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Women and the Military in Uganda: An Analysis of Mama Chama in the National Resistance Army Bush War, 1981-1986

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Abstract

This paper focuses on *Mama Chama,* women who participated in the National Resistance Army (NRA) bush war in Uganda, through the lenses of historical contestation and varied views on the involvement of women in frontline military operations and warfare. While *Mama Chama* remains part of Uganda's historical trajectories, their roles during the civil war and their influence on women's post-war military involvement in Uganda remain less documented and analysed. This article draws on debates about gender integration in military service, historical comparative analysis of documentary data, and participant soldiers' responses to demonstrate that women's participation in military activities is not new and that women's experience in Uganda's bush war and state military services debunks the narrative that women's role in the military and its operations are not salient. The findings reveal that Uganda's armed struggle ushered in a new era, offered a firm foundation, and opened space for the recruitment and participation of women in the national military. This study contributes to civil-military relations research on women as soldiers or civilians and their influence on gender equality in the contemporary military in Uganda and beyond.

Keywords: *Mama Chama*, Military, Women Integration, Uganda.

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Introduction

The National Resistance Army (NRA) civil war, locally represented as "the bush war "in Uganda, 1981-1986, is seen to have altered the hitherto existing history of women's exclusion in military services, specifically warfighting and frontline roles. The NRA recruited, trained, and deployed a group of women rebel fighters and war supporters from the start to the end of the war. Known as *Mama Chama* in Uganda's military lingo, these women bush war heroines acted both as champions of support roles, which are dominantly acknowledged as women's roles, as well as frontline fighting roles that had historically been largely for men. Ironically, women's engagement in military activities has always been underestimated in the literature. Where their involvement is acknowledged, women's contributions are often blurred by gender stereotypes, misrepresentation, and gendered patriarchal cultural purviews that place men as more suitable actors in military operations. Proponents of women's involvement in military activities argue that women have historically been excluded from participation as combatants, have been relegated to the sidelines of military operations, and that fighting remains the ultimate test of masculinity. This exclusion of women offers men a chance to assert their control, capacity for domination, conquest, and even immortality (Wheelwright 1989; Holm 1992; Kuhlman 2008; Nuciari, 2006; Sherrow 2007; Macdonald, Holden and Ardener 1987). Existing historical facts, however, reveal that women's participation and influence in military activities are as old as the military institution itself.

Attempts to understand the historical accounts of women's involvement in the military draw from Skocpolian Historical Sociology, which underscores the importance of appreciating of the relationship between personal activity and experiences as something that is continuously constructed in time and space to inform social change. Historicising women's participation in military services, in particular *Mama Chama*, is therefore to advance the premise that understanding past patterns and alternative trajectories of women's inclusion or exclusion in military operations is relevant for present choices and informs current gender relations in the military (Abrahams 1983; Calhoun 2003; Skocpol, 1984). The study of *Mama Chama* is grounded in the historical accounts of women's participation in military activities from ancient times to the present world. I further contextualise women's engagement in the military from pre-colonial, colonial, post-colonial military, civil war, and liberation movements.

I focus on *Mama Chama*, women who supported and participated in the NRA civil war of 1981–1986 and the post-civil-war military in Uganda. Beyond the accounts of the heroes and heroines of the war, the extent of women's participation in Uganda's military allows us to gain salient insights into how the history

of *Mama Chama* has shaped women's participation and influenced gender relations in Uganda's contemporary military and its operations. This paper responds to the question: 'How have the wartime roles of *Mama Chama* during the war influenced the debates about and trends of gender integration of women in Uganda's post-bush-war military?

To answer this question, I draw on debates about gender integration in military service, historical comparative analysis of documentary data, and the responses of participant soldiers to historicise women's role in modern Uganda's military landscape. I show that the subject of women in military activities is not a new phenomenon. Where participation took place, available records demonstrate that women have served with courage, honour, bravery, determination, and heroism, and have accomplished remarkable feats on battlefields. The narrative that makes women's participation in the military and its operations appear to be insignificant and portrayed as rendering only support roles needs to be debunked. Available evidence indicates that the civil war in Uganda ushered in a new era and offered a firm foundation for women's recruitment and participation in today's military.

