CHAPTER TWO

THE MUORIAS IN KENYA: ‘A VERY LONG CHAIN.’ AN ESSAY IN FAMILY BIOGRAPHY

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Introduction

In September 1952 Henry Muoria (1914–1997), a Kenyan newspaper owner, journalist and writer, travelled to London on what was meant to be a visit. He left his wives and children behind: one branch in rural Kiambu, one in the colonial capital, Nairobi. Muoria was an active and well-known figure in the increasingly militant nationalist politics, and the state of emergency in Kenya, declared a few weeks later, prevented him from returning to his home country. The government closed down his profitable and widely read Gikuyu-language newspaper, Mumenyereri, and arrested and detained his wife, Judith, who had taken over as the temporary editor of the newspaper. With her young child she was interned in one of the quickly erected detention camps.

When he left for London, Muoria was an established writer and oppositional political figure in Kenya. His newspaper, Mumenyereri came out regularly for seven years—between 1945 and 1952. It reported on international and national news, debated ideologies, everyday politics and social issues, and published a number of Jomo Kenyatta’s speeches following his return from Britain in 1946. Mumenyereri was one of a group of nationalist papers, and because of its regular appearance and well-established network, especially in southern Kikuyuland, it was influential as a platform for Kikuyu and broader nationalist sentiment and closely watched by the authorities. Muoria wrote features, editorials and news reports for his newspaper. In the 1940s and early 1950s he translated pamphlets on social issues from Swahili and English into his mother tongue, and, himself, wrote political and didactic essays in Gikuyu, which were published as booklets. Three of them are reproduced in this volume in their original Gikuyu versions and in annotated English translations: What Should We Do, Our People from 1945 is a long essay on politics, morality and everyday life in modern
Kenya. *The Home Coming of Our Great Hero Jomo Kenyatta* is a lively, step-by-step account of Kenyatta’s reception by his fellow Africans in Mombasa where he landed on the ship *Alcantara* on September 24, 1946. It goes on to report his words in conversations and speeches over the next days. *Kenyatta is Our Reconciler* from 1947 is a collection of Kenyatta’s political speeches in Nairobi and Kikuyuland with Muoria’s reflections on context, setting and audiences.

In 1954 Muoria persuaded his third wife Ruth, the mother of five children, to join him in England. The couple settled in modest rented rooms in north London. She had to leave her children behind in the care of her mother, Grace. A son died before she left, and she left behind their three daughters and a daughter from her previous marriage—a painful sacrifice that has thrown shadows over the couple’s married life and the lives of wives and children who remained in Kenya. In Britain Muoria was not able to find work as a journalist but he did not stop writing. His writings took a new turn. Over and over, he recounted the story of his childhood, when he straddled the world of traditionalist Kikuyu rural life and mission modernity. He told of his early youth as a labourer, his marriages and his training and work for the railways, which took him far away from his known surroundings in Kikuyuland and Nairobi. He kept up his interest in politics, philosophy and morals and wrote long essays and semi-fictional novel-length tales in his London attic, now in English, meant for publication in the U.K. In order to make a living and support his family, he returned to his first profession and worked as a train guard on the London Underground.

Although Muoria wished to, he never managed to go back to Kenya to live. The journey from his homeland, deep in the struggle for independence, to permanent exile in the imperial nation was decisive in the fashioning of the Muoria family history. The exile of Ruth and Henry Muoria affected all branches of the extended polygamous family. The outcome was a far-flung family, consisting of several clans, spread over London, Nairobi and rural Kikuyuland.

Like other families the Muoria clan has been shaped and sustained by the stories members tell of themselves in dialogue with those told by others. Certain foundational myths of beginnings, breaks, loss and reunion, acted out by protagonists, enemies and helpers, have been told in agreement. Other stories, branching off from the core versions, have been contested and modified according to the narrator’s personality, age and gender and position within the family and in society more broadly. The story of the Kenyan nationalist Henry Muoria and his extended
family, as told by differently situated members, is a story of loss and recovery. Some family members have emphasized loss—others recount their version of the family story in the light of eventual recovery.

Muoria’s enemies were colonialism and racism, embodied in the British regime. At the time of his departure, it was in a panic over African nationalism and resistance, which had crystallized into the Mau Mau movement. His immediate helper was Moral Rearmament, a movement that in this period supported African business and political leaders. The organisation helped him pay the ticket to Europe. Muoria’s long-time helpers were his wives, Elizabeth, Judith and Ruth, and the previous generation of women, Judith’s and Ruth’s mothers. Together, they took care of the family’s children, finances and property in Kenya after he had left. What enabled him more broadly was African resistance against colonialism and his own success as a publicist and newspaper editor, embedded in patriotism and African political organisation.

The early story of Henry Muoria resonates with that of his twenty-year-older mentor Jomo Kenyatta. In their interpretation of family history, Muoria’s surviving wife Ruth, his children and his grandchildren constantly referred to the friendship between the two men and marvelled at parallels and at their very different fates. Both men began their working lives as herdboys 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 proponents. They were polygamous patriarchs and married highly independent and gifted women. Both were ambitious and energetic entrepreneurs and writing was one of their enterprises. They authored and published Gikuyu 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 their country from the degrading British colonialism. Kenyatta’s account of Kikuyu history and customs, Facing Mount Kenya (1938), written as a student of anthropology at London School of Economics under the tutelage of Bronislaw Malinowski, is a foundational text of modern anthropology and a manifesto of Kikuyu cultural nationalism. Muoria’s writings on politics, philosophy and everyday morals, emerging out of Kikuyu and African political culture and resistance ten years later, deserve to be better known.
Background and approach

This essay will stitch together a history of the Kenyan branch of the Muoria family, beginning with Henry Muoria himself and continuing with those who were left behind when he travelled. The master narrative is that of a remarkable man whose favourite proverb was ‘an unspoken word convinces no one’, 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. In order to capture both the social environment that made Muoria’s thinking and career possible and his unique independence two routes will be pursued: the dramatic story of Muoria himself who dedicated his life to writing and politics, but learned to cook and make clothes for his children and invented new livelihoods in exile, when times were tough. And the no less dramatic story of the family’s women, several of whom shared Muoria’s intellectual and political pursuits, and who all struggled during a dangerous and changeable period in Kenya’s history to get along and make meaningful and secure lives for themselves and their children. As it will turn out, unsurprisingly perhaps, the ties and networks that have kept together generations and sub-clans have been crafted by women more than by men. Muoria’s freedom of movement and political influence, like that of other powerful men, depended on the skills and labour of resourceful women. The story’s time span is from the end of World War I to the present. The account is necessarily selective. It is refracted primarily through the memories and reflections of Muoria himself, his widow Ruth who joined him in London and started a new family there, their London-born daughter Wangari, and the accounts of several of his daughters and sons and grandchildren who stayed behind in Kenya.

In 1995 I was in Kenya, gathering material on urban livelihoods and popular culture in African Nairobi. I was based at the old Anglican Church Mission Society Centre—now St. John’s Community Centre—in Pumwani, a poor area of the city. Here, I got to know two local young men, then in their mid-twenties, George Muoria and Julius Mwaniki, who became friends and helped me in my work. They were the grandsons of Henry and Ruth Muoria, as I found out when I was invited to their near-by home, met their mother Christine and saw a photograph of Henry Muoria’s characteristic smiling face on the wall. I knew about
the career of this Kenyan journalist from John Lonsdale’s “The Moral Economy of Mau Mau”.¹

These young men and their mother took me by the hand and invited me into the family. They were part of the widely dispersed Nairobi Muorias—Henry and Ruth’s four daughters who grew up in Kenya, and their children and grandchildren. They were the first to tell me about the extraordinary fate of this gifted Kenyan family. They were keen to talk about their grandfather, who was well known locally, and they always did so in the light of the influence his life and ideas had on the whole family. They told me that the extended family—as constituted by livelihood opportunities, political events and pure chance—consisted of three clans: the rural clan in Kiambu, sons and daughters of Henry and his first wives, Elizabeth and Judith, and their spouses and children; the clan in London, made up of Ruth and Henry himself and their London-born children and grandchildren; and finally their own clan, the Nairobi Muorias, daughters and grandchildren of Ruth and Henry. Socially and economically the three sections of the family seemed far apart, but no matter where, family members identified strongly with the Muoria mbari.²

At the time I was struck by the thought that the conditions in which the two young men had grown up and now live in independent Kenya may in several respects be more restricted than those in which their parents and grandparents had found themselves. I was interested in finding out whether their grandfather’s private and public political and social ideals had any relevance for a generation of Kenyans born after the country’s independence. George and Julius are talented, well educated and keen to work, but they share the hardships of contemporary urban living with millions of young Africans, who, after having left school, have great difficulties in finding work and a social role for themselves. Growing up and living in an urban slum, as they do, means exposure to unhealthy surroundings, crime and insecurity, few economic opportunities, political instability and harassment from the authorities, but also support from networks of family, neighbours and age mates.

