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978-1-107-06104-0 - Ethnicity and Empire in Kenya: Loyalty and Martial Race among the Kamba, c. 1800 to the Present

Myles Osborne

Excerpt

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## Introduction

On January 11, 1945, a young British lieutenant serving in the King's African Rifles was given the responsibility of transporting a small group of Kamba chiefs from the shores of Lake Victoria – in Uganda – to Nairobi, the capital of Kenya Colony. The chiefs had just carried out an important undertaking in the war effort: They had visited a barracks at Jinja and given speeches to boost the morale of the rank-and-file soldiers there. They had then taken pains to meet with the troops individually, and assured them that their families back at home were being looked after while they served in foreign lands. British military officials considered these sorts of visits vital for the overall prosecution of the war: for a large proportion of the rank-and-file were also Kamba, and because the “tribe” was considered East Africa's premier martial race<sup>1</sup> – a people who supposedly possessed an in-born aptitude for military service – ensuring their satisfaction was paramount in the midst of conflict.

The lieutenant piloted his lorry without issue through much of the wasteland that is northern Kenya. It is easy to imagine how the chiefs experienced the journey. They would have worn their old uniforms, carefully mended where the inevitable tears had appeared over time, and their medals would have shone brightly on their chests: for practically all of them had extensive military backgrounds and had served in the First World War in the East African Campaign. It was for this reason that British officials had chosen them – and not any other chiefs – to go to Jinja.

<sup>1</sup> During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the term “race” – in the context of “martial race” – was used to describe any ethnic, religious, or other group with “warlike” characteristics. Streets, *Martial Races*, 6–10.

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As war veterans – and deeply proud of their service – they would have borne the bumping and jarring of the rough roads stoically, without complaint. They would have conversed amongst themselves in Kikamba;<sup>2</sup> when it came to chatting with the lieutenant, some would have stuttered in stilted English, and others spoken more fluently.

To the north of Nairobi, the lieutenant pulled his lorry over at one of the checkpoints that dotted the colony during its wartime footing. He handed his papers to the British officer on duty, and exchanged small talk: “I have half the Wakamba reserve on board!” he joked, perhaps gesturing toward the back of the vehicle.

The lieutenant’s comment caused uproar. Documentary evidence does not allow us to understand precisely what upset the chiefs. Possibly they disliked being lumped together with the common men and women from the villages, or took umbrage at words they considered flippant or disrespectful. Perhaps there were other reasons. But the issue caused by one off-hand remark quickly escalated.

The following day, the lieutenant penned a groveling apology to the district commissioner of Kitui, the eastern of the two Kamba districts, from which several of the chiefs hailed. “[My] remark, I admit unreservedly, was foolish and in the poorest of taste,” he wrote, “I . . . realise that my conduct was both ill-considered and undiplomatic.” Not only had the lieutenant embarrassed himself, but also those above him in the military hierarchy. He continued: “I would be grateful . . . Sir, if you would assure the Chiefs, should they mention the incident, that I, and my superiors, are unreservedly apologetic for this breach of manners.”<sup>3</sup> It is difficult to imagine that a note about the incident did not end up in the young man’s personnel file.<sup>4</sup>

The incident encapsulates the relationship between Kamba leaders and the state in Kenya during the later colonial period. The Kamba – a Bantu-speaking people living in modern-day central and eastern Kenya, in

<sup>2</sup> This is correctly “Kikamba” but appears without the accent for ease of reading. Similarly, Gĩkũyũ – referring to the language or people of central Kenya – is rendered “Kikuyu.” All other Kikamba words – with the exception of the names of informants or historical figures – are produced in standard (accented) orthography.

<sup>3</sup> Kenya National Archives [hereafter KNA], DC/KTI/7/5, Holt to DC [District Commissioner] Kitui, January 12, 1945.

<sup>4</sup> The recollection of one former district officer – and later district commissioner – is instructive here. When I mentioned Kamba chiefs to him, he laughed loudly, and said: “Junior officers used to get practically slapped on the head and told these [the chiefs] are the bosses,” he told me. “They’re the ones that keep the tribe straight!” Personal communication, April 4, 2011.

