"Be Like Firm Soldiers to Develop the Country": Political Imagination and the Geography of Gikuyuland
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“BE LIKE FIRM SOLDIERS TO DEVELOP THE COUNTRY”: POLITICAL IMAGINATION AND THE GEOGRAPHY OF GIKUYULAND

By Derek R. Peterson

Toward the end of 1932, Judge Morris Carter’s Land Commission began taking testimony to determine how far Africans in the British colony of Kenya were owed compensation for land taken from them by white settlers. Thousands of people attended the commission’s public hearings. In Nyeri district, 129 Gikuyu sub-clans representing 105,550 people made claims before the commission.¹ Nyeri’s district commissioner reported that virtually every person could be seen walking about with typewritten claim and map in hand.² In Kiambu District, Chief Koinange and his colleagues became part-time pamphleteers producing petitions to sway Carter’s opinion.³ And in Fort Hall, local opinion was so strong that Charles Muhororo, the translator for the commission, was confounded at the profanity the presenters employed.⁴

Transcripts of oral interviews I conducted are held at Tumutumu Church and at the Kenya National Archives. Archival sources are cited as follows:

AIM  Africa Inland Mission Archives, Nairobi
EUL  Edinburgh University Library, Scotland
KNA  Kenya National Archives, Nairobi
Mahiga  Papers of the Kikuyu Traders Association, held by Mr. Kariuki Kiboí
Murray  Papers of Dr. Jocelyn Murray, London Mennonite Centre
PCEA  Presbyterian Church of East Africa Archives, Nairobi
PRO  Public Records Office, Kew
TT  Tumutumu Church Archives, Karatina

² KNA DC/Nyeri/1/1/2: Nyeri District Annual Report, 1933.
³ See PRO CO/533/441/9: Chief Koinange, “Memorandum on Njumu Land,” January 1934; PRO CO/5333/506/7: Koinange et al. to Secretary of State for the Colonies, 5 November 1935; and 29 April 1936.
The Carter Land Commission was plainly a major event in Gikuyu political life. It is therefore surprising that one of Nyeri’s major parties, the Kikuyu Central Association, did not pay the commissioners heed. Only a minor KCA official, Waiga Kibanya, testified before the commission during its Nyeri hearings. He spoke for a few scant minutes about Gikuyu claims to the Mount Kenya forest. Observers thought him ill prepared. The KCA in Nyeri did not present a written memorandum for the commission’s review. Instead, its officials gate-crashed a meeting of the Progressive Kikuyu Party, their political opponents, hanging about while PKP members drafted a memorandum.

This essay inquires into the history of Gikuyu political thought by exploring why the Kikuyu Central Association’s Nyeri branch had so little to say to Judge Carter. It focuses on the tension between the polite theater of colonial advocacy and the noisy brawl of ethnic argument. It was John Lonsdale who first tuned historians’ ears to the competing strains of political discourse within African communities. In his seminal essay “The Moral Economy of Mau Mau,” Lonsdale contrasted the spare discourse of Kenya’s high politics with the earthy culture of Gikuyu thought. African leaders represented themselves as leaders of homogeneous, unified peoples, in order to compete for influence on the colonial stage. But within the “tribes” that leaders purported to represent, people kept arguing. Ethnicities, Lonsdale showed, are forums of argument. Political leaders had always to do creative work in order to convince their doubting constituents to follow their lead.

The present essay applies Lonsdale’s insights to the study of land politics in northern Gikuyuland. My thesis, put simply, is that colonial-era political entrepreneurs created a Gikuyu people by reformulating property as territory. By the sweat of their brows, the precolonial pioneers of central Kenya had once hewn their homesteads from the encroaching forest. They and their descendants saw land as a patrimony, an endowment that enabled family members to flourish. Colonial-era politicians asked central Kenya’s proudly independent homesteaders

5 Kenya Land Commission, Evidence, 105.
6 PCEA 1/C/7: Arthur Barlow to John Arthur, 23 March 1934.
7 PCEA I/Z/6: Tumutumu Station Log Book, entry for 23 July 1932.
to think about their hard-won property as territory, a gift from a paternal God to an identifiable Gikuyu nation. By refiguring property as territory, political entrepreneurs drew clansmen together as soldiers dedicated to serving their country.

Where organizers asked Gikuyu to practice a single-minded discipline, Judge Carter brought clannish local politics to the fore. Carter asked Nyeri people to recount the local histories that divided them. It was this parochial parade, I suggest, that terrified the unifiers of the KCA. Nyeri’s organizers did not pronounce on Gikuyu land tenure because they could not. Their project was founded on constituents’ strategic willingness to overlook the local politics that set them at odds. Judge Carter threatened to turn organizers’ imagined community into a fratricidal absurdity.

John Lonsdale taught us to see how thoroughly people sharing an ethnicity could disagree. This essay pays tribute to Lonsdale’s pioneering scholarship by documenting the political work by which Gikuyuland was made.

Property, Territory, and Gikuyu Political Thought

Their precolonial history gave Gikuyu people two different models of political community.9 Pioneering immigrants first settled in the highland forests of Murang’a and Othaya in the late seventeenth century.10 They came from all over eastern Africa: an early European observer heard Gikuyu claim to be descended from Masai, Kamba, even Chagga immigrants.11 Using iron crowbars and axes, it took pioneers as much as five hundred days to clear three acres of land.12 Big men lent out land to tenants, who helped push back the forest and were in return “born again” into the landlord’s sub-clan (mbari). By the sweat of their brows, pioneers walled out the wilderness with fences of thorn trees, built around homesteads to protect children and women from wild animals. The verb -gita linked the work of fencing to human flourishing: it connoted both “grow too thick to be seen through

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(as in a hedge)” and to “flourish, prosper.” Deriving political theory from labor history, household heads protected their political autonomy against outsiders’ interference. Ludwig Krapf, the mid-nineteenth-century Anglican missionary, described Gikuyuland as a “republic.” “They have neither king nor chief recognized as such by the whole nation,” he wrote. “The head of every family village rules the people who belong to him in accordance with the customs and usages of the country.” Their political mythology described how Gikuyu had once overthrown the exploitative dictatorship of King Gikuyu. So wholly was the memory of dictatorship obliterated that early translators of the Old Testament were unable to find a suitable Gikuyu word for “king.”

The lessons of forest clearing taught pioneers that change came gradually, through hard human exertion. But Gikuyu people also recognized a dramatically different way of measuring time. Since the disastrous nineteenth century, they had divided their history into epochs by practicing ituika, generational succession. In the face of famine and disaster, a candidate generation—named the irungu or “straighteners”—paid off ruling elders with goats and other livestock, ushering their fathers into retirement and taking over the reigns of local power themselves. Young straighteners’ investments were supposed to give birth to a new era of peace and prosperity, restoring sociable relationships between people and enabling the land to flourish. Generational time, therefore, rested on the contrast between old and new, between darkness and light, between the past and the future. Its dispensationalist account of time called people together not as kinsmen but as activists, dedicated to bringing in a brighter future.

In the late 1910s, a series of human and natural catastrophes called a new generation of straighteners into existence. Some 14,293 young men from the northernmost Gikuyu district of Nyeri were conscripted during the First World

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13 *EUL Archives*, Gen. 1785/1: Barlow, entry on -gita.

14 Quoted in *KNA PC/CP 1/4/1: Political Record Book, Kikuyu District, Jan. 1912*.


16 *KNA MSS* (Bible Society) 1/2: Barlow to Garriock, 1 Jan. 1914.


