



EMERGENCY STORIES

Field Marshal Muthoni Wa Kirima

This interview was conducted in Muthoni's house in Nyeri on 30th April 2019, by Caroline Wanjiru and Beth Rebisz. The interview was conducted in Gikuyu and translated and transcribed by Angela Kariuki. Two friends of Muthoni's were also present during the interview.

Caroline: If Muthoni could start by telling us her full name?

Muthoni: My name is (proverbially), 'the one who complains about something, but keeps quite once it is settled'. However, I am best known as Field Marshall Muthoni Kirima.

Caroline: Before we go on to talk about the emergency period, could Muthoni please tell us how old she is and where in Kenya she was born?

Muthoni: Nyeri....My parents could not say for certain what year, but used to estimate with my peers...So I was approximately born in 1930.

Caroline: Can Muthoni tell us a bit about her involvement in the MauMau, how it began and why that was and how that was?

Muthoni: MauMau... er, let's say it is not known for certain and unfortunately, I can't remember exactly as I was a very little girl, but what I remember is that it was somewhere around 1950. It was an underground and unknown movement, that only came to be known later.

Caroline: Why does Muthoni think the movement began, and particularly why did she want to join?

Muthoni: Well...of course, I wanted to free my country from the colonialists because they had ruled us for a long time, and it was necessary for us to organise ourselves strategically to get them out. I was brought up in the colonial era in the areas that were under the colonial rule. It was the era in which, I was born, brought up as a young child and even worked for them under their rule, so I knew of them and was well aware that they were foreigners in our own land.

Caroline: Can Muthoni tell us how her involvement in the MauMau began and if it was during the state of emergency? Could she describe her experiences during that time?

Muthoni: Perhaps I am not sure by what you mean about how my involvement began. It

was simply a case of joining forces with my other counterparts so that we could go and fight for our freedom and become independent, as we are now.

Caroline: Can Muthoni tell us a bit the emergency period when Britain implemented the state of emergency in 1952? How did that impact her in terms of the freedom struggle? Did it change your lifestyle?

Muthoni: Of course, it did! I had to leave my home to live in the forest. We did not have sufficient clothes or shoes, and the weather was of course not always favourable, and it would rain. it was a tough time indeed!

Interviewer: Could Muthoni explain a little bit about what her specific role was when she was in the forest and what exactly she was doing there?

Muthoni: Oh, in the forest there were no specifically defined roles. It was simply a case of deciding what we needed to do and where we needed to go, such that if we found any white people there, we would ask them to leave us alone and go back to their own countries. We actually had no intention of harming them, or for there to be any bloodshed.

Interviewer: Did Muthoni have any interactions with the colonial officials during the emergency period? If she did, what were they like?

Muthoni: We really did not speak to them much. Nevertheless, they knew very well that we wanted them gone. And like I mentioned before, when we did run into them, we did not harm them. We just told them that we wanted them to leave us alone, and go back to their own lands. Some would actually heed to our ask, pack their belongings and move elsewhere. And there were others who came to hear of such instances and because they did not want us to find them, they also packed their bags and moved on.

Interviewer: Was Muthoni ever detained or villagised during the conflict? Could she tell us a little bit about that?

Muthoni: Even when the villages were created, I was still in the forest. Our people who were in their homelands were however moved into these villages and stayed there for a very long time.. The villages were put in place so that our people were huddled together into zoned areas where their free movement was restricted. As such, they were not able to continue giving us food or otherwise help us while we remained in the forest. As a result, we suffered a whole lot.

Interviewer: And was Muthoni ever detained?

Muthoni: No. I was never captured. When I went into the forest in 1952, I came out much later with that flag, which I marked using ink from the trees and the leaves, which I was given by Kenyatta when he called us out after independence. (Muthoni adds something else that is not clear).

The incumbent's flag was brought down, so that our own could go up. Kenyatta specifically sent out a car to remove me from the forest, so that we could truly believe that the conflict was over and that the colonialist's flag had indeed been brought down. Ours was hoisted up that day at around midnight.

Instead of having their eyes on the flag as it was hoisted up, our people had their eyes fixated on us, as unlike them we did not have normal clothes. Instead we were dressed in clothing made from animal skin, just like that one over there. Afterwards, we went back to the forest in a car.

And all that we planned with Kenyatta, when I had gone to see him. The plan on 16th December 1963 was to meet over at Ruring'u stadium. That time we had already obtained our independence and we were to be called to come out of the forest forever.

(Something mentioned about clothes and imprisonment that is difficult to hear).

In fact, they (the colonialists) used to ask if I am still there (in the forest) and were told that I am indeed still there. They knew me because I had worked for them for a long time with these very hands of mine. And they seemed to like me. They would often take pictures of me whilst I was harvesting pyrethrum. They liked me a whole lot. They used to come and see what I am doing when harvesting and they would ask how I knew what was good from what was bad. And I would tell them, 'but don't you see that the harvest is good?' That is what they had planted out in the farms.