Historising Women in the Military

Women's historical participation in military activities is richly documented in Greek mythology of the Amazons, which shows that women played key roles on the battlefield, as did men. The Amazons were fierce warrior women, courageous and skilled in battle, as the mightiest Greek heroes of the greatest Greek City State, Athens (Mayor 2014; DeMott 2006; Arbor 1991; Geary, 2006; Ardener 1987). The Amazons are presented in Greek history as women warriors who fought Heracles and other heroes in Greek myths and were long assumed to be an imaginative invention by the Greek. The story of the Amazons is widely documented in Europe, South America, West and North Africa, and Asia, referring to women fighters. While the Amazons are presented in literature as fictional mythologies, evidence shows that they were real human beings and women. Evidence from archaeological discoveries of battle-scarred female skeletons buried with weapons proves that warlike women existed among the nomads of the Scythian Steppes of Eurasia (Mayor 2014). But at the same time, the mythology about women as fighters and as equals of men is met with all kinds of discourses.

The Amazons, for instance, were referred to as "equals of men, single-breasted women, a society of self-governing women living apart from men. Some Amazons are pictured as a tribe of man-hating virgins or domineering women who enslaved weak men and mutilated baby boys, a vision that led to speculations on how Amazon society reproduced" (Myscofski 2013:37). The varied definitions of Amazons enable us

to analyse how women have been diversely involved in military affairs, but also withstood the perceptions against cultural stereotypes that emphasise male domination and treated any woman's exceptional engagements in military affairs as out-of-the-norm. Wide-ranging accounts of female warriors across the globe, in which scholars have documented accounts of women who have excelled in warfare are summarised here.

In ancient China, the successes of the great Chinese woman, General Fu Hao, an Emperor's wife who lived during 1250–1192 BC, are referenced. Fu Hao is said to have led an army of three thousand to win decisive battles. Most of Fu Hao's military accomplishments were listed on two hundred tortoise shells according to the records excavated in 1936 by archaeologists (Mayor 2014:414). This discovery validates the pre-existing historical records. Moreover, many women fought battles in the early centuries of British history, the notable ones being the English Girl and Lady of Mercians. The English Girl in the 6th Century commanded 100,000 men and 400 ships at the mouth of the Rhine River to attack Varni, conquering Radigis, the King of Germania, who would eventually become her husband, though she later annulled their marriage. The other warrior woman is the Lady of the Mercians, whose reign spanned between 911 and 918 AD. The Mercians fought many expansionist wars in Britain and are remembered for their daring military adventures that involved years of victorious advances, battles, and occupation of territory (Kathleen 1997). The two women exhibited remarkable heroism and remain prominent figures in British history.

In Brazil, women in the Tupian and Arawak communities in Northeastern Brazil reportedly fought alongside male warriors and led separate women's sodalities, which may have been confirmed in European folklore (Myscofski 2014). In the Black Jacobins, women who are former black slaves in Haiti are historized to have broken the patriarchal norm in defense of their freedom during the Haitian Revolution of 1780 and the early 1790s, which made Haiti the first Black Republic in the Americas to have acquired independence from a European colonial power (Cyril 1989). During the two successive world wars, women were reported to have been active actors in many countries (Pegler 2004; Maninger 2008; Nuciari 2006; Honey 1999). Women were heavily deployed in defense industries in the USA, France, Britain, Germany, and the Soviet Union to support the production of ammunition. Others fought on the frontlines. In addition, the publication, "When the War Was Over", a mirror view of the roles women played in the world wars, states:

> During the war years, women were active in armed conflict, supporting troops in the field, and participating in resistance movements. They had been

> victims of political oppression and violence, bombs, and sexual aggression, and abuse. They looked after families, shouldered unpredictable responsibilities, endured harsh living conditions, and sustained personal loss (Duchen and Bandhauer-Schoffmann 2000:1).

The World Wars undoubtedly disrupted traditional gender roles when women were brought into formal employment and inclusion in the traditionally male domain (Higonnet et al., 1987; Duchen and Bandhauer-Schoffmann 2000), thereby breaking women's domesticity and exclusivity of wars and the public sphere to men.

In the Philippines, history is written about two beauty queens - Remedios Gomez, also known as Kumander Liwayway, and Teofista. In particular, Liwayway is identified as a daring female military commander who established her reputation by leading successful military attacks against the Japanese during World War II (Lanzona, 2009). After the war, she rejoined the Huks in what is known as the Huks Movement, in their struggle against the new Philippine Republic. She quickly re-established herself as a skilled military commander, once again leading a number of men in the mountains of Arayat, but this time, fighting fellow Filipinos. These stories reflect the significance of women as agents of revolutionary struggle in the postwar Philippines; yet most studies of the Huk rebellion have overlooked the important role these women played in the movement (Lanzona, 2009). Even when the Huks movement was defeated in the late 1950s, it brought to the fore the ability of women to shape the vision of war and liberation movements.

