

## African Women Traders During the Peak of the Mau Mau Emergency, 1953-1956

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### Abstract

*The study examined African women traders' in Nairobi at the height of the Mau Mau Emergency from 1952-1956. The study focused on Nairobi's Eastlands- the main African residential area during the colonial period. The main objective of the study was to examine trading activities, opportunities and challenges that women traders in Nairobi, experienced. The conceptual framework of the study was guided by the Gender and Development (GAD) approach. GAD is relevant to the study as it addresses the activities, opportunities and challenges of the women traders. . The sources of information for the study were oral, archival and library materials. The study concluded that the outbreak of Mau Mau and the subsequent government's imposition of a State of Emergency in October 1952, interrupted the trading activities.*

**Key Words: Imposition, State of Emergency, Gender and Development, Mau Mau, Women Traders, African Quarters**

## Introduction

Before the arrival of the Kenya Uganda Railway in 1899, the pre-colonial Nairobi area was already a centre for the exchange of various goods between women traders from the surrounding Kikuyu, Maasai and Kamba communities. The arrival of the Railway in Nairobi marked the emergence of the town. A number of women traders sold goods especially agricultural produce to the town's growing population which included African migrants from rural areas coming to seek wage work (Ngesa, 2014, 68) . By the end of the 1940s, there were a series of rules and regulations for the control of Africans, especially women. These included the Vagrancy Laws, first enacted in 1902 and the Township Pass Laws in 1903. Amendments to these laws from time to time, imposed restrictions on the influx of Africans into the town except as labourers (Ngesa, et.al, 2022) . But the word labourer was almost always coterminous with the male- a fact which largely kept women out of wage labour and for removal from Nairobi. (Ngesa, et.al, 2022) Even so, some headstrong women traders negotiated their way around the system and operated their exchange activities within the town until the declaration of the Mau Mau Emergency in late 1952. By then, Nairobi had become one of the major towers of the Mau Mau- an insurgency against colonial rule in Kenya. The movement's leadership and its rank and file including street traders, spivs and unemployed, and many trade unionists, aimed to overthrow colonial rule by armed struggle. Armed gangs were formed to execute its decrees, safeguard oath administrators from the police, and exterminate the colonial government's informers and collaborators (Newsinger, 1981,165; McConnell, 2005,10, 26 ),

The years 1953-1956 witnessed a struggle between the Mau Mau and the colonial government for the control of Nairobi as the British launched counter-insurgency measures.

Among the measures were restrictions on the movement of Kikuyu, Embu and Meru and military operations which culminated in the infamous Operation Anvil in 1954, which dealt a major blow to the Mau Mau war in Nairobi (Newsinger, 1981,174-175; Rosberg and Nottingham, 1966,292-294) .. How the struggle impacted the women traders is the subject of this study. The study is organised into five sections; the first, is the introduction, second, , highlights developments among women traders in the years 1899 to 1952 as a prelude to their exchange operations in Nairobi in the years of the Emergency; third discusses the rise of the Mau Mau and the declaration of the Mau Mau Emergency and their impact on Nairobi's commercial sector. The study in fourth section assesses the possibilities and challenges of African women traders in Nairobi, particularly, in the African quarters in Eastlands which until 1954, were basically under the control of the Mau Mau. Further, this section also illustrates that the defeat of the Mau Mau in 1954 saw a gradual return of conditions conducive to trade, but men predominantly took over the opportunities, leaving women largely on the sidelines. and finally the last section of the study is the conclusion.

## Women Trade Before the Mau Mau Emergency 1899-1952

Nairobi is the capital city of Kenya and the largest town in the country. Prior to its emergence, it was uninhabited swamp that the Maasai ethnic group who lived nearby called Engore Nyarobe, which means a place of cold water (Ogot and Ogot, 2020, XXXI). Nonetheless, the area was a marketplace for ethnic groups living in the proximity of the swamp. When in 1896, the Uganda Railway engineers set up the first camp in Nairobi on the South West of Nairobi River, there was an African market near the present junction of Ngara Road and Limuru Road. The

Kikuyu brought maize, beans and potatoes to the market, while the Maasai came with goats and cows. Many of the traders were women (Ogot and Ogot, 2020, XXX; City Council of Nairobi History <https://nairobi.go.ke/history/>; Hake, 1977,19). Thus, the exchange of goods by women in the Nairobi area predated the establishment of the town.

The growth of Nairobi began in 1899 with the arrival of the Kenya Uganda Railway from Mombasa. The first inhabitants of the town were railway workers who included Europeans, Asians, and Africans. After the protectorate headquarters moved from Mombasa to Nairobi in 1904, employees of the colonial administration were added to the growing population (Ogot and Ogot, 2020, p. 2). A number of other early African residents of the town were railway followers, among whom were women prostitutes and traders who supplied some essential services to the emerging town's inhabitants (White, 1990,1; Hake, 1977,34). Over time, however, the growing population of the town evolved in to an important food market which attracted other women, mainly from among the Kikuyu and Kamba communities who lived in the peripheries of the town. The exchange operations of these early women traders who came to dispose of their surplus produce was not unique as the tradition of trade was well established among Kikuyu and Kamba women in pre-colonial Kenya (Thomson, 1968, 308; Muriuki, 1974, 108; Robertson, 1997, 66).

However, in 1901, the arrival of Charles Eliot as the Commissioner of the East African Protectorate, as Kenya was then called, saw an attempt to shift the focus of the town from a multi-racial metropolis to a European settler town. Eliot's idea was that the development of Kenya would only be best carried out by a European settler community. Thus, during his tenure, which lasted up to 1904, he invited settlers

to come and do farming in Kenya and many arrived from Britain and South Africa (Sorrenson, 1968,61-62; Van Zwanenberg and King, 1975,37; Fall, 2016, 1-2). As many of the settlers resided in the growing town of Nairobi, they tried to influence the colonial town government to make the metropolis an exclusively white town. Consequently, a series of township laws were passed to keep Africans, in particular, out of Nairobi (Werlin, 1974,37-60). The Vagrancy and Pass Laws mentioned above remained the major instruments of regulation. Nonetheless, in the succeeding years, new amendments were made to the laws for stricter control of Africans. The need for stricter regulation was necessitated by an increase in the number of unemployed African labor in Nairobi- a surplus that the government viewed as a threat to the security of the town. Following recommendations of the Feetham Commission Report 1927, the length of stay of African job seekers in Nairobi, originally limited to a maximum of seven days, was reduced to thirty-six hours (KNA Report of the Local Government Commission 1927, 51-60). Even so, in response to the labour needs of the budding town, the migration of Africans to the metropolis only gathered momentum. By 1930, the African population in Nairobi was approximately 28,000 out of an estimated total of 49,000 people in the town, including Europeans and Asians (Hake, 1977,43). It was becoming clear to the Nairobi Municipal government and the settlers that co-existing with Africans in Nairobi could not be avoided.

Nonetheless, following a plague outbreak in the Indian Bazaar in 1902, Europeans strongly felt that it was necessary to prevent racial contacts to avoid the transmission of disease and to keep away crime (Ngesa, 1996, 60; Werlin, 1974, 53). For this reason, the design of residence in Nairobi from its nascent years, was segregated. Europeans, the economic and political power wielders chose to live on the hilly cooler west side

of the Railway, while Asians and Africans, the politically dominated and lower income groups resided on the east and north east parts of the town (Ngesa, 1996, 37). However, unlike Asians, whose presence in the town found general acceptance among its European administrators, and whose living areas tended to have an intermediary character, the white colonial Nairobi administration viewed Africans as an adjunct population to the town for whom no real accommodation plans were necessary. Africans therefore lived in unplanned settlements namely, Pangani, Mji wa Mombasa, Maskini, Kaburini and Kileleshwa (Ngesa, 1996, 37; Hake, 1977, 23; Van Zwaneberg, 1972, 177; Werlin, 1974, 48-49). The Simpson Report of 1913 sanctioned the pattern of the town's segregated development when it noted that "In the interests of each community and of the healthiness of the locality and country, it is absolutely essential that in every town and trade centre, there should be well defined and separate quarters for Europeans Asiatics and Africans..." (Quoted in Werlin, 1974, 53). The demarcations produced a particular pattern of life in Nairobi which came to determine African women's trading spaces in the town.