War.\textsuperscript{19} They served in the Carrier Corps, which suffered a 20 percent casualty rate. Nor were people at home spared. Famine and influenza decimated Gikuyu communities in 1918. Nyeri was especially hard-hit. Some 10 percent of the district’s population perished, so many that overfed hyenas left human bodies to rot in the open.\textsuperscript{20} This demographic and social disaster invited a generation of “straighteners” to make a clean break with the past. By 1922, observers reported that young men in Nyeri were continually paying \textit{ituika} goats to ruling elders.\textsuperscript{21} Late that year, Nyeri’s African District Council ruled that all members of the postulant generation, regardless of religious or political allegiance, were obligated to pay the \textit{ituika} goats.\textsuperscript{22}

Converts at the Presbyterian mission station at Tumutumu were deeply divided over the generational politics of the early 1920s. The mission was established in 1908; by 1922, the Scots missionaries had 2,271 young “readers” (as converts were called) under instruction.\textsuperscript{23} At Tumutumu as at other mission stations in central Kenya, most early converts were children of land-poor families, or junior sons who could not hope to inherit land from their fathers.\textsuperscript{24} But there was also a group of older readers at Tumutumu, senior men who were already heads of their respective \textit{mbari}.\textsuperscript{25} It was this group of senior readers who refused to pay \textit{ituika} goats in 1922. They argued that their political freedom of decision was at risk. By paying the goats, missionaries reported, they felt “that they would have committed themselves and could not refuse such practices … which are undoubtedly at variance with the Christian faith.”\textsuperscript{26} They were led in argument by landholder Musa Matu wa Kagondu. Making \textit{ituika} payments, Matu told the Nyeri District Council, was a profligate misuse of property. The goats were slaughtered and eaten in the owner’s absence; how then could Christians ensure that they were not used for pagan purposes?\textsuperscript{27} Anglican converts at the Kabare

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{19} Geoffrey Hodges, \textit{Kariakor: The Carrier Corps} (Nairobi, 1999), Appendix 1.
\item \textsuperscript{20} \textit{PCEA I/B/7}: Tumutumu Medical Report, 1919.
\item \textsuperscript{21} \textit{PCEA I/A/38}: Stevenson to Chief Native Commissioner, 12 August 1922.
\item \textsuperscript{22} \textit{KNA DC/Nyeri/I/6/1}: Council Meeting, 21 October 1922.
\item \textsuperscript{23} \textit{PCEA I/B/7}: Tumutumu Annual Report, 1922.
\item \textsuperscript{24} See John Karanja, \textit{Founding in African Faith: Kikuyu Anglican Christianity, 1900–1945} (Nairobi, 1999).
\item \textsuperscript{25} \textit{PCEA I/C/7}: Stevenson to Arthur, 29 November 1922.
\item \textsuperscript{26} \textit{PCEA I/A/38}: Stevenson to Chief Native Commissioner, 12 August 1922.
\item \textsuperscript{27} \textit{PCEA I/E/10}: African District Council Meeting, 30 Jan. 1925.
\end{itemize}
Mission Station likewise objected to the ituika payments. Testifying before the Nyeri district commissioner in 1924, Mbubi wa Njogu vowed to kill himself and his goats rather than pay ituika goats.28 He was sure that the animals would be used in pagan sacrifices.29

There was more than religious principle at stake in these readers’ objections to ituika payments. Matu, Mbubi wa Njogu, and Tumutumu’s senior readers were defending their moral and political autonomy. Sila Karimu, a reader at the Anglican mission station of Kahuhia, made the point most clearly in a 1927 letter to “All the Christians in Fort Hall.”30 Karimu condemned Christians who complacently paid ituika goats to elders. They should feel “ashamed and ill at ease,” he wrote, for ituika encouraged sexual immorality. In a lurid exposé, he described how, once the goat payments had been completed, men of the rising generation were permitted to commit adultery with other men’s wives. Women who refused to submit were fined up to ten shillings. Could this immoral tradition be “associated with the good kingdom of mercy—that of the British Empire?” asked Karimu. He thought not: ituika was “not a sign of anything important but that of laziness, adultery and lies.” In Karimu’s partisan view, ituika recklessly gave outsiders control over householders’ property and progeny. His exposé showed ituika’s advocates to be irresponsible. Sila Karimu, Musa Matu, and Mbubi wa Njogu were critics of ituika because their political thought led them to protect their families and property from outsiders’ control. Like the proudly independent pioneers of the nineteenth century, they knew that political and moral authority was best exercised at home.

Where ituika’s critics sought to preserve their families’ local autonomy, ituika’s supporters called unrelated people together on principle. On March 11, 1922, Harry Thuku came to Nyeri’s Gakindu market to drum up support for his East African Association. Thuku was touring the Gikuyu reserves, preaching against government-issued identity cards and condemning chiefs for their misrule. His supporters called him messiah, come to bring in a new era in history. Calling on all Christians to pray for “our leader, Harry Thuku,” Anglican reader Gideon Mugo thought Thuku would guide Gikuyu out of “our present condition of slavery.” “Remember how God brought the children of Israel out of the house of bondage of King Pharaoh,” wrote Mugo in 1922, “also remember that Goliath

28 KNA DC/Nyeri/1/7/3: Champion, “Inquiry,” 24 November 1924.

29 For more on Kabare readers’ politics, see Karanja, Founding an African Faith, 174–77.

30 Murray: Sila Karimu to All the Christians in Fort Hall, 22 November 1924. The original letter is held in Handley Hooper’s papers at the University of Birmingham.
was unable to hurt David when David was a child and not yet fully grown." Thuku himself used the imagery of the Swahili language Old Testament in a communiqué to Tumutumu readers, where he described how the wafalme, the "kings" of Gikuyuland, were conspiring against him. Suffering under their shared bondage, Gikuyu should come together under Thuku's direction. "It is [God] who has set [Harry Thuku] apart to be our Master and Guide," wrote Mugo, "may he be chief of us all." Mugo and other Thuku supporters recruited people to act as partisans, sharing a political agenda. As "slaves" suffering under Pharaoh's lash, Gikuyu were alike in their suffering. They had therefore to come together, like the children of Israel, as partisans of a political movement. Mugo's Old Testament imagery invited Gikuyu, as activists, to work for change.

This call to duty resonated with Tumutumu's junior apprentices, most of them land-poor young men. Thuku's earliest advocate in Nyeri, George Maina wa Kagonye, was in training to be a stonemason. Maina's family had disinherited him; at his wedding in 1918, another mission youth had to stand in as his father. Other Thuku supporters were sons of impoverished lineages. Luka Macaria's family, for example, was in such dire straits during the famine of 1918 that they sent Macaria's younger brother to faraway Ukambani in exchange for food. Early in 1922, Macaria, Maina, and other young apprentices began meeting in the evenings at a house near the mission. The district commissioner was convinced that they were "intriguing hard": in early March, some of them traveled as far away as Embu to advertise Thuku's message.

Senior readers at Tumutumu would not agree to be Thuku's emissaries. They attended a 1921 meeting organized by Thuku and his political opponents,


32 PCEA I/F/9: "Umoja wa Tumutumu," 7.3.22.


34 PCEA I/C/7: Philp to Arthur, 12 March 1922.

35 Hutcheson, "A Visit to Tumutumu," Kikuyu News 66 (Feb.–April 1918).


37 PCEA I/B/7: Tumutumu Annual Report, 1922.

38 PCEA I/F/9: DC Mutira to DC Nyeri, 8 March 1922.
the chiefs of Kiambu district. But they refused to sign a letter that Thuku sent to the Colonial Office. The letter was about “things we were not aware of and didn’t know about,” they explained.\textsuperscript{39} They likewise refused to join the missionary-sponsored Kikuyu Association when the Kiambu chief Philipo Karanja toured Nyeri seeking support. Tumutumu readers accused Karanja of “double dealing and of being like Harry Thuku, desirous of becoming paramount chief of Kikuyu.”\textsuperscript{40} Missionaries reported that the “educated people here seem to think that they can manage their own affairs themselves.”\textsuperscript{41} When the British arrested Thuku on March 14, 1922, Tumutumu missionaries dismissed a bare thirty junior apprentices for conspiring with him.\textsuperscript{42} The missionary Horace Philp thought senior readers’ opposition to Thuku was a testimony to the “persistent teaching of loyalty to the government and to the Apostolic injunction to live in peace with all men.” But there was more than abstract loyalty to the British at stake in Nyeri readers’ political choices.