In Africa, stories of women warriors can be traced in the scholarly work of historians. Women's active involvement and roles in war date back to ancient Africa. The chronicle of African women is rich and diverse. First, Queen Ahhotep 1 of Egypt (1560–1530 BC) is believed to have played an important role in her country's liberation struggle during the Hyksos period (Juma 2009). The Hyksos comprised a small group of West Asian individuals who ruled Northern Egypt, especially the Delta, during Queen Ahhotep's reign. Due to her bravery, Ahhotep was awarded the "Golden Fly of Valor" by the Pharaoh of Egypt (Singer 2009; Sayce and Maspero 2023). Moreover, accounts of African warrior queens - Amanirenas, Nzinga Mbande, and Nanny are detailed in *Female Warriors who led African empires and armies* (Pitchon 2022).

In present-day Sudan, Queen Amanirenas ruled the Kingdom of Kush from 40 B.C. to 10 B.C. She is believed to have successfully led an army of 30,000 fighters against the Roman Emperor Augustus. Another Heroine historicised is Queen Nzinga Mbande (1583-1663), who led the Mbundu people in present-day

Angola to fight against the Portuguese and the expanding slave trade in the 17th century (Miller 1975). In present-day Jamaica, Queen Nanny (1685-1750) led the Jamaican Maroons community, largely composed of formerly enslaved Africans, to fight for freedom. A Ghanaian by origin, Queen Nanny is believed to have possessed exceptional leadership and military skills. The Dahomey Amazons (from modern-day Benin) are also documented to have formed a key group of female warriors in the national army, and their equivalents in Monomotapa (modern-day Zimbabwe) were renowned for their courage and efficiency (Juma 2009). In modern military history, Gaddafi's Amazonian Guards in Libya, also known as the Revolutionary Nuns, present an example of women in military service at the front on the continent.

Moreover, African women fighters and their roles in wars are largely seen in anti-colonial struggles and later liberation movements. In 1900, Yaa Asantewaa, the Queen Mother in the Ashanti Kingdom in modern-day Ghana, led the Ashanti War, also known as the War of the Golden Stool or the Yaa Asantewaa War of Independence, against the British Empire (Boahen & Akyeampong 2003). In Nigeria's Women's War of 1929 and Cameroon's Anlu uprising of 1959, women exemplified their abilities to champion war and military activities (Falola and Paddock 2011, Umoren 1995, Wipper 1989, Drew 1995). In 1905, in the nationalist resistance struggle in German East Africa, Tanganyika, both men and women warriors organised themselves to fight the Germans in the famous Maji Maji rebellion (Shiraz, 1984; Rushohora and Kurmann, 2017; Rushohora, 2005). Women warriors, such as Nduna Mkomanile Namabengo, File, and Sanyasi, who played key roles in the course of the Maji Maji rebellion, have been documented (Elijah, 2010). In the Maji Maji, women were largely involved as diviners and foretellers in the rebellion. In Kenya, women fighters, largely drawn from Kikuyu, actively fought in the Mau Mau movement. For instance, Muthoni Ngatha was designated as a Field Marshal. Wagiri Njoroge was crowned Queen of Mau Mau which occurred around 1953 at the time that Queen Elizabeth II was being crowned in the United Kingdom (Kanogo 1987a:89, Kanogo 1987b, Mboka 2012). The accounts of the Mau Mau movement clearly show that women lived in the forests as guerrillas and in various other capacities, against the traditionally held stereotypes that they were weak for war.

In pre-colonial Uganda, armies were formed to defend clans, chiefdoms, kingdoms, empires, and later, the colonial state. The armies were recruited and structured on a system of patron-client relationships, age-sets, and age grades, which dictated that junior warriors were predominantly male (Bernardi 1952, Omara-Otunnu 1987). The strict division of labour confined women

to domestic work (Kodesh 2010) and support roles whenever any external threat, most especially during inter-clan wars or expansionist wars in kingdoms, occurred. While boys and men were designated as warriors to defend society, including the protection of women who might be vulnerable to invading enemies, the notion of boy warriorship played out in all societies, including modern times. In Acholi, for instance, males of fifteen years and older formed the fighting force, and the essential condition of members of the force was being able-bodied males. In Bunyoro, the standing Army, Abarusula, although multi-ethnic, never integrated female guards. In Buganda to date, the Royal Guards, known as "the Bambowa", Kabaka's protection soldiers, were and are still largely male. Moreover, it was compulsory for all males in Buganda to serve in the army as and when called upon (Kyerere 1990, Omara-Otunnu 1987). The societal designation of defence roles to men and the protection of women was and is still the order of Kingdoms and Chiefdoms in modern societies.