Evidence of the operations of women traders in Nairobi before 1952, show that they capitalized on the needs of African labourers. The migrant labourers' poor wages made the predominantly male labour an important market for the women traders' inexpensive goods (Ngesa, 2014, 73; Ngesa et al, 2022, 100-102; Hake, 1977, 65). The women traders themselves included those who commuted to the town from the peripheries and others who resided within the metropolis. Indeed, the number of women residing in the towns continued to grow. In Nairobi in 1938, for instance, the total resident African population was estimated at 45,500 and about 15,000 were women (Stichter, 1975, 14). But whereas the male migrant labourers in towns such as Nairobi were rapidly absorbed in to the wage labour market to

work in clerical positions or as shop, office or store assistants, the only employment available for women in towns up to the 1950s was that of the children's nurse. However, even such opportunities were extremely few as the majority of domestic workers were still men (Stichter, 1975, 14-15, 19). According to Stichter, lack of employment opportunities for women in towns was a result of the need, under the migrant labour system, for women to keep up agricultural production and to secure each family's access to land. While Kanogo accepts this view she also argues that African male elders (whose aim was to control women) despised women living in towns and entered a conspiracy with the European colonial town administrators to discourage the enrolment of women in to wage work (Stichter, 1975, 15; Kanogo, 2005, 19, 25, 33-34). The arguments notwithstanding, having been discriminated against in the new wage labour dispensation, some African women, turned to trade to supply the needs of the largely 'bachelor' population in the town. Their objective was to obtain cash, especially to purchase the new cheap western imported goods, like blankets, slashers, hoes, sugar, salt and rice for which Africans were rapidly developing taste (Ngesa et al, 2022, 99-102).

But the involvement of women in trade in Nairobi was not without obstacles. In their wish to perpetuate the culture of the domestication of women, African male patriachs collaborated with the colonial Nairobi government to control the presence of African women including the traders in Nairobi. The pair alleged that Nairobi corrupted women's morals, leading them not only to prostitution but also making them agents for the spread of disease. Through a host of laws in the 1930s and 1940s, therefore, they attempted, with some success to keep women, especially those unaccompanied by spouses or other male guardians, out of Nairobi. Apart from the vagrant and pass laws already mentioned above, and

which saw major legal adjustments especially in the 1940s, the colonial Nairobi administration introduced new policies and institutions for the control of Africans, women included. In 1942, the infamous Control of Natives by-laws, also called the Spivs laws, were enacted (Ngesa et al, 2022, 113). More regulations passed in 1948 made loitering in any public place within the Municipality and being in the town without regular employment unless in possession of a valid resident's permit, an offence. Illegal hawkers, usually women, could be charged under any of these laws (Ngesa et al, 2022, 113) . To ensure the efficient execution of these policies, the Municipal Government formed a Municipal Police force in 1940, and in 1944, it created a Municipal Inspectorate Department with a number of inspectors. These inspectors conducted patrols to arrest and charge lawbreakers like the women illegal hawkers (NCC/CR Archives, CCN Minutes, Finance Committee Meeting May 21, 1940) Other agencies like the Nairobi Advisory Council established in 1939<sup>1</sup> and the Local Native Councils of areas bordering Nairobi like Kiambu and Muranga were involved in the repatriation of women. During the 1940s, ethnic associations like the Luo Union, the Kikuyu General Union and the Kalenjin Union joined the fray. Given the tag of prostitution that was almost always labelled against the spouseless women in Nairobi, some of these associations employed extremely harsh measures in the process of repatriating them back to their rural homes. Yet many of these women had earned a living through the exchange of commodities (Ngesa et al, 2022, 111-114).

Despite the controls, a number of women did not relent in their search for cash. In fact, the presence of hawkers, many of them women on the streets, especially in the Eastlands section of the Municipality, became a feature of the women's struggle to integrate themselves in to the colonial cash economy (Ngesa et al, 2022: 111-114). By the 1940s, whereas some of these women had obtained hawker licenses to legally conduct their activities, many continued to operate illegally. They sold mainly fruits, vegetables, and cooked food like *uji*<sup>2</sup> and *githeri*<sup>3</sup> (Robertson, 1997,105-106; Kiruthu, 2006, 132, 137; Buoga Obuya, personal communication January 11, 2015; Charles Rubia, personal communication March 10, 2015). By the early 1950s, some of these women traders had moved to established premises. Statistical evidence on the actual number of women who operated from such premises was not available to this study. Nevertheless, one of these women, married and living with her husband in Kaloleni estate in Nairobi, had begun her trading journey in the 1940s by knitting and selling children's sweaters to her estate neighbours. In 1951, she acquired a City Market stall.<sup>4</sup> where she sold poultry and eggs, and afforded the stall rent of shillings 120 per month (NCC/CR Archives, CCN Minutes, PHC Meeting, 14/2/51). Her enterprise name was Embu Poultry and Egg Dealers. The trading proceeds so empowered the woman financially, that she rarely begged for money from her husband- a teacher, as she had done before (DN September 3, 1993, 14). In the same year (1951), through the influence of Jomo Kenyatta, then a key official of Kenya African Union (KAU)<sup>5</sup>,

<sup>1</sup>The Nairobi Advisory Council established in 1939 to involve respectable Africans in the administration of the African locations. White, L. (1990). *The comforts of home: Prostitution in colonial Nairobi*. Chicago and London. The University of Chicago Press. p. 141

<sup>2</sup> Uji is gruel made from maize, sorghum or finger millet flour or a mixture of some of these.

<sup>3</sup> A boiled mixture of maize and beans.

<sup>4</sup> City Market was built in 1932 to serve mainly the upper class European and Asian Population. The retailers were chiefly Indians. In the backyard of the market, Africans had rented stalls as well as a wholesale section where they could dispose of produce from upcountry (See Parker, 1949:59).

<sup>5</sup> The Kikuyu Central Association formed in 1924 was the predecessor of the Kenya Africa Union (KAU). Right from its formation, its members rejected European dominance to



another woman was allocated an officially designated eating house number CCN 6 in Shauri Moyo estate (Ngesa, 1996, 99). The woman, a widow, met her financial needs from the business as she continued to live in the city (Buoga Obuya, personal communication, January 11, 2015). Generally, however, the situation of Africans, but particularly women traders in Nairobi during the period indicates that the prosperity and expansion of the town's economy was least beneficial to them.<sup>6</sup> African men, especially the elite traders fared better as they enjoyed a measure of colonial patronage. For many other Africans including women, rising aspirations were blocked and their hopes frustrated by the failure of the government to comprehend their growing poverty and hopelessness. This created an atmosphere of disgruntlement and despondency which made them fertile ground for the growing nationalist movement.

### The Mau Mau Uprising and its Impact on Nairobi's Commerce, 1952-1956

According to Mwangi Wa Githumo the Mau Mau uprising was the most dynamic aspect of African nationalism in Kenya. "It was a revolutionary and military response to the imperialists' incursions, aggression, land expropriation, as well as the exploitation of the Africans' natural and human resources." Inasmuch as the climax of the movement was 1952, its shoots grew out of land grievances that were articulated by Kikuyu political associations from as early as the 1920s. Having lost much of their land to settler farming,

many members of the community had become squatters (Mwangi Wa Githumo 1991, 2).

Over the years, settlers had made attempts to constrict squatter rights over land. As early as the 1920s, European settlers had begun to implement diverse measures to restrain squatter cultivation and grazing. By 1928, approximately twenty per cent of the European settler land in the highlands was occupied by squatters and their stock. But in that year, settler farmers obtained the discretion to reduce squatter contracts to one year and monthly contracts were allowed (Sorrenson, 1967, 35-36). According to Kanogo "these measures brought insecurity, blackmail and economic degeneration," to the squatters, but they were also an early warning of future troubles (Kanogo, 1987, 97; Sorrenson, 1967, 36). Indeed, settler deprivation of the squatters reached its peak in the post- World War Two period, when as opposed to the expanding settler farming to provide food for the hungry post-war world, squatter conditions were hardened to make them total farm labours or remove them from the farms altogether (Newsinger, 1981,161). Settlers adopted forced destocking measures and land for squatter cultivation was greatly limited. Whereas before the Second World War a labour rent of 90 days a year had served as payment for five or six acres of land, in 1946, a labour rent of 240-270 days was being demanded for one and a half acres of land (Newsinger, 1981,161). Furedi (1974, 492) has argued that the measures occasioned a massive deterioration of the Kikuyu squatter population incomes- the loses of which ranged between 30 to 40 per cent of their 1930s earnings, and that this deterioration was worsening during the late 1940s. The enforcement measures

