



EMERGENCY STORIES

James Njuguna Mwaura

This interview was conducted on 21st March 2019 by Beth Rebisz and Caroline Wanjiru. The interview was conducted in Gikuyu. Family members and friends were also present for the interview and, at times, also ask questions. The English transcript was prepared by Maureen Ng'ayu and Angela Kariuki.

Caroline: I want you to start with your name. What is your name?

James: James Njuguna Mwaura.

Caroline: Were you there during the war?

James: Very much so.

Caroline: Did you come here [South Kinangop] after you were displaced by the war? How is it that you are here?

James: I came here. This is not where the war was. We fought the war while in the Kikuyu Reserves. So we came here for work.

Caroline: So you came here because of work.

James: Yes, we came for work. Now when the war broke out, we went back to the reserves.

Caroline: So you came to work and that's why you have land here?

James: I didn't get land. It was bought. I was not given. There was no land to be given anyway.

Caroline: What is the name of this place?

James: This place is called Njabini.

Caroline: When the Emergency began, how old were you?

James: I was 20 years old.

Caroline: In the war, what was it like? How did it begin?

James: It began like this. There were people we called home guards. The home guard was he who went against the Mau Mau. That is who we called home guard. They opposed those who had taken the oath. He dedicated himself to beating the other people.

Caroline: Can you remember the year you took the oath?

James: I can't remember although at the time of taking it, we were just- 20 years was not much.

Caroline: At the time of taking the oath, did you have a family?

James: No. I was a young man.

Caroline: Why did you join the Mau Mau?

James: Because I wanted us to gain independence.

Caroline: How did you know about the oath for you to take it?

James: All we knew was that when we take the oath, we have to ask for freedom. That one should not depart from the cause of the Mau Mau. So we took the oath so that then we could be given our freedom.

Caroline: So you took it so you-?

James: So we wouldn't go against the cause.

Caroline: Did you participate? Did you go into the forest to fight?

James: I was here so I didn't get into the forest because there were those who had gone into the forest. So we were here in order to check how the Mau Mau would live in the forest. Like a spy, giving them the direction of what was in side the forest.

Caroline: So you didn't get inside the forest?

James: I didn't but I was their support because if a route was used we would have to tell them "go through a certain route" or, "This information you will get it at a certain place." And we would kill the white man.

Caroline: Kill them?

James: Yes.

Caroline: By rope?

James: No. By knife. Slaughtering.

Int. 2: Are those things still in memory really?

James: Yes. We would really kill them.

Int. 2: Why were you killing them?

James: Because they had refused to give us freedom and they were oppressing us.

Int. 2: So it is those who came really close?

James: Yes, if they come too close, we kill them.

Int. 2: So it was like self-defence?

James: Yes. Just as you would act when you see a beast that could eat you, you must think of a way to protect yourself from being devoured.

Int. 2: What was the issue with those that colonised you?

James: White men?

Int. 2: Yes.

James: White men had grabbed this land, this Rift Valley. And this is what we were gunning for because it was ours, and the white man had grabbed it and claimed it for his own.

Int. 2: The question was, was there anywhere you related with them or did you have to go through the chiefs who were of that colonial time?

James: The chiefs? We couldn't relate. We were not together with the chiefs at all because it is they who were finishing us Mau Mau.

Int. 2: Were the chiefs black men?

James: They were black men.

Int. 2: So it is they who used to beat you?

James: Yes.

Int. 2: So they supported the white men?

James: Yes, because they wanted the white man and we wanted independence.

Int. 2: So there is nowhere you related with the colonial government?

James: No.

Caroline: Was there a time you were arrested?

James: Yes, we would be ordered to dig trenches. Once arrested you'd be taken to the detention camp and locked up there.

Caroline: Was it a jail or?

James: No, it was just a fenced compound with trenches dug all around with a barbed fence and you would be shackled so you couldn't leave. So because we are recording all this, what is the cause?

Caroline: She [Beth] wants to know what happened in that time of the Mau Mau. How you went from one area to another, how people were arrested, and how people lived in that time.

James: Now, people were arrested in the presence of the white man and the home guards could not arrest you in their absence. Because it was the white man who gave the orders as he was one with authority. The white man was the leader and the commander.

Caroline: Are the white men who came to arrest you of the same authority?

James: They were GSU [General Service Unit]. We called them GSU or Johnny.

Caroline: Are they the same ones who came every time or did they change?

James: They were all the same. You know they were all white men so they looked the same because they wore their police uniform.

Caroline: Would they exchange or were they of the same authority?