Given the limited scholarship on women in the military in Africa, the history of women warriors in Uganda is generally not well documented, even though the country experienced decades of war and instability. For instance, in Kingdoms and Chiefdoms, women are known to govern along with their husbands (kings), which puts them in rear command positions for the Kingdom Guards (Hanson 2002). Like in other Kingdoms, Dahomey and the Asante, Queen mothers in Buganda were co-rulers with the ruling chiefs (Barnes 2006): "Queen Mothers were not just women rulers; they were women who ruled by doing for kings the things that mothers did for their sons, which included supporting, advising, defending, protecting, punishing, and nurturing" (Hanson 2002:220). Moreover, in the early 1900s, historical records point to women leading anti-colonial resistance in present-day Kigezi under the Nyabingi Movement. A woman called Muhumuza was the first known woman resister who mobilised a cross-section of Banya-Kigezi into armed resistance (Rutanga 1991). After Muhumuza's defeat, other women fighters, such as Nyinabatwa and Kanzanyira, assumed leadership of the Nyabingi Movement against colonial rule. Another widely referenced example is that of Alice Auma, also known as *Lakwena*. In August 1986, Alice Auma, a young woman from Gulu in northern Uganda, began raising an army called the Holy Spirits Mobile Forces (HSMF). The HSMF marched through numerous districts of modern-day Uganda from Kitgum to Lira, Soroti, Kumi, Mbale, Tororo, and as far as Jinja in eastern Uganda, where they were defeated at the end of October 1987 (Behrend, 2000). In her struggle, Auma can be categorised as the Ugandan Amazon who led men to battle and registered remarkable success, albeit short-lived.

The limited number of women warriors in Uganda highlights the fact that there is a remarkably small number of women who have directly engaged in military operations. Uganda's historical trajectories speak to the fact that during the colonial and post-colonial eras until the overthrow of the Obote II government in 1986, no women are reported to have served in military operations. It was during and after the National Resistance Army/National Resistance Movement (NRA/NRM) war that women were allowed into the military, although the police had embraced them since the 1960s. In a twist of history, during the NRA war, women were recruited to fight on the frontline and support the war. The resilience of women in the bush war set the stage for a new era of women in Uganda's military. The women who supported the armed struggle were later called *Mama Chama* or Mothers of the Party, a concept buttressed in this paper.

Underpinnings of Women Exclusion and Inclusion in Uganda's Military

The historical foundations of the evolution of military institutions show that the contemporary military in Uganda has evolved over the years from the pre-colonial to the colonial army, to anti-colonial movements, to the post-colonial military, to rebel movements, and later the Uganda People's Defence Forces (UPDF) as we have it today. Due to this evolutionary trajectory, I contend that the foundations of a country's military influence men's and women's participation trajectories. Accordingly, the post-independence military in Uganda inevitably inherited pre-colonial and colonial gendered military practices that excluded women. The laws and policies that informed the post-independence military in Uganda and other British Colonies were largely colonial in origin, patriarchal in nature, and excluded women's participation in the military. The recruitment, training, and deployment procedures for military service during colonialism barely changed and continued to influence the status and operational processes of military missions. As such, the contemporary military in Uganda and all formally colonised societies that are now defined as 'independent states,' were formed from the patriarchal division of labour that was informed by the army of the pre-colonial and colonial cradle, where women had no or limited space to participate.

As such, it is important to acknowledge that militaries world over-represent the circumstances under which they emerge. According to Kyerere (1990:66), "armies are institutions whose character and activities shed a revealing light on the nature of the societies from which they sprung." Thus, the participation of women as militants in pre-colonial societies can be viewed as a result of their indigenous traditions of discrimination against women. The organisation and operation of

their armies reflected patriarchal social practices which entrenched masculinity as the embodiment of power for the defence of society.

When colonialism was introduced in Africa, the colonial army was structured along the lines of the Victorian Army and was an exclusive institution for men. The legal evidence is clear and unambiguous. The 1895 Uganda Rifle Ordinance, King's African Rifles Ordinance 1902, and their associated amendments, limited military service to men. For instance, in Section 19 of the King's African Rifles Ordinance 1912, enlistment, discharge, and service in the military were specifically referred to with the male gender. It states that,

> Every man who is enlisted, re-enlisted, or re-engaged or is a native officer is re-appointed in the regiment, as aforesaid, shall, prior to his being enlisted, re-enlisted, re-engaged, or re-appointed, make the following declaration and shall confirm such declaration by oath in his native language in such a manner as he may declare to be most binding his conscience (The Official Gazette 1912).

