives have centred almost exclusively on male forest fighters and commanders, leaving women's contributions at the periphery of both early scholarship and popular memory. The study adopts a qualitative historiographical and document-based analysis, drawing on published oral histories, archival scholarship, and published life narratives of participants to reconstruct the range of women's experiences within the Kenya Land and Freedom Army (KLFA) and its civilian support networks. The findings identify five interlocking categories of women's participation (oath administration and ritual leadership, intelligence gathering and courier work, supply and logistics, armed combat, and resistance within detention and villagisation camps) and show that these roles were not peripheral activities but structurally essential functions, without which the forest-based combat units could not have been sustained; women occupied a position at every level of the movement's support chain, from the home front to the forest itself, even where their presence in combat roles remained comparatively rare. The study concludes that recovering this diversity of roles challenges the male-centred framing that has dominated both colonial records and post-independence commemoration, and constitutes a contribution toward a more complete and inclusive account of Kenya's liberation history, with implications for how the struggle is documented, taught, and memorialised going forward.

Key terms: Colonial historiography, gender and nationalism, Mau Mau, oral history, women combatants.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

The central problem this article addresses is that the historiography of the Mau Mau uprising (the eight-year guerrilla war, mass detention, and villagisation campaign that followed the British colonial government's declaration of a State of Emergency in Kenya on 20 October 1952) has been written overwhelmingly around the figures of male forest commanders such as Dedan Kimathi, Stanley Mathenge, and Musa Mwariama, while African women have been treated in both colonial records and much early scholarship as incidental to a movement they in fact helped to sustain. The Kenya Land and Freedom Army (KLFA), the guerrilla force at the centre of the uprising, drew its membership overwhelmingly from the Kikuyu, Embu, and Meru communities and was bound together in part through oathing: the administration of ritual oaths of secrecy, mutual aid, and dedication to the cause of land and freedom, most notably the mungurio and mbatuni oaths. It is this oathing system, together with the villagisation programme through which the colonial government forcibly relocated rural populations into guarded settlements from 1954, that structured much of the terrain on which women's participation took place.

Women administered oaths, recruited members, carried messages and supplies to forest hideouts, and supported the families of men who were detained or fighting, and, in a smaller number of cases, served directly as combatants. Some, such as Field Marshal Muthoni Kirima, rose to senior command; others, such as Mukami Kimathi, were responsible for oath administration, resource mobilisation, and courier networks from the home front. Thousands more undertook less visible but no less essential work, such as feeding, sheltering, and warning fighters, often at considerable personal risk, and faced interrogation, sexual violence, and imprisonment in camps established specifically to hold suspected Mau Mau women, including Kamiti (Njagi, 1993).

Existing scholarship has already established important elements of this picture. Kanogo (1987, 2005) and Presley (1992) have shown that women's land rights, squatter histories, and labour were integral to the uprising's origins and its sustained operation, and Likimani's (1985) early collection of women's testimonies remains a foundational primary source. What this scholarship has not yet done, however, is bring these separate strands (the ritual, intelligence, logistical, combat, and carceral dimensions of women's participation) together into a single typology that can be traced across the chronology of the Emergency and connected explicitly to the structural argument that women's labour was a precondition for, rather than a peripheral accompaniment to, the survival of the forest units. This study addresses that gap by developing such a typology and applying it across the periods of the conflict.

Methodologically, the article proceeds through a qualitative historiographical and document analysis. It draws on three categories of sources: published oral history collections, most notably Likimani (1985), which recorded first-hand testimony from women participants; archival scholarship, including Kanogo (1987, 2005), Presley (1992), and White (1990), which draws on colonial records, court proceedings, and detention-camp documentation; and published life narratives, such as Otieno's (1998) autobiographical account of her work as an urban courier and scout. These sources are read comparatively, alongside secondary historiography, to reconstruct patterns of participation that are rarely visible within any single source considered in isolation.

The article is structured as follows. It first examines the historiographical problem surrounding the long-standing neglect of women's roles in the Mau Mau struggle before developing a five-part typology of

women's involvement, illustrated in Figure 1. It then traces the chronological development of women's participation throughout the Emergency period, as presented in Figure 2, and examines the support chain linking the home front to forest fighters, illustrated in Figure 3. Individual profiles further demonstrate the range of roles identified in the typology. The article also considers the politics of post-independence memory and commemoration before concluding with a synthesis of the findings and recommendations for further research and public memory work.

