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