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Abstract

The purpose of this project is to examine the role of rituals in the *Mau Mau* struggle for Kenya's independence. Traditionally, research on the *Mau Mau* has focused on the political and socio-economic aspects of Kenya's anti-colonial struggle. As a result, the place of spirituality and, in particular, the role of rituals in the *Mau Mau* struggle has largely been ignored in existing literature. Initially, when KLF A rituals were studied at the height of the *Mau Mau* struggle, the task was undertaken by colonial anthropologists and psychologists who were often unable to escape the snare of racist and Eurocentric prejudices in their analyses. Subsequent revisionist studies have attempted to be more objective in their analyses, but the focus has mainly been on the elements and details surrounding the actual ceremonies, at the expense of how these rituals impacted individual freedom fighters. Using oral history interviews of seventeen former *Mau Mau* freedom fighters, this project looks at how rituals impacted individual freedom fighters and shaped their views of, and contributions to, the struggle for Kenya's independence. The study uncovers six *Mau Mau* rituals including drinking the oath, clutching soil at death, seeking a seer, singing, praying, and wearing locked hair. Relying on African Indigenous Knowledges to frame and interpret the collected narratives, this study particularly uses *Nommo*—the creative and generative power of the spoken word—to demonstrate that the *Mau Mau* struggle effectively utilized the utterances made during ritual ceremonies to generate courage, perseverance, strength, commitment, and other values that were invaluable to the struggle. Ultimately, the study establishes that experiences of rituals were integral to shaping the participation of freedom fighters in the *Mau Mau* struggle for Kenya's independence.

“Thaai thathaiyai Ngai thaai”: Narratives of Rituals, Agency, and Resistance in the KLFA (*Mau Mau*) Struggle for Kenya’s Independence

By
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B.A. Daystar University, 2010

Master’s Thesis

Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Pan African Studies in the Graduate School of Syracuse University

May 2013

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Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to the thousands of men and women who lost their lives fighting for Kenya's land and freedom. Their stories must be told to our children and children's children, and their sacrifices must never be in vain.

Acknowledgments

I give thanks and praises to the Most High God for giving me divine strength and motivation to successfully complete this project, and especially get through those times when I felt completely overwhelmed.

I would like to sincerely thank my advisor, Mwalimu Micere Githae Mugo, for her guidance, constructive feedback, and unyielding support during this project. She stood by me despite being in a very difficult period of bereavement. Her dedication to this project was a source of great strength and motivation to me. I am also indebted to Prof. Joan Bryant and Prof. Martin Shanguhya who, together with my advisor, formed my Thesis Committee. My long conversations with Prof. Bryant, and especially the insightful questions she posed, helped me to critically reflect on the direction of this project. My numerous conversations with Prof. Shanguhya enabled me to situate my work within the vast *Mau Mau* Historiography. I am also grateful to the Department of African American Studies and Pan African Studies program at Syracuse University, for funding my research in Kenya.

I am deeply indebted to the members of the Mau Mau War Veterans Association office in Gitura Sub-Location, Murang'a South District. They welcomed me into their community and shared very personal and compelling stories that made this project possible. I am also grateful to Prof. Maina wa Kinyatti and the Mau Mau Research Centre for introducing me to some of the former freedom fighters who participated in this study. A special thanks goes to Kimani Waweru for helping me in this endeavor.

I am very grateful to Dr. Wandia Njoya and Curtis Reed who have been my mentors since my undergraduate years at Daystar University. Your guidance, love, and support have been integral to getting me to this point.

I would also like to sincerely thank the entire Mbunga family and my fiancé, Kalo Sokoto, for their constant prayers and motivation during this project. Their love and support helped me to press on during all those sleepless nights of writing, editing, and corrections. In addition, I would like to thank my friends Sila Musyimi, Muthami, Mbunga, Makau Nzioka, and Samson Kamina. My groundings with these brothers have greatly motivated and informed my interest in this project.

In addition, I would like to thank all A.I.C. Jericho English SAF members and Daystar University's Ajenda Afrika members for all the vibrant discussions we have held regarding *Mau Mau* history, in particular, and Pan-African history and politics in general.

Lastly, I give special thanks to Beatrice Wambui Mathenge and Nduta Mbugua-Mainda for their help in translating some of the Gikuyu interviews. There are many other people who have contributed to this project in one way or the other, but I am unable to mention everyone by name. To all of them, I say *asanti sana!*

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**“Thaai thathaiyai Ngai thaai”¹: Narratives of Rituals, Agency, and Resistance in the KLFA
(Mau Mau) Struggle for Kenya’s Independence**

1. Introduction

Statement of the Problem

Narratives of colonialism are dominated by the colonizers. Seldom do historical records include the stories and experiences told by colonized people on their own terms. The story of Kenya under British colonialism and the subsequent struggle for independence are no different. Many of the dominant narratives, interpretations and reflections on the period are by colonial officials, historians, anthropologists, psychologists, missionaries, educators, novelists and journalists who often give one-sided analyses of the subject.² Their works often ignore the lived experiences of many actual participants whose lives were profoundly affected by colonialism. Furthermore, they not only dismiss, repress and demonize the colonized people’s cultural practices, but also attempt to erase them.

In his widely acclaimed essay, *National Liberation and Culture*, Amilcar Cabral explains the pivotal role of culture in the process of dominating a people. He notes that, an imposed rule “can be maintained only by the permanent [and] organized repression of the cultural life of the

¹ This is a Gikuyu expression which directly translates as: “Peace, we beseech you, God, peace be with us.” It was said at the end of every prayer and was also a part of the oath-taking ritual. It forms part of the title of my project because it captures the essence of the interviews conducted for this study.

² These include: Louis S. B. Leakey. *Defeating Mau Mau*. (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd, 1955); John C. Carothers. *The Psychology of Mau Mau*. (Nairobi: Colony and Protectorate of Kenya, 1955); Elspeth Huxley. *The Flame trees of Thika: Memories of an African Childhood*. (New York: William Morrow, 1959); Karen Blixen. *Out of Africa*. New York: Harper Collins, 1938); Ian Henderson & Philip Goodhart. *Manhunt in Kenya*. (London: Doubleday & Co., 1958); Robert Chester Ruark. *Uhuru: A Novel of Africa Today*. (New York: McGraw Hill-Hill, 1962); and Robert Chester Ruark. *Something of Value*. (New York: Doubleday & Co., 1955).

people concerned.”³ The accuracy of Cabral’s remarks is seen in the brutal history of British colonialism in Kenya. Through its institutions, especially the church and the school, the British colonial system violently and systematically attempted to alienate Africans from their culture. In spite of persistent African resistance, the colonial enterprise viciously opposed African languages, singing, dancing, initiation rites, traditional marriage ceremonies, and indigenous forms of worship.

In addition, the colonial state forcefully evicted Africans from their land and huddled them into “Native Reserves.”⁴ The British colonial government appropriated land in the most fertile regions of Kenya which later became known as the “White Highlands.” There, one European could own land “bigger than a location in the Reserves containing sixty thousand people.”⁵ For the Africans, land was not merely a means of economic production, but a God-given inheritance, a medium connecting them to their ancestors, and an important site of ritual.⁶ The *Mau Mau* armed resistance which broke out in the early 1950s reflected this orientation.⁷ It was a response to the far-reaching effects of land and cultural alienation on Africans in Kenya.

³ Amilcar Cabral. *Return to the Source: Selected Speeches of Amilcar Cabral*. (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1973), 39.

⁴ Bethwell A. Ogot. *Zamani: A Survey of East African History*. (Nairobi: East African Publishing House and Longman Group Ltd, 1974), 271.

⁵ Josiah Mwangi Kariuki. *Mau Mau Detainee*. (Nairobi: Transafrica Press, 2009), 2. (First published in 1963 by Oxford University Press).

⁶ Jomo Kenyatta. *Facing Mount Kenya*. (Nairobi: Heinemann Kenya, 1978), 21. (First published in 1938 by Martin Secker and Warburg Ltd).

⁷ There are different accounts explaining the origin of the term *Mau Mau*. According to Maina wa Kinyatti, in *History of Resistance*, the term arose from a British colonial prosecutor’s misunderstanding of the Gikuyu words “*mau mau*” which loosely translate as “those those”. Eager to name, characterize, and denigrate the Kenyan anti-colonial movement, the British press and its government popularized the name *Mau Mau* (Kinyatti, 2009, p.105). Even though, the narrators in this study corroborated Kinyatti’s account, other interpretations still exist. See for example, Bruce Berman and John Lonsdale. *Unhappy Valley: Conflict in Kenya and Africa*. (Nairobi: Heinemann Kenya, 1992), 265-303. However, the movement’s key objectives were *ithaka* (land) and *wiyathi* (freedom). It is therefore accurate to refer to it as the Kenya Land and Freedom Army (KLFA). But because of the pervasiveness of the term *Mau Mau*, both within and beyond Kenya, and even among the freedom fighters themselves, this study will use the name *Mau Mau* and KLFA interchangeably.

Traditionally, research on the *Mau Mau* has focused on the political and socio-economic aspects of the movement.⁸ This is probably because the *Mau Mau* armed resistance was the first well-organized and fully-fledged peasant revolt against British colonialism in Africa.⁹ As a result, the place of spirituality and, in particular, the role of rituals in the *Mau Mau* struggle has largely been ignored in existing literature. Initially, when KLF A rituals were studied during the *Mau Mau* struggle, the task was undertaken by colonial anthropologists and psychologists who were often unable to escape the snare of racist and Eurocentric prejudices in their analyses. For example, J.C. Carothers describes the oathing ritual as “peculiarly obscene,”¹⁰ while L.S.B. Leakey describes it as being characterized by “incredible beastliness and depravity.”¹¹ Since then, revisionist historians have attempted to offer a more objective analysis of KLF A oaths.¹² However, focus has mainly been on the elements and details surrounding the actual ceremonies, at the expense of how the oaths impacted individual freedom fighters and shaped their participation in the KLF A struggle.¹³

Furthermore, there has been a tendency to reduce ritual to the oathing rite alone, yet there were many other rituals practised during the KLF A struggle, including praying, singing,

⁸ For example: Carl Roberg & John Nottingham. *The Myth of “Mau Mau”: Nationalism in Kenya*. New York: Frederick A. Praeger, Inc., Publishers, 1966); Robert Buijtenhuijs. *Mau Mau Twenty Years After: The Myth and the Survivors*. (The Hague: Mouton & Co., 1973); Tabitha Kanogo. *Squatters and the Roots of Mau Mau: 1905-1963*. (Nairobi: Heinemann Kenya, 1987); Maina wa Kinyatti. *Mau Mau: A Revolution Betrayed*. (Nairobi: Mau Mau Research Centre, 2000); Wunyabari O. Maloba. *Mau Mau and Kenya: An Analysis of a Peasant Revolt*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993).

⁹ Ngugi wa Thiong’o, introduction to *Kenya’s Freedom Struggle: The Dedan Kimathi Papers* by Maina wa Kinyatti. (London: Zed Books, 1987), xiv.

¹⁰ John C. Carothers. *The Psychology of Mau Mau*. (Nairobi: Colony and Protectorate of Kenya, 1955), 14.

¹¹ Louis S. B. Leakey. *Defeating Mau Mau*. (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd, 1955), 77.

¹² See for instance, Carl Roberg & John Nottingham. *The Myth of “Mau Mau”: Nationalism in Kenya*. New York: Frederick A. Praeger, Inc., Publishers, 1966), 241-262.

¹³ See for instance, Wunyabari Maloba. *Mau Mau and Kenya: An Analysis of a Peasant Revolt*. (Oxford: James Currey, 1993), 98-113.

seeking a seer, and clutching soil at death. Inevitably, this has drastically narrowed the scope of analysis with regard to rituals in existing literature.

Research Questions

1. What is ritual and what was its place in indigenous Kenyan cultures before the advent of British colonialism in Kenya?
2. What are the rituals that were practised during the KLFA struggle and how were they significant to the movement?
3. How did the practice of KLFA rituals act as a form of resistance and a means of reclaiming agency for the freedom fighters?
4. In what ways did rituals motivate individual freedom fighters to fight colonialism despite the threat of hardship and death?
5. How did rituals shape the spiritual convictions of individual freedom fighters and thus their participation in the KLFA struggle?

Background

The use of rituals in resistance is not unique to the *Mau Mau* movement. Other resistance movements in Kenya which preceded the *Mau Mau* or worked alongside it also used rituals to resist colonial domination. First, between 1911 and 1914, the Giriama community on the coast of Kenya waged a fierce armed resistance against British occupation of their land, and forced labour on sisal plantations. Their leaders, Mekatilili wa Menza and Wanje wa Mwandorikola, administered oaths of loyalty and unity among the people in order to solidify their commitment to the struggle. The two leaders were arrested in August 1913 and transported to Kisii, in Western Kenya, where they were imprisoned without trial. But in January 1914, they escaped

from prison and trekked all the way back to the coast—a distance of about 500 miles—where they continued with their activism.¹⁴

Secondly, both the Kikuyu Central Association (KCA), which began in the mid-1920s, and its predecessor, the Young Kikuyu Association (YKA), which was formed in 1921 by Harry Thuku, administered oaths of allegiance to their members. This was done in order to strengthen the resolve of its members in the agitation for lost land, better working conditions for Africans on settler farms, and the abolition of the hut tax. The oath was known as “*muma wa chuba*” (oath of the bottle) and was administered with the Bible on the left hand and a mound of soil on the right hand.¹⁵

Additionally, African Independent Churches and other religious movements arose during the colonial period and were sharply critical of the oppressive political, cultural, and socio-economic policies of the colonial state and missionary church. These included: *Dini ya Mumbo*, *Dini ya Roho*, *Dini ya Msambwa* and *Dini ya Zakawi* in Nyanza; *Dini ap Mbojet* in Kipsigis; *Kathambo na Ndonge* in Machakos; and *Dini ya Yesu Kristo* and Arathi (also known as *Watu wa Mungu* or *Akorino*) in Central Kenya. All these groups practised secret rituals to create solidarity and commitment among their members. Because of the huge following they generated among the peasantry, the leaders of these organizations were often deported, imprisoned without trial, tortured to death, and sometimes admitted into mental asylums on fabricated grounds of insanity.¹⁶

¹⁴ Maina wa Kinyatti. *History of Resistance in Kenya: 1884-2002*. (Nairobi: Mau Mau Research Centre, 2009), 4-5. Since 2009, a group calling itself Mombasa Republican Council has been agitating for the secession of the Coast Province from Kenya. They are said to use oaths to foster the commitment of members. It would be useful to investigate how these oaths relate, if at all, to those administered by Mekatilili and Wanje.

¹⁵ Kariuki, *Mau Mau Detainee*, 15-16.

¹⁶ Kinyatti, *History of Resistance in Kenya*, 44-46, 87-90.

Similarly, in neighbouring Tanzania, the *Maji Maji* rebellion which broke out in 1905 also employed rituals in resistance to German colonial rule. Africans in Matumbi and other southern districts had not only been alienated from their land, but were also being forced to grow cotton on the small pieces of land available to them. This resulted in frequent food shortages and when a serious drought broke out in 1905, the unbearable conditions sparked off a rebellion under the leadership of Prophet Kinjeketile Ngwale. In a trance-state in which he stayed under water for 24 hours, the prophet received instructions from Bokero, the Supreme Being, to mobilize and unite people from different communities in order to collectively resist German rule. He therefore administered an oath of unity in which he sprinkled sacred water on the freedom fighters to protect them against German bullets.¹⁷

In the African Diaspora, the use of rituals in resistance is perhaps best illustrated in the case of Haiti. The Haitian Revolution is regarded as the most successful “slave” revolt and it resulted in the establishment of the first independent Black state in the so called New World. Under the leadership of Boukman Dutty, the enslaved Africans partook of a freedom oath which is regarded as the final catalyst to the Haitian Revolution. The well-known Boukman’s prayer captures the deeply-spiritual nature of the Haitian Revolution:

The god who created the earth; who created the sun that gives us light. The god who holds up the ocean; who makes the thunder roar. Our God who has ears to hear. You who are hidden in the clouds; who watches us from where you are. You see all that the white man has made us suffer. The white man's god asks him to commit crimes. But the god within us wants to do good. Our god, who is so good, so just, He orders us to revenge our wrongs. It's He who will direct our arms and bring us the victory. It's He who will assist us. We all should throw away the image of the white men's god who is so pitiless. Listen to the voice for liberty that sings in all our hearts.¹⁸

¹⁷ “Records of Maji Maji” in Robert O. Collins., *African History in Documents: East African History*. (Princeton: Markus Wiener Publishers, 1990), 124-141.

¹⁸ C.L.R. James. *Black Jacobins: Toussaint L'Overture and the San Domingo Revolution*. (New York: Random House, 1963), 87.

There are many other examples of the use of rituals in Afro-people's resistance movements. All of them demonstrate the fact that African spirituality has played a significant role in Pan-African resistance to various forms of oppression.

Objectives of the study

1. To foreground the narratives, interpretations, and lived experiences of former KLFA members, and thereby expand the range of voices that define and interpret colonial experiences and anti-colonial struggles.
2. To understand the significance of rituals to KLFA members, and to show how these rituals enabled them to assert their agency, and also shaped their participation in the anti-colonial resistance movement.
3. To incorporate the narratives of former KLFA members who did not enter the forest to fight— majority of who were women and children.
4. To expose the centrality of spirituality in the *Mau Mau* movement and thus challenge the notion that it was a movement driven solely by material want.
5. To challenge the racist and Eurocentric narratives on *Mau Mau* rituals inherent in existing literature on the subject.

Significance of the study

This study is significant because it investigates an aspect of the KLFA which is comparatively underrepresented in the *Mau Mau* Historiography. The subject of *Mau Mau* is one of the most widely-researched topics in Kenya's history. Yet, in spite of this huge

historiography, little attention has been given to the place of spirituality and, in particular, the role of rituals in the movement.

Secondly, the rituals in this study were situated within a cultural context shaped by the masses of the people. The peasantry and working classes were the main actors in Kenya's anti-colonial struggle. As a result, this study focuses on the role of the masses in the movement and not on an exclusive group of KLFA leaders—many of whom were relatively educated males.

In addition, most of the former freedom fighters, who are the narrators in this study, are now elderly men and women and it is important to tell their stories before they all pass on. The true history of anti-colonial resistance is an important chapter in Kenya's history and it will be an invaluable tool for the youth and for future generations. By foregrounding the narratives of 17 former KLFA members, this study unapologetically stands in solidarity with the three former KLFA members who recently won their case in the London High Court.¹⁹ The court ruled that they have legitimate grounds to sue the British government for torture and detainment during the anti-colonial struggle. This is a significant ruling, albeit quite overdue, because it opens the way for thousands of claims from former KLFA members who were imprisoned and brutally tortured by the British colonial government during the *Mau Mau* struggle.²⁰ Better yet, it is an opportunity to compel the British government to set up a comprehensive compensation scheme for former KLFA members and their families, in order to avoid dealing with thousands of litigations that are likely to be brought against the government. This study strongly believes that by highlighting the narratives of former KLFA members, it will create awareness and thus lend

¹⁹ For more information on this court case, see: Ian Cobain & Richard Norton-Taylor. "Mau Mau Veterans win right to sue British Government." *The Guardian*, October 5, 2012.

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2012/oct/05/mau-mau-court-colonial-compensation-torture>

²⁰ For a detailed account of the harrowing experiences of former KLFA members under the British colonial government, see Caroline Elkins. *Britain's Gulag: The Brutal End of Empire in Kenya*. (London: Jonathan Cape, 2005).

support to their current activism for reparations and state support from the British and Kenyan governments respectively.

Furthermore, this project is important because there are limited studies existing which analyze the role of African spirituality in anti-colonial resistance movements after World War II. This period is generally considered to be one of heightened nationalistic consciousness in Africa and therefore, most research has focused on the traditional contours that characterized nationalist politics: agrarian and economic inequalities, nationalist political parties, and the rise of educated Africans. However, by analyzing how rituals impacted KLFA members and consequently shaped their participation in the anti-colonial struggle, this study hopes to start filling the current void.

Lastly, this is an important study because it investigates what, in my view, is the key ingredient for the realization of Pan-African unity in the 21st century: spirituality. I strongly believe that African spirituality, when progressively used, possesses the depth, capacity, and sensitivity needed in order to address identity, gender, race, class, materialism, sexuality, environmental change, war, ethnic-based violence, and other pertinent issues facing Africans and other Afro-descended people globally.

Research Methodology

Participants in this study were selected through the snowball method whereby, one former KLFA member introduced me to another member, who in turn introduced me to another, and so on. A contact at the Mau Mau Research Centre in Nairobi introduced me to one former KLFA member and then the snowball method took effect after that.²¹ Former KLFA members

²¹ Mau Mau Research Centre is a Kenyan organization dedicated to researching the history of the KLFA, and that also stands in solidarity with the current activism of former freedom fighters. Its founder and director is Prof. Maina wa Kinyatti, one of Kenya's leading historian on the KLFA.

are known to be very secretive and so the snowball method proved to be quite useful and convenient because it built a circle of trust. Every new narrator would be comfortable to share their narrative with me because their comrades had already done so. Oral history is the research method that was used in this study. It was the most suitable method of carrying out this research because oracy, the mastery and effective use of the spoken word, is a central feature of the society of former KLFA members.²² Pio Zirimu and Austin Bukonya, some of the earliest proponents of oracy, highlight its central place in indigenous African societies: “Oracy, orature and oratory are regarded as having a vital social, political and moral role in the society. The orator sees himself not just as an efficient linguistic technician but also as a teacher, as a guide, [and as] a conscience for his society.”²³ In addition to its appropriateness for the narrators in this study, oral history also allowed the participants to share their own narratives and experiences on their own terms. As noted earlier, narratives of colonialism are dominated by the colonizer and thus, a key objective of this study is to foreground the narratives of former freedom fighters in Kenya. According to Paul Thompson, one of the founders of the British Oral History Society, oral history gives voice to the marginalized groups in society. He offers that:

Since the nature of most existing records is to reflect the standpoint of authority, it is not surprising that the judgement of history has more often than not vindicated the wisdom of the powers that be. Oral history by contrast makes a much fairer trial possible: witnesses can now also be called from the under-classes, the unprivileged, and the defeated. It provides a more realistic and fair reconstruction of the past, a challenge to the established account. In so doing, oral history has radical implications for the social message of history as a whole.²⁴

Thompson’s remarks resonate with an often quoted African proverb which says, “Until lions tell their tale, the story of the hunt will always glorify the hunter.” The proverb implies that dominant

²² Pio Zirimu and Austin Bukonya. “Oracy as a Skill and as a Tool for African Development.” *The Arts and Civilization of Black and African Peoples*, 10 (1987), 90.

²³ *Ibid*, 94.

²⁴ Paul Thompson. “The Voice of the Past: Oral History,” in Robert Perks and Alastair Thompson, eds. *The Oral History Reader*. (New York: Routledge, 1998), 28.

narratives are not always accurate and calls for attention to be given to alternative narratives as well.

Linda Shopes, a former president of the Oral History Association, gives us a succinct definition of oral history: “a self-conscious, disciplined conversation between two people about some aspect of the past considered by them to be of historical significance and intentionally recorded for the record.”²⁵ This definition embodies some of the key principles of oral history which made it best-suited for this study. First, oral history is characterized by shared authority between the narrator (also known as interviewee though less preferred in this study) and the interviewer. Unlike other types of interview methods, where authority over the direction of the interview resides primarily with the interviewer, oral history is characterized by shared authority over the direction, structure and content of the interview. This principle of oral history perfectly complements the “communal nature of oracy”²⁶ which upholds democratic and all-inclusive participation in decision-making processes within the cultural context of the narrators in this study.²⁷ My experience with James Karanja Waweru, one of the 17 narrators in this study, perfectly illustrates this.

After several introductory meetings with Mzee Waweru, he informed me that he was willing to grant me an interview but that I could not record it.²⁸ This is because he was in the process of writing his own book on the history of the KLF, and so did not want the interview to be recorded as this could undermine the significance of his upcoming book. I tried to persuade him to reconsider his decision on grounds that mine was a thesis and not a book project, and that

²⁵ Linda Shopes. “What is Oral History?” *Making Sense of Evidence, History Matters: The U.S. Survey on the Web*. 2. <http://historymatters.gmu.edu/mse/oral/oral.pdf>

²⁶ Zirimu and Bukenya. *Oracy as a Skill*. 93.

²⁷ Kenyatta, *Facing Mount Kenya*, 186-189

²⁸ In Kiswahili, Mzee is a respectful title for an elderly man.

note-taking was cumbersome, time-consuming and would affect his flow, but he would hear nothing of the use of a recorder. However, he was still willing to grant me an interview so long as I only took notes. Seeing as it was my first interview with a former KLFA member, and he was bound to have profound insights based on his own experiences as well as his research, and he had earned my full respect by virtue of being elderly, I agreed to proceed with the interview on his terms. The interview went very well and proved to be extremely rewarding to both of us.

Even though recording is a fundamental aspect of oral history interviews, exceptions can be made and this was certainly one of them.²⁹ Mzee Waweru is the only narrator in this study who refused to be recorded and my experience with him exemplified the importance of shared authority in oral history. It is important to note that Mzee Waweru's concerns about recording are not unfounded. Many scholars of KLFA history have aggressively sought interviews with former KLFA members, "harvested their brains" and gone on to publish best-selling books, make millions of dollars, and completely forget about the plight of these freedom fighters.³⁰ He was therefore more than justified to refuse to be recorded.

A second principle of oral history is its dialogic process. Linda Shopes comments on how oral history is primarily a dialogue between the narrator and the interviewer:

Although the conversation takes the form of an interview, in which one person – the interviewer – asks questions of another person – variously referred to as the interviewee or narrator – oral history is, at its heart, a dialogue. The questions of the interviewer, deriving from a particular frame of reference or historical interest, elicit certain responses from the narrator, deriving from that person's frame of reference, that person's sense of what is important or what he or she thinks is important to tell the

²⁹ Donald Ritchie, *Doing Oral History*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 112-113.

³⁰ Micere Githae Mugo. *Writing and Speaking From the Heart of My Mind: Selected Essays and Speeches*. (New Jersey: Africa World Press, 2012), 243.

interviewer. The narrator's response in turn shapes the interviewer's subsequent questions, and on and on.³¹

This principle of oral history further complements the communal nature of oracy which highly values dialogue and conversation within the cultural context of the narrators in this study. It was evident in all my interviews but was most memorable during the interview with Mzee Mwangi wa Murimi.

In the course of our interview, I asked Mzee Murimi to tell me how the oath had impacted him and shaped his participation in the KLFA. He quickly corrected me by saying, "The oath is still active. Don't ask me what it did; it is still doing and it is actively within me right now."³² To my delight, Mzee Murimi did not passively respond to my questions. Rather, he critically engaged me, challenged some of my questions, and even asked me his own questions. For instance, towards the end of our interview, he asked me a series of probing questions: "Where are you from? How have you come here? Who sent you? Why are you interested so much in this history? Why do you have locked hair? Are you *Mau Mau*?"³³ One would expect that he ask such questions at the beginning of our interview but he asked them at the end. This is probably because I had somewhat gained his trust given that some of his comrades had already granted me interviews. It could also be because he simply wanted to tell his story and there was someone available and willing to listen. Whatever the case, the interview with Mzee Murimi was a good illustration of the dialogic process in oral history. Our interview was a truthful conversation that met both our needs. I got to learn more about the history of the KLFA from an actual participant while Mzee Murimi got a chance to share the narrative of his KLFA

³¹ Shopes, "What is Oral History?" 2-3.

³² Mwangi wa Murimi, interview with author, June 9, 2012.

³³ Ibid.

experience on his own terms. Paul Thompson offers an apt description of this function of oral history:

Oral history... can be used to change the focus of history itself, and open new areas of inquiry; it can break down barriers between teachers and students, between generations, between educational institutions and the world outside; and in the writing down of history – whether in books, or museums, or radio and film – it can give back to the people who made and experienced history, through their own words, a central place.³⁴

Conversely, it is important to note that this study also faced some methodological challenges in the use of oral history. First, the traditional notion of interviews—where the interviewer wields sole control over the direction, structure and content of the interview—was quite prevalent among some of the narrators. A few of them expected that their role would solely be to answer very specific questions that I posed to them. They therefore struggled with the deliberately open-ended questions that I chose to ask. I did not have a list of specific questions prepared in advance for the interviews. But after general introductions, I would typically begin an interview as follows:

I am interested in the history of the *Mau Mau* and particularly in your own personal experiences as a member of the movement. I would like to know about the rituals you conducted in the movement and how they shaped your participation in the struggle for independence. I would also like to know what motivated you to resist colonialism despite the threat of imprisonment, torture and sometimes even death. But let's begin by what you were doing with your life when the *Mau Mau* revolt broke out and how you eventually joined the movement.³⁵

For majority of the narrators, as soon as they told me their date of joining KLF (which in all cases was when they drank the oath), they naturally continued with the narrative of their experiences. This is probably because the broad issues I touched on in the introduction would usually activate their memories and serve as a good ice-breaker for our interview. But this did

³⁴ Thompson, “Voice of the Past,” 26.

³⁵ Mwangi wa Murimi.

not work for all the narrators. In fact, one narrator, slightly annoyed by my questions, remarked, “Your questions are too broad, what exactly do you want to know about the *Mau Mau*?” Others would keep quiet after telling me when they joined the movement or tell me, “Okay, so what else do you want to hear?” I would then formulate another deliberately broad question hoping to draw them out. The second and third attempts worked for some narrators and they would eventually open up and get into the flow of their narrative. However, for a few narrators, the entire interview was characterized by, “Okay, so what else do you want to hear?” after every question for which they usually gave a brief and somewhat shallow response. For these narrators, it was difficult to view themselves as key stakeholders in determining the direction of the interview. For them, it was the responsibility of the interviewer to ask all the questions and their task was simply to answer him.

A second challenge faced in this study was that some narrators were unable to share their own personal experiences. Such narrators found it difficult to give a personal narrative of their experiences in the KLFA. This was not because they were introverts or uncomfortable with sharing their personal experiences. Rather, it was because they did not necessarily consider their thoughts, feelings, memories and reflections on the KLFA struggle as important to the history of the KLFA. They were more comfortable speaking about KLFA as if they were mere observers and not actual participants. With such narrators, I kept posing the challenge that they should share their own experiences and include themselves in the narratives.

Additionally, it is worth noting that oral history is sometimes criticized, even by some oral historians, for lacking credibility. Donald Ritchie, a former president of the Oral History

Association, argues that oral history narratives can at times be factually inaccurate and biased.³⁶ While Ritchie's concerns are legitimate, Alessandro Portelli, a key proponent of oral history, gives an apt response to such criticisms. He argues that the value of oral history has less to do with its factual veracity than with the narrators' personal reflections and interpretations of their history. Portelli emphasizes that oral history "tells us less about *events* than about their *meaning*... Oral sources tell us not just what people did, but what they wanted to do, what they believed they were doing, and what they now think they did."³⁷ On the question of memory, he adds:

Memory is not a passive depository of facts, but an active process of creation of meanings. Thus, the specific utility of oral sources for the historian lies, not so much in their ability to preserve the past, as in the very changes wrought by memory. These changes reveal the narrators' effort to make sense of the past and to give a form to their lives, and set the interview and the narrative in their historical context.³⁸

In addition, it is important to situate questions of accuracy that are raised against oral history within the context of the longstanding tension that exists between the written and the oral. There is a tendency to assume that everything which is written is true and simultaneously, to treat everything that is oral with a lot of scepticism, in the belief that it is highly susceptible to manipulation and exaggeration. However, the reality is that both the written and the oral are at equal risk of being manipulated or exaggerated, and none is inherently more accurate than the other. This false notion has led to the silencing and alienation of orate cultures and groups in society. In post-independent African states, it is the elders who have fallen victim to this "fetishization of the written word."³⁹ Despite being "walking libraries", as Amilcar Cabral aptly

³⁶ Ritchie, *Doing Oral History*, 117-118.

³⁷ Alessandro Portelli. "What Makes Oral History Different?" in Robert Perks and Alastair Thompson, eds. *The Oral History Reader*. (New York: Routledge, 1998), 36.

³⁸ *Ibid*, 37.

³⁹ Abebe Zegeye and Maurice Vambe. "African Indigenous Knowledge Systems." *Research Foundation of SUNY* 29 (4) (2006), 332.

described the elderly, they have been forced into “indignant silence” because many of them are orate and non-literate.⁴⁰ By deliberately employing oral history and focusing on a predominantly orate and non-literate section of society, this study hopes to show that oracy can be an effective and reliable tool for historical research.

In this section, it is also important to describe the setting of the interviews. Fifteen of the 17 interviews were conducted in the Mau Mau War Veterans Association (MMWVA) office in Gitura Sub-location, Murang’a South District. This is where former KLFAs members hold most of their meetings and thus, they appeared to be quite comfortable to conduct the interviews there. Besides the narrator and the interviewer, there were always two or three other freedom fighters in the room during an interview. The main narrator would be seated at the centre of the room, closest to the voice recorder, while the other freedom fighters would be seated in different positions around the room. The main narrator would do most of the talking but once in a while, they would seek the help of fellow comrades in remembering an important detail. On other occasions, their comrades would interrupt to remind them of something important they had left out, or to correct them on a wrong detail they had given. These exchanges expanded the principle of shared authority in oral history beyond the confines of narrator and interviewer, to include the narrator and their community. Other times, the freedom fighters sitting in would nod or make small sounds in approval of what their comrade had said, and this seemed to encourage the main narrator to continue. While recollecting KLFAs songs, as soon as the main narrator sang the first line, the freedom fighters who were sitting in would join in and sing along. Other narrators would begin the interview with a word of prayer. Everyone in the room would then stand up, lift both hands over their heads, face the direction of Mount Kenya and join in the prayer. The

⁴⁰ Zirimu and Bukenya, *Oracy as a Skill*, 103.

interviews therefore employed a variety of orature techniques, including call and response, storytelling, purposeful repetition, emphasis, audience participation, and purposeful silence. This was another illustration of how well oral history complemented the orate traditions of the narrators.

The foregoing discussion has shown the rationale of using the oral history method in this study. It has shown how the principles of oral history played out during the actual interviews and how oracy and orature, inherent within the cultural context of the narrators, complemented oral history principles and techniques. In conclusion, it is important to highlight specific dimensions of KLFA history that would not have been effectively illuminated without using the oral history method. In order to illustrate this, a rehash of two of the research questions in this study is necessary:

1. In what ways did rituals motivate individual freedom fighters to fight colonialism despite the threat of hardship and death?
2. How did rituals shape the spiritual convictions of individual freedom fighters and thus their participation in the KLFA struggle?

These questions could not have been asked nor answered in a neat and linear manner where one would completely get done with one question before moving to the next. It would have been impossible to attempt to do it that way. This is because the questions encompassed a variety of experiences whose answers could only be found in bits and pieces strewn all over the narratives. It was therefore my responsibility as the interviewer to pick out these answers as we went along with the interview and piece them together. These complex and multi-faceted questions could best be addressed within the structural flexibility provided by the oral history method.

Interpretive Tools

The main interpretive tool employed in this study is *Nommo*—the creative and generative power of the spoken word. It was extremely important for this study to employ interpretive tools that do not impose on, or distort in any way, the collected narratives of former KLFA members. This is because, as we noted earlier, a key objective of this study is to foreground the narratives of former KLFA members. With this in mind, *Nommo* was carefully selected because it helps illuminate specific aspects of the collected narratives without compromising their integrity and authenticity. *Nommo* is a concept from the Dogon people of Mali. It will be useful in analyzing how the spoken word was creatively used during KLFA rituals. The spoken word was a central feature in most of the rituals under investigation in this study, including drinking the oath, praying, singing and seeking a seer. *Nommo* will help demonstrate that the spoken word was effectively used to generate courage, self-sacrifice, love, faith, hope, commitment, resilience, unity, perseverance, and trust among KLFA members.⁴¹

It is important to note that the concept of *Nommo* belongs to a corpus of work that is generally referred to as African indigenous knowledges or African indigenous technologies.⁴² This body of work privileges African ways of knowing, languages, cultures, naming systems, beliefs, values, myths, legends, literature, orature, experiences, and worldviews. Many of these aspects will be evident in the oral history narratives collected in this project. This is because, as we saw earlier, the oral history method used in this study allows narrators to tell their stories and experiences on their own terms. These stories and experiences are rooted in the particular context

⁴¹ A more detailed discussion on *Nommo* is undertaken in Chapter 4.

⁴² This study uses Malidoma Somé's description of technologies in *The Healing wisdom of Africa*. Therein, he notes that: "Technologies in the indigenous world are developed in order to fulfil basic human needs, such as community, health, harmony, and a sense of meaning and purpose in life. In this sense, technology is oriented toward Spirit." (Somé, 1998, p. 71). Therefore, in this context, the term does not merely refer to machines or industrial equipment.

of the narrators. It is therefore useful in this section to briefly discuss some general characteristics of African indigenous knowledges that are present in the particular context of this study's narrators. This should not be interpreted to mean that African indigenous knowledges are homogenous; on the contrary, they are richly diverse. But in all this diversity, it is still possible to pick out, in a broad sense, some of their general characteristics.