Other laws, such as the Military Forces Ordinance of 1958 and subsequently the Armed Forces Act at independence in Uganda, focused on men. The Act was later supplemented by the Legal Notice 1 of 1986 by the NRA which never referred to women as being part of the military. The major amendments to Uganda's military laws were made with the enactment of the Uganda Peoples' Defence Forces Act, 2005 on 2 September 2005. On the nature of the Victorian Army on women participation in the military, it is quoted that,

> The Army was deliberately designed for bachelors, and its regulations reflected traditional attitudes toward marriage, gender roles with domestic ideology, masculinity, and sexual behaviour.…women lived on the fringes of the regimental community, tolerated as wives and daughters, and valued as prostitutes and casual workers (Kyerere 1990:67; Myna Trustram 1984).

This signifies that in the colonial cradle, women were never accepted as part of the military, and similar policies were fertilised in the colonised societies. Indeed, in Britain and other countries, there are records of many women who disguised themselves as men in order to join the military (Wheelwright 1989). However, the opportunity to serve would end when it was discovered that one had attained their military service status through disguise.

It is vital to note that during the colonial era, the guiding ideology was male domination of society, especially among those who tended to resist. African women find themselves under the structural constraints of both gender and racial discrimination. Consequently, many women joined

armed struggles, fighting for independence, believing that victory would not only liberate their nation but also provide women with greater freedom and opportunities. In other aspects, the colonial political economy is argued to have drastically altered gender relations and the role of women in the provision of security, relegating them to the domestic sphere (Juma 2009). This does not mean that women in pre-colonial Africa enjoyed the same rights as men; however, the scholarly consensus suggests that European gender roles imposed on African women relegated them to the private sphere of providing production labour in commercial crop farms and eroded some of their rights to engage in the defense of society.

In addition, the colonial army was driven by masculinity and martial characteristics, which informed recruitment criteria. According to Omara-Otunnu (1987:10),

> the colonial authority did not attract educated men into the military at all for the first 60years of its existence, and women were never identified as potential recruits. During colonial rule, the basic requirements for an African to be recruited into the army were a height of 5'8, speed and stamina, and the ability to easily open and shut one eye while the other remained closed.

Therefore, martial requirements for recruitment into the colonial military were highly unfavourable for women and lightly excluded them from the military and security forces. According to Major Iain Grahame, a British officer who made several recruitment tours across the country between 1940 and 1960, the record in his book shows that emphasis was placed on strong physique: Only the strongest and fit would be selected. Recruits would be made to stand against a stick notched 5'8, to run races, and to perform squinting exercises before their selectors. These requirements automatically excluded women in one way or another and alienated any woman who would have aspired to join the fighting forces.

The above narrative was emphasised in an interview with one UPDF Officer, who submitted that:

> The colonial militaries that overran our fragile militaries in the colonies were, in terms of doctrine, forces of domination. The imperial forces and the nature of their doctrines were mostly male-dominated. He pointed out that "colonial forces came here and later moulded the King's African Riffles into a male-dominated force. This is why, to confront these alien militaries, we had the later emergence of liberation forces.

It is also important to observe that structuring the colonial army promoted a division of labour that

was highly gendered. While men were designated to expand and protect the colonial government, women were left to concentrate on commercial agriculture by growing cash crops, mainly coffee and cotton, for the market. This nurtured women's involvement in domestic work as opposed to military service, which was viewed as much in the public sphere.

The Post-Colonial Military

Like other British Colonies, Uganda's military was constituted from the remnants of the British King's African Rifles (KAR) units. The issue of ethnic divisions formed a replica of the racial and marshal segregation that existed in the Western world, mostly in the Americas. For instance, prior to independence, the Kamba, Kalenjin, and Samburu ethnic groups dominated the Kenyan battalions of the KAR, with the Kamba in particular having been regarded by the British as a martial race (tribe) (Osborne 2014). During the 1970s, military heads were exclusively Kamba, Kikuyu, or British, except for the sole exception of one ethnic Taveta, who held the post of commander of the Navy from 1972 to 1978 (Osborne 2014). Likewise, in Uganda, Northern people, mainly the Acholi, Langi, and West Nile, dominated the police and the army, which practice was strengthened by the martial yardstick for recruitment (Omara-Otunnu 1987), adopted during colonial rule.