Their contending models of imagined community divided Tumutumu’s senior and junior readers in 1922. Having learned from the sweaty work of forest clearing, Tumutumu’s landed senior readers knew that change came slowly. Trees were cut down, crops planted, and households established through hard work done in family units, not by political will. No man could therefore presume to dictate to another. In their proverbs, proud householders maintained that “The final decision concerning a homestead is the prerogative of the head of that homestead.”\textsuperscript{43} They therefore would not agree to follow Gideon Mugo and acknowledge any person as “chief of us all.” Tumutumu’s junior readers, in contrast, sought to unite people based on shared interest. They saw a new day at the door, a new era in history radically different than the old. With changed times on the horizon, they and other generational theorists called people together as partisans dedicated to a cause. They imagined, that is, a community of activists, unified under the authority of God and Harry Thuku.

Thus divided, Tumutumu’s readers developed two competing patriotisms. After Thuku’s deportation, his supporters formed the nucleus of the Kikuyu


\textsuperscript{40} \textit{PCEA I/C/7}: Horace Philp to John Arthur, 12 March 1922.

\textsuperscript{41} \textit{PCEA I/C/7}: Horace Philp to John Arthur, 27 February 1922.

\textsuperscript{42} \textit{PCEA I/B/7}: Tumutumu Annual Report, 1922.

Central Association (KCA) in Nyeri district. The KCA’s name in the Gikuyu language—Athothiicini cia Gikuyu ciothe—highlights the political challenges that its organizers faced.44 “Association” was a foreign word, imported directly from the English language. Central Kenya’s inhabitants did not naturally affiliate themselves based on abstract principles. The KCA’s intellectuals looked to history to legitimate their experiment. As fitting for a culture of immigrants, Gikuyu historians had always differed about where they came from. Some clans claimed to be descended from neighboring Masai or Kamba peoples. Others said they had migrated up the Tana River from the coast. KCA historians could not abide this mongrel complexity. They found a more usable past in Marion Stevenson’s reading primer Karirikania, published at Tumutumu in 1924 and used in Presbyterian and Anglican schools until the 1950s.45 The book began with a singularly useful phrase. “Ngai [God] gave the Gikuyu a good country that lacks neither food nor water or forests. It’s therefore good for the Gikuyu to be praising Ngai, for He has been very generous to them.” Stevenson’s primer was meant to impress readers with their duties to God. KCA thinkers thought it a rousingly good recruiting speech. It helped them cast themselves as defenders of a fatherland. Writing to the KCA journal Mwigwithania (“The Reconciler”) in 1931, an unnamed member of the KCA’s Karura branch reminded readers about their political duty.46 “The land [tiri] we have was given to us by our father, Ngai,” he wrote, “for there is no one who wasn’t given this kind of inheritance by his father.” Readers should remember that they could never leave their fatherland behind. “See how you have been tied to this your land,” wrote the author, and “whatever God has joined together, no one will put asunder.” Schooled in mission stations, readers would immediately recognize these lines from the Christian marriage service. Church ministers’ warning against divorce fed the writer’s political message. As children of Ngai, KCA members were obligated to work for the good of their kindred people. “WAKE UP! WAKE UP,” he wrote in capital letters, as if to awaken the Gikuyu body politic by force of words, “and take care of the country together, which was given to us by our father.”

Nothing about their labor history invited Mwigwithania’s readers to think about “the land” as a gift given by God to a unitary Gikuyu people. The land that mbari pioneers had wrenched from the forest’s grasp was called a githaka (pl.

44 For the name, Murray: Sila Karimu to Handley Hooper, 9 June 1927.


Gikuyu language lumped cows, goats, children, and *ithaka* together with the word *iri*, "sustenance," "substance," and "prosperity."48 Won from the enclosing wilderness, *ithaka* estates were the material and moral foundation for kin communities. "Land is people," went one proverb; it enabled kin to flourish and progeny to prosper. The word *ng’undu* meant both a land-clearing community and the land that it inhabited.49 Elders of neighboring clans demarcated their *ithaka* with piles of stones or rows of lilies, called *igaya ng’undu*, the "divider of land/people."50

By 1902, when the Routledges began anthropological research in Nyeri district, they could report that "as far as the eye can reach, in all directions, spreads one huge garden, every square inch of it ... [with] carefully marked boundaries."51 Gikuyu people's parochial political divisions were physically marked out on the landscape.

KCA innovators asked their readers to overlook the boundaries that divided them. Where *mbari* autocrats accounted their land as *ithaka*, the writer in *Mwigwithania* called the land *tiri*. *Tiri* appears in the earliest Gikuyu language dictionaries as "soil": farmers called fertile soil *tiri munoru*.52 *Tiri* was also the name that Gikuyu gave to the "ground" on which boys and girls were circumcised.53 The writer from Karura expanded *tiri* into a national territory, given by an omniscient God to a politically identifiable people. His translation allowed KCA activists to cast themselves as defenders of a fatherland and (therefore) as spokesmen for a people. As early as 1926, KCA organizers in Nyeri were complaining that government officials and missionaries were snatching "Kikuyu

49 *EUL* Gen. 1785/2: Barlow, notes on *ng’undu*.
53 *EUL* Gen. 1785/4: Barlow, notes on *tiri*. The 1924 edition of *Genesis* had the "dry ground" separated from the primordial waters as *tiri* (*Genesis* 1:9), but the "land" that emerged as *thi* (*Genesis* 1:10). See *PCEA* I/Z/19–20: *Genesis* (Kijabe, 1924).
land” from its rightful owners. By 1928, KCA leaders were petitioning government to fix the boundaries of “Kikuyu country” properly and justly, with title deeds issues to Local Native Councils. By lumping householders’ ithaka up together as tiri, KCA intellectuals were also clearing the ground on which to create a Gikuyu polity. Their surveying work, in other words, invited the divided inhabitants of central Kenya to think of themselves as defenders of a homeland. Their surveying work also gave KCA intellectuals, as leaders of a politically identifiable people, leverage in the colonial world.

But KCA surveyors’ work was not uncontroversial. Not everyone would blandly agree that their githaka, won with sweat and muscle, could be incorporated into an undifferentiated Gikuyu homeland. KCA organizers had always to keep constituents’ shifting loyalties fixed on their imagined fatherland. Political organizers’ first test came in 1924, when Tumutumu missionaries insisted that the rural “outschools” connected with the mission should have gardens on which to grow food crops. During the “school garden controversy” that followed, Gikuyu landholders and tenants throughout Nyeri argued, in public, over who properly could allocate land for missionary gardeners’ use. These internecine arguments over seniority, land tenure, and family history undermined KCA organizers’ efforts to keep divisive mburi politics under wraps.

Tumutumu missionaries hoped that an educative foray into agriculture would teach students the virtues of thrift and hard work. Early in 1924, they gave African teachers the seeds with which to plant the garden; at the end of the growing season, the school staff was to remit the harvest back to the mission. Within a few months of the first planting, however, missionaries reported that potatoes, peas, and other vegetables were being pulled out of outschool gardens. At Wandumbi School, wattle trees planted by scholars students in the river basin were pulled up by an angry crowd, which planted sweet potatoes in their place. In Kangeita, five women stole loads of firewood stacked beside the school and cut a swath through the school garden. And at Mukangu Intermediate School,

54 KNA PC/Central/8/5/2: H. Mundia, Joshua Kiboi, and Allan Gicuki et al. to DC Nyeri, 10 July 1926.
57 PCEA I/A/39: Philp to D.C. Nyeri, 2 April 1924.
58 PCEA I/A/38: Philp to D.C. Nyeri, 18 January 1926.
attendees leaving the church on Sunday morning uprooted crops in the school garden.59

Missionaries were convinced that the KCA and other “outside agitators” from Nairobi were orchestrating the controversy. But KCA leaders were startlingly interested in putting a quick end to the troubles. Hezekiah Mundia, Johanna Kunyiha, and other leaders met with missionary Horace Philp in 1929 and were “extraordinarily friendly.”60 They lauded the mission for its work in fostering progress in the district and favored agriculture as part of schools’ curriculum. Writers to the KCA journal *Mwigwithania* similarly applauded the school gardens. “Cast your eyes and your thoughts over the little agricultural plots near you,” editor Johnstone Kenyatta enjoined his readers, “examine them and think and see how carefully the crops are planted.... And having observed, you become industrious too and learn how to plant in the best way.”61 In 1932, Nyeri KCA chairman Hezekiah Mundia disowned the instigators of the garden controversy, calling it the “work of fools who did not understand their leaders.”62

