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**The Muorias in Kenya:  
Matriarchy and Social Change**

**An Essay in Family Biography**

Draft. Please do not quote

Bodil Folke Frederiksen  
Roskilde University  
PO BOX 260  
DK 4000 Roskilde, Denmark  
e-mail: bodilff@ruc.dk

The early life of the writer and (Kikuyu) nationalist Henry Muoria has striking similarities with that of his twenty-year-older mentor, the writer and (Kikuyu) nationalist Jomo Kenyatta. Both began their working lives as herdsboys in the southern part of Kikuyuland not far from Nairobi and were driven to the city by curiosity and poverty. They were mission-educated moralists and Kikuyu cultural nationalists. They were polygamous patriarchs and entered into unions with highly independent and gifted women. Both were energetic entrepreneurs, and writing was one of their enterprises. They edited Kikuyu newspapers and perfected their writing skills in Britain. They devoted their writing to a critical celebration of African and Kikuyu culture and to the liberation of Kenya from the degrading British colonialism. They spent more years than they had wanted thousands of miles away from home. Muoria was part of the organising committee that welcomed Kenyatta back from Britain in 1947. Five years later he himself left for Europe in pursuit of knowledge and new technologies for the production of his newspaper, *Mumenyereri*. Kenyatta became the President of Kenya; Muoria died unknown in his London exile in 1997. He was the beloved father of a large Kenyan and English family, the writer of a number of published and unpublished books and pamphlets, and a retired railway guard on the London Underground.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> My debt to John Lonsdale who has written extensively on the two men is obvious. The only people to whom I owe a greater debt are members of the Muoria family in Kenya and Britain. This paper reflects ongoing work and is still short of material, especially on the Kabete branch of the Muoria family.

In 1995, I found myself in Nairobi, gathering material on the history of community development and popular culture in African Nairobi. I was based at the old Church Mission Society community centre in Pumwani, a long established Nairobi African neighbourhood. From there I got in touch with a group of local young men, who helped me in my research. The group called itself “Unity Teens”. As it happened, three of the young men in the group, then in their early twenties, were the grandsons of Henry Muoria. I was aware of the existence of Mouria. From the writings of John Lonsdale I knew of him as a valuable source to the history of Kenyan nationalism and as an important political actor in his own right.

Two of his grandsons lived in one of the oldest tin roofed mud and wattle houses in the centre of Pumwani, Majengo, as it is known. They shared the house with their mother, one of Henry Muoria and his wife Ruth Nuna Muoria's Kenya born daughters. The third young man, their cousin, the eldest son of another Muoria daughter, lived with his mother and siblings in an Eastlands estate. He was about to enter college when I met the group in 1995 and now works as a successful computer technician.

At the time I was curious about the fate of a prominent Kenyan family, the descendants of a well-known and respected journalist and nationalist. I was especially challenged by the thought that the conditions under which the three young men now grow up in independent Kenya may in several respects be more restrictive than those in which their parents and grandparents had found themselves. I was also interested to know whether their grandfather's public and private ideals had any relevance for members of a generation of Kenyans who were born twenty years after Kenya's independence.

The three young men are talented and educated, but share the hardships of contemporary urban living with millions of young Africans, who after having left school have difficulties in finding work and finding social roles for themselves, in spite of talents and will to work. Those who live in Pumwani have grown up in a slum with few amenities and economic opportunities, and all know the experience of the double exposure to crime and harassment from the authorities. They welcome multi-party politics, fear political and social unrest, vote in elections but are not otherwise particularly engaged in politics.

Their grandparents, Henry and Ruth Nuna Muoria, and Muoria's first two wives, Elizabeth Thogori and Judith Nyamurwa, were Kikuyu adults during the Emergency of the 1950s. Their lives have been profoundly influenced by politics. Before he left Kenya in mid-1952 to buy an automatic printing press in England, Henry Muoria was a successful newspaper- and businessman. He planned to stay in Europe for six months. After the declaration of the Emergency, friends in London advised him that it would be unwise to return to Kenya. Muoria claimed that even in spite of the Emergency he could have been a millionaire, had he stayed in Kenya (I. 10).<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Material from interviews is identified by a capital 'I' and a number.

His second wife, Judith Nyamurwa, who continued bringing out *Mumenyereri* after her husband had left, was arrested and detained for two years when the authorities could not get at Muoria. His third wife, Ruth, had to hide in the Eastlands estate of Bahati during 1952 and 53 in order not to be rounded up. When asked by her husband to join him in London she managed to get a passport. She sold one of Muoria's two cars and got herself a ticket for a flight to London. She left her four young children behind to stay with her mother in Pumwani.

All parts of the family had economic difficulties. Those in London met with the realities of being African immigrants, which included racism. When Muoria and his wife looked for a place to stay with their young child they were met with signs in windows saying "No Blacks, no children and no Irish" (I. 2). Henry Muoria was a man of many skills, but his heart lay in journalism. In London he found that he could not get work as a journalist without being a member of a trade union, and not become member of a trade union without having a job as a journalist (The British and my Kikuyu Tribe: 104). He had to rely on other skills. His training and experience as a telegraphist and railway guard meant that British friends were able to get him a job as a railway guard with London Transport.

