

## Primary Source: Excerpts from Wambui Otieno's Memoir, 1998



Excerpts from Wambui Otieno's memoir: *Mau Mau's Daughter: A Life History*, ed. and intro. by Cora Ann Presley (Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1998). The following excerpt was cut from "Chapter 3: Early Days in the Mau Mau Movement," 33–47.

**Setting:** The city of Nairobi and its surrounding area in the British colony of Kenya between 1954 and 1956

.....

### My Work in the City

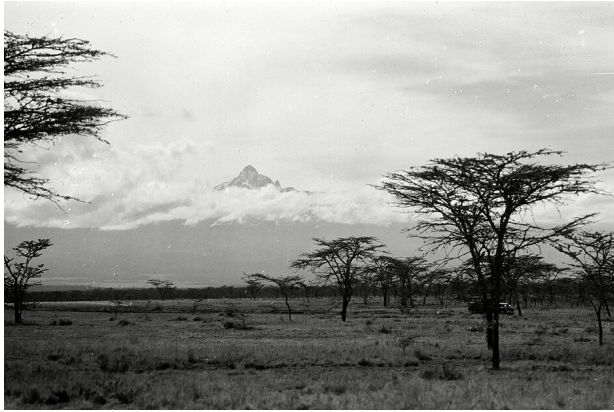
By the time the State of Emergency was declared, I had already taken my first Mau Mau oath ... By late 1954, I had become so deeply involved with Mau Mau, I could no longer pretend to be leading an ordinary village girl's life. I therefore did the best thing under the circumstances – I ran away to Nairobi. My mother, in her ignorance, thought I had eloped with a man, because in those days that was the only thing that could take a girl away from her home ...

In Nairobi, I became a full-time Mau Mau ... A typical Mau Mau scout was a young, smartly dressed woman; rarely were they men. Because she was required to disguise herself every now and then, her working tools included paraphernalia such as wigs, various uniforms, *buibui* (the caftan-like dress and head cover worn by Muslim women), and makeup.<sup>1</sup> Once in disguise,

1. The *buibui* is a reference to colonial Kenya's Muslim population, particularly prominent on the coast near Mombasa. As a disguise, it encourages the perception that Otieno was an outsider to the Central Highlands.

## Primary Source

Excerpts from  
Wambui Otieno's  
Memoir, 1998



*View of Mount Kenya, near the region where the Mau Mau and Otieno operated*

the scout visited a targeted area. She gathered information about the area's layout and other relevant bits and pieces that she passed on to the appropriate battalion ...

I was chosen to lead a group whose sole responsibility would be to obtain firearms ... I decided to enlist the help of taxi drivers and single women. I divided them into cells so that one cell did not know what the other was doing. This was both for their safety and for that

of the movement ... I also decided to use a little psychology in my endeavors. I had seen the British soldiers and knew they were like small boys who could not be kept in the barracks for any length of time. They were easy prey for attractive girls. I stationed these girls at strategic points, mainly nightclubs, which the soldiers frequented.



*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.*

One very popular spot was Dinaz Bar on Tom Mboya Street, then known as Victoria Street.<sup>2</sup> The girls would arrive at Dinaz Bar in the evening looking their best. They smoked and drank a lot. This was important because it encouraged the soldiers to indulge themselves. As for the girls, whenever they felt they were getting tipsy, they were under instructions to go to the toilet and induce vomiting by pushing the fingers as far down the throat as they would go. This

left them in a more sober state than their soldier partners. When it was time to leave for the girls' lodgings, taxis driven by our men were ready. After dropping the passengers off, the taxi would wait at a prearranged place because the women might emerge anytime with the evening's prize catch, the gun and ammunition. Sometimes they got cash as well. Once the girl was back in the taxi, a quick getaway was made. The risks were high for the women involved, but with dedication and precise timing, almost every operation was a success, and our stockpile of arms rose dramatically.

Some girls became so daring that they accompanied the soldiers to their barracks at Kahawa or Gilgil.<sup>3</sup> At first I was apprehensive, but when they explained it to me, I realized we could turn their being accepted at the barracks to our advantage.

2. The changing of colonial place names, like "Victoria Street," was common after independence.

3. The locations mentioned in this excerpt are mostly north of Nairobi, though to a greater or lesser distance.



Members of the Kenyan Land and Freedom Army (KLFA) pose for a photograph outside the Aberdare Forest, where they operated during the uprising, after independence.

They told me that at the barracks they were treated as mere prostitutes, which suited us very well. Any method that could secure arms for us was acceptable. Security at the barracks was lax and the girls were never intercepted. This way they were able to smuggle out guns (and sometimes a whole belt of live ammunition) in their handbags without interception ... My girls were

passing on information to the Mau Mau about the goings-on in the barracks, so that at any given time we knew very well the positions of the troops in the barracks.

