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GENDER ISSUES IN AFRICAN HISTORY OF FREEDOM STRUGGLE: THE CASE OF FIELD MARSHALL MUTHONI AND THE MAU MAU MOVEMENT OF KENYA, 1930- 2015

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ABSTRACT

In 1952, thousands of Kikuyu men and women took up arms in a guerilla war to drive the British out of their land. They referred to their movement as the Kenya Land and Freedom Army (KLFA), popularly known as the Mau Mau. Numerous studies have since been conducted on the movement. However, despite women offering service to the movement across all levels little is documented about their role in combat and leadership. These aspects of the movement have not been central themes to preceding studies on the movement. This article uses Muthoni, the only female Mau Mau to lay claim to the title of a Mau Mau field marshal in her own right, as a 'window' to explore the contribution of Mau Mau women in the two roles. In their efforts to serve the movement as fighters and leaders, Mau Mau women had to first overcome challenges relating to male dominance of warfare in the traditional Kikuyu military organization and its perpetuation to the Mau Mau. However, many Mau Mau veterans oppose Muthoni's claim to the rank. This article explores the role of Muthoni and the intricacies surrounding her claims to the rank of a Mau Mau field marshal. It draws information from oral testimonies of Mau Mau veterans and the archival sources. The findings of the study challenge the view that women were an auxiliary wing of the Mau Mau movement by depicting them as active combatants and leaders.

KEYWORDS: Mau Mau, Field Marshal, Combat And Leadership.

INTRODUCTION

In 1952, the Kenya Land and Freedom Army (KLFA), popularly known as Mau Mau, staged a guerilla war against the British. The movement was predominantly Kikuyu although other communities such as the Meru, Embu and Maasai made important contribution to the movement. Among the movement's guerillas was a large group of gallant women who offered their service from the stalwart to the leadership level. Many studies have documented

the contribution of Mau Mau women in all other aspects of the movement apart from leadership. Similarly, the role of women in combat has not been adequately studied. This article uses Muthoni as a prism to shed light on contribution of Mau Mau women in both combat and leadership. It also examines the intricacies surrounding Muthoni's claims to have been a Mau Mau field marshal in her own right.

This article uses the descriptive research design. The findings are disseminated descriptively alongside three sections. Section one outlines factors that led to subordination of women role in the Mau Mau. The second section analyzes the levels of women service to the Mau Mau, Muthoni's contribution to the Mau Mau. The last section looks at Muthoni's contribution to the Mau Mau. It also investigates the controversy surrounding her claim to have been a Mau Mau field marshal in her own right. The last section of the article is the summary and conclusions.

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

Until relative recently, many historiographers did not consider women contribution as a central theme in their studies on Mau Mau. Consequently, women have long been considered an auxiliary wing of the Mau Mau. Although some included the role of women in their studies, "These studies on the whole deal with the question of women on a general basis."[1] The studies fail to make precise explanations and clarifications on the role of Mau Mau women, especially in combat and leadership. Nevertheless, recent studies have emphasized the role of women in the Mau Mau. A few of these studies are reviewed below.

Wangui Gachihi studied the role of Kikuyu women in Mau Mau. She reflected on the role of women who were left in the village and those who joined the forest guerilla. Women outside the forest were closely watched by the loyalists. Nonetheless, they carried out treacherous roles of gathering and delivering intelligence and supplies such as food and weapons for the Mau Mau guerilla. Those in the forest assumed various roles ranging from domestic chores such as cooking, and some became companions to male fighters. Other women fought alongside men, some proving to be as good as men in the art of war. On women leadership, she mentions that some would have troops of women fighters under their command. She gives examples of women such as CindaReri, who commanded a platoon of over two hundred women. She notes that a few women were promoted to higher ranks after proving themselves in battles. Gachihi however, concludes that women rarely rose to positions of overall leadership.[2]

Some scholars such as Kanogo and P. Mwaniki have appreciated the importance of biography in writing of history. Their works give deep insights into the Mau Mau through the lives of Mau Mau male leaders such as Dedan Kimathi and Stanley Mathenge. Some literate Mau Mau males have also told their versions of Mau Mau history through memoirs. Mau Mau historiographers have not extended similar studies to Mau Mau women. This version of history therefore explains various aspects of the movement from a male point of view. Mau Mau women have largely been overlooked in biographical studies on the contributor's to the Mau Mau. While addressing the lack of biographical studies on Mau Mau women, one scholar lamented, "I note with special interest, that the role women played in the bitter struggle for Kenya's costly struggle for independence has not been highlighted. To me women freedom warriors are unsung heroes."[3] This article tells the Mau Mau story from a female and male point of view. It looks at the contribution of women through Muthoni.