Back in Kenya his first two wives and their children lived off the land in Muoria's home Nyathuna, in Kiambu. The children were educated using the income from farming and from the sale of Muoria's second car. Their maternal grandmother Grace Njoki brought up the Nairobi Muorias, three daughters born to Henry and his third wife Ruth Nuna, and one born to Ruth in an earlier marriage. All the children in Nairobi were seen through secondary school.

I began looking into the family history and structure from the perspective of the Kenyan branches and was told early on that the family consisted of three clans. Socially and economically the three parts seemed far apart. Members of the family experienced a division between the clan in London, the clan in Nairobi, and the upcountry clan in Kiambu. However, since the late 1980s the three parts have had increasing interaction. If there has been bitterness in the family it has had little to do with economic hardships, but more with the division of the family which was the consequence of Muoria and his wife's exile in Great Britain. My research into three generations of Muoria family history and the present present realities of branches of the family in Kenya has had more to do with the question of what constitutes a family than with deprivation and economic differentiation. Which traits did members think of as characteristic of their particular family and subclan? How is the family imagined in a situation in which it wishes to keep together in spite of historical circumstances which have meant that it has been radically divided in terms of space and subsequently of "culture"? What unites and what divides? Are boundaries between nations easier to negotiate than those are between generations, or between town and countryside?

The subject of this biographical essay is a family rather than a man. As it will turn out, unsurprisingly perhaps, the ties and networks which have kept together each of the sub-clans and made connections between them have been crafted by women more than by

men. The master narrative, however, is that of a remarkable man who believed that truth would always be victorious, and that writers and journalists no matter where they found themselves had a duty to tell the story. One of Muoria's favourite proverbs goes like this: "An unspoken word does not convince anyone."

What follows deals firstly with Henry Muoria's early life, a story, which is scarcely more than a recounting of material from his autobiographical writings. Then follows the story of three generations of women who came to stay in Pumwani: Ruth Nuna Muoria, her mother and her grandmother. This is based on interviews with her and her daughters. The story of Ruth and Henry's marriage and collaboration, and their journey to London is again based on interviews with her and members of the Muoria family in Kenya, and Muoria's own writings. In the next section daughters, a son, and a son-in-law, born in the 1940s and 1950s, explain what being a Muoria means. Finally the word is given to three young Kenyan men, Muoria's grandsons, all at the start of their careers.

Around 1925 a young herdsboy, Muoria son of Mwaniki in the Kikuyu area, north of Nairobi, was alerted to the magic of writing. Two kids his own age passed by every day, and he got talking with them. They told him that when they disappeared into the distance every day the place they went to was school. Muoria asked,

What do you go to do at school?" "We go to learn how to read and write",  
Ngugi replied [...]. "We go to school to learn to read books like this," he said as he pointed at the tiny letters with his index finger. "Do you mean to tell me that you go to school to learn how to count all these small dots in this book?"

(The British and my Kikuyu Tribe: 6)

After further exchanges the young Muoria understands the enormity of what is being revealed, and he asks: "Tell me, do you mean that, learning how to write letters would enable you to write down such words as we are now talking to each other, and then send that letter to someone who is not here to hear what we are saying to each other, and that man will then be able to know what we are saying to each other by reading that letter?" (British and my Kikuyu: 6-7).

This was the beginning of a remarkable writing career, which only ended when Henry Mwaniki Muoria died at the age of 83 in London, January 1997. Whether the young Muoria was so bright as to understand one of the key properties of writing, its own independent mobile material life separate from the speaker of words, is uncertain. But the adult writer, Henry Muoria, who tells the story from his London flat in the 1980s, knew all about writing. He told the story repeatedly in his autobiographical writings of which there are a good number.

Muoria was born in 1914 to what he calls an "ordinary Kikuyu couple", Mwaniki wa Muoria and Wambui wa Mbari. His father worked for "white people" in Nairobi, and only returned home during weekends. He showed no interest in having his son educated, but Muoria managed to get himself to evening classes at the mission station in nearby

Kirangari. Two years later, when his younger brother was old enough to look after the cattle, he entered the Church Mission Society day school. Conversion and literacy were two sides of the same coin, and in 1930 the famous Canon Leakey baptized Muoria. Three years earlier he got himself circumcised together with age mates from the school, in the Christian way, without the appropriate rituals, a fact that his father had to accept. He interrupted school briefly and found work in Nairobi with an Indian plumber's firm in order to pay for the finery necessitated by being now a mature, circumcised person. Poverty drove him to town. He left his job after having suffered the indignity of being slapped by his employer for a small mistake and swore never to be employed again.

He ended five years of schooling with the so-called "vernacular exam", had no means to go further, and entered the railways as a trainee telegraphist in 1931. He worked as a guard on trains from places like Kisumu, Athi River and Voi. He was married in Church to Elizabeth Thogori in 1932; a daughter was born but died. In 1942 he asked for a transfer to Nairobi, and started moving and working in more familiar country, "among his tribespeople" (British and my Kikuyu: 10). The couple had three sons.

During his long hours of travel he digested a journalism correspondence course which he ordered from London. His return to Kikuyuland inspired him to write his first book, *Tungika, atia iya witu? What should we do for our sake?* which came out in 1945. Its aim was to "provide his tribespeople with a lot of ideas which they could discuss among themselves for their own benefit" (British and my Kikuyu: 10). It covered areas like education of children, modern homes, the necessity of work, a fair profit, co-operative farming, the study of books, the dangers of drunkenness, jealousy, and more broadly right and wrong.