The Historiographical Problem: Why Women Were Overlooked

The reasons why women's involvement in Mau Mau went unrecognised for so long can be attributed to three overlapping forces. The first was the colonial system of record-keeping. The British administration, courts, and military intelligence were primarily interested in identifying armed male combatants and movement commanders; women who administered oaths or carried messages were often simply noted in connection with male suspects, if they were noted at all, rather than recognised as political actors in their own right. Despite this, the colonial authorities' fear of women's participation was not imaginary: their presence at facilities such as Kamiti detention camp was noted by officials who considered women dangerous enough to warrant a dedicated high-security camp (White, 1990).

The second was the nature of early nationalist and academic history. Early post-independence accounts of Mau Mau tended to reproduce the hierarchical organisational structure of the movement itself, which allowed women to play key roles in its political and logistical dimensions while excluding them from its recognised command hierarchy. Tabitha Kanogo and Cora Presley, among others, have in recent decades systematically questioned this pattern, arguing that women's labour, land rights, and squatter histories were integral to the uprising's origins and performance rather than peripheral to it. The third was the gendered politics of memory in post-independence Kenya. The dominant story of Mau Mau, understood as a movement led by men and later reinforced by memorials such as the Mau Mau Memorial unveiled in Nairobi in 2015, has tended to marginalise women's role in the movement's history. Feminist historians and oral history projects such as the Mau Mau Chronicles have begun to correct this, but the imbalance in the historical record remains far from fully addressed.

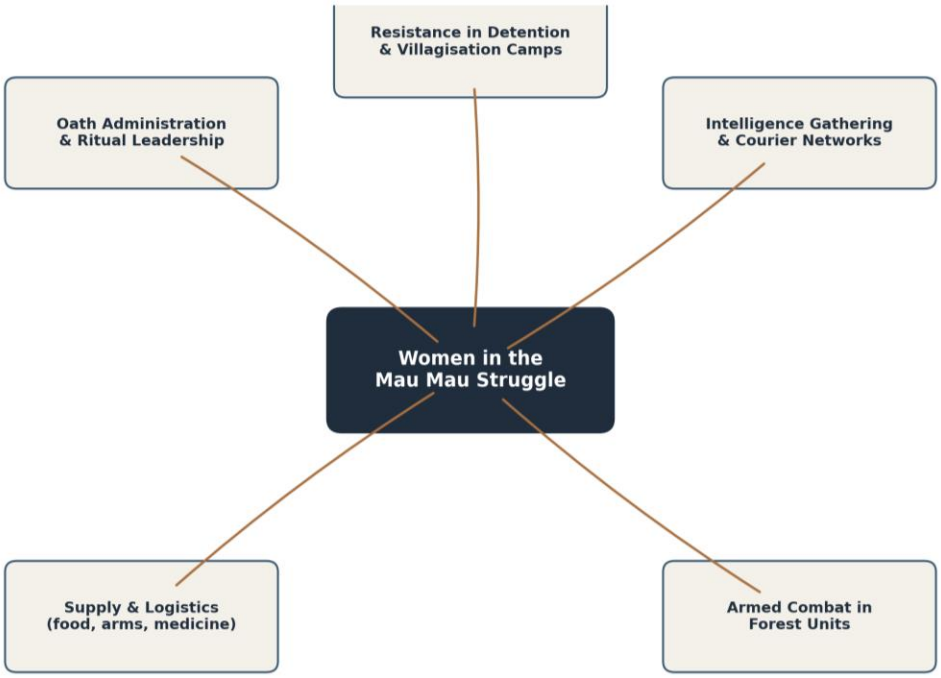


Figure 1: A Typology of the Principal Roles Occupied by African Women During the Mau Mau Struggle

A Typology of Women's Roles

To recover women's contributions, it is necessary to move beyond a single type of experience. Figure 1 shows five overlapping functions through which women participated in the movement.