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an area usually called “Ukambani”<sup>5</sup> – possessed a reputation for sterling military service and loyalty. Colonial and military officials leaned heavily on them to fill the ranks of the police and soldiery. Kamba soldiers were proud of that reputation: They recalled decades of war against “the Maasai” in the nineteenth century as having hardened them into a fighting “tribe” whose courage and abilities in battle had no peer, and who always gladly volunteered in large numbers for military duties. British officers and colonial officials, therefore, came to view the Kamba as they did the Sikhs of India, Gurkhas of Nepal, or Scottish Highlanders: as a “race” of soldiers who “naturally” made good fighting auxiliaries.<sup>6</sup>

But this simplistic understanding conceals a more complex truth. First, few thought of themselves as “Kamba” before the 1940s, when daily life was oriented in a profoundly local way. And second, this apparently all-encompassing martial identity was only a thin veneer: Beneath its surface, old and young, Christian and non-Christian, elite and non-elite, men and women, educated and not fiercely contested and debated what was “Kamba.” Each had their own conceptions of what virtues, values, and practices constituted “proper” behavior in their communities, and by extension, should constitute the basis of “Kamba” culture.

*Ethnicity and Empire* explores this process of “making Kamba” over the past 200 years of East Africa’s history. Its central theme intersects with a number of broader issues that have concerned historians of empire and colonialism. First, it takes the imperial label of “martial race” – a nineteenth-century British construct applied to peoples from India to West Africa, and beyond – and recasts it as a contested space that encompassed local debates about martial service. Thus when British officials defined the Kamba in martial terms, it meant that local leaders could use that military reputation to pressure the colonial government in Kenya for benefits, and also attempt to solidify positions of authority at home by bolstering their social standing.

Second, this book addresses the hoary notion of “loyalty.” The term appears throughout colonial history, used in plain fashion: Some peoples were “loyal” and others “disloyal” depending on their relationship to the colonial power. But this work suggests that “loyalty” was a far richer

<sup>5</sup> This is an informal and commonly used term. Until the 1990s, Kamba lived in Machakos district – in the west – and Kitui district in the east. Since the 1990s, the Kenyan government has created, erased, or altered a variety of different locations and districts. This book typically refers to Machakos and Kitui because these districts were in existence for the majority of the period under study.

<sup>6</sup> Enloe, *Ethnic Soldiers*.

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concept with deeper meanings. On one level, it was the arena in which Kamba and colonial officials negotiated their relationship; colonial propaganda demanded Kamba remain “loyal” to the government, as befitted a people with a history of martial service, and Kamba reminded officials of that service to procure advantages. But “loyalty” – rendered in Kikamba as *ĩwi* – came to mean much more; by the 1940s, veterans argued that it described a set of shared values that constituted the core cultural material in Kamba communities; others – women in particular – disagreed.

Third, this work contributes to a new wave of research on development in Africa by bringing ethnicity into dialogue with the colonial development agenda. After the Second World War, Britain instituted new programs of “development” and “welfare” in an effort to create new, visible manifestations of its trusteeship in Africa. This was an effort to assuage pressure from the United States and the Soviet Union – as well as intellectuals in Africa, India, and the Caribbean – that Britain grant independence to its colonies. In Kenya and elsewhere, however, these new programs were actually methods of imperial control. During the 1940s and 1950s, officials diverted enormous chunks of the colony’s development monies to the Kamba in an effort to maintain political calm, as well as to ensure the “loyalty” of Kamba soldiers and police (the proportion rose from 39 to 53 percent of the colony’s overall funding, while Kamba comprised one-eighth of Kenya’s population). Aware of officials’ worry, leaders leveraged their martial reputation to press for greater and greater benefits from these programs.

Finally, this book provides the first comprehensive history of the Kamba. Due to the relative political insignificance of the Kamba in post-colonial Kenya, scholars have perhaps assumed a similar trend in the preceding years. This study weaves the Kamba into a revisionist approach to Kenya’s history, arguing that our understanding of the country has been greatly compromised by their absence.

No analysis of this book’s topics relating to colonialism or imperialism is possible without understanding the process of “making Kamba.” If “the Kamba” did not exist in common consciousness (as opposed to – say – in the minds of missionaries or district administrators), then any discussion about “them” (or “the Sikhs,” or “the Gurkhas”) cannot proceed with validity.<sup>7</sup> It is, in fact, almost impossible to separate “making Kamba” from any discussion of martial race, loyalty, or empire.

<sup>7</sup> Lonsdale, “Gusii.”

