Kenya

Introduction

The subject of this lesson is the Kenyan freedom fighter Wambui Waiyaki Otieno Mbugia, known as Otieno for short. Otieno was born near the village of Kikuyu, around 12 miles northwest of Nairobi, in 1936. Her plans to attend university in England were dashed when Britain imposed a "State of Emergency" in Kenya in response to an anti-colonial uprising led by a group now known as "Mau Mau." In 1953, when she was sixteen, Otieno joined Mau Mau as an urban guerrilla in Nairobi and a scout in the surrounding countryside. After the movement was defeated in 1956, she worked as a labor organizer until her arrest in 1960. Freed when the British government began to transition Kenya to independence in 1961, she devoted the rest of her life to Kenyan politics. She passed away in 2011 at the age of 75. Years before, however, she had recorded her time in Mau Mau in a memoir entitled *Mau Mau's Daughter.* It is these years that are at the center of our lesson.

Colonization and Resistance in Kenya

In order to understand why Otieno joined Mau Mau and how she worked for the movement, we first need to understand the history of British colonialism and anti-colonial resistance in Kenya. Britain's colonization of Kenya took place as part of Europe's broader colonization of Africa in the late-19th century. With a few exceptions (such as Algeria), most of Africa was colonized by Western European empires from 1880 to 1910, following the Berlin Conference. The Berlin Conference was a meeting of European nations with colonial aspirations that unfolded over three months in Germany in 1884 and 1885. The participants established rules amongst themselves for the colonization Africa so as to avoid getting in each other's way. Their gentlemanly agreement formalized a "scramble" for African colonization. At the time of the conference, only about 10% of Africa was colonized. Less than three decades later, 90% was claimed by a European empire.

At the time of the Berlin Conference, the coast of Kenya was under the jurisdiction of the Sultan of Zanzibar; however, the British claimed the inland regions on the basis that they had sponsored missionaries there since the late 1840s. By the 1870s, British imperialists had a vision of creating an unbroken network of colonies that spanned the eastern half of the continent and ran through Kenya. Possessing Kenya would enable Britain to extract resources from interior kingdoms and facilitate trade with their colonial possessions in Asia. Kenya was ruled for the

Map of Great Britain and Kenya, c. 1950.

Key Terms:

Wambui Otieno

Kenya

Mau Mau Uprising

White Highlands

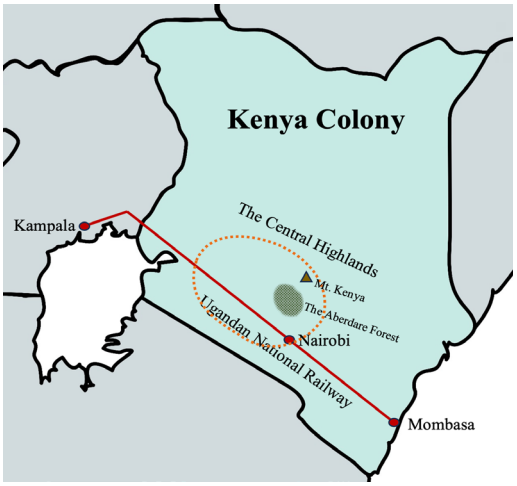
Kipande

Kenya African Union (KAU)

Kenya Land and Freedom Army (KLFA)

Mau Mau's Daughter

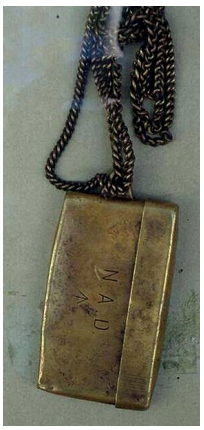
first seven years by a commercial association and for the next 25 as part of Great Britain's broader East African Protectorate. In 1920, Britain extracted Kenya from this protectorate and governed it as a Crown Colony. The name they chose, Kenya, was an English corruption of *Kirinyaga*, a Kikuyu word for Mt. Kenya, the tallest mountain in the region and a sacred site to native peoples.



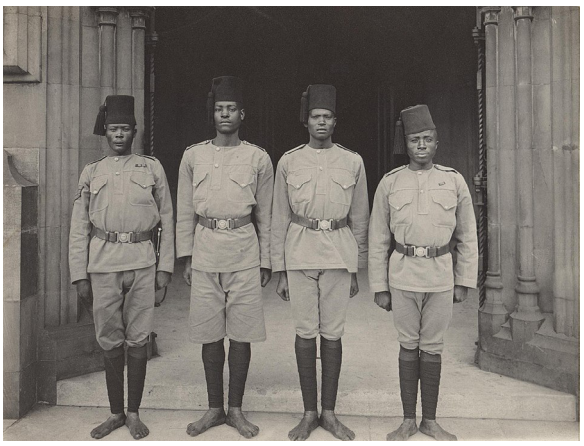
Kenya Colony in East Africa, c. 1950, showing the White Central Highlands (above); Sisal harvesting on a plantation, 1936 (below).