Oath Administration and Ritual Leadership

The movement was organised through oathing, and participants were bound by the mungururio and mbatuni oaths, principally oaths of secrecy, mutual aid, and dedication to the cause of land and freedom. Women, especially older women and traders whose travel from homestead to homestead raised few suspicions, often administered these oaths and recruited new members. This placed them at the organisational centre of the movement rather than at its periphery.

Intelligence Gathering and Courier Networks

Women's routine movement as traders, market vendors, and housewives gave them access to information and physical spaces that were unsafe for male fighters, who were under intense colonial surveillance. Women delivered messages, monitored colonial patrols, and relayed warnings to forest units, acts of considerable discretion that could result in interrogation or execution if discovered (Likimani, 1985).

Supply and Logistics

Forest fighters required a continuous supply of food, medicine, ammunition, and clothing, which had to be produced, purchased, or obtained by supporters on the home front. Studies conducted in Mathira and Kirinyaga show that women grew and prepared food for the fighters, smuggled supplies through checkpoints, and organised distribution networks linking villages to forest hideouts.

Armed Combat in Forest Units

While the majority of forest fighters were men, a smaller number of women joined front-line units directly. The most prominent example is Muthoni Kirima, who took the Mau Mau oath in 1952 and progressed from trading to courier work to forest combat, becoming the only woman to attain the rank of field marshal. Her career demonstrates both the potential for women to fight directly and how few women, in practice, did so (Presley, 1992).

Resistance in Detention and Villagisation Camps

The colonial government's villagisation programme, launched in 1954, forcibly relocated hundreds of thousands of Kikuyu into guarded emergency villages, while others suspected of Mau Mau involvement,

many of them women, were held in detention camps. Interrogation, forced labour, and sexual violence were among the abuses women faced in these camps and villages, alongside organised acts of resistance, including refusal to take oaths under torture, the covert passing of information, and the establishment of protection networks among detainees.

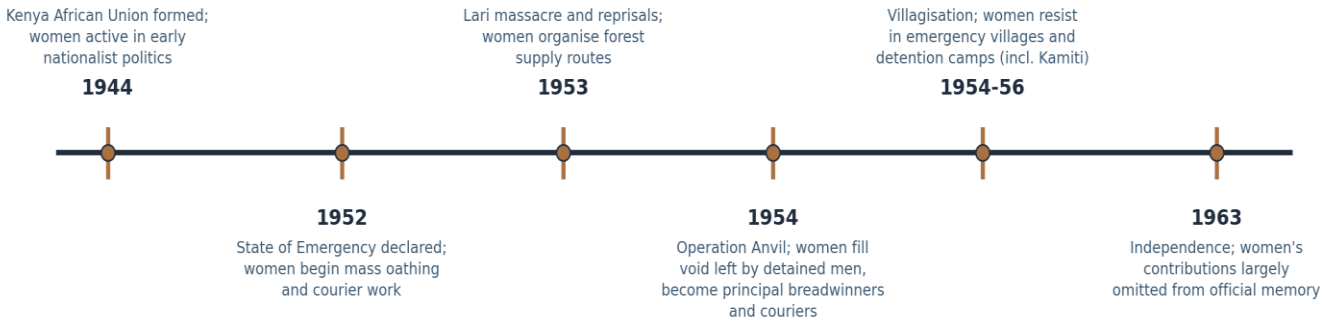


Figure 2: Timeline of Key Events in the Emergency Period and Corresponding Shifts in Women's Involvement

Chronological Development of Women's Involvement

Women's involvement in the movement was not constant across the Emergency but grew and shifted in character as the conflict progressed, as illustrated in Figure 2.

Pre-1952: Origins in Nationalist Politics

Even before the declaration of the Emergency, women were already engaged in the nationalist politics that gave rise to Mau Mau, including through organisations such as the Kenya African Union. This early involvement built the networks of trust, communication, and mobilisation on which the movement would later draw.

1952–1954: Mass Oathing and the Expansion of Women's Roles

With the declaration of the State of Emergency in October 1952, mass oathing accelerated rapidly, and women became active in courier and organisational work in large numbers, administering oaths and building the recruitment and communication network.