James: No, you know they were many white men.

Caroline: When you were arrested, how long would they hold you for?

James: We would do this, there was a holding cell. Once you are locked in, you'd be given permission to go for food but you came from working at the trenches. At 3pm you would be given permission to go get food in the garden because you are locked in the cell.

Caroline: How long would you be locked in for?

James: All the days you would be locked in and stay in the camp.

Caroline: So you would be locked in there for long periods of time?

James: But you would be given an allowance to go get food to eat.

Caroline: Then you would go back?

James: Yes, you would go back to the same cell. You would be locked in there the whole time. There was no chance so it was like a jail cell. The beating is what was really severe. We would really be beaten up.

Caroline: How long were you there for?

James: Around three or four years. I am not sure how many. I wasn't literate because when the war came I didn't find a way to go to school.

Caroline: Could you know the name of the detention camp you were in?

James: Karatina.

Caroline: In the camp you were in, could you give a description of it?

James: There was just a lot of beating. People would get seriously beaten; nothing to joke about.

Caroline: Not that way, how it was built.

James: I was fenced with barbed wire which was up high and we would stay there but there was a house built where we would sleep; a big house.

Caroline: The barbed wire was really high right?

James: Yes, very high. You couldn't climb out.

Caroline: At that time, did you receive visitors in the form of parents or relatives?

James: Our parents had been shot so there was no parent to come. Where would they come from?

Caroline: Did you have a wife at the time?

James: No.

Caroline: But there was no one who was visited in the camp?

James: No. How could you be visited?

Caroline: Were you interrogated when at the camp?

James: Very much so. It was mandatory that you said everything and confess that you are Mau Mau, but we never confessed. We denied completely, even if the authority came, we couldn't confess.

Caroline: Because of the oath you had taken?

James: Yes.

Caroline: Were you beaten a lot during that time?

James: Very much so. The scars I carried around with me, even when I was abroad I went with them.

Caroline: They are still visible?

James: Yes, it was because of the scars that I went abroad.

Caroline: While at the camp, were there any rules to follow?

James: Those there, there was none who would go against the rules but what we couldn't agree to was to speak of anything concerning Mau Mau. Not even a word of it.

Caroline: The work you did to build trenches, what was it for?

James: Land such as this where it slopes, you would be require to dig trenches such as those in coffee farms. Once dug you wouldn't be compensated in any way, and there was nothing you would ever expect to come from it. It was for you to dig them as required.

Caroline: Why were they dug?

James: They were built to block the flow of water into the white Highlands. If constructing a road, you would dig for a long distance and for nothing. The trenches were dug to keep the water from flowing into the white man's land.

[Background conversation]

Caroline: Was there a village close to your camp in Karatina? Did you see women around?

James: We were removed from the village and taken to the detention camps.

Caroline: So you spent your days working in the villages?

James: Yes we would spend the day in the village digging and go to sleep in the detention camp. We wouldn't sleep in the village.

Caroline: So even while working you would still be under guard?

James: Yes, totally. You are at work and the guard is right there.

Caroline: Was the village made up of white or black people?

James: It was for black people.

Caroline: Where were the women?

James: Right inside.

Int. 2: In the village?

James: Yes, the women had their dorm and the men had their dorm as well.

Caroline: So in the camp there were women as well?

James: Yes.

Caroline: So they had also been arrested?

James: Yes.

Caroline: Those who guarded you were white men or?

James: They were white men. They were GSU.

Int. 3: Let me try to understand better. These villages, were they inside the camp or?

James: The village was separate, not inside the ward. The ward was like, from where we are, at Njathi-ini. The village would be where we are at.

Int. 2: Sir, let's say for instance that this is one of the houses you slept in, and that one over there is another, now the village is on the outside?

James: Now like this verandah, you would be kept there. It was not partitioned. It was built into a bare open space where you would sleep.

Int. 2: Did you sleep on the floor or did you have beds?

James: One would have to source for his/her own leaves on which to sleep on.

Int. 2: Now here, the house has iron sheets.

James: Yes, it was enclosed.

Int. 3: It was built very high and long.

James: Very long, as long as this house and beyond.

Int. 3: Supported by posts.

James: Yes supported by posts.

Int. 3: Was there nothing on the sides?

James: The sides were cemented with mud. You couldn't leave. Once you are padlocked in-

Int. 2: It had iron sheets and doors?

James: Yes, iron sheets and doors. They would come and lock us in.

Caroline: Was it always built like this or was it only built when you came?

James: It was not like so earlier but when the Johnny came in-

Caroline: So it was you who built the place?