Just as the French had done in Algeria, the British tried to secure and profit on their colonization of Kenya by promoting white settlement to the region. The center of European settlement was an area that came to be known as the "White Highlands." This refers to an uplands region of central Kenya no less than 5,000 feet above sea level. The region's elevation gave it a temperate climate and agricultural conditions that were familiar to European settlers. Settlers could graze cattle and farm in similar ways as they could back home. The first settlers started arriving in the 1890s, but their numbers accelerated after the completion of the Ugandan National Railway in 1902. This railway, which traversed the highlands, encouraged migration by giving settlers a way to import goods and export crops to market. In 1905, the British government relocated the capital from the coast at Mombasa to Nairobi on the highlands. In 1919, there were 9,000 white settlers in Kenya, most of them from England and South Africa. By the 1950s, there were approximately 60,000.

Also like the French in Algeria, the British secured their power in Kenya by controlling land ownership, requiring indigenous peoples to pay taxes, and restricting their physical movement. In 1902, they passed The Crown Lands Ordinance that limited land ownership on the highlands to white people. The British then waged military conquests to steal land and turn native peoples into forced laborers for settlers' farms. They confined Africans to infertile sections of land called "reserves" and prohibited them from growing the most profitable crops so they couldn't compete with settlers. Those living off the reserves were called "squatters" and forced to work as laborers on white-owned farms. They had to labor all day harvesting crops such as tea leaves, sisal, coffee beans, and pyrethrum (a flower used to make insecticides) for meager wages barely sufficient to pay the taxes mandated by the colonial government. Settlers controlled Africans' movements by instituting a pass system called the *kipande*. All African men over the age of 15 had to wear a metal box around their neck that contained identifying information, like their name, the reserve they were assigned to, and the farm that "employed" them. The *kipande* allowed settlers to detain Africans they viewed as "out of place" and ensure that they continued to serve white landowners.



Example of a kipande



King's African Rifles in 1902, one of the African military and police forces established by the British government.

British colonizers divided Africans in Kenya by creating "native" militaries and empowering them to police the colony. This was something European colonizers did all over the continent after the Berlin Conference. African-staffed military units enabled colonizers to avoid the worst parts of administering the colonial state by delegating these tasks to Africans themselves. They also allowed colonizers to divide Africans against one another by offering status and privileges to those recruited. Such privileges included salaries, uniforms, weapons, rations, and exemptions from taxes and plantation labor. Also, by favoring certain ethnic groups over others, and by using Black people to enforce colonial law, colonizers sowed ethnic tensions and obscured the fact that the colony was built on white supremacy. In colonial Kenya, the most important African-staffed police force was called the Kikuyu Home Guard. It numbered 25,000 men and was created out of existing African-staffed police units at the start of the Mau Mau uprising.

Members of the Kenyan Land and Freedom Army (KLFA) pose for a photograph outside the Aberdare Forest, where they operated during the uprising (above); View of the Aberdare forests (below).

Even though they were subjugated during the conquest of the 1890s, indigenous Kenyans never stopped resisting British colonialism. They formed nationalist associations from the 1920s that lobbied the colonial state to liberalize its policies toward native peoples. In response, the settlers banned these groups and arrested their leaders. After World War II, the Kenyan nationalist movement took a radical turn when an organization called the Kenya African Union (KAU) demanded total independence. They formed a guerilla unit called the Kenya Land and Freedom Army (KLFA), more popularly known as "Mau Mau," and declared war on the colonial state in 1952. They set up a base of operations on the outskirts of Nairobi in the Aberdare Forest. From the protection of the bush, they terrorized the settler community by staging raids on farms and state infrastructure. To recruit members, they adapted traditional Kikuyu oath-taking practices that required initiates to swear allegiance in a series of private ceremonies. They also used a system of secret codes so members of Mau Mau could tell themselves apart from Africans who were loyal to the colonists.

