



EMERGENCY STORIES

Gitu wa Kahengeri

This interview was conducted by Olivia Windham Stewart and Susan Kibaara in August 2018. Adam Rodgers Johns and David Nzioka were also present at the interview.

Gitu: My wife was a freedom fighter like me. We married when we were struggling for freedom, at the initial stages. When the Emergency was declared, and the fight broke, then we both joined the struggle. She was playing the part of supplying food to those who were fighting the fight. She was fighting, and accommodating those who of course were in the reserves and everything that needed to be done, she did.

I married her in 1948. At that time, I was in the struggle for freedom still. At that time. And my question to her, in the first place, "I am going to marry you, are you also going to join the freedom struggle like me?" And she said, "Definitely, I will be with you, on and on." And she did so.

Gitu: Mau Mau was not an organisation of 1952, as many of you perhaps believe. It was an underground movement for many years. For many years. Even before I was born in 1922.

Because the colonialists entered our country without our permission, many people started resistance. It was started by Mekatilili wa Menza in Coast province. You know the colonialists were getting into the country from Fort Jesus and Mombasa, therefore Mekatilili wa Menza in the coast started the struggle. She was a Giriama woman, and she resisted, and resisted. She was arrested. She was put into jail, and ultimately she died, as she was struggling for prevention of domination of British power.

That is somewhere in the 1900s, at the beginning of the 1900s. And therefore, their struggle moved towards the interior. Other freedom fighters joined what Mekatilili was doing. Here in Central province, we had Waiyaki wa Hinga. In Rift Valley, we had Koitalel

Samoei. In Turkana, we had Ebei. And all over the country, we had people who resisted against the British colonialists. All over the country.

And then, that movement continued on and on, until the explosion of 1952 came up, and then we started the struggle, physical struggle. All along, all the correspondences, writing to the colonial office, without reply. And therefore, when it came to 1952, we said enough is enough. They are not offering us memorandum, therefore we will try another way. A plan B. That was it.

Gitu: A colonial administrator would come in the *baraza*. You know what a *baraza* is? A meeting. He could speak to us for hours. He is not telling us anything profitable to our people. He is abusing us because we are 'savages'. And in the end, they would say, "The meeting is ended, and there are no questions." And that is the end. If you raised a question, you are put into a cell. Because you have questioned an officer of the government.

Gitu: We were restricted in education. You could only be educated up to Standard 4. If you tried to go to Standard 5 to further your education, you would be asked, "Are you a European?" To go to Standard 5. Because they wanted us just to know how to count 1 to 1000, so that they can take us home and take us to a colonial settler farm who is doing daily farming. So that we can be clerks, to count how many cows they milked that morning. Or in a farm belonging to a coffee farmer, to calculate how many tins of coffee were harvested on that day.

And then you continue that work until you are an old man. Your son comes in, also educated up to Standard 4, he takes the place of you. That was the circulation of poverty, circulation of slavery, all the time. And therefore we say, "No, we cannot - we want our children to be educated as far as they can go." And to be able to do that, there is no other way than using all means possible to remove colonial administration. And that is what we did. That is when we had the Mau Mau armed struggle.

They killed a lot of our people, many people. Because we did not have sophisticated arms. We would just fight almost without arms. That is the position of the colonial government with us during that time.

Gitu: Being a Kenyan who was among the people who were being abused, and being

ill-treated in every manner of ill-treatment, I decided I will join other people like me, who feel we are oppressed. That is how I got to it. My father, at the beginning, was one of those who started resistance. And he enlisted me, as a young man, to be used by those who were before us.

Taking letters, or calling someone to go and ask so-and-so to come to the meeting. And then I continued that way, until I became mature. Then they registered me. During the Mau Mau struggle, I played the role of a strategist. I went to Tanzania, I went to Uganda, to enlist people who were working there, who were working in Tanzania. So that they know what we are doing at home, they can join us. Anything they can do when they are working there, they can do to boost our activities here in Kenya. That's all. That is how we started. But we ended victoriously.