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the extent that membership of the association became one's personal symbol of dissent. See Carl Rosberg and John Nottingham (1985). Nationalism in colonial Kenya: The myth of Mau Mau. Nairobi, Transafrica Press: 87. During the Second World War, it was forced underground, but re-emerged in 1944 with the formation of the KAU. See Caroline Elkins (2005). Imperial Reckoning: The Untold

Story of Britain's Gulag in Kenya. New York, Henry Holt and Company, LLC. P.24

<sup>6</sup> This subject has been discussed more fully in another article Pamela Olivia Ngesa, et al. (2022). *Colonialism and the Repression of Nairobi African Women Street Traders in the 1940s. Thought and Practice: A Journal of the Philosophical Association of Kenya (PAK)*, New Series, Vol.8 No.1, June 2022, pp.95-123.

themselves reflected the cruelty of the system. For instance, forced destocking was common and squatters who rejected the new terms were evicted before they could harvest their crop, while old squatters were removed from land they had lived all their lives to return home to the reserves they had never known. By 1952, owing to the deteriorating economic benefits, squatting had ceased to be an attractive economic option to the land-hungry Africans. A bitter hatred of the white settlers and a fierce determination to retain their stake in the land made the squatters the backbone of the Mau Mau revolt in the countryside (Newsinger, 1981,161; Elkins, 2003, 24; Stichter, 1982, 128-130).

The evicted squatters, largely Kikuyu, found no respite in the Kikuyu land units where population was already reaching bursting point. As early as 1932, it was estimated that there were 2.07 acres per head of the resident population in the Kikuyu reserve (Sorrenson, 1967:39). By 1948, the national Census of that year established that, Kikuyu landholdings accommodated a total population of 745, 000. In Kiambu District, there were 420 persons per square mile while Fort Hall and Nyeri had 411 and 272 persons per square mile respectively (East African Population Census 1948). Using the Census figures, Sorrenson (1967, 77) reports that there was less than one acre per head of population, or about five acres per household, in the Kikuyu land unit.” The situation was worsened by continued land buying and selling as those with money accumulated more and more land, leaving increasing numbers of the Kikuyu landless. By the turn of the 1950s, about 50 per cent of the Kikuyu had no land (Elkins, 2003, 24; Sorrenson 1967, 78).

In their search for possible means of survival, a considerable number of the Kikuyu landless population chose migration to towns such as Nairobi. In 1948, there were 28,889 Kikuyu living within the Nairobi Municipality, 45 per

cent of the total African population of the town (Sorrenson, 1967, 85). By 1951, the African population of Nairobi was approximately 80,000 with roughly 80 per cent male and 20 per cent female (LG2/40, City Council of Nairobi AR 1951, 11). By 1952, the estimated African population in the town stood at 95,000 persons, and fifty percent of them were Kikuyu (KNA LG2/40, City Council of Nairobi AR of the African Affairs Officer 1952, 5; EAS May 23, 1953; EAS July 17, 1953,5; KNA JW 6/7 Nairobi Extra-Provincial District AR 1955:4). It must be noted that these figures do not take in to account the large African population which lived on the fringes of the town like Kariobangi, Dagoretti Corner and Kabete and depended on it for a livelihood (EAS July 17, 1953,5; Van Zwanenberg,1972,184).

Yet even in Nairobi, African problems remained unattended and multiplied with time. A major issue, unemployment, witnessed soaring figures as the years went by. Between 1945 and 1953, the number of African wage earners in Nairobi only grew from 38,000 to 50,000 leaving thousands of Africans with no means of support (Hake, 1977,58). Many unskilled labourers were unable to find work in industries as their short contracts, hardly exceeding six months, hindered their acquisition of the skills or semi-skills required by employers (Hake, 1977, 58; Stichter, 1982, 131; Parker, 1949, 51). As unemployment hit Africans in Nairobi, the situation of women, who had over the years suffered gender discrimination in the distribution of jobs, did not change. Apart from limited openings in domestic employment, job opportunities for women and girls remained almost non-existent (Hake, 1977,65). Consequently, many African women desiring personal earnings in Nairobi resorted to commodity exchange (Buoga Obuya, personal communication, January 11, 2015; Charles Rubia, personal communication March 10, 2015;

Eunice Reuben, personal communication, July 23, 2014).

The opportunities for Africans in Nairobi's commercial sector also continued to be strictly controlled. Street vending where a number of unemployed Africans including women, had attempted to eke out a living over time saw the imposition of more and more restrictions in the 1940s. The new rules were amendments to the Nairobi Municipal Hawkers By-Laws 1928, which had made the possession of a hawker license mandatory for one to hawk legally in the town. However, throughout the 1930s the laws were not fully executed because of weaknesses in the methods and availability of personnel (Onstad, 1990,123). One set of the new regulations was the Nairobi Municipal Hawkers Amendment By-Laws (1942) which delimited the goods and license fees chargeable to hawkers per month or per annum to peddle their wares in defined places within the Municipality. The laws also provided that every hawker be issued with a badge at the cost of shillings 2/- deposit returnable upon the cancellation of a license and/or the return of the badge. Additionally, the regulations granted the Council with the authority to fix the maximum number of licenses from time to time (KNA LG 2/125 Municipalities and Local Government, Nairobi Municipal Council By-Laws-Hawkers). A further amendment of the by-laws in 1947 for the first time defined hawker to mean "any person who, whether as principal, agent or employee carries on the business of offering or exposing goods for sale, barter or exchange elsewhere than at a fixed place". The regulations also forbade the sale of any meat or poultry whether fresh or cooked, anywhere within the Municipality unless the seller was in possession of an unexpired license issued by the Town Clerk authorizing him to do so (KNA LG 2/125 Municipalities and Local Government, Nairobi Municipal Council By-Laws-Hawkers). To obtain a license, an applicant was to be

screened for good conduct, and for African women, only those residents in Nairobi and depending on hawking for a livelihood were to receive the licenses (Ngesa, 1996:158; Hake, 1975:54; Onstad, 1990:86; NCC/CR Archives CCN Minutes, NAC Meeting February 11, 1946).

A number of Africans, including women, unable to fulfil the legitimate hawking requirements, operated illegally in Nairobi and became victims of the hawking By-laws. In 1949, among the recorded criminal cases, ere a number of hawkers. Of these 309 were arrested for hawking without a license; 332 for hawking within scheduled area; 6 for hawking meat within the Municipality; 1 for hawking within the precincts of a public market and 79 for failing to wear hawker's arm badge (KNA LG 2/39 Municipal Council of Nairobi AR 1949, 12). This record of arrests has not segregated the offenders by gender. But Guy Hunter's observation that in the colonial period, the police of East Africa harried the vegetable sellers, usually women, on a periodic round up of unauthorized markets in an urban estate (Cited in Werlin, 1974,57) is a pointer to the fact that women were often among those apprehended. The arrested were fined, imprisoned and/or returned to their rural land units. Instantaneously, however, the unbearable conditions in the reserves pushed those repatriated to their up-country homes back to the town to still face the viciousness of Nairobi's colonial regime (Ngesa et al, 2022,112-119). Landless, hurried by the authorities, not only for attempting to earn an honest living by trade, but even for just being in the town, Africans in Nairobi, many of them Kikuyu, lived in poverty and misery (Van Zwanenberg, 1972, 184-186), a fact which made them fertile ground for the spread of the Mau Mau uprising. The Mau Mau war was therefore, the culmination of years of disgruntlement, particularly over loss of land, poor wages or lack of employment and harassment by authorities in towns such as Nairobi, ostensibly for being there



“illegally.” A widespread feeling among Africans, particularly the Kikuyu was that the British colonial regime was in a deliberate mission to impoverish them (Wa Githumo, 1990: 3)

The Mau Mau insurgency was initiated by a group of several thousand Kikuyu squatters who were evicted from the White Highlands and resettled in an area called Olenguruone in the Rift Valley region. When around 1943, the colonial government once again threatened them with yet another eviction, the Olenguruone residents radicalized the Kikuyu practice of oathing- a custom which had traditionally united the community to face an enemy in battle. Through the oathing rituals, the Kikuyu at Olenguruone were bound together in an effort to fight the injustice of British rule (Elkins, 2003,25; Kanogo, 1987,128-129). The banned Kikuyu Central Association (KCA)<sup>7</sup>, still operating underground, took control of the movement and through an extensive campaign, spread it into much of the Rift Valley and Central Province including Nairobi (Elkins, 2003, 25-26; Kanogo, 1987,126-127). By 1950, Mau Mau had come to the attention of the colonial government and was banned (Lonsdale, 1990, 394). Nonetheless, violence flared up again in 1952 on settler farms where squatter cultivation and grazing rights were more sternly enforced in the interest of the settlers, in the Kikuyu reserve where Mau Mau's opponents were murdered and in the slums of Nairobi that had become characterized by unemployment and crime (Lonsdale, 1990, 394). Many supporters of Mau Mau in Nairobi were the harassed illegal hawkers, many of them women. Some of such women became messengers, secret agents, oath givers and suppliers of food to the Mau Mau (Newsinger, 1981:164; Robertson, 1997,134). One of these women Wangu Kinyori,

a former trader, opted out of the sector and dedicated seven years to the Mau Mau cause (Kiruthu, 2006, 170). For such women, service to the Mau Mau seemed to be a higher calling, with better hopes for the future than life in the uncertain illegal hawking sector of Nairobi.