Two past studies have made attempts to examine the contribution of Muthoni to the Mau Mau. The first was a story of Muthoni was by Ruth Karani. Karani depicts Muthoni as a brave person not only during the Mau Mau but also in her childhood when she arguably killed a rhino to protect her father's goats. However, Karani leave gaps on Muthoni's early life, marriage, motivation to joining the KLFA, her rise through ranks, leadership, challenges as a female leader in a male dominated guerilla movement, her life in the forest between 1956 (when Mau Mau was defeated) and leaving the forest in 1963, life after the Mau Mau to this date among others.[4]

In 2007, Marjorie Macgoye and Naomi Shitemi included in their article a narrative by Muthoni on her life in the Mau Mau. It begins with Muthoni's description of her ordeals at the hands of the home guards shortly before joining the forest guerillas. This ordeal motivated her to join the movement fighters in the forest. The narrative quickly shifts to Kimathi as the central figure and her role in the movement fades away. Two things in this narrative point to Muthoni's leadership role. One, she sat at the Mau Mau parliament although her role is not elaborated, neither is that of other women. Two, on behalf of the last Mau Mau group `to leave the forest in 1963; she contacted the first African president of Kenya, Jomo Kenyatta, in Nairobi to ascertain if Kenya was finally independent before they could leave their hiding.[5] Like Karani's story, this narrative leaves similar questions on Muthoni's role unanswered.

Although this article uses the 'Great Woman Theory', a modification of Thomas Carlyle's Great Man Theory to suit the needs, its purpose is not to simply outline Muthoni's contribution to the Mau Mau. It examines the role of Mau Mau other women in combat and leadership in the movement. Rather than worship Muthoni's achievements as Carlyle would suggest, the article uses her to probe deeply the two mentioned women roles. The article thus adopts a historical biography approach, writing the life of a person with keen interest on particular event. This decision is premised on the fact that, "A historical biography can be written as a prism in which the light of history is refracted and the perspective raises the central figure as a representative of a time, a historical situation, a type, a social phenomenon or a culture."[6] Therefore, Muthoni's greatest significance to this article is that of the big picture, illuminating the contribution of women in combat and leadership.

Subordination of Women role in the Mau Mau

The outbreak of the Mau Mau war in 1952 gave women an opportunity to the uncharted world of warfare. For the first time in the history of the Agikuyu, women fought side by side with their menfolk. They went to the forest for the similar reasons as men, fight for land and freedom as well as run away from constant harassment by the home guards. The declaration of the State of Emergency and repatriation of the Agikuyu, Aembu and Ameru from Nairobi made life unbearable in the villages. The villages became congested putting a lot of strain on limited resources set aside for the Africans. Some Mau Mau admits, "Most men and women went to the forest after the declaration of the State of Emergency since they had no option."[7] Ironically, most men interviewed during the course of this study suggested that women only went to the forest to escape harassment by the home guards while they (men) motivated by a higher reason, to fight for land and freedom. Nonetheless, these men admit women made important contribution to the movement although not in actual combat. On top of excluding women and combat in their accounts, some also fail to put into account the significance of the non-combat roles in the survival of the movement.

Although the war provided women with a rare opportunity to prove themselves, they soon found out that many men were uneasy with their inclusion. One male veteran admitted, "We did not believe that women could fight leave alone leading."[8] It is evident that a strong patriarchal system established itself within the movement especially at the initial stages of the war. Men were not ready to share with women roles that gave them privilege and power within the traditional set up. However, things changed within course of time. Women proved

themselves useful in war, some becoming better fighters than some men. In some situations, women resourcefulness became the lifeline for the Mau Mau. This turn of events did not onlycatch Kikuyu men by surprise; it also left Europeans "struggling to reconcile female Mau Mau militancy and solidarity with their simplistic notions of a passive and compliant African womanhood."[9] It was never again taken for granted that men fought while women remained at the comfort of their homes waiting for their men to come from war. Defending the community became the responsibility of the women as well.

Throughout the Agikuyu history, war was associated with masculinity. However, the entry of women into Mau Mau war presented a challenge to this patriarchal notion. The conservatives felt that women would be a source of disruption in the field of war. They gave numerous reasons to justify why women at the forest were to continue with domestic chores as opposed to fighting. They wanted them to remain in forest camps and prepare meals for the men coming from raids. The following is a discussion on this conservative notion and the challenges it imposed on Mau Mau women.