One major characteristic of African indigenous knowledges is that they embody a close relationship between the material and spiritual worlds. Unlike Eurocentric knowledges which tend to “sacrifice the wholeness of personhood” by dichotomizing reality into opposing and competing binaries of spirit versus matter, reason versus emotion, and ultimately, man versus woman, African indigenous knowledges perceive spirit and matter as complementary and interdependent parts of a whole.⁴³ Spirit and matter are seen as products of each other and a close relationship is maintained between them. Malidoma Somé, a Burkinabe shaman and a key expositor of African indigenous knowledges, offers this apt description:

Indigenous technology is accomplished not by machines, but by a dynamic interplay among the mind, emotion, spirit, and senses of the human body on the one hand, and the natural world on the other... Indigenous technology concerns not only the material world but extends to and grows out of our interactions with Spirit; it is the embodying of our relationship with Spirit.⁴⁴

The intimate relationship between spirit and matter is evident in the relationships Africans have among themselves and with nature. A good illustration of this relationship is in the fact that in most African languages, there is no word for religion. This is probably because, in certain respects, religion is an artificial construction which attempts to compartmentalize a people's awareness and articulation of their spirituality. It stems from a Eurocentric tradition of

⁴³ Marimba Ani. *Yurugu: An African-Centered Critique of European Cultural Thought and Behavior*. (New Jersey: Africa World Press, 1994), 32.

⁴⁴ Malidoma Patrice Somé. *The Healing Wisdom of Africa: Finding Life Purpose Through Nature, Ritual, and Community*. (New York: Jeremy P. Tarcher/Putnam, 1998), 60.

detaching the physical, visible and material world from the “unseen” spiritual world. However, in most African societies, the spiritual world is so fluidly interwoven into the material world, that an autonomous spiritual compartment cannot exist within their reality. The interconnection between spirit and matter is seen in birth and naming ceremonies, planting, harvest, initiation, death, war, drought, marriage, cooking, eating, sleeping, travelling, and literally all spheres of life. In our study, this interconnectedness is best illustrated in a common prayer made by KLFA members during the anti-colonial struggle: “*Ngai, tūkīhotwo nīwe wahotwo na tūkīhotana niwe wahotana.*” (God, if we lose you are the one who has lost, and if we win you are the one who has won.)

Secondly, because of the close relationship between the spiritual and material worlds, African indigenous knowledges are characterized by seemingly supernatural phenomena that break empirically-grounded laws of science and nature. Yet, placed in their contexts, these phenomena are considered quite normal. Somé, for instance, offers a fitting illustration of this characteristic: “A Westerner will say, for example, that water always makes you wet, yet a native healer who gets into a river and stays for hours doing what healers do might get out just as dry as if he had been working in the Sahara Desert.”⁴⁵ A similar observation was made by Kathryn Geurts, an American anthropologist who was studying bodily experiences in Ghana. Her field research among the Anlo-Ewe of South-eastern Ghana revealed that the five-sense model of touch, taste, sight, smell and hearing was inadequate in their context. The reasons for this were: the Anlo-Ewe do not treat these five senses as distinct; they conceive of more senses than just these five; and they do not make a clear-cut distinction between sense and feeling. For the Anlo-Ewe, sense and feeling, collectively known as *seselelame*, are interconnected because they are

⁴⁵ Ibid, 11.

experienced together. Geurts notes that, “seselelame then houses both the cognitive function of perception, as well as the somatic phenomenon of sensation (inside the flesh).”⁴⁶

In other words, Geurts discovered that the Anlo-Ewe could experience phenomena in a way that was very different from her own worldview. Indeed, the ordering and experience of knowledge is not universal; it is highly contextualized and can vary considerably from one culture to another. This is a significant characteristic of African indigenous knowledges because some of the experiences that are discussed in this study will appear fictitious to hearts and minds that rigidly believe in universal knowledges and ways of knowing.

Thirdly, African indigenous knowledges are often stored and transmitted orally. While it has been proven that there is a long history of writing in certain regions of Africa, most notably Ancient Egypt⁴⁷ and Abyssinia⁴⁸, it is accurate to say that in most parts of Africa, both past and present, “oracy, orature and oratory are regarded as having a vital social, political and moral role in the society.”⁴⁹ The spoken word is the most common medium of communication in Africa and it is the form in which most of the indigenous knowledges are stored and transmitted. Oracy, the mastery and effective use of the spoken word, is a central feature of the society of former KLF A members.⁵⁰ In fact, among the Gikuyu, “those who speak well have always been honoured, and the very word *chief* means *good talker*.”⁵¹ This pervasiveness of oracy in Gikuyu society ensured that oral history was the most suitable research method for this study. A legacy of oracy undergirds African indigenous knowledges and this perhaps, is the biggest reason why literate

⁴⁶ Kathryn Linn Geurts. “On Rocks, Walks, and Talks in West Africa: Cultural Categories and an Anthropology of the Senses”, *American Anthropological Association*, 30 (3) (2002): 185.

⁴⁷ Cheikh Anta Diop. *The African Origin of Civilization: Myth or Reality*. (Chicago: Lawrence Hill & Co., 1974).

⁴⁸ Ayele Bekerie. *Ethiopic, An African Writing System: Its History and Principles*. (Asmara: Red Sea Press, 1997).

⁴⁹ Zirimu and Bukenya, *Oracy as a Skill*, 94.

⁵⁰ *Ibid*, 90.

⁵¹ *Ibid*, 95.

societies, obsessed with valorizing the written word, continue to denigrate indigenous knowledges. Abebe Zegeye and Maurice Vambe describe this attitude even more lucidly in their refreshingly critical article, *African Knowledge Systems*: “The fetishization of the written word created the impression that all that was unwritten or unwritable in Africa constituted nonknowledge.”⁵²

Zegeye and Vambe introduce an important dimension to the discussion on oracy and African indigenous knowledges: some knowledges are unwritten because they are “unwritable.” In fact, not only are they unwritable, but they also cannot and should not even be verbalized. This is because some esoteric knowledges are only meant to be experienced and they would lose their power or become destructive if they were to be verbalized. Malidoma Somé, in *Of water and the spirit*, his classic autobiographical work, explains to his readers why he cannot reveal details of certain rituals he participated in during initiation. In one such ritual, he stares at a tree for hours until the tree changes into a tall green lady who lovingly embraces and converses with him. He notes:

I cannot repeat the speech of the green lady. It lives in me because it enjoys the privilege of secrecy. For me to disclose it would be to dishonor and diminish it. The power of nature exists in its silence. Human words cannot encode meaning because human language has access only to the shadow of meaning. The speech of the green lady was intended to stay alive in silence, so let it be.⁵³

He adds:

Every initiation has its esoteric and exoteric parts. As the years have passed, I have realized that some things can be told and others not. Telling diminishes what is told. Only what has been integrated by the human aspect of ourselves can be shared with others. I have also come to believe that things stay alive proportionally to how much silence there is around them. Meaning does not need words to exist... the word is not

⁵² Zegeye and Vambe, “African Indigenous Knowledge Systems,” 332.

⁵³ Malidoma Patrice Somé. *Of Water and the Spirit: Ritual, Magic and Initiation in the Life of an African Shaman*. (New York: Penguin Group, 1994), 222.

the meaning and the meaning is not the word. At best, words are merely a vehicle, a very shaky and second-rate means of human communication. This is because meaning does not have a body.⁵⁴

This dimension of indigenous knowledges is key to our study because some of the rituals under investigation, especially the oathing ritual, fall under the category of “unwritable” and unspeakable experiences. Most of the narrators in this study made it clear from the onset that there were certain experiences of rituals which they were unwilling to talk about. African indigenous knowledges provided this study with the tools it needed to respect and meaningfully interpret this silence. This deliberate and selective silence on the part of the narrators helped to further demonstrate the suitability of the oral history method in this study. This is because oral history allows the narrators to tell their stories and experiences on their own terms.

Lastly, African indigenous knowledges are geared towards healing the bodies and spirits of community members, their relationships with each other, and with nature. Somé, in his highly-acclaimed book, *The Healing Wisdom of Africa*, notes that “indigenous technology is what keeps the individual and the relationship between individuals and nature healthy.”⁵⁵ Not only are these knowledges useful in restoring harmony in the lives of individuals and the entire community, but they also diagnose the cause of any disharmony. For example, among the Akamba community of Eastern Kenya, naming is an important ritual that takes place a few days after the birth of a child. Names are important markers of identity and they often embody a child’s life purpose. There are some rare occasions on which the newborn child is said to have “refused” the name assigned to it. This usually happens when the parents of the child fail to give it its proper name and it manifests in sickness or unusual behaviour in the new-born. This could include the child crying for hours and sometimes even days, or the child inexplicably developing a tumour on its head or

⁵⁴ Ibid, 258.

⁵⁵ Somé, *Healing Wisdom of Africa*, 59-60.

an infection in its eye. The situation is usually remedied by an elderly man or woman, often a grandparent, who after holding or looking at the child for a few minutes, tells the parents its proper name. The child immediately stops crying and the inexplicable illness starts to clear and completely disappears in a matter of days.

The foregoing interpretive tools will help us to understand and fully appreciate the narratives of former KLFA members collected in this study.

Chapter sequence

This study contains six chapters. Chapter 2 is a review of existing literature on ritual and resistance in general, as well as the specific treatment of KLFA rituals in the vast *Mau Mau* historiography. A survey of sources on the research methodology and interpretive tools has already been presented in this chapter. Chapter 3 examines the nature, functions and components of rituals. It also looks at the historical background of KLFA rituals in indigenous Gikuyu culture. Chapter 4 “listens to” and engages the collected narratives of 17 former KLFA members with reference to drinking the oath—the core KLFA ritual. Chapter 5 also “listens to” and engages the collected narratives of 17 former KLFA members with reference to five routine KLFA rituals. Chapter 6 is the conclusion and it summarizes the main themes in the narratives and the possible opportunities for further research.

2. Literature Review

A large body of research exists that examines the role of rituals in resistance movements across Africa and other parts of the world. The purpose of this chapter is to review some of this research and to highlight the common methods and approaches used relative to those in this study. A survey of sources on the research methodology and the interpretive tools has already been presented in the previous chapter, and will therefore not feature here. The chapter is divided into two parts: Part A is a general review of how scholars have analyzed the role of rituals in resistance movements in Africa and other parts of the world. Part B reviews the KLFA historiography with specific focus on *Mau Mau* rituals, and it is further divided into two sections: Section 1 examines the scholarly treatment of rituals in the vast *Mau Mau* Historiography, while Section 2 looks at how former KLFA members have analyzed *Mau Mau* rituals in their published narratives and autobiographies.

A. General Review

The majority of studies discussed here reveal that rituals have historically played an integral role in resistance against political, socio-economic, and cultural forms of domination.

To begin with, Bruce Lincoln in *Ritual, Rebellion, Resistance: Once More the Swazi Ncwala*, analyzes how the *Ncwala* ritual was used to resist British colonialism among the Swazi of Southern Africa. *Ncwala* was traditionally a social ritual of renewal which involved ritualized singing and dancing, but in the face of colonial domination, Swazi royalty mobilized the community to use the ritualized singing and dancing to articulate their dissatisfaction with the colonial administration. Lincoln notes that “*Ncwala* served as an instrument of resistance to

British domination, through which Swazi solidarity was effectively mobilised and maintained.”⁵⁶

In his study, Lincoln uses existing research on the *Ncwala* ritual in which Swazi participants were interviewed and observed. Similarly, Patrick McAllister in *Political Aspects of Xhosa Beer Drink Oratory*, examines how the beer drinking ceremony was used to resist colonial domination among the Xhosa people in Shixini, Willowvale District in Transkei, South Africa. Although beer consumption was quite common in Shixini, beer drinking ceremonies were unique as rituals because they gathered together large groups of people and went on for several days. Through observation and interviews with the participants, McAllister establishes that oratory performances, the main feature of beer drinking ceremonies, enabled “Shixini people to maintain a semblance of unity and independence and thereby to resist fuller incorporation into the wider southern African political economy.”⁵⁷ Based on interviews with and observations of the ritual participants, both Lincoln and McAllister establish that the rituals in question were performed as acts of resistance to colonial domination. Notably, just as in my study, both Lincoln and McAllister trace how indigenous rituals were adopted and utilized within a particular context of anti-colonial struggles.

In addition, Benjamin Lawrence in *'La révolte des femmes': Economic Upheaval and the Gender of Political Authority in Lomé, Togo, 1931-33*, looks at the role of Voodoo in resistance to French colonialism in Togo. Lawrence uses interviews with the chiefs and elders of Lomé, Togo, and historical analysis of archival records to establish that the practice of voodoo by Ewe women catalyzed a 1932 protest against French colonial policies. The voodoo acts involved pronouncement of curses upon colonial officials by naked voodoo priestesses. The protest broke

⁵⁶ Bruce Lincoln. “Ritual, Rebellion, Resistance: Once More the Swazi Ncwala”. *Man, New Series*, 22(1) (1987): 132.

⁵⁷ Patrick McAllister. “Political Aspects of Xhosa Beer Drink Oratory.” *English in Africa*, 15(1) (1988), 84.

out because the French colonial administration arbitrarily increased the taxes levied on the market women. Just as in my study, Lawrence demonstrates how the practice of rituals motivated participants in their anti-colonial struggles. In contrast, Karen Middleton in *Circumcision, Death and Strangers*, argues that the decline of circumcision among the Karembola of Madagascar was in itself an act of resistance to colonial domination. Through interviews with a sample of community members, Middleton argues that the Karembola people were so aware of the decline of circumcision, and the consequent erosion of their culture, that this decline constituted “part of a wider performative in which Karembola both remained rooted in their own culture and reclaimed their autonomy.”⁵⁸ While Middleton attempts to offer a new way of looking at ritual, she does not convincingly show how the decline of ritual was an act of resistance to colonial domination.⁵⁹ Her work contrasts with mine because I try to argue that the retention and practice of rituals was integral to the KLF A struggle.

Additionally, Scott Schnell’s *Ritual as an Instrument of Political Resistance in Rural Japan*, examines how the rousing drum ritual was used as a medium for political protest in Japan. Traditionally, the rousing drum ritual was used to mark the beginning of a local Shinto shrine festival, but in the 1990s, the ritual became a means of articulating land grievances. Through interviews and observation of the residents of Furukawa town in Central Honshu, Japan, Schnell establishes that the rousing drum ritual was a catalyst for politically motivated violence. The participants in the rousing drum ritual were protesting the state-sanctioned entry of foreigners into their territories. Schnell’s study is similar to mine in that it also traces the adoption and utilization of indigenous rituals in activism over alienated land.

⁵⁸ Karen Middleton. “Circumcision, Death and Strangers.” *Journal of Religion in Africa*, 27(4) (1997): 343.

⁵⁹ This study is aware of the longstanding debate that exists in African Studies about the significance of circumcision to males and females in Africa. Such a discussion is beyond the scope of this study as circumcision is mentioned here only as it relates to the role of rituals in resistance.

Moreover, Duncan Brown in *Orality and Christianity: The Hymns of Isaiah Shembe and the Church of the Nazarites*, looks at how hymns were used to resist colonial domination in South Africa. Isaiah Shembe was the founder of the Church of the Nazarites in Natal, South Africa, in the 1910s. Through a typological analysis of Isaiah Shembe's published collection of hymns, Brown shows that members of the Church of the Nazirites ritualistically "hybridized" Christian hymns with Zulu poetry and song, in order to articulate "religious and political resistance to colonial oppression."⁶⁰ Brown's study is similar to mine because I also examine the ritualized rewriting of Christian hymns by KLFA members in order to articulate their anti-colonial ideologies.

Likewise, James Searing in *No Kings, No Lords, No Slaves: Ethnicity and Religion Among the Sereer-Safen of Western Bawol, 1700-1914*, shows how the Sereer-Safen of Senegal used prayer rituals to resist religious domination from their Islamic neighbours. By analyzing historical archival records on the Sereer-Safen community, Searing establishes that the Sereer-Safen gathered and prayed together at the sacred village shrine, as per custom, in direct defiance of their Wolof neighbours who were trying to forcefully Islamize and enslave them from the beginning of the 18th century. Furthermore, Mary Hegland in *Shi'a Women's Rituals in Northwest Pakistan: The Shortcomings and Significance of Resistance*, highlights how Shi'a women used religious rituals to resist male domination. By interviewing Shi'a Muslim women in Pershawar, North West Pakistan, Hegland establishes that they used chanting, preaching, recitation and mourning rituals to protest against male domination in their society. By participating in these rituals, they "demonstrated their abilities and competence in dealing with the public, thereby

⁶⁰ Duncan Brown. "Orality and Christianity: The Hymns of Isaiah Shembe and the Church of the Nazarites." *Current Writing*, 7(2) (1995): 69.

non-verbally contesting belittling gender characterizations.”⁶¹ Just as in my study of KLFA rituals, both Searing and Hegland show how the practice of rituals enabled oppressed groups to reclaim and exercise agency in the face of oppression.

Lastly, Rosa Ehrenreich in *The Stories We Must Tell: Ugandan Children and the Atrocities of the Lord's Resistance Army*, exposes the dehumanizing use of rituals in the LRA. By interviewing 28 children who were kidnapped and later released by the LRA, Ehrenreich establishes that the LRA forced the children to participate in ritual killings in order to initiate them into the movement and make them more accustomed to killing. Ehrenreich's study provides a good conclusion to this section because it demonstrates the two-sided nature of rituals. When progressively used, as most of the preceding studies have shown, rituals can be an effective tool of resistance against various forms of domination. However, like in the case of the LRA, they can also be used to oppress and dominate others. This study is solely concerned with positive and humanizing rituals that are instrumental in people's struggles against various forms of domination. It does not in any way support or advocate for dehumanizing rituals like those of the LRA.⁶²

B. KLFA Historiography

i. Scholarly treatment of KLFA rituals

As noted earlier, the oldest analyses of KLFA rituals are from the 1950s at the height of the *Mau Mau* struggle. They were offered mostly by colonial officials, psychologists, and

⁶¹ Mary Hegland. "Shi'a Women's Rituals in Northwest Pakistan: The Shortcomings and Significance of Resistance." *Anthropological Quarterly*, 76(3) (2003): 411.

⁶² This study is aware of the debates surrounding the origins and benefactors of the Lord's Resistance Army in Uganda. However, such a discussion is beyond the scope of this study as we are only concerned with the use of rituals in the movement.

anthropologists who were unabashedly biased and explicitly disparaging in their analyses.

However, subsequent studies have attempted to be more objective.

In *Defeating Mau Mau*, L.S.B. Leakey, the British archaeologist-cum-anthropologist, distinguishes between what he perceives as the culturally legal and acceptable elements of the KLFA oathing ceremonies, from those he describes as “black magic.”⁶³ He argues that the inventors of *Mau Mau* oaths distorted accepted Gikuyu rituals to create “horrible, filthy and degrading acts”⁶⁴ which were characterized by “incredible beastliness and depravity.”⁶⁵ This, he suggests, was deliberately designed to cause insanity in the oath-takers and thus enable them to commit the “unnatural... act[s] of arson, massacre and disembowelling of victims.”⁶⁶ He contemptuously adds that those who had taken the more advanced forms of the oath were beyond rehabilitation and should be segregated for the remainder of their lives so that their evil, acquired from the oaths, could die with them.⁶⁷ Even though Leakey notes the ingenious use of Gikuyu Christian hymns and tunes to encode anti-colonial propaganda, his overall assessment of KLFA rituals is quite hostile.

Similarly, in *The Psychology of the Mau Mau*, J.C. Carothers derisively describes KLFA oaths as “peculiarly obscene and bestial.”⁶⁸ Carothers was a British psychiatrist who worked at Mathari Mental Hospital in Nairobi from 1938 to 1950 and was requested by the colonial government, in 1955, to prepare this report. He suggests that oaths and other KLFA rituals were “invented” by educated and “highly sophisticated” Africans, like Jomo Kenyatta, who had over-

⁶³ Leakey, *Defeating Mau Mau*, 80.

⁶⁴ *Ibid*, 84.

⁶⁵ *Ibid*, 77.

⁶⁶ *Ibid*, 85.

⁶⁷ *Ibid*, 86.

⁶⁸ Carothers, *Psychology of the Mau Mau*, 14.

ambitious aims of raising nationalistic consciousness among the masses.⁶⁹ His diagnosis is that the oath induced a state of hypnosis in the participants which remained in effect indefinitely and was responsible for their actions. He concludes that those who had taken the more advanced forms of the oath could not be rehabilitated because Africans were not endowed with a conscience or a sense of guilt about their actions.⁷⁰ Evidently, both Leakey and Carothers do not really analyze KLFA rituals; they simply take hostile anti-KLFA stances.

In contrast, Carl Rosberg and John Nottingham in *The Myth of "Mau Mau": Nationalism in Kenya*, offer a more objective political analysis of oathing and other KLFA rituals. They see the oath as a tool for mass mobilization and as a way of fostering unity among the African masses in Kenya. They also discuss the effective use of KLFA songs in conscientizing and mobilizing the masses. Rosberg and Nottingham trace the political use of oathing back to 1925 with the Kikuyu Central Association (KCA) oath of loyalty. They then show how the oath evolved until its use in Olunguruone where, in the early 1940s, mass oathing was employed to mobilize Gikuyu squatters in protest of government plans to evict them from their land. Even though they challenge the "myth of Mau Mau"⁷¹ which depoliticizes the movement and depicts it as "evil... [and] primitive"⁷², Rosberg and Nottingham sometimes appear sympathetic to the characterization of KLFA and its rituals as "an atavistic flight from reason and the processes of modernization."⁷³

Additionally, Tabitha Kanogo, in *Squatters and the Roots of Mau Mau*, also highlights the Olunguruone resistance and particularly the mass oath as a fundamental catalyst to the *Mau*

⁶⁹ Ibid, 16.

⁷⁰ Ibid, 19.

⁷¹ Rosberg and Nottingham, *Myth of Mau Mau*, 320.

⁷² Ibid, 321.

⁷³ Ibid, 320.

Mau armed struggle. She offers that the Olunguruone oath spread to other parts of central Kenya and eventually “combined with the KCA loyalty oath to become the [Mau Mau] oath of unity.”⁷⁴ However, in a different article, *Kikuyu Women and the Politics of Protest: Mau Mau*, Kanogo controversially claims that “menstrual blood was an ingredient in some oath concoctions.”⁷⁵ This is highly controversial because contact with menstrual blood is a great taboo in Gikuyu customs and would probably have been resisted by the participants.⁷⁶

In, *Mau Mau Oathing Rituals and Political Ideology in Kenya: A Re-Analysis*, Maia Green asserts that she is out to offer a re-analysis of the *Mau Mau* oathing rituals. She argues that “oathing rituals are to be understood as part of the ideological apparatus of the movement, along with rallies and songs.”⁷⁷ Just like Kanogo, Rosberg and Nottingham above, Green stresses the political function of rituals in the KLFA struggle. In addition, she posits that the oathing rituals constituted part of the African sub-elite’s strategies for constructing a Gikuyu identity important in the pursuit of a constitutional nationalism. This argument is unconvincing because majority of the African sub-elites were Christian moderates opposed to armed resistance. It is therefore a contradiction to argue that these same sub-elites developed the oathing rituals that were integral to the armed resistance.

Further, Katherine Luongo makes a unique contribution to the study of KLFA rituals in her aptly titled article, *If You Can’t Beat Them, Join Them*. Luongo examines how the British colonial government in Kenya resorted to forcefully administering anti-*Mau Mau* oaths to suspected KLFA members in order to combat the powerful effect of the *Mau Mau* oath, and

⁷⁴ Kanogo, *Squatters and the Roots of Mau Mau*, 127.

⁷⁵ Tabitha Kanogo, “Kikuyu Women and the Politics of Protest: Mau Mau” in Shirley Ardenes et al., *Images of Women in Peace and War*. (London: Macmillan, 1987), 86.

⁷⁶ A more detailed discussion on women and oathing is undertaken in chapter 4.

⁷⁷ Maia Green. “Mau Mau Oathing Rituals and Political Ideology in Kenya: A Re-Analysis.” *Journal of the International African Institute*, 60(1) (1990): 69.

thereby “cleansed” these members. She focuses on Machakos District where “Kamba occult experts” were enlisted to “cleansed” community members who were believed to have taken the *Mau Mau* oath. Her work is significant to my study because it demonstrates how the deeply-spiritual underpinnings of the *Mau Mau* struggle forced the colonial government to “break with its longstanding *de facto* policy of not officially combating supernatural challenges to state authority with supernatural means.”⁷⁸ In other words, her study corroborates my argument that spirituality and, in particular, rituals were at the core of the KLF A struggle.

In addition, Maina wa Kinyatti gives us a valuable anthology of *Mau Mau* songs in his 1980 publication *Thunder From the Mountains: Mau Mau Patriotic Songs*. The anthology contains a wide array of mobilization, detention, and guerrilla songs which were effectively used as “a weapon to politicize and educate the Kenyan worker and peasant masses.”⁷⁹ In a different work, *Mau Mau: A Revolution Betrayed*, Kinyatti highlights the significance of the KLF A oath which he refers to as the “anti-imperialist oath.” He offers that:

The oath served not only as a political instrument against the enemy, but also as an effective tool for strengthening and reinforcing discipline, commitment, security and secrecy in the underground movement. Further, it was used as a psychological weapon in erasing fear of imperialism in cadres and deepening their patriotic consciousness.⁸⁰

This is an important contribution to my study because, even though just in passing, Kinyatti notes the impact of the oath on KLF A members—a key component of my project.

Lastly, in *Mau Mau and Kenya: An Analysis of a Peasant Revolt*, Wunyabari Maloba devotes an entire chapter to oathing and the nature of oaths in the KLF A struggle. From the

⁷⁸ Katherine Luongo. “If You Can’t Beat Them, Join Them: Government Cleansings of Witches and Mau Mau in 1950s Kenya.” *History in Africa*, 33 (2006): 451.

⁷⁹ Maina wa Kinyatti. *Thunder From the Mountains: Mau Mau Patriotic Songs*. (Trenton: Africa Wide Press, 1990), ix.

⁸⁰ Maina wa Kinyatti. *Mau Mau: A Revolution Betrayed*. (Nairobi: Mau Mau Research Centre and Vita Books, 2000), 23.

onset, Maloba emphasizes the need to challenge the biased and racist characterizations of KLFA oaths as “barbaric” “bestial” and “devilish.” He embarks on this task by engaging the biased views of colonial administrators and missionaries who claimed, for instance, that KLFA oaths involved eating the brains of a dead man.⁸¹ However, a major weakness of his study is that it does not incorporate alternative narratives and interpretations of oathing. In fact, in his introduction, Maloba admits that he was unable to interview former KLFA members on the question of oathing.⁸² As a result, his discussion of KLFA oaths—even when it incorporates a few of the published KLFA narratives—is based primarily on the narratives and interpretations of colonial administrators and missionaries. Even though he challenges their biased views, they still dominate his discussion. Furthermore, because the colonial administrators and missionaries focused entirely on details surrounding the oathing ceremonies, his discussion is also restricted to the same focus and does not/cannot illuminate the impact of oaths on KLFA members, and the resulting shape of their participation in the anti-colonial struggle. My study differs with Maloba’s because it focuses on KLFA members’ narratives and interpretations of the oath, its impact, and the resulting shape of their participation in the anti-colonial struggle.

ii. Published Narratives and Autobiographies

Typically, autobiographies are not included in Literature Review sections as they are considered to be primary sources. But because this study is about personal narratives, autobiographies are included here since they provide a useful background on KLFA members’ interpretation of rituals. The majority of published narratives and autobiographies of former KLFA members highlight the central place of rituals in the KLFA struggle. Generally, all point

⁸¹ Wunyabari Maloba. *Mau Mau and Kenya: An Analysis of a Peasant Revolt*. (Oxford: James Currey, 1993), 106.

⁸² *Ibid*, 19.

to the use of rituals in fostering unity among members, mobilizing, and educating the masses about the struggle. It should be noted however, that nearly all the published narratives are by literate males; only one exists by a female KLFA member. This obviously limits the scope of voices that give firsthand accounts of a struggle that had some unmistakably gendered dimensions.⁸³

J.M. Kariuki's *Mau Mau Detainee* was first published in 1963 and was the first narrative published by a former KLFA member. Kariuki gives a detailed account of the two KLFA oaths he took: the oath of unity and the *Batuni* oath. He asserts that these were the "only legitimate" oaths and challenges colonial reports which claim that up to fourteen oaths were taken.⁸⁴ He also categorically refutes claims that menstrual blood was used in the oathing ceremonies and expounds on its sacredness in Gikuyu culture. Besides details of the oathing ceremonies, Kariuki describes the oaths' impact on him. He explains how the oaths empowered him and records that: "I felt exalted with a new spirit of power and strength. All my previous life seemed empty and meaningless. Even my education, of which I was so proud, appeared trivial beside this splendid and terrible force that had been given me. I had been born again..."⁸⁵ He also describes different songs and prayers that were conducted to mourn, celebrate and mark other important events in the lives of *Mau Mau* detainees.

Similarly, in *Swords of Kirinyaga: The Fight for Land and Freedom*, H.K. Wachanga, who was the *Mau Mau* General Secretary among the forest fighters, highlights the importance of oathing to the KLFA struggle. He notes that oaths have always occupied a central place in Gikuyu culture and that their use in the KLFA struggle was nothing new; it was simply the

⁸³ See Chapter 4 for a longer discussion on women, gender roles and oathing in the KLFA.

⁸⁴ Kariuki, *Mau Mau Detainee*, 27.

⁸⁵ *Ibid*, 23.

customization of a pre-existing phenomenon to fit prevailing circumstances. Wachanga points to the Olunguruone resistance and particularly the mass oaths as foundations for the *Mau Mau* oaths. He profoundly describes the oath as the “central leader” of the KLFA as it united their members and gave direction to the struggle.⁸⁶ He also recounts numerous songs and prayers that were composed and offered during the struggle to mourn, celebrate and seek God’s help.

However, in Waruhiu Itote’s *Mau Mau General*, only passing remarks in the main body of the text are made about the significance of oathing to the KLFA struggle. Itote inexplicably places the discussion of oathing in the appendix section of his autobiography. While this might have been the publisher’s decision and not necessarily that of the author, it is still puzzling because he emphasizes the central place of oathing in the KLFA struggle, yet places this discussion in the appendix section of his narrative. But in spite of this structural peculiarity, Itote notes that oaths and oathing ceremonies fostered unity among the forest fighters and provided an opportunity to educate and conscientize them about the struggle. Like Kariuki, he also refutes allegations of cannibalism associated with the oathing ceremonies.

Likewise, in *Mau Mau From Within*, Karari Njama explains how the oathing ceremony was an opportunity to educate the participants on the objectives of the KLFA and the history of anti-colonial struggles in Kenya. After providing a detailed account of the actual ceremony, Njama describes how the oath had given him a kind of rebirth: “I had been born again in a new society with a new faith.”⁸⁷ However, he also discusses how as an educated Christian, the vows he made during the oathing ceremony contradicted with some of his Christian beliefs. Njama’s autobiography highlights the complexity of KLFA members’ experiences of rituals and the need

⁸⁶ H.K. Wachanga. *Swords of Kirinyaga: The Fight for Land and Freedom*. (Nairobi: Kenya Literature Bureau, 1975), 36.

⁸⁷ Karari Njama and Donald L. Barnett. *Mau Mau From Within: Autobiography and Analysis of Kenya’s Peasant Revolt*. (London: Macgibbon and Kee, 1966), 121.

to keenly study their narratives and experiences while fully cognizant of the class differences that shaped them. Njama also notes the importance of seers and prophets to the KLFA forest fighters. Though he is a bit sceptical about their usefulness to the KLFA struggle, probably because of his Christian background, he admits, almost grudgingly, that many of the forest fighters were greatly influenced by prophets and their prophecies.

Further, in *Mau Mau's Daughter: A Life History*, Wambui Waiyaki Otieno describes how she took her first oath as a 16-year old schoolgirl in the reserves of Central Kenya. Otieno was initially a KLFA scout in Gaitumbi village before she relocated to Nairobi. She records that she took a total of nine oaths during the course of the KLFA struggle. Describing the impact of the second oath, Otieno observes that, "I took Mbatuni voluntarily and felt more commitment to Mau Mau thereafter, convinced it was the only way Kenya could be free. The oath made believers keep secrets. Above all, it brought unity to Mau Mau's members."⁸⁸ Otieno proceeds to demonstrate how the oath motivated her in KLFA activities which included gathering intelligence, and securing guns and ammunition for forest fighters. Her narrative is unique because it is the only one that exists by a female KLFA member.⁸⁹

Lastly, in *Freedom Fighter*, Joram Wamweya explains how the oath fostered his total commitment to the anti-colonial struggle. After giving details of the oathing ceremony, he illustrates how the oath enabled him to divest all his energies to the KLFA struggle.

The preceding discussion has shown that there is an obvious bias towards oathing in the KLFA Historiography. The studies that have been examined either focus exclusively on oathing

⁸⁸ Wambui Waiyaki Otieno. *Mau Mau's Daughter: A Life History*. (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, Inc., 1998), 35.

⁸⁹ Cora Ann Presley, Introduction to *Mau Mau's Daughter: A Life History*. (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, Inc., 1998), 1.

or pay very little attention to other KLFA rituals. On one hand, this is understandable because oath-taking was the central KLFA ritual. As we shall see in chapter 4, oath-taking was an initiation ritual into the KLFA and no one could play any part in the struggle if they had not drunk the oath. On the other hand, the focus on oath-taking has ignored other significant rituals and narrowed the scope of analysis with regard to KLFA rituals. Besides oath-taking, my study analyzes the neglected KLFA rituals which include clutching soil at death, seeking a seer, singing, and praying. It is also apparent from the foregoing discussion, that existing scholarship has focused more on the elements and details surrounding the actual oath-taking ceremonies, than on the impact of oaths on KLFA members. My study attempts to fill this gap by focusing on the impact of oaths and other rituals on KLFA members, and the resulting nature of their participation in the anti-colonial struggle. Let us now turn to a discussion of the components and functions of rituals.

3. Understanding Rituals

In indigenous African cultures, rituals play an important role in the everyday life of individuals and communities. The purpose of this chapter is to understand what constitutes rituals. Thus, it discusses some important functions and components of rituals with a view toward understanding the defining features of rituals. It then provides a historical background of the KLFA rituals being investigated in this study. While many useful analyses of rituals exist, this initial section relies extensively on Malidoma Somé's work because his theorizing on ritual embodies an African-centered approach that is highly-sensitive to the spiritual dimensions of rituals. Such an approach is integral to our study. In *The Healing Wisdom of Africa*, Somé offers a lucid description of the functions of rituals that can start off our discussion in this chapter:

Ritual is the most ancient way of binding a community together in a close relationship with Spirit. It is a way of communicating with forms of consciousness and beings from countless worlds. It has been one of the most practical and efficient ways to stimulate the safe healing required by both the individual and the community. Ritual has always been the way of life of the spiritual person because it is a tool to maintain the delicate balance between body and soul. In a tribal [sic] community, healing of the village happens in ritual.⁹⁰

There are two important functions of rituals in the above description. First, the practice of ritual is in pursuit of healing and restoration for the individual and/or their community. This healing and restoration is pursued at different levels, including the physical, spiritual, mental and emotional. Far from being mutually-exclusive, these levels are closely connected and interdependent. For example, among the Agikuyu, the traditional doctor is referred to as *mũndũ mũgo*. When a sick person goes to seek treatment, the *mũndũ mũgo* tries to find out the spiritual cause of the sickness. Gikuyu medicine holds that spiritual maladies manifest themselves as

⁹⁰Somé, *Healing Wisdom of Africa*, 141-142.

bodily ailments.⁹¹ These ailments are therefore just symptoms; the *mũndũ mũgo*, through healing rituals, strives to diagnose the root spiritual cause of the sickness. In addition, healing through ritual is also experienced communally. This is best illustrated by the funeral rituals conducted by most African communities. In a different work, *Of Water and the Spirit*, Somé explains how the funeral ritual among the Dagara of Burkina Faso functions as an avenue for multiple types of grief. Besides mourning the deceased person, young men who are yet to find lovers, or farmers who have experienced a bad harvest all use the funeral as a space to release their pain and frustrations.⁹² This healing function of ritual is important to our study because, as we shall see, several of the rituals under investigation served this function.

Second, the practice of ritual is an attempt to maintain existing balance and harmony in an individual, among community members, and with nature. For example, pouring of libation among the Agikuyu and Akamba of Kenya is meant to maintain harmony and communion with the ancestors.⁹³ By pouring portions of water or beer on the earth before drinking them, individuals and communities respectfully recognize the presence of departed members within their society.

