CHAPTER FOUR

“ALL PEOPLE WERE BARBARIANS TO THE ASKARI...”: ASKARI IDENTITY AND HONOR IN THE MAJI MAJI WAR, 1905–1907

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INTRODUCTION

In the history of colonial warfare in East Africa, the Maji Maji conflict represented an intensification of tactics and strategies that had already been applied by the German Schutztruppe during the previous fifteen years in the conquest of German East Africa.¹ Thus from the military history perspective, Maji Maji could simply be described as another in a long series of wars fought to secure part of East Africa for the German empire. Maji Maji differed from previous “punitive expeditions” or “wars of pacification” characteristic of German colonial conquest in East Africa, however, in significant ways. First, its territorial scope far surpassed any previous wars in the colony. The numbers of people and ethnic groups involved in the fighting against the Germans were correspondingly high. The Maji Maji soldiers’ coordination and military organization also reflected a level of sophistication that astonished and confused contemporary observers. Finally, and most importantly, Maji Maji resulted in unprecedented loss of life and physical devastation as the German Schutztruppe waged a terror campaign throughout the southeastern portion of the colony in an effort to destroy the rebels’ basis of support.² It was a period marked by the emergency recruitment of new troops, both regular and irregular, to supplement the

² For various commentaries on these aspects of Maji Maji, see G.A. Graf von Götzten, Deutsch-Ostafrika im Aufstand 1905/06 (Berlin: Dietrich Reimer, 1909); G.C.K. Gwassa, “African Methods of Warfare During the Maji Maji War, 1905–1907,” in Bethwell A. Ogot (ed.), War and Society in Africa: Ten Studies. (London: Frank Cass, 1972); Merker, “Über die Aufstandsbewegung in Deutsch-Ostafrika während der Monate August bis November 1905,” Militär-Wochenblatt 1906, no. 45 (1906); Otto Stollowsky and John W. East, “On the Background to the Rebellion in German
existing force of askari—the African soldiers who made up the bulk of the Schutztruppe in East Africa.³ Their increased presence and mobility throughout the colony made them highly visible to a wider range of Tanganyika’s populations during this period, while also giving the askari themselves increased access to peoples and property made vulnerable by the war.

From a historiographical perspective, the Maji Maji war generated considerable amounts of evidence and commentary from an unusual diversity of perspectives. German military men, colonial administrators, missionaries, and African civilians all left records of what they observed during the war. This unique evidentiary base allows for a concentrated analysis of askari actions within the context of war, and allows us to consider what their actions reveal to us about their identities as askari.⁴

Standard sources used in writing Maji Maji history are rife with references to the actions of the askari in German East Africa. These materials show unequivocally that the askari acted with near impunity in the exercise of violent power, securing for themselves the spoils of war along the way. Their spectacular abuses and atrocities have featured prominently in explanations of the causal factors leading to the conflict in 1905.⁵ As yet, however, the askari have not been analyzed as actors in the conflict. What is known of their activities during the Maji Maji war is usually summarized on the one hand by the oft-repeated claim that the askari remained loyal to the German cause, and on the other hand, the equally oft-repeated claim that they were extremely brutal in carrying out their duties as German “mercenaries.” This paper

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³ The word askari is the Arabic and Kiswahili word for ‘police’ or ‘soldier’. The German, British, Belgian and Italian colonial militaries in East and Central Africa all used this word to refer to their African soldiers.

⁴ At the beginning of the war there were 1701 askari in the Schutztruppe. These were supplemented by the 659 police-askari available in the colony. More African troops were recruited later in the war. About 200 German officers and NCOs were on hand at the beginning of Maji Maji. An additional 47 arrived in late September 1905 to help with leadership duties. A contingent of 150 German marines also landed that month, rounding out the forces available to the Germans in defeating the Maji Maji fighters.