Women menstrual cycles were believed to be the worst cause of bad omen. Consequently, measures were taken to protect the Mau Mau from this omen. Some of the measures were dehumanizing. For instance, "A woman was kept in a hut separate from others with another woman to take care them and a man to guard them until their days were over."[10] During this period, a woman could not be allowed to offer services such as cooking since everything she touched would become unclean nor would she interact with the rest. It is hard to know what went on in the minds of women during such a time although it is safe to guess they must have felt rejected and lonely. After the days were over, the woman was taken down stream to wash her clothes. Again, she could not be trusted to properly clean herself and her clothes. "Someone would watch her to make sure she cleaned well and that the water she used did not drain back to the river as this would expose the group to the omen."[11] Whether men believed in this omen or not, they used it against the woman. Since there was no telling when the periods would start for all the women, many men the best course of action would be for all women to remain in camps as men went to fight.

Patriarchy made it difficult for women to fight especially at the initial stages of the war. According to some male respondents some platoons did not allow women to possess guns unless every man had one, in which case a woman just carry the gun but not use it. Female veterans refute these claims arguing that after a woman took the *ngero* oath (third Mau Mau oath) and trained on the gun nothing held her back. They argue that in the forest

there were no men or women, just fighters, some even led in war. "There is one who led the attack at Kagunduini and another beat a guard post at Kirurumi."[12] Mau Mau men were not alone in this denial. The colonial authorities were reluctant to accept that women could take up arms against them. However, they eventually did accept that women were not bystanders in the political play as evidenced by this admission,

The attitude of the women of the tribe towards the emergency has in general been particularly distressing perhaps owing to the divergence in educational standards between the sexes, the primitive and indigenous cult of Mau Mau has had for many a powerful appeal. There have been instances of female relatives being privy to the murder of their loyal men folk… Women are known to have operated with some of the gangs and harbored and encouraged the gangster in the reserve. While the fighting continues there is no doubt that the Kikuyu female will continue to be an extremely tough nut to crack.[13]

But even in this admission, the woman was believed to act out of influence by men rather than out of her own determination. Her perceived character, easy to influence, is attributed to her low education and thus inability to decide on her own.

Mau Mau had a strict code regarding sexual relations among the guerillas. It was believed such relations would have brought bad omen to the movement as well distract males who couldn't get sexual partners at the forest since women were generally fewer than men. As strict as it was, this code was sometimes broken. Some of those interviewed during the research reported cases where men fought and even killed the other over women. It is important to note that when sexual activities occurred, they were blamed on the woman because men were believed to be infallible to sexual desires. Sometimes the Mau Mau forest court executed those accused of 'sexual offences'. With time this rule was relaxed and there are reports some women even became pregnant at the forest. The rule however remained biased on women. If such incidences were reported, the woman would be evicted from the forest without considering the dangers posed by home guards and colonial police for anyone associated with the movement. For instance, "A woman called Gacani was taken by a man we called Mwangi from Nakuru, she became pregnant at the forest and that's when she was kicked out of the forest."[14]

There is little documentation on the role of Mau Mau women in combat and leadership. This article contends the following to be the reason why the two women roles have been overlooked in preceding studies. First, the number of women who went to the forest is inferior to that of men. This presents a big challenge to any researcher in terms of

getting a good number of female veterans who were actual combatants. This is further compounded by passage of time as many of these women have either passed on or are too old to recall accurately the events during the war. Male Mau veterans seem to have an agenda to suppress the role of women in combat and leadership. Their accounts write off women from these two roles and assign them the role of care givers. This agenda was self-revealing during mixed gender focused group discussions where men tended to dominate the discussion. They also dismissed recollections by women that seemed to elevate women to leadership and combat. In such a case, the researcher was forced to make plans to meet these women on their own for more information.

Second, like their male counterparts, Mau Mau women were indoctrinated in a male defined value system and conducted themselves as such. They grew up in a traditional set up where men led and women followed. During the war, some of them were contented with carrying out domestic roles in the forest. One woman recorded, "Women only led in the villages. That place (forest) was led by men. A woman could not take a gun because she would die before the enemy. War is not a joke."[15]This is an account of a woman who went to the forest but she believed it was not her place to fight or lead. She saw no point in challenging the traditional social order. This phenomenon presented a challenge during focused group discussion as some women were ready to take a second position in these discussions to avoid contradicting the opinions of male veterans.