At this time similar didactic books on modern life for Africans were being written by colonial servants like Tom Askwith, and solicited from African writers by East African Literature Bureau. The Bureau also published guidebooks for aspiring African writers, but I have not come across any mention in Muoria's reminiscences of having been influenced by these activities. The sale of the book, from the CMS bookshop in Nairobi among other places, provided start capital for setting up his newspaper, *Mumenyereri*. He decided to leave his job with East Africa Railways to the horror of his wife who by then had three sons to look after. This is how he explains the split to a journalist who interviewed him in London forty years later: "My wife could not comprehend how a man of my calibre could leave a high paying job and a respectable one at the Railways to go into a trade where I had very little time even to sleep, while returns were not handsome (*Daily Nation* 12 February 1987). The couple did not get a formal divorce, and soon after he married his second wife, Judith Nyamurwa, in the customary way.

Judith was a teacher, educated at Makerere. She shared his critical views of the British and supported him in all activities connected to the paper. Henry and Judith's daughter comments:

She was able, she was educated and she was able to help him in the work he was doing. So they have written several books together [...]. And Mum also had political ambitions in her. She was a leader in her own right. I always say that she was the unsung heroine in all these things. She was detained and at the same time, even long after our father was not there she stood once to be a councillor, upcountry (I. 6)

According to their daughter Judith "was a strong campaigner for independence in her own right and she didn't worship the white man at all" (personal letter, 15 December 1999). Together they had three children. Henry built two houses in his home area, Nyathuna near Kabete. One is a substantial stone house which he built 1952 with the help of his age mates, the first by an African in the area; the other, where Judith moved in, is a beautifully designed smaller house which he built of bricks, in order to show his fellow tribesmen that indigenous materials lent themselves to building modern homes. Brick houses had several advantages over the traditional round mud houses, an issue he had dealt with in *What Should we do for our sake?*

In 1948 Henry Muoria married his third wife, Ruth Nuna, who also assisted him with the running of the newspaper as well as bore him a son who died and three daughters while they were still living in Kenya. Ruth Nuna was born in 1927 as the only child of a Pumwani woman Grace Njoki and an Indian trader. "My father was a hunter, hunted for skin. He was a rich man. He didn't marry my mother because my mother didn't want to be a Muslim. My mother brought me up herself " (I. 11). Ruth Nuna's father later married a Kikuyu friend of her mother's, and she has friendly relations with half sisters and brothers from that union.

Grace grew up in the city. Her mother was one of a generation of pioneer women migrants to Nairobi. Around 1917 she fled from her upcountry home near Kiambu where she was the third wife of a brutal husband. At first she had to leave her children behind, but later brought them with her to the city. "She wanted to run away [...]. She left the children behind but she knew that she would go again and steal them when there was nobody there. So she found somewhere to stay and went another time with somebody else, and she carried those children who were born [...]. She came to get the children when the husband was not there. They carried them through the maize, the children who were born there. Then others she had in Pumwani" (I. 11). She built a house in what is now Pumwani but was then known as "Maskini" on land, which was later taken over by the Municipal Council. She married again in the city, her husband died after some years, and she "used to cook food to sell, and she used to sell wine - Kikuyu wine, and she stayed there" (I. 12). She also rented out rooms at twenty shillings a month. She had thirteen children in all, seven sons and six daughters. But all the boys died early as did two of the girls. So no more than four were left to grow up in Pumwani with their mother.

Her career showed courage and agency which may seem exceptional but was paralleled by numerous other women who settled in Pumwani, both from nearby Kikuyu tracts and poor rural communities as far away as Tanganyika. They turned their skills as wives, mothers and peasants into profit, and the Kikuyu women among them exploited their

access to rural produce and sold vegetables at the hungry Nairobi markets.<sup>3</sup> Ruth Nuna's grandmother was working and living like other urban female pioneers in Pumwani, where in the next decades, the 1930s and 1940s, more than 40 % of houses in Pumwani were owned by women (Burja 1975: 216). As the founder of an urban family she was setting out a pattern of female independence among descendants which was to shape the lives of her daughter, Grace, her granddaughter Ruth and her four great granddaughters. She had chosen surroundings which were congenial to women's activities in a way that was unusual in colonial Kenya, where patriarchy and paternalism tended to walk hand in hand.

When Grace Njoki reached maturity and had shown that she was more than capable of running her own life, her mother decided that she wanted to return to rural life. She bought land and built a house in the Kabete area, in Wangike, near the home of the Muorias. Grace took over the Pumwani house and stayed there with her daughter. She sent the money, which came from renting out her mother's urban property to Wangike. Then one day accident struck. While Ruth was in school and her mother was also away, an unknown person came up to the house closed the two doors carefully and set the property on fire. The home and the most important source of income for the three generations of women lay in ruins. Grace asked her mother for money to rebuild the property. The old women, however, refused and suggested that instead she should salvage whatever was left from the fire and build a house upcountry, close to herself. Ruth reports her mother's reaction: "My mother said, 'I can't manage upcountry life; I don't know about it. So, why should I do that? Now, and what is going to happen to the land? All right, I'm going to work and I build. And then the house will be mine'. So my mother worked hard to make that house here again. And it was built" (I.11).