² A mbari is a landowning sub-clan. It may be used more loosely about an extended family.
However, in spite of these beginnings, my research into the history and the present realities of the family in Kenya has had more to do with the question of what constitutes a family than with deprivation and economic differentiation. How did members imagine the family in a situation in which historical circumstances meant that it had been radically divided in terms of space and ‘culture’? What unites and what divides? Are boundaries between nations easier to negotiate than those between town and countryside? Which traits did they think of as characteristic of their family and clan? And what has it meant for the Muorias in Kenya to lose to exile a wonderfully alive and forward looking husband, father and grandfather, and a high spirited, tolerant and warmhearted mother and grandmother? The nation of Kenya also lost out. Why did Henry Muoria not return to the independent Kenya he and his families had fought and made sacrifices for?

These questions emerged early in the research process as a result of dialogue with family members. I address them in the form of an essay and not in a fully-flanked generational biography, which the history of this family might well deserve. The questions have organized the process of collecting material, directing my attention to key persons in the family network. In interviews they were asked to reflect on themes of identity, family and clan, division and cohesion, separation and home. Some of Muoria’s daughters and grandchildren wrote down what they wanted to say and parts of their accounts are included in the essay. This material is supplemented with stories of Muoria’s life and that of his family from his autobiographical writings, and features and interviews in Kenyan newspapers. Some members of the family have read earlier versions of the narrative and let me know their interpretations and disagreements, but also their appreciation that Henry Muoria would be remembered.

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4 I am deeply grateful to Ruth Muoria, Wangari Muoria-Sal, Peter Mwaniki, Julius Mwaniki, George Muoria and other members of the Muoria family in Britain, Kenya and the United States who have been more than generous with their stories, interpretations and hospitality.
The essay opens up by giving an account of Muoria’s early days, his youth, his marriages and working life. Then follows the story of his third wife, Ruth, as an illumination of the role of the women in his family, their history and resilience. She is a third generation urbanite, belonging to a lineage of independent women who established themselves in the changing social and economic environment of the Nairobi neighbourhood of Pumwani, from the 1920s onwards. This part of the story is based on interviews with Ruth and her daughters and grandchildren in Kenya. In the next sections daughters of Henry and Judith and Henry and Ruth, his second and third wives, tell about their upbringing, one branch in Nairobi, the other in rural Kiambu, and discuss issues of identity. Finally, the word is given to groups of grandchildren: David, Patrick and Julius reflect on the role of women in the Muoria family, and on what it means to be a Kenyan and a descendant of a highly respected national figure. Their cousins, two sisters, Nuna and Terry, born and raised in Nairobi and resident in the United States, discuss identity, home and exile. And Alex Muoria, a grandson of Henry and his first wife Elizabeth, who has stayed in the rural family home in Nyathuna and carries on with the agriculture that has sustained the family for so long, tells of the pleasures and difficulties of being a Muoria grandson and cultivating a farm. Together, the different voices express the mixture of pride and loss which marks the history and present situation of the Muoria family.

*Henry Muoria—early life, literacy, marriages and career*

Muoria wa Mwaniki was born in 1914 to what he calls an ‘ordinary Kikuyu couple’ Mwaniki wa Muoria and Wambui wa Mbari. His grandfather, the founder of the Muoria *mbari*, established himself with his two wives and children on the fertile lands near Kabete in Kenya’s Central Province. His son Mwaniki, Henry’s father, worked with electrical installations for ‘white people’ in Nairobi, and only returned home to his family and land during weekends. Lillian Gathoni, Muoria’s sister,
tells that until their mother converted to Christianity and started going to Church their parents would not let Henry go to school, ‘we used to do as we were told by our mother.’ Both children worked around the farm and were quite happy, ‘we wanted to be where we could feel at home—among cows and goats.’\(^6\) Muoria, however, pursued his plan of learning to read and write, first in Gikuyu, and managed to get himself to evening classes at Kirangari, the Anglican mission, where he learned English. Two years later, when his younger brother was old enough to look after the cattle, Henry entered day school. Conversion and literacy were two sides of the same coin, and in 1930 the famous Canon Harry Leakey, one of the pioneers of Kikuyu literacy and a translator of The New Testament into Gikuyu, baptised Muoria who was now sixteen. This was how he got the name Henry. Instead of becoming a mundu mugo, a traditional Kikuyu seer and wise man, as had been prophesied at his birth, he was ‘converted to Christianity…through his great desire to know how to read and write.’\(^7\)

Muoria was one of a very small number of African children in the British Kenya Colony who was in a position to seize the chance of entering the world of reading and writing, and he was able to do so only after overcoming resistance from his surroundings. He ended five years of schooling with the so-called ‘vernacular exam’. After that he interrupted school briefly and found work in Nairobi with an Indian plumber’s firm. He left his urban job after having suffered the indignity of being slapped by his Asian employer for a small mistake. He now joined the East African Railways as a trainee telegrapher. He was given work as a guard on trains crisscrossing Kenya Colony. Around this time he met Elizabeth Thogori who was to become his first wife. She was a student at the Anglican Mission in Kabete, close to Nairobi, where she was learning knitting and tailoring. They celebrated a church wedding in 1932 after Muoria had been transferred to Voi, a desolate station on the railway line to Mombasa. A year later their first son was born, and in the same year Henry’s father died. Henry was transferred to Athi, south east of Nairobi, arid and deserted, and worked as an assistant station-master for three years. In 1935 The East African Railways offered him a place at their training school for further education, and after he had finished he was sent to Eldoret in Western Kenya. His

\(^{6}\) Interview, Kiambu, October 2000.

\(^{7}\) The British and my Kikuyu Tribe, 8.
work with the railways took him far away from his home area and the nationalist and regional politics he was becoming involved in. In 1942, saddened by the loss of a baby daughter and pining for home, he asked for and was granted a transfer to Nairobi. This meant that he was back in more familiar country, ‘among his tribespeople’, as he wrote in his autobiographical account. He settled on the Muoria land in Nyathuna, Kiambu, with his wife and children.

During his long hours of travel Muoria worked his way through a journalism correspondence course, which he had ordered from London. He wished to make his views on African and Kikuyu problems and progress known to a broader public. In his autobiographical writings he attributes his determination to become a journalist to having a letter to the editor containing strong criticism of the British presence in Kenya rejected by the *East African Standard*, Kenya’s leading newspaper. His return to Kikuyuland inspired him to write his first book, *Tungiika Atia Iiya Witu*? or *What Should We Do, Our People?* that came out in 1945. Its aim was, as he wrote, to ‘provide his tribespeople with a lot of ideas which they could discuss among themselves for their own benefit.’ The book covered education of children, modern homes, jealousy, the necessity of work, a fair profit, co-operative farming, the study of books, the dangers of drunkenness, and more broadly moral issues concerning right and wrong and the importance of choosing the right path. The sale of *Tungiika Atia Iiya Witu*? and other pamphlets from the Church Mission Society bookshop in Nairobi, among other places, provided start capital for setting up his newspaper *Mumenyereri*, a forum for news, education and discussion among Gikuyu-speaking people.

Muoria was in contact with several other writers and journalists, among them one of the other prominent, independent Kikuyu pamphleteers, Gakaara wa Wanjau, who used Muoria’s newspaper and network to advertise his own works. At the time similar didactic

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8 *The British and my Kikuyu Tribe*, 10.
9 *The British and my Kikuyu Tribe*, 10.
10 He noted that *Ngoro ya Ugikuyu ni ya Gutoria*, (“The Gikuyu Spirit of patriotism is for victory”), which he later included in *I, the Gikuyu*, sold out its five thousand copies in a week. *The British and my Kikuyu Tribe*, 15.
11 Thanks to Derek Peterson for drawing my attention to this connection. On Gakaara wa Wanjau and political writers of the 1940s and 1950s see Christina Pugliese, ‘Complementary or Contending Nationhoods? Kikuyu Pamphlets and Songs 1945–52, in Atieno E. S. Odhiambo & John Lonsdale (eds.), *Mau Mau and Nationhood* (Oxford,
books on modern life for Africans were being written by colonial servants, and solicited from African writers by colonial institutions like Christian missions or the East African Literature Bureau. The Bureau also published guidebooks for aspiring African writers and held Gikuyu literature competitions. Muoria was aware of these activities, but not particularly influenced by them. He translated *Hanahela* into Gikuyu, a didactic novel written by A. T. Culwick, a colonial officer from Tanganyika. More important than colonial enlightenment, the source of his modern outlook was frustration at what he occasionally called the ‘backwardness’ of his own people and a strong conviction that reform was needed, based on his own experience all over Kenya, but particularly in his home region. The thrust of his work was towards education and the value of individual enterprise. In an unpublished manuscript, written in 1944, he emphasized that ‘people are not determined by parents, but have free will’, a statement which mirrored his own successful social and spatial mobility. His reforming zeal was, however, combined with a strong respect for Kikuyu values and morality. Both ambitions are caught in the title of his newspaper, *Mumenyereri*: the one who guards and the one who observes.