By 1952, Mau Mau had become not just a popular African resistance movement in Nairobi against colonialism, but the city was its headquarters. According to Hake (1977, 61) Nairobi was ‘an arms depot, a recruiting base, a source of the supply of medicine and money: the control tower of the movement’ and a network of cells around the city facilitated mass oathings (Hake, 1977, 60). Lawlessness reigned in the town and its vicinities, and market proximities became bizarre danger spots. As a crime wave hit Nairobi, endless stories of threats, murders and thefts of property rent the air. On 7<sup>th</sup> October 1952, Senior Chief Waruhiu, an eminent Christian leader in Kiambu and top government spokesman in Kikuyu was murdered just outside Nairobi. On 20<sup>th</sup> October, the new Governor of Kenya, Sir Evelyn Baring, declared a State of Emergency in all areas affected by the Mau Mau (Rosberg and Nottingham, 1966, 276; Bates, 1987,1).

In the aftermath of the government’s declaration of a State of Emergency, its priority was to win the war against Mau Mau. Consequently, Jomo Kenyatta, Fred Kubai, Paul Ngei, Achieng Oneko, Bildad Kaggia and many other political leaders deemed to be the masterminds of the insurgency, were expeditiously arrested and detained, convinced that in doing so it, deprived Mau Mau of its political voices. Concurrently, the Kenya African Union (KAU) was banned, and nationwide political parties and public meetings prohibited (Rosberg and Nottingham, 1966, 276-278; Werlin, 1974, 75; Clayton, 1976: 5-7, 21). In

<sup>7</sup> The Kikuyu Central Association was formed in 1924. Right from its formation, its members rejected European dominance to the extent that membership of the association

became a [personal symbol of dissent. Carl Rosberg and John Nottingham (1985). Nationalism in colonial Kenya: The myth of Mau Mau. Nairobi, Transafrica Press: 87

addition to the official Kenya African Rifles (KAR) battalions serving in Kenya before the declaration of the State of Emergency, the Governor requested for more reinforcements. Thus a British battalion from Egypt and two other battalions arrived in Kenya on the night of 20<sup>th</sup> October 1952 (Clayton, 1976, 33). However, the British battalions, consisting largely of conscript soldiers, few of whom had training on forest warfare, were no match for the Mau Mau whose supplies of food, money and recruits were regular, and who were familiar with their impenetrable forest battle fronts (Elkins, 2005, 37-38). Thus, in spite of the counter-insurgency measures, Mau Mau was untamed as crime in Nairobi and its surroundings reached an all-time high. On November 27<sup>th</sup>, 1952, Councillor Tom Mbotela was brutally murdered and his lifeless body found near Shauri Moyo market (popularly known as Burma market).<sup>8</sup> A subsequent police raid of the market netted several traders who were held for interrogation. This police action was a desperate effort to unearth the killers of Mbotela and Mau Mau guns. Hours after the raid, fire broke out at the market and razed it to the ground. Traders at the market, women and men, made serious losses (Furedi, 1973, 284-284; KNA MAA Deposit 2/194, African Affairs Department AR, 59; Stella Amodi, personal communication, July 6, 2014).

Tension remained high up to the end of 1952, in Nairobi as more Mau Mau suspects were 1 arrested and detained. Some women traders were victims of such arrests and detentions, which consequently brought their trading activities to a halt (Viginia Wathoni, personal communication, August 1, 2014; Jacobo Maweu, personal communication, November 9, 2015; Pancrasio Wahinya, November 8, 2015). Others were

displaced while yet others had their trading activities interrupted by the situation which was doubly dangerous. Being on the streets or open shop premises attracted Mau Mau or the police. On the one hand, the Mau Mau would beat their victims senseless for not being part of the movement, while on the other hand, the police might pick up the person as a suspect who might end up in jail or detention. Commerce in Nairobi came to a near standstill (Ngesa, 1996, 163-165).

Nairobi, the headquarters of the Mau Mau, became a battleground between the government and the insurgents. The government, in its effort to win the war against the Mau Mau onslaught, brought Africans in Nairobi under closer administration of the Central government through a network of District Officers and Chiefs throughout the city. Curfews imposed in the African locations from 9.00 p.m. to 6.00 a.m. were ruthlessly enforced by Loyalist Home Guards who patrolled the Nairobi streets and who were allowed to shoot on the spot, any African found on the roads during the curfew hours (Werlin, 1974, 59; Kiruthu, 2006, 169; KNA JW/6/7 Nairobi Extra Provincial District AR 1955, 1; KNA JW 6/6 District Commissioner Nairobi, Handing over Notes, 20/2/1957,3). The government also immediately barricaded the African locations with a barbed wire fence and cleared farmlands and bush in the location vicinities to unmask the Mau Mau hideouts (Clayton, 1976: 25; Furedi, 1990,120).

Evidently, the Mau Mau offensive gathered momentum as more Kikuyu entered the town (Clayton, 1976, 25; Furedi, 1990,120). Some of the immigrants were Kikuyu squatter refugees from the Rift Valley, who had been repatriated to the Kikuyu reserves for resisting new squatter regulations, which, among other things, required

<sup>8</sup> Having established itself after the Second World War, partly through the remittances of returning soldiers who were refused business licences by the government, the market was named Burma after the war of Burma”

(Myanmar). Hyde (2002) ‘The Nairobi General Strike [1950]: from protest to insurgency’ in Azania Volume 37 [2002], Journal of the British Institute in Eastern Africa.:242.

them to be photographed. To many of the repatriates, the idea of photographs was untenable as it was a grim reminder of the infamous kipande system.<sup>9</sup> By the end of 1953, approximately 100,000 squatters fleeing the Rift Valley had arrived in Central Province where they were confronted with new problems namely, rising landlessness, starvation and chiefs' misuse of Emergency powers and regulations to intimidate perceived enemies. More than 30 per cent of the new arrivals could not survive without relief from the government, and scores found their way into Nairobi (Rosberg and Nottingham, 1966, 285-286; Onstad, 1990, 139; Kiruthu, 2006,171). It is no wonder that despite many Kikuyu, Embu and Meru being expelled from the city in 1953, the East African Standard newspaper could still report in May that the population of Nairobi was increasing at the rate of 3000 persons per annum (Kiruthu, 2006, 170; EAS, May 23, 53; Pancrasio Wahinya, personal communication, November 8, 2015; Viginia Wathoni 1/8/2014; Eunice Reuben, Personal communication July 23, 2014). Thus, in spite of discharging considerable reinforcements to bolster the inadequate police establishment in the struggle for the control of Nairobi, the city remained under the grip of Mau Mau. In 1953, in response to the evident deterioration in the position of the government, further British contingents arrived in Kenya under the command of General George Erskine (Clayton, 1976:22-23). But as the insurgents continued to arm themselves, crime in Nairobi escalated and a

<sup>9</sup> The kipande system was introduced by the Registration of Natives Ordinance 1915 whose implementation took effect in 1919 and 1920. See Sharon Stichter (1982). *Migrant Labour in Kenya: Capitalism and African Response, 1895-1975*, p.46. Rosberg and Nottingham have offered a more graphic description of the kipande noting that "The kipandes were registration certificates placed in a small solid metal container which usually hung from the neck of the owner on a piece of string. To the Africans they were a perpetual reminder of a subordinate status, and, as such they remained a political issue up to and through the Emergency". See Carl G Rosberg and John Nottingham (1966). *Nationalism in Colonial Kenya: The Myth of Mau Mau*. Transafrica Press, Nairobi, p.45.

measure of government control over the situation was only achieved in 1954 (Kiruthu, 2006, 168-170; White, 1990, 210-211; KNA MAA Deposit 2/194 African Affairs A.R.1952, 23; African Affairs A.R.1953, 23-27; NCC/CR Archives CCN Minutes, GPC Meeting, February 3, 1953).