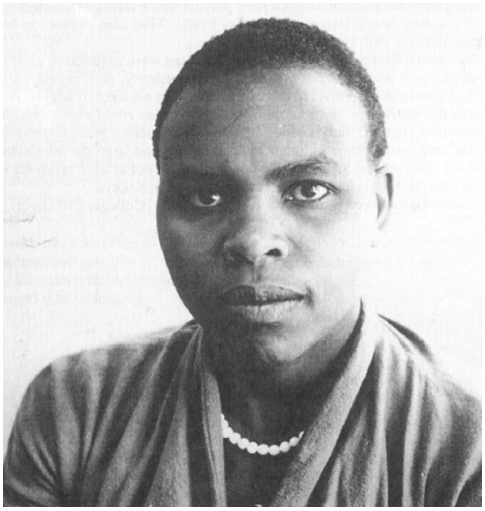
Image of the panga, an agricultural tool that was used as a weapon by peasants during the Mau Mau uprising. The panga featured prominently in British propaganda about Mau Mau.

The Mau Mau succeeded in increasing the paranoia of the settler state and attracting international attention to the Kenyan nationalist movement. By 1953, it had around 30,000 members. Many of them were soldiers who operated out of the forest, but others were couriers, smugglers, and spies who worked undercover in government buildings and on white-owned plantations in Nairobi and the surrounding countryside. Since the Mau Mau kept their networks a secret through oathing practices and coded language, settlers could not tell them apart from the Africans whom they depended on as laborers. Their response was to lock down the entire colony. Declaring a "State of Emergency" in 1952, they banned the KAU, imprisoned over 100 labor leaders, and implemented a strategy of detaining and torturing anyone whom they suspected of having Mau Mau ties. In an attempt to isolate civilians from the Mau Mau, the government forcibly resettled 1.2 million Africans at 800 hastily built concentration camps. It was during this period of intense paranoia that a young Otieno joined Mau Mau and began her work for independence.

Mau Mau suspects held in detention in Nairobi, 1952

The Freedom Fighter Wambui Otieno

Otieno was born in 1936 to a prominent Kikuyu family in Kenya's Central Province. Her great-great-grandfather was a Maasai who migrated to southern Kikuyuland as a refugee sometime in the 18th century. When British settlers began arriving in the 1890s, her great-grandfather was a spokesperson for his generation's council of elders. He negotiated some of the first treaties with British colonial agents but was exiled and killed after misunderstandings led to war in 1892. Thereafter, Otieno's family were loyal to the British. Her grandfather donated some lands to the Church of Scotland Mission and permitted Otieno's father to be educated there. He boarded at Thogoto Mission School and began a career for the colonial state after graduation. He worked first for the Railways Department and then as Kenya's first African chief police inspector.



Photograph of Wambui Waiyaki Otieno in 1955, at the age of 19

Downtown Nairobi around 1950. Otieno worked in the greater Nairobi area as a Mau Mau spy, scout, courier, handler, and smuggler during the State of Emergency.

Otieno was raised in a large, upper-middle-class family. She was the seventh child and third girl. They lived in a wealthy neighborhood called Muthaiga in the capital of Nairobi and also owned a farm west of the city in Thogoto. Otieno's mother had attended an all-girls' mission school in Mambere. As a result, Otieno was raised with a mixture of Christian and Kikuyu culture. She attended Sunday School and performed chores for her mother at their home and family farm. She attended primary school at Rungiri and became part of approximately 0.1% of Kikuyu women who received formal schooling in Kenya during their youth. At the time, the highest education one could receive in colonial Kenya was Form Two, the equivalent of high school, and so Otieno's parents sent their children abroad for university. Otieno was on the path to join her older siblings in England when the State of Emergency was declared in 1952.

Otieno was just 16 years old when she took her first Mau Mau oath—by accident—in 1952. She was on holiday from school when one of her cousins took her to a ceremony at Gaitumbi. She initially thought it was an event associated with the Girl Guide movement, a counterpart to the Boy Scouts. After undressing down to her underwear, she was escorted to a dimly lit room. Here, tied to another initiate with a goatskin, she walked several times beneath an arch made of two sugarcane poles, drank a concoction of blood and dirt, and swore undying allegiance to the cause of independence. Over the next four years, Otieno would deliberately take a total of eight more Mau Mau oaths. Each one marked an increasing commitment to the movement.

Although Otieno took her first oath by accident, it was not a mistake that she was introduced to the Mau Mau. She had developed anti-colonial views in her teenage years as a result of several influences. The first was her experiences at colonial boarding school, where she was required to show deference to her white instructors and suppress her African heritage. The second was her exposure to a nationalist literature that challenged the colonial narrative. She read works by the anti-colonial organizer Jomo Kenyatta, who was one of her relatives. His works represented her great-grandfather as an early martyr for independence and explained how British colonialists had stolen Kikuyu land. The third influence was her growing awareness of the oppression faced by the majority of Africans on the "White Highlands." This lesson came home in the early 1950s when Otieno's father was briefly detained, and her mother was nearly beaten by a white soldier.