In the mid-1940s, after having proved that it was possible to make a profit from publishing a book, Muoria decided to leave his job with the railways in order to start his newspaper. His wife was not willing to support him in his venture into journalism and thus the dangerous world of nationalist politics. The couple by now had three sons to look after and she thought that by doing so he put the family at risk. Events proved her right. However, Muoria had made up his mind and the couple were formally divorced. This is how Muoria explained the disagreement 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.’ In 1945 Muoria entered into a customary marriage with his second wife, Judith Nyamurwa. Judith was a teacher, trained at Kahuhia Teachers’ College, and a writer in her own right. She shared

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12 *The Inquisitive Karamando*, 193.
Muoria’s critical views of the British, was committed to the fight against colonialism and supported him in his journalistic and political activities. They wrote a book together, *Muturiri wa Kiriu*, on modern living, or ‘what it takes to live sociably’.14

Muoria met his third wife Ruth in 1947. She was the only daughter of a Kikuyu woman, Grace Njoki, who was a house-owner in Pumwani, the core of African Nairobi. After their marriage, she also moved to Nyathuna and, like Judith, assisted her husband in the writing and production of *Mumenyereri*. Muoria and his extended family lived in two houses he had built on a ridge in the middle of fertile fields of Kiambu. One is a beautifully designed smaller house, which Muoria built of bricks in the mid 1940s 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 his published book. This building enterprise, where he showed in action and not only in words what could be done, was part of his didactic enlightenment project. The second larger building, where Judith lived, a substantial house that he finished in 1952 with the help of his age mates, is the first stone house built by an African in the area. The family farmed and traded in agricultural produce. The children were educated on the income from farming, from paid work undertaken by Judith and, for a few years, from the newspaper, which from 1950 onwards made a profit.

*Journalism and the city*

Starting a newspaper was not easy, especially in 1945 when war-time restrictions still applied. Paper was rationed and it was not until Muoria convinced the colonial authorities that he was reviving an already existing Gikuyu newspaper, *Muthithu* (‘The Treasure’), which had been published by the well-known nationalist politician, James Beauttah, that he was able to push ahead. The first issue of *Muthithu/Mumenyereri* in Gikuyu and English was published in May 1945, and the paper quickly became popular. For a short period it came out every second week, it then speeded up and became a weekly, then a bi-weekly, now in

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14 Thanks to Derek Peterson for this translation. Unfortunately, I have not been able to locate a copy of the book.
Gikuyu only. It grew from a circulation of two thousand copies to one of around twelve thousand towards the end of its existence.\footnote{On Mumenyereri and Muoria as a newspaper editor see Bodil Folke Frederiksen, ‘“The present battle is the brain battle”: Writing and publishing a Kikuyu newspaper, Mumenyereri, in the Pre-Mau Mau period in Kenya’, in Karin Barber (ed.), Africa’s Hidden Histories: Everyday Literacy and Making the Self (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2006), 278–313.}

It is not surprising that a political paper in Gikuyu such as Mumenyereri should be in high demand in Nairobi at this time. Nationalist politics were gaining strength after a lull during the war. In 1946 Muoria was one of the group of influential Africans, most of them active in the leading nationalist political organization, Kenya African Union, who in Mombasa welcomed Jomo Kenyatta back from his British exile. Over the next years Muoria followed Kenyatta closely and made sure that Mumenyereri reported the important speeches which he made—activities that were stepping stones in the careers of both men as nationalist political spokesmen. The paper reported fully and openly on political issues and brought letters from Africans who were dissatisfied with the politics of the colonial regime. Muoria wrote carefully considered but strongly worded editorials, and the paper announced a host of political meetings and Mau Mau oath ceremonies under the guise of ‘tea parties’.

Muoria’s working environment as a newspaperman was the volatile and politically fraught atmosphere of the city. At this time the ownership and governing of Nairobi, the colonial capital, was extremely contested. In 1950 the colonial authorities decreed that the town of Nairobi had existed for fifty years and celebrated its elevation to city status. This symbolic and self-congratulatory event was turned into a celebration of fifty years of colonial rule. The achievements of the African and Asian populations of the city were neglected. The preparations for the Jubilee and its actual celebration served to focus and dissatisfaction on several fronts among the African population. First and foremost, racial segregation of the three main population groups, Africans, Indians and Whites, had deepened at all levels and included active implementation of the colour bar in restaurants and other public places. 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 businesses and housing, 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. They had to carry passbooks with them at all times, showing that they had legitimate business. Paternalism and ‘welfare’ from above crushed African self-organisation and entrepreneurship.

Furthermore, Kikuyu in the city and some owning land on its outskirts feared that the ‘city’ might be more land hungry than the town and swallow up land around Dagoretti Market, which was occupied by African enterprises. African townspeople and political organisations protested against the participation of their two nominated 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 municipal beer halls was halved because of popular boycott, and in 1950 the municipal canteen had to close down.

Muoria did not live in the city, but left his home in Kiambu every day to go to work. On the day of the Jubilee, Muoria himself did not take part in the celebrations or the protests, 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. In his writings he links this day to the beginning of clandestine oathing that later came to be associated with the Mau Mau movement.

He ran his newspaper business from changing locations in Nairobi. When Ruth, looking back, characterized her husband, she 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 was 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.’ At one time he employed four to five people, among them an assistant editor, John Gatu, who later became Moderator of the Presbyterian Church of East Africa. Muoria also used family labour. Ruth wrote stories for the paper, allegorical tales with a moral, and reported from political meetings, when her husband could not go. Both she and Judith helped with production, packing and distribution of Mumenyereri. When the printing machine broke down in mid-1950, Muoria rented a duplicator and continued producing the paper—two thousand copies twice a week from changing urban locations. At this

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16 The British and my Kikuyu Tribe, 282.
time political tensions made the production of nationalist newspapers a risky business, as Muoria’s first wife had foreseen.

For the first time the paper made a profit, a development that whetted Muoria’s appetite for new technologies and for being independent of printers who took fifty percent of his income, as he told in an interview, forty years later: ‘Mumenyereri was selling at twenty cents a week. Of that amount ten cents went to the printer, four cents to the vendor and I collected six cents from each copy.’ When he had earned enough money he bought a second-hand printing press from an Indian printer and established his workshop and office in a rented space in Nairobi’s central business district.

Muoria situated himself in a network of innovative African entrepreneurs. He collaborated with Asians, who were experienced and well established in the area of printing and newspaper production. He was not willing to go along with the established colonial structures and procedures and was strongly critical of his some fellow editors who let the government assist them financially and with training activities. His intransigence may have had something to do with his departure for Britain. It certainly prevented his return.

_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, Paul Ngei and Victor Wokabi. The authorities watched _Mumenyereri_ and the other African newspapers closely and Muoria produced his paper under constant threat of being prosecuted for sedition. The paper’s report on a strike at the Uplands Bacon Factory in 1947, where two strikers were shot dead by African police officers, did in fact lead to court proceedings. The reporter who wrote the story was sent to prison for six months, Muoria and the printer, Mr. V. G. Patel, were fined. At this time the legislation which made it possible for the authorities to confiscate the printing equipment of publications deemed to be subversive had not been introduced—it came into effect only in 1950. After having paid his fine, Muoria was set free to continue the production and sale of his paper.

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Muoria sought to shake African trust in the colonial masters. In 1950 Mumenyereri published a letter warning Africans against believing what they were being told in 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.’ Muoria 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.’

When Muoria left for Europe to widen his journalistic experience and look out for new technology his second wife Judith took over as an editor. ‘She was already an experienced journalist and machine operator’, as he told in an interview thirty-five years later. She was in close contact with her husband, who sent her articles from London. The front page of the September 20 issue carried a photo of Muoria and an account of his air flight to London which lasted four days and nights: He reported that flying was like sitting in a swing! Number 456 was the last issue of the newspaper to appear before the colonial government clamped down on the African press.

The authorities did not leave Africans who had been involved in newspaper production alone, and in early 1953 Judith was detained. She recalled the event many years later during an interview: ‘I was tipped by a policeman that my husband and I were to be arrested’. She asked him to delay the arrest so that she could transport the printing press to her rural home. ‘The man was kind, and he gave me a day or two, where I hired a lorry and we transported the heavy machines to my home.’ After that she went to the police headquarters carrying her son Kinyanjui and gave herself up. While in detention she kept fighting for her rights and ideals and petitioned the authorities with long lists of grievances: that she was not allowed to collect her older children and stepchildren before being taken away; that conditions in the camp were unsuitable for young children; that she was not told why she was detained and that she had a right to petition; and that she

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was not allowed to continue the publication of *Mumenyereri* in spite of having been given an ‘application to proceed with the paper’. Her file includes an English translation of a Gikuyu article that she had published in a magazine. She exhorts women to ‘come to the aid of Gikuyu and Mumbi’ and to continue their fight: ‘We must show that we are intelligent and can do anything, in politics we should stand in the middle and cultivate the land that is ours. It is our job to grow food and to know the lands we possess. This we can only do by helping the men in their task of trying to get the land back.’