Why did Mundia think the anti-garden agitation was the work of irresponsible fools? The answer illuminates the precariousness of the KCA’s political project. KCA men represented themselves as defenders of a united Gikuyu commonwealth. But the local politics of the garden controversy were deeply divisive. The garden conflict at Wandumbi, for example, was stirred up by an internal family argument over seniority. Nguku, the *mbari* founder, had sired children with a woman he did not marry. Her offspring were incorporated into the clan as a junior lineage.63 In 1926, Nguri wa Gacoki, the senior elder of the clan, had by right of seniority reclaimed land previously farmed by Cege wa Kiragu, a member of the junior lineage. Nguri cemented his claim on the land by inviting the Scots to build a school on a part of it. Mission students planted wattle, a long-maturing crop, in the fertile river valley behind the school. Cege, worried that the school garden would render his lineage landless, purchased property on the other side of the river basin. When students began planting a second stand of wattle in the river basin, Cege appeared and methodically uprooted some 1,391 seedlings.64 A group

59 PCEA I/A/38: Philp to D.C. Nyeri, 19 November 1926.
61 Kenyatta, “Stir Up the Earth that You May Find Precious Things,” *Mwigwithania* 1, 7 (Nov. 1928).
64 PCEA I/C/12 and 13: Johanna Wanjau to Dickson and Philp, 10 Nov. 1926.
of younger men accompanied Cege, taunting students and planting sweet potatoes to replace the uprooted wattle.\(^{65}\) Local debates over who precisely controlled mbari land drove the violent confrontations of the garden crisis.

The school garden controversy in Wandumbi and elsewhere set family members against one another in intractable argument. Desperate to avoid divisive debates at home, the KCA’s surveyors blamed the troubles on short-sighted Tumutumu readers. One anonymous reader wrote to pastor Solomon Ndambi in 1926:

I want to ask you what you the readers at Tumutumu are thinking. Your learning is nonsense. It is fitting to a barbarian rather than you. You eat your mother’s …, you ministers at Tumutumu. I know your stupidity is because you have learned at Tumutumu and you have never come to see the other places in the country. You have sat at your wives’ buttocks; you have not remembered the question of the country.\(^{66}\)

School gardens were bad politics. Tumutumu’s agricultural policy needlessly inflamed local rivalries. Divisive histories of land ownership and family definition, KCA unifiers knew, needed to be papered over, not paraded in public view.

The garden crisis brings the KCA’s political project into sharper focus. KCA politicians were creators of a people endowed by God with unalienable rights to a national territory. They did theological and linguistic work to paper over divisive local politics, drawing people together not as clansmen but as partisans working for Gikuyu commonwealth. But internecine debates over land tenure, stirred by missionaries’ school garden initiative, challenged KCA leaders’ strenuous efforts to make Gikuyu overlook family history. By parading Gikuyu differences, the garden agitators proved that parochial mbari disputes could not easily be smoothed over.

**Autonomy and Activism During the “Female Circumcision Crisis”**

The contest between linear time and regenerative time, between divisive mbari parochialism and principled political activism, came to a head during the “female circumcision crisis” of 1928–1930. The crisis is supposed to have begun when Protestant churches called on church members to sign a pledge (called a kirore, or “thumbprint”) promising to abjure the practice of circumcising women at adoles-

\(^{65}\) *PCEA I/A/38*: Philp to D.C. Nyeri, 17 Nov. 1926.

\(^{66}\) *PCEA I/C/12 and 13*: Anonymous letter to Solomon Ndambi, 2 November 1926. The deletion is the work of the letter’s translator, Horace Philp.
cience. By August 1929, the Presbyterian mission in Kiambu District had lost all but 250 of 2,500 communicants over the kirore issue. Other missions were similarly affected: attendance at Africa Inland Mission schools in Kiambu District dropped by 75 percent. The scurrilous song called muthirigu, the "song of the big uncut girl," spread from Kiambu throughout the Gikuyu reserves. It blamed the signers of the kirore for selling Gikuyu land and Gikuyu girls to the whites, and demanded that they be deported.

Historians have most often agreed with the performers of muthirigu about church members' foreign allegiances. Even Lynn Thomas's very illuminating study of the "politics of the womb" in colonial Kenya argues that the men and women who supported anti-circumcision rules were acting out European missionaries' project. African church members' opposition to female circumcision, writes Thomas, "demonstrates how the reproductive perspective of some had been altered by colonial rule. Their views on excision had become intertwined with those of the white missionaries and colonial officials who taught and ruled them." As the "local allies" of government officials and Christian missionaries, says Thomas, African church members' support gave momentum to British interventions in women's reproductive practices.

But readers in Nyeri had their own reasons for signing the kirore. In Nyeri, the "female circumcision controversy" manifested Gikuyu people's ongoing debates over the proper exercise of political authority. The Progressive Kikuyu Party (PKP) was the foremost advocate for the anti-circumcision pledge in Nyeri. In 1922, landholding senior readers at Tumutumu had rejected Harry Thuku's authority, arguing that no man could pose as "chief of us all." This same group formed the core of the PKP in 1928. Landlord Zakayo muru wa Kagotho, one of the wealthiest men in Nyeri district, was the PKP's first vice-chairman. He refused to have his daughter circumcised, and married her to a teacher. Another leader was Muhoya wa Kagumba, a large landowner and a polygamist. There were also a significant number of tenants on the PKP's membership roll. Stanley


68 AIM, "McKenrick to Downing, 1910s to 1930s" File: McKenrick to Downing, 22 April 1930.


Kiama Gathigira was a schoolteacher at Tumutumu and the PKP’s assistant secretary in 1928. His father had been dispossessed in the 1910s, when the British demarcated the forest area from the Gikuyu reserve. He had settled on the slopes of Tumutumu Hill, on another man’s land.

PKP men made two arguments in support of the church’s ban on circumcision. First, they condemned circumcision as an untoward interference in householder’s private affairs. Like the pioneering householders of the nineteenth century, like the critics of *ituika* in 1922, PKP householders thought it irresponsible to give up control over their property and progeny. In March 1928, KCA leaders in Nyeri had publicly proclaimed the party’s support for paying *ituika* goats and for the continuance of female circumcision. The PKP condemned KCA men as parasites, benefiting from other men’s hard work. The party’s essayists described how KCA deceivers dined on *ituika* goats at night, growing fat while their unknowing dupes slept. Gideon Gatere, chief, polygamist, and early PKP leader, called the KCA “hyenas” in front of the provincial commissioner in 1929. “How could you, Sir, have goats and hyenas in one flock, or in one hut?” asked Gatere. “For these people are hyenas, because they eat fat sheep at night, and they demand contributions at night. It was well that this council of theirs should be abolished from now on.” Hyenas had once ravaged pioneering farmers’ herds. Like hyenas, KCA leaders grew fat at other people’s expense, during nighttime dinner parties. PKP members wore badges on their breasts bearing the emblem of a rising sun, and met only during daylight hours. Their party, they argued, belonged to the productive hours lighted by the sun, not to the dark, unproductive night.

The contrast between productive and unproductive time helps explain the PKP’s opposition to female circumcision. The PKP and other readers supported the ban on circumcision because they sought to keep lazy, unknowable men from exercising authority over householders’ hard-earned property and progeny. The clearest evidence comes from Sila Karimu’s 1927 letter to “All Christians of

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73 *PCEA* I/A/38: Philp to DC Nyeri, 25 March 1925.
74 *PCEA* I/C/7: Philp to Arthur, 4 April 1928.
75 *PCEA* I/C/9: Zakayo Muru wa Kagotho et al. to Barlow and Calderwood, 2 July 1934.
76 “Notes on a Meeting at Nyeri,” *Mwigwithania* 1, 8 (Jan. 1929).
Writing from the Anglican mission at Kahuhia, Karimu equated female circumcision with "slavery." "A person must look after her own body," he wrote. Circumcisers took away girls' freedom of decision. Karimu proved the point with a series of questions:

Why are a girl's legs forced open before people when she is circumcised?
Why, if a girl is afraid of being circumcised, is she cut on the thigh?
Why is a girl caused to sing Gitiro when she is circumcised?
Why is a girl subject to illicit sexual intercourse? ...
Why does a girl have to be cut with a razor when she is giving birth?
In what ways can circumcision be counted as part of our faith or of our Christian religion?