This two-fold function of ritual, healing and maintenance of balance in a community, is undergirded by what, in my view, is the overarching function of ritual: to connect the material and spiritual worlds. As we saw in chapter 1, a major characteristic of African indigenous knowledges is the close relationship that exists between the material and spiritual worlds. Ultimately, ritual is the medium through which this relationship is maintained; it is a link or doorway between these two worlds. Therefore, the practice and outcome of ritual is intended for,

⁹¹ Kenyatta, *Facing Mount Kenya*, 260.

⁹² Somé. *Of Water and the Spirit*, 58.

⁹³ See John S. Mbiti. *African Religions and Philosophy*. (Oxford: Heinemann, 1990), 9; and Kenyatta, *Facing Mount Kenya*, 232.

and experienced in, both worlds. This is best illustrated in the Gikuyu ritual that is conducted during a prolonged period of drought. In *Facing Mount Kenya*, Jomo Kenyatta, the founding president of Kenya, gives a detailed account of this ritual. During a prolonged drought, the elders

[G]et together and summon the seers. The seers (*arathi*) are asked if they have received any message or instruction from Mwene-Nyaga [God] in connection with the causes of the drought. If no messages have been received by any of the *arathi*, they are asked to go home and report again [sic] in the morning if they have been able to communicate with Mwene-Nyaga. Next [sic] morning[,] the elders and the *arathi* meet again to solve the mystery. At this time[,] some of the *arathi* may have received instructions from Ngai [God] describing what has made him to be angry and to act so unkindly as to refuse to bring rain for his people as usual; and also the message will describe what sort of animal [sacrifice] would be acceptable to Ngai and soothe his anger.⁹⁴

Kenyatta goes on to give a very elaborate description of this ritual sacrifice in which he himself was once a part of.⁹⁵ Regarding the sacrifice he participated in, he notes that, "...even before the sacred fires had ceased to burn, torrential rain came upon us."⁹⁶ The point here is that drought, a problematic occurrence in the material world, was believed to have its roots in the spiritual world. It was therefore solved by performing a ritual aimed at appeasing *Ngai*. When this ritual was performed successfully, it produced rain in the material world. As mentioned earlier, the practice and outcome of rituals is intended for, and experienced in, both the material and spiritual worlds. This takes us back to the first function of rituals: healing and restoration of individuals and/or their communities. There are many different situations that may require healing and restoration for an individual or community, and thus the performance of rituals. These include epidemics, drought, war, floods, and even death. Therefore, it is justifiable to assert that rituals are dynamic practices which are performed within specific historical periods and unique cultural contexts. Such an assertion is extremely important to our study because we

⁹⁴ Kenyatta, *Facing Mount Kenya*, 243-244.

⁹⁵ *Ibid*, 243-252.

⁹⁶ *Ibid*, 249.

are concerned with the role of rituals within a very specific period and context. In this regard, our study differs considerably with works by scholars such as Mircea Eliade, the Romanian historian of religion, whose analysis of rituals and other religious phenomena is often described, quite ironically, as ahistorical.⁹⁷ In fact, in one of his most well-known works, *The Sacred and the Profane*, Eliade admits that he is not in the least bit concerned with the vastly different “historical-cultural” contexts from which he draws all of his examples.⁹⁸

Further, it is important to examine the various components of ritual. Somé suggests that there are generally two main components of rituals: the planned and unplanned parts. The planned parts are those that relate to the logistical details surrounding the ritual. These include the pre-determined ritual space, the sacred elements to be used, designated roles of participants, some key words and phrases to be repeated, and the routinized order of activities. It should be noted that symbols and symbolism are crucial in determining the planned parts of ritual. For example, as we shall see in the next section, prayers in indigenous Gikuyu culture were offered while facing Mount Kenya because it was believed to be the symbolic dwelling-place of *Ngai*. Symbols are finite words or objects that point to an infinite reality. They are tangible phenomena found in the material world, but whose meaning and significance transcends into the spiritual world. In African indigenous knowledges, it is important to distinguish symbols from signs. A red light, for instance, is a traffic sign that requires you to stop at a junction. It has no meaning beyond that. However, a national flag is a symbol for the citizens of a particular country. It signifies patriotism, freedom, and a sense of unity. The symbolism assigned to various words, objects, and experiences is what designates them as sacred or profane. Different cultures assign

⁹⁷ Randall Studstill. “Eliade, Phenomenology, and the Sacred.” *Religious Studies*, 36 (2) (2000): 177.

⁹⁸ Mircea Eliade. *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*. (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company: 1959), 15-16.

symbolism to different things. That is why something can be highly sacred in one culture and nearly meaningless in another. A clear understanding of symbols is therefore invaluable to our understanding of rituals. In essence, symbols and symbolism are inherent in rituals. According to Somé, “symbols are the doorway to ritual.”⁹⁹ In other words, one cannot enter into ritual without symbols. This is crucial to our study of KLFA rituals because, as we shall see, symbolic words, phrases, and objects were present in all the rituals.

The second part of ritual is the unplanned part. This part, according to Somé, cannot be planned for because,

[I]t is the part that Spirit is in charge of. The unplanned part of ritual is a spontaneous, almost unpredictable interaction with an energy source. It is a response to a call from a nonhuman source to commune with a larger horizon. It is like a journey. Before you get started, you own the journey. After you start, the journey owns you.¹⁰⁰

Notably, it is within these unplanned parts of ritual that the healing and maintenance functions of ritual take place. Contact between the material and spiritual world is navigated through these unplanned and spontaneous parts of rituals. This contact with the spiritual world is experienced within an individual’s psyche and it is often characterized by a cathartic emotional release. According to Somé, it is these cathartic experiences that make indigenous people so drawn to rituals.¹⁰¹ In many African communities, ritualized singing and dancing ceremonies are some of the most common examples of rituals that induce catharsis in the participants. In light of this discussion, it is accurate to state that our study is about the unplanned and spontaneous parts of KLFA rituals. As we saw in the Historiography, whenever KLFA rituals have been examined in existing literature, it is the planned parts of these rituals that have received the most attention. For instance, it is the elements and details surrounding the oath-taking ceremonies that have been

⁹⁹ Somé, *Healing Wisdom of Africa*, 146.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid, 142.

¹⁰¹ Ibid, 146.

focused on, at the expense of the spontaneous and unpredictable impact of oaths on individual KLFA members. The unplanned and spontaneous parts of rituals are best examined through the personal experiences of the ritual participants. And these experiences are best articulated within the personal narratives of the ritual participants. Even though, as we shall see in upcoming chapters, there were numerous similarities in KLFA members' experiences of rituals, and even desired outcomes for some rituals, each experience was unique, spontaneous, and unpredictable. Because of this, a caveat is necessary about the functions of rituals. Due to the dynamism inherent in these unplanned parts of ritual, it follows that the desired outcomes are not always achieved. The specific healing or maintenance that is sought after in ritual is not always assured. If it was, then there would be nothing spontaneous about rituals. Kenyatta reinforces this point when he notes that it was never a guarantee that a ritual sacrifice for rain would result in rain.¹⁰²

It is this spontaneous and unpredictable component of ritual that differentiates rituals from the normal events and activities of everyday life. It is important to make this distinction lest every event and activity is considered to be a ritual. Somé makes a valuable intervention towards this end when he observes that, "It is important to recognize what ritual is not. It is not repetitive or impulsive behavior like having coffee or a cigarette in the morning. Nor is it an everyday formality, like greeting another person with a handshake, hug, or kiss."¹⁰³ The difference between rituals and ceremonies, he continues, is that:

From an indigenous point of view, ceremonies are events that are reproducible, predictable, and controllable, while rituals call for spontaneous feeling and trust in the outcome... Ritual... is a time of unplanned, unforeseeable, yet orderly disorder. Whereas in ceremony there is a potential for boredom because the participants pretty

¹⁰² Kenyatta, *Facing Mount Kenya*, 250

¹⁰³ Somé, *Healing Wisdom of Africa*, 143.

much know what's going to happen, in ritual the soul and the human spirit get permission to express emotion.¹⁰⁴

While I agree with Somé's overall argument that differences exist between rituals, ceremonies, and everyday activities, there are still a few gaps in his argument that need to be pointed out. Some ceremonies, for instance, embody ritualistic aspects in them. For example, in the Gikuyu marriage ceremony, a ritual involving traditional beer drinking is conducted between the parents of the two lovers to mark their engagement. The girl, her parents and the man's parents all sip this beer from the same beer horn to symbolize collective consent to the engagement.¹⁰⁵ Therefore, the difference is not so much between rituals and ceremonies, but between ritualistic and non-ritualistic ceremonies. Furthermore, everyday activities are not all non-ritualistic. For example, singing is an everyday activity that takes place while bathing, cooking or ploughing the fields. Singing is not necessarily ritualistic in all these contexts. However, if catharsis is deliberately sought through singing—whether or not it is achieved—then it becomes ritualistic. As we shall see in the next chapters, cathartic experiences are partly what made KLFA singing ritualistic. Additionally, if singing is directed to a deity for a sacred purpose, then it also becomes ritualistic. And so, again, the difference is not so much between rituals and everyday activities, but between ritualistic and non-ritualistic everyday activities.

Another way of distinguishing rituals, ceremonies, and everyday activities is by looking for symbols and symbolism within them. As we mentioned earlier, symbols are inherent to rituals. On the other hand, one is unlikely to find symbols or symbolism in either non-ritualistic ceremonies or non-ritualistic everyday activities. For example, the ritual sacrifice for rain that was discussed earlier, usually involved the slaughter of a spotless lamb. In the context of the

¹⁰⁴ Ibid, 145.

¹⁰⁵ Kenyatta, *Facing Mount Kenya*, 166-167.

ritual, the blood of the lamb symbolized atonement for the sins of the community. However, the slaughtering of animals was not always ritualistic. There were times, say after an initiation ceremony, when an individual family would slaughter a goat in honour of their son or daughter who had successfully entered adulthood. The purpose of the slaughter would be purely celebratory and the blood would have little ritualistic significance.¹⁰⁶

The foregoing discussion has examined some of the functions and components of rituals. Under functions, we have seen that rituals serve to heal and restore an individual or community that is faced by epidemic, war, drought, crop failure, death or any other type of social malady. Rituals also serve to maintain balance and harmony within an individual, among community members, and with nature. Under the components of rituals, we have seen that there are generally two parts. The planned parts are those that relate to the logistical details surrounding the rituals. Their determination is greatly influenced by the symbolism attached to various words, objects, and experiences. On the other hand, the unplanned parts of rituals are spontaneous and unpredictable. Contact with the spiritual world is navigated through these unplanned parts and is often characterized by cathartic experiences. But in all these, the question still begs, what is ritual? It was worth noting that throughout his lucid analysis, Somé avoids offering a concise definition of rituals. He spends most of his time analyzing the nature and functions of rituals without really attempting to define them. This is probably because, to a certain extent, it is easier to state what rituals are not, than it is to precisely state what they are. In the context of our study, rituals are defined on the basis of a combination of any of the following features. First, they serve one or both of the functions discussed in this section. For example, as we shall see in chapter 4, drinking the oath generated strength, courage, and perseverance among KLF A

¹⁰⁶ Ibid, 151.

members who faced great hardships during the anti-colonial struggle. Second, they involve a sacred routine. For instance, as we shall see in chapter 5, praying was done while facing Mount Kenya with members raising their hands over their heads in symbolic reverence to *Ngai*. Third, they induce a deliberately sought cathartic emotional release on the participants. For example, as we shall see in chapter 5, singing was a cathartic form of lament for KLFA members during the anti-colonial struggle. Fourth, they contain symbolic words and objects in their makeup. For instance, as we shall see in chapter 5, wearing locked hair was a symbol of physical and spiritual strength for KLFA forest fighters. These are the four defining features of rituals in the context of this study. All the six rituals being investigated possess a combination of any of these features. In conclusion, it should be noted that these are certainly not universal features of rituals. In fact, they are probably not even the only features of rituals in the context of the narrators. Nevertheless, they are the most salient features of the rituals being investigated in this project. Let us now examine their historical background.

Historical Background to KLFA Rituals

There are six rituals under investigation in this study. All of them, even if in a different form, existed in indigenous Gikuyu culture. A brief historical background of these rituals will therefore be useful in understanding how they were practiced before their adoption into the anti-colonial struggle. The background focuses on the functions and components of these rituals, plus the symbolism attached to various words, objects, and actions within them. Because majority of KLFA members were from the Gikuyu community, and all the narrators in this study except for one Kamba man were also Gikuyu, this section focuses on the historical background of KLFA rituals in Gikuyu culture. Therefore, Jomo Kenyatta's seminal work on Gikuyu culture, *Facing Mount Kenya*, is quoted extensively.

a) Drinking the oath

The oath was a fundamental aspect of the anti-colonial struggle because it symbolized initiation into the KLFA. No one could play any part in the struggle if they had not drunk the oath of unity. But even before the advent of colonialism in East Africa, the oath was an integral part of Gikuyu culture. It is important to first note that in Gikuyu, Kikamba and Kiswahili, the act of taking an oath is referred to as *kũnyua muma* or *kula kiapo* which literally translates as “drink or eat the oath.” This represents a significant component of the worldview of these communities because an oath was not just verbalized mindlessly, but ingested and assimilated into one’s being. Furthermore, eating and drinking were both communal activities used to bond people together. Gikuyu warriors, for instance, were forbidden from eating or drinking in solitude. It is therefore quite illuminating for the oath to be associated with eating and drinking as oath-taking was also a communal affair. Indeed, Kwame Gyekye, a key expositor of African philosophy, has stressed the significance of language in “the construction of moral and metaphysical doctrines.”¹⁰⁷ For this reason, our study will deliberately refer to the act of taking the oath as either “drinking the oath” or “eating the oath.”¹⁰⁸ This is so as to convey, as accurately as possible, the depth and meaning in the original languages. And by so doing, the study will also be highlighting the importance of names in African indigenous knowledges.

There were different types of oaths in indigenous Gikuyu culture and they served a variety of functions. To begin with, drinking the oath was especially useful in resolving land and property disputes between individual family members as well as different families in the community. But it was only used as a last resort in resolving these disputes. Normally, the *kiama*

¹⁰⁷ Kwame Gyekye. *An Essay on African Philosophical Thought: The Akan Conceptual Scheme*. (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1995), 32.

¹⁰⁸ “Drinking the oath” will be used more frequently than “eating the oath” because the narrators spoke more in Gikuyu than in Kiswahili.

(council of elders) would hear and give their ruling on such matters. However, when one or both of the affected parties were dissatisfied with the ruling, they would appeal and the oath would then be used.

There were three types of oaths used in court procedures and they were all “terribly feared” by the Gikuyu people.¹⁰⁹ The first oath, which was simply referred to as *muma* (oath), was used to resolve minor disputes over small pieces of land and ownership of goats, sheep or cattle. The oath involved mixing together the stomach contents of a slaughtered lamb, a little of its blood, and some water. A *mũndũ mũgo* would prepare the mixture and then use a ceremonial shrub to scoop it. He would then ask each of the disputing parties to lick the shrub in turn while uttering: “If I tell a lie, let this symbol of truth kill me. If I falsely accuse anyone, let this symbol of truth kill me. If the property I am now claiming is not mine, let this symbol of truth kill me.”¹¹⁰

Second, *kũringa thenge* (to swear by killing a male goat) was administered in major disputes over vast tracts of land or many heads of cattle. This oath required the disputing parties to break all the limbs of a small male goat using a ceremonial stone. The male goat would be spread out on an isolated rock and all the disputing parties would have their turn to break its limbs while saying: “If I am claiming more than what is due to me, let my limbs be smashed to smithereens like the bones of this male goat. If I am claiming more than what is due to me, let my family group be crushed like the bones of this male goat.”¹¹¹

Third, *gethahi* was administered mostly in criminal cases concerning murder or theft. *Gethahi* was the name of a small red stone with seven natural holes in it. In this oath, the accused

¹⁰⁹ Kenyatta, *Facing Mount Kenya*, 223.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid*, 224.

¹¹¹ *Ibid*,

party would insert several grass stalks into each hole seven times while swearing to the truthfulness of their statement. This oath was feared to be so evil that it had to be conducted on uncultivated land lest the evil in the symbolic red stone entered and destroyed crops.¹¹²

Besides use in court procedures, oaths were also used in other socio-cultural spheres. For example, *muma wa thenge* (oath of the male goat) was used to bind families together during marriage ceremonies and to seal transactions involving the sale or exchange of land and/or cattle.¹¹³ Additionally, *muma wa anake* (oath of the warriors) was used to bind the warriors together in love, unity and courage as they went out to battle.¹¹⁴ The other important function of oaths was to safeguard against the use of sorcery in a community. In *Mau Mau Detainee*, J.M. Kariuki explains that, “The fear of being killed by sorcery was prevalent among our people. The *muma* (oath) removed that fear and created a new and special relationship between the families and clans involved.”¹¹⁵

While there remained striking similarities between the oaths discussed above and those that were later used in the KLFA struggle, indigenous Gikuyu oaths possessed two unique attributes that did not get transmitted into the KLFA oathing system.¹¹⁶ First, in indigenous Gikuyu oathing, women were excluded from drinking most of the oaths, particularly those used in court procedures. Kenyatta gives the logic of this practice as being, “Their husbands or sons took the responsibility, for the women were not considered fit mentally and bodily to stand the ordeal which involved not only the individual going through it but the whole family group.”¹¹⁷ A feminist analysis would rightly view this as insulting to women. However, it can be explained by

¹¹² Ibid, 224-225.

¹¹³ Kariuki, *Mau Mau Detainee*, 26.

¹¹⁴ Ibid, 26.

¹¹⁵ Ibid, 27.

¹¹⁶ See for instance: Josiah Mwangi Kariuki. *Mau Mau Detainee*. (Nairobi: Transafrica Press, 2009), 21-26.

¹¹⁷ Kenyatta, *Facing Mount Kenya*, 225.

the fact that in Gikuyu society, a woman was viewed as the mother of the nation. Not only did the Gikuyu woman give birth and increase the Gikuyu population, she also carried and transmitted Gikuyu language and culture to her offspring. Her role was therefore too important to the advancement of the Gikuyu nation, for her to be unnecessarily exposed to the risk of death through drinking the oath. In fact, there is an apt Gikuyu proverb which states, “*mũndũ mũka ndoragagwo*” (A woman should not be killed).

Second, in indigenous Gikuyu oathing, there was never a situation that required the entire community to drink the oath. As we saw earlier, the oath was drunk in very specific circumstances and by very specific people; there was seldom need for a mass oath. However, this changed at the height of the anti-colonial struggle, beginning in the late 1940s, when entire communities were required to drink the oath. Men, women and teenagers all had to drink the oath in order to participate in the anti-colonial struggle. These two changes in indigenous Gikuyu oathing suggest that the oath was so critical to defining KLFAs membership that long held customs had to be disregarded.

This section has examined the types and functions of indigenous Gikuyu oaths. It should prove useful in analyzing and fully appreciating KLFAs members’ experiences of oaths in the next chapter.

b) Clutching soil at death

During the anti-colonial struggle in Kenya, a KLFAs member on the brink of death would clutch a mound of soil or put a handful of it in their mouth, as a symbol of what they had died fighting for—land. This kind of death ritual was almost nonexistent in indigenous Gikuyu culture. However, there was a personal oath known as *koirugo* which was somewhat similar to it.

The oath involved tasting the soil and swearing by it to do or not to do something.¹¹⁸ It was usually a personal oath to *Ngai* and the ancestors or an oath just between a few people. Even though it was much less elaborate than the oaths described earlier, it was equally binding to the one drinking it. Regarding *koirugo*, Kenyatta notes that, “an everlasting oath is to swear by the earth.”¹¹⁹ In order to fully appreciate the significance of *koirugo* and the KLFA death ritual, one must first understand the deep symbolic significance that Gikuyu people attached to their land.

Kenyatta offers a lucid description of this intimate relationship:

As agriculturalists, the Gikuyu people depend entirely on the land. It supplies them with the material needs of life, through which spiritual and mental contentment is achieved. Communion with the ancestral spirits is perpetuated through contact with the soil in which the ancestors of the tribe [sic] lie buried. The Kikuyu consider the earth as the “mother” of the tribe [sic], for the reason that the mother bears her burden for about eight or nine months while the child is in her womb, and then for a short period of suckling. But it is the soil that feeds the child through lifetime; and again after death it is the soil that nurses the spirits of the dead for eternity. Thus the earth is the most sacred thing above all that dwell in or on it. Among the Gikuyu the soil is especially honoured, and an everlasting oath is to swear by the earth (*koirugo*).¹²⁰

Indeed, land was not merely a means of economic production but a God-given inheritance, a medium connecting them to their ancestors, and an important site of ritual. The process of buying and selling of land in indigenous Gikuyu culture further illustrates this sacredness. Buying and selling of land was done very matrimonially. Just like in marriage, where a young man could not go directly to the father of his lover and ask for her hand in marriage, a potential buyer could also not simply go to a land owner and explicitly declare interest in purchasing a portion of their land. Similarly, a potential seller could also not explicitly advertise a portion of their land which they wanted to sell. This is because land was symbolically regarded as the “mother of the people” and therefore, land transactions had to be conducted very

¹¹⁸ Ibid, 322.

¹¹⁹ Ibid, 21.

¹²⁰ Ibid, 21.

respectfully.¹²¹ In light of this, an elaborate “proposal” ceremony was arranged between the potential buyer and landowner. Just like in an actual marriage proposal ceremony, the potential buyer would carry traditional beer and after both parties had ceremonially sipped it, they would engage in a dialogue coded with parables about the land transaction.

Furthermore, in indigenous Gikuyu culture, there was both communal and private ownership of land. For example, if your family land contained water springs or salt licks—communal resources—you could not prevent anyone in the community from accessing them. Every district also had communal grazing areas and public areas for community meetings and dances.¹²² This communal awareness of land ownership further deepened Gikuyu reverence for their land. All these factors should help us appreciate the significance, to KLFA members, of clutching soil at death.

c) Seeking a seer

During the anti-colonial struggle in Kenya, KLFA members in both the forests and the reserves relied heavily on the oracles of *arathi* (seers) to direct their activities in the movement. As we shall see in chapter 5, oracles from *arathi* helped guide various KLFA activities including the best day and time to launch an attack, the best day to collect and transport food to the forest fighters, and the safest day, time, and location to conduct an oathing ceremony.

The office of the *mũrathi* (seer) was an important part of indigenous Gikuyu culture. *Arathi* were believed to possess the supernatural power of communicating directly with *Ngai*. This would usually happen in their sleep where, through dreams and visions, *Ngai* would give

¹²¹ Ibid, 38.

¹²² Ibid, 36.

them important messages for their communities.¹²³ They were routinely consulted during natural disasters, like drought and disease, for them to advise on the cause and remedy of the calamity as instructed by *Ngai*. Because they were divinely-appointed, *arathi* could either be male or female. The office of the *mũrathi* was held in very high regard because s/he was seen as a symbolic channel of God's will in the community. The *mũrathi* was expected to never use his/her powers for personal gain. If they dared do so, it was believed that a serious disaster would befall them and their families.¹²⁴ In order to prevent impostors from claiming they were seers, a penalty of death was imposed on a *mũrathi* whose oracle did not come true.¹²⁵ This was a foolproof method of ensuring that the highest levels of integrity were maintained in that office. The *mũrathi* should not be mistaken for the *mũndũ mũgo* (traditional doctor); these were two completely separate offices. The one was strictly God's messenger as was just discussed, while the other had a variety of functions. Besides his/her medical duties, the *mũndũ mũgo* also assisted the elders in conducting purification rites and oathing ceremonies.¹²⁶

Seers have long been a part of indigenous Gikuyu culture but the one seer who has been immortalized in Gikuyu folklore is Mũgo wa Kibiro. This is because he is believed to have accurately prophesied about the coming of Europeans and the advent of colonialism in Gikuyu country. In his sleep one night, he received a vivid vision from God about what was to happen:

Strangers would come to Gikuyu land from out of the water, the colour of their body would resemble that of a small light-coloured frog (*kiengere*) which lives in water, [and] their dress would resemble the wings of butterflies... These strangers would carry magical sticks that would produce fire... these sticks would be very much worse in killing than the poisoned arrows. The strangers... would later bring an iron snake with as many legs as *manyongoro* (centipede) ... this snake would spit fires and would stretch from the big water in the east to another big water in the west of Gikuyu

¹²³ Ibid, 242.

¹²⁴ Ibid.

¹²⁵ Ibid, 243.

¹²⁶ Ibid.

country. Further... a big famine would come and this would be the sign to show that the strangers with their iron snake were at hand... When this came to pass, the Gikuyu, as well as their neighbours, would suffer greatly... Also... sons and daughters would abuse their parents in a way unknown hitherto by the Gikuyu.¹²⁷

In the vision, the big water in the east represented the Indian Ocean while the big water in the west represented Lake Victoria. The magical sticks represented guns and the iron snake represented the Kenya-Uganda railway train. As we shall see in chapter 5, Mũgo wa Kibiro's oracle was very influential to the KLFA struggle. So too were the various seers in the KLFA who were sought for their oracles regarding the struggle. This background should help us understand KLFA members' experiences with seers in the collected narratives.

d) Praying

Praying was an integral part of the anti-colonial struggle in Kenya. KLFA members prayed incessantly asking for God's intervention in their struggle. As we shall see in chapter 5, many KLFA members saw their KLFA activities as divinely directed by *Ngai* (God), and their overall participation in the anti-colonial struggle as an act of total submission to his/her will. But even before the anti-colonial struggle, praying was an important ritual in indigenous Gikuyu culture. It was a ritual in itself and was regularly conducted by both individuals and communities. It was also a key component in many rituals and ceremonies, including marriage, initiation, sacrifices, and funerals. It is important to first understand indigenous Gikuyu conceptions of deity and the divine, in order to fully grasp their understanding of prayer and the symbolism they attached to it.

The Gikuyu believe in a monotheistic deity who is known as *Ngai*. In some ritual sacrifices, *Ngai* is also referred to as *Mwene-Nyaga* (possessor of brightness or owner of

¹²⁷ Ibid, 42-43.

whiteness). This name is associated with Mount Kenya which, in Gikuyu, is referred to as *Kirinyaga* (mountain of brightness or whiteness).¹²⁸ The whiteness or brightness is in reference to the snow-capped summit of Mount Kenya. The mountain is the highest and most majestic feature in the vast Gikuyu country. As such, it was believed to be the symbolic dwelling place of *Ngai* and the most sacred place in Gikuyu country. Besides Mount Kenya, *mũgumo* and *mũtamayo* trees were considered to be sacred shrines and sacrifices to *Ngai* were often offered under these trees. As a sacred routine, most prayers were made with the people facing Mount Kenya and with their hands raised over their heads. At the end of the prayer, they would spit some saliva on their hands and apply it on their heads as a symbol of genuineness and surrender to *Ngai*. They would then conclude with the phrase, “*Thaai thathaiyai Ngai thaai.*” This is a difficult phrase to explain in English but it loosely translates as “Peace, we beseech you, God, peace be with us.”¹²⁹ It symbolized an affectionate yet reverent petition to *Ngai*.¹³⁰

Ngai is eternal and has no father, mother or relation of any kind.¹³¹ He/she is the creator of all things and therefore has the title of *Ngai Mũmbi* (God the creator). Notably, the name Mũmbi is given only to female children and it denotes the creative power that females, through childbirth, share with *Ngai*. Equally, the name Mũngai, which means “of God,” is given only to male children. It is therefore possible to conclude that in Gikuyu, the Supreme Being is not a monopoly of any gender. *Ngai* embodies both masculine and feminine characteristics. This might have contributed to the widespread opposition against missionary Christianity in Gikuyu country during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The persistent male-centered portrayal of God as a

¹²⁸ Ibid, 234.

¹²⁹ Ibid, 247.

¹³⁰ This phrase forms part of the title of our study because it symbolizes the attitude of the former KLFA members who participated in this study. Its significance is discussed further in chapter 5.

¹³¹ Kenyatta, *Facing Mount Kenya*, 233.

king, a father and a man, might have posed conceptual difficulties to the Gikuyu who had a more gender-balanced conception of God.

Additionally, *Ngai* is pleased or displeased by the actions of humans. When pleased, he is believed to bring the blessings of rain, good harvest and good health. But when displeased, *Ngai* is believed to bring drought or disease until a sacrifice is offered to appease him. In the case of prolonged drought, for instance, the ritual sacrifice would require an elaborate ceremony. First, seers would be sought to determine the specific cause of God's anger and the kind of sacrifice *Ngai* wanted.¹³² This would usually be a one-coloured lamb with no spot or blemish on it. In addition, the lamb would have to have been rightfully owned by the one who donated it; it could not have been stolen or illegally acquired.¹³³ After all this had been ascertained, the participants in the sacrifice would be chosen. It would usually be male and female elders who were no longer sexually-active, and a male and female child below the age of eight, as they were still considered to be undefiled by sin.¹³⁴ All these participants would meet on the appointed day and head together to the designated site of the sacrifice. This would usually be under a sacred *mũgumo* or *mũtamayo* tree.¹³⁵ The entire ritual would be accompanied by prayers made at various intervals. If all the instructions that *Ngai*, through the seer, had given before the sacrifice were followed, it was believed that rain would fall almost as soon as they finished the sacrifice.

Besides *Ngai*, ancestral spirits constituted the other component of the divine in indigenous Gikuyu culture. The Gikuyu believed that there were three types of ancestral spirits: First, *ngoma cia aciari* (spirits of the parents) who could advise or reproach their children just

¹³² Ibid, 244.

¹³³ Ibid.

¹³⁴ Ibid, 244-245.

¹³⁵ Ibid, 245.

like they did when they were alive.¹³⁶ Second, *ngoma cia mūherega* (clan spirits) who administered justice depending on the actions of clan members.¹³⁷ Third, *ngoma cia riika* (age-group spirits) who were concerned with the activities of their particular age-group. Because there were age-groups for every member of the community, this group of spirits was concerned with the well-being of the entire community. The Gikuyu closely communed with their ancestral spirits by frequently pouring them libation, offering them sacrifices, and consulting them, through the *mūndū mūgo*, regarding the causes and cures of certain diseases.¹³⁸ It is important to note that the Gikuyu only communed with ancestors but did not worship them. The Gikuyu term for worship is *gūthathaiya* and it is used solely in reference to *Ngai*.¹³⁹ But the Gikuyu phrase which is used to indicate communion with ancestors is “*gūitangera ngoma njohi*” and it literally means “to pour out or to sprinkle beer for spirits.”¹⁴⁰ The commonly used anthropological term, ancestral worship, is therefore a misnomer as far as indigenous Gikuyu culture is concerned.

The foregoing discussion on Gikuyu conceptions of the divine, and the symbolism surrounding prayer should aid our understanding of KLFAs members’ experiences of prayer and worship during the anti-colonial struggle.

e) Singing

Singing was a common ritual in Kenya’s anti-colonial struggle. As we shall see in chapter 5, singing was a cathartic form of lament for KLFAs members who were facing great hardships during the struggle. It was also an orature form useful in recording and storing history,

¹³⁶ Ibid, 266.

¹³⁷ Ibid.

¹³⁸ Ibid, 267.

¹³⁹ Ibid, 232.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.

and an effective tool for mass conscientization among the peasantry and working classes—majority of whom were non-literate.

In indigenous Gikuyu culture, singing was ritualistically used for various functions. First, it was ritualistically used to make work easier. Singing often accompanied individual and communal work in the community. It made the work more enjoyable and therefore much easier. Kenyatta notes that, “It is characteristic of the Gikuyu people to sing inspiring songs while performing a task, for it is said: to work in a happy mood is to make the work easier, and to relieve the heart from fatigue.”¹⁴¹

Second, singing was perceived as a ritual in itself and as a key component of other rituals and ceremonies. The *irua* (initiation) ceremony, for instance, best demonstrates this aspect. The entire ceremony incorporated a lot of singing and dancing that was collectively known as *mambura*.¹⁴² About three or four days before the *irua*, all the initiates, both boys and girls, would gather at the homestead where the initiation would take place. While there, they would engage in all-night singing and dancing as they prepared traditional sugarcane beer for a ceremony known as *kūraria mūrungu* (keep the gods awake).¹⁴³ This ritualistic ceremony was meant to invoke the guidance and protection of *mūrungu* (ancestral god) during the initiation ceremony. No initiate was allowed to leave the singing and dancing because it was viewed as a great opportunity to be in direct contact with *mūrungu*. Any initiate who left, risked facing misfortune during the initiation.¹⁴⁴ However, the initiates were allowed to go to their respective homes on the following morning.

¹⁴¹ Ibid, 81.

¹⁴² Ibid, 134.

¹⁴³ Ibid, 136.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid, 137.

On the eve of the initiation, all the initiates would gather again for a special song and dance ceremony known as *matuumo*.¹⁴⁵ This was an all-day event and it took place in the same homestead where the initiation would be carried out. Amidst the singing and dancing, a ceremonial horn would be blown which was believed to chase away evil spirits.¹⁴⁶ During the actual initiation, there would be silence as the surgeon made the incision on the initiate. But as soon as this was completed, the relatives and friends present would break into jubilant song and dance proclaiming that, “*Ciana ciito ire kooma ee-ho, nea marerire-ee-ho,*” (Our children are brave, ee-ho [hurray]. Did anyone cry? No one cried, ee-ho).¹⁴⁷

These two ritualistic functions of singing should prove useful in shaping our understanding of KLFA members’ experiences of singing in chapter 5.

f) Wearing locked hair

During Kenya’s anti-colonial struggle, locked hair became a trademark of the KLFA forest fighters. As we shall see in chapter 5, the forest fighters wore locked hair for both ritualistic and non-ritualistic reasons. Ritualistically, wearing locked hair symbolized deep reflection about the struggle, plus physical and spiritual strength. It also symbolized their fierceness and valiance. It is therefore useful, in this section, to briefly look at the ritualistic aspects of hair in indigenous Gikuyu culture.

First, it is important to note that in indigenous Gikuyu culture, the aesthetic value of hair was important to both males and females. One of the things, for instance, that could make a

¹⁴⁵ Ibid, 138.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid, 139.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid, 146.

young initiated male attractive to females in his age group, was well-dressed hair.¹⁴⁸ Dressing of hair was done using *therega* (red ochre) as it helped in the twisting or locking of the hair.¹⁴⁹ It is only initiated youth, and particularly warriors, who were allowed to keep long hair.¹⁵⁰ Kenyatta lists wearing long hair as one of the seemingly prestigious things that an uncircumcised boy could not do. It is not entirely clear why, besides aesthetic value, warriors kept long hair. However, there is a ritual that was practiced by the warriors after a successful battle that might illuminate this further.

After a successful battle, the warriors who had killed one or more of their enemies in combat, would participate in *kũina kaare*—a special ceremony where the warriors sang songs describing their contributions in the battle and praising their own heroic acts. After this ceremony, the warriors' locked hair was shaved off and “a purification ceremony [was] performed to remove any curse that might have been uttered by the dying enemies who were killed in the battle.”¹⁵¹ This ritual is quite similar to the Hebrew custom that was practiced by those who had taken the vow of the Nazirites. They were not, among other things, supposed to shave their hair or go near a dead body. If they accidentally touched a dead body, they would have to cut off their hair and restart their period of consecration to God.¹⁵² As for the Gikuyu warriors, they would stop wearing locked hair after they got married because soon after, they became junior elders.

Regarding hair in general, it should be noted that on the eve of their initiation, both boys and girls had their heads shaved clean in anticipation of the new birth which initiation

¹⁴⁸ Ibid, 156.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid, 144.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid, 107.

¹⁵¹ Ibid, 207

¹⁵² Numbers 6: 1- *New King James Version*

represented.¹⁵³ This brief background should help us understand the significance of wearing locked hair in the collected narratives of former KLFA members.

This section has examined the historical background of the six KLFA rituals being investigated in this study. It has focused on the functions and components of these rituals, as well as the symbolism attached to various words, objects, and actions within them. Let us now turn to the collected narratives of former KLFA members and focus on drinking the oath—the core KLFA ritual.

¹⁵³ Ibid, 138.

4. Listening to and Engaging the Narratives with Reference to Drinking the Oath—the Core KLFA Ritual

In this study, I conducted 17 oral history interviews during my research externship in Kenya, between May and August 2012. The primary objective of this chapter is to present and analyze the 17 collected narratives with reference to drinking the oath—the core KLFA ritual—and its significance to the *Mau Mau* struggle. But first, a biographical sketch of the narrators and a discussion of *Nommo*, the main interpretive tool in this project, are necessary.

Biographical Sketch of the Narrators

I interviewed ten men and seven women. They were all aged between 72 and 94 years. Fifteen of the 17 narrators interviewed were from Murang'a South District, Murang'a County, in Central Kenya. Of the two remaining narrators, one was from Limuru Town, Kiambu County, in Central Kenya, and the other was from Mananja Sub-location, Machakos County, in Eastern Kenya. 16 of the narrators were from the Agikuyu community and one was from the Akamba community. The interviews were therefore conducted in Gikuyu, Kikamba and Kiswahili. Because of the linguistic ties between Gikuyu and Kikamba, majority of the Agikuyu narrators could also speak fluent Kikamba. In fact, when one of the Agikuyu narrators learned that I was from the Akamba community, he enthusiastically exclaimed in Kikamba, “You should feel welcome here because you are at your in-laws; the Akamba and Agikuyu are one and the same thing!”¹⁵⁴ He then proceeded to speak in fluent Kikamba for the rest of the interview.