Judith spent seven months in detention camp in Kajiado. Judith and Henry’s two oldest children, Rosabell and Charles, were left in the care of her mother. In London Muoria mobilized liberal politicians in his fight to have her set free, and eventually she was released with their assistance. She returned to live at Muoria’s property in Nyathuna and worked hard to look after and educate her children. After Muoria left for the U.K. there was no further income from publishing activities, and Muoria’s car was sold to finance children’s school fees. Their daughter Rosabell recalls: ‘We were brought up with lots of financial difficulties. Mum had to work as a teacher during the day and as a hotel keeper in the evenings in order to make ends meet. To supplement this we did peasant farming.’ According to her daughter, Judith was ‘a strong campaigner for independence in her own right and she didn’t worship the white man at all’. In October 1996 an article in the Kenyan newspaper *Daily Nation* praised Judith and other ‘unsung heroines of the freedom war’, and Rosabell followed up in a letter to the editor, writing that her mother ‘felt a lot of satisfaction when the white man capitulated and Kenya became independent.’

*Ruth Nuna and her forebears in Pumwani—marriage to Muoria*

Family stories about Henry Muoria’s courage and persistence in his public and private life are balanced, as we have seen, by stories of the actions of the family’s courageous and resourceful women. Muoria was typical in the sense that, like other organic intellectuals in Kenya,

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23 KNA JZ 7/5. Judith w/o Henry Muoria. Thanks to Derek Peterson for notes from this file. The magazine in question was *Gikuyu na Mumbi*, No. 2 November 1952. Gikuyu and Mumbi are the mythical founders of the Kikuyu nation.  
he came out of rural mission modernity, profoundly associated with masculine ideals. The backgrounds of his three wives were equally significant: Elizabeth was one of the very early Christian converts, Judith a pioneer on the strength of her education and political awareness, and Muoria’s third wife Ruth was representative in that she was the product of a distinct modernity unfolding in towns, associated with women’s lives, work and values. The intertwining of rural and urban sets of values have affected generations of Kenyans deeply. Some of the tensions and patterns of mobility characteristic of the Muoria extended family have followed from these different roots and trajectories.

Ruth Nuna Japhet Kinyori was born in Nairobi in 1927 as the only child of a Pumwani woman, Grace Njoki, and a Kenyan Asian, Jan Muhammed, who was a trader. When Ruth tells her life history, the account begins with the dramatic events that determined the fate of Grace’s mother Pricilla Nuna Gikiro, whom she considers the founder of her lineage. Ruth’s grandmother was one of a generation of pioneer women migrants who settled in the newly established colonial capital, Nairobi, which at this time consisted of a small colonial administrative area, a railway junction and a few scattered townships for Africans.

Pricilla fled from her husband in rural Kikuyuland with her children and first settled in Masikini, one of the five original African villages on the outskirts of the colonial town. When, around 1921, Masikini was destroyed as part of the colonial zigzag policies on housing of Africans, Pricilla moved to Pumwani, paid rent to the Municipal Council for the land and built her own house. Pumwani was established in the early 1920s in segregated Nairobi as the first area in which Africans were allowed to build and own their own houses. It was the heart of African Nairobi and started out as a well-ordered location with space and amenities for a number of households on the principles of English garden cities. However, because of increasing population pressure and the unwillingness of the colonial regime to seriously plan and provide for Africans as legitimate inhabitants of cities, overcrowding and deprivation came to mark the neighbourhood. The colonial authorities came to regard it as dangerous because of poverty, disease and crime, more than because of nationalist politics, which they did not pay much attention to in their urban manifestations until the end of the 1930s.26

Pricilla married again in the city. Of her thirteen children only four survived into adulthood—a testimony to the dismal social and economic conditions of the urban African population. One of them was Grace. She was elected by her mother to inherit the house and carry on the family business of letting rooms and selling beer. Grace who chose not to marry Ruth’s father, as she would have to convert to Islam, did so with her daughter as a companion and helper. Grace put Ruth through school, the first one run by the Anglican Mission, the second better one by the Salvation Army in nearby Kariokor. Encouraged by her mother, Ruth wanted to learn more and was unhappy with the prevailing social realities that meant that ‘even if you study so much you cannot get a job because you are a woman. You have to get married, your work is to go and cook and look after children.’

Ruth was taught spinning and weaving by colonial wives and social workers, and she remembers that they appropriated the income from the sale of the products. She did get a job, however. Because of her excellent Swahili she appeared regularly in a radio programme on hygiene and child rearing, where her task was to impersonate the figure of Mama Mzee who would advise listeners presumably keen to learn about the latest wisdom on baby care from Britain. Vernacular broadcast programmes was one of several propaganda initiatives, emerging from the colonial Information Office.

Ruth’s early first marriage was to a Goan. He was married already and the union with Ruth was celebrated in the customary way with the payment of dowry and blessing by parents. Already at the age of nineteen she separated from him, ‘he was not my tribe’, as she says in retelling her life story. They had a daughter together and she stayed with her mother. Not long after her divorce, she met Henry Muoria on the way to her radio job in central Nairobi. At this time, around 1947, Muoria was a well-known writer and Ruth knew about his work, especially the newspaper Mumenyereri. Muoria was a prosperous man—a husband and the father of several children. He owned land, two cars, grew crops and had built a substantial house for himself and his fam-


28 On colonial use of radio, see Frederiksen, ‘Making Popular Culture’.
ily. His newspaper was doing well. A few days after meeting Ruth, he visited her mother in Pumwani. She liked her daughter’s suitor and agreed that he wrote ‘good things about people’. A fortnight later Muoria offered to give Ruth a lift in his car when she was going to visit her grandmother Pricilla. She had retired to her rural home close to Muoria’s own home after having handed her property over to her daughter. Ruth accepted and soon after Henry asked her to marry him. Her reaction was to point out that he was married already, but he persuaded her that he was allowed to marry again and promised to talk to his second wife, Judith.

Ruth’s mother was surprised that out of many suitors her daughter had picked Muoria. She did not have reservations about Ruth being in a polygamous marriage 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 Grace keep her young daughter for company and for reasons of access to schools, and settled in the brick house in Nyathuna, which she shared with Judith, who was friendly and showed her around. For a time, Muoria and his wives and children were able to pursue peaceful and productive lives. However, with the intense political activity building up to the Mau Mau crisis and the increasing suppression of African activities and organisations, everything changed drastically during the first years of the new decade, and especially after Muoria had left for Britain.

Like Judith, Ruth was made to bear the brunt of British suppression of particularly Kikuyu women. She had a troubled time after Muoria’s departure. Kiambu was one of the hearts of Kikuyu political activity and unsafe for the wives of a well-known African journalist, as Judith’s fate had demonstrated. Ruth took her children, left Nyathuna and returned to her mother in the city. Pumwani, however, 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. The screening operations could take place at any time and took many forms. Ruth describes one in which men, women

29 Interview with Ruth’s daughter Christine Gathoni, Nairobi, November 1999.
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 and made to 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 anybody at random. 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.30

Luckily, Ruth was not among those picked up. She moved on from the insecurity in Pumwani to a house in Makadara, an African neighbourhood further to the east. Her husband’s urgent wish that she join him in London in 1954 came at a very difficult time, but by going Ruth probably saved him from deep depression—a condition he describes in his autobiographical manuscripts31—and enabled him to be a happy father and to continue as a productive writer. Henry and Ruth’s exile in Britain meant both that the very foundations of the family were shaken, but also that resourceful helpers mobilized and came to their assistance.

Growing up in Nairobi in the 1950s and 1960s:
The sisters from Pumwani.

Ruth left for London, certain that Grace Njoki and the network of Pumwani women, in which she was a leading figure, would take excellent care of her four daughters, Mary Njoki, Hellen Wambui, Christine Gathoni and Margaret Waringa. The rural branch of the extended Muoria family could also be relied on to help out. The girls grew up where their great grandmother had settled, in the area known as Majengo in the heart of Pumwani. As we have seen, colonial officials regarded Pumwani as a neighbourhood that was almost ungovernable, singling out the women of the area as particularly difficult. This perception from outside stands in strong contrast to the Muoria family’s memories of respectable and socially mobile middle class living with an emphasis on education and with women forming the hard-working core.