Grace Njoki understood the value of urban land. She later bought plots and built houses in other areas of Nairobi so that when she died she could leave urban property to the four granddaughters, she had brought up. Her decision to stay in Nairobi also marked that she identified herself as an urban person - at one remove from her mother who, after braving city life while bringing up her children, chose to re-cultivate rural roots. If female strength is one strain characteristic of Ruth Nuna's family, the urban identification is another.

In periods Grace worked as a nanny for white families while one of her sisters looked after the children. She also had small jobs of teaching Swahili locally, but the major part of her income came from renting out rooms in her property in Pumwani and Kawangware, and from running a bar. Unlike her mother, who sold home brew, she would sell and serve bottled beer in her sitting room. Grace was very sociable and had many friends who came to visit the house. The atmosphere was friendly. Bottled beer was for leisure consumption, whereas it was well known that those who drank the Kikuyu home brew *ratina* were those who were hard core, engaged in serious politics (I. 4). Money for school fees for the four

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<sup>3</sup> The working lives of a number of them have been analysed by Andrew Hake (1975), Janet Burja (1975, 1978-9) and Luise White (1990). On the risky business of pursuing trade in the face of Colonial British urban and Kikuyu rural male opposition see Lonsdale 2000 p. 114-5.

girls was found from these activities. Once a month Muoria's first wife, who was a skillful farmer, brought food from the fields owned by Muoria in the family's upcountry home.

Beer is still sold as part of the family business - now from a regular bar, owned by Ruth's eldest daughter. The bar, which adjoins the house, consists of two large rooms with a jukebox, acquired by the family in the 1950s, and a more recent snooker table. The atmosphere is still friendly and the billiard and beer are both very popular with young Tanzanian men who operate profitable sale of second-hand clothes, *mitumba*, and, like their grandmothers who came to Pumwani in the 1930s and 1940s as prostitutes, lead migrants' lives.

Ruth Nuna went to the local CMS mission school up to Standard 3, then moved to a superior school in nearby Kariokor, run by the Salvation Army. Encouraged by her mother, she wanted to learn more and was unhappy with the prevailing social realities, which meant that "even if you study so much you cannot get a job because you are a women. You have to get married, your work is to go and cook and look after children" (I. 11). She was taught spinning and weaving by colonial wives and social workers who used to sell the produce and pocket the money, as she recalls. She did get a job, however, after having been briefly married to a Goan with whom she had a daughter. Because of her excellent Swahili she appeared regularly in a radio programme on hygiene and child rearing, where her job was to impersonate the figure of "Mama Mzee" who would advise listeners, presumably avid to learn about the latest wisdom on babies from Britain. She would read out the prepared answers to fictitious questions, written down by the inventive employees of the Information Office, which was in charge of the programme. "It was in colonial times - I was only told to read what was written, not to say my own thing, but to say it like I am talking myself" (I. 11). For this colonial ventriloquism she was paid one shilling a minute.

The latter half of the 1940s was a period in which the colonial authorities turned their attention to problems of urban living for Africans. It had turned out that it was not possible to keep out of the city relatives of the male work force, which was needed in Nairobi; housing and wages were based on the assumption that women and wives lived and looked after the rest of the family upcountry. Worry over crime, idleness and immorality among the African section of the population ran high in official circles. Social welfare was the rage, and it was the heyday of community development initiatives (Lewis 2000, Frederiksen 1995). Official Kenya collaborated closely with church and missions, which had divided the Eastlands' area of Nairobi, where Africans lived, between them. The core area of Pumwani was Anglican but Anglicans rubbed shoulders with Catholics, Salvation Army officers, Baptists, Quakers and Presbyterians. Several community halls were in function - Pumwani Memorial Hall founded in 1923 being the largest and best equipped. Ruth Nuna remembers ballroom dancing, cinema watching, and listening to bands hired by the municipal authority (I. 2).

Ruth met Henry Muoria on her way to her Radio job in central Nairobi. He was with a friend, who was also a friend of her mother. At this time, around 1947, he was a well-

known writer, and she knew about his work. Muoria was a prosperous man who owned land, two cars, grew crops and had built two substantial houses for himself and his family. His newspaper was doing well. A few days after meeting Ruth e visited her mother in Pumwani. She liked her daughter's suitor and agreed that he wrote "good things about people" (I. 11). A few weeks later Muoria offered to give Ruth a lift in his car when she was going to visit her grandmother upcountry, close to Muoria's own home. Soon he asked her to marry him. Ruth's reaction was to point out that he was married already, but he told her that he was allowed to marry again, and that he would talk to his second wife, Judith.

Ruth's mother was surprised that out of many suitors she had picked Muoria. She did not have reservations about her daughter being a third wife as long as she loved her husband and he could provide for her. She did, however, have reservations about rural life and the role of her city-bred daughter on a farm. Ruth assured her that she would not have to do any farm labour as there were people working for her future husband. She let her mother in Pumwani keep her young daughter for company and for reasons of access to schools, and settled in a room in the brick house which she shared with Judith, who was friendly and showed her around.

Muoria left his home in Kabete every day to go to work in the city. He ran his newspaper business in Nairobi, where at one time he employed four to five people. In interviews Ruth stressed how in his case "work" and the "city" were two sides of the same coin: "He was from upcountry, but his work was in the city. He only went upcountry to stay [...]. Most of the time he is in the city, only when he goes home, it is home time. Then in the morning he wakes up to get ready to go to town" (I.11).