The martialisation of military activities was thus gendered. Most women were automatically ineligible to be members of the armed forces in colonial Uganda, negatively impacting their post-independence participation in military activities. Unlike in Uganda and other African countries which inherited colonial military structures, Uganda's military has grown in an environment of political instability (Rwengabo 2012; Kisembo 2021; Museveni 1997; Karugire 1980). The numerous political conflicts in Uganda denied the country the opportunity for the professional growth of the military, as has been the case with other politically stable countries. For instance, the consistent professionalisation of the Kenyan Armed Forces provided an environment that attracted female combatants, leading to the formation of the Women Service Corps as early as 1971. In contrast, Uganda was experiencing political and military upheavals which portrayed the military as a no-go zone for "peaceful women".

The *Mama Chama* in the NRA Armed Rebellion

The history of women warriors in Uganda is not well documented. While the country has experienced wars and instability over the last four decades, there is limited reference to women fighters. It ws only during the NRA/M struggle in the jungles of the Luwero Triangle that women found their way to the ranks and files of the

fighting forces, thereby setting the pace of recruitment and employment of women as combatants. The embracing of the female gender among NRA fighters and their support agents led to the emergence of women cadres who largely played supportive roles in the struggle, later named *Mama Chama*.

In the NRA armed struggle, women who supported the struggle closely were referred to as "mothers" within this organisation. This shows that women were part of the struggle and played an important role. Moreover, the *Mama Chama* were strong women, mature in age, and most could not join the training. Like the Mau Mau in Kenya, they provided information, food to fighters, and property that contributed to the success of the armed war. They loved the military though their acts, and liberation was the reigning and motivating ideology. These included, among other names, Sankara, Late Jolly Rwakanenjere, Maj (Rtd) Gertrude Nanyunja Njuba, Mama Gumizamu, Late Maj. Olivia Zizinga and Late Malita Namayanja, Captain Janet Mukwaya, Joy Mirembe, and China Keitetsi. Other women joined the mainstream military, including Gen. Proscovia Nalweiso, Col. Joyce Kabanyoro, Brigadier Agnes Musoke, Lt. Col. Alice Kahwa, Lt. Col. Beatrice Kunihira, and Late Capt. Yasin Nakawunde. Future studies will explore other names of Mama Chama, numerously mentioned in media reports but with no documented evidence, such as Mama Kawempe, Maria Bata, Sergeant Christine Nakiryowa, Lt. Night Nabunya, Commander Sarah Kamagoba, and Nalongo, among others.

Through interviews with militants, I explored who the *Mama Chamas* were in the context of the NRA's armed struggle. In response, a senior female officer in the UPDF noted that *Mama Chama* were women who played support roles in mobilising and delivering food. This role was described as follows:

> *Mama Chamas* were older women with strong hearts, who could not train with us. Such elderly women would have been in the military according to their hearts. They supported us in that way; that is why we used to call them *Mama Chama*. These were the ladies who had their properties to support the struggle financially, and they even used to give us food. They were very positive about the movement and contributed significantly to the NRA. So, such ladies became our *Mama Chama*, *Chama Cha NRA,* that's the movement of NRA, and that is how we came up with the word**.** *Mama Chama,* like Mzee Malita, and others from Luwunga gave us cows. In Luwunga, we used to eat meat as meals, and cows were given by these people from the Luwero Bukomero-Kiboga area (P74: BGENF).

The Mama Chama were further described by another Senior Officer during an interview at the UPDF Headquarters in Mbuya, Kampala, who explained that they largely executed support work, although a few were part of the frontline. While some joined the mainstream military as fighters at the end of the war, the majority did not.

> They were fighters but many did not participate in combat. They were female soldiers who were in uniform, had ranks, and were doing either staff work, or a few of them were doing command work. Most of them were doing staff work because, in the army, there is the staff branch and the command branch, and our ladies are effective in the staff branch**.** In liberation, not everybody is in active combat, but all of them are in the struggle. For example, being a midwife is regarded as a role within liberation. So, some did not become full-time soldiers in the sense that when we became a conventional force, they did not go into uniform, but they are freedom fighters (P76: MAJGENM).

The narratives about Mama Chama are unending but informative for appreciating women's roles in liberation movements. In a tribute to Mama Chama, the late Jolly Rwakanenjere, one cadre described her in an online posting, clearly elaborating on how she played various roles in the war. Among these roles were cadres, support staff, nurses, and fighters. The Mama Chama enforced discipline and engaged in conflict resolution. The Mama Chama is described as follows.

> … Mama Chama was a true NRM revolutionary but also a revolutionary guard … A historical who cared to sow the NRM seed into the younger generation every day! … was among the few women who took part in the NRA liberation war as a bush war hero! She was in the bush, not as a cook, not as a wife, not as a nurse, but as a soldier! … was a soldier at the front. She was a fighter! But guess what? Her heart was kind-very kind! She was a no-nonsense tough woman, but she was quick to forgive and forget. When NRM cadres were fighting and bickering, Mama Chama would forge a way towards peace!" (Nameere 2021).