¹⁵⁴ Thurugu wa Gitombo, interview with the author, June 6, 2012. Mzee Gitombo was making reference to the Gikuyu myth which notes that the Agikuyu and Akamba are in-laws. This is apparently because a Kamba man married the tenth daughter of Gikuyu and Mumbi (the first parents of the Agikuyu nation). In the Akamba version of the myth, Gikuyu's first wife, Mumbi, was from the Akamba community.

The narrators occasionally used Kiswahili, Kenya's national language, in the course of our interviews. But it was telling to note that generally, the men were more fluent in Kiswahili than their women counterparts. This might be explained by the fact that a significant number of the male narrators had worked in big towns like Nairobi, before and after their participation in the KLFA struggle. They had therefore learned Kiswahili in order to navigate the ethnic diversity characteristic of these big towns. However, most of the female narrators had spent most of their lives in the reserves. This accurately represents the domestication of women that was perpetuated by the colonial system. Due to the imposition of hut and poll taxes in the Native Reserves, from 1901 and 1910 respectively, peasant families were forced to seek employment on European farms as squatters and labourers.¹⁵⁵ In addition, the men were forced to go into the big towns to look for low-wage employment. Because of the high cost of living in these towns, they would be forced to leave their families behind. This pattern continues even in post-independent Kenya and is a major contributor to the marginalization and disempowerment of women.

I also observed that former KLFA members were living in abject poverty. It was heartbreaking to interact with elderly men and women who were malnourished, sickly, dressed in tattered clothes and some even without shoes, and all lamenting that they had little or no land. I conducted my research during the cold season in Kenya and it was evident that most of them were not warm enough. In addition to the ailments that occur due to old age, the participants also had permanent injuries and bullet scars acquired in the course of the struggle for independence. At the end of my research, my family and friends donated some foodstuff and clothing to the narrators. Needless to say, much more needs to be done by the Kenyan government which has neglected the freedom fighters since Kenya attained her independence in 1963, and the British

¹⁵⁵ Kanogo, *Squatters and the Roots of Mau Mau*, 8-9.

government which is morally indebted to pay reparations to the freedom fighters for the imprisonment and torture inflicted upon them during the struggle.¹⁵⁶

Additionally, I noted that majority of the narrators were members of the Akorino Church. In fact, one of the narrators, Mzee Ngaruiya wa Kanyua, is the pastor of the Akorino Church in Gitura Sub-location, Murang'a South District. This is significant because the Akorino Church is one of the African Independent Churches that started in the 1920s to protest the political and cultural domination of Africans by the colonial state and missionary churches. It combines indigenous Gikuyu practices with some aspects of Christianity that are compatible with it.¹⁵⁷

According to Timothy Gachanga, a Kenyan theologian and scholar, the Akorino,

[R]eacted towards the colonial aggression by withdrawal and rejection... They refused to carry *kipande*, to be counted during censuses, to pay taxes, to take their children to missionary schools or hospitals, and to be employed in settlers' farms. They also abstained from buying colonial industrial goods from the shops, to eat or drink from plates and cups, or to travel by vehicles.¹⁵⁸

To this day, the Akorino Church continues to be a strong critic of Western materialism, individualism and social injustice. It is therefore no surprise that majority of the freedom fighters who participated in this study are committed members of a church that has a long history of social activism and is rooted in indigenous African spiritual forms. This is perhaps the most

¹⁵⁶ On 20th October, 2012, *Mashujaa* (Veterans) Day in Kenya, Raila Odinga, the Kenyan Prime Minister, announced that the government was set to start giving free healthcare services to the former KLFA members. While this study applauds such a move, it notes with concern that by the completion of this thesis, the government had not yet released details regarding when and how these healthcare services would be offered. For more details on this announcement, see: Isaac Ongiri, "Kimathi's body will receive State burial, leaders say." *Daily Nation*, October 20, 2012. <http://www.nation.co.ke/News/Kimathis+body+will+receive+State+burial/-/1056/1538360/-/fk1e96/-/index.html>

¹⁵⁷ Kenyatta, *Facing Mount Kenya*, 273-274.

¹⁵⁸ Timothy Gachanga. "The Pacifist Presence in Kenya". *Heritage, Museums and Memorialisation in Kenya: Exploring the Past in the Present*. Retrieved from <http://www.open.ac.uk/Arts/ferguson-centre/memorialisation/events/addis-workshop/tim-gachanga-paper.shtml> on October 23, 2012.

potent testament of how their activism has evolved in the five decades since Kenya attained her independence.

Lastly, my research also found divisions among the former freedom fighters. 16 of the 17 freedom fighters who participated in this study are affiliated with the Mau Mau War Veterans Association (MMWVA). They are registered members of the MMWVA Murang'a South District office. MMWVA is widely regarded as the national body that advocates for the rights of former KLFAs. In fact, the three freedom fighters who recently won the London High Court case, mentioned earlier, all belong to this organization. However, there exists a parallel organization that also advocates for the rights of former KLFAs—Kenya National Liberation War Veterans Association (KNLWVA). For this study, I interviewed the national chairman, James Karanja Waweru. It was noted that each organization denies the legitimacy of the other group, and they work independently from each other. In the course of this study, for instance, MMWVA was busy preparing to see off the three freedom fighters that were going to the London High Court. During the same period, KNLWVA organized a protest march to the Attorney General's chambers in Nairobi to petition the government to take up the social welfare of former KLFAs. I managed to attend the protest march and there were at least 150 freedom fighters present.¹⁵⁹ Regrettably, the differences do not end with two separate groups. I also learned that divisions exist within MMWVA itself. There was a strong sentiment among the narrators that the organization's spokesperson, Gitu wa Kahengeri, a former Member of Parliament, was usurping the role of the national chairman, Ndung'u wa Gicheru. They complained that they had appointed him to be the spokesperson for their organization as he was

¹⁵⁹ See appendix for pictures of the protest march. Also, see the following newspaper article of the event: Chrispinus Wekesa. "Mau Mau veterans hold peaceful protest in Nairobi." *The Star*, May 30, 2012. Retrieved from <http://www.the-star.co.ke/national/national/77919-mau-mau-veterans-hold-peaceful-protest-in-nairobi>

the only one fluent in both Gikuyu and English. This was an important consideration because of the looming London High Court case. However, they all felt that he had taken advantage of the situation and behaved as if he was the chairman. I did not get a chance to interview Mzee Gitu wa Kahengeri in order to hear his side of the story. But this issue came up so frequently that it would be an untruthful omission to fail to mention it. Nevertheless, it should be noted that none of the narrators claimed that the spokesperson was an intruder in their organization.

In spite of all these differences, it is the view of this study that the question of legitimacy does not arise. Both KNLWVA and MMWVA, including its spokesperson, constitute former members of the KLFA as far as the participants in this study are concerned. Proof of this is in the fact that there were no contradictions whatsoever in the narratives shared by the two groups. Therefore, their differences did not affect this study in any way. While it is true that the value of oral history interviews lies more in their meanings than in their factual veracity, consistency in some general details helped resolve the question of the legitimacy of both groups.¹⁶⁰ It is the hope of this study that MMWVA and KNLWVA will be able to resolve their differences, and forge a united front in their advocacy for state support and reparations from the Kenyan and British governments respectively.

Let us now discuss the concept of *Nommo* which will be invaluable in interpreting the narratives collected in this project.

Understanding *Nommo*

Nommo is a concept from the Dogon people of Mali. It denotes the creative and generative power of the spoken word. This project will show that KLFA, through the rituals it

¹⁶⁰ Portelli, *What Makes Oral History Different?*, 36.

practised, invoked the creative and generative power of the spoken word and thus strengthened its movement. Dogon culture, particularly its cosmology, has been studied since the 1930s and is arguably the most studied of African cultures in the Western academy. Marcel Griaule, a French anthropologist, was one of the pioneers in the study of the Dogon, and his 1965 publication, *Conversations with Ogotemmêli*, is central to any study on them.¹⁶¹ The Dogon people have a long and rich history and are able, through mythology, to trace their ancestry back to the Ancient Egyptians. Laird Scranton, in his insightful book, *The Science of the Dogon*, notes that

Dogon myths are expressed in words and symbols that are shared commonly with the Amazigh, the tribes [sic] of hunters who lived in Egypt prior to the beginning of the First Egyptian Dynasty. Perhaps most significantly, Dogon cosmology is documented in tribal [sic] drawings that often take the same shape as the ancient pictograms used to produce Egyptian hieroglyphic writing.¹⁶²

As a result of this long history, Dogon cosmology has particularly enriched the body of African indigenous knowledges. One remarkable contribution is in astronomy whereby, for centuries, Dogon astronomers have possessed and used knowledge on Sirius B—“a white dwarf star invisible to the naked eye and its unsuspected presence explains the perturbations of the orbit of Sirius.”¹⁶³ Additionally, Scranton shows strong parallels between ancient Dogon cosmology and recent scientific discoveries in Western science, including Quantum Structure and String Theory.¹⁶⁴

The spoken word is central to the Dogon people and it features prominently in their creation myth. Ogotemmêli, the Dogon priest who agreed to share with Marcel Griaule the

¹⁶¹ Marcel Griaule. *Conversations with Ogotemmêli: An Introduction to Dogon Religious Ideas*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1965). The book was first published in French, in 1948, as *Dieu d'Eau: entretiens avec Ogotemmêli*

¹⁶² Laird Scranton. *The Science of the Dogon: Decoding the African Mystery Tradition*. (Rochester: Inner Traditions, 2006), 2.

¹⁶³ Cheikh Anta Diop. *Civilization or Barbarism: An Authentic Anthropology*. (Brooklyn: Lawrence Hill Books, 1991), 314. (First published in French, in 1981, by Presence Africaine).

¹⁶⁴ Scranton, *Science of the Dogon*, 54-81.

esoteric knowledge of Dogon culture, recounts the role of the spoken word in creation.

According to the Dogon creation myth, Amma, the Supreme Being, created all life through a series of spoken words referred to as the First, Second, and Third Word. Both the First and Second Word are closely linked to the art of weaving and as a result, it is considered to be deeply spiritual and symbolic of the creative and generative power of the spoken word. In fact, the symbolic Christian title, “men of the cloth,” which refers to the priests that handle the Word of God, might have its roots in this Dogon concept.¹⁶⁵

Further, according to the Dogon, the spoken word is the life force and it is in vapour form. Ogotemmêli offers that: “The life force which is the bearer of the Word, which *is* the Word, leaves the mouth in the form of breath, or water vapour, which is water and is Word.”¹⁶⁶ As the life force, the spoken word has the power to initiate and shape events in both the spiritual and material worlds. This concept of the spoken word as the life force in vapour form is not peculiar to the Dogon. Many communities in Africa have similar conceptualizations of the spoken word. For example, among the Akamba of Eastern Kenya, it is believed that a person’s words have the power to shape events in their life. It is therefore common to hear one person telling another, “*tema mata asu*” (spit that saliva) as a rebuke for verbalizing words that portend bad luck for them or for others. Because the life force is in the word, and the word is in vapour and liquid form while in the mouth, spitting saliva immediately after the ominous words have been spoken, symbolically cancels out their power. Similarly, among the Agikuyu of Central Kenya, an elder is believed to have the power to pronounce a blessing or a curse on someone. In order to seal a blessing, the elder usually spits saliva on their chest, their palms, or on the person being blessed. This is done for the same reasons as above.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid, 29.

¹⁶⁶ Griaule, *Conversations with Ogotemmêli*, 138.

Since the first French publication of *Conversations with Ogotemméli* in 1948, there have been many other studies undertaken on various aspects of Dogon culture. For my study, the most relevant of these works is Janheinz Jahn's 1958 publication, *Muntu: An Outline of the New African Culture*. This is because Jahn devotes an entire chapter to *Nommo* and engages in a provocative discussion of the concept. Moreover, just as in my study, he makes a connection between *Nommo* and the *Mau Mau* struggle—albeit in a sharply contrasting manner. It is therefore necessary to briefly engage Jahn's conception of *Nommo* and the following excerpt is useful towards this end:

The God of Israel said, 'let there be light', and there was light. In Africa every muntu [human being] is capable of such an utterance. Every muntu, even the least of them, is by the force of his word lord over everything, over animal and plant, stone and hammer, moon and stars. If he says, 'let the sun fall from the sky!' then it falls, unless a more powerful muntu than he has already, by the force of his word, commanded the sun to stay in the sky. Thus the word force of one muntu is different from the word force of another.¹⁶⁷

Throughout the chapter, Jahn emphasizes the power of the spoken word. While it is clear he understands this power, it is his analysis of how it works that raises some concerns. First, he conceives of the *muntu* who is practicing *Nommo* as the supreme ruler over nature. He frequently describes the *muntu* who is exercising *Nommo* as having unilateral power over animals, plants, rivers, mountains, sun, stars and all of nature. This flies right in the face of one major characteristic of African indigenous knowledges discussed earlier: that they are geared towards healing community members and maintaining harmonious relationships with nature. The *muntu* who is truly practicing *Nommo* strives to live in harmony with all of nature and not assert his power over nature as conceived by Jahn. If anything, it is nature—which consists of ancestors,

¹⁶⁷ Janheinz Jahn. *Muntu: An Outline of the New African Culture*. (New York: Grove Press, 1961), 133.

spirits, and deities—that sometimes asserts her power over man. Proof of this is in the rituals performed in many parts of Africa, during the dry season, to petition for rain.¹⁶⁸

Second, Jahn conceives of *Nommo* in very individualistic terms. He views *Nommo* as the creative and generative power of the spoken word—but for individuals. This is a misinterpretation of *Nommo* because African indigenous knowledges are geared towards the well-being of the community. *Nommo* therefore finds its fullest and most powerful expression in the unity of the community and not among individual members. In a sense, *Nommo* is like a human body in a community where different members have different parts of this body. These different body parts can perform some basic functions by themselves, but their fullest and most powerful expressions are witnessed only when the individuals come together and re-member the dismembered body of *Nommo*. Ogotemmêli captures it well when he notes that, “The Word is for everyone in this world; it must come and go and be interchanged; for it is good to give and to receive the forces of life.”¹⁶⁹

To his credit, Jahn makes a strong case about wizardry stemming from the misuse of the power of *Nommo*. He accurately points out that evil magic usurps its power through the misuse of the spoken word by a witch or wizard. The misuse of the power of *Nommo* was, and remains, an unforgivable act in many African cultures. It was such a grave act that if one was found guilty, they were “either burned or thrown to the hyenas,” and therefore denied a proper burial¹⁷⁰ However, just as in the previous example, Jahn makes an accurate observation about witchcraft and wizardry but his conclusion is problematic. He notes that:

¹⁶⁸ Kenyatta, *Facing Mount Kenya*, 243-252.

¹⁶⁹ Griaule, *Conversations with Ogotemmêli*, 137.

¹⁷⁰ Jahn, *Muntu*, 131.

It was only through the disruption of the traditional order that the practices of the wizard lost their terror and, where foreign rule drove the masses to despair, became the only remaining means of resisting a lawless oppression in equally lawless fashion. Thus wizardry or illegal witchcraft became the source for the power of the Mau-Mau.¹⁷¹

There is no question about the depths of “lawless oppression” that colonial rule maintained in Africa— sufficient evidence exists to support this.¹⁷² However, what is questionable is the conclusion that at the time of their greatest despair, a people would turn to that which they loathed the most. How could it be that a community that loathed witchcraft so passionately, as to burn to death witches and wizards, would resort to it at their hour of greatest need? Wouldn’t it make more sense to turn to their source of strength, the spoken word, instead? As we saw in the KLFA Historiography, Jahn’s characterization of *Mau Mau* as being rooted in witchcraft is typical of European scholarship during and immediately after the KLFA struggle.

On the contrary, this project demonstrates how the KLFA used *Nommo* to strengthen its movement. It shows how KLFA rituals, including drinking the oath, praying, and singing all invoked the creative and generative power of the spoken word. KLFA rituals utilized the life force present in the spoken word to generate courage, self-sacrifice, love, faith, hope, commitment, resilience, unity, perseverance, and trust among the freedom fighters. Far from using witchcraft, which is a taboo and a misuse of the spoken word, the KLFA effectively used *Nommo* to launch and sustain the most significant attack on British colonialism in Africa, and arguably, the entire British Empire.

¹⁷¹ *Ibid*, 132.

¹⁷² See Caroline Elkins. *Britain's Gulag: The Brutal End of Empire in Kenya*. (London: Jonathan Cape, 2005); David Anderson. *Histories of the Hanged: Britain's Dirty War in Kenya and the End of Empire*. (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 2005); and Adam Hochschild. *King Leopold's Ghost: A Story of Greed, Terror, and Heroism in Colonial Africa*. (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1998).

Lastly, it should be noted that the decision to use a West African concept to interpret phenomena in East Africa is quite deliberate. It is a testament of the Pan-African consciousness that undergirds this project. As we shall see, awareness regarding the creative and generative power of the spoken word is quite prevalent in the cultural context of the narrators in this study. Let us now discuss the first and most important ritual from the collected narratives—drinking the oath.

Drinking the Oath

The following discussion focuses exclusively on drinking the oath because it was the core ritual during the KLFA struggle. It symbolized initiation into the KLFA as no one could play any part in the struggle if they had not drunk the oath of unity. Drinking the oath was so crucial to defining KLFA membership that, as we saw earlier, it necessitated the disregard for age-old customs relating to mass oathing and the oathing of women. Each of the narrators in this study drank at least one oath during the *Mau Mau* struggle. And a few of the narrators drank up to seven oaths in total. It is important to note that this study did not ask the narrators to recount their recollections and experiences of the actual oathing ceremonies they participated in. Several factors explain this decision. First, this study was more concerned with the impact of the oath on KLFA members, and how this shaped their participation in the anti-colonial struggle. Details surrounding the actual oathing ceremony were of secondary importance. Second, this study wanted to respect the esoteric nature of oathing ceremonies in African indigenous knowledges. It therefore did not engage the narrators on specific details regarding what they did or said during these ceremonies. Third, as we saw in the KLFA Historiography, existing research has paid much attention to the elements and details surrounding the actual oathing ceremonies. Such an undertaking would therefore have been redundant on my part. On the whole, the findings in this

chapter focus on the impact of the oath on KLFA members. But when deemed necessary, in order to contextualize certain sections of the collected narratives, it will quote existing descriptions of actual oathing ceremonies from the published narratives of former KLFA members. Let us now examine the experiences of former KLFA members with regard to oaths.

a) Coercion or volition in the oath administration process?

To begin with, all the narrators in this study emphasized the fact that they had not drunk the oath out of their own volition. For instance, James Karanja Waweru, the national chairman of the Kenya National Liberation War Veterans Association (KNLWVA), described his experience as follows:

Old men and women in the villages met to discuss and determine who was faithful and trustworthy enough to eat the oath. War is not porridge; people were chosen to take the oath and people were chosen to go into the forest... I was taken from school to go eat the oath. One of our teachers chose a few of us to go collect beans from one Dedan Mugo because there were not enough of them in the school. We arrived at Mugo's home in the evening and he fed us very well with *githeri*.¹⁷³ After supper, he bid us goodnight and told us that we would collect the beans early the following morning. We all slept but during the night, unknown people woke us up one by one and took us to a different house to eat the oath. Each of us came back very scared but we could not talk about what had happened. Come morning, we collected the beans and carried them back to school. It was evident in each person's eyes that something had happened during the night, but no one could talk about it.¹⁷⁴

Mwangi wa Murimi, a 90-year old man from Gachanjiru Location, Murang'a South District, shared a similar experience. Mzee Murimi was an oath administrator in his home area during the KLFA struggle.

I was chosen from Nairobi by the Mau Mau War Council. The council met and decided that I should come home and carry out the work of administering oaths. I was chosen together with two other people, Njoroge Kamau and Kibe Kariuki. Each of us was assigned a specific task: Njoroge Kamau's was to give out the meat during

¹⁷³ This is a staple food in Gikuyu culture and it is a mixture of maize and beans.

¹⁷⁴ Joseph Karanja Waweru, interview with author, May 31, 2012.

oathing ceremonies; Kibe Kariuki's was to look for a tree called *ngũka* whose branches were worn by oath-takers like a necklace; and mine was to slaughter the goat used during oathing ceremonies because I knew every single part of a goat. Even now, I can still slaughter a goat... While in Nairobi, I was working for the East African Railways and Harbours Corporation as a cabin technician. But when I was chosen by the War Council, I had to quit that job. I did not want it anymore because I believed *uhuru* [freedom] was coming soon, and I wanted to do the work of *uhuru*... You were never asked whether you wanted to do the work of *Mau Mau*; you just had to do it. The War Council would simply determine your age group and then assign you a task based on that... You could never refuse. If you dared do so, you would be hanged. If you dared say no, a day would not pass with you still alive... No one asked you what you wanted; you were simply assigned a task... There were no questions or answers... You were simply informed of your task and you carried it out. The most important thing was for the War Council to show you what you were supposed to do... The three of us were taken to Muruka Sub-location where we drank the oath. We stayed there for three days being told how we would do our work. Afterwards, we went home and had instructions to go back three days later, each of us with our wives... Our wives also had to drink the oath because you could not do our kind of work and still have a woman who did not know about this work.¹⁷⁵

Gitau Mungai also had a similar experience to Mzee Murimi's, but his narrative had a slightly different twist to it. He is a 76-year old man from Gitura Sub-location, Murang'a South District, and was a KLFA scout in his home area during the struggle.

I was herding my grandfather's cattle and goats one day, when I accidentally bumped into a large group of forest fighters inside a huge banana plantation. They were carrying guns and wore locked hair but I continued herding without paying too much attention to them. Later that evening, many different people came to ask me what I had seen while herding, but I kept silent. I refused to tell them anything because our grandfather had taught us that, "the mouth can cost you your head." They persisted in asking me what I had seen but I refused to tell them. This was all a trap for me to say that I had seen this or that kind of people. Even though I had not drunk the *Mau Mau* oath, which would have sworn me to secrecy, I had [symbolically] drunk our grandfather's oath which had taught me that the mouth can cost you your life. The following day, people came to our house and told me, "You will now become a true Gikuyu. You will become a soldier. You have passed the test... You were being coerced into a trap. If you had said you saw people here or there, you would not be alive today." I gave thanks to God and then they administered the oath to me.¹⁷⁶

Still on the administration of the oath, Bastillio Matheka described the unique circumstances that surrounded his family as they drank the oath. He is a 76-year old man from Mananja Location in

¹⁷⁵ Mwangi wa Murimi, interview with author, June 9, 2012.

¹⁷⁶ Gitau Mungai, interview with author, June 9, 2012.

Machakos District. But during the struggle, his family was living in Kirinyaga District and he was a KLFA scout in that area.

Our family was the only Kamba family in that predominantly Gikuyu area... We lived very peacefully with our Gikuyu neighbours... But as the struggle intensified, our neighbours questioned why we lived with them, and yet had never drunk the oath. They therefore came to our home ready to use force in order to administer the oath to us... And those who dared to refuse were beaten... We drank the oath in late 1952, immediately after Kenyatta was arrested... I drank two oaths during the struggle... and a third one was given to us by Kenyatta during his presidency, after he killed [Tom] Mboya... In fact, I was one of those who administered this oath in Mwea. The Provincial Commissioner, Nick Kiereine... gave me a government car, a driver, and police officers to come administer the oath in Mwea... Kenyatta wanted to unite the rest of Kenya against the Luo who were becoming troublesome.¹⁷⁷

While it is important to note that none of the narrators in this study drank the oath out of their own volition, it should equally be emphasized that none of them saw this coercion as their sole-motivation for the struggle. All the narrators seemed to view drinking the oath and their participation in the struggle as part of a larger scheme of things that was far more important than an individual's choice to participate or not.

b) Drinking the oath as a source of courage, strength and perseverance

The oath was a source of great strength, courage and perseverance for KLFA members who went through many hardships during the struggle. Wanjiku Thigira's experience helps demonstrate this. She is a 74-year old woman from Location Four, Murang'a South District, and was the KLFA Guard Commander in her area during the struggle.¹⁷⁸

I was not married when I joined *Mau Mau* in January 1953. I was a young girl. When I joined, I was given the work of collecting food for the forest fighters... I would collect

¹⁷⁷ Bastillio Matheka, interview with author, June 21, 2012. It has long been speculated that Jomo Kenyatta's government was responsible for Tom Mboya's assassination in 1969, but such allegations have never been proven.

¹⁷⁸ The Guard Commander was the KLFA leader/coordinator in a given location or sub-location. S/he was the liaison between KLFA forest fighters and KLFA members in the Reserves. S/he also coordinated the collection and distribution of food, clothing, money and medical supplies for the forest fighters. Lastly, s/he officially received and sent off forest fighters who went through her area.

the food and keep it at home until the appointed day of delivering it to the forest fighters. On the appointed day, together with other women, we would transport the food... This would usually be done at night and not during the day. We would start at about 7 p.m. and reach there at around midnight or 1 a.m. By dawn, about 4 or 5 a.m., we would be back home. We did not fear anything... Even if I were alone, I would still have gone. God protected us from hyenas and all kinds of wild animals... We witnessed many difficult things in the course of the struggle... There were those amongst us who followed the white man because they were lied to by their stomachs... They were enticed by the white man's things, like meat, and they became our oppressors... I was the Guard Commander in charge of collecting food, and therefore I was very dangerous. My brother was also a KLFA scout and we were the only children of our parents... One day, home guards came to our home and beat us thoroughly... My father was forced out of the house and when they reached the cow shed, they shot and killed him, and took away the cows and goats that were there. They also carried away my brother whom they continued to beat mercilessly. I have never seen him to this day and they must have killed him in the bushes somewhere. I was left in the house being beaten by the other home guards until one of them said to his colleagues, "Leave that girl alone, she is very beautiful and I am going to marry her." The man who had said this took me with him. I could barely walk due to the beating I had received, but I wouldn't have dared to refuse. Fortunately, when we got to his home, I managed to hide and later ran away... Home guards were often called by the government to go and seek out suspected *Mau Mau* members in different areas. My captor left for such an assignment that same night, and I ran away as soon as he had left... I have never seen him again... Meanwhile, when my mother learnt of my father's murder, my brother's disappearance, and my own abduction, she hung herself... I was therefore left alone but I said to myself, "that's not a problem; I will forge on..." I worked with the *Mau Mau* until the end of the struggle... We fought not knowing whether the war would end during our lifetime... All we knew was that we wanted *ithaka* [land] and *wiyathi* [freedom]... Conditions during the struggle overwhelmed us... Even going to Kabati [a nearby town] one needed a pass from the local chief or headman... It was all about self-sacrifice, whether it brought death or not. If anyone died while we were together, I would just jump over their body and move on. Death did not scare us... We got this strength and courage from God and from the oath... If one was fearful, there is nothing they could have done. They would even have been unable to carry the food. But due to God's enablement, we managed to do all these things and not be afraid... You could not do this work without drinking the oath. You had to drink the oath and swear that you would not stop fighting for land and freedom no matter what happened...¹⁷⁹

Lydia Wahu wa Muiruri also shared a similar experience. She is a 92-year old woman from Kabati Division, Murang'a South District and actively participated in providing food and medical supplies for the forest fighters. Her story also demonstrates how drinking the oath generated great resilience among KLFA members who faced severe hardships.

¹⁷⁹ Wanjiku Thigira, interview with author, June 13, 2012.

I joined the struggle in 1952 as a married woman... Other women in my area would bring cooked and uncooked food to be stored in my house until forest fighters came to collect it... When they came, the forest fighters would stay in a secret location... A few of us would then take the collected food to them. They would eat the cooked food and then pack the uncooked food in sacks in order to carry it... Other times, girls would transport the collected food to the forest... One group of girls would pass on the food to another group who would in turn pass it on to another, until the food got to the forest... When the fighters came from the forest... they would also come with their injured comrades and their doctor... I would be woken up and told to boil water in order to sterilize the needles that would be used to treat them... After the forest fighters had left, we would walk backwards while sweeping away their footprints from that homestead... so that when the home guards came the following day, they would not ask whose footprints those were... As the struggle intensified, our men started being moved to detention camps in Manyani, Lamu and other places... Those of us who remained were forced to leave our farms and move into government village camps in Katigerera... The entire camp was usually fenced in using barbed wire and there was only one small door into the camp... There was also a ditch surrounding the entire camp which measured 10-feet deep and 8-feet wide and was fitted with sharp bamboo poles to ensure that no one could dare jump over it... The only way to go across the ditch was through a make-shift bridge that was temporarily put up in the morning if we were going to work, and was taken out in the evenings after we were herded back into the village camp... A bell would ring every morning at exactly 5 a.m. for us to leave our houses and go to work. Each of us would be given a hoe and a shovel and we would be forced to go and dig ditches around other village camps. We would dig and dig until 5pm when we were allowed to go and fetch water... Each person would only be allowed two jerry-cans... we would then all line up to fetch water with an armed home guard overseeing us... Even before your jerry-cans were full, you would be told, "Enough! Get out of here!" On other occasions, curfews would be imposed ordering us to stay indoors for consecutive days and nights... We would stay indoors for days, unable to step outside... You would sleep and sleep until you got tired and just sat down... You could not even open the windows in your house... You could not step outside... for a whole day and night and then another whole day and night... All this was to ensure that when *Mau Mau* forest fighters came, we would have no food to give them... After days of staying indoors, the home guards would gather all of us together and ask us, "Do you want to work or do you want to stay indoors?" We would opt to go back to work because staying indoors any longer would have killed us. While in the house, you had no water, you had nothing... You could not step outside... The home guards would be outside monitoring and because the houses were built in a straight line, they could easily see which house had an open window. If they saw the window in your house was open, they would come and knock at your door, and severely beat you... During that period, all the men had been taken away into detention. There were no men in the village camps, as they had all been taken to Manyani, Lamu and other such places... I was therefore alone in the house with my children... We faced a lot of pain and hardship but we would tell ourselves, "It's okay, because we want our land and freedom." The home guards would taunt us saying, "You are all going to die fighting for this soil!" But we would

tell them, “It’s okay. That’s not a problem... We are ready to die in order to realize our land and freedom...” The guards would continue taunting us saying, “You will never see children again. You will never give birth again. Because all your men have been detained, you will never get pregnant again.” But we would again tell them, “It’s okay. That’s not a problem...” Indeed, our men were in detention and some even died there. Those who came back had many problems... They had no clothes, they had nothing.... except the detention uniform they came home wearing... Our struggle would have been impossible without the oath. The oath was called *kivinya* [source of strength]... It gave us strength to endure... No one could have done this work without drinking the oath; it would have been impossible...¹⁸⁰

The above narratives clearly demonstrate the strengthening power of oaths to KLFA members who faced severe hardships during the anti-colonial struggle. They also highlight the important contributions made by KLFA women during this period. None of the female narrators in this study was ever a forest guerrilla; they all contributed to the KLFA struggle from the reserves. Indeed, the majority of KLFA women never entered the forest, but they still participated actively in the struggle. Additionally, the two narratives also embody the power of *Nommo* in the face of hardships. Both narrators allude to the fact that drinking the oath and, in particular, uttering certain words while doing so, had generated strength and courage within them, necessary for the struggle. J.M. Kariuki, in *Mau Mau Detainee*, recounts the words he uttered while drinking his first oath. Even though each oathing ceremony was unique, Kariuki’s recollection can be used to illustrate the kinds of words that so powerfully affected the above narrators. He notes that:

I speak the truth and vow before God, and before this movement, the movement of Unity... That I shall go forward to fight for the land. The lands of Kirinyaga that we cultivated; the lands which were taken by the Europeans. And if I fail to do this, may this oath kill me... may this meat kill me... I speak the truth that I shall be working together with the forces of the movement of Unity, and I shall help with any contributions for which I am asked... And if I fail to do this, may this oath kill me... may this meat kill me...¹⁸¹

Kariuki’s recollections demonstrate why the above narrators asserted that they had to stick to whatever they had sworn to do. Even in the midst of torture, personal loss, and taunting by home

¹⁸⁰ Lydia Wahu wa Muiruri.

¹⁸¹ Kariuki. *Mau Mau Detainee*, 22.

guards, they would respond by saying, “it is okay” or “that’s not a problem.” Their responses demonstrate a sharp awareness of the creative and generative power of the spoken word. This is because, in a sense, it became okay only after they had said it was. All the narrators in this study, and especially the females, were keen to point out what they had verbalized during oathing ceremonies and in the face of great hardships. The life-force in their spoken words generated strength, courage and perseverance.

Further, there was a strong conviction among the narrators that the KLFA struggle would have been impossible without the drinking of various oaths. Two former forest fighters and World War II veterans shared similar reflections regarding the strengthening power of KLFA oaths. Joseph Waweru wa Thirwa, the oldest narrator in this study at 94, noted that, “The oath transformed your mind completely... You became like an animal and did not fear anything... I ate many oaths... but all had the same purpose: to strengthen us... When it appeared like you were relenting, you ate another oath to strengthen you.”¹⁸² His comrade, 92-year old Thurugu wa Gitombo, offered that:

Drinking the oath helped us persevere many hardships... It gave me courage to fight against the white man... I did not fear death... Do you want me to show you where I was shot? [Even before I could respond, he unbuttoned his shirt and showed me a bullet scar just above his right collar bone] Come on, touch it and feel... The bullet went through but God saved me... My comrades carried me to Kariaini where I got treated... by forest doctors... They used herbs on the wound... and it healed completely... When it healed, I went back to active combat, ready to die... Frankly, there was no other way. We had to fight and, if necessary, die in order for us to regain this soil which was given to us by *Ngai*... The white man came from nowhere and came to call us gorillas... And cultivated our land... Planted coffee and sisal... Took away our cattle... and every good thing he could find... because he is an oppressor... He is an oppressor because he has power and we do not... Those days, if a white man met you wearing a hat, he would beat you seriously... Yet he is a man like you... We got to a point where we said, it is better to die than to be alive in such bondage...¹⁸³

¹⁸² Joseph Waweru wa Thirwa, interview with author, June 6, 2012.

¹⁸³ Thurugu wa Gitombo, interview with author, June 9, 2012.

Just as he does in the above excerpt, Mzee Thurugu wa Gitombo severally lamented the racially-motivated verbal and physical abuse Africans experienced from colonial administrators and white settlers. This dehumanization and denial of agency led many of the narrators in this study to see resistance or death as the only options available to them. Drinking the oath was thus the first step towards reclaiming their agency and humanity. It reminded them that far from being “gorillas,” they were proud sons and daughters of Gikuyu and Mumbi, and therefore the rightful owners of Gikuyu land.¹⁸⁴ It also urged them to take pride in the fact that they were the beloved children of *Ngai*, who had given Gikuyu and Mumbi the land in the first place.¹⁸⁵

Next, Monica Wambui wa Gitau reflected on how drinking the oath strengthened her in the dangerous task of transporting food to the forest fighters and living through the many hardships of life in the reserves. She is 78 years old and is from Gitura Sub-location, Murang’a South District.

To transport food to the forest fighters, we went purely by God’s grace knowing that we might not make it back... We knew we could easily meet home guards along the way and get shot... Drinking the oath gave us courage to carry out the work ahead of us... It strengthened our hearts to do the work of *Mau Mau*... Without drinking the oath it would have been impossible to do this work... Life in the reserves was extremely difficult and we were beaten, shot and arrested mercilessly by the home guards... Scottish soldiers wearing skirts [kilts] also came here and they really whooped us... Those in the forest were more fortunate than us because no one beat them... I was detained and released several times in both Nairobi and Murang’a... In the village camps, we could not open the windows or even fetch water... Life was hard... In our area, so many people were shot dead that it was not possible to bury them... People just rotted where they had fallen because there was no one to bury them... My husband died almost immediately after he was released in 1962. He had been tortured so badly while in detention that he did not live long... He was one of the “*Mau Mau* hard-cores” and while in detention, they always kept his hands and feet chained together...¹⁸⁶

¹⁸⁴ Gikuyu and Mumbi are the mythical ancestors of the Gikuyu community.

¹⁸⁵ Kenyatta, *Facing Mount Kenya*, 3.

¹⁸⁶ Monica Wambui wa Gitau, interview with author, June 12, 2012.