Olivia: So were you out of the country for the main part of the struggle? You were in Uganda, you were in Tanzania... Or were you in Kenya for much of the time?

Gitu: No, very much in Kenya. In Tanzania, I was going to fetch people who were working in Tanzania. They are Kenyans, they were working in Uganda and they are Kenyans. Because we wanted to involve every Kenyan, if we could, to be a Mau Mau freedom struggler.

Olivia: And what was required to become a Mau Mau? Because there's lots written about the oathing ceremonies and everything else. Were you a part of that whole process? Can you tell us about how that worked, to be initiated?

Gitu: All you wanted to do was agree to join the struggle for independence. Only that, that is the only qualification. Then when you say that, you have to take an oath. You have to commit yourself. That one, we call the oath of commitment.

Oaths are not bad things to do. They are done even in law courts, they are done even in other organisations. It is a binding promise that you will not let other people down. So we had to take that oath of joining the Mau Mau to liberate Kenya. That was called a commitment oath. And then you have to take another one. To say that you sacrifice. You sacrifice your wealth, you sacrifice your brains. You sacrifice your bodily strength, and you sacrifice your intelligence. And lastly, you sacrifice your life. You say, whether I die or live, I must fight for Kenya to be independent. That is the position.

Gitu: My father was a freedom fighter. I was a freedom fighter. We were picked up by my father, together, and then were put into detention camps. For seven years. In Manda Island. In Manda Island, we were denied medical facilities. In Manda Island, we were denied sufficient food. In Manda Island, we had to use a borehole for water.

There were about 75 old freedom fighters. People who were even older than my father. I was the only young man in Manda Island. And my job every morning was to go to the well holes, draw the water with a can - you know how it's pulled out of a borehole? And take it to the old people for washing, for bathing, and all that. If you visited Manda Island, you would see how grievously they were treated by the colonial administration.

Olivia: What years were you in Manda Island for?

Gitu: 1954 to 19... to 1959. These few years I spent in Manda Island. The rest, to make up the seven years, were spent in Lodwar. You know Lodwar? In Turkana district. That's where I was first detained. And then I was moved from there to Manda Island. It is not Manda Island actually, it is a camp called Takwa. But it is situated in Manda Island.

Olivia: Can you tell us what the camp looked like? How did the camp look?

Gitu: It was a camp with the buildings like this, thatched by coconut leaves. And then the surrounding is all open, only surrounded by barbed wire. Beyond the barbed wire are mangrove trees. It was a bush, nearly a bush. But this was about 700 yards from the beach of the Indian Ocean.

Gitu: We had people in the forest fighting the freedom fight. And they were coming from the forest to the reserves to seek for food. And then after finishing getting food, or not getting it, they'd go back to the forest. And therefore the colonial administration decided to dig a big trench - it was about 30 feet by about 10 feet deep. And that is where they put the spikes, wooden spikes, so that people from the forest cannot jump over - cannot cross to the reserves. And those in the reserves cannot possibly cross to the forest. It was all round the forest area. Everything was dug by Mau Mau adherents as punishment.

Olivia: And what was your wife doing while you were in Lodwar and in Manda Island?

Gitu: She was being treated in what we call 'Emergency villages'. Where all the wives, all the mothers, all the children, all the goats, all the cows, all the utensils of a known Mau Mau freedom fighter, or a suspected Mau Mau freedom fighter, were enclosed.

They were beaten there, they were denied food there, they were denied medical services there. And everything... we called them 'torture villages'. Because they were purposely established to torture our children, our mothers, our wives, when we are in conventional detention camps. There were no exceptions. All the people known to be Mau Mau, or suspected to be, had to suffer. All the persons.