His two wives helped him in numerous ways. Judith co-authored a book with him on child care and modern living, drawing on her training as a teacher and her own experience as a mother. Ruth assisted him in getting together the material for his pamphlet *Our Mother the Soil. Knowledge our Father*, she wrote stories for the paper, allegorical tales with a moral; and also reported from a meeting when Henry cold not go. This was a highly significant meeting where Kenyatta and other leaders spoke. Both wives helped with production, packing and distribution of *Mumenyereri*.

When the printing machine broke down Muoria rented a duplicator and continued producing the paper - 2000 copies twice a week, against heavy odds. Ruth describes this period in their life like this:

We used to duplicate in Eastleigh. First we did it in my mother's place, but there was a kind of strike in Majengo, people were not allowed to strike, they were beaten, arrested. We knew that if they came and found it they would take it away. We moved and did it in Kangemi a friend of my husband called Mugo [...]. He used to type on the stencil; my job was to pin it together [...]. We would do it all night without sleeping. In the morning the newspaper was ready. The people would buy - so much. They used to fight for it, they used to wait in the street" (I.11)

For the first time the paper made a profit, which whetted Muoria's appetite for new technologies, and for being independent of printers who took 50 % of his income from the newspaper. When he had enough money he bought a second-hand printing press from an Indian and established his workshop and office in a rented space in central Nairobi.

1950 was the year in which the colonial authorities decreed that Nairobi had existed for fifty years, and celebrated its elevation to city status. This symbolic and self-congratulatory event served to focus and concentrate dissatisfaction on several fronts among the African population. First and foremost racial segregation of the three population groups, Whites, Indians and Africans, had deepened at all levels, and included active implementation of the colour bar in restaurants and other public places (Werlin 1974). African political representation was doled out from above, by nomination only. Segregation was carried out from below, by means of finely meshed by-laws on location and regulation of housing and shops, and on the movement of people. Passbooks had existed and been resisted for a long time, but now rules were being enforced with great zeal for Africans in the city. Paternalism and "welfare" from above seemed to crush African initiative and entrepreneurship. Furthermore Kikuyus worried that the "city" might be more land hungry than the town and swallow up land around Dagoretti Market. African townspeople were angered at the participation of their two town councillors in the celebrations, which were widely boycotted. Strikes and boycotts were aimed particularly at municipal welfare institutions such as canteens and beer halls. In 1947 income from the city's beer halls was halved because of popular boycott, and in 1950 the municipal canteen had to close down (Werlin 1974, Lonsdale 2000).

Muoria himself did not take part in the celebrations, but "drove to the town in his old squeaking Ford Four car" and observed the jubilee pageant and the speeches from a distance, in his capacity as a journalist (British and my Kikuyu: 282). In his writings he links this day to the beginning of oathing.

It is not surprising that a political paper in Kikuyu should be in high demand in Nairobi at this time, the turn of the decade. *Mumenyereri* was one of a handful of vernacular papers. Others were brought out by leading nationalists and opposition journalists like Achieng' Oneko, W.W.W. Awori, Meshenk Ndisi, Paul Ngei and Victor Mukabi.<sup>4</sup> The authorities watched *Mumenyereri* and the other African newspapers closely. The paper's report on a strike at the Uplands Bacon Factory in 1947, where two strikers were shot dead by African police officers, led to court proceedings. The reporter who wrote the story was sent to prison for six months, Muoria and the printer Mr. Patel were fined.

Muoria deliberately continued "sailing as close to the wind as possible" (I, the Gikuyu and the White Fury: 74), and sought to shake African trust in the colonial masters. In 1950 the paper brought a letter warning Africans against believing what they were being told in

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<sup>4</sup> On Awori's *Habari za Dunia*, *Radio Posta* and the K.A.U newspaper *Sauti ya Mwafrika* see Gasden 1980: pp. 515-6 and Goldsworthy 1982 pp. 20 and 40. On Wokabi see KNA A.G. 5/2811, 'Seditious Publications: Muthamaki'.

government pamphlets and publications: "Whenever you see a European give you anything free, remember that there is something he is trying to get out of you." An editorial stressed the need for African newspapers: "There is no reason why the African Press should publish articles just to suit Europeans while the Europeans do not publish theirs to suit the Africans." The editor ended by quoting one of his favourite proverbs: "Chase a man with the truth and he will go away for good. But if you chase a man with a stick, he will turn back to you with a stick." <sup>5</sup>

In 1952 Muoria got the chance of going to London, at first through the Moral Rearmament, which was active in Kenya, but as it turned out he went on his own steam. His main aim was to get an automatic printing machine for his newspaper. He left for London in September 1952, and the emergency of 20th October caught him there. He was advised by London friends not to return to Kenya, as several of his friends and associates there had been arrested. Like Kenyatta twenty years earlier he initially survived by teaching Kikuyu, but he was in agony over being so far away and hearing Africans in Kenya maligned as barbaric and bloodthirsty. Also he missed his family. This is how Mouria describes this unhappy period in his life: Due to "the sudden change of circumstances from being a proud prosperous man to a man without hope [...]. I found myself sitting in the small room I had rented [...] spending a lot of six pence's to keep myself warm by the gas fire. The news published in the English newspapers of the Kikuyu tribe being composed of murderous thugs who were hacking white and black men with pangas made [me] feel more distressed in a manner not easy to put into words" (The British and my Kikuyu Tribe: 92-3). I shall leave him there and return to Kenya to look more closely at the situation of the family there.