Caroline: Can Muthoni tell us a little bit more about her time in the forest, what she was doing and was she with a particular group of people? I'd just like to know a little bit more about what was going on in the forest.

Muthoni: Well, in the forest, it was just like any other typical forest. But for us, we used to live there with a lot of suffering as we did not have any food or clothes...and the ones that used to assist us were subsequently detained in the villages such that it was impossible for us to get any help.

So, there was great suffering indeed. A lot! And as the struggle intensified, the problems with the lack of food and the rain and accusations only got worse. Those searching for us were also working very hard such that some surrendered and subsequently came to look for us, even though they had been part of us. So as you can imagine, there was a lot of suffering indeed.

But for me, since I went into the forest in 1952, I came out on 16th December 1963 after the struggle. I never surrendered! No, no, no surrender!

Caroline: So in the forest was Muthoni actively fighting for the MauMau or were they more hiding to avoid capture?

Muthoni: (coughing)...Maina, bring me my shawl from inside there.

No, we had not gone to hide. We had gone to show the coloniser that we wanted our country back. Did I not tell you that even in the forest we used to run into them, and tell them we did not want to kill them, but we wanted for them to go back to their country and get out of ours. They also used to gather their own people and come into the forest to look for us. But not the white people, they ones they sent were our own black people.

The white people were only like 2 or 3, and the black people were those that had turned against us, and were now working for the colonialists. They were the ones that used to come

and look for us.

Interviewer: And did they ever have any clashes? And were they ever found? Or was Muthoni very good at hiding, and did the group always hide together?

Muthoni: They would attempt to come looking for us, but we would learn about it and we would hide. Even for them, they did not come looking for us openly. Of course, if we knew they were coming we could harm them...so they came covertly...and we would be hiding from each other.

Caroline: Could you talk a little bit more about how you hid yourselves? In what areas of the forest in particular?

Muthoni: We used to hide in the forests in Nyandarua and Kirinyaga. That is where we were.

Other Parties Present at the interview: But weren't there also the MauMau caves where you used to sleep?

Muthoni: No! Hiding out in the caves would have been like prescribing a death sentence over one's self! Caves often have animal tracks leading up to them used by the wild animals. No one lived in the caves, and anyone who claims to have done so would be telling a lie. Such a person is clueless! There is no cave in which we could have slept. For us, sleeping in a cave would have been like a clueless mouse waiting in a basket (trap) to be captured!

[Laughter...]

The colonialists could have easily followed the animal tracks and found us there.

On top of that, deep in the caves there were some very dangerous snakes, the kind that could swallow human beings! So we stayed away from the caves. We didn't even approach them. Even when it was raining, we would look for leafy branches and use those to cover ourselves until the rain had gone away. No one could have lived in the caves. Can you imagine if even just one of those that were looking for us found us as a group in the cave? Say like the way we are all sat here inside the house? What can they not do to us? We would have made it extremely easy for ourselves to be captured!

Caroline: Considering that Muthoni stayed in the forest a long time and there was a lot of suffering, were there ways as a group that members of the forest kept the spirit of the movement alive? Did you sing songs? Did you share stories? How did you sort of keep the morale while the fight went on?

Muthoni: We did used to sing songs, but that was only at night. During the day, we could not sing, let alone cough slightly or blow our noses as that would have readily given us away. But when evening came, we would sing... (breaks into song)... 'This country of ours, our people (Gikuyu), God blessed us and said we shall never leave it!'

Other Parties Present at the interview: Were there some other groups from the outside that were supporting them as they were inside?

Muthoni: In the forest, there were those that were in the homesteads and we were very

very close. When we wanted a report on what was going on, it was them that would give it to us. If we wanted food, they would give us. However, it got to a point, when they were taken to the villages that they were no longer be able to help us.

From then on, there was no way they could assist us as even the villages were manned by guards who watched their movements. And the villages were fenced off with barbed wire too. So when the colonisers came to know that those in the villages had been supporting us, that is when the villages were established. All across the homesteads, they established the villages to stop us from getting any further help and support.

Nevertheless, even when that happened, God was still there for us, as this is our country. We used to go into the farms where the crops were growing, and that is where we would look for food. If we found cabbage, we would yank it off and eat it raw. If we found maize, we would break off the cobs and gnaw on it raw, just like you see monkey do. And let me tell you, don't you see how strong monkey's are? Raw, uncooked food eaten regularly can make you as strong as steel!

[Laughter!]

We never even used to feel the cold because of that raw diet. When we found cabbage, we just peeled off the top layer and crunched at the rest...and we gnawed on the maize. Oh my God! What are you even asking me!

(Murmurs something over the translation that is difficult to hear).

Caroline: And so can Muthoni tell us a little bit about how (before the colonial villages in 1954) information got to them? Because I've heard stories obviously about scouts...people moving in and out of the forest with information...and then also about the post boxes with the leaves being used inside the trees? I wondered if she could clarify any of that information or tell us a little bit more?