Gitu: There was a First World War. That war was in 1914. Started in 1914, ended in 1918. Then, there were the soldiers who served the British battalions. And because they wanted to colonise Kenya, all those who left the army during dispersing of the armies were given land here in Kenya.

How are they getting the land? They came and found a family, who had, say about 20, 30, 40, 100 acres of land. Like this place here now. And these people are ordered to move out so that that soldier can occupy that land. It was done to many many soldiers who served in the First World War, and many many soldiers who served in the Second World War. Therefore, this is how they fed Kenya with settlers from British land.

Olivia: Did your father fight in the World War?

Gitu: Yes, he was in the World War. He was one of the instructors who was showing the young people how to use arms.

Olivia: And did he use those skills in the Mau Mau Rebellion? Did he use those skills? The skills that he learnt from the war?

Gitu: Yes, of course. He was teaching the newcomers in the struggle how to use the guns. We had guns. We went on and on and on until we acquired guns. My father was my great trainer. He put me into the organisation and he showed me everything that he wanted me to do.

Olivia: And between 1952 and 1954, were you fighting in the forest or were you working on the strategy? What were you doing at that time?

Gitu: At that time - we are the people who started the guerilla war. In the towns of Nairobi, Mombasa, Nakuru, and Kisumu. The forest... I did not go to the forest. Because when we started the struggle, the guerilla war in these towns, then there came a time when the British government wanted to collect us all, and put us into detention camps. And that is why some of the guerilla freedom fighters moved to the forest. At that time, before I was caught, in the middle here. I was caught and put into detention camps.

Olivia: Do you remember - I mean, you must have a very vivid memory of the day you were caught?

Gitu: Yes, of course. It is in 19... 1953. Somewhere in March. I cannot remember the date

exactly, but I know it's somewhere in the beginning of the year.

Olivia: Can you tell us about the day?

Gitu: What happened is that we had a meeting in Nairobi. I have told you that we were the people who were working to collect - to find the arms and to see where we can get them. And we had a meeting in Nairobi in a particular place, called Grogan Road.

Well, when we were sitting and arranging our - making our arrangements, what to do on that day, then a security force came and stopped inside there. And they caught us all, the people who were there. They took us to Kileleshwa police station. We stayed in Kileleshwa prison for about three months, and then we were moved to detention camps.

The first detention camp was in Athi River. Athi River, we stayed in Athi River for about one year. And then we were moved into Lodwar. Two years there, then moved from there to Takwa for four to five years. At the end of 1959, I think the British prime minister declared that Kenya will have - he said in English - "Kenya will have a wind of change."

Then all the battalions here in Kenya were started to be mobilised to go back to you. And therefore everybody knew, perhaps this is coming. A freedom that we were fighting for in the forest.

Then... they did a bad thing. Because they betrayed our freedom fighting victory. By stationing their people in the government. That was made before the real declaration of independence was done. And therefore they put in the government position all the people who were against freedom fighters. That is why we are not completely enjoying what we fought for.

Susan: Why do you say that?

Gitu: Because we were fighting for the people to get wealth. To get educated. Not very many people belonging to the freedom fighter lineage are now educated up to their wishes. The reason is that they don't have money to educate their children to that level. Just because they are not the people who received the independence.

If they were the people who received the independence, they would have been employed in good positions to be able to educate their children. They would have perhaps started establishments where they could have made money to educate their children well. That did not happen. It was a complete betrayal.

Olivia: It must be very disappointing. The feeling.

Gitu: We were, we were very disappointed, but. But. We achieved our goal. We did not

benefit, but we broke the freedom. Which was the requirement of the freedom struggle. Therefore we are happy, our people are enjoying good education, they are enjoying driving good cars. We are happy. But that is from our shoulders.

Olivia: Have you personally, and your colleagues, had the recognition that you would like?

Gitu: Not as yet. Not as yet. About 2004, I went to a national constitutional conference. And I was able to move a motion to be recognised in our constitution. That is there now, in the preamble section of our constitution we are recognised. That is good. A day is also set aside, called the Mashujaa Day. The heroes' and heroines' day.