Similarly, 89-year old Muhinya wa Kinyanjui noted that, “The oath gave us courage... If I had to, I would fearlessly have gone out at night to transport the food by myself.. Even now, as an old woman, I can go out at night by myself without any fear.”¹⁸⁷ 92-year old Loise Wangui wa Kamau added that, “The oath gave you perseverance... Without it you had no courage... After drinking the oath, you received strength from God... Strength to stick to the end... The oath gave us fierceness in order to fight against the European... If we hadn’t drunk the oath, the European wouldn’t have left... He would still be here stepping on our backs...”¹⁸⁸

Still on strength, courage and perseverance, Magdalena Wanjiku wa Kamau added that:

When the struggle began, I was a farmer. Forest fighters used to pass through my house on their way to the guard commander’s house because my house was strategically located on a common path... The forest fighters would ask me if I had seen any guards around and if it was safe for them to proceed... This went on for some time and after a while, word went round that *Mau Mau* fighters frequented my house... Because I was suspected of aiding the forest fighters, home guards came and burnt down six houses and four granaries in my homestead. They also took away six cows, eight goats and all the chickens that they found in the compound... They burnt all the maize that was in the granaries... All of us in that home were left with nothing except the clothes we were wearing... Drinking the oath gave us courage to face all this... Great courage... After they burned my house, my children and I had to sleep under a banana tree until morning... And I did not fear anything...¹⁸⁹

All these narratives demonstrate the power of the oath in generating strength, courage and perseverance among KLFA members.

c) Drinking the oath to generate commitment, resolve, and self-sacrifice

Drinking the oath also generated commitment, self-sacrifice, and resolve among KLFA members. The narrators in this study described how drinking the oath enabled them to stubbornly stick to the tasks or responsibilities that had been assigned to them. Two former forest fighters

¹⁸⁷ Muhinya wa Kinyanjui, interview with author, June 12, 2012.

¹⁸⁸ Loise Wangui wa Kamau, interview with author, June 13, 2012.

¹⁸⁹ Magdalena Wanjiku wa Kamau, interview with author, June 13, 2012.

had similar experiences of this. One of them, 88-year old Joseph Karanja Waweru, stated that, “The moment the oath entered your head, that was it. You could not waver... you could not change your mind even unto death.”¹⁹⁰ His comrade, 78-year old Ngaruiya wa Kanyua, added that:

Once you drank the oath, nothing else could enter your heart... You were determined to accomplish the task... If the general asked you to go and bring someone’s head or finger, you went and brought it... It didn’t matter how long it took you or whether you were alone, you couldn’t go back without it... After drinking the oath, you had something like a stone in your heart that helped you forge ahead.¹⁹¹

Evanson Wainaina Waritu’s story further illustrates the importance of the oath in fostering commitment, resolve and self-sacrifice in the KLFA. Mzee Waritu was the youngest narrator in this study at the age of 72. He drank the KLFA oath at only 14 years and his story eloquently illustrates the significant role played by children in Kenya’s anti-colonial struggle.

I became aware of the struggle in 1952 when I started seeing people firing bullets, which would hit someone and they would fall. I used to hear from my parents and older siblings that there was a war because the British were trying to take away our land. Then, I was in Standard Two [Second Grade]... In 1953, our older brothers and sisters who used to transport food to the forest fighters, started instructing those of us who appeared to be clever, that if we saw *Mau Mau* forest fighters, we should not tell any white person about it even if they killed us. By 1953, I was a grown up... After school, I would go to herd cattle and on arriving home in the evening, I would be told that I was going somewhere with my sisters. They would be carrying food and would ask me to walk ahead of the entire group. I soon discovered that the food was meant for the freedom fighters and I managed to see where they were staying. On one occasion, four of them who were carrying guns and wearing locked hair collected the food from where my sisters and her friends had placed it... In 1954, when the battle was at its hottest, those of us who were almost 15 or 16 ate the oath. We were taught that a white man was an enemy and instructed to send out a warning if we ever saw him approaching... We were also taught to never speak to him or respond to any of his questions... 1954 is the year I did a lot of work for the movement... I used to transport bullets hidden inside a pumpkin. The pumpkin would be slit open and all the seeds taken out. Bullets would then be carefully arranged inside. After this, the pumpkin would be sewn back together so well that it was impossible to tell it had been slit. This would be done to two pumpkins and I would carry them in a *kiondo* [sisal bag]... It

¹⁹⁰ Joseph Karanja Waweru.

¹⁹¹ Ngaruiya wa Kanyua, interview with author, June 9, 2012.

would be very heavy... We would transport the bullets from our home area to a place called Kagumoini. On arrival, young men would pick the sisal bags and we would immediately start our journey back. On some occasions, we would find that they had boiled meat and would give each of us some to eat on our return journey during the night... During the day, if forest fighters had visited our area, it would be our responsibility to stay on the lookout for home guards and johnnies [white soldiers].¹⁹² If one happened to see them, they would whistle in order to alert the forest fighters... When the home guards discovered our whistling strategy, we resorted to using leaves. We would cut leaves and drop them along the safest path into and out of our home area. Forest fighters would know that the path with leaves was safe from home guards and johnnies. But the enemy would not be able to tell what the leaves meant. When they again discovered this strategy, we resorted to drawing marks on the ground. If there were four different paths, we would draw a mark on each one of them but draw a *Mau Mau* mark on the safest path. These marks would be the letters "L", "B", "C" or "X". Home guards and johnnies would have no idea what these marks meant but the forest fighters would know which was the safest path to follow... We were taught all these tactics by older scouts who had already been initiated... In 1955, I also did a lot of work for the movement because I was no longer in school. I had sat for my Common Entrance Exam [CEE] in 1954. My mother together with my other siblings had all been detained and so I was left alone. I was literally fed by our neighbours because I had no one... That year, I worked day and night for the movement. Three of us young men together with other girls our age would often be sent to deliver various messages at night and come back... We were also taught secret ways of writing messages on white paper using lemon juice... One would dip a stick into the lemon and use it to write the required message. You would then be instructed to go and drop the piece of paper at a designated place where the intended recipient would be on the lookout for it. To the naked eye, the paper looked blank. But the recipient would set the paper on fire and as it burned, he would be able to read what had been written on it. To other passersby, the paper would look like a piece of trash, but the intended recipient knew otherwise... Home guards beat us a lot when they found footprints which they suspected to belong to the forest fighters... They would want us to tell them whose the footprints were... They would also beat us if we refused to tether goats or sheep which they wanted to steal and go eat... They feared that if they tethered the animals themselves, they would receive a curse. They therefore wanted us, children, to do it on their behalf in order to cancel out the power of the curse... But we would refuse to do it and in return, they would really beat us... Children did not fear eating the oath because from an early age, they had been taught to view the white man as an enemy... He had eaten your goats, your sheep, and even [taken away] your mother's clothes. And so your heart was naturally enraged by this. Add to it the oath, and there was no task that we could not accomplish as children... Eating the oath produced in you a lot of contempt for Europeans and Africans who collaborated with them. It made you not want to see them and would have killed them if only you had a gun... Children undertook the most difficult task of safeguarding the forest fighters... We were a great source of gathering intelligence. We could enter home guards' posts undetected and listen in on their plans because we appeared to be just playing... We

¹⁹² Johnnie was the name given to white soldiers in colonial Kenya.

became known as *ciana cia mikirigichi* [children of the playing wheel] because we could ride our wheels right into the home guards' posts... The only difference between us and crafty hares is that we used to bathe... But we had to go through an exam... It was like an interview... There were a few home guards that used to be on the side of the *Mau Mau*... Older scouts would work together with these home guards and using sweets, would test our commitment to the struggle... On seeing us in their post, these home guards would entice us with a big sweet and then attempt to draw out information from us regarding *Mau Mau*... They would ask us if we knew the routes forest fighters used or the people who transported food to them... Our oath had taught us that sweets were bad and we should not eat them... the British made them with poisonous substances that could kill you if you dared eat them [he says this laughingly]... We were supposed to refuse these sweets or accept them and later throw them away... Those who failed this test, by eating the sweet, would be punished. But if you passed, you were considered fit for the job... Very few, however, failed the test as it resulted in beatings by the older scouts and alienation from the rest of the group...¹⁹³

The above story demonstrates how the oath was useful in educating KLFA members on the causes and objectives of their struggle. It shows why in some instances, the first oath was referred to as *muma wa kūruta andu ūrimūini* (oath of creating understanding and enlightenment).¹⁹⁴ The story also highlights the important contributions made by children and youth to the KLFA struggle. The ingenious tactics employed by KLFA children and youth represented an assertion of their agency. Mzee Waritu, like most other KLFA children, did not go beyond Standard Four (Fourth Grade) after sitting the Common Entrance Examination (CEE). Exams were often used in colonial education as a tool for maintaining European domination over the African population. Exams achieved this by restricting the number of Africans who could proceed to higher levels of education. The CEE was such type of an exam. Kilemi Mwiria in his aptly titled article, *Education for Subjugation*, describes it as “one of the most competitive selective examinations ever administered in the history of Kenyan education.”¹⁹⁵ The CEE was administered in Standard Four and it was the criterion for determining who would proceed to

¹⁹³ Evanson Wainaina Waritu, interview with author, June 9, 2012.

¹⁹⁴ Wachanga, *Swords of Kirinyaga*, 190.

¹⁹⁵ Kilemi Mwiria. “Education for Subordination: African Education in Colonial Kenya.” *History of Education*, 20(6) (1991), 265.

intermediate school. The CEE eliminated so many students that it was not uncommon for an entire class to be denied an opportunity in the few available intermediate schools. For example, Micere Githae Mugo, co-author of the classic play on KLFA, *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi*, was the only student in her school, Baricho Primary School, who passed the CEE in 1951. In a class of about 50 students, she was the only one who proceeded to intermediate school at Kangaru Embu Girls Intermediate School.¹⁹⁶ In a sense, therefore, the KLFA struggle was an avenue for children and youth to utilize their creativity and innovativeness. The highly-selective nature and poor quality of colonial education for Africans had greatly inhibited them from doing this. But the KLFA struggle provided an opportunity for children and youth to offer their creativity for the good of the national struggle. The contributions made by KLFA children and youth further reinforce calls by some Pan-Africanists to re-envision Pan-Africanism in the 21st century, and seriously engage African youth who have developed new sites of activism and resistance through social media, as well as pop music and culture.¹⁹⁷

Further, the oath's power to generate commitment, resolve and self-sacrifice among KLFA members, was seen in their unwavering commitment towards supplying food for the forest fighters. Two former KLFA members explained why it was compulsory for them to give food for the forest fighters. Lydia Wahu wa Muiruri noted the following:

Every member had to bring their portions of maize, beans or whatever was available. No one was allowed to claim that they did not have any food to give. They had to find food for the forest fighters... If we claimed that there was hunger and therefore no food, what would the forest fighters do and they had nowhere to cultivate? They only

¹⁹⁶ Micere Githae Mugo, interview with author, April 4, 2012.

¹⁹⁷ See Micere Githae Mugo. "Re-envisioning Pan-Africanism: What is the Role of Gender, Youth and the Masses?" In Ibbo Mandaza & Dani W. Nabudere (Eds). *Pan-Africanism and Integration in Africa*. (Harare: SAPES Books, 2002), 239-262. This is, of course, a completely different proposition from employing child soldiers.

went to the forest to fight. If you dared refuse to give food, we would kill you. Your family would never see you again.¹⁹⁸

Muhinya wa Kinyanjui succinctly added that, “Even in drought, food for the forest fighters was always available.”¹⁹⁹ Evidently, their commitment to collecting food was so unyielding that killing uncooperative members was viewed as moral and just. It should be noted that food was collected only from KLFA members and therefore, this was a readiness to kill fellow comrades if they had to do so. In essence, after drinking the oath, their cause was so important that not even a comrade could be allowed to stand on the way.

Besides giving and collecting the food, transporting it was also a matter of self-sacrifice.

First, it involved great distances. Loise Wangui wa Kamau noted that:

We walked for great distances. It’s like from here [Gitura sub-location] to Nairobi...²⁰⁰ The forests of Mount Kenya and Nyandarua are quite far... It would take us about six hours to get there and don’t forget we would be carrying food... And of course there was the journey back home... We would get home just in time to be given shovels and hoes to go dig ditches around village camps... God did well and fought for us. We are alive and well... The only thing we cannot do is walk for long because our feet have become weak from the work we did.²⁰¹

Second, it was a dangerous journey. Because of the curfews imposed during the emergency period, just being out at night, not to mention aiding a proscribed group of forest fighters, was a serious offence. KLFA members clearly understood the risks involved but selflessly chose to still transport the food. Loise Wangui wa Kamau admitted that, “Sometimes, some of us would be shot by home guards while transporting the food. But we would say, “That is nothing.” We would say this because we had no soil.”²⁰²

¹⁹⁸ Lydia Wahu wa Muiruri.

¹⁹⁹ Muhinya wa Kinyanjui.

²⁰⁰ The distance from Gitura Sub-location to Nairobi is about 80km.

²⁰¹ Loise Wangui wa Kamau, personal interview with author, June 13, 2012.

²⁰² Ibid.

Magdalena Wanjiku wa Kamau shared another story of self-sacrifice and commitment to the KLFA struggle. She recorded that:

On two occasions, we had to hide guns for forest fighters and they were never discovered. A group of fighters would leave guns at our house to be collected by another group. We went out at night and buried them on the side of the road going to Githunguri... The guns stayed buried for four days before they were collected by other fighters... If we had been found in possession of the guns, we would surely have been killed; there was no other way out of it...²⁰³

Indeed, the 1953 Ordinance on Arms and Ammunition outlined very stringent regulations on the use and possession of firearms.²⁰⁴ Nevertheless, the above narrator went ahead and hid the guns, fully aware of the personal risks involved. James Kinyua's story further demonstrated self-sacrifice generated by drinking the oath. He offered that:

I drunk the oath in 1949 and immediately became a KLFA scout to be on the lookout during oathing ceremonies. In 1950, my father instructed me to enter the forest and become a fighter. KAU [Kenya African Union] had ordered all the fathers in Central Province who had drunk the oath, to choose one of their sons who would become a forest fighter. If say a father had three sons, he had to choose one of them to send to the forest. We entered the forest in Kirinyaga, at a place called Kimunye where we found a man named General Mathenge wa Mirugi... General Mathenge trained us on handling guns and various aspects of warfare... He had experience in warfare because he had fought in Italy during World War II, together with Kimathi and Mwariama... KAU used to pay us a salary of 60 shillings every month to be forest fighters. But in October 1952, Kenyatta was arrested and KAU was proscribed on allegations that it was coordinating the armed resistance. After it was proscribed, the party was unable to pay us any more salaries... General China therefore called a big meeting for those of us who were in the forest. He informed us that there would be no more salaries for us but asked if we still wanted to continue with the battle. We said we would certainly continue fighting because we were fighting for our country... I ate four oaths in total and each had its unique name: Kanyekeni, Moscow, Batuni and KKM... Drinking the oath gave you the motivation to fight for your nation.²⁰⁵

²⁰³ Magdalena Wanjiku wa Kamau.

²⁰⁴ Kenya Gazette, May 26, 1953. Retrieved from

http://books.google.com/books?id=qMCIHbBd6EC&pg=PA494&lpg=PA494&dq=1953+Ordinance+on+Arms+and+Ammunition+colony+and+protectorate+of+Kenya&source=bl&ots=_mT9Jq_jKg&sig=d3ny7arUwccgutA4AfDYKrWTbVYs&hl=en&sa=X&ei=C-1PUZ_GOQu20AHp-IHACQ&sqi=2&ved=0CDIQ6AEwAQ#v=onepage&q=1953%20Ordinance%20on%20Arms%20and%20Ammunition%20colony%20and%20protectorate%20of%20Kenya&f=false

²⁰⁵ James Kinyua, interview with author, June 12, 2012.

Lastly, it is important to note that all the narrators in this study indicated that the commitment generated by drinking the oath was lifelong, and that the impact of the oath was still with them. Mwangi wa Murimi, for instance, the former oath administrator, was quick to correct me when I asked him to describe the oath's impact on him. He quickly retorted that, "The oath is still active. Don't ask me what it did; it is still doing and it is actively within me right now."²⁰⁶ Loise Wangui wa Kamau equally stressed that, "If the power of the oath had withered, I would not have come for this interview. I would just have stayed at home... The power of the oath will end when I have somewhere to step on [land]... And I must get what is mine."²⁰⁷ Muhinya wa Kinyanjui succinctly added, "*Muma wi nda*"²⁰⁸ [the oath is still in my guts]. This was a symbolic reference to the fact that she had literally eaten or drank the oath. But unlike normal food, which is ingested, digested and excreted, the oath she ate was still in her guts. This seemingly timeless nature of the oath further demonstrates the effective use of *Nommo* in the KLFA. The utterances made during the oathing ceremonies and in the course of the struggle, helped birth unwavering commitment and self-sacrifice among KLFA members. It was evident that they were still committed to agitating for the land they had suffered and fought for during the KLFA struggle.²⁰⁹

d) Drinking the oath to foster unity

Drinking the oath also fostered unity among KLFA members. The oath was a double-edged sword which bound KLFA members together in strong cords of love and solidarity on one hand, and on the other, filled them with deep-seated contempt for all British colonial administrators and their African collaborators. So strong were these opposing effects of the oath,

²⁰⁶ Mwangi wa Murimi.

²⁰⁷ Loise Wangui wa Kamau.

²⁰⁸ Muhinya wa Kinyanjui.

²⁰⁹ A more detailed discussion of the current activism of former KLFA members is undertaken in the first ritual in chapter 5—clutching soil at death.

that KLFA members who had drunk the oath literally viewed each other as blood relatives. Equally, the oath taught members to loathe and treat with great suspicion, anyone who had not yet drunk or who had refused to drink the KLFA oath—even if that person was a blood relative. J.M. Kariuki’s recollection of the words he uttered while drinking his second oath clearly demonstrate this point.

I speak the truth and vow before our God, that if I am called to go to fight the enemy or to kill the enemy—I shall go. Even if the enemy be my father or mother, my brother or sister. And if I refuse, may this oath kill me... may this meat kill me. I speak the truth and vow before our God, that if the people of the movement, come to me by day or night, and if they ask me to hide them, I shall do so and I shall help them. And if I refuse, may this oath kill me... may this meat kill me.²¹⁰

Indeed, drinking the oath unified KLFA members and simultaneously made them ostracize non-members. Wanjiku Thigira captured this well in her narrative. She noted that, “I could not sit and eat with you if you had not drunk the oath. Even if you were my child, you had to first drink the oath. We had to be in the same mindset and this was only possible through the oath.”²¹¹ Loise Wangui wa Kamau, a former KLFA member, who used to collect and transport food to the forest fighters, added that, “If I knew you had not drunk the oath, I never wanted your food. I could never ask for, or even eat your food... I could not even agree to walk down the same path with you. Headed where..? Anyone who had not drunk the oath was left to stay by themselves.”²¹² Wanjiku Thuku further noted that, “We did not associate with anyone who had not drunk the oath... If a group of us came across someone who had not drunk the oath, we would alert each other by saying, “there is a flea amongst us.””²¹³ Evidently, the unity generated by drinking the oath transcended KLFA activities and shaped all spheres of life for KLFA members. The suitability of a marriage partner, for instance, was determined by, among other

²¹⁰ Kariuki, *Mau Mau Detainee*, 25.

²¹¹ Wanjiku wa Thigira.

²¹² Loise Wangui wa Kamau.

²¹³ Wanjiku Thuku.

considerations, whether a potential suitor had drunk the oath. For any KLFA member, not having drunk the oath was an automatic deal-breaker. For example, Joseph Waweru wa Thirwa asserted that, “Of course my wife had drunk the oath before I married her. I would never have chosen a woman who had not drunk the oath. That would be marrying an enemy... She had to have drunk the oath.”²¹⁴ Similarly, Wanjiku Thigira stressed that, “If any girl among our members dared to get married to a man who had not drunk the oath, we would go to them at night and beat or even kill them. This is because they would be compromising our work... No girl could dare do this.”²¹⁵

Still on unity, Joseph Waweru wa Thirwa noted that, “Oaths were drunk in order to unite the people. If you want to unite people, you must administer oaths. There is no other effective way of uniting people besides the oath. The oath unites people and enables them to speak in one voice.”²¹⁶ Similarly, James Kinyua, a former forest fighter, added that, “*Uhuru* {freedom} could not be realized if people were disunited. People had to be unified in order to collectively demand for *uhuru*. The oath was a way of restoring unity among people. If people had not drunk the oath, *uhuru* would not have been realized.”²¹⁷ The kind of unity generated by drinking the oath was so strong that it created a special form of intuition among KLFA members. Several narrators indicated how over time, they were able to just look at someone, and without any verbal or physical signals from them, determine whether or not they had drunk the oath. One narrator stated that, “It was possible to identify someone who had drunk the oath, and they also could tell

²¹⁴ Joseph Waweru wa Thirwa.

²¹⁵ Wanjiku Thigira.

²¹⁶ Joseph Waweru wa Thirwa.

²¹⁷ James Kinyua.

if I had drunk the oath, because we had all become of one spirit... We all knew each other...

From here all the way to Meru, we could identify each other.”²¹⁸ Another narrator added that:

Someone could come from Kisumu and as soon as I saw them, I was able to tell that they had drunk the oath without them telling me... By just looking into their eyes, I could tell they had drunk the oath... This was God’s work and it was not a joke... It didn’t matter where you went or came from, if you had drunk the oath, other members could identify you and you could also identify them.²¹⁹

The above narrators were careful to note that this special intuition generated by drinking the oath, went beyond the secret greetings and phrases KLFA members sometimes used to identify each other.

e) Drinking the oath, women, and gender roles in the KLFA

There was a common assertion among the narrators in this study that KLFA oaths were the same for both men and women. According to Thurugu wa Gitombo, “There was one oath for both men and women because the land we were fighting for was one, and it belonged to both man and woman.”²²⁰ As we saw in the previous chapter, women were excluded from drinking most oaths in indigenous Gikuyu culture. But this changed with the advent of the KLFA struggle as both men and women had to drink oaths. However, this study established that women were excluded from the administration of KLFA oaths. They still played an important role of *kūrangira* (guarding and coordinating) the oathing ceremonies, but they were never the actual oath administrators. The general consensus among the narrators was that only males were allowed to administer oaths. Mwangi wa Murimi, a former oath administrator, asserted that,

²¹⁸ Joseph Waweru wa Thirwa.

²¹⁹ Gitau Mungai.

²²⁰ Thurugu wa Gitombo, interview with author, June 9, 20112.

“Women could not do this work [oath administration] because there are other things that happen in their bodies [referring to menstruation]...”²²¹

Historically, in many African societies, menstrual blood was viewed as a source of uncleanliness for women and therefore, menstruating women were not allowed into sacred ritual spaces.²²² This same view was responsible for the exclusion of women from oath administration in the KLFA. In addition, menstrual blood restricted the KLFA activities of female members. Wanjiku Thigira, for instance, who used to transport food to the forest fighters, noted that: “If you suddenly got your periods [while transporting the food], you would place the food on the ground and it would be carried by someone else. You would then be assigned another woman, and together be shown where to sit and wait for the others to go deliver the food and come back. You would only join them on their way back as all of you headed home together.”²²³ It is important to quickly add that all human blood, and not just menstrual blood, restricted the activities of KLFA members. Because KLFA members transported food at night, it was possible to get pricked by a thorn or hit by a stone while walking in the dark. When this happened, and bleeding occurred, the injured member would be left to sit and wait on the side of the road in the same manner as a menstruating KLFA member.²²⁴ Wanjiku Thigira explained why:

Blood portended bad luck for the forest fighters... It portended bad luck because forest fighters did not want to come into contact with any human blood... Even among the forest fighters themselves, anyone who got hurt and was bleeding, could not go out to battle and had to stay behind in the camp. Anyone who started bleeding during a battle had to retreat and played no further role in the battle...²²⁵

²²¹ Mwangi wa Murimi.

²²² Ifi Amadiume. *Male Daughters, Female Husbands: Gender and Sex in an African Society*. (London: Zed Books, 1987), 53.

²²³ Wanjiku Thigira

²²⁴ Ibid.

²²⁵ Ibid.

Such strong views by the narrators in this study pose serious challenges on existing research on KLFA oaths which claims that oathing ceremonies involved menstrual and human blood. Tabitha Kanogo, for instance, in *Kikuyu Women and the Politics of Protest: Mau Mau*, states that, “All of the oaths incorporated features relating to female sexuality, and women were required for the performance of the rites. Menstrual blood was an ingredient in some oath concoctions...”²²⁶ It is extremely difficult to reconcile Kanogo’s claims with the narratives collected in this study. If menstruating women were not allowed to carry food for the forest fighters, how could menstrual blood possibly be used in the oathing ceremonies? In fact, one narrator solemnly observed that, “If a man dared to touch menstrual blood, he was sure of dying.”²²⁷ Therefore, the rationalization offered by Kanogo that KLFA leaders believed breaking such a longstanding taboo would “invoke a greater sense of commitment” among KLFA members, is unconvincing.²²⁸ This is because, as we shall see in chapter 5, KLFA members were heavily reliant on God’s favour and direction during their struggle. It is therefore unlikely that they would have blatantly disregarded such a sacred taboo as touching menstrual blood. J.M. Kariuki, in *Mau Mau Detainee*, also responds to this claim:

The stories of the widespread use of the menstrual blood of women... are either fabrications or, if anyone can prove any truth in them (and they have not yet done so to my satisfaction) they must have been confined to a minute number of perverted individuals driven crazy by their isolation in the forests... In our society the sacredness of the menstrual blood is impressed on our young men and women by their mentors (*Atiiri*) at the time of circumcision. Abuse of it was a sin (*thahu*) which led to barrenness and other disasters and could only be purified in a most solemn ceremony. No Kikuyu leader in his senses would make use of such an ominous substance in a movement which could in no way afford to flaunt the spirits of our ancestors.²²⁹

²²⁶ Tabitha Kanogo, “Kikuyu Women and the Politics of Protest: Mau Mau.” In Shirley Ardenes et al., *Images of Women in Peace and War*. (London: Macmillan, 1987), 86.

²²⁷ Thurugu wa Gitombo.

²²⁸ Kanogo, *Kikuyu women*, 86.

²²⁹ Kariuki, *Mau Mau Detainee*, 28.

It is true that KLFA oaths broke other longstanding taboos such as vowing to kill one's own parents if forced to do so for the sake of the struggle. Even though such occurrences did take place, they were relatively uncommon. This study established that most KLFA members had drunk the oath as entire family units and not just as individuals. In fact, all the narrators in this study actively participated in and suffered for their roles in the KLFA struggle, together with their fathers, mothers, husbands, wives, brothers, sisters, and other family members. The narrators in this study are a representative sample of KLFA members because during the struggle, they were spread out across various districts, including Murang'a, Nyeri, and Kiambu. While killing of family members undeniably took place, the vow to kill one's parents was more of an ideological stance than a common practice, and it can sufficiently be rationalized. On the contrary, it is quite difficult to see any possible reason for using menstrual blood in KLFA oathing ceremonies. It is thus a strong conviction of this study, that such allegations are unfounded.

Next, experiences of drinking the oath revealed various aspects of gender relations among KLFA members. First, drinking the same oath gave women a sense of gender parity with their male counterparts. Wanjiku Thigira, for instance, stated that, "Men and women drank the same oath so that a woman could gain courage like that of a man... [After drinking the KLFA oath] If women decided to go and arrest a man, they could do so easily... And if he dared refuse, they could even strangle him..."²³⁰ This gender parity was further emphasized by Joseph Waweru wa Thirwa:

Women certainly drank the oath and actively participated in the struggle... There were also women soldiers in the forest... Have you seen the Coat of Arms? There are two lions on it: one is holding a spear in its left hand [front left paw] and stepping on the

²³⁰ Wanjiku Thigira.

crown with its left leg [back left paw], and the other lion is doing the same thing only with its right hand and leg. The lion on the left represents a woman. It is what gives women the power to rule because both men and women fought for this country... We are the ones who created the Coat of Arms and that is what it represents.²³¹

Among the forest fighters, men and women abided by a very strict code of conduct. One narrator observed that, “If as a man you appeared to just want to chit-chat and sleep around with the women, you would be killed because you had a different agenda... In the forest, no matter how beautiful you thought a woman was, at that point, she was a man just like you.”²³² In line with this, very strict regulations governed sexual conduct among the forest fighters. Ninety-four year old Joseph Waweru wa Thirwa stressed that:

Men and women lived in completely separate camps while in the forest. If a man dared to enter the women’s camp, they would kill him because he would be bringing sin to them... Sexual relations were strictly forbidden among forest fighters as they portended bad luck... Those found contravening this rule were killed... There were official days set apart for sexual liaisons among the forest fighters, but no one was allowed to go into battle after such encounters. They all had to undergo a seven-day period of cleansing... Sexual relations were strictly forbidden for soldiers engaging in battle... Have you heard about our soldiers in Kiiru who were always being killed by government security forces? It’s because they were going into battle after sexual encounters with women. Going into battle after being with a woman is disastrous. You are sure of being killed.²³³

Similarly, 92-year old Thurugu wa Gitombo asserted that:

No man could dare enter the women’s camp. If he did, he would certainly be killed as he would be bringing bad luck and death to the rest of the camp... Everyone had to wait until Kimathi gave authorization for men to go into the women’s camp. We would go and sleep with them for one night and thereafter, observe seven days of cleansing. Men and women would separately assemble at the river and there, a *mũndũ mũgo* [traditional doctor] would purify us using *ng’ondu* [a ceremonial herb]. After the purification, we would all be ceremonially clean and the *mũndũ mũgo* would allow us to go back to our camps... If you went into battle before this purification ceremony, you were sure of being killed.²³⁴

²³¹ Joseph Waweru wa Thirwa.

²³² Wanjiku Thigira.

²³³ Ibid.

²³⁴ Thurugu wa Gitombo.

It is important to point out that in *Mau Mau from Within*, Karari Njama presents a contrasting picture of gender roles among forest fighters, from that depicted by the narrators in this study. In one of the forest camps he visited, he was surprised to find that top KLFA leaders were usually assigned female companions who cooked and cleaned after them, and slept with them on a continuous basis. He notes that these women were disparagingly referred to as *kabatuni*, which literally meant a “small platoon” that was to be commanded by the man.²³⁵ Njama is genuinely surprised by this blatant disregard for Gikuyu regulations as pertaining to the conduct of men engaged in battle. His surprise is perhaps an indicator that this practice was not common in all the KLFA forest camps. Njama’s contribution further emphasizes the need to give voice to the narratives of female KLFA members and in particular, female forest fighters. As indicated in the discussion of the Historiography, very few published narratives by female KLFA members exist. Even though female forest fighters are alive, and some research has been done on them, they are much harder to locate.²³⁶ Of the seven women who participated in this study, none had been a forest fighter. All of them had undertaken their KLFA activities from the reserves.

One narrator’s sexual experiences in World War II might shed light on Njama’s contrasting observation above. Joseph Waweru wa Thirwa candidly described his encounters with European women while in Italy during World War II.

We went for the war in Italy in 1939. Before then, we all thought the white man was a god... You never saw him defecate, spitting saliva or working. You never even saw him eating. The boy who served him usually brought him food, and only came back to collect the dishes—without ever seeing him eat...²³⁷ During that war, we slept with their women because we thought they were gods... We discovered that their bodies were much colder than ours and their skins as tough as that of pigs... Their women revealed to us who these people truly were... They had warned their women against

²³⁵ Njama and Barnett, *Mau Mau From Within*, 242.

²³⁶ See Micere Githae Mugo. *Muthoni wa Kirima, Mau Mau Woman Field Marshal: Interrogation of Silencing, Erasure and Manipulation of Female Combatants’ Texts*. (Harare: SAPES Books, 2004).

²³⁷ Boy was a derogatory colonial term used to refer to all male workers regardless of their ages.

playing around with us because our penises were supposedly very long... We supposedly wore *kaptulas* [khaki shorts] because our genitals were so long that we tied them around our waists... But this made their women even more curious about us and because we all bathed in an open river, they hid on the sides of the river in order to have a peek at us. When they realized our genitals were normal, they started playing around with us and got attracted to us. We slept with them throughout the course of the war even though we did not think they were as good as our women...²³⁸

Because a considerable number of KLFA forest fighters were World War II veterans, it is possible that experiences like those of the above narrator challenged their traditional view of sexual relations during battle.

f) The uniqueness of KLFA oaths

According to Joseph Karanja Waweru, drinking the oath was not peculiar to the KLFA struggle. “There are oaths for presidents, cabinet ministers and other government leaders. The only difference between *Mau Mau* oaths and these government oaths is that we finished ours with the words “may this oath kill me,” but they finish theirs with, “may God help me.”²³⁹ However, Mzee Mwangi wa Murimi was more categorical about the differences between KLFA oaths and present day government oaths. He asserted that, “Theirs is not about justice. If it was about justice, they would all be dead because they continue to sell us... Theirs is a lie... You are just told to hold up a book... that’s a complete lie. A true oath of justice involves soil and not lifting up books claiming to talk to God... Theirs is a complete lie; a cunning way of stealing money from us... a true oath of justice involves soil and blood.”²⁴⁰

In conclusion, this study established that drinking the oath was the core ritual during the KLFA struggle. No one could play any part in the struggle if they had not drunk the oath of unity. Even though KLFA members were coerced into drinking the oath, they still viewed the

²³⁸ Joseph Waweru wa Thirwa.

²³⁹ Joseph Karanja Waweru

²⁴⁰ Mwangi wa Murimi.

oath and their participation in the struggle as a collective and divinely-ordained responsibility. This study also established that drinking the oath was also a source of strength, courage and perseverance among KLFA members who faced severe hardships during the struggle. It generated commitment and self-sacrifice, and fostered unity among KLFA members. Lastly, drinking the oath had an impact on gender relations in the KLFA. The evidence presented in this chapter seriously challenges the vilification of oathing by colonial psychologists and anthropologists. Far from being “beastly” or “depraved,” this project demonstrated that oathing was a sacred ritual that positively impacted the narrators in multiple ways. More evidence of this sacred nature of KLFA rituals and their pivotal role in the anti-colonial struggle will be presented in the following chapter on routine rituals.

5. Listening to and Engaging the Narratives with Reference to Five Routine KLFA Rituals

Besides the core ritual, this project established that there were five other routine rituals practised by KLFA members during the anti-colonial struggle in Kenya. The purpose of this chapter is to present and analyze the collected narratives with reference to these rituals and their significance to the KLFA struggle. It is important to note that no one could participate in any of the routine rituals if they had not drunk the oath of unity. This is because, as we saw in the previous chapter, drinking the oath was a crucial initiation ritual into the KLFA. But it should also be highlighted that none of the KLFA rituals was mutually-exclusive. As we shall see in this chapter, both the core and routine rituals were interconnected and they functioned in conjunction with each other.

1. Clutching soil at death

The narratives collected in this study reveal that clutching soil at death was an extremely important death ritual during the KLFA struggle. KLFA members on the brink of death would clutch a mound of soil with both hands, and sometimes place a handful of it in their mouth. This study established that the ritual was significant for a number of reasons.

a) A symbol of their struggle's key objective

First, clutching a mound of soil symbolized a key objective of the KLFA struggle: reclamation of alienated land. All the narrators in this study emphasized that the purpose of their struggle was to reclaim *ithaka* [land] and *wiyathi* [freedom]. Wanjiku Thuku, for instance, offered, "Clutching soil was a statement signifying that even in death, all they were demanding

was land.”²⁴¹ Joseph Waweru wa Thirwa, whose interpretation of the ritual was almost replicated by every other narrator, added that, “The purpose of clutching soil after being shot was to show that this person had died fighting for land. It was a message to his killers that he was fighting for the land which had been grabbed by Europeans.”²⁴² It was apparent that all the narrators saw this ritual as a bold statement of resilience and an assertion of their agency in the struggle.

Further, several narrators related the significance of this ritual to drinking the oath. Gitau Mungai observed that, “It [clutching soil] was important because people were fighting for the soil. Anyone who had drunk the oath could not die without holding on to soil, as they had drunk the oath for the sake of the soil.”²⁴³ Similarly, Joseph Karanja Waweru added that, “During the oath, one swore never to betray the soil. At death, they made the same vow by clutching on to soil.”²⁴⁴ It is important to bear in mind the close relationship between this death ritual and KLFA oaths, because none of them existed in isolation. Indeed, as we have mentioned, none of the rituals under investigation in this study functioned in a mutually-exclusive manner. All of them were practiced and experienced in relation to each other.

Clutching soil at death was also accompanied by some utterances. Monica Wambui wa Gitau stated that, “One died holding on to the soil because it was their right as participants in the struggle... It was meant to show that one had been killed because of the soil... The dying person would say, “I have been killed because of this soil that belonged to Gikuyu and Mumbi,” and then they would die.”²⁴⁵ Bastillio Matheka, added that, “Upon being shot, someone would grab the soil and proclaim “*nĩũ ũũ ndagũa, ndagwa tĩĩri,*” meaning, I have been killed by this soil

²⁴¹ Wanjiku Thuku

²⁴² Joseph Waweru wa Thirwa.

²⁴³ Gitau Mungai.

²⁴⁴ Joseph Karanja Waweru.