The narrative about the roles played by Mama Chama is further elaborated. When asked what Mama Chama meant to the NRA, a Senior Officer in the UPDF responded, indicating that women wielded a lot of respect and influence, which, by the nature of our policy, we look after them even after the liberation war. "The existence of the mothers of the organisation literally provided a mother figure to the soldiers, especially at a time when

we had young soldiers, we used to call them Kadogo. These women would be the mother figure now, but they also played a special role in giving the organisation or the liberation movement that motherly touch. Imagine when soldiers are moving with an old lady, there are things they will pose before they can do because of the presence of this mother figure" (P76: MAJGENM). In so doing, Mama Chama set an example for other women to join the military.

Mama Chama is an interesting component of Uganda's historical storyline on women in military service, as they provided the foundations which inform the current posture of women's participation in the Ugandan military. Some women joined the forces immediately after the war and were given regular ranks in the army. These included Mama Gertrude Njuba, who was promoted to Major; the late Olivia Zizinga, who died at the rank of Major; and many others. The institutionalisation of Mama Chama is deep in the UPDF to the extent that those who did not join the regular force after the NRA took over power in Uganda are today being looked after in their old age by the UPDF. It is clear that the recruitment of women into the military during Uganda's War of Liberation set a new chapter for gender integration and women's participation in the contemporary military in Uganda.

Discussion

Historical traces reveal a critical trajectory of women's integration into military services that is reflected in contemporary militaries (Maninger 2008; Creveld 2001. For example, in the United Kingdom, the Sex Discrimination Act of 1975 and the Equality Act of 2010 allow the armed forces to exclude women from posts where the military judgment is that the employment of women would undermine and degrade combat effectiveness. In Israel, women were allowed to have joint training with men in 2003, but only in the infantry force. In the USA, women were open to combat roles in December 2015, and in France, women can serve in all combat activities except submarines. In other countries, such as Australia and the United Kingdom, women were allowed to undertake frontline combat roles in 2013 and 2016, respectively. These examples reveal that women's participation in the military is influenced by the country's cultural context and legal and policy regimes.

Therefore, the issue of the small number of women in the military is manifest and prominent in the advocacy for inclusion against exclusionist debates. Like today's military, a few women have historically stood out as heroines in male-dominated institutions in the past. The history of the Greek Amazons, the British Girl, the Black Jacobins in the Americas, the HUKs in the Philippines, and African warriors

in liberation struggles, women are identified and presented as minority actors. However, historical narratives reaffirm that women have always been part of military operations. However, their contributions are blurred by patriarchal societal norms that have shaped humanity in almost all societies worldwide. The stereotype of keeping women in subservience has been carried forward in perpetuity over centuries. It is also vital to note that the inclusion and participation of women in military activities cannot be described as linear progressions but as irregular patterns of incremental integration into military activities. As pointed out in regard to world wars, the desire for more fighting soldiers led to an increase in the number of women accepted into the military, thereby underpinning the drivers of women's recruitment across time and space.

It is vital to note that while history points to a more egalitarian pre-colonial society in Africa, the colonial military was largely patriarchal. The majority of the colonial army was for men not women. The Women Service Corps that came to the colonies were basically doing clerical and medical duties as supportive roles which institutional practices carried forward in post-independence countries. Therefore, colonialism exacerbated the gender gap in the defence and maintenance of security in the clans, kingdoms, and chiefdoms, where young and strong men were already an embodiment of defence. Colonialism entrenched the historical exclusion of women from military activities, as was the case with the King's African Rifles, the designated official colonial army.

In analysing the trajectories of women in Uganda's current military and armed forces of other former colonies, the differences and similarities come to the fore. In Uganda, there was no protracted uprising of the magnitude and level of organisation of the Mau Mau in Kenya. The Mau Mau, as a pre-independence or anti-colonial uprisings, provides the historical foundation for women agency and cannot be divorced from post-independence military formations in Kenya. Similarly, in Uganda, the 1981-86 civil war is a comparable movement where women are seen to play similar roles as in the MAU MAU, both as fighters and offering support to the fighters. The Queen of the MAU MAU and Mama Chama in the NRA point to the early foundations of contemporary women in the armed forces in Uganda. The limited and existing data further indicate that the foundations for positive gender relations in Uganda's post-war military had roots in the bush war, where women were cherished and valued as an important component of the fighting forces, irrespective of their roles.

