SECTION FOUR

REMEMBERING THE COMPLEXITY OF MAJI MAJI IN NJOMBE

These chapters on the western-most portion of the Maji Maji region, Njombe, draw upon a particularly rich body of oral and documentary sources to consider how wartime decisions were influenced by complex and tangled streams of messages from regions further east. Nyagava explores the circumstances which impeded intercommunication and alliance-building among the Bena-speaking people. Giblin stresses the intensity of contact between “rebels” and “loyalists.” The two chapters represent contrasting ways of contextualizing events, with Nyagava placing Maji Maji within a prior history of regional rivalry among chiefs, while Giblin sets it in the more intimate context of kinship and gender.

The two chapters share much in terms of common characters and events, and in their concern with memory and retrospective interpretation of Maji Maji. However, their different styles of contextualization yield significantly different interpretations. Nyagava believes that a widely-shared desire to overthrow colonial authority was hobbled by the legacy of precolonial political divisions and the violent nature of German conquest. Giblin believes that only in particular circumstances did widespread resentment of German interference blossom into outright defiance, and that the aims of defiance were limited, falling well short of the complete expulsion of the Germans. Rather than attempting to reconcile these different interpretations, we offer them as examples of the diversity of viewpoint which marked scholarly collaboration at all stages of the project which led to this volume.
CHAPTER SEVEN

WERE THE BENA TRAITORS?: MAJI MAJI IN NJOMBE
AND THE CONTEXT OF LOCAL ALLIANCES MADE
BY THE GERMANS

Seth I. Nyagava

INTRODUCTION

The tensions which led to the confrontation at Yakobi in present-day Njombe District between the Bena chief, Mbeyela Mkongwa, and the Germans in September 1905 can be traced back to regional rivalries which emerged in the mid-nineteenth century. In struggles for the control of the Southern Highlands, Njombe was caught between the Hehe, Sangu and Ngoni from the 1840s to the early 1880s.1 During the first part of this era, southern Njombe was particularly vulnerable to raids from nearby Songea while Hehe and Sangu warlords were a greatest threat to northern Njombe. Later, in the 1870s, the Hehe took control of northern Ubena. They pushed the Bena leader, Mtengela, into the Ulanga Valley following the Battle of Mgodamtitu in the mid 1870s, and in the same decade drove Merere of Sangu into Usafwa (near present-day Mbeya). Five years of Hehe campaign against the Mshope Ngoni from 1878 to 1882 ended with a peace of exhaustion, after which Ubena was partitioned. Peace was established on two conditions: firstly, the Luhudzi River was recognized as the boundary between the Hehe and Ngoni spheres of influence; and secondly, a Hehe bureaucracy replace the Sangu bureaucracy in parts of northern Ubena where the Sangu had established themselves previously. It was these struggles which forced Mbeyela to leave Ikilavugi in northern Ubena—that is, north of Luhudzi River—to settle in Nyikolwe in southern Ubena.

When the Germans came they exploited these old rivalries. After the German Imperial government took over administration of its east

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