Third and perhaps the biggest impediment to understanding the role of women in leadership and combat is the description of the women by many scholars as "also there." As a consequence, the role played by the women on behalf of themselves and of other women has rarely been considered a central theme in many proceeding studies on the Mau Mau. For instance, one study on women role in the movement mentions, "groups of women had their own leaders, these women were useful as representatives of women's interests especially in general meetings"[16] doesn't attract a further discussion to discern who such leaders were and what these women interests were.

Muthoni's Role in the Mau Mau

When Muthoni left her village for the guerilla life in 1953 she had no idea what it entailed. She was only twenty three years old and had no training and experience in war. She went on to become the only woman among the last group of Mau Mau, those who did not leave the forest until 1963. Exploring her life helps illuminate contribution of women in the

levels discussed above, with keen interest on leadership. The study utilized her recollections and those of other veterans as well as archival sources. There are contradictions between what Muthoni claims to have done and what other informants believe to have been practical for a woman.

Although this section adopts a biographical approach, hindsight makes it difficult for Muthoni to provide a clear chronological account of her life in the forest as well as her rise through ranks. This feature also lacks in the accounts of other informants. This is further compounded by the fact that most Mau Mau fighters were not adept with chronicling events as they occurred. Although Muthoni claims records of everything that happened were kept by educated Mau Mau such as renowned KarariNjama, no such documents were available for review by this article. Most of the events told are bungled up, with their dates lacking. The narrative of her forest life will be presented chronologically and thematically accompanied by researcher's interpretations. The narrative also brings to life contradictions between the life as told by Muthoni and the life possibly lived and investigates reasons for the contradictions. The role of Muthoni has been analyzed along four different levels, namely: as a stalwart and a spy, as non-combatant in the forest, as a combatant and a dominant force.

When KLFA started recruiting through oaths in the late 1940s, it gained popularity among the Kikuyu population in Nairobi such as petty traders. Muthoni was among women who silently supported the cause of the movement long before she took her first oath. As a trader in Nyeri, she had business relations with traders in Nairobi who strongly supported the underground movement. She remembers contributing money whenever Kikuyu nationalist such as those of KAU (Kenya African Union) needed funds for their operations long before the war broke out.

This thing about independence started when we were very young kids. I used to keep what was collected because contributions were made even at the rural areas and in the white men's farms. It's something that was kept underground for long[17]

As a girl, Muthoni was already playing her part in the nationalist struggle.

Shortly after marriage, Muthoni took her first Mau Mau oath. Her role changed from a mere supporter of the underground movement to a conduit of both information and supplies to the Mau Mau who were by then at the forest preparing for the guerilla war. From mid-1952 women intensified their intelligence gathering. At around the same time oathing hit its peak. Muthoni would wake up early to go to the forest to get twigs for her goats and at the same time deliver information in partnership with other women. Carrying out this role "Was easy

because the home guards didn't suspect we (women) would intend any harm."[18] This was especially so before the war became full- blown. After conveying the information, Muthoni would head back home to her unsuspecting husband and continue with the family chores.

She continued to operate from the village until May 1953. Like many other villagers, she became a victim of brutality at the hands of the home guards. It was common for the home guards to victimize villagers whose relative were believed to be Mau Mau adherents. Her brief detention by Chief Muhoya of Nyeri on suspicion of association with Mau Mau couldn't have made things any better for her. When her husband went missing early on May that year, the home guards descended on her, kicking her with boots and hitting her with barrels leaving her for dead. She was still recuperating when she took to the forest. One veteran who saw her when she arrived at Mathaini*bushi* (area in forest under one platoon) on May 1953 remembered vividly, "She arrived at the camp on May 1953. She arrived in the morning alone. She came because she had been beaten by the home guards because her husband was missing and also because a person (probably a loyalist) had been killed in their village."[19] From then, her role changed from a conduit of information and supplies to a guerilla.

At the forest, she first joined the non-combat wing of women. Like other women, she cooked and looked after the welfare of others. She wasn't stuck in this role for long. After getting well, Muthoni began her long journey as a fighter. It is important to note that assumption of a new level didn't mean that one stopped doing the earlier roles. Women often multi-tasked, offering services as: cooks, spies, sourcing guns and other supplies. Some trusted women who operated in the forest near Nyeri were sometimes sent out of the forest to buy weapons from Africans working in the British military camps. "Those who cooked for the 'jonnies' (white soldiers) were Kikuyu. People contributed money at the reserves and gave it to us. We paid the cooks to get us bullets, grenades and guns. We gave men the ability to fight because they were not able to go for the bullets and grenades from that place."[20] The same respondent recorded that as a woman, she used to fight, get the weapons from the garrisons as well as carryout the domestic chores in the forest. She went further to demonstrate to the researcher her shooting skills using her walking stick to clear any doubts as whether or not she was a fighter.