Karimu's questions emphasized circumcised girls' loss of moral autonomy. Made subject to other people's will, girls became like slaves. Other supporters of the missionaries' rules similarly compared circumcision with slavery. In Embu, Anglican Church member Mariamu wa Daudi illustrated her sermons against circumcision by placing an old tire about the neck of another woman. The tire, she said, represented the "burden of sins" that circumcised women suffered under. Shackled at other people's command, circumcised girls lost their agency.

PKP men and women saw it as their duty to protect girls from thralldom. Women at Tumutumu formed the Ngo ya Tuiritu, the "Shield of Young Girls," in 1928. The group protected girls who wanted to avoid circumcision. The group's leaders wrote to the Nyeri Local Native Council in 1931 to ask for a legal ban on circumcision. They reasoned as follows:

We have heard that there are men who talk of female circumcision and we get astonished because men do not give birth and feel the pain. Some [women] die and others become infertile and the main cause is circumcision.

Therefore circumcision should not be forced. People are caught like sheep; one should be allowed to find her own way either to be circumcised or not without being dictated to about one's body.

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78 Murray: Sila Karimu to "All Christians of Gikuyuland," 1 August 1927.
79 Murray interview: Mariamu wa Daudi, Kabare, Embu, 4 April 1972.
80 PCEA I/C/12 and 13: Nyambura wa Kihurani, Raheli Warigia wa Johanna, and Alice Murigo wa Meshak to LNC South Nyeri, 25 December 1931.
Like Silas Karimu, the Ngo ya Tuiritu women saw circumcision as an unwonted loss of autonomy. Men who insisted on the practice took away women's freedom of choice, herding them like helpless sheep. Circumcisers were agency thieves; they stole the girls' right to self-determination.

PKP members' first criticism of circumcision, therefore, defended men and women's moral and physical independence against interfering outsiders. On a second level of argument, PKP members argued that banning circumcision was good colonial politics. PKP organizers worked hard to make the British pay them heed. They named the party "progressive" in English, and took care to invite the district commissioner to party meetings. Members lobbied the British government for Gikuyu representatives on the Legislative Council. Europeans had ignored Gikuyu politicians for too long, wrote Musa Matu in 1930. "Europeans are the drivers and we are cart and ox. When the driver gets asleep or is drunk, won't the cart and the ox go astray?" Europeans' monopoly on political power made it impossible for Gikuyu to learn to direct themselves. "Our problems should be worked in the same way like those of other tribes," wrote Matu, "because we are soldiers of the same king who rules the whole world."

As soldiers of the British king, PKP politicians practiced a sober discipline. They sought to flatten out differences between the British and the Gikuyu, the better to exercise influence in the colonial world. This political strategy led the PKP to support the circumcision ban. As Zakayo muru wa Kagotho and other PKP members put it in a 1929 letter to the East African Standard:

The beginning of civilization is in the honoring of women, because the strength and power of a people comes from its women. The nation which belittles women, we know that they do not go forward but go back.... We of the PKP hate customs which bind the Kikuyu and prevent them from knowing the true religion, and going forward in civilization and becoming a strong people, able to receive their inheritance in mind and body. We want [women] to be whole in body, able to speak the truth, and give evidence in their cases, so that the Government can trust us as being a full-grown nation with clean customs.

81 PCEA I/A/37: Philp to Fazan, 5 July 1928.
82 PCEA I/C/12 and 13: Musa Matu to Calderwood, 29 April 1930.
For PKP politicians, ending circumcision was a means of getting leverage with colonial rulers. As the teacher Stevenson Githii put it in a 1929 letter: "If we wish to be regarded as civilized and fit to take part in governing Kenya Colony these old barbaric customs must go."84 The circumcision ban was the surest way to pass the British audit of respectability.

PKP men did not support the ban on circumcision because they were unthinkingly loyal to British missionaries. Their own partisan philosophy taught them to see the circumcision ban as good politics. As actors on the colonial stage, PKP organizers supported the circumcision rules in order to smooth out differences with British rulers. And as Gikuyu landlords, PKP men defended their autonomy against outsiders' demands. They rejected Harry Thuku’s call to duty, criticized the goat payments at ituika, and supported the ban on circumcision because they refused to submit to any authority removed from the moral test of household reputation. Their logic carried in the day in most of Nyeri District. Hundreds of people supported the circumcision ban at Tumutumu. The church’s communion roll expanded between 1929 and 1930, the same years that the circumcision controversy gutted churches in Kiambu.85

Where the sectarians of the PKP strove to defend their freedom of decision, KCA organizers used ituika lore to draw the diverse, divided critics of the mission’s rules together. The KCA’s political base in Nyeri was at Mahiga Location, where two hundred church members refused to sign the anti-circumcision pledge.86 They founded their own school, called Kagere, shortly after the Tumutumu church court excommunicated them in 1930. The school register recorded 465 students in 1931.87 KCA members were the school’s prime sponsors. Willy Jimmy Wambugu was the first teacher at Kagere and a partner in a maize mill at Gatugi trading center.88 Harrison Ngari Githenji, another leader, was also a maize dealer.89 These and other cash-dealing traders raised money for a new school building in 1931. It was to be 60 feet long by 24 feet wide, with a store and office,

85 TT Cocí ya Tumutumu: minute for 27 December 1930.
87 Mahiga: Mariitwa ma Athomi a Mahiga, New Promise, 26 October 1931.
88 Interview: Gerard King’ori, Gitugi, 19 June and 8 July 1998.
89 “Muoyo wa Harrison Gathenji Ngari” (unpublished ms., n.d.).
six windows, three doors, and 18 long tables. The school cost 2,254 shillings in total to build, a large sum in the early 1930s when cash was short.

A powerful sense of obligation drove KCA members and other Nyeri people to contribute to the school. The "straighteners" of the nineteenth century had once made ituika payments to bring in an era of prosperity after environmental and social disasters. Kagere's fundraisers similarly thought themselves obliged to sacrifice for the public good. In a 1932 report titled "How the Gikuyu Can Go Forward," they argued that contributing cash to the school building was like making the goat payments at ituika. Cash investments in Kagere School would prepare Gikuyu society for the future and "make the country clean." Those people who refused to contribute lacked visionary foresight. They were "like the Swahili people of Mombasa when the whites first arrived or like the Jews who did not recognize Jesus' kingdom." Both the Jews and the Swahili had failed to see the world changing before their very eyes. History had therefore passed them by. Kagere's fundraisers urged Gikuyu to read the signs of the times, warning members of disaster if they failed to contribute to the school.

When the sun shall come, or the rain fall, where shall you be sheltered from? Who are you wanting to lead you to set up the building for you? Where shall you be sheltered from? Or even you and your children? If you don't set up buildings you will be killed in the open. People from other places have buildings.

Kagere's readers thought themselves obliged to teach Gikuyu how to deal with changing times. Their school promised to train a new generation of leaders, educated and prepared for the future. Those people who refused to invest in the school building were not merely selfish. Their failure to prepare for the future was irresponsible, endangering the welfare of their children. Willy Jimmy Wambugu called those who hung back "cowards" in a public meeting in 1931. Building Gikuyu polity took courage, the courage to commit to principled self-sacrifice.

Like the nineteenth-century organizers of ituika, KCA entrepreneurs asked people to see themselves as activists, working for the good of Gikuyu country. Herein lies the crux of the party's political strategy. Land in Nyeri was in actuality divided into hundreds of ithaka, worked by kinfolk who fiercely protected their independence. But organizers asked their constituents to think of land as ter-

ritory, given specifically to a Gikuyu people by an omnipotent God. By this act of religious imagination, KCA politicians demarcated a homeland for which to fight. Members who joined Kagere’s fundraising committee signed their names on the members’ list, promising to “be like a firm soldier to develop the country.” By transforming mbari landlords’ property (ithaka) into national territory (tiri), KCA organizers also invited wavering, divided people to think of themselves as patriots, defenders of a fatherland.