Anti-colonial organizer and relative of Otieno, Jomo Kenyatta, c. 1950.

Otieno deepened her involvement with Mau Mau after her plans to study abroad were cancelled by the State of Emergency. In 1954, she started running missions fulltime for Mau Mau's War Council. She began as a courier but was promoted to a scout, spy, smuggler, and organizer. She was a valuable asset for the movement. European settlers and soldiers, as well as their African allies in the Home Guard, assumed that the rebels were men. As a young woman, Otieno was unlikely to be suspected as Mau Mau. This allowed her to infiltrate colonial spaces undetected and carry out special assignments like gathering intelligence and smuggling weapons. Her light complexion added to her inconspicuousness, as it helped her disguise her Kikuyu heritage from the Home Guard and pass as an outsider to the highlands. Her upper-class background gave her connections to people in the government whom she could call on to get out of trouble and acquainted her with the kinds of behaviors expected of "proper" young women. Most important, her education allowed her to evaluate and copy important documents by hand in real time.

Mau Mau leaders c. 1954.

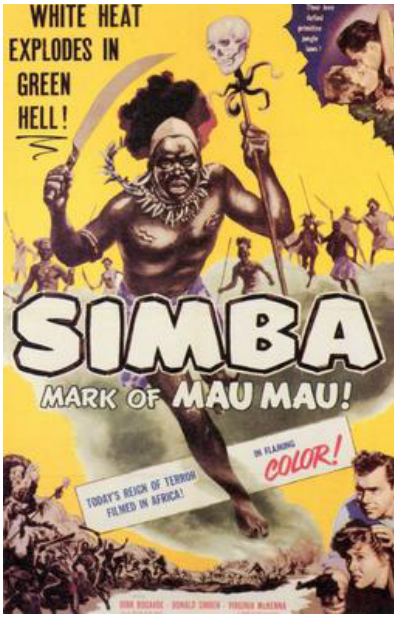
Between 1954 and 1956, when Britain declared Mau Mau defeated, Otieno worked undercover as an agent in the city and countryside. Her work served many purposes. Sometimes it involved scouting a target the Mau Mau intended to attack, gathering intelligence about the best time to strike, the safest escape routes, and the mission's overall likelihood of success. Other times it involved sneaking into government buildings to steal weapons and intelligence. Such intelligence included government knowledge about Mau Mau's activities and propaganda meant to disparage the movement. Having acquired this information, Mau Mau leaders could adjust their war plans and anticipate the propaganda in the press. Otieno's work also involved recruiting and managing a network of civilian informants in strategic positions. All of this work put her life at risk, since taking the oaths was illegal and death was the penalty for being caught with an unlicensed firearm. It also put the bodies of the operatives whom she organized at risk. An extraordinary example of this occurred when a team of women under her charge went undercover as prostitutes at a local bar to gain access to colonial barracks' for the purpose of stealing weapons.

View from a watchtower of a detention camp, created by the colonial government during the "State of Emergency," 1954.

Otieno joined the trade union movement in Nairobi after Britain proclaimed Mau Mau defeated. In 1960, she was detained off Kenya's coast on Lamu Island, where she was tortured and raped. At the same time, however, British administrators came to feel that the costs of their "victory" over Mau Mau had been too high. Perhaps 10,000 Mau Mau, 3,000 Kenyan police and white soldiers, and 100 white settlers had been killed, £55 million had been spent, and the fighting had tarnished Britain's international reputation. Weighing these costs, the British government decided that defending Kenya's white settlers had become politically unwise both at home and abroad. They released their political prisoners (including Otieno) in 1961 and granted Kenya independence in a formal ceremony in Nairobi on December 12, 1963. Like Drif, Otieno dedicated the remainder of her life—another 48 years—to working in national politics.

Jomo Kenyatta holding up an official document marking Kenyan independence at a ceremony in December 1963.