But that is a matter of recognition. We want to be recognised materially. Because there is material that we brought about during the freedom struggle and after. We want those people to be given something in appreciation of what they did. Recognition only is a matter of putting something on paper. We want something to be put in our mouths.

Susan: In the Veterans Association, do you have the ladies who were part of the fight? Are they in the Association?

Gitu: Yes, yes, we do. Our constitution specifies that in all elective positions in the Mau Mau War Veterans Association, one third must be women. And we have women. We have women that participated in the struggle, we have women who were in the forest fighting the freedom struggle. And therefore we recognise them. Fully.

Olivia: Can you tell us about the day Kenya became independent? How you heard the news, and what happened.

Gitu: We were very joyous. We were very pleased on that day. All the Mau Mau people who could possibly travel to Nairobi were part of the freedom honour in Nairobi. Celebrating the lowering of the British flag. We were very very happy. In the villages also people were enjoying a great deal. Because of our successful struggle.

Gitu: We don't have many detention camps in place now. Where we have detention camps in place is where they were converted to conventional prisons. Like Manyani, like Mackinnon Road, like Nyanza, where we had a detention prison there. It was converted into a conventional prison. Others were temporary structures.

Olivia: Have you ever been back to Manda Island?

Gitu: Yes. In 19... in 2004. I had gone there to see what is happening. There are, in Manda Island, five wells, where we are drawing water. And I wanted to go back there to see if they are there. I wanted to go there and see whether the bungalow that we lived in is there. And I wanted to make sure whether my space was still there. The space I occupied in that detention camp. I went there.

Olivia: What did you find?

Gitu: Well, it's ruined. It's a ruin. There's nothing that you can see at all. Because it was a temporary detention camp, just to put people for the duration that they are going to be there.

Olivia: What was your space like, that you referred to at Manda? What was your space like - you said you had a space?

Gitu: That space was three by six, where you had to lay your sisal mat, and sleep there. And interestingly, we were placed together with my father. He had his mat here, and next to him is my father's mat. So when I turn in the morning, on my right I find my father sleeping on the mat.

That was only a psychological torture. To think badly about what is happening when my father is lying in that small place, and my father also is seeing his son. It was a bad experience.

Olivia: How did you get news when you were in the camp? Did you know what was happening, or did you hear nothing?

Gitu: Yes, we had some of the wardens in the camp who cooperated with us, and they would bring us newspapers. If they didn't bring us newspapers, they would gather information outside and tell us, "This is what happened outside." That is how we had our news. We were quite informed on what was happening.

Gitu: There were only about two or three European officers in each camp.

Olivia: Can you remember them?

Gitu: Yes, I can remember one we had in Lamu was called Mr. Eames. E-A-M-E-S. Yes, I can remember him well. But he was a good man. He did not treat us badly. He was not authorising our beatings, no, no.

We stayed there for about four years, peacefully, but he had nothing to do because the surprise was coming from the commissional prisons. He could not feed us well because he didn't have the power, all the other things are coming from somewhere else only for him to administer. And therefore they were sending - there were some times that we were eating about eight ounces of flour. Eight ounces. You think about that, eight ounces. Only to keep you alive.

Gitu: Not everybody was cruel. No, not everybody was cruel. They were - some of them were working as administrative officers only, without involving themselves in beatings and all that. But there were others who did not want one day that prisoners are not beaten. Beatings, in some camps and some prisons, with some officers, beatings were routine. A prisoner must be beaten. And must be beaten how many times a day.

Susan: What were they using to beat you with?

Gitu: *Viboko*.

Olivia: What's that?

Gitu: Tire slaps. These were the weapons they were using to beat us. At one stage of my life in detention, I was beaten the whole day, until I did not feel pain any longer. Then, when I was taken back to the camp where I was living, I prayed, "God, can you let me die, so that I cannot go back to that place tomorrow to be beaten the way I was beaten today."