His second wife Judith continued running the newspaper and looking after his other business interests to the end of the year. She was in close contact with her husband who sent her articles from London. The declaration of the State of Emergency meant that all African run newspapers including *Mumenyereri* were banned. The authorities did not leave Africans involved in newspapers alone and in early 1953 Judith was detained. She spent two years in detention camp in Kajiado. Their two oldest children were left in the care of her mother. In London Muoria approached liberal politicians and eventually she was released with their assistance, having committed no crime. After her release Judith returned to live at Nyathuna. Rosabell, the eldest daughter, who was born in 1950, saw her father for the first time when she travelled to London in 1969.

Ruth Nuna also had a troubled time after Muoria left. Kiambu was one of the hearts of Kikuy political activity and unsafe for the wives of a well-known journalist, as Judith's fate had demonstrated. Ruth took her children and returned to her mother in the city. Pumwani, however, with its mixed population, was another centre of unrest. The authorities repeatedly screened inhabitants, ostensibly to find instigators of the Mau Mau oathing ceremonies, in fact to empty the city of Kikuyu, Embu and Meru, who were the key groups behind the nationalist uprising.

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<sup>5</sup> KNA A.G. 5/2810, 'Seditious Publications: Mumenyereri'.

Married Kikuyu women could only get the passbooks which made them legal inhabitants in Nairobi via their husbands, and Ruth's husband was in London: "I had no passbook. My mother found a place in Bahati; the people who had stayed there had been arrested and deported [...]. We went there [...]. It was bad in Bahati. I was scared. They, the Home Guards, were arresting and shooting people" (I. 12). Men, women and children were made to march past police cars where African informers, hidden behind dark windows, would point out troublemakers:

I used to go for screening carrying my baby on the back [...]. Everybody was taken out of their houses, walk walk in the sunshine. The baby I carried on my back, the other one I held in my hand [...]. We had to go there. I used to pray to God, because sometimes they used to choose somebody. Not because they had done something wrong. They were paid for arresting more people [...]. Lots of women were arrested [...] at that time they did not choose. Even the Vicar, they used to arrest. They used to accuse even Christians. They were bad people (I. 12)

Luckily, Ruth was not among those picked up. Thanks to her mother's foresight she could move on from troubled Pumwani, to a house which her mother was building in Makadara, further to the east.

Mary Grace Njoki, named after her grandmother, was the eldest of Ruth's children. I shall tell her early story in her own words:

We were staying with Mum and Dad at Eastleigh Section 3 (close to Pumwani), and our Dad used to go to print his magazines and our Mum was selling them at different places. My Dad has a Citroën car, which was taking us to Church. When my Dad went to London we didn't know, and we moved from Eastleigh to Majengo with our Mum. Then later we moved to Bahati because the colonial homeguard wanted to arrest Mum. After some months Mum got her passport and she went to London 1954. We were left with our Grandmother. She took care of us, educating us, and everything she did for us (personal letter, November 1999).

The four girls called their Grandmother "Mama", and although she was strict they were very close to her: "I am happy I was brought up by my Grandmother. I don't regret it at all" (I. 4). Grace was known in Pumwani for looking after her four "daughters" very carefully. The girls were brought up as Kikuyus and were circumcised (I. 3).

John, the future husband of one of the daughters, was attracted to the house because of the friendly bar and also because of the four beautiful girls growing up there. John's parents were friends of Grace Njoki. After he had been dating one of the sisters for some time he "eloped" with her, and started negotiations with the family on that basis. This was a common way of securing a wife, and widely accepted. At the time John could not afford bride price, but among families which were known to each other and fairly well off payment of bride price was not a serious issue (I.4). The couple now lives in a large house

in Kibera, they have six daughters and got married in Church in 1989, when Henry Muoria was in the country and could give away his daughter.

Although Pumwani in the 1950s, when the girls grew up was marked by low incomes and by the Emergency, it was also a "smart place". It was established in the 1920s as the first area in Nairobi in which Africans were allowed to build and own their own houses. It was mixed in terms of ethnicity and religion, and had large populations of Muslims and of Kikuyus. When in 1953 John returned to Pumwani, where his family lived, from upcountry, where he had gone to school, this is how he saw the neighbourhood:

I found Pumwani to be a smart place; I admired it [...]. Very nicely plastered houses. It was a proper City Council. You could see the grass, also in Pumwani. The houses in good long rows, the Muslims were sitting in their verandahs, nicely, you admired everything. The Kikuyus were doing their business, clean, the butchers. I remember the hotels, which were open, all night, at one o'clock. I used to go to those hotels at night, I couldn't sleep, I was enjoying it. I had never seen that in the reserves, with music going on, with big mandazis, about a foot long which cost ten cents. (I. 4)

In 1956 to 1957 there was an economic upswing in Kenya, which coincided with a new wave of colonial and mission efforts to intensify welfare activities for Africans. In the two neighbourhood community halls, Kaloleni and Pumwani, there were a number of activities. During the year of 1957 110 dances and 300 meetings were held; 350 films were shown (Hake 52. 4: 89: "Urban Community Development"). There were regular evening classes in languages and home economics, spinning and weaving, health and hygiene. Clubs were in charge of exhibitions, tea parties and sports events. There were 91 registered shops in the neighbourhood (Hake 86. "Specific Industries"). The house of the Muoria family was surrounded by open spaces - whereas now houses "are all joined together" (I. 4).