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Much of the research on the creation of ethnicity in sub-Saharan Africa analyzes the role played by colonialism in this process. During the 1980s, Leroy Vail produced arguably the most direct statement of colonialism's impact in his now-classic edited volume, *The Creation of Tribalism in Southern Africa*. Basing his argument on a series of case studies drawn from the region, Vail suggested that severe famine and drought, combined with the presence of the all-encompassing migrant labor system of the gold mines, led chiefs and commoners to seize upon ethnicity as a way to negotiate these challenging circumstances.<sup>8</sup>

Charles Ambler's excellent work on central Kenya in the late nineteenth century – which addressed Kikamba-speaking peoples<sup>9</sup> in part – reflected this approach. For Ambler, the commencement of colonial rule led to the promulgation of ethnic boundaries that are recognizable today, and removed the flexibility that previously existed (an argument made more broadly by Mahmood Mamdani).<sup>10</sup> The two existing studies that address geographically and chronologically limited periods of “Kamba” history reflect a less nuanced approach. Arriving before the publication of Vail's work and that of Terence Ranger,<sup>11</sup> both Robert Tignor and J. Forbes Munro assumed the existence of a coherent “Kamba” tribe by the late nineteenth century, which they used as a baseline for their studies.<sup>12</sup>

But these works overemphasize the impact of colonial rule.<sup>13</sup> From the perspective of the quiet reading rooms of the National Archives of the United Kingdom, colonial bureaucracy seems neat and clear in its delineation of Africans into “tribes.” But the colonial state was rarely some behemoth that shaped the day-to-day aspects of African lives in the early twentieth century. It was more analogous to the “thin white line” described by Anthony Kirk-Greene: a handful of youthful administrators, stumblingly trying to make sense of a world that bore little resemblance to Winchester or Eton.<sup>14</sup> In Sara Berry's succinct summation, this was

<sup>8</sup> Vail (ed.), *Creation of Tribalism*.

<sup>9</sup> This term is used instead of “the Kamba” to avoid implying a sense of ethnic unity that did not exist until around the time of the Second World War (see Chapter 1).

<sup>10</sup> Ambler, *Kenyan Communities*; Mamdani, *Citizen and Subject*; Mamdani, “Making Sense.”

<sup>11</sup> Ranger, “Invention of Tradition.”

<sup>12</sup> Munro, *Colonial Rule*; Tignor, *Colonial Transformation*. A similar criticism may be leveled at Kennell Jackson's work, the most well-known example of which is Jackson, “Dimensions.”

<sup>13</sup> Spear, “Neo-Traditionalism.” <sup>14</sup> Kirk-Greene, “Thin White Line.”

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“hegemony on a shoestring.”<sup>15</sup> Some parts of Kitui never received a visit from an administrator or missionary before the 1920s, and in many areas life continued as it always had: As late as 1929, approximately 30,000 “Kamba” trekked west and “became” “Kikuyu.” Women had a particular ability to slide between “tribes” without difficulty, causing disquiet for many British administrators who cherished neatness and order.

This is not, of course, to argue that the colonial emphasis on tribes was irrelevant. It provided African peoples with an extraordinary opportunity: They could – in John Iliffe’s words – “*create* [my emphasis] tribes to function within the colonial framework.”<sup>16</sup> The system catalyzed the discourse between peoples in central and eastern Kenya as they sought to create “Kamba” around their own – frequently competing – visions. Intellectuals and others attempted to use the weight and authority conveyed by tribe to increase their own personal power and to accrue benefits for their people. It was Africans alone who could give the “tribal” units genuine meaning, and they worked hard to fill these “empty boxes.”<sup>17</sup> This effort was successful when it built upon the shared history, experiences, and values that had developed among many Kikamba-speaking peoples during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries: These were the buried commonalities, the “roots of ethnicity,” that could be molded into “Kamba.”<sup>18</sup>

John Lonsdale provided the most coherent and comprehensive treatment of this process in a seminal essay on the Kikuyu. For Lonsdale, ethnicity was an arena of debate in which Kikuyu people argued over virtue and morality. This “moral ethnicity” was a set of standards of behavior that sustained Kikuyu communities, and was often at odds with – or contrary to – the external manifestation of ethnicity (“political tribalism”) that African intellectuals presented to the colonial state.<sup>19</sup>

Matthew Carotenuto’s and Julie MacArthur’s work – in the cases of the Luo and Luyia, respectively – are in significant part inspired by this approach. But there are important distinctions between these examples and that of the Kamba. In the cases of the Kikuyu, Luo, and Luyia, intellectuals did extensive linguistic work as they sought to define and

<sup>15</sup> Berry, *No Condition is Permanent*, 22–42.

<sup>16</sup> Iliffe, *Modern History of Tanganyika*, 318.

<sup>17</sup> Ranger, “Invention of Tradition Revisited,” 84.

<sup>18</sup> I am grateful to Richard Waller for helping me to clarify my thinking on this point. The phrasing “roots of ethnicity” is borrowed from Atkinson, *Roots*.

<sup>19</sup> Lonsdale, “Moral Economy.”