### **Women Traders in Nairobi's African Locations During the Peak of the Mau Mau Emergency, 1953-1956**

Under the Emergency regulations, Africans in the locations were besieged by both Mau Mau gangs and the Home Guards. During the last months of 1952, Mau Mau launched a campaign to boycott shops and buses not owned by their adherents. Major casualties were shops and vehicles of individuals presumed to be government loyalists and the City Council shops like those in Pumwani. Many such properties were vandalized in the course of Mau Mau violence in 1953. The Kenya Bus Service vehicles<sup>10</sup> were also targeted and had to be escorted by police as the insurgents threatened to set them on fire if they remained on the road (Charles Rubia, Personal communication March 10, 2015; Eunice Reuben personal communication July 23, 2014). Although, the government, in retaliation, took steps under the Emergency regulations to close Mau Mau adherents' shops and take their buses off the road, the unrelenting Mau Mau reprisals, which included threats and killings, paralyzed transport which consequently obstructed trade (Newsinger,

<sup>10</sup> Kenya Bus Services Limited (KBS) was established in 1934 when Overseas Motor Transport Company of London started a bus service using 13 buses on 12 routes. Its aim was to offer inter-town transport to the rapidly growing population which at the time stood at approximately 50, 000 people. See Tom Opiyo (2002). The metamorphosis of Kenya bus services limited in the provision of urban transport in Nairobi. SSATP Urban Mobility Component 12<sup>th</sup> Steering Committee Meeting Maputo Conference, July 1-5, 2002.

1981, 72; KNA MAA Deposit 2/194 African Affairs A.R.1952, 23; African Affairs A.R.1953, 23-27).

Further, official trading outlets such as markets, especially in the African locations, became Mau Mau targets. Between 1953 and 1954, the Mincing Lane Wholesale Market area close to Muthurwa African Railway quarters experienced serious insecurity to the extent that only a few of the usual produce laden lorries from up-country could arrive in the town to bring the much needed food supplies. Being the acquisition source of many wholesalers and retailers in the city, few business persons, including women foodstuffs dealers' resident in the town, could obtain their provisions. Many resident women's trading operations slumbered (AR of the Registrar of Cooperative Societies, 1953,10; Registrar of Cooperative Societies AR 1954, 10; MAA Deposit 2/194 AR of the African Affairs Officer, 1953, 48).

The same period saw the markets of Kariokor, Pumwani, and Stewart Street (Municipal market) and their surroundings similarly marred by chaos, and occasional police raids were mounted to restore order. During one such raid at Shauri Moyo market, 600 temporary stalls were destroyed (Robertson, 1997, 124). Many women traders in the markets of Kariokor and Shauri Moyo, apprehensive either of harassment by government police or the Mau Mau, abandoned their operations. Amidst the unrelenting insecurity in Nairobi, some of them, feeling too frightened to continue living in the town, left altogether for their up- country homes. One of these women, the wife of Tom Mbotela who had been a partner with her husband in operating their stall in Burma (Shauri Moyo market), returned home to mourn her murdered husband and to be

away from the charged environment (Nelson Ohanya, personal communication December 21, 2015). In sum, these women lost a source of survival and many valuable years of trading experience.

Correspondingly, emergency measures against members of the Kikuyu, Embu and Meru ethnic groups saw them rounded up, searched, documented, and most were shipped off to rehabilitation camps at MacKinson Road<sup>11</sup> and Manyani<sup>12</sup> (Maloba, 86, cited in McConnell, 2005/2006, 36; Kiruthu, 2006, 171). Those who remained in Nairobi were segregated to specific areas of their own to prevent a further spread of the insurgency to other ethnic groups (Newsinger, 1981,172). Consequently, a number of Kikuyu, Embu and Meru Nairobi resident traders, including women lost many of their trading facilities (KNA MAA Deposit 2/194 African Affairs A.R.1953, 23-27; Eunice Reuben, personal communication July 23, 2014; Habbakuk Wamache personal communication March 12, 2015). A woman, who had operated her husband's shop in Kaloleni shopping centre remembered how during the Emergency, Kikuyus were moved from Kaloleni to Bahati, Makadara and Ziwani (Eunice Reuben, personal communication July 23, 2014). Her own family was moved from a house in Kaloleni to Bahati, but their shop was relocated to Ziwani. Another woman, a long-term city trader, who had operated a poultry and eggs stall in Stewart Street market since early 1951, came face to face with Mau Mau brutality in 1953. Having ran into the gang while on her way to the shop, the insurgents greeted her. However, unable to respond using their jargon, the gang beat and robbed her of money before she narrowly escaped their further wrath. Fearing for her life, she closed the shop and left Nairobi for

<sup>11</sup> MacKinson Road is a town in Kwale County. It is located between Voi and Mombasa.

<sup>12</sup> Manyani in Taita Taveta County was the location of the infamous Manyani prison where many Mau Mau prisoners were incarcerated



her rural home in Embu following her already repatriated husband (DN, September 3, 1993: 14).

Generally, the losses of women traders over the period are apparent from the fact that sellers of pots, offal, porridge and beans, who were most possibly women, disappeared from the markets. The cooked food stallholders, another group of traders where women were likely to be the majority, saw a precipitate decline (Robertson, 1997, 125). The occasional references to illegal women hawkers in official records as before the Emergency, disappeared altogether. The huge blow of the Mau Mau Emergency to the women resident traders cannot be gainsaid.

Similar interruptions beleaguered the exchange activities of commuter women traders. Over the years, this group of women had evolved a tradition of travelling with back loads, or cartloads of goods from their home areas in the vicinities of Nairobi to the town. From the 1940s, they frequently used trucks (for passenger transport) or the train for those close to a railway line. However, under the Emergency regulations, the population of Central Province and in parts of Embu and Meru, was forcefully moved into villages. By 1955, 854 villages with quarter acre plots to cultivate accommodated over one million Kikuyu and Embu (Robertson, 1997, 116). The impact of this deliberate dislocation of population, combined with the existing atmosphere of conflict, led to the closure of a number of African markets and produce buying centres in Central Province as they came to be perceived as insurgent dens. As the closure of markets imposed a temporary shortage on the acquisition of goods to sell, while the security demands of the Emergency like the pass system blocked a number of women from accessing the town, many commuter women's trading activities ground to a halt. (Ngesa, 1996, 164; KNA MAA Deposit 2/194 African Affairs A.R.1953, 47;

Pancrasio Wahinya, personal communication November 8, 2015). Thus, the trading operations of the commuter women traders, like those of their counterparts resident in Nairobi, were interrupted by the Mau Mau Emergency situation, to the extent that it compromised their accessibility to cash, at least temporarily. By extension, it disabled the women's ability to purchase many of the western goods that had become for them household items like sugar, tea and rice.

Generally, the interruption of the women's exchange activities affected their clientele as well. A number of people who were accustomed to the women itinerant traders decried their disappearance as such women had sold to them goods such as vegetables at their doorsteps, and even on credit. They recalled how prior to the Emergency, they had bought from the women, food items, among them big cabbages for as little as twenty five cents. Others remembered them for going an extra mile to retain a customer by giving a few extra tomatoes or onions or whatever else they sold, which then went along way to sustain the lowly paid African workers (Pancrasio Wahinya, personal communication November 8, 2015; Habbakuk Wamache, personal communication March 12, 2015; Eunice Reuben, personal communication July 23, 2014).

The unstable situation in Nairobi, particularly in the African locations notwithstanding, the need to supply and/or distribute goods for use by the many Africans still resident in the town, majority of whom were people with limited resources, persisted. But, the cost of living of Africans rose faster than the growth in their earnings. According to the Labour Department Annual Report 1953, the wages of Africans employed in urban areas, including Nairobi, fell under the categories below



*Table 1: Africans Employed in Urban Areas*

<b>Wage Group</b>	<b>Private Industry</b>	<b>Public Services</b>
Shillings Per Month	Percentage	Percentage
Under 65	26	8
65-99	46	44
100-199	23	35
200 and over	5	13
Total	100	100

*Source: Labour Department Annual Report 1953:42 Table 5a III*

The above earnings include the value of any rations or housing provided by the employer.