1954–1956: Operation Anvil, Villagisation, and the Home-Front Burden

Operation Anvil in 1954 removed tens of thousands of Kikuyu men from Nairobi and other urban centres, leaving women as the majority of the remaining adult population in many homes and villages. This was a change imposed on the movement rather than one it had chosen, and it placed women at the backbone of the home-front support system, sustaining both the logistical networks on which forest fighters relied and the households that depended on them for survival (Kanogo, 2005). The villagisation programme of 1954–1956 intensified this burden further, forcing women into guarded villages from which continued support for the movement had to be concealed.

The Later Emergency Period and Its Aftermath (1956–1963)

As the Emergency continued and the movement's forest-based combat capacity declined, women's home-front and carceral experiences, including detention, interrogation, and continued underground support, became an increasingly central, if still under-recorded, feature of the conflict. When the Emergency and Kenyan independence formally arrived in 1963, women had borne this burden for over a decade, yet their contribution received comparatively little recognition in the official celebration of the struggle that followed.

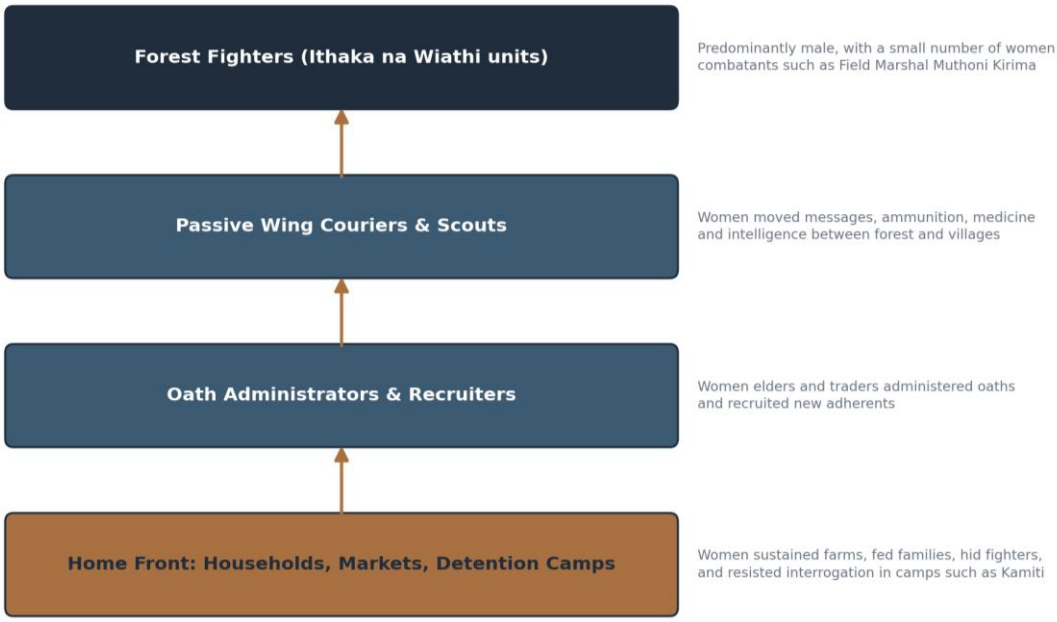


Figure 3: The Support Chain Linking the Home Front to Forest Fighters, Showing the Layers at Which Women's Labour Was Concentrated

The Support Chain: From Home Front to Forest

Figure 3 represents the movement's support structure as a chain running from households and markets, through oath administrators and couriers, to the forest units themselves. Women were involved at every level of this chain, although their numbers and visibility varied: they were overwhelmingly present at the base of operations on the home front, still significant among couriers and oath administrators, and sparse, though not absent, among forest combatants. This distribution helps explain why women's contribution has historically been undercounted: although the logistical and courier subsystems were what made forest units viable at all, and units could not have survived as long as they did without them, women's

participation in the historical record has largely been measured against the smallest of these categories, combat roles (Kanogo, 1987).