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redefine their communities.<sup>20</sup> In each case, they wrote histories of their “tribes.” In Kikuyu and Luo areas, the pages of newspapers and newsletters like *Muigwithania*, *Mumenyereri*, and *Ramogi* were important sites for these discussions.<sup>21</sup> In Luyialand, the Luyia Language Committee was active from 1941 in such work, though the magazine *Muluyia* does not seem to have gained the importance of the others.<sup>22</sup>

Yet unlike these communities, the development of a Kamba ethnic identity – and the desire of a majority of people to ascribe to it – came late, in the 1940s. Uniquely, it was driven by powerful war veterans and chiefs who successfully pulled together a series of disparate strands of cultural argument. This process is all the more difficult to identify because no Kamba intellectuals published newsletters or histories: There is an almost complete absence of non-government publications written in Kikamba before 1963 (and few after). Nor did any easily visible ceremony of circumcision – as in the Kikuyu case – clearly convey “tribal” membership in Kamba communities.<sup>23</sup>

*Ethnicity and Empire* resolves these difficulties in two ways. First, it places the colonial period in the context of the past 200 years of East Africa’s history, unlike almost all other contemporary works on ethnicity in sub-Saharan Africa. This enables all-important arguments and discussions among nineteenth-century Kikamba-speakers to elucidate later debates under colonial rule. Only with this deeper reaching into the past – and toward the present – does the opacity of Kamba history lighten.<sup>24</sup> Second, it relies on more marginal sources for studying Africa’s history, which take on tremendous import.

In this regard, historians are fortunate that Ukambani was a frequent stop for a variety of missionaries, anthropologists, travelers, and others during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. They include the Swedish anthropologist Gerhard Lindblom, who undertook field research in 1911 and 1912, and published extensive findings. The publications of several early colonial administrators assigned to Ukambani are also of great value. Men such as Charles Hobley and Charles Dundas were semi-professional anthropologists – “anthro-administrators,” in Kate Luongo’s phrase – whose works are important sites for revealing

<sup>20</sup> In the Kikuyu case, see especially Peterson, *Creative Writing*.

<sup>21</sup> Carotenuto, “*Riuruok E Teko*”; Lonsdale, “Moral Economy.”

<sup>22</sup> MacArthur, “Making and Unmaking.” <sup>23</sup> Thomas, *Politics of the Womb*.

<sup>24</sup> This approach owes much to scholarly work on precolonial Africa. See Atkinson, *Roots*; Greene, *Gender*.

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arguments between Kikamba-speaking peoples about “custom” and “tradition.”<sup>25</sup> The worldview of early Christians is revealed through their translations of biblical passages;<sup>26</sup> proverbs and folk tales published during the early twentieth century speak to virtues people considered important at the time; and vocabularies help unpack how people conceived of the “tribe” to which they supposedly belonged. These kinds of sources are complemented by information drawn from more than 150 in-person interviews with people living in central and eastern Kenya – as well as with former British administrators and settlers – in addition to the more “standard” records of the British government, colonial administration, missionaries, and the military.<sup>27</sup>

Scholars have argued that the experience of serving under British officers during the Second World War caused African veterans to view themselves as a separate, privileged *caste* after 1945.<sup>28</sup> But among Kamba, the war was the crucial event from which a wide sense of *ethnic* identification spread. The experience of war meant that this ethnic identity was conceived initially in martial terms, though this was quickly contested. To British officials, the war simply provided confirmation for something they had “known all along”: The Kamba were a “martial race.”

The term “martial race” came into common parlance during the consolidation of British rule in India in the mid nineteenth century.<sup>29</sup> It was developed in large part following the Indian Uprising of 1857, which caused a crisis of confidence for liberal British administrators. They came to classify Indians into “martial” and “non-martial” groups, basing their assertions on the colonial science of ethnography.<sup>30</sup>

The majority of scholarship on martial races approaches the topic in a similar fashion. It typically stems from the logic that because the term was a British one, then the concept barely involved the Africans or Indians who were labeled “martial.” But this is a highly problematic perspective. As scholars such as Antoinette Burton and Mrinalini Sinha have demonstrated, the relationship between colony and metropole was one of two-way exchange.<sup>31</sup> The categories of “colonized” and “colonizer” constantly shifted, and most importantly, happenings in the empire

<sup>25</sup> Luongo, *Witchcraft*.

<sup>26</sup> An approach inspired by Peterson’s work. Peterson, *Creative Writing*.

<sup>27</sup> For more details about sources and methods, see *Bibliography*.

<sup>28</sup> Killingray, *Fighting for Britain*; Parsons, *African Rank-and-File*, 53–103.

<sup>29</sup> The foundational work on India’s “martial races” is MacMunn, *Armies*.