### My Work in the Countryside

The War Council was so impressed with my success that they decided to assign me higher duties of scouting in the countryside, a task quite different from scouting in the city. It was a lonely and often hazardous job. My first assignments were to spy on the Kirwara police post and the Kandara Home Guard post, installations we intended to attack. Wearing a *buibui* to disguise myself, I traveled from Nairobi by train. Because of my light complexion, I easily passed for somebody from the coast. I deliberately wore the *buibui* to enhance this impression.



Map of Kenya showing Thika, 1988.

At Thika, I met my contact man, a Kalenjin<sup>4</sup> police constable at the Thika police station. He briefed me about the situation at Kirwara, then introduced me to a post office employee, a Kamba<sup>5</sup> who was also a member of the movement. We were able to identify one another by means of a code. My contact, the postman, and I visited Kirwara and surveyed the area. I took the relevant information – details about the layout of the police post, the number of men staffing it, the location of the armory, and the best directions from which to attack – to Ruiru, and it was further relayed to the higher authorities in Nyandarua Forest. Thus, the stage was set. My mission to the Kirwara police post was successful, and the Mau Mau killed eight policemen.

I moved on to Kandara where I collected the data for an assault on the Home Guard post ... However, the security was tighter than I had expected and I was quickly arrested because I could not produce a movement permit on demand<sup>6</sup> ... My cover story was that a man hailing from Kandara, who wanted to marry me by force, had abducted me from Muthiga,<sup>7</sup> only to abandon me at Kandara.

4. Kalenjin refers to a group of tribes in East Africa whose homeland is western Kenya and eastern Uganda.

5. Kamba is one of the largest ethnic groups based in Nairobi and its environs.

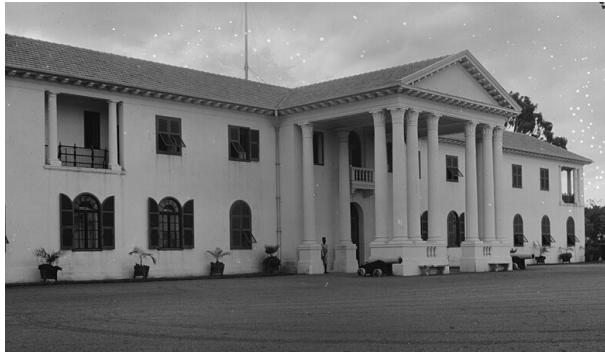
6. Colonial law required Africans to carry “passes” when they were outside of their government-assigned “reserves” or estates.

7. A neighborhood in Nairobi.

When asked exactly where in Kandara he came from, I became so dumb about it that they gave up. My story remained consistent and in the end they believed it because incidents of abductions of girls were not uncommon in those days. As a result, I was released ...

### **Undercover at Government House**

A few days later I left for Nairobi, in the company of Senior Chief Ndung'u, Senior Chief Muhoya, and Githu (a notorious Home Guard called "Speaker").<sup>8</sup> I was



*Government House in Nairobi, Kenya Colony.*

amused that I should be traveling with three men whose ideals were quite the opposite from mine. While they were dedicated to destroying Mau Mau, I was devotedly serving the movement. At Government House they left me in the car and went to look for someone to give me a lift to Muthiga. Apparently the meeting started before they could find anyone, because none of them returned immediately. I located some of our members who were employees of Government House. They gave me a spy camera ... I took photographs of all the delegates at the meeting. The roll of film was quickly smuggled to our superiors in the bush.

amused that I should be traveling with three men whose ideals were quite the opposite from mine. While they were dedicated to destroying Mau Mau, I was devotedly serving the movement. At Government House they left me in the car and went to look for someone to give me a lift to Muthiga. Apparently the meeting started before they could find anyone, because none of them

After the meeting, the delegates proceeded to the Norfolk Hotel for a reception. Chief Ndung'u assigned one of the delegates to take me home after the reception. He left me in his car and went to drink in the hotel. He also left his briefcase containing notes of the meeting and the resultant memorandum, which was to be sent to the Colonial Office in London ... I took the papers from the briefcase. One of our taxi drivers who was nearby rushed me to Kivuli House, where we copied them.

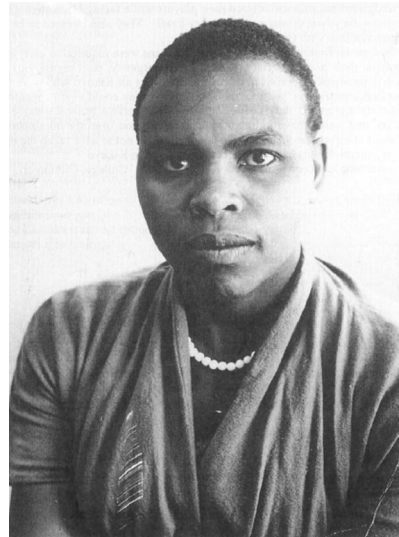
When I returned to the Norfolk, the delegate was tipsily chatting up a white woman. He had no idea what I had done. As I had had no intention of going back to Muthiga in the first place, I lied to him, saying that someone else had offered to take me home. I pretended that I was anxious to reach home quickly. His countenance showed that he was glad to see me go.