According to the table 1 above, 72 per cent of Africans employed in industry and 52 per cent in the public services earned below Shillings 99/-. Further statistics from the Labour Commissioner show that the average gross earning of African workers in Nairobi was Shillings 97 in private industry and 132 in public services, inclusive of the value of any rations, housing, overtime and output bonuses. However, oral sources reveal that overtime and bonuses were not part of the African workers' regular pay package, which means that the Labour Commissioner's calculation of average gross earnings indicated above could be an exaggeration (Labour Department Annual Report 1953, 4 Table 6; Habbakuk Wamache, personal communication March 12, 2015; Nelson Ohanya, personal communication December 21, 2015).

Even if the high Labour Department figures were to be taken in to account, the cost of living had moved several indices higher than wages owing

to the steep rise in the cost of commodities and accommodation. According to the Report of the Commission on the Civil Services of the East African Territories and the East African High Commission (1953-54:37), the cost of living of Africans in Nairobi had risen by 44 per cent between 1947 and 1953.<sup>13</sup>

Accommodation expenses also continued to be driven upwards by the perpetual shortage of housing for Africans. In spite of the construction of additional housing quarters in Bahati (completed in 1953/54), Bondeni (completed in 1954) and Makadara (completed in 1956/57),<sup>14</sup> the problem of housing not only remained, but was exacerbated by the demolition in 1953, of slums such as Mathare, Buru Buru and Kariobangi where many Africans had found residential reprieve (KNA K.363.5 KEN Appendices to the Report on the Control of The Nairobi City Council's African Housing Rental Estates, 1958, Appendix B; KNA MAA Deposit 2/194 African Affairs A.R.1953, 23-27; White, 1990, 209). By the end of the year, there was an official shortage of 20,000 bed spaces and that

<sup>13</sup> This was calculated excluding rent and all increases in duties on alcohol and tobacco since 1939. Report of the Commission on the Civil Services of the East African Territories and the East African High Commission, 1953-54, Vol 1:37

<sup>14</sup> Occupation of these houses was in phases and a number of units were already occupied in 1953 See Finance Committee

Meeting 19<sup>th</sup> Jan, 1953, . Source: Labour Department Annual Report 1953:42 Table 5a III  
CCN Minutes NCC -CR Archives; KNA LG 2/40 Nairobi City Council AR of the Social Welfare Worker (Housing), 1952:1

was after many Kikuyu, Embu and Meru expelled from the town lost their accommodation to other ethnic groups (KNA K.363.5 KEN Appendices to the Report on the Control of the Nairobi City Council's African Housing Rental Estates, 1958, Appendix B; Werlin, 1974:50; KNA MAA Deposit 2/194 African Affairs A.R.1953, 23-27).

The increase in rents by the City Council in 1954 worsened the deteriorating financial situation of African workers in Nairobi. Rents of the Council houses in estates like Kariokor, Shauri Moyo, Pumwani, Kaloleni, Bondeni, and Bahati rose from between shillings 6/50 and 16/50 a month in 1953 to between Shillings 11/- and 100/-<sup>15</sup> in 1954 depending on the nature.

and size of the house (NCC/CR Archives CCN Minutes Finance Committee Meeting 19<sup>th</sup> Jan

1953; NCC/CR Archives CCN Minutes, Finance Committee Meeting, 18/01/54).

Additionally, shortage of accommodation fuelled sub-tenancy of Council houses at exorbitant costs. Some tenants to whom the houses were officially allocated raised their rent and cash savings by subletting sleeping space for as high as Shillings 20/- a month (NCC/CR Archives CCN Minutes, Finance Committee Meeting, January 18, 1954; Nelson Ohanya, personal communication 21, 2015; Jacobo Maweu, personal communication November 9, 2015). Nonetheless, the same period saw a rapid upward movement in African wages as demonstrated by the minimum wage increases between 1952 and 1956 shown below.

*Table 2: Minimum Wage Increases (in Shillings) 1951-1956*

Year	Min. Wage	House Allowance	Sources
October 1951	42/-	5/-	KNA Report of the Committee on African Wages in Kenya, 1954:19-20, 177
January 1952	43/50	5/-	-do-
May 1952	43/50	6/-50	-do-
June 1952	48/-	6/50	-do-
August 1952	50/-	6/50	-do-
May 1953	52/50	7/-	-do-
January 1955	71/50	13/-	KNA MAA 7/158 Annual Reports and Returns, City Council of Nairobi (African Affairs Department 1956) :8
May 1955	82/50	17/50	KNA J/W 6/7 Annual Report Nairobi Extra-Provincial District 1955:12

*Source: Labour Department Annual Report 1953:42 Table 5a III*

<sup>15</sup>Some City Council houses built in the 1950s were meant to accommodate a family unlike the majority that were meant for a single man. This explains the high rent of shillings 100 /- which appears rather too expensive. The building of family housing was a response to the Labour Department's pressure for

the need for the stabilization of African labour to create skilled and semi- skilled workers- an achievement which had been hindered over the years by lack of family housing. See LABOUR DEPARTMENT ARS 1949:16; 1952:22; 1953:6

Even so, the wage rises failed to fulfil the basic survival needs of African workers in Nairobi. No wonder the East African Royal Commission Report 1953-1955 (:xi), could still note that wages earned by Africans in towns were not even enough to take care of the needs of a single man. It went on to comment that “Africans were in receipt of wages insufficient to provide for their basic needs of health, decency and working efficiency” (The East African Royal Commission Report, 1953-1955:xi). In these circumstances of poverty, one method Africans adopted in their struggle to make ends meet was a saving on food. Essentially, therefore, the services of the African women traders especially the itinerant ones whose prices were not only affordable, but allowed bargain and credit remained necessary (Pancrasio Wahinya personal communication November 8, 2015; Habbakuk Wamache, March 12, 2015; Eunice Reuben, personal communication July 23, 2014).

However, during the Mau Mau Emergency, especially in the aftermath of ‘Operation Anvil’ in May 1954, the removal of about 24,000 Kikuyu, Embu and Meru led to an acute shortage of African labour for commerce and industry and public services. This created job opportunities for the non- Kikuyu, Embu and Meru population including women (Labour Department AR 1954, 30; KNA JW 6/7 Nairobi Extra-Provincial District AR 1955:3; KNA Deposit 7/119 Policy Control of Africans in Nairobi and Mombasa; KNA ARC MAA 2/3/36 Central Province AR 1954, 55). Indeed, available evidence shows that before the Emergency, women were mainly employed in agriculture except for a small number in urban areas who worked as children’s nurses or did sorting in industries in urban areas (Labour Dept A.Rs 1951,14; 1952:24). In Nairobi in 1952, for instance, females and juveniles non-agricultural and public services employees were only 974 (KNA LG 3/2 Municipalities and Local Government- General Miscellaneous 1953-1956,

No pages). But in 1954, 2009 women were employed in the city of Nairobi (Labour Department AR 1954: Appendix 1, Table 1(f)). An even more significant development in women’s employment was their entry into secondary industries- a field until then almost exclusively reserved for men (Labour Department AR 1954,30). Given that ever since the early years of Nairobi a number of women traders had taken up the activity because of lack of employment, it is highly probable that the new opportunities in the job sector diverted some women from trade.

Even so, the job opportunities could still not absorb the whole female population in Nairobi which by 1951 had stood at 20% of the estimated African population of 80,000 (Labour Department AR 1954, 30; see also table 2.2; KNA LG 2/40 City Council of Nairobi AR 1951, 10). It is unlikely that this male to female ratio varied significantly during the Emergency as many Kikuyu women continued to reside in the city before and after ‘Operation Anvil’. (KNA MAA7/158 African Affairs Department AR 1956,8). Kikuyu, Embu and Meru, both men and women were allowed to remain in Nairobi as long as

- “a) they have been born and domiciled in Nairobi...and have no land rights in their tribal unit.
- b) they have long been domiciled in Nairobi ...and have no land rights in their tribal unit.
- c) in the case of females are unemployed and the unmarried adult daughters of respectable KEM families authorized to live in Nairobi.
- or
- d) are unemployed widows or relatives upon KEM persons authorized to reside in Nairobi or elsewhere out of the KEM land unit”

Source: KNA ARC (MAA) 2/5/184 I Unrest, General Emergency Regulations, Movement and Resident Permits for Kikuyu, Embu and Meru 1953-1954, 24

Besides the women living in Nairobi, many others residing in the peripheries of the town drew a livelihood from its economy (EAS July 17, 1953). From among these women was a section who remained determined to continue earning a livelihood by exchanging commodities, especially food items, in Nairobi.