This article contends that expeditions for food and livestock in villages and settlers farms were considered 'going to war' by the Mau Mau and should be treated as such. These expeditions were high risk operations that required speed and precision in execution. Women

were significant in such operations because they were able to carry more food on their backs than men. Muthoni claims to have taken part in many of such operations. These expeditions became difficult with increased patrols by the colonial police and trenching to keep Mau Mau from the villages and farms.

Some veterans claim that Mau Mau sometimes raided settlers' farms with intention to scare the settler's rather than kill them. Muthoni claims taking part in such raids. "During the attacks we could threaten them and in return they would plead for their lives. We would ask them for guns and eat their food. We just wanted to pass a message that this is our land. After the invasions some *Wazungu* (whites) would move out the following day."[21] This study was not able to ascertain whether or not Mau Mau organized raids intended to simply scare settlers from their farms. However, it is difficult buy the notion that Mau Mau hesitated to take such opportunities to slay the settlers who had caused them untold misery for decades.

Although women didn't sentinel, it was everyone's responsibility to stay vigil of the enemy. Women ability to multi-task made them better than men on this role. The British military made several bombing raids on Mau Mau hideouts using the Harvard Aircraft. At the beginning, these bombings took toll on the movement but they soon adapted to such invasions "they soon got used to this weapon."[22] Being watchful was a concerted effort by all. Women were exemplary in this. "We used to be very careful in the forest. There was this small aircraft we used to call *kamaumau.* (Probably it was small and searching for the Mau Mau) It was used to sport fires in the forest. We would hear it from far and we would shout *kariiguru* (it is up there). We immediately used soil to cover the fire. Isn't that fighting?"[23]

Muthoni's platoon had a medical practitioner who treated the injured. When he died, they turned to traditional medicine to treat casualties. She was among women who assumed this role. They used honey and traditional herbs to handle all medical conditions, "we used herbs and honey, mostly honey. The injured was given honey in the morning and evening. We also used *mutundu* (croton macrostachyus) extract, which was put on the injury to stop bleeding."[24] They were also masters of urotherapy, often using their own urine to disinfect to wounds. Although they used unconventional methods, Muthoni and other 'medical practitioners' alleviated pain and helped reduce fatalities in their respective platoons.

Muthoni was among the group of women who broke the patriarchal rules that barred women from fighting alongside male counterparts. It is worth noting that the narrative on women and the combat role in war is presented differently by male and female veterans. When the question on Muthoni's role in combat was asked to the veterans, one woman

veteran responded, "There was one woman called Muthoni, I was with her. She feared nothing. She used to go to war with men because she didn't fear. She was a dangerous woman even men could fear her."[25] When the question role in combat was asked to one of her male forest acquaintance, he answered, "I used to be with her. She was cooking at the kitchen."[26] Why would these two accounts differ so sharply? Many other male veterans utterly dismissed women role in combat. Could women veterans be exaggerating the role of women while the male folks seek to suppress it? The reality is in the middle. There were men who could not accept women as their equal in the field of battle. This was especially so at the initial stages of the war. With time some men came to appreciate the role played by the women in combat.

Muthoni sees no need to over emphasize on women and combat. She views combat as a piece of the whole, one that could not exist without other pieces. She argues there was no man or woman in the forest but fighters. What a man did, a woman did. She insists women did go to war just like men did the cooking sometimes. Her assertion is reinforced by documented evidence of groups of Mau Mau including women attacking various targets. For instance,

Mau Mau women terrorists struck for the first time in the Fort Hall reserve when a gang of which they were members killed three men, five children and a woman in a night raid near Muriaini. Criminal Investigation Officers including assistant superintendent from Forth Hall stated yesterday that this was the first time that they had learned definitely that women hardcore terrorists had murdered. They strangled the woman with skin thongs as the male gangsters hacked the rest of her six children to death.[27]

Muthoni was one of the female leaders in the Mau Mau. Although she doesn't remember chronologically her rise through ranks, her accounts indicates that she was promoted from one rank to another as a result services other than actual combat. Mau Mau gave ranks to any work well done to appreciate, encourage and motivate the particular person and others. When obtaining food became a major problem, anyone who went out of their way to get food for the movement was highly regarded and promoted.