The contrasts between the KCA and the PKP can now be more carefully drawn. The parties differed in their base of support: the PKP was an organization of chiefs, merchants, and teachers attached to the Tumutumu mission. The KCA’s core constituents were traders and entrepreneurs, most from Othaya division. But more than geography or economic interest divided the two parties. At bottom, Nyeri’s organizers differed over political philosophy. The PKP was an alliance of mbari autocrats and wealthy tenants, dedicated to protecting their material and moral autonomy against outsiders’ demands. The KCA, in contrast, sought to draw people together in principle, as partisan members of an imagined community, not as kin. Both parties were founded on members’ strategic willingness to ignore the local politics that divided them. Both parties were deeply challenged when Judge Carter’s commission brought divisive mbari politics to center stage.

Judge Carter and the Unmaking of Imagined Communities

In Kiambu District, the Carter Commission saw the apotheosis of what John Lonsdale calls “dynastic theory.” Kiambu witnesses told Judge Carter that an honorable past merited British recognition. Gikuyu landlords had purchased, not stolen, land from the original Dorobo inhabitants of Kiambu. When the British arrived, Gikuyu lineage heads had succored them with land and laborers. The British were therefore the clients of Gikuyu patrons, not their conquerors. Greedy British clients had broken their trust by appropriating Gikuyu land for their own use. The Kiambu presenters’ dynastic theory proved that Gikuyu clans had rights to land in the White Highlands; moreover, it made Europeans look ungrateful. Judge Carter, the Kiambu presenters argued, should reward Gikuyu generosity by returning the land alienated to avaricious white settlers.

The Carter Commission arrived in Nyeri District in November 1932. The testimony they heard in Nyeri was of a remarkably different tenor than in

93 *Mahiga:* “Watho wa Members.”

Kiambu.95 The most significant difference between the Kiambu and Nyeri evidence had to do with the status of the Dorobo. The Dorobo figured in Kiambu presenters’ evidence as the original owners of Gikuyu country; it was they who had bequeathed their rights to Gikuyu purchasers. Nyeri presenters, in contrast, discounted the Dorobo. “They used to wander about, they did not live on one place,” Chief Nduini told Judge Carter.96 He assured Carter that Nyeri had always been Gikuyu country. Anyone who said they had purchased land from the Dorobo was lying. Chief Wangombe agreed, testifying that the land “is ours from of old.”97 One group of Nyeri mbari, using printed forms brought in from Nairobi, claimed to have purchased land from Dorobo inhabitants. Later they reconsidered, writing in a hastily revised application that they had “inherited lands from our forefathers.”98 The Dorobo seemed dangerous on further consideration.

Why did the Dorobo story fail to make an appearance on Nyeri’s political stage? In Kiambu, the story of how Gikuyu pioneers had purchased land from Dorobo landlords helped prove the legitimacy and longevity of Gikuyu land claims. In Nyeri, in contrast, Dorobo landlords were a threat to public order. For Nyeri people were already arguing over landlords’ rights in 1932. During the late 1920s, a long-running drought in Ukambani and Somaliland had driven desperate cattlemen south into Nyeri. They traded their goats for grain with which to feed starving cattle.99 The price of Kamba goats fell dramatically on the Nyeri market. In 1929, one headload of maize could purchase a goat.100 By 1934, prices were 700 percent less than in 1928.101 The precipitous slide in the value of goats fueled land litigation. Land values in Nyeri had always been figured in livestock. Tenants paid goats to landlords and in exchange were given rights to cultivate, build houses, and reside on the land. But Nyeri landlords insisted on the right to


97 Ibid., 84.

98 Ibid., 373.


100 KNA DC/Nyeri/1/1/2: Nyeri District Annual Report, 1929.

101 KNA DC/Nyeri/1/1/3: Nyeri District Annual Report, 1934.
redemption the land they lent to tenants, arguing that "property is jointly held."[102] In the early 1930s, the cheap goats from Ukambani made it possible for even impoverished landlords to purchase sufficient livestock and redeem land they had lent to tenants. By 1934, the district commissioner reported that landlords throughout the district were avidly redeeming land with goats purchased on the Kamba market.[103] Tenants who had built expensive stone houses were especially at risk: they stood to lose the value of the improvements they had made.

The cheap Kamba goats set landlords against tenants, forcing Nyeri people to argue publicly about intimate social relationships. It was with this divisive land politics in view that Nyeri’s presenters rejected Kiambu polticians’ Dorobo strategy. The KCA was the most hard-pressed of Nyeri’s parties. For the party’s central office in Nairobi was intent on harnessing Nyeri’s evidence for Kiambu’s political purposes. They sent out forms for Nyeri presenters’ use, which framed the evidence as follows:

Many centuries ago, [__________] purchased a large portion of land from [__________] for [___] goats, [___] rams, and [____] pots of honey. The land ... was taken away without our knowledge. We were only told by [__________] to quit from it.[104]

The KCA’s Nairobi leaders hoped the forms would impress Judge Carter with the coherence of Gikuyu land claims. But Nyeri’s KCA leaders saw trouble in this formulaic approach to land tenure. For the Nairobi office’s forms put the Dorobo firmly at center stage, asking Nyeri presenters to acknowledge their prior claim to the land. It was for this reason that the party’s Nyeri branch balked. In Nyeri, unlike Kiambu, landlords could redeem land they had lent to tenants. And by 1932, Nyeri people were already arguing over who, exactly, held the original title to the ithaka they inhabited. Acknowledging the Dorobo as landlords would have thrown Nyeri’s politics into disarray by giving a new group leverage over already disputed property. The Dorobo would turn the KCA’s principled political association into an internecine brawl.

KCA leaders in Nyeri were immobilized by the Dorobo problem. Torn between their party’s coordinated strategy and Nyeri’s political reality, KCA leaders studiously avoided Judge Carter. In April 1932, KCA Nairobi leader Joseph Kang’ethe wrote to Nyeri’s leadership for input on an official party memo-

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randum for the commission. Asking that they “join hands” to press Gikuyu land grievances on Judge Carter, Kang’ethe requested 30 shillings to help pay presenters’ expenses. But KCA officials in Nyeri never paid. Later in 1932, the central office invited Nyeri’s leaders to take a *muuma* oath in Nairobi. Gikuyu pioneers had once taken oaths together when faced with a dangerous or controversial task. Nairobi’s KCA leaders likewise knew Judge Carter’s hearings to be dangerous. Their call for oath-taking was a desperate attempt to rally party members behind a single purpose.

But no one in Nyeri was willing to line up behind Nairobi’s Dorobo strategy. Instead, Carter heard a long parade of Nyeri witnesses talk about the boundaries of Gikuyu country. Nyeri’s presenters had worked out their strategy in a special meeting convened before Carter’s arrival. The PKP’s vice-president described the plan in this way:

> We wanted the government to give us title deeds for the whole country of the Gikuyu and for a “line” to be drawn around the whole Gikuyu country. After the discussion even the chiefs found it good for all people in Gikuyu country to be given titles. These titles would give the boundaries between the Gikuyu and the Europeans.

Nyeri’s presenters were strikingly coordinated in their presentations before Judge Carter. All of them carefully delineated the boundaries of Gikuyu territory, rolling back white farmers’ plantations in an onslaught of border-drawing. Chief Wambugu began by describing how in olden times elders had traveled to the top of Mount Kenya to make sacrifices to God. He vowed that the northern boundary of Gikuyuland had been the Amboni River, deep in the settlers’ “White Highlands.” Headman Nderi was even more specific: he described how his father, Chief Wangombe, had given British officials rights to use what became the government station at Nyeri. Elders of the Local Native Council likewise laid claim to Nyeri town, stressing that over a thousand people had been displaced when the British had arbitrarily marked the Gikuyu reserve off from the land to the north.

