Ethnicity and Empire in Kenya

From India to Africa, British imperial rule was built upon the service of "martial races." The label described subject peoples with an apparent aptitude for warfare, who provided military support for the empire in its colonies, and indeed further afield. This book is about the creation and development of ethnic identity among East Africa's premier martial race – the Kamba – who comprise approximately one-eighth of Kenya's population today. From the British perspective, the Kamba were a simplistically "martial" and "loyal" people they recruited in large numbers as soldiers and police during the colonial era. But this understanding hid a more complex truth. Since 1800, men and women, young and old, Christians and non-Christians, and the elite and poor had fought over the virtues they considered worthy of honor in their communities, and which of their visions should constitute "Kamba." This process of "making Kamba" frequently intersected with the colonial state: Chiefs and war veterans, for instance, demonstrated skill in leveraging their martial reputation for financial benefits from the government in Kenya. But ultimately, women's arguments about the importance of community came to the fore as the Kamba role in Kenya's military declined in the 1960s. The book ends by reflecting on Kamba ethnicity in twenty-first-century Kenya, especially following the post-election violence of 2007 and 2008.

Based on extensive archival research and more than 150 interviews on several continents, Myles Osborne's *Ethnicity and Empire* is one of the first books to analyze the complex process of building and shaping "tribe" over more than two centuries. It reveals new ways to think about several themes central to the history of European empires and their colonies: soldiering, "loyalty," martial race, and the very nature of imperial control.

Ethnicity and Empire in Kenya

Loyalty and Martial Race among the Kamba, c. 1800 to the Present

MYLES OSBORNE

CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

32 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY 10013-2473, USA

Cambridge University Press is part of the University of Cambridge.

It furthers the University's mission by disseminating knowledge in the pursuit of education, learning and research at the highest international levels of excellence.

www.cambridge.org
Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9781107061040

First published 2014

Printed in the United States of America by Sheridan Books, Inc.

A catalog record for this publication is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication data
Osborne, Myles, author.
Ethnicity and empire in Kenya : loyalty and martial race among the Kamba, c. 1800 to the present / Myles Osborne.
pages cm
Includes bibliographical references.
ISBN 978-1-107-06104-0 (Hardback) 1. Kamba (African people)–History. 2. Ethnicity–Political aspects–Kenya. 3. Kenya–Politics and government–To 1963. 4. Great Britain–Colonies–Africa–Administration. 5. Allegiance–Kenya. I. Title.
DT433.545.K36083 2014
305.8963953–dc23
2014004591

ISBN 978-1-107-06104-0 Hardback

For my parents

Contents

Acknowledgments

As I was putting the finishing touches on this book, I discovered two old passports tucked away in a cardboard box at the bottom of my closet. A quick flip through revealed visa after visa – and an overwhelming variety of entry and exit stamps – from Kenya over the past decade. Some simple calculations disclosed that I had traveled to the country seven times, and spent close to two years living there.

After the predictable flash of concern that I should, perhaps, have more to show for these research trips, my next thought was of the vast number of debts I had incurred along the way. They were not, of course, restricted to people in Kenya, but many others in the United States and United Kingdom who provided academic counsel, research assistance, or simply a friendly face in an unfamiliar place. This book would never have been concocted, written, or published without the help of the people mentioned below, though they bear no responsibility for any errors that appear in its text.

This final product has been written, shredded, and rewritten more times than I care to remember since its first manifestation as a doctoral thesis in 2008. But I hope that it retains the attention to detail, nuances of social history, and clear argumentation that I learned at Harvard University under the guidance of Emmanuel Akyeampong and Caroline Elkins. During each stage of the dissertation they were generous and encouraging, and have continued to play a role in my career as mentors. Similarly, John Lonsdale has helped guide this project since 2006, with the characteristic thoughtfulness that has inspired many junior scholars. This book derives, in many ways, from arguments put forth in his classic essay "The Moral Economy of Mau Mau," published in 1992.

His encouragement to think deeply about the cultural basis for ethnic identity was vital in my own learning about Africa, and in the production of this book.

In Kenya, Mwendwa Musyimi accompanied me on innumerable trips around the country to conduct interviews. He is one of the most hard-working and good-humored people I know, and the quality of my oral interviews owes much to his personality and acumen. I doubt whether there exists any pertinent political or social question about Kenyan society that we have not debated on some hillside during the course of a multi-hour walk. Many of those conversations concerned the men and women who were the sources for our interviews, and often our hosts: I can certainly never repay the countless cups of tea, plates of *mũthokoi* (de-husked maize), or beds we were offered, nor will I forget the hours people took to sit with us and patiently discuss Kamba history.