During the 1950s and 1960s letters kept up the contact between the London and the Kenya families. Ruth's eldest daughter came to London to do her O-levels in 1962. The London Muorias were bringing up a large family of seven sons and daughters, and Henry Muoria besides working as a guard on the London Underground also had to learn to cook and make clothes for the children, when his wife had health problems. In a difficult period around 1968 the London family was assisted financially by Ruth's mother. So money and assistance again flowed from mother to daughter, but this time from Majengo to the Metropole. The girls from Nairobi did not have much contact with the upcountry family, but would visit briefly once in a while. They felt closer to the London family than to that in living in Nyathuna, "maybe because we had the same mother" (I. 4).

Henry Muoria visited Nairobi in 1975 for the first time, and he and his wife paid further visits in the late 1980s, which brought the family together again. Wangari, eldest daughter of the London Muorias, spent time in Nairobi working from the age of 19, and together with Rosabell from the second marriage, who spent time in UK, she was instrumental to

bringing the three branches of the family together. There is a strong cohesion and family feeling between sisters and brothers of the second and third wife. All the same, Rosabell Mbure, the eldest daughter of Henry and Judith had no doubt that the Muorias has split in three clans, characterised by degrees of "Kikuyuness":

As for me there is no debate about my identity - I am a pure Kikuyu person and I am very proud of that because like when I saw my Dad - I have been with him in London several times - he identified himself with his own tribe. So I am Kikuyu through and through and my Dad was also Kikuyu through and through (I. 6)

She would always speak Kikuyu with her father in London, never English. To her a Kikuyu identity is closely linked to pride in being African and equal to but different from Western people. Kikuyu identity is also linked to acquiring language and customs. Rosabell explains that the family in London may be more English than Kenyan:

there are many things that they don't understand [...]. A culture - you grow up in it, something you are taught, you somehow have to live with it [...] it is acquired through living in it [...]. When we come to Nairobi - okay they are Kikuyu but without the culture, they may not claim to be so much Kikuyu, because they have to adapt to the culture where they [...]. So we are three cultures: The Kikuyus, that is the rural Kikuyus, the half Kikuyus, and I think the ones in London are maybe a quarter Kikuyu (I. 6)

When this idea was presented to Ruth Nuna she insisted that her London children are full Kikuyus, brought up to "in the customs of the Kikuyu", to "respect elders": "They are proud to be Kikuyu. But they are born in London" (I. 12). Rosabell agreed that relations between generations are a touchstone of Kikuyu culture. Those children who grew up in the rural areas used to respect and keep a certain distance to their parents:

Upcountry now, where we think we are Kikuyu [...] like Mama, if she told me off over certain things I didn't do right, there is no way that I can answer back. Oh no, there is no way. I will just keep quiet and be sober [...]. The present generation is more free to say what they feel and what they want (I. 6)

On the other hand relations to grandparents are close and characterised by equality: "Children believe that their grandmothers cannot be wrong. A Grandmother can be friend, more than Mama." More generally from contact with the London branch of the family and from living in Britain for several years, she has found that Kenyan and British understandings of what constitutes a family differ a great deal. Most significantly the Kenya Muorias are blessed with a whole string of grandmothers and mothers; and traditions of age sets mean that half brothers and sisters as well as cousins are considered brothers and sisters through being age mates.

When talking about sisters, mothers and grandmothers, Rosabell generalised and claimed that Kikuyu women are very strong. Part of the explanation, according to her, is that there

is a "saying in Kikuyu for every occasion to make you strong. Even when the husband goes the woman still remains very strong. They are like the backbone, it's only that they don't talk" (I. 6).

Women's education and urban property have been central to the power of women in the Nairobi branch of the family. The house in Pumwani has been left to Ruth's eldest daughter - the fourth woman in a direct line of descent to own the house. The other daughters have been left the house their mother built in the Eastland estate of Makadara.

Now, where does that leave men, and particularly the young men? During an interview three male Muoria cousins in the twenties, sons of three of the sisters from Pumwani, agreed that their mothers were very strong. They had responsible positions in their working lives and that reinforced their position in the family: "Most of what they say, it goes" (I. 7). When the husband of one of the sisters left her for a second wife, her grandmother, Grace Njoki, made sure that the two sons stayed with their mother: "The Kikuyus from a long time, when you get children you have to stick to them. Our mothers were taught by their grandmother not to let the husbands go with the kids, even if the divorce comes, to stay with the children. That is why she forced us to be named after Kikuyus - the mother's side" (I. 7). They see it as a distinct characteristic of Kikuyus - other tribes will let husbands get away with appropriating children from a split-up marriage.

The three young men explained that they were all named after their mother's side, and if they did have a name from the father's, it was because in school one had to, but it was less important than the other names. They considered this naming practice a special feature of their family, and located the source of the strength in their great grandmother: "I think our mothers have inherited something from her - that thing of dominance, control. They are always in charge, they always take charge." The cousins were less sure if female strength was characteristic of their own generation, in relations between themselves and their sisters. One claimed that important decisions were taken by the young men of the family, "nowadays they have let the men take over," - another said that relations were characterised by "respect and equality" (I. 7).