31 I, the Gikuyu, 77.
Although Pumwani was marked by poverty and, after 1952, by the policing and control that were the consequences of the Emergency, it was also a ‘smart place’.\(^{32}\) It was known as a neighbourhood where it was good to relax, and it was home to a good number of bars and eating places as well as being well known for prostitution. The area housed several schools, a large maternity hospital and a colonial chief’s camp and police station. The two municipal community halls, Kaloleni and Pumwani, hosted a number of activities. There was a library, regular evening classes in home economics, health and hygiene, spinning and weaving, and in languages—English and Swahili. Voluntary associations and clubs were in charge of exhibitions, tea parties and sports.

Grace brought up her four grandchildren as her own daughters. When, for a period, she worked as a nanny for white families, her sister looked after the girls. Grace had small jobs of teaching Swahili locally, but the major part of her income came from letting rooms in her properties in Pumwani, Kawangware and other Eastlands estates, and from running the bar. Unlike her mother, who had sold home brew, she would sell and serve bottled beer in her sitting room. The atmosphere was friendly. Bottled beer was for leisure consumption, whereas it was well known that the men who drank the Kikuyu home brew \textit{muratina} were engaged in nationalist politics. The clientele of the bar were ‘professionals’ and a ‘better class of people’, and included a Kenya Broadcasting Company broadcaster and a future manager of the East African Airways.\(^{33}\) Money for school fees for the girls came from these activities. Once a month Muoria’s first wife, Elizabeth, who was a skillful farmer, brought food from the fields owned by Muoria in the family’s upcountry home.

Grace was known in Pumwani for looking after the four sisters very carefully. She was ‘the one who brought them up, saw them through school, through everything.’ The four girls called her ‘Mama’, and although she was strict they were very close to her: Hellen tells that she is happy that she was brought up by her Grandmother: ‘I don’t regret it at all.’\(^{34}\) The girls were educated at first locally, later, for their secondary education, at boarding schools. It was known in the neighbourhood that they were the daughters of an important figure. Christine tells that at

\(^{32}\) Interview with Hellen and John Gichache, Ruth’s daughter and son-in-law, Nairobi, December 1999.

\(^{33}\) Interview with Hellen and John Gichache, Nairobi, December 1999.

\(^{34}\) Interview with Hellen and John Gichache, Nairobi, December 1999.
Primary School ‘we were famous because of our father, who was known as a Kikuyu journalist. All the teachers knew him through reading his magazines.’ The girls had a Kikuyu and Christian upbringing, Gikuyu and Christian names.

The eldest daughter, Mary Grace Njoki, named after her grandmother, went to a Catholic boarding school. She tells her early story like this:

We were staying with Mum and Dad at Eastleigh Section 3 and our Dad used to go to print his magazines and our Mum was selling them at different places. My Dad had 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 Home Guard 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.

Her younger sister, Christine, tells of an early childhood made unstable by the Mau Mau emergency, but also full of love:

I am the third born of Muoria’s family, born in 1950. My parents went to London when I was still young…. When our mother was still here we stayed in Bahati Estate where I could hear some gun shots—people were being shot and we were not allowed to go out since it was during the Emergency. After Bahati we moved to Eastleigh and stayed with a landlady called Josephine Muthoni who now owns Sun City Cinema and is a very rich woman. We came back to Majengo where we stayed with our grandmother after my mother left us. We were told that she flew to London with a bird called Hongo. We were taken care of by our grandmother who loved us so much.

Grace was a well-known figure in Pumwani. Her great grandson Julius, son of Christine, now in his thirties, tells that ‘she was known all around as Mother Bigi… because she used to be huge.’ She became front-page news during a Miss Kenya Beauty Contest when, bored with the predictability and lack of action of the prize-giving event, she jumped...
onto the stage and successfully challenged the contestants. Julius’ cousin Nuna, daughter of Hellen, remembers that her great grandmother looked after her frequently: ‘She looked very prominent. I used to think of her as a queen. She was big. She was sitting on that chair there and everybody was coming to her, she was giving instructions, that was a very beautiful woman…. I think we called her Mama…. or Nyanya wa Majengo (‘Grandmother of Majengo’). We had a lot of Nyanyas, you know.’ Nuna thinks of her as a rich woman who would give her and the other great granddaughters small gifts and whose house was ‘beautiful and clean’.41

After Grace’s four granddaughters had grown up and had children of their own, they went on conducting their family celebrations in the house in Majengo with Grace as the towering center. And after her death in 1977, the sisters have held a memorial party, ukumbusho, every year on the day of her death, a celebration which involves a visit to their grandmother’s grave, cooking and eating a meal of rice and chicken, and pouring Tusker beer on the ground outside the house as a greeting to the deceased.42

Education, private enterprise and urban property have been central to the power of women in the Nairobi branch of the family. Henry and Ruth’s four daughters have worked either as professionals in business organizations or as independent entrepreneurs. Ruth, who inherited the Pumwani house from her mother, has left it to Mary, her eldest daughter and the fourth woman in a direct line of descent to own the property. The other three daughters have inherited the houses their grandmother built in the Eastlands estate of Makadara and other urban property. All have small pieces of land in the family’s rural home in Kiambu.

Beer is still sold in Pumwani as part of the family business—now from a regular bar owned by Mary and run with family labour. The bar, which adjoins the house where her sister Christine lives with her sons, their wives and her grandchildren, consists of two large rooms with a jukebox, acquired by the family in the 1950s, and a more recent pool table. The atmosphere is still friendly and the billiards and beer are both very popular with young Tanzanian men who operate profitable sale of second-hand clothes, mitumba, and, like their great grandmothers who came to Pumwani in the 1930s and 1940s, lead migrants’ lives.

41 Interview with Nuna Gichache, Oakland, April 2003.
42 Interview with Nuna Gichache, Oakland, April 2003.
During the 1960s and 1970s the three branches of the Muoria family in London, Nairobi and Kiambu were busy keeping the families afloat and putting children through school and further education. Letters kept up the contact between the London and the Kenya families in Nairobi and Nyathuna. Henry Muoria was a regular correspondent, writing in Gikuyu from his north London home. He told news of life in London and about the lives of Ruth’s and his seven London born children, four sons and three daughters. Besides working as a guard on the London Underground, Muoria had to learn to cook and make clothes for the children when his wife had health problems. In a difficult period around the late 1960s, Ruth’s mother assisted the London family financially. Money and assistance again flowed from mother to daughter, but this time from Majengo to the Metropole.

Ruth’s Nairobi-born daughters did not have much contact with the upcountry family but they would visit once in a while. Christine remembers paying a long visit to the landed Muoria clan after her uncle had been killed in an accident: ‘When we were there we were able to see our grandmother Nyiuru Wambui and our stepmothers Thogori and Judith… and we were also introduced to our step brothers and sister Rosabell. We also visited Gikuni and met our great grandmother.' The grandmother she refers to was Henry’s mother who was still alive and resided in Nyathuna. The great grandmother was Grace’s mother, Pricilla, the founding matriarch of the Nairobi Muorias, who had retired to a comfortable life in the countryside, made possible by her daughter’s remittances from the city.

In the 1950s and 60s, when Muoria’s sons and daughters grew up, income from cultivation and trade in agricultural products was not enough for an expanding family. Land ownership was contested in the fertile tracts, and Muoria’s first wife Elizabeth was involved in several cases of litigation. In the early 1970s the mbari got together and invested in a bus, an enterprise that Alex Muoria, the grandson in charge of the rural farm, thinks would have made the family prosperous had it been sustained. At the same time a growing economy made urban

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44 Interview, Kiambu, October 2000.
living possible and attractive. So, several of the Kiambu Muorias came to town. Judith’s son Mwaniki was employed by the City Commission and his brother Kinyanjui worked in Barclay’s Bank. Elizabeth’s son John Mwaniki was a sculptor and taught art at the famous Starehe School for boys, situated close to Pumwani. James Kinuthia Gitau, his equally gifted brother, was a graphic artist. He went to art school and was subsequently employed by The Standard, the newspaper that had dismissed his father’s letter to the editor and thus started Muoria’s career as a journalist.

Gitau had a troubled career. He lived with his wife, Fedelis Njeri, and four children in the smaller brick house where his mother, Elizabeth Thogori, had stayed after her divorce from Muoria. He was unhappy about his parents’ divorce and was torn between his rural home and life in the city. His ambition was to be able to live a comfortable urban life, rather than being dependent on the limited and unstable income from cultivating the land. In spite of his efforts, he did not manage to generate enough income from business activities and his newspaper job to make his wish come true. However, like his father he distinguished himself in the newspaper industry: when Muoria returned to Kenya in 1989 and paid a visit to The Standard, his son was given credit for having started the paper’s art department and influenced its lay-out, while Muoria was praised for being a pioneer African journalist.\(^{45}\) Gitau died in 1990 after a long illness.