Muthoni: Even when they (those in the homesteads) were taken to the villages....er...but can you really stop someone with a specific purpose from carrying out that purpose? We still found someone carefully chosen to carry out that purpose who could not be stopped...and they would be instructed, 'go to this specific place...and tell them this or that...and that these are the difficulties we are facing'.

Caroline: And because Muthoni had done so well to hide in the forest this whole time, I'd be really interested to know how she discovered the conflict had ended? Or when the conflict had ended for her...maybe in a much more ambiguous term?

Muthoni: We came to know. Such that the conflict could end, they entered the forest with dogs, passing over the branches...

Caroline: The white people or who?

Muthoni: Yes, but they were with our people.

Caroline: The ones called the home guards?

Muthoni: Indeed. They were with them, and they came together. They came in a haste

and did not return to the forest again. At that point they made a decision to retreat as they had tried several tactics, but they had all failed.

Even those villages they had built...like for me I used to go and force myself in through the fence, to ask so and so where was my calabash and why they had not made the things they were preparing for me...the ones I would come out (of the forest) with, and take for the others too. So there was nothing that was happening there (in the villages).

And we used to pass each other with those that were guarding on the inside, because they did not know any different, as I had changed into normal clothes. When I wore normal clothes, I would look just like the others. And those clothes, I was also given by those on the outside, and would leave the ones I had in the forest there where they would pass them through to me. Even if you try however hard to stop people when they have a specific purpose in mind, you cannot succeed. There is just no way you can bar them all.

Caroline: So you knew the battle was over when these people came with the dogs into the forest?

Muthoni: We learnt it was over and also that Kenyatta had left Kapenguria, and when we found out...

Caroline: But, how did you find out?

Muthoni: From the people that were there on the outside. And so when we found out, I was the one that was sent to confirm the news, and because we were told that on 12 December 1963 Kenya would be obtain its independence.

And when we went to the farms, where we used to fend for ourselves, we found a newspaper being used as a scarecrow with the news. We took it with us. Don't you know how God works in mysterious ways? We took it and read it and saw that it said on 12 December 1963, Kenya would obtain its independence.

Heh, we were excited and decided we would not keep quiet. I used to be known as Mama Thonjo in the forest and I was picked as the one to be sent. The women bought me shoes, clothes and a headscarf to tie back my hair which had grown a whole lot...and even now as you can see it is a whole lot. And the women also rented a car for me. And let me tell you, women are something of substance indeed! Women! They should be honoured! And that is why they were told to be bearing children because they are gracious and intelligent. I was bought for shoes, clothes and a headscarf, and I was rented for one of those original Peugeots that first came here... (mimicking a speeding car).

Kenyatta at the time had left Kepenguria and also came to the same place... I don't know if you know Nairobi? A place called Jevanjee? That is where I was taken, into the 2nd floor of a building, and they searched for a room for me...Everyone I tell you came together as one, even those that were taking care of me...we were all one. They are the ones that were called and went to see Mzee (Kenyatta)

And tell her that I don't speak lies. My God does not allow it. I speak the truth. Whether I pee or poo, you should tell it as it is or not at all. I speak only of what I know and what I don't know I stay away from.

Caroline: And so I think I maybe know the answer to this question, but how did you feel when you found out that Kenya was becoming independent from the colonial rule?

Muthoni: Oooi, I felt relieved...because I was now able to return home....and I had not gone into the forest as a child...I went as a married woman...I didn't go as a child. I went as a woman. Can you imagine all that time I spent in the forest and that is not where I was born or went as a child? I went in as a married woman and even my husband was there with me in that forest. And we came out with him. How can I not feel good? Imagine getting that which you have fought for for many years? Weren't you asking me? That is when I was bought for shoes, clothes and all...and went to Jevanjee...and now I am summarising...I went there because I wanted to see Mzee.

And he would not agree to be seen just like that, just in case it was the coloniser that was coming to capture him again. So he was told that there was a woman coming from the forest and that she had asked to see him, because she had heard the news about independence...even the newspaper I had carried, I gave it to him when I saw him....and before I did they asked around where I was from...and I am summarising here...and Kenyatta said the Chief of my homeland should be asked if at all he knew me.

Chief Muhoya was the one who was asked, 'er, this woman, do you know her?' Chief Muhoya said, 'she is from my location. And she has been in the forest for a very long time. And the day before yesterday is when we were looking for her and found her when she was coming out with the young girls from the forest helping them carry their firewood. That is how we came to know her. And she has been living in the forest for all those years, and she went in because of the fight for independence'.

Caroline: I don't have any more specific questions but if you would let Muthoni know that for us as the Museum, we feel it is really really important for these stories to live on for future generations in Kenya, in Britain and across the world, to better understand this period of Kenya's history. Is there anything else she would like to share? Or is there anything else she thinks we ought to know about the period and about her experiences?

Muthoni: Not really, perhaps we could finish here. Even if we had 400 years telling stories about the forest, we could never finish.

Caroline: If you could just let Muthoni know I really really appreciate her taking the time to speak with us today and that we can all learn an awful lot from her stories, so if you could thank her for that.