### **The Dangers of Scouting**

Scouting or gathering intelligence was not a simple task, and the War Council knew that without scouts no war would be waged or won. As I mentioned before, scouts had to be women for various reasons. Women normally look innocent and are able to change with every setting. Scouting in war is really espionage or the transportation of vital information or valuable items from one location to another; scouts also had to see to the maintenance of our weapons. A spy had to go to an area that the fighters intended to attack and find out all the essential details. Such a place could be near a police station or a Home Guard post. One would first have to make friends, find out the comings and goings thereabouts, and then

8. According to Otieno, Ndung'u, Muhoya, and Githu were invited to attend "a meeting of chiefs and anti-Mau Mau leaders at Government House," the official residence of Britain's colonial governor in Nairobi (40). They brought Otieno with them to Nairobi as a favor to return her home.

assess the situation: Did the officers drink exceptionally heavy? Or were they fascinated by women? Who posed no threat after what specific hours? How many officers would remain aware of their surroundings after specific hours? All these sundry details would have to be unearthed before a scout could report to the War Council. These reports had to be precise, as a small mistake could cause the fighters to incur heavy losses. The scouts were the ones who arranged the whole attack ...



*Wambui Otieno in her scouting uniform at the age of 19, 1955.*

The reader might infer from my narratives that scouting was an easy job. To the contrary, it was an occupation full of unpredictable pitfalls with danger lurking in every corner. Scouts lived from day to day, as one wrong move could mean death. I remember one time when I ran into a police screening team near Khoja Mosque in Nairobi. I was smuggling a faulty gun that I was taking to be repaired. The penalty for possessing an unlicensed firearm those days was a mandatory death sentence. My wits saved me. I managed to keep cool on the outside and was not searched. Luckily, I had perfected the art of assuming an innocent young girl's expression. That, coupled with my very light complexion, always helped disguise my identity. Who would suspect a woman who looked like a Goan, of all people, of being a Mau Mau activist?<sup>9</sup>

## Raising Children During the War



*View of a detention camp created by the colonial government during its "villagization" program in 1954.*

During the violence of the Mau Mau days it was difficult to raise children, since as a freedom fighter, scout, and member of the inner circle, I never knew when I might be betrayed, arrested, or killed. I had three children before 1960. When not engaged in party business, I took care of them myself. My mother and a nanny also helped me take care of them. My fiancé, to whom I was engaged for ten years, supplied money for the children's care. We delayed our marriage because my step-

grandfather opposed it. I also earned money by typing letters for the trade union. In my spare time, I worked as a bookkeeper. For a long time I lived rent-free in my father's rental property. My mother frequently sent food to me in Nairobi from our farm in Kiambu. Without their support, I would not have been able to raise my children to be the strong, beautiful people they are. My fiancé and I intended to get married ... We stayed together until I was arrested and detained at Lamu detention camp.<sup>10</sup>

9. Editor's note: "In general, Goans have lighter complexions than Kikuyu." *Goans* refers to a community of mixed Portuguese and Indian ancestry who settled in Kenya from the 1890s onward. Their name derives from the word Goa, a state on the southwestern coast of India that was once a Portuguese and later British colony. At the time of these events, Goa was part of the newly independent India. Otieno's statement suggests that the British and their allies presumed Goans from the coast to be more pro-British than Kikuyu from the highlands.

10. Lamu is an island off the coast of Kenya, roughly 300 miles east of Nairobi.

# Image Citations

**Page 1:**

Wambui Otieno, before 2011, <https://kenyanrk.wordpress.com/2011/09/02/wambui-mutumia-njorua-wambui-our-warrior/>

**Page 2:**

Kenya Colony. Mount Kenya. Snow-capped, 1936, G. Eric and Edith Matson Photograph Collection, Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, Public Domain, [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Mount\\_Kenya\\_1936.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Mount_Kenya_1936.jpg)  
Nairobi, c. 1950, Public Domain, [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Nairobi\\_in\\_1950.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Nairobi_in_1950.jpg)

**Page 3:**

KLFA outside the Aberdare Forest, Fair Use, <https://www.cam.ac.uk/research/news/how-the-british-treated-hard-core-mau-mau-women>  
Kenya, 1988, Central Intelligence Agency, Library of Congress Geography and Map Division Washington, Public Domain, <https://www.loc.gov/resource/g8410.ct001674/?r=0.4,0.295,0.416,0.198,0>

**Page 4:**

Kenya Colony. Nairobi. Government House, 1936, Eric and Edith Matson Photograph Collection, Library of Congress, Public Domain, [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Kenya\\_Colony\\_Nairobi\\_Government\\_House\\_LOC\\_matpc.00370.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Kenya_Colony_Nairobi_Government_House_LOC_matpc.00370.jpg)

**Page 5:**

Photograph of Otieno, Wambui Waiyaki Otieno and Cora Ann Presley, *May Mau's Daughter: A Life History*, Boulder: Lynne Reiner Publishers, 1998, Fair Use.  
Detention camp, after 1954, courtesy of Beth Rebisz.