In Nairobi, John Nottingham has been a good friend and source of wisdom on Kenyan history (not to mention England's cricket team) since 2004. During the same period, Frederick Iraki of the United States International University has been a constant presence, always sharing local knowledge and sage counsel. And a group of Kenyanists provided academic stimulation and excellent company: They include Brian Casady, Dave Eaton, Lynsey Farrell, Sunil Lakhani, Julie MacArthur, Daniel Ostendorff, and Suraj Shah. Sana Aiyar's copious and typically hilarious responses to questions about Kenya's Indian community were gratefully received, as were Kelly Jo Bahry's offers of couch space, floor space, or company in a *matatu* (public minibus) on the way to an interview.

In the Kenya National Archives, Peterson Kithuka and Evanson Kiiru were generous with their time and expertise, while Richard Ambani discovered "lost" files with a panache that has proved the savior for several generations of Kenyanist historians. Archivists at many other repositories have provided invaluable assistance. These include the staff at the National Archives, Imperial War Museum, University of Birmingham, British Library, and Rhodes House Library in the United Kingdom; McMillan Library, the University of Nairobi Library, and Africa Inland Mission Archives in Nairobi; and the Billy Graham Center and Wheaton College Archives and Special Collections at Wheaton in the United States. Lucy McCann of Rhodes House, Brian Arensen of the Africa Inland Mission, and the staff of the Imperial War Museum went above and beyond the call of duty to help a rushed researcher. Each helped me to procure permissions to cite from restricted documents, for which I thank both them and the copyright holders of these pieces.

I owe intellectual debts to a number of scholars who have encouraged me to question and analyze my material in new and varied ways through their critical readings of my articles or chapters. In this, I am grateful to Huw Bennett, Jeremiah Kitunda, Joanna Lewis, Kate Luongo, Greg Mann, Tom Metcalf, Maarten Onneweer, Tim Parsons, Ed Steinhart, Heather Streets-Salter, and Richard Waller. John Catton and his colleagues at the King's African Rifles and East African Forces Association provided quick and detailed information about several military photographs from the Kenya National Archives.

Chuck Ambler and Derek Peterson both read the "final" draft of this book and provided extraordinarily perceptive, prompt, and helpful comments. They then proceeded to read the "final final" draft with similar attention. Whatever merits the "final final final" version owes much to their willingness to devote the time and energy to help me improve, clarify, and tighten my thinking and writing.

In Colorado, a faculty writing group including Lucy Chester, Sanjay Gautam, Mithi Mukherjee, John Willis, and especially Marjorie McIntosh helped me to refine my chapters and ideas. Scott Bruce, Susan Kent, and Anne Lester provided the friendship and mentorship that have enabled me to progress along my chosen career path with far less bumping and jarring than I experienced on the road in eastern Kenya. In addition, Reg Carlyon and her team at the Interlibrary Loan Office patiently fulfilled the most obscure of requests, while Eric Lovell drew the maps that illustrate the text, graciously tolerating repeated entreaties for increasingly minor alterations.

I am also grateful to the publishers of the following journals for permission to reproduce sections from several previous articles. Parts of Chapters 6 and 7 first appeared in the *International Journal of African Historical Studies* as "The Kamba and Mau Mau: Ethnicity, Development, and Chiefship, 1952–1960" (2010) and in the *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* as "Controlling Development: 'Martial Race' and Empire in Kenya, 1945–59" (2014). Several pages of information on the politician Paul Ngei (in Chapters 7 and 8) first appeared in "'The Cat With Nine Lives': Paul Ngei and the Making of Modern Kenya," in the *Journal of Eastern African Studies* (2012).

Various organizations and committees at Harvard University and the University of Colorado Boulder provided funding to facilitate this research. At Harvard I received grants from the Department of History, Committee on African Studies, Frederick K. Sheldon fund, Graduate Society, and Project on Justice, Welfare, and Economics at the

Weatherhead Center for International Affairs. At the University of Colorado Boulder, grants from the Graduate Committee on Arts and Humanities, Dean's Fund for Excellence, and Eugene M. Kayden fund allowed me to continue my research in Kenya and the United Kingdom. An international research program established through the generosity of Hazel Barnes and Doris Schwalbe permitted me to spend several weeks in London working at the National Archives at a crucial time in this project.

As this book neared its final stages, a number of people with Cambridge University Press hauled it toward – and then shoved it across – the finish line. They include Britto Fleming Joe, Will Hammell, Dave Morris, and Sarika Narula. Lila Stromer copyedited the entire draft with patience and great attention to detail, and Linda Woods brought the same talents to her proofreading and editing of the very last version (once I could no longer tolerate its presence in my house).