Propaganda, Gender, and the Women Veterans of Mau Mau

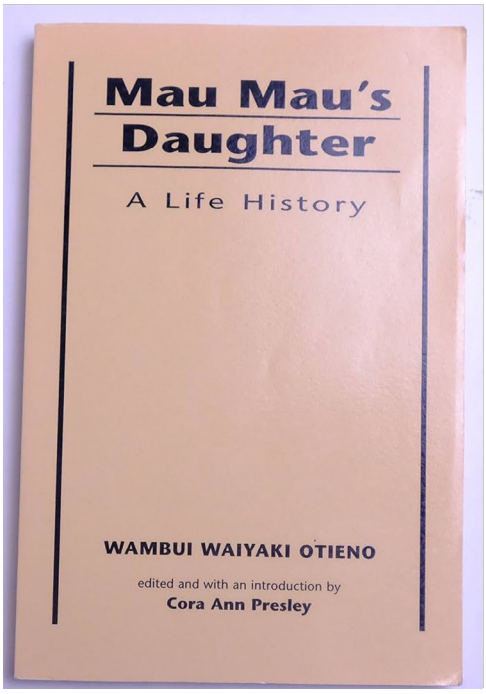


Film poster for Simba, 1955, illustrating stereotypical representations of the Mau Mau.

Efforts to tell the "true" story of Mau Mau ran parallel to the uprising itself. In order to maintain public support for the colony and explain their conduct there, white settlers and their allies had to produce a constant stream of propaganda. Their propaganda demonized the Mau Mau as savages and depicted their cause as irrational by never acknowledging colonial oppression. Meanwhile, it represented the settler community as heroic and overemphasized "loyal" Africans in an effort to persuade viewers that the conflict was not about imperialism and white racism. It represented the Mau Mau as exclusively men and depicted their victims as mostly women and children.

Ever since the 1960s, and especially over the last 30 years, veterans of Mau Mau have worked to correct this colonial propaganda and tell their own stories about the struggle for independence. Between 1986 and 1993, Otieno drafted a memoir detailing her life experiences. When the book was finally printed in 1998 as *Mau Mau's Daughter*, its editor described it as the only "authentic nonfiction account of a Kenyan woman's role in politics from the 1950s to the 1990s, authored by herself." The work not only corrected the fiction that Mau Mau rebels were exclusively men, but it revealed what the war looked like from a young woman's perspective. It showed how Mau Mau relied on women to work for the resistance in ways that men could not; how sex was used as a weapon, both by and against women rebels; and how women rebels balanced the demands of fighting for freedom while simultaneously providing for and sustaining their families.

Otieno, who died in 2011, was not alone in her attempt to correct British propaganda. In 2009, survivors of the State of Emergency, including women like Jane Muthoni Mara, sued the British government for reparations. They demanded the government acknowledge the tens of thousands of Kenyans who were imprisoned, tortured, killed, and executed and pay restitution to survivors. In 2013, they won their case. The British government issued a formal apology and reparations in the amount of £20 million. This payment is paltry and inadequate, but the verdict has opened the door to future lawsuits and created a trail of public records that make it impossible for the state to deny its history of violence. In recent years, an educational organization based in Nairobi, named *MauMau Chronicles*, has taken upon itself the task of documenting oral histories from Mau Mau veterans. Interviews like that of Grace Njoki Mwangi, linked below, remind us that Otieno was extraordinary but not exceptional. She was one of many women rebels in the struggle.



The cover of Wambui Waiyaki Otieno's memoir, entitled Mau Mau's Daughter, 1998.

Survivors from the State of Emergency in Kenya Colony, including Jane Muthoni Mara (second from the left), pose for a photo outside the High Court of Justice in London, England, 2011.

Explore More..

To learn more about the Mau Mau and the experiences of Grace Njoki Mwangi, alias Kanguniu, see the following interview segments conducted with *MauMau Chronicles:*

- "Part I: My Life as a Young Mau Mau Scout-Veteran," interview with Grace Njoki Mwangi, June 21, 2021
- "Part II: How I Rescued the Mau Mau Warriors," interview with Grace Njoki Mwangi, June 21, 2021

Further Reading

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Image Citations

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Jomo Kenyatta (left) with Apa Pant and Aching Oneko, between 1948 and 1952, Public Domain, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Jomo_Kenyatta_Apa_Pant_and_Acheing_Oneko.jpg

Page 7:
Mau Mau leaders, Kenya, c. 1954, National Army Museum, https://collection.nam.ac.uk/detail.php?acc=1967-05-110-4
Photograph showing one of approximately one hundred detention camps created as part of the colonial government's "villagization" program in 1954. Provided by Beth Rebisz.

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Duke of Edinburgh and Jomo Kenyatta, Independence ceremony, December 13, 1963, Fair Use, https://newafricanmagazine.com/4047/
Cover art, Simba, 1955, Fair Use, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Simbpos.jpg

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