²⁴⁵ Monica Wambui wa Gitau.

because it is what I was fighting for... It meant that the person had not died a normal death which comes from God, but had died because of Kenya's soil."²⁴⁶ Evidently, the power of *Nommo* was still active in this KLFA death ritual. The significance of clutching soil was heightened by the words, "I have been killed by this soil." It was an important pronouncement to both the dying person and the KLFA members who were still alive. To the dying, the pronouncement was a kind of verbal epitaph that concisely captured the main cause and objective of their personally-experienced, yet inherently collective struggle. To those left alive, it was, as we shall see shortly, a warning and an encouragement to press on with the struggle.

Lastly, it should be noted that some home guards took advantage of this KLFA death ritual.²⁴⁷ Knowing the significance, to KLFA members, of dying while holding the soil in their hands, home guards would force KLFA detainees to literally dig their own graves before killing them. This was a cruel practice aimed at mocking KLFA members' reverence to land. James Kinyua explained that:

Holding on to soil showed that you were fighting for your soil... After being shot, you died holding on to it... Do you know that when home guards decided to kill one of the detainees in their post, they would give them a hoe and shovel for them to dig their own grave? The detainee would dig and dig and as soon as the home guards saw that the hole was big enough, they would shoot the detainee and he would literally die in his grave.²⁴⁸

b) A warning, an encouragement, and a curse to the living

The narrators in this study also explained that clutching soil at death was a warning, an encouragement, and a curse to the living. One aspect that distinguishes this KLFA death ritual from the five others under investigation in this study is that none of the narrators, by virtue of

²⁴⁶ Bastillio Matheka.

²⁴⁷ Home Guards were African village police officers who worked for the colonial government. They were infamously known for being sadistically brutal to KLFA members.

²⁴⁸ James Kinyua.

still being alive, have ever practised it. Therefore, the experiences, reflections and interpretations they offered are all based on witnessing the death of their comrades. Such experiences greatly shaped their insights regarding this second function of the death ritual.

Several narrators eloquently captured how the death ritual served as a warning, an encouragement, and a curse to both KLFA and non-KLFA members who were left alive.

Mwangi wa Murimi, for instance, the former oath administrator, offered that:

On falling to the ground after being shot, someone would clutch soil with both hands and die holding it. They would be imploring us never to give up on the struggle until we have realized our freedom. They left a curse on us... Everyone who died left a curse on us. And that's why regardless of how long this interview takes, I could never reveal to you details surrounding the oath... Telling you how many times I drank the oath would be surrendering and I will never surrender...²⁴⁹

Loise Wangui wa Kamau also noted that:

When someone was shot, they would die holding on to the soil because it was their inheritance from Gikuyu and Mumbi. Do you know who Mumbi is? [Directing the question at me] We [women] are Mumbi and you [men] are Gikuyu. Do you understand that? You are Gikuyu and I am Mumbi. Therefore, it was mandatory to hold on to the soil which was left for us by Gikuyu and Mumbi. And we shall never stop doing so... While holding on to the soil, one would say to the guards who had shot him, "May this soil that belongs to Gikuyu and Mumbi kill you." After all, guards were killing people, so why should they have continued to live on the soil that we were fighting for? And that's why very few guards are still alive...²⁵⁰

Wanjiku Thigira added that, "After being shot, one would grab the soil as soon as they hit the ground. This was a warning to us that if anyone became a traitor, he would be killed by that soil... One clung to the soil symbolizing that it was ours, and if anyone dared to betray it, it would eat him up."²⁵¹ Magdalena Wanjiku wa Kamau further observed that, "While dying,

²⁴⁹ Mwangi wa Murimi.

²⁵⁰ Loise Wangui wa Kamau.

²⁵¹ Wanjiku Thigira.

someone would say, “I am dying because of this soil and because of freedom. You killers, may you die if you dare eat food grown from this soil.” No one ever died without clutching soil.”²⁵²

All these excerpts lucidly demonstrate how clutching soil functioned as a warning and an encouragement to KLFA members, and a curse to home guards and other colonial officials who wantonly killed the freedom fighters. For the KLFA members who were left alive, the pronouncements were aimed at motivating them to push on with the struggle in spite of the many hardships they faced. As we saw above, the narrators in this study, more than 50 years after the KLFA struggle ended, could still quote *verbatim* the utterances made by their dying comrades. The strong impression made by these words is therefore self-evident and it is a classic illustration of the power of *Nommo*, and how effectively it was used during the KLFA struggle. In indigenous Gikuyu culture, as in many African communities, the last words of a dying person were taken very seriously. They were believed to possess special powers that could either bless or curse those who were left behind. It was actually considered taboo to ignore or disregard the final wishes of a dying person. The warning against betraying the struggle was therefore taken very seriously by KLFA members and it encouraged them to forge ahead with the struggle. Ingeniously, instead of just dampening their spirits, the death of KLFA members, through the practice of this ritual, strengthened and motivated those who had been left behind. No doubt they still mourned for their fallen comrades, but it was not all doom and gloom. The death ritual rejuvenated the resolve of those still engaged in the struggle.

As for the home guards, the pronouncements made by dying KLFA members were curses which portended bad luck, misfortune and ultimately, death as divine retribution for their unjust actions. In indigenous Gikuyu culture, as in many African communities, curses, especially from

²⁵² Magdalena Wanjiku wa Kamau.

a dying or elderly person, were deeply feared as they were believed to be irreversible. Once a curse was pronounced by a dying person, and they died without taking back their words, the curse was perceived as already being active and it was only a matter of time before it came to pass. This represented the double-edged sword of *Nommo* which could create and generate health, wealth, and other desirable things on one hand, and on the other, curse and cause misfortune, disease or death. Just as Loise Wangui wa Kamau observed above, many other narrators stressed the fact that very few home guards, if any, remained alive in their home areas. The general consensus was that those home guards who survived KLFA attacks during the struggle, died very painful and divinely-orchestrated deaths in independent Kenya. This issue is discussed in further detail under the praying ritual and thus, in this section, it suffices to only refer to Magdalena Wanjiku wa Kamau's experience. Her story was recounted in the previous chapter on drinking the oath. Because of her KLFA activities, home guards burnt down her entire homestead and took away all her belongings. She observed that, "The home guard who urged the others to come and burn my home died in a lot of pain. He suffered severe wounds on his hands and hips that refused to heal. They would start off as painful boils which grew and grew until they burst, and then a new one would develop, and so on..."²⁵³ Magdalena strongly believed that this particular home guard suffered a painful and mysterious death because of the many curses pronounced against him by dying KLFA members, and those, like her, who had survived his brutal actions.

In conclusion, it should be emphasized that in the earlier excerpts, Mwangi wa Murimi, like many of his comrades in this study, perceived revealing details regarding the oath as an unacceptable act of surrender. This is because during the KLFA struggle, the process of

²⁵³ Magdalena Wanjiku wa Kamau.

screening KLFA members— disingenuously referred to as rehabilitation— involved coercing them into confessing they had drunk the oath, the number of times they had done so, and giving detailed descriptions of each oath ceremony attended, and their specific contributions toward the proscribed movement.²⁵⁴ Screening was a very brutal question and answer process and it is no wonder, most of the narrators saw it necessary to inform me that they would not give details surrounding the oathing ceremonies. Fortunately, as we noted earlier, this study was not interested in such details. Furthermore, it employed the oral history method which privileges shared authority between a narrator and an interviewer, and thus allows a narrator to share their narrative on their own terms.

c) A link to their current activism

It was notable that in all their interpretations of this death ritual, the narrators in this study linked it to their current activism for land. Each of them would start off by explaining, as we have just seen, what the ritual meant to them. Afterwards, almost as if they were reading from the same script, they would all shift the narratives to their current activism. Painfully, they would lament the neglect by Kenya's government since the achievement of independence in 1963. Many of them had hoped that, at the very least, post-independent Kenyan governments would give them back their lost lands in appreciation of the contributions they made to the anti-colonial struggle. However, fifty years into independence, many of them remain "land poor and landless," as Greet Kershaw aptly put it in *Mau Mau From Below*.²⁵⁵ Worse, a number of them were, for a second time, tortured and imprisoned for agitating for land—this time in independent Kenya. In 1967, for example, two narrators in this study, 92-year old Thurugu wa Gitombo and 72-year old

²⁵⁴ See Elkins. *Britain's Gulag*, 62-120.

²⁵⁵ Greet Kershaw. *Mau Mau From Below*. (Oxford: James Currey, 1997), 212.

Evanson Wainaina Waritu, were detained for 14 months without trial, for demanding that they be given back their lost land.²⁵⁶

In light of such experiences, it is not a surprise that all the narrators in this study linked the significance of the death ritual to their current activism. Considering, as we have seen in the foregoing discussion, that the death ritual motivated them to press on with their struggle, it is only logical that their reflections on this ritual would usher them into discussing their current activism. Ngaruiya wa Kanyua, for instance, a former forest fighter, offered that:

Someone would clutch the soil because it is the origin of the entire country of Kenya. They would die holding on to the soil in order to urge others never to stop agitating for land and fighting against the European... And now because the European left, did he leave with the soil? No, the soil is still here and I want Kibaki [Kenya's president until April 2013] to give me my share so that I can have somewhere to cultivate. I deserve to be given what I fought for.²⁵⁷

After explaining the significance of the death ritual, Thurugu wa Gitombo, a former forest fighter, added that:

And to this day, we have not stopped agitating for land. We are demanding that Kibaki give us our soil. And we are not planning to stop any time soon. We already chased away the European, and Kibaki has been left with the soil... Kibaki, give us back our soil! That is the point we are at. That's what our struggle is about today... We should be given that which made us die, that which made us go and live in the forest, eat wild fruits and herbs, brave the cold and the rain... We should be given back the land we fought for. There is nothing as important as land; absolutely nothing. Soil is what makes a person human. And God gave each group of people their own soil so that no one would ever fight over it. But I don't know what kind of people Europeans are and where they came from... Mere crooks...²⁵⁸

As demonstrated above, discussion of their current activism would be characterized by moments in our interview when they would address Kenya's president, Mwai Kibaki, directly. Their remarks would be concise questions or demands such as, "Kibaki, where is my land?" or

²⁵⁶ Evanson Wainaina Waritu.

²⁵⁷ Ngaruiya wa Kanyua .

²⁵⁸ Thurugu wa Gitombo.

“Kibaki, give us back our soil!” These remarks would be firm and assertive and they probably represent precisely what they would say to the president if they ever got an audience with him. In a sense therefore, reflecting on this death ritual allowed the narrators in this study to verbalize longstanding questions or demands, and thus exercise their agency. It further demonstrates the significance of *Nommo* in their current activism. It was not enough to just describe the nature of their current activism; they had to direct specific questions and demands to the president and government of Kenya.

It is important to note that since the achievement of Kenya’s independence in 1963, land has been a very emotive subject in the politics of Central and Rift Valley Provinces. This is largely because Jomo Kenyatta’s government instituted a land consolidation policy that unfairly advantaged home guards and former colonial officials. Kenyatta’s infamous policy was referred to as “willing buyer, willing seller.” Instead of overhauling agrarian inequalities that were established during the colonial period, and redistributing land among the majority of Africans who were either landless or land poor, the policy required Africans to buy back their land. The blatant injustice in this policy lay in the fact that only home guards and former colonial officials had the necessary resources to buy land, or the credit worthiness required to secure bank loans. This is not to mention the obvious absurdity of Africans buying back land that was illegally taken away from them in the first place. At independence, the majority of KLFAs were poor squatters, workers, and small-scale peasant farmers who could barely eke out a living, let alone buy back land. Therefore, most of their ancestral land was “bought back” by the home guards and former colonial officials in their home areas. Understandably, this has been a source of great anguish for former KLFAs, and the narrators in this study raised it frequently in the course of our interviews. It must be pointed out that this “willing buyer, willing seller” policy

sharply contradicted Kenyatta's communal and sacred views on land espoused earlier in the historical background of KLFA rituals.

The final observation made in this section has to do with the reverence for land demonstrated in the narrators' descriptions of the KLFA death ritual and their current activism. As we saw earlier, land in indigenous Gikuyu culture was viewed as the mother of the community. All transactions relating to land were therefore conducted very "matrimonially" because of the deep-seated respect ascribed to land. In the foregoing discussion, reference was made to soil or land that could eat or finish you if you dared betray it. In the same way that a human mother can cut short the life of her children, so too it was believed that land—the mother of the community—could cut short the life of her children who dared betray her. Equally, in indigenous Gikuyu culture, human children could do anything to defend the honour and dignity of their human mother. In fact, the most vulgar way of verbally abusing someone, and especially a Gikuyu man, was to abuse and disrespect their mother. Such an insult was, and remains, the cause of many fights between community members which sometimes resulted in the killing of the offending party. Undoubtedly, the symbolic relationship between physical land and human mothers played a significant role in the KLFA struggle. Indeed, it would be accurate to say that KLFA members fought to restore the dignity of their mother who had been defiled and disgraced by the system of colonialism. One narrator's words encapsulated this relationship: "Soil is... the mother of all humanity. You cannot exist without it because it is the source of your food... It is therefore very important to every human being... When the Europeans came here, they grabbed

our lands... They used force to grab our lands and so we also had no option but to use force to reclaim them...²⁵⁹

In conclusion, this study established that clutching soil at death was symbolic of a major objective in the KLFA struggle. It also established that the ritual acted as a warning and an encouragement to KLFA members, as well as a curse to home guards and other non-KLFA members. Lastly, it found that reflecting on the KLFA death ritual was a source of motivation to former KLFA members who continue to agitate the government for land.

2. Seeking a seer

The narratives collected in this study demonstrate that seeking a seer was an important ritual in the KLFA struggle. Seers were sought for their oracles regarding various KLFA activities in both the forests and the native reserves. As we mentioned earlier, seers have always played an integral role in Gikuyu society. Besides Mugo wa Kibiro, who is famously believed to have foretold the coming of Europeans in the 19th century, this study established that there were many other seers who came after him with similar oracles from *Ngai* (God). 92-year old Thurugu wa Gitombo, for instance, described how events in the 1920s that later shaped Kenya's nationalist struggle were directed by seers. He noted that:

There once lived a great seer by the name of Kariuki Cukang'a. He received a dream from *Ngai* in which he was told that our lands were about to be taken away from us. On hearing this, we prayed and asked *Ngai* what we should do about it because we had no strength... [In response to our prayers], Kariuki told Kenyatta that he had to go to Europe... Kenyatta went to Europe to study the ways of the European in order to understand what had driven him to come here... [To understand] how the European had decided that this [Kenya] was now his home, and how he did not want to go back

²⁵⁹ Joseph Karanja Waweru.

to his own country... How he now wanted to take away our lands for himself...
 Kenyatta went and studied all this and then came back ready...²⁶⁰

Seldom do historical accounts of Jomo Kenyatta's first visit to England in 1929 include the role played by seers in that decision. This is probably because historians have paid little attention to the role played by seers in the historical development of Kenya. Charles Ambler, in *Revealing Prophets*, one of the few existing historical works that seriously examine the role of prophecy in East Africa's history, critiques this scholarly bias. He argues that most historians prefer to only read seer traditions in "metaphorical terms" that dramatize the "traumatic events" of colonial rule in Kenya.²⁶¹ However, this study posits that seers played a critical role in the KLFA struggle. In order to clearly demonstrate this, let us examine KLFA members' experiences with seers in both the forests and the reserves.

a) Experiences with seers in the forests

The former forest freedom fighters who participated in this study emphasized the crucial role played by seers in the forests of Mount Kenya and Nyandarua. Most forest camps had a seer who was usually assigned to it by top KLFA leaders. Seers often had their own tents in the camps but they never went out to battle. Their only task in the camp was to communicate God's messages to the forest fighters. And like every other KLFA member, they had also drunk the oath.²⁶² Thurugu wa Gitombo's experiences with a seer in the forests of Mount Kenya are quite illuminating. They demonstrate the important contributions made by seers towards the military activities of KLFA forest fighters.

²⁶⁰ Thurugu wa Gitombo.

²⁶¹ Charles Ambler. "What is the world going to come to? Prophecy and Colonialism in Central Kenya." In David M. Anderson and Douglas H. Johnson (Eds). *Revealing Prophets: Prophecy in East African History*. (London: James Currey, 1995), 222.

²⁶² Joseph Waweru wa Thirwa.

When we entered the forest, there was a big snake that used to live in a river right next to our camp. The snake would provide us with very valuable information because it would tell us when home guards or Europeans were on their way to attack and kill us. The seer in our camp would communicate with this snake and then relay the message to us. He would tell us, for example, “You have been told that there will be no battle today. Go bathe and rest in your tents because God has said there is no battle today.” Indeed, that day would pass without any battle. Early the following morning, the snake would call out to the seer... I have never seen such a big snake. It was huge! Its eyes alone were the size of... [He points to a water basin in the room whose diameter is about 50cm (20inch)]. I have never seen such an animal... It was a huge animal! At the centre of the river, where the snake lived, there was a big rock. The snake would push its head and neck above the water and rest them upright on the rock. It would then cry out “titititititi” [hissing sound], beckoning the seer to it. The seer would go out to meet with the snake and receive the message for the day. On one such day, the seer came back and told us that, “You have been told to go and attack a place called Kabati. None of you is going to get hurt or killed in this attack. Furthermore, you are going to recover some guns. Therefore, prepare your weapons and get ready for battle.” On hearing this, we started preparing our weapons for battle. We had a special bomb called *kivonoko* which we usually carried with us on such attacks...²⁶³ At about 4pm in the afternoon, we set off for Kabati. You should not think it was near. We had to walk round the mountain for hours in order to get to Kabati. We arrived there late in the night and found that everyone including the home guards was asleep. Our plan was to attack the home guards’ post and recover all the guns we could find. Our leader, General Kahiu-Itina, was the one who had been appointed by the seer to detonate the bomb. Carrying the bomb, he quietly crept through a hole we had made in the fence surrounding the home guards’ post... We made our bomb by putting flour [probably explosives] and many glass bottles together in a sack... General Kahiu-Itina stealthily carried the bomb to the entrance of one of the huts, detonated it, and quickly ran back to where we all were. As the bomb exploded, the breaking glass bottles sounded as if the entire post was under heavy gunfire. All the guards woke up screaming in great panic that their post was under siege. Fearing for their lives, they all ran away and left all their guns behind! [Breaks into a hearty laugh]... General Kahiu-Itina then ordered us to enter the camp and take all the guns we could find. We recovered eight guns that night... That is how we used to get guns... by simply using our brains... Believe me; the snake I have told you about was huge! Its eyes were this size... [He picks up the water basin he had pointed at earlier]. Huge and bulging eyes that could rotate from side to side... But despite this intimidating appearance, the snake was harmless and had no problem with anyone. Sometimes we took offerings to it in order to catch a glimpse of it. We would carry millet, sorghum, cow peas, black-eyed peas, and ghee to drop inside the river... We would then move away and observe from a distance as the snake appeared. However, it is only the seer who could communicate with the snake. He is the only one who could hear what it was saying as he had received such abilities from God... I tell you, that animal had huge eyes! You didn’t want to be near it if it was staring at you... Because we only got to see its head and neck, we never knew

²⁶³ *Kivonoko* was a home-made KLFA bomb that was made using glass bottles and “flour” which was probably explosives.

with certainty what kind of animal it was. No one knew what the rest of its body, underneath the water, looked like... A seer is someone who is highly-blessed of God. Seers are the ones who saved our lives during the struggle. They could perceive everyone's needs... [However] there were also times when the messages received by the seer warned us of fatal encounters. He once said to us, "Be careful as you cross Kayahwe River because a number of you will drown or get shot there." And sure enough, five people died that day. It didn't matter how careful we were, the foretold deaths always had to occur... That animal was huge! If it wasn't so far, I would have taken you there myself. I would just have told you the kind of offerings we needed to carry in order to go and see that mysterious animal. It's at place called Karaba near where Mugo wa Kibiro was left after he died... You would be able to see the animal for yourself.²⁶⁴

Joseph Waweru wa Thirwa shared similar experiences with seers.

The seer in our camp was called Waithaka and God would reveal to him the things that were to happen. Early each morning, Waithaka would assemble all of us in the camp and relay God's oracle concerning that day. No one was allowed to leave the camp before we had received Waithaka's instructions. Waithaka himself would have received the message as soon as he woke up... The messages would come to him in various forms. Sometimes, it would be a very big snake that brought him the message. It would come and wait at the entrance to our camp and Waithaka would go to speak to it. He would then come back and tell us, for example, that all of us had to be purified by a *mũndũ mũgo* [traditional doctor] because one of us had brought sin into the camp. All of us would then be purified. Other times, a sacrifice was necessary in order to atone for the sin. The sacrifice would be offered by a representative from Mwangi or Maina's age group amongst us.²⁶⁵ This is because in our culture, there are special sacrifices offered to God by each age group... On other days, the message would come through an elephant. Waithaka would speak to it at the entrance to our camp and then relay the message to us. He would tell us, for example, that we had to move camps as there was an enemy plane that had just left Nairobi and was coming to attack our camp. He would instruct us to go and make other dummy camps deep inside the forest in order to fool the approaching attackers. We would tie bed-sheets over several trees to make them look like our camps. We would also chop off tree branches, dress them in bed sheets, and fix them around the dummy camp to look like our fighters. On arrival, the enemy planes would fall for this tactic and drop many bombs around the dummy camp. However, because of the thick undergrowth found deep inside the forest, the bombs would refuse to explode. They would just make a "ssshhhhhh" [hissing] sound but refuse to explode. On hearing this sound, we would go and extract the dynamite from these bombs and use it to make our own bombs...

²⁶⁴ Thurugu wa Gitombo.

²⁶⁵ Mwangi and Maina are age-groups in indigenous Gikuyu culture. One age-group is usually older than the other and it occupies positions of leadership for one generation, a period of about thirty years, before handing over leadership to the next generation. Therefore, if the age-group that is now leading is called Mwangi, then their sons are called Maina, and their grandchildren will be called Mwangi again, and so on. See Kenyatta, *Facing Mount Kenya*, 189.

For bombs to explode, they need to hit a hard rock-like surface. [Fortunately,] the thick undergrowth was too spongy for them to explode... Other times, having learnt from Waithaka that an enemy's battalion would be entering the forest, we would lay a trap for it. We would cut down a line of trees that made a narrow path into the forest. This was intended to fool the enemy into thinking that that was the route to get to our camp. The length of the path would approximately be the same distance you would cover moving from here [Gitura] to Thika [about 15 km]. On finding the path, the enemy's troops would follow it in a single file. Meanwhile, we would quietly be hiding on the sides of the path with some of us perched up in the trees. We would all be armed with guns and machetes ready to launch our attack. The plan was that as soon as the last of the enemy's troops had entered the forest, our fighters on that end would shoot in the air to signal the launch of our attack. Our fighters on the opposite end would also shoot in the air signalling all who were lying in wait to attack the enemy. We would shoot and chop them up ensuring that not even one was left alive [makes a chopping gesture with right hand]. We would then take their guns and strip them of their uniforms so that when a second battalion came the following day, they would find us dressed in their own uniforms. Because they could not distinguish us from their own troops, we would massacre them again... Waithaka accurately told us what a particular day would be like... There were also days when he told us that there would be no battles. On those days, we would just eat, drink, and rest in anticipation of the next battle... The seer truly spoke to God... Can you speak to a snake or an elephant? [Directing the question at me] All kinds of animals came to our camp in the mornings to bring messages from God... And by the way, Waithaka is the man who drafted Kenya's constitution at independence... There are many things which the government claims were created by KANU [Kenya's ruling party at independence] but which were actually created by us. We crafted them while in the forest but they are now alleged to have been created by KANU... [Anyway,] this struggle would have been impossible without seers because we had to communicate with God during our struggle... We could not fight without God.²⁶⁶

78-year old Ngaruiya wa Kanyua added that:

The seer in our camp owned a short staff which he used to receive messages from God. He would lift it above his head three times in order to receive these messages. If there was a looming battle or some European troops were on their way to attack our camp, he would be told and would in turn tell us to leave that camp immediately. Barely five minutes after we had left, our camp would be attacked but the enemy would find no one there... It was all God's doing! Other times, the seer would tell us that there was no battle and therefore, if one just wanted to sleep they were free to do so. If they wanted to go to the river and take a long bath, they were also free to do so as it was safe.²⁶⁷

²⁶⁶ Joseph Waweru wa Thirwa.

²⁶⁷ Ngaruiya wa Kanyua .

The above narratives clearly demonstrate the critical role played by seers during the KLFA struggle. Besides forewarning KLFA troops about looming enemy attacks, seers also recommended the military tactics to be employed by the forest fighters. Most of these tactics were quite ingenious and they proved to be highly effective. Mzee Thurugu wa Gitombo's hearty laugh as he reflected on the successful use of *kivonoko*, the KLFA home-made bomb, is symbolic of the agency reclaimed through well-executed military operations. With the divine help of seers, KLFA forest fighters launched successful military offensives that enabled them to reclaim and reassert their agency.

It is important to observe that most of the narrators in this study were still in awe of the supernatural phenomena they witnessed through the seers in their camps. Seers' conversations with wild and mysterious animals, for instance, became absolute indicators of God's involvement in their armed struggle. It was worth noting that despite their deep reverence for the seers and the mysterious animals they communicated with, none of the narrators appeared to deify seers or to depict them as objects of their worship. Seers and the mysterious animals they communicated with were strictly viewed as God's symbolic instruments and, as we shall see in the next section, all thanks and praises for divine intervention ultimately went to *Ngai*. The exceptionally high regard for seers was strictly a product of their firm belief that seers were God's divinely-chosen channels for directing KLFA activities. This firm belief can also be attributed to a deep reverence for the power of *Nommo* in Gikuyu society. As we saw in the historical background of KLFA rituals, stringent measures were in place to ensure that the highest standards of integrity were maintained in the office of the seer. A self-appointed seer whose oracle did not come true was put to death because he was impersonating the divine, and thereby defiling the sacred nature of a seer's words. As a result, the transmission and reception of

a seer's divine message were always imbued with a sharp awareness of the creative and generative power of the spoken word.

While this view was unanimously held by the narrators in this study, mention should be made of KLF A members who took issue with seers. Karari Njama, for instance, in *Mau Mau From Within*, frowns upon the heavy reliance on seers in the planning and execution of KLF A attacks.²⁶⁸ It is important to note that by the time he became a KLF A member, Njama was a primary school teacher and a Christian. The nature of colonial education for Africans in Kenya was such that being educated simultaneously meant that one had undergone Christian indoctrination. This is because in the early decades of the 20th Century, it was missionary organizations that were primarily concerned with African education.²⁶⁹ As a result, the curriculum of colonial education in Kenya was heavily bent on “religious dogma and basic literacy.”²⁷⁰ As far as missionaries were concerned, Christianization was the primary objective of African education. Because Christianization was also synonymous with westernization, colonial education became a vehicle for undermining African spiritual forms, languages, and cultures, while simultaneously instilling, rather forcefully, British culture and identity.²⁷¹ It is therefore no surprise that colonially-educated KLF A leaders like Njama would frown upon the heavy reliance on seers displayed by the “uneducated” majority of KLF A members.

Still on the role of seers in the forests, James Kinyua stated that, “We had to consult a seer before every battle. If the seer advised us against going to battle on certain days, then we

²⁶⁸ Njama, *Mau Mau from within*, 205-206.

²⁶⁹ John Anderson. *The Struggle for the School: The Interaction of Missionary, Colonial Government and Nationalist Enterprise in the Development of Formal Education in Kenya*. (London: Longman Publishers, 1970), 10-16.

²⁷⁰ *Ibid*, 17.

²⁷¹ Ngugi wa Thiong'o. *Decolonizing the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature*. (Nairobi: Heinemann Kenya, 1986), 11.

could not go... The seer we consulted lived in the reserves.”²⁷² Until this point, we have seen KLFA members in the reserves supporting the activities of forest fighters by acting as scouts, and food and supplies distributors. In addition, the office of the seer allowed KLFA members in the reserves who were believed to possess this prophetic gift, to also support the forest fighters. Let us now look at KLFA members’ experiences with seers in the reserves.

b) Experiences with seers in the reserves

KLFA members in the reserves also had their own unique experiences with seers. Just like among forest fighters, seers played a crucial role in coordinating the activities of KLFA members in the reserves. First, seers were crucial in determining the safest and most appropriate day of conducting oathing ceremonies. Mwangi wa Murimi, a former oath administrator, observed that:

Before slaughtering the goat that was used in oathing ceremonies, we would make it face Kirinyaga [Mount Kenya] and lift our hands in prayer, while also facing Kirinyaga, in order to ask God for permission to conduct the ceremony. We could not slaughter the goat or proceed with any part of the ceremony without asking for God’s permission. If the seers in our midst received word that the ceremony could not be conducted on that particular day, we would immediately stop it... There were times when seers were told that it was unsafe to continue with the ceremony. When that happened, we would postpone the ceremony to another day. Proceeding with the ceremony would have been dangerous as it would likely have been disrupted by government security agents... Our work [oathing] had to involve seers. In fact, in our team of three, [mentioned earlier] the man who used to give out the meat [during oathing ceremonies] was also a seer. He would tell us whether or not it was safe to proceed with the ceremony...²⁷³

Mwangi wa Murimi’s experience was unique because unlike in the forests, where seers only performed tasks related to divination, his fellow oath administrator doubled up as the seer who directed their oathing activities.

²⁷² James Kinyua.

²⁷³ Mwangi wa Murimi.

Second, seers also coordinated the transportation of food and other supplies by KLFA members in the reserves. Wanjiku Thigira observed that, “Sometimes when food was scheduled to be transported on a particular day, a seer in the forest would send word informing us that it was unsafe to do so. We would then be forced to reschedule to a safer day as instructed by the seer.”²⁷⁴ Monica Wambui wa Gitau added that, “Prophecy is a gift from God and not the choosing of any human being... Seers were also present in the reserves and we worked in consultation with them.”²⁷⁵ From Wanjiku Thigira’s experience, it was notable that some KLFA members in the reserves relied on seers in the forests, while some forest fighters, as we saw earlier, relied on seers in the reserves.

Third, seers were involved in the numerous activities undertaken by KLFA scouts which included: gathering security intelligence for the forest fighters in transit; delivering secret messages to KLFA members in distant places; and transporting bullets and guns to the forest fighters. Evanson Wainaina Waritu, the youngest narrator in this study at age 72, and a former KLFA scout observed that:

Elderly men and women in the reserves did the work of advising KLFA scouts who were mostly aged between 14 and 19 years. Some elders had been given the gift of prophecy by God and they would sometimes prohibit us from going on a scheduled assignment. We would have to wait for several days until they received word [from God] that it was safe to go... Upon authorization, we would go and come back safely without facing any challenges.²⁷⁶

As shown above, the office of the seer allowed elderly men and women to play a part in the KLFA struggle. Unable to participate in almost all other KLFA activities due to old age, elderly KLFA members, who were endowed with prophetic abilities, divinely-guided the activities of KLFA scouts in the reserves.

²⁷⁴ Wanjiku Thigira.

²⁷⁵ Monica Wambui wa Gitau.

²⁷⁶ Evanson Wainaina Waritu.

Lastly, it is important to highlight the significance of Mugo wa Kibiro's prophetic vision on the lives of all the narrators who participated in this study. As was mentioned in the previous chapter, Mugo wa Kibiro has been immortalized in Gikuyu folklore because, it is believed, he accurately predicted the coming of Europeans and the advent of colonialism in East Africa. All the narrators emphasized the impact of his prophetic vision on the KLFA struggle. They particularly made reference to his prediction about the end of colonialism in Kenya. Mugo wa Kibiro had told the people that they would know the end of colonialism had come when a big *mũgumo* tree in Thika fell. And sure enough, that *mũgumo* tree is reported to have fallen during the emergency period in Kenya at the height of the KLFA struggle. Ngaruiya wa Kanyua, for example, exclaimed that, "As soon as that *mũgumo* tree fell, the European left our country. We ordered him to leave using the same route he had entered... It was all God's doing. And after that, the struggle ended... Do you still see any Europeans around here? [Directing the question at me] They all left and now require proper documentation before they can be allowed into this country!"²⁷⁷ While all the narrators made reference to the *mũgumo* tree in Mugo wa Kibiro's prophetic vision, it was notable that none of them mentioned the great seer's warning against armed resistance. Mugo wa Kibiro had warned the people against taking up arms to resist British occupation because in the vision he received from *Ngai*, the foreign occupiers had superior weapons that could easily annihilate the community.²⁷⁸

This selective utilization of Mugo wa Kibiro's prophetic vision introduces an important dimension to the seer tradition in Gikuyu society. Seers appear to have gone through two types of prophetic experiences: instructional and revelatory experiences. Instructional experiences were those that required immediate and specific action on the part of the seer and/or their

²⁷⁷ Ngaruiya wa Kanyua .

²⁷⁸ Kenyatta, *Facing Mount Kenya*, 43.

community. For example, during a serious drought, a seer would receive a message from *Ngai* explaining the cause of the drought and instructing the community to offer a particular sacrifice as atonement. The main task of the seer was thus to relay the specific messages from *Ngai*. Revelatory experiences, on the other hand, involved the seer receiving accurate premonitions and revelations about future events. Because these premonitions and revelations were predictive, and did not necessarily require specific action from the seer and/or their community, seers often took the liberty to offer their own interpretations of them. Mugo wa Kibiro's warning against taking up arms to resist British colonialism is a good example of such personal interpretations. If indeed he was born around 1850, as suggested by John Lonsdale in *The Prayers of Waiyaki*, then it is understandable that Mugo wa Kibiro could not envisage Gikuyu spears and clubs offering any meaningful resistance to British guns and canons.²⁷⁹ It is also understandable that, a century after Mugo wa Kibiro was born, Gikuyu peasants and workers living in the 1950s would be more optimistic about anti-colonial armed resistance. This is because, amongst other reasons, they had acquired skills in guerrilla warfare during World War II, and therefore believed they could mobilize a strong guerrilla army to challenge British rule in Kenya. KLF A's selective utilization of Mugo wa Kibiro's prophetic vision, as demonstrated by the narrators in this study, embodies a sharp awareness of the unique political and socio-economic factors that shaped their struggle. This reinforces what was mentioned in an earlier chapter that the experiences of rituals under investigation in this study are specific to a historical period and context.

Mugo wa Kibiro's prophetic vision was also utilized by national leaders in the early stages of the KLF A armed struggle. One narrator recalled that in 1952, Jomo Kenyatta held a big

²⁷⁹ John Lonsdale. "The Prayers of Waiyaki: Political uses of the Kikuyu past." In David M. Anderson and Douglas H. Johnson (Eds). *Revealing Prophets: Prophecy in East African History*. (London: James Currey, 1995), 240.

KAU (Kenya Africa Union) meeting at the site of Mugo wa Kibiro's *mũgumo* tree. Bastillio Matheka observed that:

I remember attending a big meeting in Thika where the old market used to be located. There was a special tree there and a fence had carefully been planted around it for protection... Kenyatta held the meeting there because a prophecy had been made that colonialism would end when that tree fell. He spoke very powerful words during that meeting and they might have contributed to his arrest shortly after.²⁸⁰

The above narrator was probably referring to the big KAU meeting that was held in Kiambu on August 24, 1952.²⁸¹ While official records pay little attention to the venue of this meeting, the recollections of this narrator suggest that it was quite significant to the attendees. Even though educated Gikuyu leaders were reported to be sceptical of traditional seers and their oracles, it seems Kenyatta and the rest of the KAU leadership could not ignore the significance of Mugo wa Kibiro's *mũgumo* tree to the Gikuyu peasantry and working classes.²⁸² The KLFA struggle, which arose from these same peasants and workers, effectively utilized Mugo wa Kibiro's prophetic vision and allowed the Gikuyu seer tradition to flourish. KLFA seers experienced both instructional and revelatory prophetic experiences which proved invaluable to the entire struggle.

In conclusion, this study established that seeking a seer was an important ritual to KLFA members in both the forests and the reserves. It was instrumental in the planning and execution of KLFA military operations, and the scheduling of oathing ceremonies, scout assignments, and transportation of food and supplies to forest fighters. The evidence presented in this section seriously challenges the vilification of KLFA activities by colonial historians and anthropologists who argued that they were based on "witchcraft" and "black magic." It is quite evident that the

²⁸⁰ Bastillio Matheka.

²⁸¹ J. R. A. Bailey and Garth Bunde. *Kenya: The National Epic*. (Nairobi: East African Publishers, 1993), 47.

²⁸² See Lonsdale, *Prayers of Waiyaki*, 243.

struggle had very spiritual and sacred roots, and more evidence of this will be seen in the following section on praying.

3. Praying

The narratives collected in this study reveal that praying was a key ritual during the KLFA struggle. Most of the narrators saw their KLFA activities as divinely directed by *Ngai*, and their overall participation in the struggle as an act of total submission to his will. As a result, communion with *Ngai*—through prayer—became an invaluable ritual to their struggle. Let us examine the major contours of the praying ritual that arose from this study.

a) An individual and communal ritual

Praying was both an individual and communal ritual for KLFA members in the forests and in the reserves. Individually, all the narrators in this study stressed that they spent countless hours praying and asking *Ngai* to intervene in their struggle. Lydia Wahu wa Muiruri, for instance, stated that, “We prayed at all times and literally lived on prayers.”²⁸³ Monica Wambui wa Gitau added that, “There were no specific times for prayer; we called upon God at all times.”²⁸⁴ Such remarks were made by all the narrators regarding their individual prayer lives.