Individual Profiles

Figure 1 summarises the range of individual biographies, only a few of which can be given here. Born in Nairutia, Nyeri County, in 1931, Muthoni Kirima, then known as Muthoni Wihihuini, followed the movement first by gathering information from traders before formally joining the forest fighters, eventually becoming the only woman to attain the rank of field marshal. She was honoured in later life as a symbol of women's role among the forest fighters, and died in September 2023. Mukami Kimathi, wife of Field Marshal Dedan Kimathi, worked on the home front, coordinating oath administration, mobilising resources, positioning informants, and supplying fighters with food; she was nicknamed 'The Wasp' for her ability to move undetected by colonial forces, and continued to advocate for the recognition of Mau Mau veterans until her death in May 2023. Memoirs such as Wambui Otieno's published life history of her work as a scout and urban courier for the movement in Nairobi illustrate both the value and the interpretive challenges of such sources for recovering women's history. The writer and broadcaster Muthoni Likimani did not herself take part in the fighting, but her 1985 volume recounting the experiences of nine women in the struggle remains one of the earliest accounts of women's roles and a central source for the historiography used throughout this article (Likimani, 1985).

Memory, Commemoration, and Ongoing Marginalisation

Memories of Mau Mau have remained politically contested in relation to women's roles ever since the movement's own time. Kenyan governments after independence never wholeheartedly embraced the movement, and when it was officially commemorated, this was often done in ways that foregrounded men's military leadership. Some descendants and scholars have read this imbalance as being reproduced in the 2015 unveiling of the Mau Mau Memorial in Nairobi, conceived in part as a gesture of reconciliation for victims of colonial-era torture and detention following the 2012 legal settlement between the British government and Kenyan claimants. At the same time, the decade since that settlement has seen significant growth in oral history projects, family-based testimony collection, and public scholarship focused specifically on women's experiences. This has included new academic research on detention-camp experiences, drawing in part on interviews and testimony gathered from figures such as Field Marshal Muthoni Kirima before her death in September 2023, whose long connection to the movement gave her testimony particular significance. Taken together, this suggests that the recovery of women's roles in the Mau Mau movement remains a continuing and unfinished project rather than a settled historiographical matter (Gathogo, 2017).

2.0 CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion: This article set out to recover the roles that African women played in the Mau Mau struggle, and its findings show that these roles were neither marginal nor incidental. Taken together, the five-part typology developed in Section 3 demonstrates that women's participation was structural rather than supplementary: as administrators of oaths and ritual leaders, women stood at the organisational centre of the movement rather than its periphery; as couriers and intelligence gatherers, they exploited social access that male fighters could not safely use, and bore direct personal risk in doing so; as suppliers and logisticians, they were the mechanism by which forest units remained materially viable at all; as combatants, though comparatively few in number, they showed that the movement's command structure was not closed to women in principle; and as detainees and residents of emergency villages, they

absorbed much of the coercive weight of colonial counter-insurgency while, in many cases, continuing to sustain the movement covertly. Read together rather than separately, these roles show that the forest-based combat operations for which Mau Mau is best remembered could not have been sustained without the home-front and courier infrastructure that women built and maintained. The relative invisibility of this contribution in colonial records and in much post-independence commemoration reflects the gendered assumptions embedded in the processes of record-keeping and commemoration themselves, rather than the actual distribution of labour and risk during the war. Recovering these roles therefore does more than add detail to an existing narrative: it challenges the male-centred framing that has dominated both the historical record and public memory, and makes possible a more complete and accurate account of how the struggle for Kenya's land and freedom was fought and sustained.

Recommendations: The study recommends the systematic collection and archiving of oral testimonies from surviving participants and their descendants, given the rapidly narrowing opportunity to record first-hand accounts. It also recommends supporting the re-reading of existing colonial and post-independence archival records specifically to identify and index women's presence, as their contributions are often documented only incidentally in connection with male suspects.

The five-part typology developed in this article, or comparable frameworks, should be integrated into secondary and university curricula covering Kenya's liberation history to move beyond narratives centred primarily on forest commanders. Public memorials and commemorative programmes, including future additions to sites such as the Mau Mau Memorial in Nairobi, should explicitly represent the diverse roles played by women rather than focusing exclusively on combat. Finally, comparative research should be encouraged to examine women's roles in the Mau Mau struggle alongside women's participation in other African liberation movements, thereby situating the Kenyan experience within a broader historiographical context.

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