His half-brother, Charles Mwaniki, son of Henry and Judith, who had grown up next door in Nyathuna, was also aware of the tension between rural and urban life as it played itself out in the Muoria family. Mwaniki, who died in 2008, was a trained nurse, and after sixteen years in Nairobi, working for the City Commission, he ran a medical clinic named after his mother near the rural family home. He traced the urban-rural ambivalence back to the different outlooks of Henry’s wives and to an ambivalence in Henry himself, the founder of the family. In Mwaniki’s view, although his father worked, married and owned land in the city he ‘was not an urban person. He had a plot in Eastleigh, but he did not build there. He built here, in his community.’ On the other hand Ruth and her children were urban: ‘They have a garden here, but they don’t cultivate. We wouldn’t squeeze them here, where they don’t fit.’ Charles himself, though settled in Kiambu for the last

part of his life, was not immune to the pleasures of city life, ‘you feel better when you visit town.’

The lives of the Nairobi Muorias have involved travel and mobility. In 1962 Mary, Ruth’s eldest daughter went to London to live with her parents and take her O-levels. From the mid-1960s onwards other Muoria children started travelling between their two homelands. Urban-rural traffic, already ingrained in the family, translated itself into transnational mobility. Rosabell from the second marriage, born in 1950, saw her father for the first time when she travelled to London in 1969. She took a secretarial course in the U.K., sponsored by the Bible Society of Kenya. Wangari, the eldest of the London Muorias, born in 1955, first visited Kenya in 1975 with her sister Juliet and brothers Peter and Josphat. Wangari remained in Nairobi, working and getting to know her family. Nine years later Peter Mwaniki met his future wife in Kenya. They married in the U.K. They were the ones who actively recreated the links—carrying greetings, photos and stories that restored the family spirit and re-presented the family experience as something that was relevant to all branches.

Kenya’s independence intensified Muoria’s wish to return home, but obligations to his London family and an uncertain political situation in Kenya made it impossible. He returned to Nairobi in 1975 for the first time since 1952. Kenya was deep into a political crisis connected to Kikuyu political and economic dominance. Kenyatta’s hold on power was uncertain. Muoria took tea with the President and had dreams of re-launching his newspaper, but the idea of publishing a newspaper in Gikuyu was then extremely controversial. Family members warned him not to go ahead with his plans. All in all, he did not experience sufficient political and economic encouragement during his test visit for him to give up his life in Britain, and he returned to London. He had been away from Kenya’s political life for too long and the political culture had changed in ways that he was not conversant with. Muoria’s visits to Kenya in the late 1980s and early 1990s in connection with the deaths of his first and his second wife stirred an interest in his life and ideas and contributed to bringing the family together. On these visits the political climate was very different from that of the mid-1970s and Muoria was welcomed like a hero in his home area. People came

46 Interview with Charles Mwaniki, Kiambu, November 1999.
from near and far to greet him and national newspapers brought out interviews and lengthy features on his life and achievements.

Henry Muoria’s funeral at Nyathuna in 1997 brought almost the whole of the London branch of the family to Kenya. After his death Ruth, his widow, stayed on for a longer spell in the Kibera house of her daughter Hellen and her son-in-law John. However her visits are becoming less frequent as her health is fragile. She is supported in London by her children and grandchildren and the British health care system.

_Identities—London, Nairobi and Kikuyuland_

All family members share a pride in being a Muoria and refer to the family history as a source of identity. But they are also aware that the complicated and dramatic family experience, with its forced separations and remaking of links across economic, social and spatial differences, has fostered a variety of possible identities and potential conflicts. Muoria never saw himself as anything but Kikuyu and Kenyan. In Britain he was in exile. When, during an interview in his London house in 1987, he was asked about his identity, his answer played with the crucial difference between a ‘house’ and a ‘home’, known to all Kenyans: ‘I am a Kikuyu, a Kenyan who was born to Mwaniki wa Muoria and Wambui wa Mbari. My home is in Nyathuna, Kikuyu. In London I have only a house.’

Wangari in London considers language is a key to identity. In her view it is significant that those that were brought up in the rural areas all speak Gikuyu, even Henry’s grandchildren. Among the Muorias in Nairobi, Ruth and Henry’s daughters speak Gikuyu. The urban grandchildren speak Swahili and English but understand Gikuyu. As for the London branch, Muoria’s sons and daughters understand Gikuyu but cannot speak it—like their nieces and nephews in Nairobi.

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47 _Daily Nation_ 18 February 1987. This was the year of the highly controversial court case concerning the right to determine the burial site of S. M. Otieno, a case in which discussions of the difference between ‘house’ and ‘home’ turned out to be crucial. See David William Cohen & E. S. Atieno Odhiambo, _Burying SM: The Politics of Knowledge and the Sociology of Power in Africa_ (Portsmouth, New Hampshire: Heinemann, 1992).
Judith’s daughter Rosabell, interviewed in 1999, characterized her father as a pure Kikuyu person. However, as a consequence of its dispersal the Muoria family had split in three clans, characterized 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. When I saw my Dad—I have been with him in London several times—he identified himself with his own tribe. I have never known him to speak to me in English unless we were in the company of non-Gikuyu speakers. So I am Kikuyu through and through and my Dad was also Kikuyu through and through.

To her a Kikuyu identity is closely linked to pride in being African and equal to but different from Western people. Kikuyu identity is nurtured by growing up in Kikuyu culture. Rosabell explains, half jokingly, that although her father encouraged his children to feel like Kenyans and Kikuyu, the family in London may be more English than Kikuyu:

There are many things that they don’t understand, especially Kikuyu cultural trends. I believe one adopts the culture one grows in… Culture, I take it as the total way of life of a particular society or people. Culture is not in a name but in a way of life. A culture—you grow up in it, it is 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 are…. 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.48

When this idea of degrees of Kikuyuness was presented to Muoria’s widow, Ruth, she disagreed and insisted that her London children are full Kikuyus, brought up ‘in the customs of the Kikuyu’ to ‘respect elders’: ‘They are proud to be Kikuyu. But they are born in London.’49

In Rosabell’s view relations between generations are a touchstone of Kikuyu culture. 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

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48 Interview with Rosabell Wambui Mbure, Nairobi, November 1999.
sober…. The present generation is more free to say what they feel and what they want.

On the other hand, relations to grandparents are close and characterized by equality: ‘Children believe that their grandmothers cannot be wrong. A grandmother can be friend, more than Mama.’ Grace Njoki’s upbringing of her granddaughters is an example, as is the close relationship between Ruth and her grandchildren.

More generally, from contact with the London branch of the family and from living in Britain for several years, Rosabell has found that Kenyan and British understandings of what constitutes a family differ a great deal. The polygamous character of the family has meant that for the Kenya Muorias there was a great flexibility when it came to bringing up children—primarily located in networks of women. Another distinct feature of the extended family in Kenya is that it upholds traditions of strong horizontal cohesion between people from the same generation. Age sets mean that half brothers and sisters as well as cousins are considered brothers and sisters.

The grandchildren on being Kenyan, being African and being a Muoria: Nairobi, Nyathuna, Oakland

The historical transformations of the Kenyan society that have occurred in this period have meant that creating a space for the survival and security of the family in rapidly changing and often volatile political situations has been a great challenge. In the case of the Kenya Muorias the traditional reliance on women as caretakers of children and for primary livelihood was strengthened by the absence of Henry Muoria. In this situation in addition to the over-all economic responsibility the family’s women have had the task of making sure that the younger generation had access to school and further education, and of instilling appropriate (but flexible) social and moral values. Undoubtedly the women of the family have lived up to it. They have exploited tendencies towards a matrilineal family organization that were already inherent in the social upheavals occurring from the 1920s onwards in the wake of rural-urban migration by men and women. In the optic of family members, female strength is a double heritage, stemming from being

50 Interview with Rosabell Wambui Mbure, Nairobi, November 1999.
Kikuyu and from belonging to their particular family. When talking about sisters, mothers and grandmothers, Judith’s daughter Rosabell emphasized that Kikuyu women are powerful, their oral wisdom is still alive and available: There is ‘a saying in Gikuyu for every occasion to make you strong. Even when the husband goes the woman still remains very strong. They are like the backbone.’

Now, where does female thrift and enterprise situate men, and particularly the young men of the family? Do they agree about the power of women, and do they value the Kikuyu identity, which is part of the family heritage? In an interview, David, Patrick and Julius, sons of three of the Pumwani sisters, confirmed that their mothers were very strong. They located the immediate source of the women’s power in two generations of women: their great grandmother, Grace—I think our mothers have inherited something from her—that thing of dominance, control. They are always in charge—and their grandmother Ruth: ‘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.’ Kikuyu identity more broadly has been one source of authority for the family’s women and another has been their ability to hold important positions or build and manage enterprises. They have had responsible positions in their working lives that reinforced their position in the family: ‘Most of what they say, it goes.’ As an illustration, they told that 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 and thus the family was kept together: ‘The Kikuyus from a long time back, when you have 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.’ The cousins saw this as a distinct characteristic of Kikuyus—other tribes will let husbands get away with appropriating children from a split-up marriage. They explained that ‘that is why they forced us to be named after Kikuyus—the mother’s side.’ According to the traditional Kikuyu naming practice the first son and daughter are named after the paternal grandfather and grandmother. The sub-

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51 Interview with Rosabell Wambui Mbure, Nairobi, November 1999.
52 Interview with Patrick Muoria, David Muoria, Julius Mwaniki, Nairobi, December 1999.
sequent children will be named after the maternal grandparents, and, following that, paternal and maternal uncles and aunts. In their case, however, if they did have a name from their father’s side of the family it was because in school one had to, but it was less important than the maternal name. David, Patrick and Julius considered the naming practice privileging women a distinct characteristic of their family, but not one that they themselves would carry on.