Communally, groups of KLFA members would often gather for prayers in the forests and in the reserves. Ngaruiya wa Kanyua, a former forest fighter, offered that:

Prayers in our camp were led by the seer. Early each morning, he would strike the *mūrangi* tree three times to alert us that it was time for prayer. We would all come out of our hideouts and gather together in a straight line facing Mount Kenya. The seer would be the one leading the prayer and we would all respond at various intervals with the phrase, “*Thaai thathaiyai Ngai thaai.*” This phrase symbolized that all our prayers

²⁸³ Lydia Wahu wa Muiruri.

²⁸⁴ Monica Wambui wa Gitau.

were directed to *Ngai*... It was a statement of worship to *Ngai*; thanking him for his protection and provision thus far, and beseeching him to lead us as we forged ahead... After the prayer, we would all go back to our hideouts.²⁸⁵

James Kinyua, another former forest fighter, stated that, “Before leaving for any battle, we would gather together for prayer and ask for God’s enablement. We would do this while facing Kirinyaga [Mount Kenya]... After each battle, we would gather again for prayer... Prayers in our camp were led by a fellow fighter... He was both a fighter and the one who conducted prayers because he was the oldest amongst us.”²⁸⁶

Meanwhile, KLFA members in the reserves also conducted their own prayers during the struggle. As we saw in the previous section, seers and oath administrators had to pray before proceeding with the oathing ceremonies. KLFA members who were transporting food also took time to pray before embarking on their journeys. Wanjiku Thigira, for example, observed that

We could not start our journey before we had prayed... On arriving safely with the food, we would pray again to thank *Ngai* for the safe journey and ask him for protection on our trek back during the night... We prayed a lot and called upon *Ngai* to intervene in our struggle. We finished all our prayers by repeating this phrase three times: “*Thaai thathaiyai Ngai thaai*.” It symbolized our thanksgiving to *Ngai*... It is the equivalent of “Amen” that is used by church people...²⁸⁷

Additionally, KLFA elders in the reserves would pray for KLFA scouts during their meetings and before they embarked on various assignments. Evanson Wainaina Waritu noted that:

During our meetings, elders present would tell us to stand up and face Mount Kenya. These would usually be the oldest elders in our community... We would stand up and raise our hands over our heads with our palms open towards Mount Kenya. The elder would pray for everything: for cows, for the forest fighters, for children, for women and girls... for everything! They would even pray for animals and birds. In their prayers, the elders would literally mention everything by name. At the end of the

²⁸⁵ Ngaruiya wa Kanyua.

²⁸⁶ James Kinyua.

²⁸⁷ Wanjiku Thigira.

prayer, we would all finish with the phrase “*Thaai thathaiyai Ngai thaai.*” This phrase was a way of beseeching God... We would then spit saliva on our hands and apply it on our heads... Elders had to be present during scout meetings because they opened and closed the meetings with prayers... Elders also had to be there to pray for us before we left for various assignments.²⁸⁸

From the foregoing discussion, it is important to highlight a few aspects about prayer in the KLFA struggle. First, it is evident that seers, elders and older forest fighters conducted prayers among KLFA members in the forests and in the reserves. This is because, as we saw earlier, seers were believed to possess the gift of directly communicating with *Ngai*. In addition, age was seen as a marker of maturity and it was expected that as one grew older, they became more concerned with peace and community than with war. In light of this, an elaborate initiation ceremony was held in indigenous Gikuyu societies to mark the transition from warrior to elder. During the ceremony, one was symbolically handed a *mũthegi* (staff) and *mataathi* (sacred leaves) to replace the spear and shield that they always carried with them as warriors.²⁸⁹ This explains why elders in the reserves and the oldest fighters in various forest camps led prayers among KLFA members.

Second, the phrase “*Thaai thathaiyai Ngai thaai*” requires some elaboration as it featured prominently in all the narratives. It was usually uttered at various intervals during a prayer and three or five times at the end of it.²⁹⁰ It thus served as a way of collectively affirming that which was being verbalized before *Ngai*, and as a symbolic way of uniting the person leading the prayer with the rest of the group. In effect, the phrase created a fluid three-way dialogue between *Ngai*, the leader, and the entire group. As we mentioned in the historical background of praying, it is a difficult phrase to explain in English but in *Facing Mount Kenya*, Jomo Kenyatta literally

²⁸⁸ Evanson Wainaina Waritu.

²⁸⁹ Kenyatta, *Facing Mount Kenya*, 201-203.

²⁹⁰ It was not clear why the phrase was repeated three or five times at the end of a prayer. Interestingly however, in *Facing Mount Kenya*, Kenyatta mentions that bad luck is associated with odd numbers. See Kenyatta, *Facing Mount Kenya*, 149.

translates it as “Peace, we beseech you, God, peace be with us.”²⁹¹ In light of the narratives collected in this study, part of what is lost in Kenyatta’s translation is the pleading and reverent attitude it embodies while simultaneously ascribing affectionate yet assertive worship to *Ngai*. For the narrators in this study, the phrase symbolized the state of their hearts during prayer as well as their overall outlook towards the struggle. This is best demonstrated by a common prayer made by KLFA members during the struggle. In their reflections about praying, almost all the narrators in this study recounted the following prayer: “*Ngai, tũkĩhotwo niwe wahotwo, na tũkĩhotana niwe wahotana.*” (God, if we lose you are the one who has lost, and if we conquer you are the one who has conquered.) In this prayer, KLFA members pleadingly yet assertively petitioned *Ngai* to adopt the cause of their struggle. They beseeched him to move from the backdrop of their struggle and onto centre stage where he could play the main actor as well as direct all the scenes in their struggle. The gentle assertiveness demonstrated in this prayer sprang from strong conviction that *Ngai* was a God of justice who could not allow his children to perish under the brute force of foreign oppressors. And for many of the narrators in this study, God indeed heard their prayers and, as we shall see shortly, they firmly believe he directed their entire struggle. In essence, “*Thaai thathaiyai Ngai thaai*” succinctly captured the outlook of KLFA members towards *Ngai* and their entire struggle.

Third, as Evanson Wainaina Waritu pointed out, spitting saliva on one’s hands and applying it on their head was the final part of the KLFA praying ritual. Everyone participating in the prayer would do this after they had uttered “*Thaai thathaiyai Ngai thaai.*” This is perhaps the most obvious manifestation of *Nommo* in this study and in Gikuyu culture as a whole. As demonstrated in the discussion on *Nommo*, among the Dogon of Mali, and the Agikuyu and

²⁹¹ Ibid, 247.

Akamba of Kenya, the life-force was believed to be present in the spoken word which was stored in vapour and liquid form while in the mouth. Spitting saliva and applying it on one's head was therefore a symbolic way of sealing the prayers that had just been uttered. Evanson Wainaina Waritu further observed that, "Spitting saliva was a way of asking God to accept the petitions that were coming from the mouth that was beseeching him."²⁹² Indeed, it was a symbol of genuineness and surrender before *Ngai*. Let us now examine KLFA members' reflections on the effectiveness of their prayers during the struggle.

b) Reflections on the effectiveness of their prayers

While reflecting on the significance of prayer in their struggle, former KLFA members recounted various supernatural experiences which, in their view, clearly demonstrated the divine intervention of *Ngai* in their struggle. For the narrators in this study, these experiences were clear indicators that *Ngai* indeed heard and answered their prayers. In the following discussion, these experiences are broadly categorized as those that took place in the forests and in the reserves.

i. Divine intervention in the forests

There was a strong assertion among the former forest fighters in this study, that God divinely-directed and protected them during their years in the forests of Mount Kenya and Nyandarua. Ngaruiya wa Kanyua's experience, for instance, was a good illustration of this. He is 78 years old and he entered the forest in October 1952, immediately after the State of Emergency was declared in Kenya. He was a soldier under General Gitau Matenjagwa.

My name is Ngaruiya wa Kanyua but most people don't know me by this name. They know me as Kiura wa Kanyua. I acquired the name Kiura [which in Gikuyu means frog] during our struggle against the British. One day, while walking in the forest, I

²⁹² Evanson Wainaina Waritu.

accidentally bumped into two johnnies [white soldiers] who were accompanied by five African soldiers [King's African Rifles]²⁹³. They were all armed and on seeing me, they immediately started shooting. I therefore had to run in order to save my life. I ran as fast as I could until I got to an open river where I quickly jumped inside and hid beneath the surface of the water. When my pursuers got to the edge of the river, they stopped firing because they could no longer see me. They searched the entire area and because they could not imagine I was hiding beneath the surface of the water, they left feeling quite disappointed that I had escaped them. I stayed in the water until it was dark and only came out when I was sure they had left the forest. All my comrades were pleasantly surprised to see me alive... They started calling me Kiura from that day because I could stay underwater like a frog.²⁹⁴

After hearing this experience, I was obviously eager to find out how Mzee Kanyua had managed to breathe while submerged in water for at least a couple of hours. He gave me a one-word response which became his trademark response for explaining similar supernatural events during our interview: “*ũNgai*.” This Kamba word translates as “God-like” or “of a godly nature.” By it he meant that it was *Ngai* who had enabled him to do such a supernatural thing. Mzee Kanyua recounted several other occasions on which he had to hide under water but he repeatedly emphasized that, “There is nothing special about me; it was all *ũNgai*.”²⁹⁵

Gitau Mungai also narrated an experience which he believes clearly demonstrated God's divine intervention in the KLFA struggle.

This [KLFA struggle] was surely God's work. I sometimes meditate on it in my sleep and I am still amazed by the things God did... God certainly heard our prayers... During the struggle, a group of 60 forest fighters fell into a trap on the edges of Mount Kenya forest on their way back from an operation in the reserves. They unsuspectingly walked into an area that was completely surrounded by hundreds of heavily-armed government security agents. By the time they realized this, it was too late to turn back. Outnumbered and with no possible route of escape, the forest fighters surrendered to their fate and started praying. They agreed that they would all die together and no one would try to escape... But then an amazing thing happened. When the commander fired a shot in the air signalling all the security agents to close in and launch their attack, a herd of buffaloes that was grazing in the surrounding area went crazy. The

²⁹³ King's African Rifles (KAR) was a combined force of African soldiers from Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania. See Elkins, *Britain's Gulag*, 44.

²⁹⁴ Ngaruiya wa Kanyua.

²⁹⁵ Ibid.

buffaloes charged angrily into the cordoned area, shoving and trampling on many of the government security agents on their path. Miraculously, the buffaloes did not attack any of the forest fighters. God entered into them and caused them to only attack the government security agents. The herd of buffaloes headed straight for the forest with the forest fighters following closely behind it. A few buffaloes were shot and killed but all 60 of the forest fighters got to their camps without a scratch on them... God definitely hears our prayers. When you pray, do not doubt; pray with all your heart because he hears.²⁹⁶

Still on supernatural experiences with wild animals, Ngaruiya wa Kanyua offered that:

Lions, leopards and hyenas seldom entered deep into the forest. But even when they entered, we lived very peacefully with them. A lion, leopard or hyena would come and lie next to you with no intention whatsoever of attacking you. When it was time to eat, all the fighters would, before eating, cut off a portion of their meat and set it aside for the animals. When the fighters were done eating, they would all leave to make room for the animals to eat what had been set aside for them. By so doing, we showed respect to all the animals no matter how big or small they were. The animals would patiently wait for us to share our food with them. They never used force or attacked us. I assure you, it doesn't matter how many people you will interview. You will never hear of a *Mau Mau* soldier who was attacked by wild animals in the forest... There were of course times when we had little or no food and so we had nothing to share with the animals. But it was not all one-sided. The animals would sometimes share their food with us. For example, a leopard would kill a deer and come with it to our camp. It would cut off some part of the dead animal for itself and leave the rest for us. We would gratefully accept the gift of food, cut it up, and cook it for ourselves... We only cooked meat by boiling as the smell of roasting meat could easily lead the enemy to where we were... Do you see we were friends with these animals? They could not attack us because we were friends with them... It was all *ũNgai*.²⁹⁷

Similarly, in *Swords of Kirinyaga*, H.K. Wachanga also describes an amicable relationship between forest fighters and wild animals. However, in his account, the relationship faced some initial challenges.

In the beginning, the wild animals which lived there [in the forests] caused us many difficulties... Buffaloes... were very bad-tempered and fierce towards us... [They] killed three people in 1953, but later came to tolerate us. Although the rhinos did not kill anyone to my knowledge, they were always belligerent and we avoided their areas. However, elephants were our friends from the beginning and discouraged government troops from operating close to our camps in elephant areas. Lions, leopards and hyenas were seldom seen but were sometimes trapped in our deer-snares. Birds, monkeys and

²⁹⁶ Gitau Mungai.

²⁹⁷ Ngaruiya wa Kanyua .

even deers were our spies and sentinels. Their calls were heard and understood when people entered the forest. We could tell whether the people were Mau Mau or enemies from their calls.²⁹⁸

While Wachanga paints a less than perfect picture compared to Mungai and Kanyua above, the focus of this study is on the fact that its narrators attributed the amicable relationship between wild animals and forest fighters to God's divine intervention—as a result of their prayers.

Besides game meat and the food brought from the reserves, forest fighters ate various wild fruits, herbs, and honey. The former forest fighters in this study also attributed this to God's divine provision. Thurugu wa Gitombo, for instance, offered that, "In the forests, there were trees that had fallen which had bees that produced honey and therefore free food for us... It was all God's provision... We would eat the honey until we were completely full... The other thing we ate a lot was *mikawa* [wild fruits] and *ngathũ* [small potato tubers mostly eaten by herdsmen]."²⁹⁹

On the battlefield, the forest fighters also had experiences which, in their reflections, served as proof of God's divine intervention in their struggle. One aspect of the armed struggle that featured prominently in all their narratives is their limited weaponry. Even though they manufactured their own guns and bombs, and ingeniously recovered guns and ammunition from their adversaries, they admitted that their main weapons were machetes. That they were able to sustain a struggle armed mainly with machetes while their adversaries had highly-sophisticated military equipment, was viewed by the narrators as further proof of God's divine intervention in their struggle. Muhinya wa Kinyanjui, for example, noted that:

We prayed a lot... and of course God heard us. We now have freedom... yet we only fought with machetes. We did not have guns, only machetes. God indeed heard us.

²⁹⁸ Wachanga, *Swords of Kirinyaga*, 32-33.

²⁹⁹ Thurugu wa Gitombo.

When we uttered “*Thaai thathaiyai Ngai thaai*” God heard us from heaven... This struggle would have been impossible if *Ngai* had not gone ahead of us. *Ngai* gave us everything including our bodies and the blood that flows within us. And so when you pray to him, he hears you... The Europeans packed up and left because of our prayers to *Ngai*... Even *Ngai* knew that this [Kenya] was not a home for Europeans.³⁰⁰

Loise Wangui wa Kamau added that, “We fought this battle with wisdom and strength. *Ngai* gave us this strength; it was *Ngai* and not us. They had guns yet we had machetes. Can machetes fight against guns? [Directing the question at me]... But God still fought for us.”³⁰¹ In addition, most of the narrators made reference to an incident that has become almost like a legend in oral historical accounts of the KLFA struggle. At the height of the struggle, British forces entered Mount Kenya forest and attempted to capture Dedan Kimathi—the leader of the KLFA. According to the narrators, that group of British soldiers was completely massacred by machete-wielding forest fighters and only one of them was spared. The narrators mythically referred to this incident as “*panga za maili saba*” (the machetes that could travel for seven miles). One narrator recounted the incident as follows:

Did you hear of the soldiers who came to capture Kimathi? White soldiers dressed in metallic uniforms entered the forest intending to capture Kimathi. Forest sentries spotted them even before they entered the forest but they were allowed to enter for some considerable distance. Little did they know that forest fighters lay in wait on the sides of the path they were using. When the signal was given, we all launched our attack and killed all of them except one... That is where “*panga za maili saba*” came from... The one who was spared was forced to stay in the forest for three days. We stripped him of his clothes and fed him well to ensure that he was completely full. He was then shown the path he should follow out of the forest and given a message for his superiors: “Go and tell your fellow whites that we are here and we are ready for them. Tell them to come for us here.”³⁰²

“*Panga za maili saba*” was very memorable to all the narrators because it exemplified God’s divine intervention in their struggle. It was noted that none of the narrators literally believed their

³⁰⁰ Muhinya wa Kinyanjui.

³⁰¹ Loise Wangui wa Kamau.

³⁰² Ngaruiya wa Kanyua .

machetes could travel for up to seven miles. Nevertheless, the use of that title symbolized their firm belief that the successful outcome of that battle was divinely orchestrated by *Ngai*.

In addition, the former forest fighters used their relationship with *Ngai* to respond to allegations that they engaged in senseless killings of innocent civilians during the struggle.³⁰³

Joseph Waweru wa Thirwa observed that:

They called us terrorists! Really?.. Did we intend to kill people for no reason? What kind of animals would we be if we indeed killed people for no reason? We had God on our side and we made genuine prayers to him. Killing a person is sin and we knew that no one should shed innocent blood... We never killed anyone for no reason. We only killed criminals and those who refused to fight for *uhuru* [freedom]... Those who wanted the foreigner to continue staying here and ruling us. Those are the only kind of people we killed.³⁰⁴

In essence, the former forest fighters who participated in this study strongly emphasized the central role played by *Ngai* in their struggle. They were able to discern divine intervention in all facets of their struggle and attributed it to their fervent and incessant praying. It follows then that the final outcome of their struggle—independence—was also attributed to *Ngai*. Thurugu wa Gitombo offered that:

We prayed a lot and called upon *Ngai* saying, “*Tūkīhotwo niwe wahotwo, na tūkīhotana niwe wahotana.*” [If we lose you are the one who has lost, and if we conquer you are the one who has conquered.] *Ngai* heard us. He then turned his face and told the European, “Take the same route you used to get here, and go back to your home. Stop calling others gorillas yet they are human beings just like you. The only difference is that I gave them a dark pigmentation.” I tell you, God really loves us black people... The skies are dark because God truly loves us... and he communicates with us.³⁰⁵

Evidently, praying enabled former KLFA members to reclaim their agency and humanity while simultaneously challenging the racist nature of colonial oppression. Let us now examine divine interventions in the reserves.

³⁰³ See for instance, Leakey, *Defeating Mau Mau*, 85.

³⁰⁴ Joseph Waweru wa Thirwa.

³⁰⁵ Thurugu wa Gitombo.

ii. Divine intervention in the reserves

KLFA members in the reserves also had their own unique experiences that impressed upon them the reality of God's divine intervention in their struggle—as a result of their prayers. They went through these experiences in the course of their KLFA activities which included transporting food to the forest fighters, hosting forest fighters on transit, and delivering messages to KLFA members in distant places. Because most of these activities were conducted at night, KLFA members often petitioned *Ngai* to protect them from all possible dangers. These dangers mainly included attacks from wild animals and encounters with government security agents. Therefore, among the former KLFA members who participated in this study, those who operated from the reserves during the struggle highlighted divine protection in their nocturnal activities as a major testament of God's intervention. They all stressed the fact that they seldom encountered wild animals in their nocturnal activities and even when they did, *Ngai* miraculously protected them. Wanjiku Thigira's experience is a good illustration of this. She is a 74-year old woman from Murang'a South District who used to transport food to KLFA forest fighters in Nyandarua forests.

We did not fear anything during the night. Even if I had been alone, I would still have transported the food. God had kept away hyenas and all sorts of wild animals. We did not come across any of them on the paths that we used... It's only once that we met a buffalo on our path. A buffalo is a very dangerous animal... I was the one leading the pack that night. The buffalo was lying across the path and had left very little room on the side for anyone to pass. I passed right beside its head but it did not move. It just rolled its eyes and stared at me. Everyone else followed suit and walked right beside its head, but it did not move. Yet, it is a very big animal with dangerous horns. We went on with our journey and on our way back, we found it had defecated there and left... Therefore, we did not fear any animals because *Ngai* went ahead of us.³⁰⁶

³⁰⁶ Wanjiku Thigira.

It is important to note that food transportation during the KLFA struggle was primarily undertaken by female KLFA members. As we saw under the oath-taking section, women and girls would leave their homes in the middle of the night and walk for long distances to deliver food to forest fighters. While a few males participated in this dangerous and exhausting endeavour, a strong case can be made about the gendered nature of this and other similar KLFA activities. Indeed, extensive research has been conducted which highlights the gendered dimensions of the KLFA struggle.³⁰⁷ However, such a discussion is beyond the scope of this study except as it relates to various KLFA rituals. Besides their KLFA responsibilities, female KLFA members still had to fulfil their responsibilities as daughters, wives, and mothers in their respective communities. As one would expect, these responsibilities often overlapped. For example, because young children seldom came along when food was being transported, KLFA mothers had to make arrangements on who would take care of their children while they were absent. This was not always possible and KLFA mothers were sometimes forced by circumstances to go out at night with their infant children. Therefore, navigating their somewhat gendered KLFA responsibilities alongside their “usual” gender roles was of great concern to the female narrators in this study. So much so, that a successful navigation of these responsibilities was sometimes attributed to divine intervention. Lydia Wahu wa Muiruri’s experience helps illustrate this:

Believe me when I tell you Mau Mau children were not troublesome. So long as they were on your back, they had no problem. They never cried... I remember one night when my friend and I were on our way home. Both of us were carrying young children on our backs using blankets... Along the way, we saw a group of government security agents coming towards us and we were forced to hide inside a coffee plantation to avoid being arrested. When they got to the edge of the plantation, the government security agents somehow suspected we were hiding in there. They therefore fired

³⁰⁷ See Muthoni G. Likimani. *Passbook Number F.47927: Women and Mau Mau in Kenya*. (California: Praeger, 1985).

many *siglars* inside the plantation to see if anyone was hiding there.³⁰⁸ A *siglar* is so bright that it makes even the tiniest things visible in a dark night. Inside the plantation, we stood as still as the coffee trees to avoid being detected. Fortunately, even with their *siglars*, they were unable to see us. Furthermore, during all the running and hiding, the children [miraculously] kept still. They were very quiet and did not cry.³⁰⁹

For some female narrators, they perceived divine intervention in the low birth rates witnessed during the struggle. Wanjiku Thigira, for instance, observed that, “During the struggle, God shut the wombs of women and prevented them from bearing children. You seldom saw pregnant women or women with young children.” Even though the low birth rates could be attributed to the mass detention of males during the emergency period, this narrator viewed it as divinely-orchestrated by *Ngai* to ensure that KLFAs women were able to fully commit themselves to the struggle.

Furthermore, as mentioned earlier, the death of home guards during and after the struggle was seen as divine retribution for their unjust actions. Because KLFAs members saw the entire struggle as belonging to *Ngai*, any calamity that befell their oppressors was interpreted as being divinely-engineered by him. Mwangi wa Murimi, for example, asserted that, “In my area, all the home guards who used to kill us are now dead. It is not us [KLFAs members] but God who killed them. Because they made a grave mistake... they stood in the way of us demanding for our rights.”³¹⁰ Loise Wangui wa Kamau added that:

There are no home guards left in this area [Gitura sub-location]. Everyone who worked as a home guard for the Europeans is dead... and it is *Ngai* who killed them... Why did they shoot dead innocent people..? There are very few home guards who are still alive, maybe two or three... It is *Ngai* who killed the rest; no one shot them or went after them after the struggle ended... [Actually] there is one left in Siki [location] who is now crippled. He was the most vicious guard around here and was usually called upon by johnnies to go and shoot people... He is called Mwangi... They [home

³⁰⁸ I was unable to find out what a “siglar” really was however, from the narrator’s description, it was a form of bright light, torch, or flame that colonial officers fired in the air to help them see at night.

³⁰⁹ Lydia Wahu wa Muiruri.

³¹⁰ Mwangi wa Murimi.

guards] were very arrogant because no one could make them account for their actions. But *Ngai* proclaimed, “Come to me all who used to have an arm band [home guard’s uniform] and a gun!” That is why all of them are dead. There were very many home guards in this area... but none are left.³¹¹

As evidenced by these excerpts, the general consensus among the narrators in this study was that *Ngai* had avenged them by killing most of the home guards that brutally oppressed KLF A members during the struggle. *Ngai* was believed to have done this because, in response to their prayers, he had adopted their struggle and was fighting on their behalf.

Lastly, the narrators in this study saw the abolition of oppressive colonial policies as clear indicators that *Ngai* indeed heard and answered their prayers. In particular, the abolition of the *kipande* (identification pass) system in independent Kenya was, to the narrators, a sign that *Ngai* had intervened in their struggle. The *kipande* system was an oppressive policy introduced by the colonial government in 1918 to “control the movement of [forced] labor and curb desertion.”³¹² Its abolition was therefore quite significant to most of the narrators. Lydia Wahu wa Muiruri, for instance observed that, “One good thing that resulted from our struggle is that today, no one would ask me for a pass if I wanted to go to Nairobi. No one would ask me for a pass if I wanted to go to Nyeri, Mombasa or the Rift Valley.”³¹³ In addition, the narrators saw their being alive, more than five decades after the KLF A struggle ended, as the ultimate sign that *Ngai* had heard their prayers. They all stressed the severe hardships faced during the struggle, their genuine surprise at still being alive, and their deep gratitude to *Ngai* for preserving their lives. Loise Wangui wa Kamau offered that, “*Ngai* definitely heard our prayers. Do you not see that we are

³¹¹ Loise Wangui wa Kamau.

³¹² Kanogo, *Squatters and the Roots of Mau Mau*, 9.

³¹³ Lydia Wahu wa Muiruri.

as old as *ciondo* [sisal bags]? We are alive and strong yet we were severely beaten. Isn't that proof that *Ngai* had mercy on us? Don't you see that *Ngai* was good to us? He surely was."³¹⁴

In conclusion, this study established that praying was a significant ritual in the KLFA struggle. It was both an individual and communal ritual for KLFA members in the forests and in the reserves. Because *Ngai* was seen as the focal point of the entire struggle, communion with him—through prayer—was deemed invaluable. Furthermore, it established that former KLFA members had many supernatural experiences in the forests and in the reserves which clearly demonstrated to them God's divine intervention in their struggle.

4. Singing

The narratives collected in this study show that singing was an important ritual in the KLFA struggle. KLFA members in both the forests and the reserves composed and sang songs that achieved a variety of ritualistic functions.

a) To motivate and generate perseverance

First, singing was a ritualistic way of motivating KLFA members who faced severe hardships during their struggle. As we have seen so far, KLFA members were frequently arrested, tortured, killed, evicted from their homes, stolen from by home guards, and forced to dig trenches around government village camps. They therefore composed and sang many songs to encourage and motivate themselves in their struggle. One such song is *Rwimbo rwa Kimathi* (Kimathi's Song). This song was sung by almost every narrator who participated in this study. Beyond the first verse, different narrators could only remember specific verses in varying

³¹⁴ Loise Wangui wa Kamau.

sequences. The following is therefore a compilation of all the verses that were sung by various narrators.

Kimathi's Song³¹⁵

When our Kimathi ascended the mountain by himself
He asked for strength and courage to conquer the white man.

He told us to follow in his footsteps
And to drink from his cup

“Drink from the cup of courage; the cup I have drunk from myself.”
It is a cup of pain and sorrow; a cup of tears and death.

We are being tortured because we are black and not white
We do not have any of their privileges but *Ngai* goes ahead of us.

Don't be heartbroken about exile and detention
Or about death and dispossession of your cattle
For our God goes ahead of us.

Even if our hearts are troubled, Jomo will never abandon us
Because *Ngai* never abandoned him in Kapenguria

Evidently, this song celebrated Kimathi's courageous leadership and encouraged KLFA members to forge ahead with the struggle in spite of prevailing hardships. Because majority of the narrators sang this song during our interviews, many of them also shared their unique reflections about it. Mwangi wa Murimi, for instance, remembered how effective the song was in encouraging those about to drink the oath. The 90-year old former oath administrator stated that, “We loved this song because it strengthened the hearts of those eating the oath.”³¹⁶ Thurugu wa Gitombo, a former forest fighter, further observed that,

³¹⁵ See a version of this song in Kariuki, *Mau Mau Detainee*, 101-102. See also Kinyatti's vast collection of KLFA songs: Maina wa Kinyatti. *Thunder From the Mountains: Mau Mau Patriotic Songs*. (Trenton: Africa Wide Press, 1990).

³¹⁶ Mwangi wa Murimi.

We sang in order to ask *Ngai* for perseverance and courage... Why should someone live in fear yet they are in their own country? A country that was given to them by *Ngai* and not by Europeans. Singing was all about generating perseverance... [He then breaks into Kimathi's Song] He [Kimathi] asked *Ngai* for strength and courage to conquer the white man. [He asked this] because we were deep in the forest and we had been evicted from our homes. That is why we sang [Kimathi's Song]... The song was intended to generate courage and perseverance among people... And to this day, we have not stopped persevering. We continue to demand that Kibaki give us back our soil and we don't plan on stopping.³¹⁷

It is important to note that the above excerpts demonstrate the effective utilization of *Nommo* in KLFA songs. Singing *Kimathi's Song* generated courage and perseverance among KLFA members. As Micere Githae Mugo describes it, KLFA singing was “a powerful form of utterance” useful in “energizing the spirit.”³¹⁸ In other words, singing was a ritualistic way of rejuvenating the spirits, bodies, and minds of KLFA members. Additionally, singing was also a form of praying during the struggle. Petitions to *Ngai* were often made in the form of songs, as demonstrated in Thurugu wa Gitombo's song below:

Ngai we beseech you, *Ngai* we beseech you, *Ngai* we beseech you.
To cause the visitors [Europeans] to go back to their home.
And when the visitors leave, we shall be very happy.
And we shall remember what *Ngai* has done for us.³¹⁹

Indeed, one narrator observed that, “We prayed through our songs... and asked *Ngai* to help us as we were being killed because of the land he gave us.”³²⁰ This connection further reinforces the point made earlier that the rituals under investigation in this study were not mutually-exclusive; they often overlapped each other.

While there were many songs intended to motivate KLFA members who faced numerous hardships, a significant number of them were concerned with death. This is probably a result of

³¹⁷ Thurugu wa Gitombo.

³¹⁸ Micere Githae Mugo. *Unpublished Articles on Selected African Orature Concepts*.

³¹⁹ Ibid.

³²⁰ Bastillio Matheka.

the wanton torture and killing of KLFA members during the emergency period.³²¹ 92-year old Thurugu wa Gitombo sang the following song about resurrection of KLFA members:

The dead will resurrect and see God coming in the air.
 Like a beautiful river and its tributaries, the cry for peace will be fulfilled.
 Silence [about the struggle] is what will get you thrown into the fire.
 Like a beautiful river and its tributaries, the cry for peace will be fulfilled.
 When I get to heaven, I will drink from a heavenly cup and receive a crown of life.³²²

Notably, some KLFA songs about death invoked the Christian doctrine of eschatology which teaches that during the end times, when Jesus Christ returns to the earth for the second time, the fallen saints will be caught up with him in the air.³²³ This is significant because it highlights the fact that KLFA members appropriated specific aspects of Western Christianity that they found useful to their struggle. As we mentioned in the biographical sketch, majority of the KLFA members who participated in this study were, and still are, members of the Akorino Church—an African Independent Church that began in the 1920s to protest the political and cultural domination of Africans by the colonial state and missionary churches. As members of an African Independent Church, KLFA members were exposed to Western Christian doctrines and hymns which they creatively appropriated into their struggle.

b) As a cathartic lament

Second, singing was a way of lamenting for KLFA members. It was a cathartic form of mourning their fallen comrades and lamenting over the hardships they faced during the struggle. According to Wanjiku Thuku, for instance, “We sang in order to relieve the deep sorrow in our

³²¹ See Elkins, *Britain's Gulag*, 233-274.

³²² Thurugu wa Gitombo.

³²³ See Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine*. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995). 1091-1109.

hearts.”³²⁴ Muhinya wa Kinyanjui’s song clearly illustrated this ritualistic function of KLFA singing. Her song mourned the death of some KLFA leaders and members:

You say you were there, but where were you? Where were you when Kimathi died?
That you could not save him.

You say you were there, but where were you? Where were you when Matenjagwa died?
That you could not save him.

You say you were there, but where were you? Where were you when they removed Kung’u’s eyes?
That you could not save him.

You say you were there, but where were you? Where were you when Gitobu died?
That you could not save him.

You say you were there, but where were you? Where were you when Mburu died?
That you could not save him.³²⁵

Wanjiku Thigira added that:

When Matenjagwa was killed, Europeans walked around claiming they had conquered us.³²⁶
Stop crying, stop crying; children are born and sometimes they die.
Tell the people to work hard for the country to get better.³²⁷

Evidently, singing was a way for KLFA members to release their pain and sorrow during the struggle. Mugo has aptly described this ritualistic function of singing as, “an outpouring of the soul.”³²⁸ This cathartic function of KLFA singing is quite similar to the African-American experience of singing during chattel enslavement in the Americas. In a response to disingenuous interpretations of “slave” singing in the American South, Frederick Douglass lucidly explained

³²⁴ Wanjiku Thuku

³²⁵ Muhinya wa Kinyanjui.

³²⁶ Gitau Matenjagwa was one of the most feared *Mau Mau* Generals operating in the Mount Kenya area during the KLFA struggle. The colonial government was seriously pursuing him as it believed that his capture would significantly weaken the armed resistance. He was shot and killed on December 23, 1953.

³²⁷ Wanjiku Thigira.

³²⁸ Mugo, *Unpublished Articles*.

the reasons underlying the impassioned singing by enslaved Africans in southern plantations. He stated that:

I have often been utterly astonished, since I came to the north, to find persons who could speak of the singing, among slaves, as evidence of their contentment and happiness. It is impossible to conceive of a greater mistake. Slaves sing most when they are unhappy. The songs of the slave represent the sorrows of his heart; and he is relieved by them, only as an aching heart is relieved by its tears. At least, such is my experience. I have often sung to drown my sorrow, but seldom to express my happiness. Crying for joy, and singing for joy, were alike; uncommon to me while in the jaws of slavery.³²⁹

c) To record KLFA History

Third, KLFA members sang in order to record their history during the struggle. This was a very important function of KLFA singing considering that the majority of its members were non-literate or semi-literate peasants and workers. In oral societies like that of the Gikuyu, singing was an effective way of recording and transmitting important information. During the anti-colonial struggle, KLFA members sang and composed songs to record important victories, losses, and experiences they had gone through. James Kinyua, for instance, sang a song about a famous KLFA victory in Tumutumu. It is worth noting that the song attributes the victory to God's divine intervention.

Friends, listen to the story about Tumutumu hill,
So that you will know *Ngai* is with us and he will never leave us.
When the sun reached 9am, Karanja was sent to Ndurumo dressed like a woman,
In order for him to gather intelligence for us.
He brought back valuable information about the capture of Kirimukuyu [a town in Nyeri].

At Ndurumo, there were 400 boys who were about to be captured.
By the time the sun was at 2:00 p.m., the hill was sounding like a storm.
Bombs and gunshots could be heard all around,
But *Ngai* safely brought us out [of the forested hill].

³²⁹ Frederick Douglass. *Narrative of the life of Frederick Douglass: an American Slave*. (New York: NaI Penguin Inc., 1968), 32.

We were fortunate because a girl by the name Gakunio,
Successfully lit a fire [or detonated a bomb] and managed to save many of our lives.³³⁰

Wanjiku Thigira added that:

On the eleventh day of June, planes came at 6:00 p.m. and attacked us with bombs.
[Therefore,] all the warriors went into prayer.
After the prayers, Wambugu stood up and selected six sentries who he sent out to go
and guard the House of Gikuyu and Mumbi [Batallion's name³³¹].
The sentries were to be on the lookout for possible attacks from government forces.
When they [sentries] got to their posts, they quickly came back to the camp,
And told us to flee as government forces were on their way to attack us.³³²

In the above examples, the historicity of both songs is quite evident. It should be noted that the narrators recounted these songs in the midst of their narratives. For example, it is while reflecting on his participation in the Battle of Tumutumu that James Kinyua sang the above song.

Significantly, this embodies the fact that experiences of singing fundamentally shaped how KLFA members remember the struggle.

Further, KLFA songs recorded valuable information about the ethnic and racial composition of KLFA membership. The following is a line from another song by James Kinyua which helps illustrate this:

Chotara was a white, Corporal was a Kamba, and the rest were [KLFA] officers.³³³

Even though KLFA membership predominantly consisted of the Gikuyu, other communities and racial groups also participated in the struggle. As Maina wa Kinyatti has argued in *History of Resistance in Kenya*, the KLFA struggle also involved the Ameru, Aembu, Akamba, Maasai,

³³⁰ James Kinyua.