I became a leader soon after I joined the forest because of my work. When it got tough I could keep running, moving even when they shot at me. I could feel bullets' heat on my ears and legs but kept on going to search for food to feed the hungry warriors. When I came back they celebrated my achievement. I was given a rank. My first rank was corporal but I don't remember the flow to the top. [28]

She also claims to have been promoted for her role in treating the injured.

Her diligence earned her a couple of responsibilities. For instance, although Mau Mau didn't have a strong financial foundation, it sometimes got donations in form of money from the villagers and some Indians. The movement also got funds from first time oath takers as they were required to contribute a 'goat' (often in form of money) as a price for the oath and also support the movement cause. The oaths were administered to fighters and villagers, the latter pledging not to reveal Mau Mau secrets. They used this money to bribe the African working in British garrisons to steal bullets and grenades for them. According to Muthoni, Stanley Mathenge was the treasurer while she became his assistant. She claims that when Mathenge arguably left for Ethiopia, he gave her a coin perhaps signifying that he had deputized her for the time he was to be away. This would bring her even closer to Kimathi whom she profoundly reveres. Prayers were an important part of their daily life and each platoon had prayer leaders. She and a man she only refers to as Kihonge, from Murang'a led prayers in their platoon.[29]

Muthoni's claim to the rank of field marshal in her own right attracts sharp criticism from her contemporaries. Most veterans state categorically she wasn't a field marshal, no woman became one. This is because, to be a field marshal, one must have been an overall leader of many battalions each under its general. It is unlikely that Mau Mau generals could have agreed to be subservient to a woman. Those in the Aberdare forest, where Muthoni spent her entire guerilla life, observe that there was only one field marshal, Dedan Kimathi. The next in line of succession for this rank were all male generals led by Stanley Mathenge, NdunguGicheru among others. One of them observed, "Leadership that time was hardly given to women. I don't know how one (a woman) could get a chance although I could hear places where one woman could be mentioned. But these were in far places"[30]

The rank of a general was only second to that of field marshal. To become a field marshal; one spent considerable time as a general. This time was used to solidify ones position by gaining loyalty from other generals and soldiers. One would expect any general to vividly remember conditions surrounding their promotion to this rank, a fact that misses in Muthoni's accounts. She has, in two preceding studies, given contradicting explanations as to why she was promoted to a general. In the course of this study, she introduced another rank between that of general and field marshal. "After this, one became a general then *jenororiw*hich was superior to general."[31] This is likely a translation from Kiswahili *jenerali* which when translated back to English simply means a general. Could the lack of her

understanding of these senior ranks be a sign she wasn't one? This inconsistency casts doubt on her role as a general and a field marshal.

Her adoration of Kimathi, the overall leader of Mau Mau, is no secret. She tells narratives that bring her very close to him, indicating she spent much time with Kimathi than either did with anyone else. For instance, "there are those we were with but did not know some things. Kimathi and I used to climb up the mountain to hoist the flag. It was hard task climbing the mountain. We used to anchor ourselves on to the rocks by our toes. The purpose of the flag was to emphasize that we could not be defeated and encourage the fighters."[32] She claims to have made that flag which was a replica of Kenya's national flag. These narratives seem like a convenient version of history. They beg questions like: If hoisting the flag was meant to motivate, why was it kept secret to the ordinary fighters? Did the hoisting of the flag take place and if it did, did she take any part? She seems to derive two benefits from such narratives. One, they allow her to be close to Kimathi, the center of power in Mau Mau. Two, it allows her to create a distance between her and her husband who rarely features in her other narratives.

Throughout meetings between the researcher and Muthoni, she seemed convinced she was a Mau Mau field marshal. This compelled the researcher to seek an understanding of her conviction. First, it is probable that Kimathi gave her the rank after cracks begun to emerge between those loyal to him and those loyal to General Mathenge. The leaders differed in relation to peace talks with the British. The veterans recall an uneasy ceasefire in 1954 when talks were held between Mau Mau representatives and colonial officials with an aim to ending the war. It is believed that Kimathi didn't favor such talks. Mathenge was one of those who met the colonial officials on behalf of the Mau Mau. After these talks failed, it was decided that no more talks would be held with the authorities. Some Mau Mau veterans argue that after this rift, Kimathi grew insecure, "he started using *ujanja* (tricks) to take our weapons to build a troop of people from his place. This weakened him. It finished him and that's why he was arrested alone."[33] To reward his loyalists, "Kimathi gave out ranks to all and sundry."[34] It is a possibility that this is how Muthoni got higher ranks owing to the fact that she came from Ihururu, the same place as Kimathi.