Like most of their cousins of both sexes these young men had been to secondary school, either in Nairobi or at a boarding school upcountry. One had been to college and two were now employed in business, computers and mobile phones, and doing well. The third, the one who lives in the original house in Pumwani, is a self-employed businessman and barber. He is married informally to a Luo woman and has a son. Whereas he manages to make ends meet his chances of significantly expanding his business, owning property and changing his social situation are slight. The house where he lives with his mother, wife, son, brother, sister-in-law and niece, belongs to his aunt.

When asked about their identity the young men claimed that being African is what is most important to them. Then comes being Kenyan, and finally the tribal heritage gets a passing mention, "In our age group we don't think that tribe comes in that much." They understand Kikuyu and speak some, but prefer Swahili and English. They refer to and

share their grandfather's pride in being African: "Most Africans feel inferior. We should be proud of ourselves. There are 256 churches in Kenya. We have Christianity and have gone to school and found out what is good for us" (I. 7).

There is a tradition of openness towards other ethnic groups and other cultures in the family. In Kenya marriage partners include Asians and Kenyan tribes like Luos and Luhyas. Even for the most urbanised of Kenyans, however, there are moments of cultural truth. One is marriage. When a granddaughter of Muoria got married to a young Luhya man in December 1999 in Nairobi the wedding was preceded by elaborate bride price negotiations. They involved substantial delegations and senior spokesmen on both sides, drawing on Kikuyu and Luhya culture to an extent where problems of translation threatened to become acute. They were overcome in the end not least because of the tolerance and understanding on the part of the Muorias.

The cousins regret the lack of connections to their rural cousins, uncles and aunts. Most of them did not visit Nyathuna until the late 1980s, when they were almost grown up. The Pumwani Muorias have felt that something was missing when they were children, because almost all the different people they mixed with in the dense and sociable neighbourhood would go upcountry in holidays to visit their family: "Them, they used to go. So when they came back they say, 'ah, those guys, they don't go to their places, they don't have any rural places', they used to tease us." The key figure connecting the family between town and countryside is the grandmother: "Our family [...] when you go upcountry you normally go and see your grandmother. Okay, the grandmother is not around, she is in London, so there is no way we could." On the whole, however, the young men did not feel that the lack of connection to upcountry had been a big problem when they were children, Now that they are adults they desire closer relations between branches of the family: "Nowadays, I think, I myself, I insist that [...] we should have contact, should be going there, should be talking to them, so we know how they live and they know how we live - become one family" (I. 7).

Their uncle, a trained nurse who runs a clinic named after his mother near his home in Nyathuna, summarizes one of the major lines of division in the Muoria family: "Henry Muoria was not an urban person. He had a plot in Eastleigh, but he did not build there. He built here, in his community. Ruth's children were urban. They have a garden here, but they don't cultivate. We wouldn't squeeze them here, where they don't fit." On the other hand he is not immune to the pleasures of Nairobi where he has spent eleven years working for the City Commission: "You feel better when you visit town" (I. 7).

## Conclusion

Is the Muoria family held together by the deeds, writings and ideas of the great man? Is it true what Rosabell said about her father when I interviewed her that "a person does not go away like smoke"? For a period in the 1950s and 60s it seemed to the Muoria families in Kenya that their founder and his wife had indeed gone away like smoke, in spite of the steady exchange of letters. For a period the three branches of the family turned inwards,

relying very much on the commitment and labour of the family's women, but also on that of the founder. When daughters from the Kenyan and British families started travelling, carrying messages, goods, letters and photographs in the 1970 and 1980s they were the ones who actively reformed the links. After Henry Muoria's death Ruth has stayed for long spells in Nairobi and her presence has been much appreciated by her children and grandchildren: "Nuna, she's unique! She has been an inspiration [...]. She told us so many things about when she was a child, when she grew up, when she was about to get married to grandfather [...]. It is very good to have such an interesting grandmother. She always has something to say" (I. 7).

Links are still being forged between British and Kenyan Muorias. Some of Henry and Ruth's grandchildren have visited London. A granddaughter has studied there. Henry Muoria's funeral at Nyathuna brought almost the whole of the London branch of the family to Kenya. Others, however, those who live in an urban slum, which is what Pumwani has become, cannot even manage to get a Kenyan passport, a process which requires connections or a good deal of cash. They may be proud of belonging to a talented transnational family, and of being Africans and Kenyans, but they have difficulties in getting together enough wealth to become properly married. Structural inequalities mean that they are not in an economic and social position to reap the benefits of political independence, which their grandparents fought for.

When Henry Muoria visited Kenya he was welcomed and celebrated. On the other hand he was not offered a suitable job or a political role in independent Kenya. He was received like a hero in his home area where everybody there knew and greeted him. At his burial in Kabete the President sent a message. In London, on the other hand, Muoria was a lonely figure – for ever in exile. He did not get the social respect he deserved from being a great figure in Kenyan history. But he had a happy life with his family, kept writing and also enjoyed assisting academics like John Lonsdale, and addressing a seminar at SOAS in Kikuyu. He has left behind a body of extremely interesting writing, volumes of his newspaper, and now, finally, has a place in Kenyan history books. The extraordinary human drama of his existence and of the intertwining of private and public events which became the fate of this prominent Kenyan family has a social and historical depth which keeps the family together in shared pride, but also in shared loss.

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