James: Yes, it was us who built it and us who got put in there.

Int. 2: We laugh but some of these things...

James: That's what we did, just like I said. What else was there to be done?

Int. 3: Build where you will be sleeping.

James: It is for you to find where to sleep. The war was really heavy at the time. Yes, because of this person wants to kill you for your land, and are right next to you, who are your enemy because some are home guards.

Int. 2: Now, those white men you killed, were they those who guarded you or?

James: Yes, any one of them who came, even if by bad chance. And since you and the others are in the forest, you would just kill them.

Int. 2: So you would kill even those who guarded you?

James: It didn't matter, once you caught any off guard, you would just kill them.

Int. 2: Wouldn't you be beaten?

James: Where were you to be found? You never confessed to any crime. Would you claim to have done it?

Int. 2: So you were really committed to the oath?

James: Yes. You couldn't say or give up who had done it. You would deny profusely.

Int. 2: Did they beat you?

James: We got beat very badly, terrible beatings. Even at that time when one of them dies, the kind of beating we would receive then, was like nothing you've ever seen before.

Int. 2: Was it frequent, these killings of the white guard?

James: Now those who got killed often were the home guards. The white man was well guarded you know.

Caroline: Did it happen often?

James: Not quite often. We are who would get caught often. Once caught it was really easy to get killed.

Caroline: Did you witness anyone who did that or did you yourself do these things?

James: Even myself I did kill one.

Caroline: You killed one?

James: Yes, one of them. I did. Myself. Make sure it is noted down that I killed one.

Int. 3: So many times, for a white man to be found was rare?

James: Yes it was rare. But say for instance whites who were found in their homes by those coming from the forest would just be slaughtered.

Int. 3: So those who fought the war severely were those of our kind?

James: Yes, those who were here are they who fought the war because they told of the situation as it is: what was where, who was where, what was going on and where. Eating a white man's cow was easy.

Int. 3: So, those who really fought in the war, those who perpetrated many killings were not white men but black people like you employed by a white man?

James: Black people were killed by white men but those who pointed in the direction for the white man to attack was a black man.

Int. 2: I didn't get that.

James: He said that for this war to be effectively fought and for the white man to be able to oppress the black man as he did, it was because he had a spy who was one of the Kikuyu.

Int. 2: If I may ask, didn't you kill those who gave you up?

James: That one [people who betrayed] could not be saved. At the first opportunity, because you couldn't just pick him up, you'd just kill him.

Caroline: Did men and women make contact with each other?

James: Yes, you know you would all get out separately. Once on the outside, you would go fend for food to eat. And you were given a set time limit. Not hours long.

Caroline: So during the time you are out there fending for food is when you would meet. It would be in secret and you couldn't talk to each other?

James: Yes. They would be separate from us so we couldn't meet.

Int. 2: Because the women are who gave you inside information, how did they do it?

James: While fending for food, we would then speak of what had happened or what we had learnt from our side of the camp.

Caroline: So when you went fending for food, it was a set number of hours-

James: We were given three hours.

Caroline: And were you guarded?

James: Yes, we were always under guard.

Caroline: Did the men know of anything the women went through while at the Karatina camp?

James: We couldn't relate with those women. The home guards were right beside us and they couldn't allow for some things to happen amongst the men as there could be one who would want another man's wife, and so we could never be seen as having any relations. No. People have not just recently started behaving badly, they began a long time ago.

Int. 2: A man is a man.

James: Yes, a man is a man. Home guards were the worst.

Int. 2: When did you leave the camp... when the war ended?

James: The war found us having left the camp and we were here now. You know, when Kenyatta was arrested.

Int. 2: Had you left the camp by 1952?

James: Yes, we had left that camp.

Int. 2: So when the war broke out you had left the camp?

James: No, we were still there.

Int. 2: You fought it while in there?

James: Yes.

Int. 2: So when did you leave? When the war ended?

James: When the war receded.

Int. 2: So it was not over?

James: No it wasn't over, it had just receded.

Int. 2: How did you leave?

James: Me? We just left when released. One would be released and instructed to go home.

Int. 2: Would you be shown how to get home?

James: No. You know in your heart. Like if this was your home, Njabii-ini, then how would anyone tell you where home was, when you knew where your land was? You would just go home, right?

Int. 2: So from that time in 1952 you fought in the war?

James: We fought a really big war then.

Int. 3: No one could sit as we are sitting, drinking a cup of tea?

James: No, even two couldn't sit together unless it was night time. But for us to be found sitting together like this, no way.