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106 *Mahiga*: George Ndegwa, KCA Nairobi, to members of KCA, 24 July 1932.
107 *PCEA I/C/9*: Zakayo muru wa Kagotho et al. to Calderwood and Barlow, 2 July 1934.
109 Ibid., 92–93.
110 Ibid., 91.
Judge Carter’s commission transformed Nyeri’s people into part-time surveyors, busily demarcating the borders of Gikuyuland. In 1932, missionaries reported that dozens of Tumutumu families were moving to the northeastern part of Nyeri, to the Ruguru plains, right on the border with white settlers’ farms. They were driven by an urgent sense of duty, as autobiographer Charles Muhoro remembered:

Dr. Philp ... advised [people] not to leave the land next to the road uncultivated, because when the white land officers coming from Nairobi saw the [unused] land, they would block the government from responding to the petitions and cries of the black people. He also alerted people about the land in the Ruguru area, to the east of Ruui Ruiru river. The land was lying idle, and he saw the need for the people to go and cultivate it. This is the place to which many people moved, and many schools and churches were built.

Muhoro remembered taking advice from Tumutumu missionary Horace Philp on Gikuyu land use. Whatever Philp’s role, it is clear that Tumutumu readers thinking moving north to Ruguru was a patriotically necessary act. One of the migrants, John Muriithi, remembered how he and others sacrificed goats right up on the edges of white settlers’ fields, hoping to reclaim the stolen land. The immigrants founded a school in 1932, the same year that Judge Carter took evidence about Nyeri’s boundaries. That same year, Chief Murigo’s men drained swampland along the Rui Ruiru River in Ruguru, opening up some 2,000 acres for cultivation. Everyone was working hard to fill in Gikuyuland, and pushing hard at its northern border.

Only the Kikuyu Central Association failed to join this onslaught on Nyeri’s boundary. Party leaders did draft a memorandum on the precolonial boundaries of Gikuyu country. But in the end, the writers chose not to present the memo to the commission. It was probably too contentious. The KCA draft began in much the same way as the other Nyeri memoranda. In former times, its writers argued, Gikuyu country had gone much farther than the present border. The KCA survey set the northwestern boundary as follows:

112 Muhoro, The Life of Charles Muhoro Kareri, 14.
113 Interview: Joseph Muriithi, Ngorano, 14 May 1998.
114 PCEA II/A/39: DC South Nyeri to Barlow, 29 December 1933.
115 PCEA I/G/6: Baraza at Council House, 27 April 1933.
Our boundary with the Masai is this:

1. Othaya: from the Ndigrine river bank, that is Muya’s home. a.) Manyagi’s house. b.) Maruko’s house. c.) Rinyi’s house…

2. Tetu: Githui’s saltlick, Thathi’s swamp, Micukia, Kahoni, Gathaini … Karuga’s house, Rucira’s house, Kigwa, Kibaki’s valley … through the river Amboni stretch, up to Ithangirani, this is where the Gikuyu and Masai had their market. It was agreed that no one doing business at the market would be harmed…

From there we went up through the Amboni valley, following the course of the River Nairobi up the fetching point called Kigunda. This is also where there is a market place between the Gikuyu and the Masai.116

The opening sentence—“our boundary with the Masai”—suggests how much the writers of the KCA memorandum owed to earlier surveyors of Gikuyuland. This memo was an attempt to define “Gikuyu country,” an attempt to demarcate the tiri that Gikuyu claimed as their own. The writers relied on natural landmarks in this surveying work, on saltlicks, riverbeds, and swamps. But they also relied on social markers, on households and markets that signaled the extent of Gikuyu territory. They enlisted Muya’s family, Manyagi’s, Maruko’s and others, using their estates to delineate a Gikuyu border. It is important to recognize that this parsing of ethnic identities was a surveyor’s artifice. Ethnicity among Nyeri people was much more flexible than the KCA surveyors could allow. The mother of Wagura, the powerful chief who ruled in Othaya until the 1930s, was Masai.117 Wangombe wa Ihura, the chief who famously gave land for the government station at Nyeri, was fluent in the Masai language. He dressed in Masai clothing, took Masai wives, and traveled regularly into “Masailand.”118 Several early Tumutumu readers had relatives among the Masai who lived near Nyeri station.119 The KCA memorandum delimited this mongrel heterogeneity by parsing out who, exactly, belonged to Masai and who belonged to Gikuyu. Party surveyors had to make these strategic choices in order to impress Judge Carter with the true extent of Gikuyuland.


118 Interviews: Peter Munene, Ruare, 12 May and 9 August 1998; Mwati wa Kiruba, Kiamariga, 13 August 1998.

119 PCEA I/A/11: Barlow to Arthur, 20 April 1912.
It was in this very specific work of territory-making that the KCA survey seems to have come undone. The draft memo ends abruptly, interrupted as it pegged out the northern border. In the absence of minutes, it is impossible to know precisely why KCA writers stopped their work. What is plain is that the practical work of border making was contentious on the ground. The KCA asked its constituents to think of their *ithaka* as national space, to identify their hard-won property as Gikuyu territory. Yet the brawl of land litigation in the early 1930s drove Nyeri people to define themselves as members of *mbari*, not as constituents of a Gikuyu polity. Land litigation was being fought, and resolved, on the basis of *mbari* seniority. Faced with this reality, KCA organizers chose to keep their memorandum from Judge Carter. It was too controversial for a party of unifiers to pronounce on Nyeri’s land politics.

In contrast, the Progressive Kikuyu Party thought the Carter Commission was an invaluable opportunity to impress the British with their erudition. PKP secretary Stanley Kiama read the party’s memorandum before the commissioners. In fluent English, he reminded Judge Carter that the readers of the PKP were better educated than the chiefs and elders of the Local Native Council; they therefore were better positioned to “know what the commission was doing.”

The PKP memo was an artful attempt to reconcile members’ contradictory ambitions with the demands of colonial advocacy. It began by stressing how similar British settlers and Gikuyu farmers were: “We Kikuyu were cultivators and shepherds long before the Europeans came to the country,” wrote the farmers of the PKP.

With their historical accomplishments in view, PKP men vowed that they could produce as well as the whites. It was only the lack of land that was keeping them from producing milk, butter, wool, and other commodities in abundance. For the good of the colonial economy, Carter should extend Nyeri’s boundaries. About the divisive question of land tenure, however, the PKP was studiously vague. PKP ex-carriers reminded Carter of their service during the Great War; in recompense, they argued, the commission should give Gikuyu people secure rights to the land they held. But the PKP did not want individuals to be given freehold tenure over land. They waffled, asking only that “the old laws of native land tenure remain, as they are, at least for the present, those best suited to our customs and needs.”

What precisely these “old laws” were remained unsaid.

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120 *Kenya Land Commission, Evidence*, 84.
Like the KCA, the PKP found it impossible to be specific about Gikuyu land. For the party’s membership was deeply divided. Tenants wanted to define land tenure as individual freehold, giving them unencumbered rights to the land they occupied and protecting the expensive stone houses they had built. This group was led by Stanley Kiama, schoolteacher, PKP secretary, and son of a tenant. Worried over the cheap goats of the early 1930s, Kiama wanted to entirely abrogate landlords’ right to redeem land. Other PKP members thought Kiama was an agitator. The permanent freehold title that Kiama advocated would extinguish landlords’ claims. Zakayo muru wa Kagotho was head of a large mbari near Tumutumu. He spoke for other landlords when he argued that Kiama and other advocates of freehold land tenure “[do] not know God and … [are] not concerned with the welfare of the Gikuyu country.” Divided by their competing economic interests, PKP members were studiously imprecise about land tenure before Judge Carter.

Carter’s recommendations were released in May 1934. He ruled that Gikuyu land tenure was communal: tribes—not individuals or lineages—owned land. His decision protected British interests, ensuring that no white settler’s land would need to be returned to African claimants. Carter did reward insistent Kiambu litigants with some five hundred acres of forest land, added to Nyeri District and settled by relocated squatters. For their part, Nyeri cattlemen got access to a few hundred acres of low-lying, malarious grassland in Yatta. The land was useless for cultivation.