<sup>30</sup> Dirks, *Castes of Mind*. <sup>31</sup> Burton, *Heart of the Empire*; Sinha, *Colonial Masculinity*.



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resulted in important ideological shifts back in Britain. In a recent monograph, Heather Streets has shown specifically how the ideology of martial race impacted British ideas at home.<sup>32</sup>

Taking its lead from these scholars, this work seeks to expand the notion of martial race, arguing that current understandings pay little heed to the role played by colonized peoples in creating, accentuating, and projecting a martial nature, and the degree to which this reflected preexisting values.<sup>33</sup> In the majority of work on India, scholars note vaguely that precolonial culture was probably important in some fashion in the process of becoming “martial,” but that categories like “Gurkha” and “Sikh” were as much the “product of imperial imaginations as they were the result of indigenous development.”<sup>34</sup> This seriously minimizes the efforts of colonized peoples to shape their own destinies under British rule.

Few studies genuinely attempt to decipher the motivations of colonized peoples for joining martial service. There are partial exceptions: In his work on the Singh/Sikh peoples of India, Richard Fox considers the role played by class, religion, and occupation in creating a Singh/Sikh identity.<sup>35</sup> And David Omissi goes further in his *The Sepoy and the Raj*. For Omissi, economic considerations were certainly important for young men who joined colonial forces. But he pushes his analysis beyond the purely economic by addressing how male considerations of *izzat* (honor) and status led men to enter martial service.<sup>36</sup>

The study of martial races in Africa has never reached anything close to the level in Indian historiography.<sup>37</sup> The major area where it has received attention concerns the relationship between precolonial background and the likelihood of peoples joining the colonial military. Thus Tim Parsons and Risto Marjomaa – writing about the Kamba and Yao of Nyasaland – have argued that service in the early colonial military was minimally related to any precolonial characteristics, instead emphasizing the relevance of economic factors and the location of army recruiting offices (respectively) in the process of becoming “martial.”<sup>38</sup>

But these materialistic arguments do not reflect the rich diversity of reason and motive that guide human experience; nor do they reflect

<sup>32</sup> Streets, *Martial Races*.      <sup>33</sup> For instance, Caplan, *Warrior Gentleman*.

<sup>34</sup> Peers, “Martial Races.”      <sup>35</sup> Fox, *Lions of the Punjab*.

<sup>36</sup> Omissi, *Sepoy and the Raj*, especially 76–112. For an earlier rendering, see MacMunn, *Armies*.

<sup>37</sup> Kirk-Greene, “*Damnosa Hereditas*.”

<sup>38</sup> Marjomaa, “Martial Spirit”; Parsons, “Wakamba Warriors.”

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the role that martial service played in communities in central and eastern Kenya, and surely the remainder of Africa. To understand “martial race,” it is vital to understand communities more deeply, and to reflect on fault lines including gender, generation, class, religion, and more. What sort of status in their communities did young men believe that they might win by joining martial occupations before, during, and after colonial rule? What did colonial chiefs think of this sort of recruitment? What community values did young men claim to possess through soldiering? How did young men use their service to challenge their elders and ostensible betters? What advantages came from widely projecting a martial identity? It is essential here to blur the apparent divisions between military, cultural, and social history: The bonds and dissonances between these disciplinary lines reveal a more profound understanding of martial races, colonial militaries, and soldiering in Africa.

Finally, the historiography on martial races has utterly ignored women, viewing them as irrelevant in such “manly” and “masculine” occupations. Yet women played a central role: At a simplistic level, they conveyed respect for the demonstration of male virtues. But more importantly, they labeled what behavior and standards constituted the cultural material that became “Kamba,” and what role martial identity played in that process. By the late 1950s, women had successfully argued that martial virtue was irrelevant without a strong record of supporting community interests; it was *community*, they stated, that constituted the true meaning of “Kamba.”

Male leaders proved more adept at negotiating with British officials than with their wives, sisters, and daughters. They “sold” the Kamba as a plainly martial “tribe” – with a history and reputation for soldiering – that deserved respect and benefits. The situation was similar to the experience of the *Tirailleurs Sénégalais* in French West Africa. As Gregory Mann shows, these men believed that France had incurred a “blood debt” to them for the military service they had provided during much of the twentieth century.<sup>39</sup> But unlike West African veterans, Kamba leaders tried to make gains based on ethnic identity, not caste.

Almost every discussion or debate between Kamba leaders and British officials during the later colonial period circulated around the idea of “loyalty.” Leaders claimed that they possessed the quality and should be

<sup>39</sup> Mann, *Native Sons*.