Until the storm of “Operation Anvil” in 1954, there were those who dared trade by establishing links with the Mau Mau. This was a crucial factor in obtaining Mau Mau security in the city, until then, largely under their control. Such Mau Mau connections enabled some of the women to trade clandestinely usually, under the cover of darkness (Wairimu Chege, personal communication October 25, 2014). One woman’s case illustrates the logic behind the trade as well as the processes it involved and the returns that made the risks worthwhile. Being a single mother, the woman desired good savings and investments to take care of the future of her two sons. She therefore viewed the period as an opportune time to sell goods in Nairobi for good profit in the prevailing environment of very little competition. She hired a truck and a driver to deliver food commodities from Kiambu to Nairobi. Nonetheless, she did not lose sight of the fact that the government confiscated trucks delivering produce to Nairobi illegally. Thus, her, like fellow Mau Mau who operated a similar business, used dingy routes to get to the city.<sup>16</sup> Once in Nairobi, they had a well-known night spot where they parked their vehicle and in darkness, did illicit marketing of their produce while a Mau Mau gang kept vigil to deal with any Home Guards on sight. Buyers had to admit they were Mau Mau to get what they needed. According to the evidence, the business was very risky but paid well as the woman would get as much as Shillings 50/- in one night (Mariam Nyokabi, personal communication November 10, 2015). Nevertheless, when Nairobi

was swept of its Kikuyu population in 1954, the woman was detained, bringing an end to the trading career of a woman entrepreneur who leveraged support for Mau Mau to make money and save for her children’s future (Wairimu Chege, personal communication October 25, 2014).

There were other women risk takers who also managed to trade under the turbulent Emergency conditions but chose the path of camouflaging their Mau Mau connections to prevent government police harassment and/or closure of their premises. Driven by her widowhood, which rendered her the sole family bread winner, the Luo woman with an eating house in Shauri Moyo struggled to keep her enterprise afloat despite the doldrums. She banked on the fact that a number of the male African workers detested cooking-worse still in the overcrowded living conditions in the African locations, preferring to eat readymade food at an affordable eating outlet (Buoga Obuya, personal communication September 8, 2015). For her enterprise to survive the challenging security situation of the times, she covertly supported the Mau Mau by allowing them to use her eating house as a meeting point. Furthermore, even though she lived with the eldest daughter of detained KAU leader, Jomo Kenyatta because of her friendship with the family, the insurgents interpreted this as proof of her full support for the insurrection. She was thus able to operate under the shelter of the Mau Mau who also formed a good clientele (Buoga Obuya, personal communication September 8, 2015; Daily Nation, October 20, 1978).

Nevertheless, the authorities became suspicious of the activities at the eating house. Accordingly, sometime in early 1953, while some Kikuyus were eating at the joint, Home Guards stormed in. They roughed-up the woman and her two sons

<sup>16</sup> See also Robertson, 1997:116 with reference to the illegal marketing of produce in the city.

before picking and bundling them in to custody. However, having consistently argued that as the owner of the 'hotel' her duty was to serve food to all clients and that she had no idea whether the people she served were Mau Mau or not, she was released. It is not clear how an owner of a business outlet accommodating Mau Mau would so easily be let free by pledging ignorance of the people she served at a time when the government was determined to stamp out the movement by any means. We can only speculate that the woman was most probably advantaged by belonging to the Luo community whose members barely supported the movement.<sup>17</sup> But her release by the police notwithstanding, the harassment she suffered at their hands left her shaken. Moreover, her two sons who also had been picked by police remained in custody for a long time before they could be freed. The woman's experience was a painful reminder of fact that Europeans were still the power wielders in Kenya. Even so, her defence which culminated to her release is a demonstration of her agency in a difficult environment. She probably belongs to the group of Nairobi residents who told White that to wade through the Mau Mau Emergency, they gave money and support to both sides (White, 1990, 210).

However, insofar as the woman's confrontation with police weakened her courage to continue trading, she did not lose sight of the fact that the restaurant was the sole source of her family's livelihood. She opted to operate behind closed doors, serving only familiar clients or those that they brought. Although this new method deprived her of a large portion of her initial profit, it gave her something little to eat while she remained

sheltered away from the possibility of another nasty encounter with the police (Buoga Obuya, personal communication September 8, 2015; Daily Nation, 20.10.1978). At any rate, these women who dared trade in the difficult atmosphere of the Mau Mau Emergency are important instances of African women traders' bravery and shrewdness to navigate their way in a complex conflict situation at least for a time, to continue earning a living.

It is worth noting that despite the difficult circumstances of the Mau Mau Emergency, some women acquired legitimate status as hawkers. The number of hawker licenses had been reduced from 737 in 1952 to 391 in 1954 for easier management (White, 1990, 208; NCC/CR Archives CCN Minutes, Ordinary Monthly Meeting of Council January 27, 1953; GPC Meeting February 3, 1953; NCC/CR Archives CCN Minutes, GPC Meeting November 6, 1951; GPC Meeting, October 6, 1953; Onstad, 1990, 148). Out of this number, at least the 105 licenses for uji hawkers, whose major area of operation was the industrial area, were certainly held by women. These women and a few others in the sale of vegetables, tea and uji obtained the hawker permits through the help of Assistant African Affairs Officer, Dedan Githegi (White, 1990, 210; KNA MAA7/158 African Affairs Department AR 1956, 24).

On the whole, however, the exchange of goods in the town's African locations became a male domain. Apart from licenses for hawking uji, men dominated the rest of the licenses, which were distributed among 125 vegetable hawkers; 15 each for fruit and tea hawkers, and the remainder

<sup>17</sup> This is not to say that there were no Luos in the Mau Mau. Many Luos and Kambas had also taken the oath See AR of the Nairobi Extra-Provincial District, 1955: 1; One of the Kapenguria six, Achieng Oneko was Luo. See Elkins, Caroline (2005). *Imperial reckoning: The untold story of Britain's gulag in Kenya*. New York, Henry Holt and Company, LLC.p.197. Kenyan nationalists like Tom Mboya

and Argwings Kodhek also supported Mau Mau in different ways. See Alistair Boddy Evans (2017). *Biography: Joseph Thomas Mboya in Atrocities Africa*, (2017), Thought.com online; Evans Onyango (undated). Argwings Kodhek (1923-1969). The Mau Mau Lawyer and Luo Politician in East Africa and the Global 1960s Online.



to new cloth sellers, native handicrafts handlers, toothbrushes (mswakis) flowers, miraa and newspapers. Ethnically, these male hawker licenses were spread among the Kamba, a few Luos and Luhyas and loyal Kikuyu. Shops and property as in Pumwani, were also mainly owned by the Home Guards (NCC/CR Archives CCN Minutes, GPC Meeting, January 22, 1954; GPC Meeting, October 6, 1953; Robertson, 1997, 116; Clayton, 1976, 117).

Even so, unlike in the past when male business owners exploited female labour for no pay, the Mau Mau troubles forced men to run their own enterprises. To the Mau Mau, the pro-government traders were traitors. For this reason, the insurgents often launched surprise attacks on their enterprises in the African locations during which times the traders would be beaten and their goods stolen or destroyed (Furedi, 1990, 112-113). It became prudent for most license holders to sell their goods behind closed doors and only to known clients. The traders also learnt that it was a greater risk to leave a female relative such a wife or a daughter to sell on their behalf as Mau Mau outrages against women had more serious repercussions (Pancrasio Wahinya, personal communication November 8, 2015; Eunice Reuben, personal communication July 23, 2014; Wairimu Chege, personal communication October 25, 2014). To this end, the Mau Mau Emergency temporarily liberated women from offering unpaid labour in running of male enterprises.