But unfortunately I did not die. I awoke. And then I was taken to another. God made the arrangement that I was not taken back to where I was beaten, I was brought to another camp.

Gitu: I cannot remember them [the officers] because they were not doing a good job. And you know, they are not speaking to you. It is impossible even to know his name. I am knowing only the name of Eames, because he was cooperative, he was talking to us. He was giving us chances to play basketball in the camp. Therefore we knew, this is a good man.

Olivia: Did your father have the same treatment as you?

Gitu: Yes. There were no exceptions. A Mau Mau is a Mau Mau. And according to the camp regulations, he must be beaten. No matter how old. No matter how young. He must receive beatings. At the times that he is ordered to be. That is our experience in detention camps.

I watched my father being beaten, he watched me being beaten. It is not something that was done in a separate way. Not only my father, I saw the old people being beaten, I saw the young being beaten. Because we are in a camp. And we are in a space like this. And *askaris* are put there, go and beat them. Then you are seeing everything that is happening.

Gitu: The loyalists were only interviewing us and urging us to leave the Mau Mau movement. This is what we called confessionals. Confessions that you must say, "From today I will no longer pursue the freedom struggle." And sometimes you would be released, sometimes you would be given food to eat, enough food to eat. That kind of thing.

Now, saying "I leave it", it means I forsake the struggle I am following to get my country freed. Therefore - and I told you, we had promised. With the commitment undertaken that I will fight to the end. "To the end" meant if you die, you die. "To the end" means if you bring victory, you bring victory. Therefore not very many people said "I forsake the Mau Mau struggle for independence".

Many people who were detained were hardcores. They believed in that, and they believed they would finish. And they finished.

Olivia: Did you see anybody die because of the beating? Did you see anybody have to go until -

Gitu: Many of them. Many of them, not one. Many beaten, died. And then we are ordered to remove the corpse from the area. And that we did. It's a simple thing to do. We were hardened by what we saw, what we experienced in the struggle for Mau Mau.

Gitu: You are only coming to remind us when you come to interview.

Susan: Does it affect you when you do that? Does it affect you when you...

Gitu: No no no, no no no. We are happy, we are happy. Particularly, we people, we want to give you that information. Because the information you have is wrong. There is nowhere you can pick information other than from a Mau Mau freedom fighter. Others are stories that do not, at any point, meet what we did or what we believed in. No.

Sometimes people write our stories in the universities, and sometimes we look at what he has said, and we think, "He is a professor. What did he learn in his university, foolishness?" Or something? Because he says something - nothing about our struggle. He does not seek information, he just thinks. And says, "Mau Mau ran in the forest." Ran in the forest. No, we did not run in the forest. We were strategising our actions. You see? So that we can come out with a victory.

And that is what has happened, even in Europe. Everywhere, people have fought for their freedom. That is the thing they always do. I have mentioned to you, you have gone to the House of Lords. At the entrance, you can see what you see there. All soldiers... defending the rights of the people of England. What is wrong with us defending the rights of the people of Kenya?

Olivia: I'm glad that you said you're comfortable with sharing the information. Because what we really want to make central to what we're doing is your stories, from you. And from your colleagues and other veterans.

Gitu: We are quite comfortable. It is not something that we want to hide. It is something that we want to be known. By the world. All the interviews I have done, I have done willingly. Because I want people to understand us. Fully. We are not savages. We are human beings. Properly constructed!

But there was nothing that we could do, when somebody comes about 9,000 miles, occupies our land, moves us to the peripheries. There was nothing that we could do other than say, "No. It cannot happen."

And I know all people who want to defend their country believe in that. I am giving you an example, you come from England. You know where the House of Lords is, you know what is there. If you go to Russia, if you go to Germany, everywhere you find this kind of thing. People are proud of what they did for their country.