In the NRA/NRM, the masculine argument of protecting women places women in a subservient status. It is important to note that despite

women's contribution to the civil war, the female heroines of the war have been tied down to care, nursing sick combatants, searching for food, mobilising recruits, and sharing information, among others. Women's support roles for the fighters are very prominent. In the NRA/movement, the ability of women to recruit fellow women and men into the army constituted a form of positive mobilisation and appreciation of the roles that women play in building the military and conducting military operations.

Moreover, the NRA civil war in Uganda had many varied actors, but the component of Mama Chama presents a historical perspective of interest to the analysis of gender and women's inclusion in contemporary military and peace-building processes. Unlike colonial military recruitment or post-independence military, the liberation movements were more open and portrayed an all-gender embracing stance that attracted women to join the movement. In other words, the all-welcome ideological orientation in liberation movements can, be credited for opening up the space for more women's participation in military activities, thereby breaking the exclusivity of the military as a male institution.

The description of Mama Chama as powerful in terms of voice and influence in society contributes to the strengthening of women's agency in the military and the deconstruction of masculinity. The positive relations between Mama Chama and the NRA/UPDF can be pointed out to have lessened the negative construction of hegemonic masculinity that is associated with the military, thereby inspiring more women to join the military in the post-armed struggle period. On the other hand, Mama Chama, like the Queen of the Mau Mau depicts the gendered social relations of the military about a "woman" that traditionally emphasised peacefulness, mothering, care, and interdependence rather than violence. As in the NRA/NRM, Mama Chama cared for the hungry, angry, and wounded, but also the young ones known as the Kadogo (Nsereko 2021; Kalibala, 2022). The association of women with peace is therefore essentialised with reference to their roles as mothers, sisters, wives, and daughters. As alluded to in this paper, the roles that require women to be nurturers and life givers, preferably in the domestic context, play a big role in excluding them from the public sphere, especially where combatants are expected to lose their lives.

These notions of peaceful and generative femininity limit the space women can occupy within traditional security sector institutions and deny women agency within the military through the expectation that they will fulfil roles that support but are not actively involved in warfare. It should be acknowledged that placing women in combat roles creates tension between the feminist demand for equality and the culturally embedded

view of what it means to be a warrior, fighter, and personification of violent masculinity (Sjoberg and Gentry 2007; Tickner, 2001). It also fundamentally disrupts the combat taboo that those who give life (DeGroot 2001) should not take life, an inevitable expectation for soldiers given the nature of the military mandate. I acknowledge that women's experience of warfare and their participation in peace movements are still relatively uncharted areas, but this does not nullify the fact that the history of women's participation is as old as warfare itself. Similar to the Mama Chama, as more women join military institutions, a new era of women's inclusion is setting in for the transformation of gender relations in the military.

Conclusion

The *Mama Chama* constitute the flag-post for women's participation in Uganda's military beyond playing supportive roles. The documented narratives about women in the NRA counteract the dominant representations of women's suffering, endurance, selflessness, helplessness, and betrayal during the wars. Instead, women have fought in defence of peace in any given society. From the successes recorded by Fu Hao and others, we can hardly doubt that women have been and are active participants in military exploits. The stories of *Mama Chama* and others are alive to women's exhibition of bravery and courage.

However, it is vital to note that women in the military remain trapped in subservience. Compared to men, many women who have excelled on the battlefield remain undocumented or unrecognised. During hot debates in the early 1940s, on whether Black people, specifically women, should be freely allowed to join the military, Col. Eugene R. Householder, on December 8, 1941, is quoted to have said: "the Army is not a sociological laboratory" (Honey 1999; Bolzenius 2018). This statement emphasised racial exclusion and gendered discursive discourses that expressed the dominant ideologies that Blacks and women should not be in the military and that no experiments should be undertaken to prove otherwise. However, with the collapse of gendered barriers, the relations between women and men in military institutions and the roles they execute therein cannot be limited by sex differences but are convoluted by historical and social stereotypes of what men and women can do in society.

In many instances and in most countries around the world, traditional male-dominant ideologies intervene and prevent women's empowerment. Women who played warrior roles in liberation movements had to convince their male counterparts that they, too, were good fighters. This paper reveals the extent of Mama Chama's association with the NRA, primarily as support allies, with a few directly joining as fighters. Those who participated in active combat

diminished the negative narratives about women in the military. Rebel movements that pursue an open ideology regarding the recruitment of both men and women enable those, such as the crop of the Mama Chama, to constitute the foundation of the post-war military ethos. The current posture of women's participation in the UPDF is viewed in this light.

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