In the years 1953 to 1954, new measures by the government to completely dislodge the hitherto unyielding Mau Mau from Nairobi had further impacts on African, especially women's trading activities. When, in May 1953, General Sir George Erskine was sent to Kenya to bring an end to the violence, he took charge of the British battalions. But until 1954, the British forces, unknowledgeable about the geographical terrain of the Mau Mau landscape, were unable to defeat

the forest guerrillas. By 1954, the government had concluded that to wrest back the control of Nairobi from the Mau Mau, they needed to employ more extreme measures than hitherto. Thus, in May 1954, General George Erskine launched the infamous "Operation Anvil" to clean up Nairobi of its subversive elements. The operation which culminated in the removal of some 27,000 Africans, almost all Kikuyu from Nairobi, lasted a month and involved a huge military cordon of the African locations where police set in motion an intensive hunt for the insurgents. When the operation ended, the Mau Mau bureaucracy, lines of communication and hideouts in the city had been destroyed and Mau Mau resilience broken (Hake, 1975, 61; Clayton, 1976, 25; Elkins, 2005, 121-122; Kiruthu, 2006, 170; Onstad, 1990, 148). With this wholesale removal of the Kikuyu from Nairobi, in addition to the closure of both Kariokor and Shauri Moyo markets the same year (Robertson, 1997, 124; Onstad, 1990, 147; Kiruthu, 2006, 168-169), many more traders, among them women, especially the Kikuyu lost their trading facilities. To forestall a re-grouping of the organization's adherents back in the city, the government immediately introduced a system of passes to screen Kikuyu, Embu and Meru to ensure only loyalists had access to the town. By February 1955, 14000 passbooks had been issued to the Kikuyu, Embu and Meru males and 9000 to the females living in Nairobi. A press statement in May 1954, concerning the pass holders' engagements in Nairobi indicated that they were largely in steady and honest employment (KNA JW 6/7 Nairobi Extra Provincial District AR 1955, 4; KNA ARC (MAA) 2/5/184 1 Unrest, General Emergency Regulations, Movement and Resident Permits for Kikuyu, Embu and Meru 1953-1954, 172).

Meanwhile, the process of segregating the remaining Africans in Nairobi into separate locations continued, as did its interference with

women's enterprise activities. As the Kikuyu, Embu and Meru relocation largely to Bahati and Makadara was sustained, more women lost not only trading outlets, but goods as well. For instance, the Kikuyu woman trader referred to earlier, whose shop was relocated to Ziwani as the family moved to Bahati from Kaloleni noted that in 1954, Ziwani too was declared a non-Kikuyu area, but this time their shop was not relocated. The only option left to them was moving out of Ziwani to save their lives. They left their shop with everything inside (Eunice Reuben, personal communication July 23, 2014). Meanwhile, the non-Kikuyu, especially the Luo relocation mainly to Kaloleni also continued (Pancrasio Wahinya, personal communication November 8, 2015; Eunice Reuben, personal communication July 23, 2014; Wairimu Chege, personal communication October 25, 2014).

In the Kikuyu, Embu and Meru areas of the town, strict control through curfews and the pass book system was sustained (Hake, 1977:63; Werlin, 1974:79; White, 1990:210; Kiruthu, 2006, 170). Months after "Operation Anvil," the government maintained its fight against a remnant of the insurgents which continued to terrorize the city and peace only slowly returned to the town after the capture of one of the major Mau Mau leaders, Field Marshall Dedan Kimathi in 1956 (KNA LG 3/340 Nairobi Extra-Provincial District AR 1955,124; Onstad, 1990, 149; Hake, 1977:61).

However, owing to "Operation Anvil", a temporary labour shortage hit Nairobi to the end of 1955. There were 60,000 Africans reported in employment at the beginning of 1953 and half of them were Kikuyu. At the end of 1954, only one in four employed Africans was a Kikuyu. This meant that over a quarter of the labour had to be replaced (KNA Reported employment and Wages in Kenya, 1954,19). In spite of the enrolment of several non-Kikuyu Embu and Meru males to fill the vacancies, the shortage persisted, facilitating a sharp rise in wages. Since May 1953, the

minimum wage was only Shillings 52/50 with a housing allowance of Shillings 7.00. In May 1955 the figure had risen to Shillings 82/50 with an additional allowance of Shillings 17/50 if the employee found his own housing. The average wage for Africans, which now stood at Shilling 114/- represented a 19 per cent increase over the 1953 figure. In the heavy industries such as building, real wages for unskilled labour would be as high as Shillings 100/, far in excess of the statutory minimum. The labour shortage also led to an increase in the number of women employed in the city from 1 per cent in 1953 to 4 per cent in 1954 (KNA Report of the Committee on African Wages in Kenya, 1954,19-20, 177; KNA JW 6/7 NEPD AR 1955,12; Labour Department AR 1954:12). With the increases in wages, the purchasing power of African labourers went up approximately one and a half times, which most probably compensated, at least partly, for the loss of the displaced Kikuyu, Embu and Meru market.

Concomitantly, the removal of Kikuyu, Embu and Meru from the town and the restrictions they faced in their locations in Nairobi also meant the presence of fewer African traders, especially women, in the locations. This again opened new opportunities for the non-Kikuyu, Embu and Meru ethnic groups to supply the needs of the city (Werlin, 1974,79; KNA Reported employment and Wages in Kenya, 1954,19; KNA JW 6/7 NEPD AR 1955,2). Even so, the anxiety which hanged over the town until 1956 largely kept many women away from the town and from trade.

Thus, in the immediate post 'Operation Anvil' era in Nairobi, male dominance in the trade in the locations entrenched itself. But with a sustained crackdown on Mau Mau supporters, such male traders had to be men of 'unquestionable loyalty' to the colonial government. Consequently, members of the Luo, Abaluhya and Kamba ethnic groups, less branded as Mau Mau, were able to acquire stalls at Shauri Moyo, Kariokor and Duke Street markets (Kiruthu, 2006, 170,

173). There were even interesting arrangements where some departing Kikuyu surrendered the guardianship of their enterprises to the Luos. On the whole, therefore, inasmuch as the Mau Mau Emergency, especially in the aftermath of “Operation Anvil”, widened the commercial space for the non- Kikuyu, Embu and Meru, enabling some of their enterprises in the locations to thrive in a less competitive environment, the context of the Mau Mau crisis deprived women of the courage to seize the new opportunities (Kiruthu, 2006, 176; Robertson, 1997, 125-126;. Habbakuk Wamache, personal communication March 12, 2015; Buoga Obuya, personal communication September 8, 015; Wairimu Chege, personal communication October 25, 2014).

## Conclusion

In this paper, we have argued that prior to the emergence of Nairobi, African women living in the surroundings of the area exchanged goods on the town’s future site. From the time of the arrival of the Kenya Uganda Railway in 1899, women traders became a significant component of the population of Nairobi. Many of them were commuters, but some others traded while they lived in the town. Denied opportunities in the wage labour system, yet desiring to fit in the new money economy introduced by the British colonizers, they sold cheap goods needed by the poorly paid African wage labourers to obtain cash. Even though, they encountered challenges, especially gender discrimination, the determined manoeuvred around the regulations to conduct their activities for a livelihood or to satisfy their tastes for the cheap imported western goods. The rise of the Mau Mau uprising nearly overturned these gains.

The Mau began in the Rift Valley as a result of squatter agitation against new regulations governing their co-existence on the settler farms

with their European owners. The agitation quickly spread throughout the settler areas in the Rift Valley, Central Province and Nairobi. Thus, Nairobi in the first half of the 1950s, was a region of tension and conflict. The government’s realization of the Mau Mau insurrection led to the declaration of a State of Emergency at the end of 1952 to deal with the rebellion. However, the movement had infiltrated Nairobi and made it its headquarters. Thus up to 1954 government effort to liberate Nairobi from Mau Mau control bore little fruit. But the fighting wrecked the commercial viability of the town, and pushed many women out of trade.

Even so, the demands of African residents of the locations, especially for food had to be met. Thus, up to 1954, daring entrepreneurial women who forged links with the Mau Mau to protect them as they continued exchanging goods in Nairobi, stepped in to the hostile commercial Nairobi climate, to exchange goods to earn family livelihoods. However, in May 1954, the government launched “Operation Anvil” which removed almost all Kikuyu, Embu and Meru Mau Mau supporters from the city. The remaining Kikuyu, Embu and Meru population was segregated in specific African locations, where the government continued to monitor their activities through new pass regulations and curfews. As a result of Anvil, a short-lived labour shortage throughout 1954 and 1955 facilitated a rise in wages which remarkably improved the buying power of African workers. But Anvil had also removed many Kikuyu traders, including women, from Nairobi. Although this opened up new trading opportunities for non- Kikuyu, Embu and Meru to make money in the less competitive sector, the feeling of uncertainty which continued to hover over the town up till 1956 prohibited many women from utilizing the openings

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