When missionary Arthur Barlow gathered PKP readers to listen to a summary of the report’s conclusions, they exclaimed, “All is lost.” In their angry reply to Carter’s recommendations, they complained, “People need room to expand like a tree that spreads its branches in all directions. Now we had wanted to grow as one mbari. But we are to be allowed to expand only in one direction, and the place provided is usable for only a small sect.” The Carter Commission gave Nyeri people no respite from their land crisis. Bitterly disappointed at Carter’s perfidy, the PKP demanded compensation from the government for the

123 PCEA I/A/40: Barlow to DC Nyeri, 15 August 1930.
125 PCEA I/C/9: Zakayo Muruwakagotho et al. to Barlow and Calderwood, 2 July 1934.
126 PCEA I/C/12 and 13: Barlow to Biss, 28 May 1934.
127 Ibid.
128 PCEA I/C/12 and 13: Barlow’s notes on meeting re. Carter Land Commission, May 1934.
work they had put into preparing evidence for the commission. Many people had "gone to great expense in having their claims written down, believing they would be properly investigated." Judge Carter had wasted their time.

The PKP came unglued in the wake of the Carter report. Nyeri’s presenters had pushed hard at the northern boundaries in 1932, hoping that the commission would give Gikuyu land to accommodate the district’s growing population. Carter’s refusal to expand the northern border locked Nyeri’s landlords and tenants in inevitable conflict. Three weeks after the release of the Carter report, landlord Zakayo muru wa Kagotho complained that PKP president Jonathan Ngang’a, the son of a tenant, had stolen another man’s land. Kagotho thought Ngang’a, Stanley Kiama, and other tenants were secretly working to undercut landlords’ position. He also accused Ngang’a of misappropriating the party’s typewriter, of holding secret meetings at night, and of replacing the party’s secretary with his own appointee. In a private letter to missionary Arthur Barlow, Kagotho called Ngang’a a murogi, a sorcerer. Like sorcerers, Ngang’a and other avaricious tenants were monopolizing the party’s resources, using other men’s contributions for their own gain.

This last accusation brought the PKP back to 1922, when Tumutumu’s senior readers had refused to acknowledge Harry Thuku as their “Master and Guide.” Arguing that householders were responsible only to themselves, Tumutumu’s senior readers had scorned outsiders’ political organizations, preferring instead to defend their autonomy of decision. They banded together as the Progressive Kikuyu Party in 1928, hoping that their facility with the protocols of British administration would gain them advantages with government administrators. But when Judge Carter showed this political strategy to be hopeless, landlords were convinced that the PKP was a waste of resources. The PKP crumbled because its mbari autocrats were no longer willing to commit their resources to other men’s control.

The PKP lost the Mathira Local Native Council elections in 1934. The party’s candidate, Tumutumu reader Arthur Tutu, got only 81 votes out of 2,543 cast. The KCA in Nyeri was similarly shut out in the 1934 elections. By 1935

129 PCEA I/C/12 and 13: Barlow to Biss, 18 June 1934.
130 For Ngang’a’s biography, PCEA I/Z/6: Tumutumu Station Log Book, 1929, entry for 4 May.
131 These accusations are in PCEA I/C/9: Zakayo et al. to Jonathon Njuki, 2 July 1934.
132 PCEA I/C/9: Zakaya muru wa Kagotto to Barlow and Calderwood, 2 July 1934.
133 PCEA I/C/12 and 13: DC South Nyeri to PC Central, 25 June 1934.
both parties were defunct. Harry Thuku’s new Kikuyu Provincial Association (KPA) took their place.134 Thuku was popular at Tumutumu: a sports meet was disrupted in 1934 when someone saw him in the crowd.135 By 1936 missionaries could report that all the KCA members in Nyeri, and some former PKP members, had joined Thuku’s party.136

By its name, the Kikuyu Provincial Association offered a remedy to the controversies that had undermined readers’ parties in 1932. KPA organizer James Mite-ini Weru remembered:

There had arisen differences between Jessie Kariuki and Joseph Kangethe and Harry Thuku. The KCA got divided. They said they belonged to Kikuyu Central and we called ourselves Kikuyu Provincial so that we could enlarge our operation to the entire province which went as far as Meru.137

Earlier political organizations had been undone over how, precisely, Gikuyu country was to be defined. Was Gikuyuland comprised of specific plots of land, won by family members’ sweat from the threatening wilderness? Or could a wider Gikuyu territory be identified? If so, how was it to be surveyed? Thuku’s Kikuyu Provincial Association avoided these questions altogether by using the government’s Central Province as its staging ground.

Not until the 1950s, during the “Mau Mau” rebellion, would Gikuyu political organizers again redraw colonial maps and claim suzerainty over a wider terrain. During a ceremony in 1955, the insurgent leader Dedan Kimathi was named prime minister of the Kenya African government and knight commander of the East African Empire. His first official action was to have flags planted on the Aberdare mountains, miles beyond Nyeri District’s western boundary.138 Partisans sang of how God had once taken Gikuyu, their ancestor, to the top of Mount Kenya. “He was told all the land you can see I have given you, you and your posterity,” went the song.139 Clear-eyed Mau Mau prospectors were laying claim to a wide territory. Mau Mau units in the Rift Valley served typed eviction

134 KNA PC/Central 8/5/6: Harry Thuku to PC Central, 13 August 1935.
136 PCWA I/C/9: Calderwood to Arthur, 18 May 1936.
137 Interview: James Mite-ini Weru, Gitugi, 2 April 1998.
138 David Njagi. The Last Mau Mau Field Marshals: Their Own Story (Limuru, 1991), 40.
notices on British settlers.140 Like the surveyors of an earlier generation, Mau Mau’s organizers redrew colonial boundaries, delineated a fatherland, and called on Gikuyu to fight as patriots.141

It is telling, though, that Mau Mau’s soldiers went to war for *ithaka na wiaithi*, “property and self-mastery,” the movement’s slogan. In Mau Mau hymnody, God freely gave Gikuyuland to his people. But the men of Mau Mau knew that land rights had to be earned, with muscle and sweat. They fought for *ithaka*, for *mbari* property, for the right to establish families and secure a posterity, not for a national territory. Even in the 1950s, no one would willingly die for other people’s imaginary cause.142

An emerging body of scholarship has begun to show that the colonial encounter was, among other things, a contest over space.143 Using censuses, maps, and roads, colonial officials from Gabon to Ghana sought to pin people down, to anchor diverse individuals to particular territories, in order to govern them as natives of a particular place. That is what Judge Carter sought to accomplish in Kenya. His report was filled with maps of “Masai territory,” of the “neutral zone” between the Masai and the Gikuyu, of government forests and the White Highlands. This exercise in official map-making was a strategy of control, a means of sorting out peoples and establishing a properly tribal political order.

But African political organizers also did surveying work. By mapping out Gikuyuland, organizers delimited a homeland for a politically identifiable people. Their border-drawing mobilized a partisan constituency of “firm soldiers” dedicated to serving their country. This call to duty was always controversial. The boundaries of Gikuyu country were contestable, and contested, because its

142 For forest fighters’ debate over properly exercised political authority, see Lonsdale, “Moral Economy,” 456, and his further discussion in “Authority, Gender and Violence: The War Within Mau Mau’s Fight for Land and Freedom,” in Odhiambo and Lonsdale, eds., *Mau Mau and Nationhood*, 46–75.
proudly independent constituents would not unthinkingly agree that their hard-won estates could be counted as part of a wider territory. The issues that frustrated Nyeri’s mapmakers were the same issues that divided Gikuyu people more generally. How could any political authority removed from the localized test of personal reputation be trusted? The surveyors of Gikuyuland had always to measure their geography against the parochial politics of family and clan. Map-making was a work of imagination, part of the contentious making of a Gikuyu people.

144 Lonsdale frames this pivotal Gikuyu question in “‘Listen While I Read’: The Orality of Christian Literacy in the Young Kenyatta’s Making of the Kikuyu,” in Louise de la Gorgendiére et al., eds., Ethnicity in Africa: Roots, Meanings, and Implications (Edinburgh, 1996).