'Anyone who will not surrender, get arrested or killed in the forest will become a field marshal.' According to some Mau Mau veterans, these words were uttered by Kimathi. Some say they were uttered by Mathenge. Whoever said these words, and if they indeed said them, must have had a figurative impression that a true Mau Mau hero is the one who would fight

to the end, one who would never surrender to the authorities or get arrested. If the words are anything to go by, they would vindicate her claim to the title field marshal. In one interview, she asked the researcher "Between those of us who stayed up to 1963 and those leaders who were killed or turned against us, who is better? Who is the *jamba* (hero)?"[35] Since she couldn't become a field marshal by commanding the movement and its generals, this statement allows her free usage of the title.

Muthoni was present during the ceremony to confer Kimathi the rank of field marshal. During the ceremony, an elderly couple anointed him with oil to signify his cleansing and blessing by God and the ancestors. "The rest of us (fighters) shot in the air, a sign of military honor."[36]Muthoni claims to have been the chief witness to this anointment and for this role, Kimathi gave her the rank. After the ceremony Kimathi might have said to her, casually perhaps, 'you are a field marshal too.' She gives this as the reason why she lays claim to the title to this date. However, her explanation is watered down by the accounts of another eye witness of Kimathi's anointment. This witness was part of Kimathi's security detail. He records, "There is no such a thing. She (Muthoni) was there but didn't play any role."[37] Even without the benefit of a second eye witness, her explanation is rather simplistic and convenient. Is it possible that Kimathi told her so, jokingly in the context of a friend to another?

It is important to note that though she insists she was a field marshal since Kimathi's reign, Muthoni doesn't make claim to any military responsibility to the title. She doesn't claim to lead any group of Mau Mau general or leading any platoon of her own, whether made of women or mixed gender. Most accounts of her promotions are premised on acts of bravery and resourcefulness during times of dire material needs, especially food. Her understanding of a field marshal is that of a true hero, one who never wavered in the fight for freedom and land. Her true heroes didn't give up the fight after 1956 when Mau Mau war was officially considered over. They remained in the forest with the hope of rebuilding the movement to drive out the white men out of the country once and for all. These were the last Mau Mau. It is worth noting that Muthoni is not the only of the Last Mau Mau to claim the rank of field marshal or general. Others who adopted the rank included Mwariama, Mutungi (Muthoni's husband), and General Karangi among others. It is unlikely that the movement had so many field marshals. Some veterans believe that the last group of Mau Mau gave themselves the titles after everyone else left the forest. One veteran records the following

about Muthoni's rank, "There is no such a thing. She called herself field marshal because she was the last to leave the forest with her husband Mutungi."[38]

Muthoni was among the few women who sat at the Mau Mau forest court. Not many women even those with ranks were trusted enough by to seat on this court. Other women made a choice not to play any role in the court since it was extremely harsh on offenders most of whom were executed. These women couldn't be party to the execution of some of their colleagues. "When you were taken to the Mau Mau court, the outcome was mostly death even for small offences. I hated to see such decisions on our people. Women leaders like Muthoni took part in the court"[39] Muthoni was a pacifist in this court. She opposed acts of violence on fellow Mau Mau brought before it. Her most memorable moment of such intervention was during the trial of Stanley Mathenge. He was summoned to the court for meeting with the whites. At the trial,

It was ruled that he should be killed for revealing our secrets and meeting with the colonialists. I raised my hand and said I didn't favor the decision to kill him since it was his first time,that he should be warned and set free. The group was then asked of what they thought and they said I had ruled and they couldn't appeal.[40]

That's how she stopped the execution of the once overall leader of the movement. However, some veterans cast doubt about the fate of Mathenge and seem to believe he was assassinated later on by Kimathi. One veteran recorded,

The person in charge was Mathenge, Munene (another Mau Mau veteran) here is my witness. When Mathenge was given the mantle to lead, Kimathi was teaching at Karagoini, Nyahururu. Kimathi wanted to get this leadership. I know Kimathi killed Mathenge. He (Mathenge) never went to Ethiopia.[41]