Over the past five years, Jessica Leigh has provided encouragement at the most difficult stages of this project. I first met Jess when she was in the midst of a somewhat discouraging diatribe about professors at the University of Colorado Boulder. I doubt whether she imagined then that she would end up engaged to one some years later, or know as much about the process of academic book production or the tenure system as she now does.

But finally, and most importantly: This book is dedicated to my parents. Almost nothing I have achieved – and certainly not this book – would have come to pass without the endless time, support, and inspiration they have given me over the years.

Boulder, Colorado
April 22, 2014

Maps

FIGURE 1: Map of Machakos and Kitui districts ("Ukambani") as they existed during the majority of the twentieth century.

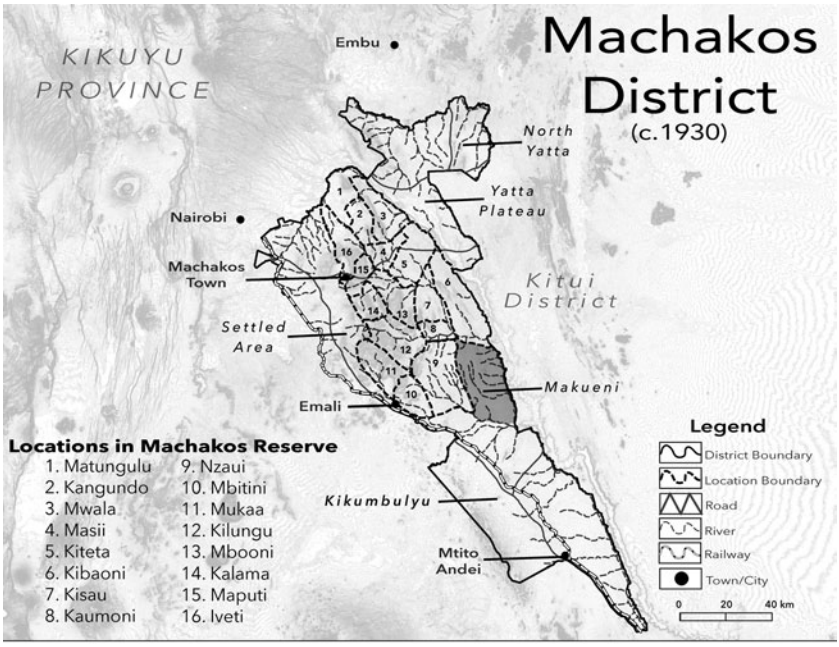

FIGURE 2: Map of Machakos district, *c.* 1930.

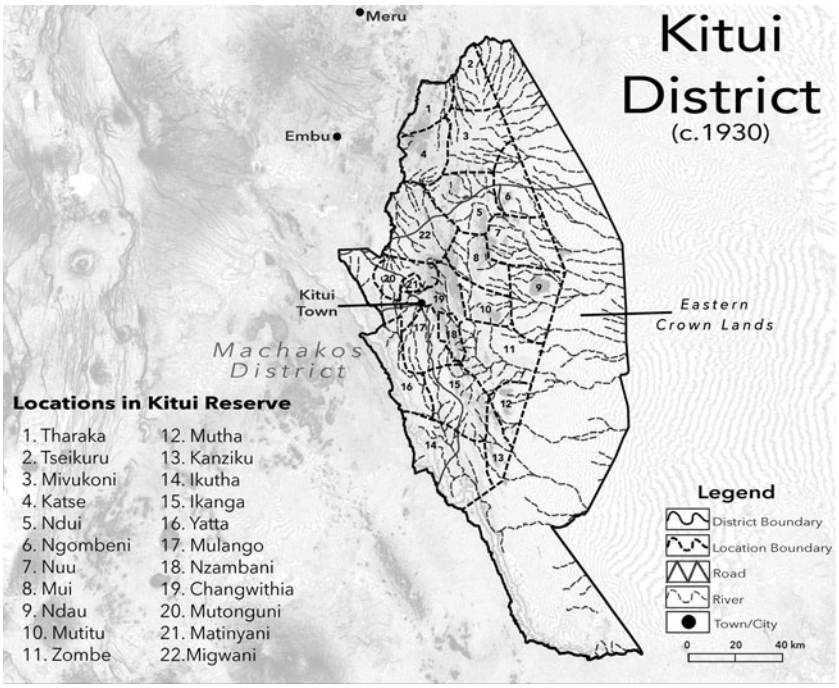

FIGURE 3: Map of Kitui district, *c.* 1930.