[Inaudible]

James: We used to call it a pass. When we left Kikuyu to come here, we came with a pass.

[Inaudible]

Caroline: When did you carry your pass?

James: In the year 1957.

Caroline: So in the period of '57 is when the pass system began?

James: Yes. In that time is when the passes came into effect.

Caroline: Had you left the camp by that time?

James: Yes we had. We were far away, looking for jobs.

Caroline: Why were you given the pass?

James: So your location could be known. And this education you are doing here, what has it got to do with anything?

Int. 2: Well it is just that one [Beth] is doing further studies, and wants to know what happened at the time, because it is important to document it. That is why she is asking you, so she can write about what happened. There are also those who will take this education and go try to add

to it, because if we don't write, we will forget about this. If you were no more, who would give us this information?

James: Alright, because I was wondering... It is good, because this could help someone else. It could leave here and go abroad to the benefit of another, but for us here, we might think it is of no use.

Caroline: In 1957, where you lived-

James: There was no war at the time, it had subsided.

Caroline: Were there guards around?

James: Beaten?

Caroline: No, as protection. Was there someone protecting you?

James: Yes. Once you leave the camp, you were not recognised so you had to be issued with a pass ... for you to carry your pass book. Wherever you would go to fend for food, that was it.

Caroline: When you left there was a place you went to settle, are there people who came-?

James: I lived in Karatina then left to come live here in Njabini in '57.

Caroline: In Njabini, were there people who came to check on you?

James: No, because my mother and father had died, so my siblings are who we lived with. So we weren't apart from each other, as we were in the forest together.

Caroline: At that time, were there any guards who came to protect you?

James: No, there was nothing of the sort, because the war seemed to have subsided so there was no more violence.

Caroline: Sir, if may ask, when you left the camp, did you leave alone or was it many of you?

James: We were a large number, it was all of us. No one was left in the camp.

Caroline: So you were not released for any job you had done well, you were all just released?

James: Yes, we were all released because the issue of war had subsided.

Int. 2: For the war to subside or why?

James: It is because the war subsided.

Int. 2: So what happened to the camps?

James: We left them as they were.

Int. 2: Didn't they remain?

James: How could they when they were only built while we were fighting for independence? Now that we had independence, what was their purpose? Even the villages diminished, right?

Caroline: When did freedom feel real for you, when you got released or when the nation gained independence?

James: Once released, because from then on you felt free again and you were as one who had gained independence. If you leave from here to Nakuru you had to have a pass book as there would be nowhere you could go without a guard stopping you to ask you where you are headed. It was not as now where you just hop into a car and go. At the time there were no cars, and people just walked to get to where they needed to.

Caroline: So without those things [passes] you couldn't go anywhere?

James: You couldn't go.

Int. 2: How we boast nowadays, so that's how bad it was back then?

James: There was nowhere you could go. Say you leave home and decide to go somewhere; you couldn't go without the pass book.

Caroline: If you went without it what would happen?

James: They would accuse you of being Mau Mau, and from time to time, you would get shot dead.

Int. 2: Then it seems there are those who got killed.

Caroline: So you spent your days with the pass?

James: No, you know there is a point you will cross where the authority is.

Caroline: So where the authority was is where you would present it?

James: Yes. You would present it then put it back in your pocket.

Caroline: When you got independence, what was the general feeling of the people?

James: The people were just very happy and still are today. Because now, who would ask you where you are going?

Caroline: No one.

James: But before then there was nowhere you could cross or go anywhere.

Caroline: Did you celebrate in any way, like slaughtering of cows or anything?

James: Yes, very much so. We were very happy when Kenyatta spoke of independence in 1963.

Int. 2: What did you do to celebrate?

James: We ate cows, those of us who were alive. Those who had died, you know they were simply no more. Those remainders are us. We have independence, we have our freedom.

Int. 2: How did you hear of the broadcast? Through the radio?

James: No. Kenyatta had where he went for meetings because like he came to this Njabini to issue a directive for land to be divided to the people. When he came, he addressed us and said we had independence. But there were no radios. You must have heard of when he went to some region where he got pelted with eggs.

Int. 2: Had he gone there to broadcast the message?

James: Yes.

Int. 2: Where was he pelted with eggs?

James: Kisumu. By the Luos. The eggs were rotten.

Int. 2: Sir, the white man's war, according to you-

James: It was terrible to me personally.

Int. 2: Is it still there or?

James: No, it ended because now we have independence.

Int. 2: So now even when you see a white man, there is nothing you feel?

James: Not at all. What would I feel?