The young men were less sure if female strength was characteristic of their own generation, in relations between themselves and their sisters and wives. One claimed that the oldest men of the family were the ones who took important decisions, ‘nowadays they have let the men take over’—another said that relations between the sexes were characterized by ‘respect and equality’.53 For the family’s young women, sisters of the three young men, the sources of authority and self-confidence that were available to their mothers are no longer there. They do not have the certainty of belonging to a particular ‘natural’ ethnic community and they do not want that kind of identification—it is out of tune with the times. Like their mothers, they have had the possibility of getting good secondary education and some have continued in higher education institutions. However, their economic situation is uncertain. Their mothers entered the labour market in the relatively confident and prosperous 1960s and 1970s under an economic regime that favoured Kikuyu enterprise. In the present situation of economic decline and growing insecurity getting a regular job for a young educated person is extremely difficult and several of Muoria’s grandchildren consider going abroad to live and work.

Like most of their cousins of both sexes, David, Patrick and Julius have finished secondary school either in Nairobi or at a boarding school in the rural areas. One has been to college and two are now employed in private business organizations: Patrick works in a computer firm and David is employed in a mobile phone company. Both are doing well. Julius, one of Christine’s two sons who still lives in the family compound in Pumwani, is a self-employed businessman and runs a barber shop called Soul Brothers with his brother George. The saloon is located in a shack on the roadside and is decorated with eye-catching brightly coloured wall paintings of young men and women, showing

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53 Interview with Patrick Muoria, David Muoria, Julius Mwaniki, Nairobi, December 1999.
the latest haircut fashions. George is a talented fashion designer who buys, redecorates and sells second-hand clothes from a stall at the nearby Gikomba Market, in sharp competitions with immigrants from Tanzania and the Congo who regard cutting-edge fashion as their business niche. George has a daughter with his Kikuyu wife, and Julius is married to a Luo woman and has two sons. In order to look after his growing family, Julius has built a small house in a plot on the outskirts of Nairobi, left to his mother by his grandmother. He lets the house and goes there frequently to supervise that things are in order and to collect the rent. While he and his brother manage to make ends meet, their chances of significantly expanding their businesses and changing their social situation are small.

Julius tells about growing up in the tough neighbourhood of Pumwani, in the late 1970s and the 1980s, a period in which slums in Nairobi were left to cope with an enormous rural influx and the settlement of numerous refugees from unstable neighbouring countries, without assistance from the government or the City Council:

During our youth there was no time that we were involved in crime or drugs, but we really lived in ghetto circumstances. Prostitution was at a high rate, also there were many drunkards because money was not a problem those days—the economy was good. Mum used to warn us not to go near the prostitutes, also they knew that our father came from their place Tanzania, so they used to respect us. Our group was known as guys from Machini, meaning guys from down land, because we are near to the river.

Machini, named by people who had moved there from Masikini, where their great grand mother Pricilla had settled sixty years earlier, lies next to Kamukunji Grounds, a large open space famous for being the site of oppositional political rallies and witness to a great deal of political and social violence. Julius and his friends have also taken part: ‘We also used to organize some gang fights at Kamukunji Grounds to see which group was tougher than the other. Our group used to win always.’ In spite of being members of a relatively wealthy family, Christine and her sons in periods had to fight poverty:

I remember there was a time when things were not good and we ended up collecting metal bars around Gikomba Market and going to sell them

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54 Julius is referring to the fact, well known locally, that many of the women working as prostitutes in Pumwani come from Tanzania.
to scrap metal workshops or garages. We could get good money by selling and we could spend it buying bread and going to movies. Mum did not like it so we had to stop this business.\textsuperscript{55}

Respectability was important and it was linked with Kikuyu ways and customs—what Julius and his cousins would refer to as ‘our culture’, a composite field of norms and ideals, put together by elements from imagined Kikuyu, national and African culture. When asked about their identity, the young men claimed that being African is what is most important to them. Being Kenyan comes next and finally the tribal heritage gets a passing mention: ‘In our age group we don’t think that tribe comes in that much.’ The young men understand Gikuyu and speak some but prefer Swahili and English. They are part of an urban generation who make use among themselves of \textit{Sheng}—a mixture of English, Swahili and other African languages common in Nairobi, like Gikuyu and Luo. They refer to and share their grandfather’s pride in being African and his beliefs in Christianity and education: ‘Most Africans feel inferior. We should be proud of ourselves. There are two hundred and fifty six churches in Kenya. We have Christianity and have gone to school and found out what is good for us.’\textsuperscript{56}

The cousins support their family’s tradition of openness towards other ethnic groups and other cultures. Their aunt Rosabell expresses it like this: ‘The Muoria’s have a broad heart that is able to accept with ease people who are different from them.’\textsuperscript{57} In the Kenya branches of the family marriage partners include Asians, Luos and Luhyas. Even for the most urbanized of Kenyans, however, there are moments of cultural truth. One is marriage. When Patrick’s sister got married to a young Luhya man in December 1999 in Nairobi, the wedding was preceded by elaborate bridewealth negotiations. They involved substantial delegations and senior spokesmen from 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 Nairobi-based cousins regret the lack of connections to their rural cousins, uncles and aunts. Most of them did not visit the family home in Nyathuna until the late 1980s, when they were almost grown

\textsuperscript{55} Personal Letter, November 2002.
\textsuperscript{56} Interview, Nairobi, December 1999.
\textsuperscript{57} Personal letter, December 1999.
They went during a home visit by their London-based grandparents. The young men in Pumwani have felt that something was missing when they were children, because almost all the people they mixed with in the dense and sociable neighbourhood would go regularly to the rural areas in holidays to visit their family: ‘Them, they used to go. So when they came back they would say, ‘ah, those guys, they don’t go to their places, they don’t have any rural places’, they used to tease us.’ They explained that the grandmother is the central figure making connections between the town and the countryside branches of the family: ‘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, urban life has suited them and they do not feel that the lack of connection to upcountry has been a serious 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.’

They now like to visit their cousin Alex who is in charge of the family farm in Kiambu, with his uncle and his mother. Alex Muoria is the son of James Gitau and has inherited his father’s artistic talent. He draws, paints and makes skillful clay figures. However, as the eldest of four brothers and sisters he has responsibility for his widowed mother and his siblings. He had to leave school two years before graduating and assist in the cultivation of the land because of economic difficulties and his father’s illness. He is grateful that Muoria has left the family with sufficient land to cultivate: ‘We pretty much depend on the past, what our grandfathers did. Me I feel lucky because we have a garden, a big garden, compared to others.’ So that, although money for hiring seasonal agricultural labour and for paying school fees may be difficult to find, there is enough produce—spices, cabbage, maize, sweet potatoes, beans and sukuma wiki (‘spinach’)—to provide for the family. Especially after an electric pump for the irrigation system has been installed. ‘I would like to stay in the rural areas. Farming, I think it’s good. I would like to build a very good house and put my farm in very good order.’ Alex is now in the process of building his own home.

58 Interview, Nairobi, December 1999.
the third substantial building on the Muoria land. He is happy to be part of the Muoria mbari:

My grandfather could marry many wives.... The land was divided between wives. The children of those wives belonged to the family, that is the mbari... who are all the same root. They became a long chain—I believe it was a very long chain. And they had similarities—they have some common things.

Like his grandmother, his uncle in London, and his cousins in Nairobi, he singles out the significance of religion in giving cohesion and hope to the family.

The part I like about Kikuyus, they knew God. They used to worship at a Ngumo tree, a fig tree. They would go to the shrine and pray for rain and stay, and by the time they came out it would rain. I tried to compare with the Bible and I saw that they were facing Mount Kenya, so they were also facing Mount Sinai. I saw they knew God.59

His far-away cousin Terry in Oakland California certainly feels that she is part of the Muoria mbari: ‘Being a Muoria means being royalty—it gave us a certain status in school, although we were from a poor area in Nairobi.’60 She is one of Hellen and John’s six daughters and grew up in Kibera, a large mixed Nairobi neighbourhood, with her parents and sisters. She finished her secondary education there and has now spent more than ten years in the United States, graduating in Business Studies and Hotel Management. Her elder sister, Nuna, has joined her, works for an attorney and lives round the corner from her.