In mid-1956, Muthoni reunited with her husband who had by then become a general by his own right. "He headed a platoon together with WambuguGathuya."[42] Prior to this date, the couple rarely met at the forest since they were in different platoons according to Muthoni. However, some of those who knew her at the forest indicate that she lived with her husband since she joined the forest in 1953. However, it is factual that the two are the only ones known to have remained in the Aberdare forest after 1956. There is a further twist in her accounts of life between 1956 and 1963 because she introduces a third person, General Karangi who is today married to her younger sister, Mukami. In his accounts, Karangi states categorically he never stepped foot in the Aberdare forest but spent his entire Mau Mau life among the Ameru on the Eastern side of Mount Kenya. This group was led by Field Marshal

Mwariama and General Baimungi. They numbered about sixteen according to him. In an effort to rebuild, they are rumored to have abducted villagers in Meru and forced them to fight for their cause. The effect of this group was felt in 1960 after they grew in numbers. Their activities led the colonial government to admit that "there was a scare among the colonialists in Kenya in the eastern Mount Kenya region and in the Meru reserve."[43]Karangi's narrative leaves Muthoni and her husband as the only two in the Aberdare forest after 1956. Indeed, accounts from other informants further attests to the fact that the couple was the only left at the Aberdares. One veteran who kept closer contact with Mutungi after the Mau Mau observed, "There was no other Kikuyu who spent eleven years in the forest apart from Mutungi and his wife Muthoni."[44] For the two, the prospects of rebuilding an army were minimal. They had neither material nor human resource enough to start the rebuilding process.

For Muthoni and her husband, forest life was reduced to basic survival after 1956. Unlike the earlier period when there was good supply of necessities such as food from the villages, the two had to survive through hunting and gathering. No one cared about them. The colonial government was successful in using propaganda making people at the villages view them as villains. Those who were arrested or surrendered turned against them. The fact that they knew all the secrets and hideouts made these surrenders the nightmare to the last Mau Mau. Those who might have cared about them were serving terms at the detention camps. Early in 1963 Muthoni left her husband in the forest for Nairobi to meet Jomo Kenyatta who was poised to become the first African prime minister. She went to confirm word that Kenya was on the verge of gaining independence so that the two could make a decision to finally leave the forest. Shortly after, the couple left the forest to restart life as civilians.

Summary and Conclusion

In summary, to subordinate the role of women, the male folk advanced a number of stereotypes about women that portrayed them as unfit for leadership and combat. These stereotypes included: associating women menstrual periods with bad omen, that women were weak and cowardly in nature, that women were more fallible to sexual temptations than men and would therefore influence men into sexual relations. Sexual intercourse by a warrior during times of war was considered a taboo by the traditional Kikuyu and was believed to cause defeat to their warriors if it were to be committed. Indeed, when such sexual activities occurred between the Mau Mau guerillas it was the woman who carried the blame and

consequently be evicted from the village while the man was left to continue with the cause of the movement. Women did however, overcome the prejudice resulting from these unfounded believes and stereotypes. They became useful in all levels of service to the Mau Mau movement, that is: as sympathizers of, and spies to the movement, non-combat wing offering support services to the fighters, fighters as well as dominant forces who were involved in the movement's leadership.

In conclusion, despite facing numerous challenges in their effort to serve the Mau Mau in combat, women did go to war alongside the men folk. Some of them proved better fighters than some men. However, the assumption of overall leadership by women remained a major challenge. Nonetheless, a handful of women went through ranks to serve in circles previously reserved for men such as the Mau Mau court. Field Marshal Muthoni is one of these women. Although her claim to the rank of a field marshal is contested by many Mau Mau veterans, the discussion of her role helped illuminate the contribution of women in combat and leadership. Under the circumstance of a strong patriarchal establishment within the Mau Mau, it was difficult for a woman to become a field marshal; a leader of Mau Mau fighters and their generals.

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GachuchaKariuki	Male	84	Nyeri	02-09-15
GathebiWangari	Female	84	Nyeri	31-08-15
Kirima Muthoni	Female	85	Nyeri	20-08-15
Miru John	Male	83	Nyeri	09-09-15
Mukami Karangi	Female	72	Nyeri	07-09-15
MuneneGathigi	Male	88	Nyeri	22-08-15
Munene Karangi	Male	84	Nyeri	07-09-15
MwangiWairimu	Female	86	Nyeri	31-08-15
NdirituMukundi	Male	86	Nyandarua	26-08-15
Wang'ombe Mathenge	Male	83	Nyeri	01-09-15

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