³³¹ For the list of the eight KLFA Battalions, see Kinyatti, *Mau Mau: A revolution Betrayed*, 81.

³³² Wanjiku Thigira.

³³³ James Kinyua.

Abaluhya, Abagusii, and Luo.³³⁴ Indeed, KLFA songs help to demonstrate this point.

Additionally, this study uniquely established that bi-racials also participated in the KLFA struggle. These included the offspring of Europeans and Africans who were referred to as *chotara*. In Gikuyu, *chotara* is an informal name for Europeans and it was also used on bi-racials because of their Caucasian-looking phenotype.

d) To educate and conscientize members

Fourth, singing was an effective tool for educating and conscientizing KLFA members on the causes and objectives of their struggle. Because, as we have mentioned, the majority of KLFA members were non-literate or semi-literate peasants and workers, singing was a highly-effective propaganda machine. According to Bastillio Matheka, “We sang so that the government would know we wanted *Uhuru* [Freedom].” The following song by Lydia Wahu wa Muiruri succinctly captured the objectives of the KLFA struggle:

We shall not stop protesting,
No matter what! No matter what!
Unless we are given a place to cultivate.
Kenya; our land and freedom.³³⁵

Similarly, Joseph Waweru wa Thirwa sang that:

Freedom and land,
Freedom and the land of Kirinyaga,
A land of happiness with valleys and forests.
Kenya is a land that belongs to black people.³³⁶

³³⁴ Kinyatti, *History of Resistance*, 144-148.

³³⁵ Lydia Wahu wa Muiruri.

³³⁶ Joseph Waweru wa Thirwa.

By asserting rightful ownership of alienated land, these songs allowed KLFA members to reclaim and exercise their agency. As a result, more people were challenged to support the struggle as demonstrated by Evanson Wainaina Waritu's song:

Mau Mau is very dangerous,
 Its leaders are seen fighting for our freedom,
 Join Mau Mau so that we can achieve our freedom,
 Freedom will come like lightning to those who support it and even to those who
 oppose it.
 It is pointless and stupid to oppose *Uhuru*,
 So join Mau in order for us to achieve our freedom.³³⁷

In addition, KLFA songs educated the masses about the nature of the struggle. The following song by Thurugu wa Gitombo is a good illustration of this function:

Asians will be told that the tomatoes they were selling are now in the hands of their
 rightful owners.
 Europeans will be told that the cows they were milking are now in the hands of their
 rightful owners.
 Europeans will be told that the cows they were milking have now refused to give out
 their milk.³³⁸

By specifically mentioning both Asians and Europeans in this song, KLFA members demonstrated a sharp awareness and critique of the racial hierarchy that existed in colonial Kenya. Colonial Kenya was a highly-segregated society where a strict racial hierarchy was maintained. At the top, there was a very small group of privileged Europeans who consisted of settlers, missionaries, educators, large-scale farmers, and administrators. Second in the hierarchy was an equally small group of Asians who were the middle-men and merchants in the colonial economy. At the bottom, Africans constituted the overwhelming majority of the population and

³³⁷ Evanson Wainaina Waritu.

³³⁸ Thurugu wa Gitombo.

consisted of peasant farmers, labourers, and squatters on European farms.³³⁹ Therefore, KLF A songs created awareness about the deeply-racialized relations of production in colonial Kenya.

Additionally, KLF A songs spread propaganda by celebrating nationalist leaders in Kenya. Thurugu wa Gitombo, for instance, sang that:

Jomo was born a king to his parents but they did not know it
 Only God knew this secret...
 Our Jomo, we beseech you to be the well that our people can drink from
 Because whites have refused us drink.³⁴⁰

Again, Christian symbolism is evident in this song. The messianic references to Jomo Kenyatta as a child-king and as the living water are similar to the Biblical references made of Jesus Christ—the perceived saviour of the Israelites.³⁴¹ As we saw earlier, KLF A members selectively appropriated Western Christian symbols and doctrines that they found useful to their struggle. In *Swords of Kirinyaga*, H. K. Wachanga gives an example of an old English hymn that was creatively re-written to convey KLF A propaganda.

Onward Mau Mau soldiers, marching as to war,
 Looking unto Jomo, who has gone before.
 Jomo the Royal Master, leads against the foe,
 Forward into battle, see his banners go.

At the name of Jomo, colonialists doth flee.
 On then, Jomo's soldiers, on to victory!
 Hell's foundation quivers, at the shout of praise,
 Brothers lift your voices, loud your anthems raise.

Like a mighty army, moves the Aberdares,
 Brothers we are treading, where politicians have trod.
 We are not divided, all one body we,
 One in hope and doctrine, one in charity.

³³⁹ See Collin Leys. *Underdevelopment in Kenya: The Political Economy of Neo-colonialism*. (Nairobi: East African Publishers, 1975) 28-62.

³⁴⁰ Thurugu wa Gitombo.

³⁴¹ Isaiah 9: 6; John 4: 10-14 (New International Version).

Colonialists must perish, kingdoms rise and wane;
 But the leadership of Jomo, constant will remain.
 Gates of colonialism can never, 'gainst that prevail.
 We have Jomo's promise, and that can never fail.

Onward then ye people, join our strong struggle.
 Blend with ours your voices, in our triumphant song.
 Glory, praise and honour, unto Jomo the King.
 This through countless ages, men and women sing.³⁴²

This selective appropriation of Western Christian hymns, doctrines, and symbols was an assertion of agency by KLFA members. Even though Christianity was used largely as an ideological tool for colonial domination, KLFA members appropriated specific aspects of Christianity that they found useful to their struggle. Creative renditions of well-known hymns acted as highly-effective propaganda machinery during the struggle. In addition, it was also a deliberate way of unlearning hegemonic colonial ideologies. According to Mugo, this re-writing of Christian hymns was a way of “exorcising the subservient spirit” that colonial education and Christian indoctrination had instilled in the African population.³⁴³ In its place, this subservient spirit was replaced by a defiant spirit that was thirsty for freedom. Because it was done communally, the practice of re-writing Christian hymns became a ritualized way of unlearning the old, and transmitting new KLFA ideologies. The practice was so ingenious and effective that in *Defeating Mau Mau*, L.S.B. Leakey sounds a warning to other colonial administrators in Africa: “pay particular attention to this clever Kikuyu method of subversive propaganda, under cover of what seems to be enthusiastic Christianity and loyalty to the crown.”³⁴⁴

In conclusion, this study established that singing was an important ritual to KLFA members as it helped motivate them during the struggle. It also acted as a cathartic lament for

³⁴² Wachanga, *Swords of Kirinyaga*, 87-88.

³⁴³ Mugo, *Unpublished Articles*.

³⁴⁴ Leakey, *Defeating Mau Mau*, 75.

their fallen comrades and as a way of recording the history of the struggle. Lastly, singing was an effective tool for educating and conscientizing the masses.

5. Wearing locked hair

The narratives collected in this study reveal that wearing locked hair was an important ritual during the KLFA struggle. Unlike all the preceding rituals, which were practised by KLFA members in both the forests and the reserves, wearing locked hair was exclusively practised by forest fighters. Because it was a very obvious mark of KLFA identity, it was illogical for KLFA members in the reserves to wear locked hair as it would have made them open targets for harassment and torture by colonial officials. This study established that wearing locked hair was deeply symbolic to KLFA members, and that it served several ritualistic functions.

a) A multi-layered symbol of their struggle

As we saw in the previous chapter, warriors in indigenous Gikuyu culture wore locked hair as, amongst other reasons, a mark of beauty. But far from having aesthetic value, wearing locked hair during the KLFA struggle was symbolic of three key aspects. Joseph Waweru wa Thirwa's interpretation of wearing locked hair lucidly captured its multi-layered symbolism to KLFA members. He is the oldest narrator in this study at 94, and was a World War II veteran.

By the time we came back from the war [World War II], we had resolved to fight against the European because we had gained experience in guerrilla warfare... When we got here, in 1945, we vowed that we would never shave our heads and beards because our war against the European had begun... When you see someone with [locked] hair, you should know that they are unhappy. They are engaged in a kind of battle and therefore are unhappy... No one remains unshaven when they are happy; they must be thinking deeply about something... Therefore, those in the forest could not shave their heads. Where could they get time to shave yet they were in deep thought? They were planning how to kick out Europeans. They had no happiness that could cause them to shave their heads until they had kicked out all the Europeans... I used to have very long hair that reached here [points to his right thigh]. It's just that [a

few years ago] I fell sick and when I went to hospital, they shaved off my hair. And of course, balding also shaves you... But even to this day, I don't shave... I have not been to a barber since 1946; my hair just falls off by itself. Why would I have shaved yet I was meditating on kicking out Europeans? I have not experienced any happiness that would cause me to go and shave my head. To this day, I am still fighting. If a barber was to shave my head today, I would seriously fall sick for six months... I don't know why; only God knows... It is only happy people who shave their heads. What business do unhappy people have shaving? [Thus] while fighting, we kept very long hair and huge beards... If you come to my house, I will show you locks of hair this size [he stretches out both hands across his body to demonstrate]... Here is a picture of me with long hair [hands me his National Identity Card].³⁴⁵

Drawing from the above discussion, wearing locked hair was first, a symbol of one who was reflecting deeply on the struggle. For the narrators in this study, wearing locked hair symbolized continuous meditation on, and unwavering commitment to, the anti-colonial struggle. James Kinyua, for instance, offered that, “We used to say that shaving your hair was equivalent to shaving your brains... But by keeping your hair long, you gained a lot of brainpower and were in tune with everything that was happening.”³⁴⁶ Thurugu wa Gitombo added that, “The purpose of having hair is to insulate your brain from the heat of the sun... Hair preserves your thoughts and ensures you do not forget them... It gathers your thought together just the way you want them.”³⁴⁷ All these explanations sound very similar to a Kiswahili proverb which states “*Akili ni nywele, kila mtu ana zake*” (The brain is like hair; everyone possesses their own). Indeed, many of the forest fighters wore locked hair and believed it was intrinsically connected to their thoughts and meditations on the struggle. In this way, wearing locked hair essentially ritualized the entire KLFA struggle for forest fighters. Just as in ritual practices like circumcision, where a permanent incision is symbolically made on the participant, wearing locked hair was a

³⁴⁵ Joseph Waweru wa Thirwa.

³⁴⁶ James Kinyua.

³⁴⁷ Thurugu wa Gitombo.

permanent symbol of the KLFA struggle on forest fighters. It is for this reason that Mugo has described wearing locked hair as a “naturalized life-long ritual.”³⁴⁸

Second, wearing locked hair was a symbol of physical and spiritual strength for the forest fighters. As Joseph Waweru wa Thirwa noted, he strongly believes that shaving his hair today would result in serious illness. Many of the narrators in this study viewed wearing locked hair as a source of well-being for the forest fighters. Lydia Wahu wa Muiruri, for instance, stated that, “If they [forest fighters] had dared to shave, it would have diminished their strength... They would not shave because they knew the kind of work they were doing.”³⁴⁹ Wanjiku Thigira added that, “Hair was a source of strength for forest fighters; shaving would have completely diminished it.”³⁵⁰ This strength might have stemmed from the fact that wearing locked hair was a bold rejection of British aesthetic standards of “good grooming” and an assertion of a new KLFA identity. It is perhaps the reason why some (nick) names of KLFA members celebrated the wearing of locked hair. Gitau Matenjagwa, for instance, the famous KLFA General, is a good illustration of this aspect. In Gikuyu, the name Matenjagwa means “one who does not shave.”

Third, wearing locked hair was a symbol of fierceness and valiance for KLFA members. It embodied the courage and rebelliousness of forest fighters. Ngaruiya wa Kanyua observed that, “I had a lot of hair on my head, arms and body... I looked just like a hyena. Home guards would sometimes see me and start chasing after me but as soon as I turned my head towards them, they would run away [afraid of my menacing look].”³⁵¹ Magdalena Wanjiku wa Kamau added that, “It [locked hair] was a symbol of their courage as *Mau Mau* soldiers... You could

³⁴⁸ Mugo, *Unpublished Articles*.

³⁴⁹ Lydia Wahu wa Muiruri.

³⁵⁰ Wanjiku Thigira.

³⁵¹ Ngaruiya wa Kanyua .

barely see their mouths because of all their beards... Hair was a symbol of their power.”³⁵²

Wanjiku Thigira further stated that, “Shaving would have diminished the rebelliousness of forest fighters.”³⁵³ It is important to note that this symbolism was transmitted to many parts of the Pan-African world during and after the KLFA struggle. In particular, the Rastafari Movement in Jamaica was greatly influenced by the KLFA into wearing locked hair. Horace Campbell, in *Rasta and Resistance*, has observed that, “When the struggle of the Land and Freedom Army... in Kenya exploded, and the Rastas saw pictures of the freedom fighters with their natural hair, long and matted, the Rastas positively identified with these fighters and began to wear their hair in “locks.”³⁵⁴

As Joseph Waweru wa Thirwa indicated, many of the former forest fighters are now balding, but they have still preserved their locked hair. The fact that they made and kept a vow to never shave their hair is another testament of the power of *Nommo* in the KLFA struggle. The utterances that constituted the vow generated a lifetime commitment to symbolically grow and keep their hair, even after it fell off. Thurugu wa Gitombo, one of the former forest fighters, actually brought some of his fallen hair to our second interview. See the pictures below:

³⁵² Magdalena Wanjiku wa Kamau.

³⁵³ Wanjiku Thigira.

³⁵⁴ Horace Campbell. *Rasta and Resistance: From Marcus Garvey to Walter Rodney*. (Trenton: Africa World Press, Inc., 1987), 95.



Thurugu wa Gitombo holding his locked hair which has now fallen off due to balding.



Thurugu wa Gitombo demonstrating what he used to like by placing some of the locks on his head.

It is important to note, however, that not every forest fighter preserved their hair. Ngaruiya wa Kanyua recorded that, “When I came back home [after the KLFA struggle,]... I cut off my

[locked] hair and threw it away in order to look like everyone else.”³⁵⁵ Interestingly, in order to make a living, Mzee Kanyua went on to become a barber in independent Kenya.³⁵⁶ His decision to shave might have been influenced by a ritual in indigenous Gikuyu culture. As we saw in the historical background of wearing locked hair, Gikuyu warriors would shave off their locked hair in a purification ceremony held after each successful battle. That some narrators continued wearing their locked hair after the KLFA struggle while others shaved it, is testament of the heterogeneous nature of the ritual experiences being investigated in this study. Even though many narrators shared similar experiences of rituals, none was identical to each other. They all had unique experiences which subsequently shaped their convictions and contributions towards the KLFA struggle.

b) Pragmatic reasons

The other reasons for wearing locked hair were quite pragmatic. First, there was neither time nor need for the forest fighters to shave while in the forests.³⁵⁷ Second, locked hair, beards and general body hair provided much-needed insulation inside the cold forests of Mount Kenya and Nyandarua.³⁵⁸

In conclusion, this study established that wearing locked hair was an important ritual to KLFA members as it symbolized three important aspects of their struggle: deep reflection, physical and spiritual strength, and fierceness and valiance of the forest fighters. It was also important due to pragmatic reasons such as insulation from the cold.

³⁵⁵ Ngaruiya wa Kanyua .

³⁵⁶ Ibid.

³⁵⁷ Ngaruiya wa Kanyua .

³⁵⁸ Magdalena Wanjiku wa Kamau.

Overall, this project found that the five routine rituals in the foregoing discussion were pivotal to the nuts and bolts of the KLFA struggle. Ultimately, seeing as these rituals were deeply embedded in the identities and day-to-day activities of KLFA members, they sacrilized the entire struggle.

6. Conclusion

This project has examined the narratives of former KLFA members with a view toward understanding how rituals shaped their participation in Kenya's anti-colonial struggle. The foregoing chapters have focused on different aspects: Chapter 1 introduced this study by outlining the statement of the problem, research questions, objectives, interpretive tools, and the research method used. Chapter 2 reviewed existing literature on ritual and resistance in general, as well as the specific treatment of KLFA rituals in the vast *Mau Mau* Historiography. Chapter 3 examined the nature, functions and components of rituals. It also looked at the historical background of KLFA rituals in indigenous Gikuyu culture. Chapter 4 "listened to" and engaged the collected narratives with reference to drinking the oath—the core KLFA ritual. Chapter 5 also "listened to" and engaged the collected narratives with reference to five routine KLFA rituals.

This study has demonstrated that experiences of rituals were integral to the *Mau Mau* struggle for independence in Kenya. By carefully analyzing the narratives of 17 former KLFA members, this study has uncovered six rituals that were pivotal to the *Mau Mau* struggle. These are: drinking the oath, clutching soil at death, seeking a seer, praying, singing, and wearing locked hair. First, drinking the oath was a source of strength, courage and perseverance among KLFA members who faced severe hardships during the struggle. It generated commitment and self-sacrifice, and fostered unity among KLFA members. Second, clutching soil at death was symbolic of a major objective of the KLFA struggle: reclamation of alienated land. The ritual acted as a warning and an encouragement to KLFA members, as well as a curse to home guards and other non-KLFA members. It continues to be a source of motivation to former KLFA members in their current activism for land.

Third, seeking a seer was instrumental in the planning and execution of KLFA military operations and the scheduling of oathing ceremonies, scout assignments, and transportation of food and supplies to forest fighters. Fourth, praying was both an individual and communal ritual for KLFA members in the forests and in the reserves. Because *Ngai* was seen as the focal point of the entire struggle, communion with him—through prayer—was deemed invaluable.

Fifth, singing helped motivate KLFA members during the struggle. It acted as a therapeutic lament for their fallen comrades and as a way of recording the history of the struggle. Singing was also an effective tool for educating and conscientizing the masses. Sixth, wearing locked hair symbolized three important aspects of the struggle to KLFA members: deep reflection, physical and spiritual strength, as well as fierceness and valiance of the forest fighters.

In sum, there are four overarching arguments in this study. Firstly, spirituality, and particularly rituals, occupied a central place in the KLFA struggle for independence in Kenya. As the narrators in this study asserted, the KLFA struggle would have been impossible were it not for various rituals practised in the movement. Through *Nommo*, the creative and generative power of the spoken word, the practice of rituals generated the values needed to successfully mobilize KLFA members, as well as organize and execute KLFA activities. The evidence presented in this project seriously challenges the vilification of KLFA activities by colonial anthropologists and psychologists. Far from employing “witchcraft” and “black magic,” this project has demonstrated that the KLFA struggle had very deep spiritual and sacred roots that significantly shaped its strategies and objectives.

Secondly, experiences of rituals greatly influence historical development. The narratives collected in this study show that KLFA members’ experiences of rituals had a significant impact

on their view of, and participation in, the anti-colonial struggle. Highlighting these experiences through the narratives of former KLFA members provides us with new lenses of examining the *Mau Mau* struggle.

Thirdly, examining narratives of former KLFA members allows us to highlight the contributions of groups that have been overlooked or underrepresented in standard historical records. Such groups include women, children, and the elderly. This study has demonstrated that through their non-militaristic acts of resistance, these groups played an invaluable role in Kenya's anti-colonial struggle.

Fourthly, by foregrounding the narratives of a predominantly orate and non-literate group, this study has shown that the monopolization of knowledge production by the intellectual class can be challenged. Through the use of the oral history method, this project has demonstrated that orate and non-literate groups can reclaim their agency and participate in the process of constructing and reconstructing their history. In concluding, let us examine the limitations of this study and the opportunities it provides for future research.

Limitations

One major limitation of this study is its inability to fully and accurately translate every word, phrase, and concept from Gikuyu, Kikamba and Kiswahili—the languages of the narrators—into English. As we saw in the foregoing chapters, phrases such as “*Thaai thataiyai Ngai thaai*” are difficult to fully express in English because inevitably, some meaning is lost in translation. This is partly because Gikuyu, Kikamba and Kiswahili have different linguistic structures from English. For example, the word order in these Kenyan languages is sometimes incompatible with the subject-verb-object order of English grammar. In other instances,

translation is difficult simply because some concepts are unique to these Kenyan languages and the worldviews they embody. That notwithstanding, this study endeavoured to maintain the integrity of the narratives by translating them as accurately as possible. A good example of this endeavour is the unique coinage of the term “drinking the oath” in reference to the act of oath-taking. As we mentioned earlier, this was deliberately done in order to convey, more accurately, the indigenous name and significance of this ritual.

The paucity of published narratives by female KLFA members is also a limitation of this project. As we saw in the Historiography, there is only one existing narrative by a female KLFA member, compared to a handful that exists by males. Consequently, this has limited the scope of parallels that could be drawn between written KLFA narratives and the oral history narratives collected in this study. Nevertheless, even though it could not focus on KLFA women, this study has attempted—in a small way—to give voice to their experiences, contributions, and reflections on the *Mau Mau* struggle.

Another limitation of this project is its exclusive focus on KLFA members who were based in the forests and the reserves. While these groups played an integral role in the KLFA struggle, there were also significant numbers of KLFA members in various towns and urban centers of Kenya. This seeming exclusion of “urban guerrillas” is purely coincidental; all the participants in this study just happened to have been based in either the forests or the reserves.³⁵⁹ Needless to say, there is need to collect and document the narratives of former KLFA members who were based in various towns and urban centers.

³⁵⁹ See Mohamed Mathu. *The Urban Guerilla: The Story of Mohamed Mathu*. (Richmond: Liberation Support Movement, 1974),

Future Research and Implications

Based on the above discussion, an advanced form of this M.A. thesis project would strive to incorporate the narratives of urban guerrillas and more female KLFA members. The unique experiences of these groups would further expand the range of voices that define and interpret colonial experiences and anti-colonial struggles.

Secondly, KLFA members' experiences of rituals provide opportunities for further research regarding the KLFA struggle. For example, James Kinyua's song about the contributions made by *chotara* (bi-racials) to the KLFA struggle provides a channel into some uncharted waters within the vast sea of *Mau Mau* scholarships. A thorough examination of the role played by bi-racials and other racial minorities would provide a deeper and more nuanced understanding of Kenya's anti-colonial struggle. Beyond enriching the KLFA Historiography, experiences of rituals can help historians reconstruct some of the missing pages in Kenya's history. For example, Bastillio Matheka recalls that he drank two KLFA oaths during the struggle, and one anti-Luo oath in independent Kenya. The latter was sanctioned by Jomo Kenyatta's government immediately after the assassination of renowned trade-unionist, Tom Mboya, in 1969. It has long been speculated that Kenyatta's government was responsible for the assassination, but such allegations have never been proven.³⁶⁰ Incriminating evidence like that of Matheka, which was gathered from his experiences of rituals, would enable Kenyan historians to finally uncover the truth about this matter.

Additionally, by highlighting the significant impact of rituals on the anti-colonial struggle in Kenya, this study hopes to initiate discussion on the adoption of indigenous African rituals in

³⁶⁰ See David Goldsworthy. *Tom Mboya: The Man Kenya Wanted to Forget*. (Nairobi: East African Educational Publishers, 1982), 283-285.

present-day political institutions in Africa. For example, why can't the oath of office for presidents, cabinet ministers, members of parliament, judges, magistrates and other civil servants be more indigenous than the colonially-inherited practice of lifting up a Bible or a Quran? Why can't court witnesses drink a more elaborate oath than the usual "I will tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth"? In *Facing Mount Kenya*, Kenyatta laments the ineffectiveness of colonially-imposed oaths on those who drink them: court witnesses go on to lie blatantly, as do presidents and other government officials on matters of integrity and abiding by the constitution.³⁶¹ In stark contrast, Kenyatta highlights the deep reverence and fear which surrounded indigenous oathing systems.³⁶² This study strongly believes that the adoption of indigenous oathing systems can begin to restore some deference, however small, to public office. This, of course, does not imply that indigenous oaths are the silver bullets that will slay the multi-headed beast of neo-colonialism which forges alliances between African ruling classes and international forces of imperialism, in order to pillage African resources and further subjugate African peasants and working classes. However, adopting indigenous oaths would, in the spirit of *Sankofa*, avail us with indigenous tools that can play a part in the ongoing struggle for a more equitable and humane society.³⁶³ Some critics might argue that Kenya houses more than 40 different ethnic communities and so there would be at least 40 different indigenous oathing systems. While this is true, nothing would prevent an African-centered government from developing a hybrid oathing system that incorporates aspects from various cultures. After all, as we saw in the historical background of drinking the oath, KLFA members developed a unique oath for their struggle. In fact, Maina wa Kinyatti has shown that in areas outside of Gikuyu

³⁶¹ Kenyatta, *Facing Mount Kenya*, 225.

³⁶² Ibid, 223.

³⁶³ *Sankofa* is an Akan symbol which means "to return and pick up." It denotes the use of African indigenous knowledges in contemporary political and socio-economic contexts.

territory, the KLFA oath was custom-made to align it with the sacred oathing elements from that particular context.³⁶⁴ In essence, though admittedly ambitious, it is possible to incorporate indigenous oathing practices into present-day political institutions in Kenya.

Lastly, as we stated in the introduction, this study unapologetically stands in solidarity with the current activism of former KLFA members. Their activism involves demanding for land and state support from the Kenyan government, and reparations for torture from the British government. It is hoped that by highlighting the narratives of former KLFA members, this study will create awareness of, and generate solidarity for, this current activism. It is unacceptable for citizens of any country, least of all anti-colonial freedom fighters, to live in poverty, malnourishment, poor healthcare, and landlessness. Despite these deplorable conditions, former KLFA members refuse to give up and stubbornly hold on to the belief that justice will be done. Theirs is a story of unwavering commitment to truth, justice, and human dignity. It is precisely for this reason that their narratives of ritual, agency, and resistance, must be told.

Thaai thathaiyai Ngai thaai.

³⁶⁴ Kinyatti, *History of Resistance*, 145.

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Appendix

Biographies of Narrators

Bastillio Matheka was born in 1936 in Kirinyaga District but his family relocated to Kangundo and then came back to Kirinyaga again. He was a scout during the KLFA struggle to help forest fighters navigate through their territory. He also helped transport food to the forest fighters. His entire family was arrested, tortured and their livestock carried off by home guards.

Evanson Wainaina Waritu was born in 1940 in Kabati *ria* Ndegwa. He is the youngest narrator I spoke to and his narrative exemplifies the role of children in the KLFA struggle. He was literally born into the struggle because his parents were active KLFA members. After drinking the oath in 1954, at age 14, he worked as a KLFA scout in the reserve until the end of the emergency. He continued his activism even after independence and was detained for 14 months by Kenyatta's government. After his release, he went into self-exile in Tanzania and worked for the East African Railways and Harbours Corporation until 1977 when the East African Community collapsed.

Gitau Mungai was born in 1936 in Gitura Sub-location, Murang'a South District. He was a herdsman in the Reserves when he drank the oath in 1952 and served as a scout in the KLFA. His mother, sister and elder brother were all KLFA members and they all got arrested together and were severely tortured by home guards in their area.

James Kinyua was born in 1932 in Mugoiri Sub-location, Murang'a South District. He ate his first oath in 1949 and became a forest fighter in 1950, serving under Generals Stanley Mathenge, Waruhiu Itote and Kago. He was arrested during combat in January 1955 and detained for 15 months in Thika, Murang'a and Kirinyaga.

Joseph Waweru wa Thirwa was born in 1918 in Mithii. He is the oldest narrator that I interviewed and he participated in WWII as one of the potters for the Allied Forces. He records that his experiences in Italy during WWII prepared him for the Kenyan struggle by exposing him to guerrilla tactics. He drank the oath in 1946 while working as a farm hand on a white settler farm in Njiru. He was arrested in November 1953 and imprisoned until 1958.

Loise Wangui wa Kamau was born in 1920 in Kagundu and actively participated in supplying food to the forest fighters. Her husband was the guard commander in their area and so their home was a hive of activity for forest fighters on transit. She was arrested and tortured for her activities in the movement.

Lydia Wahu wa Muiruri was born in 1920 in Kandara District. She is the oldest female KLFA member that I interviewed and she ate the oath while in Kabati. She was the coordinator of KLFA women's activities in her area and oversaw the collection and distribution of food, clothing and money to the forest fighters. Her home was also a common transit point for the forest fighters and a sick bay for their comrades who were wounded in battle. Her story highlights the difficult plight of women in the reserves.

Magdalena Wanjiku Kamau was born in Mang'u in 1934. Her home was strategically located between the forests and the reserves and therefore it served as a transit point for forest fighters. They stopped by her house to eat and refill their food supplies and sometimes left guns and other supplies for their comrades. She was arrested together with her husband for their KLFA activities and both were severely tortured. In addition, home guards burnt down all the huts in her compound, including her granaries, and carried away all her livestock.

Monica Wambui wa Gitau was born in 1934 in Gitura Sub-location Murang'a South District. She actively participated in transporting food and supplies to the forest fighters. She highlights the difficult living conditions in the reserves during the emergency period. Her husband was one of those described by the colonial government as "hardcore" *Mau Maus* and was therefore released very late in 1962, on the eve of independence. He had been so badly tortured in detention that he died immediately after independence.

Muhinya wa Kinyanjui was born in 1923. She actively participated in supplying food and clothing to the forest fighters. She was arrested and tortured on numerous occasions for her KLFA activities but never lost faith.

Mwangi wa Murimi was born in 1922 in Gachanjiru Location, Kandara Division, and was an oath administrator in the KLFA from 1952 to 1963. He used to work for the East African Railways and Harbours Corporation until 1952 when he quit, after being chosen to serve as an oath administrator. His insights on oathing were quite illuminating and he was a very engaging narrator.

Ngaruiya wa Kanyua (aka "Kiura") was born in 1934 and is from Gitura sub-location, Murang'a South District. By the time the KLFA struggle broke out, he was a farm hand on a white settler's farm in Kiambu, who the African workers had nicknamed "Bwana Muhia." Mzee Kanyua joined the KLFA immediately after the state of emergency was declared in October 1952, and was for three years, a forest fighter under General Gitau Matenjagwa. He was arrested in 1955 and imprisoned in a number of places including Embakasi, Tambarare, Murang'a and Kandara for a combined period of up to 3 years.

Thurugu wa Gitombo was born in 1920 and at age 19, was among the African troops in the Allied Forces in Burma during World War II. Upon his return to Kenya, he worked as herdsman until 1952 when he drank the oath and joined the forest fighters. He was in General Kahiu-Itina's battalion. His experiences regarding seers and prayer were quite illuminating.

Wanjiku Thigira was born in 1938 in Gitura and was a teenage girl at the height of the struggle. Nevertheless, she was the Guard Commander in her area and was in charge of coordinating food collection and distribution for the forest fighters. She lost her entire family during the struggle and never got married because by the time the struggle was over, she felt it was too late.

Wanjiku Thuku was born in 1927, in Kabati. Her husband was the KLFA guard commander in their area and so their home was a major transit point for forest fighters *en route* to various places. She mobilized the collection of food, money and other supplies in her area. Her husband was arrested and detained in Manyani while she and her children were moved into the government village camps where life was extremely difficult for them.

Pictures



KLFA members on the protest march to the Attorney General's Chambers on May 30, 2012.



Some of the male narrators outside the MMWVA office: L to R starting from upper level: Mwangi wa Murimi, Evanson Wainaina Waritu, Thurugu wa Gitombo, and Ngaruiya wa Kanyua (on lower level).



Some of the female narrators: L to R: Lydia Wahu wa Muiruri, Magdalena Wanjiku wa Kamau, Monica Wambui wa Gitau, Loise Wangui wa Kamau, and Wanjiku Thigira (standing).

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• Résumé •

Career Objective

In the short-run: To successfully complete my M.A. degree in Pan African Studies at Syracuse University.

In the long-run: To acquire a Ph.D. in African History and teach at the university in Kenya.

Educational Background

1. Syracuse University: 2011-2013

Master of Arts in Pan African Studies and Certificate in University Teaching. Cumulative GPA: 3.958 out of 4.0, *Summa cum laude* (Highest Honors).

Successfully defended thesis on April 2, 2013 and passed with distinction.

Thesis Title: “*Thaai thathaiyai Ngai thaai*”: Narratives of Rituals, Agency, and Resistance in the *Mau Mau* Struggle for Kenya’s Independence

Courses successfully completed include:

East Africa since 1885; Pan Africanism; Histories, Societies and Political Economies of the Pan African World; Arts, Literatures & Cultures of the Pan African World; and Seminar on African American Studies.

2. Daystar University: 2007-2010

3. Bachelor of Arts in Communication. Cumulative GPA: 3.68 out of 4.0, *Cum laude* (First Class Honors).

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Modern Africa; African Societies and Traditional Religions; Historical Foundations of the Modern World; Christianity and Islam in Africa; Art in Africa; and Communication Research and Design.

Teaching and Research Interests

African Spirituality and Anti-Colonial Resistance; Pan Africanism; African Politics; and Africa in Local and International Media.

Fellowships and Awards

- 2012/2013 Teaching Assistantship Award from the Department of African-American Studies, Syracuse University.
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- 2012 Summer Research Award from the Department of African-American Studies, Syracuse University. Funding for thesis research in Kenya.
- 2011/2012 Teaching Assistantship Award from the Department of African-American Studies, Syracuse University.
- Appeared a record five times on the Daystar University Dean's List during my undergraduate.

Publications

“Ajenda Afrika: African Studies in Kenya?” in *Postamble* Volume 6, Number 1, (May 2010). (A peer-reviewed graduate student journal based at the University of Cape Town's Centre for African Studies). Accessible at <http://postamble.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/12/Muokifinal.pdf>

“Malcolm X and Christianity: Engaging the criticisms and moving towards an African-centered Christianity that can advance Pan-Africanism in the 21st Century.” *Journal of Intercultural Disciplines* (forthcoming).

Conference and Workshop Presentations

“Narratives of rituals, agency, and resistance in the *Mau Mau* struggle for Kenya's independence.” Community, change, and adaptation: Interdisciplinary perspectives on Africa. 21st Annual Graduate Student Conference in African Studies, Boston University, March 29-30, 2013.

“Lessons from the Egyptian revolution.” Book launch for *African Awakening: the emerging revolutions* by Firoze Manji and Sokari Ekine (Eds). Syracuse University, New York, March 29, 2012.

“Malcolm X and Christianity: Engaging the criticisms and moving towards an African-centred Christianity which can drive Pan-Africanism in the 21st Century.” Solving social issues through multi-cultural experiences. National Association of African-American Studies Conference, Baton Rouge, Louisiana, February 13-18, 2012.

“Broken vows: The Kenyan media’s reaction to the Communication Amendments Act 2009.” Daystar University Communication Amendment Act 2009 Symposium, Nairobi, Kenya, April 24, 2009.

Lectures and Presentations

“The intersecting role of social media and African indigenous knowledges in political activism in Kenya.” Panel presentation at the Africa Initiative Symposium *Dialogue on Deconstructing War Zones* at Syracuse University, February 2, 2013.

“The impact of British colonialism on Kenyan languages and cultures.” Lecture given to the *Survey of African Music* class in the Department of African-American Studies, Syracuse University, New York, October 2, 2012.

“The impact of reggae music and Rastafarian culture on Kenyan youth.” Lecture given to the *Survey of African Music* class in the Department of African-American Studies, Syracuse University, New York, December 6, 2011.

“Introduction to Akamba music and culture.” Lecture given to the *Survey of African Music* class in the Department of African-American Studies, Syracuse University, New York, November 1, 2011.

“Ideological challenges facing the Kenyan media”. Lecture given to the *Research Writing* graduate class at Daystar University, Nairobi, Kenya, March 17, 2011.

Work Experience

August 2011 – Present: Teaching Assistant, Department of African-American Studies, Syracuse University.

- Teaching Assistant for the following courses: Politics of Africa; African Orature; Survey of African Music; Creative Writing; and Introduction to African-American Music. My duties include leading recitation sections, grading students’ assignments, and giving guest lectures.

January 2011 – June 2011: Communications Officer, Bible Translation & Literacy (EA) Ltd

- Editor and contributor for the quarterly journal *Call of Kenya*, media relations, event management, photography and designing of publicity materials. Recognized for

generating the highest media publicity in the organization's history during the 2011 *Run for the Bibleless*.

September 2009 - January 2010: Account Executive, Tell-Em Public Relations (EA) Ltd

- Media monitoring, media relations, event management, proposal writing and strategic communications for a variety of clients including MTV Base, British Airways, Toyota East Africa Limited and Coca Cola.

August 2009: Panelist in MTV's Staying Alive advisory panel in Kenya

- Review movie scripts and give feedback on them before they are released to the cast and production crew.
- Develop new strategies of communicating HIV/AIDS awareness to urban youth in Kenya.

June 2007: Actor in MTV's Staying Alive movie-making competition

- Directed and acted in a three-minute movie on HIV/AIDS awareness.

February 2006-November 2006: Actor, Kenya National Theatre

- Acted literature books across Kenyan high schools in Nairobi, Central, Eastern, Western and Nyanza provinces.

Leadership Roles and Activities

- Founder of **Ajenda Afrika**; a student organization at Daystar University that discusses issues of African identity and challenges facing the continent and her people.
- Chairman of **Daystar Theatre Arts** (2007-2008)

Referees

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