Nuna and Terry both affirm that their Kenyan identity is important to them though they are temporarily ‘dislocated’, as Nuna terms it. She has happy memories of her grandparents—‘my grandma is a beautiful proud woman’—and thinks that ‘being a Muoria is just nice.’ She has known for a long time that she wanted to live in America although she is ‘Kenyan to the core’. Californian living suits her and she experiences a great deal of interest in her African background. Both sisters notice that African identity, names and language enjoy a high prestige in American popular culture: ‘It’s cool, actually, now in Oakland, to speak Swahili. I know a couple of local schools, which teach Swahili. There is an interest in Africa and wanting to be African. In sitcoms

59 Interview with Alex Muoria, Kiambu, October 2000.
60 Interview, Terry Gichache, Oakland, April 2003.
nowadays you’ll find a word in Swahili, in advertisement and in radio commercials. So I think Swahili is part of popular culture.” The high value put on things African has strengthened Terry’s resolve to return to Kenya. She notes her own paradoxical trajectory: ‘For me it’s the reverse. Before I came, I wanted to be African American, but when I came here people wanted to be Kenyan and African…. Right now I think I am a Kenyan most importantly, and an independent woman.’

Both identities have been strengthened by her life in America.

Within the plethora of possible identities those of Henry Muoria’s grandchildren who were born in Kenya seem to have made their choices: whereas Muoria’s sons and daughters still want to keep up aspects of belonging to the Kikuyu community, Alex, Patrick, David, Julius, Nuna and Terry all identify with ‘Kenya’ and ‘Africa’ more than with Kikuyu heritage, no matter whether they live in rural Kenya, Nairobi, or the United States.

**Conclusion**

Like other colonized societies, Kenya underwent massive political and economic change in the period. As a consequence of the region’s incorporation in a new global political economy, urbanization and centralization, livelihoods became diversified and the population was no longer solely dependent on trade and agricultural produce; land became scarce and processes of rural class differentiation led to a growing mobility, affecting both men and women, and more or less permanent states of migration. Women and young people have taken advantage of the possibilities that the establishment of a diversified economy and the growth of urban centers have represented. In some urban settings, as we have seen, social organization centred round generations of women and tended towards a matrilineal social order. In the early period young men in particular, but also some women, made sure to harvest the fruits of education which came hand in hand with mission Christianity. Later, with independence, reading and writing became everybody’s birthright. Spatial mobility had been a reality for a long time, but for most people it was limited to movement between the town and the countryside—a process that deployed members of

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61 Interview, Oakland, April 2003.
an extended family network in accordance with family obligations and economic opportunities. Divisions and links between rural and urban living increasingly became a theme in the lives of Kenyans. Urban living and the new mobility meant that for some sections of the population the ideal and possibility of a nuclear family structure was attractive. Housing arrangements and income levels in the cities made the perpetuation of larger kinship-based family organization difficult. However, Kenyans continued depending on each other in extended family networks and many families have kept features that were characteristic of earlier polygamous structures. Similarly, they have continued drawing on both rural and urban resources in their fight to lead decent lives.

Henry Muoria published his newspaper and wrote his pamphlets in a period that has turned out to be decisive in the development of Kenya’s politics and society. In the decade after the Second World War politics were conducted in a complex negotiated and fought-out relationship between colonizers and colonized. For a long period the use of force was the crowning argument in these fights. Power was taken away from elderly rural patriarchs and habitual orderings of relations between genders and generations in the African population became destabilized in the wake of urbanization and the growth of political organization. From the 1930s onwards, and decisively in the 1950s and 1960s, Kenyans moved from being unhappy subjects of an alien colonial regime to achieving and enjoying the full rights and confidence of citizenship in an independent nation. Independence, however, came only after the confrontation between British colonialism and Kenyan nationalism and the conflict over loyalties during the crisis of the Mau Mau had torn the country apart and created deep splits within and between communities, splits that particularly affected the Kikuyu. Identification with tribe remained strong in the first decades after independence among Kenyans, but it was intersected with investment in the nation and the continent of Africa—historically configured spaces that increasingly became meaningful and worth fighting for in the course of the 20th century. Muoria’s appropriation of the pen from the colonizers and his activities—writing and publishing in the service of enlightenment, as he saw it—exemplify a particular trajectory of great and continuing importance in Kenya’s political culture: one which has celebrated a modified modernity, dialogue and democracy.

Like countless other families in Kenya, the Muorias were shaped by these economic, social and political forces. Both men and women embraced what colonial modernity had to offer—education, Christianity,
individual autonomy, urban living, changed relations between the sexes and between young and old. Their extended family consolidated itself in nuclear units, but kept and cultivated features from a different and more collective familial organization: the possibility of having several persons in charge of the primary care of children, a special relationship between grandparents and grandchildren, and cohesion within age groups. In certain ways colonialism was a helper more than an enemy. It furthered the subversion of older structures of social organization that had muted women and the young. However, the Muoria family were Kikuyu and nationalist, and during the struggle for independence, the British unequivocally became the enemy of the Muorias as they did to the Kikuyu and more broadly the African population of Kenya.

The fate of the Muoria family from the outbreak of the First World War to the end of the century is in certain ways typical, in other ways exceptional. It was exceptional in that Henry Muoria was a public figure and furthermore in that he had the support of his wives in his anti-colonial political work—not only in his private life but also in his public activities. For this the whole family was punished. Ruth and Henry’s British exile was ironic—having to seek protection from British racism and colonialism in the heart of the colonial capital. Against their wishes, the couple, already used to rural-urban mobility, became pioneers of transnational living, finding ways to keep up social and affective bonds between family members separated by great distance.

As for millions of Kenyans, distance and mobility are also elements in the mode of life of the broader family. To those of Muoria’s children and grandchildren who reside in London, Nairobi and Oakland, urban living is a matter of course. What many of them have lost is the easy access to the rural resources and values that were available to earlier generations. Some members of the family, those who live in an urban slum, which is what Pumwani has become, have found it hard to get a Kenyan passport. 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, and in obtaining day-to-day cash for school fees, medicine and doctors’ bills. 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. Their cousins, aunts and uncles who are in charge of the Muoria land in Kiambu, work around the clock, irrigating fields sometimes in the middle of the night because of erratic electricity supplies, in order to make farming profitable. They travel to Nairobi in matatus.
to market their fresh vegetables at the break of dawn. Sometimes they miss the social and economic opportunities of urban life. However, like all Muorias they have a wider perspective: they are strong Christians and deeply engaged in the religious life of the community. Rural-urban traffic is still going on, although sometimes travelling between Nairobi and Kiambu in ramshackle *matatus* on eroded roads is a greater hazard than air travel between London and Nairobi. Transnational mobility comes more easily, but is restricted to family members who are in an economic position to benefit from it. Those who are not may be more limited in their physical and social mobility than earlier generations, but they have greater possibility of mental mobility and of knowing about the world. Access to education is given, not something to be fought for as it was to Muoria and his wives.

Does the founding father hold the transnational Muoria family together? Is it true as Rosabell said, referring to the living memory of her father, that ‘a person does not go away like smoke’? Stories about the ideas and deeds of the great man have indeed spun a web that has upheld connections between family members. The stories link and make sense of the many worlds that Henry Muoria brought together in his life and works. They contribute to reconciling the paradoxes that were characteristic of his life: he was born into a Kikuyu traditionalist family and embraced Christianity. He grew up in the countryside, but chose the city as his place of work. He invested in both urban and rural property and cultivated a large plot of land in his home area with the assistance of his wives and descendants. He was a wealthy man who came to know poverty in London. He was unwavering in his trust in the importance of his families, both in Kenya and Great Britain, but the political and social upheavals which surrounded him and which he was part of meant that he had difficulties in sustaining connections to all their members, while living as he did in far-away London. He loved his country, detested racism and was cosmopolitan in his outlook and knowledge of the world. He fought for independence, but independence did not need him after it had been consolidated—he was never offered a suitable job or a political role in independent Kenya. His writings will, however, keep Henry Muoria’s memory alive and create a place for him in the dramatic history of independent Kenya’s victory over British colonialism.

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3. Wedding photo of Henry Muoria and his first wife Elizabeth Thogori, best man Mr Charles Karau and his wife Mrs Karau as maid of honour, 1932
5. Henry Muoria and Elizabeth Thogori with their two first-born children (John Mwaniki and Peter Kigia)
6. Henry Muoria, his children and his motorbike (John Mwaniki, Peter Kigia and Wambui who passed away)
7. Three generations of Nairobi women: Ruth Nuna, her mother Grace Njoki and her daughter Christine Gathoni
8. Henry Muoria received by his two first wives, Elizabeth and Judith, children and grandchildren in Nairobi, 1975