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SECTION II

ISSUES OF CONSUMERISM

THE CONSEQUENCES OF UNIFORMITY: THE STRUGGLE FOR THE BOY SCOUT UNIFORM IN COLONIAL KENYA

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In the late 1950s, authorities in Uganda arrested a number of young men from Kenya trying to sneak over the border while dressed in variations of the Boy Scout uniform. Although European Boy Scout leaders were alarmed by these potential smugglers' use of Scouting, they were particularly concerned by their appropriation and modification of the movement's uniform and core symbols. Worried Scout officials described the young men as "festooned with badges" and singled out one "gorgeous creature" who the police caught wearing "everything in the book and a few extras."¹ In donning the uniform, the young border-jumpers traded on the legitimacy of the Scout movement. They most likely reasoned that if one or two badges and a uniform brought greater respect and deference from colonial authorities and local African communities, then an elaborate uniform with a great many badges, pins, lanyards, shoulder knots, and epaulets would be even more effective.

The police record offers no insights into whether these young men were actually Scouts, but to a large degree their status did not really matter because even registered African Scouts sometimes used their uniforms for nonstandard purposes. There were three ways to wear a Scout uniform in colonial East Africa. The first way was by members of Scout troops sanctioned by the Kenya Boy Scout Association (KBSA). These were the only Africans with the legal right to wear the uniform. Second, there were unofficial African-run troops, many of which were sponsored by independent Christian churches, who developed their own unauthorized version of the movement while wearing illegally acquired trappings of Scout clothing. Lastly, young men and adults used the uniform for larcenous purposes by playing on the assumption that a properly dressed Scout was trustworthy and reliable. The Kenyan colonial government tried to deal with the second and third categories by making it crime for anyone who was not a member of the KBSA to wear Scout clothing and symbols.

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British youth experts developed Scouting and its uniform to regiment and control adolescents. Conceived by General Sir Robert Baden-Powell at the turn of the twentieth century to promote national fitness, smooth over class tensions, and reduce juvenile delinquency in Edwardian Britain, Boy Scouting evolved into a popular youth movement that offered a romantic program of outdoor life as a cure for social disruption caused by industrialization and urbanization. Baden

Powell made respect for authority a central focus of the movement, and Scouting spread around the globe as governments and youth leaders recognized its value in teaching patriotism and deference to the established political and social order.

The Scout program made the implicit promise that young males could be transformed into responsible and obedient members of society by dressing them in military-style uniforms. Assuming that industrial society freed young people from the bonds of adult authority before they acquired the moral convictions and self-discipline to make proper use of their new autonomy, Scout leaders sought to use the uniform to control and socialize potentially troublesome adolescents.² They drew young males into the carefully controlled hierarchical world of the Scout troop by dressing them in standardized and specialized adolescent clothing that was adventurous, elitist, and nurtured a sense of belonging. In this sense the Scout uniform was the uniform of adolescence. In theory, boys submitted to Scout discipline and deferred to larger social norms when they donned the uniform. If clothes made the man, then Scout uniforms made properly obedient and moral adolescents. Scouting and its military garb thus offered a means of controlling young males who threatened to slip the bonds of generational authority.

British officials introduced the movement in Africa to strengthen colonial rule. More specifically, they sought to defuse the broad challenge that African youth posed to both state and generational authority in British East Africa. Yet the movement was an awkward addition to colonial society because there were relatively few young Africans who fit the western model of adolescents.³ In early twentieth century Britain, adolescence was a transitional phase between childhood and adulthood that allowed young people to reach social maturity while protected from the demands of work and other adult responsibilities. If they broke the law they faced judgment by special youth courts and punishment in reform schools. In colonial Kenya, however, only a few African boys had access to a western-style education and gravitated to the informal sector of urban areas where they worked menial jobs, joined gangs, engaged in petty crime, and formed "adult" sexual relationships. Those who remained in the countryside weakened the foundations of colonial rule by rejecting the authority of elders, who were usually the primary representatives of rural colonial authority, because their seniors could no longer provide the land and cattle necessary for them to become adult men. Even the handful of boys in mission and government schools, who came much closer to fitting British notions of proper adolescents, posed a problem by demanding social mobility and the rights of full citizenship. Kenyan administrators, missionaries, and education experts therefore worried that student unrest, juvenile delinquency, and generational instability threatened the viability and security of British rule.

Scouting never achieved a mass following in the colonies, but British officials hoped that it would help control the students, disconnected rural youth, and urban delinquents that endangered the colonial regime. As in metropolitan Britain, they hoped that young Africans would accept the discipline of the movement if they wore its clothes. Yet although Africans were indeed drawn to Scouting's material trappings, the Scout uniform was not a particularly effective instrument of social control.

As was the case with other varieties of western clothing, the Scout uniform acquired new and unexpected meanings as Africans found alternative and unique

ways to view and wear Scout gear. The uniform subverted the strict code of racial segregation in colonial Kenya, known as the colour bar, by enabling African Scouts to dress in the same manner as their European counterparts in the movement. As a physical manifestation of adolescence, the uniform attracted Africans of all ages and both genders who sought a measure of protection from the adult judicial system and the demands of wage labor. This meant that Scout clothing offered an escape from some of the most restrictive aspects of colonial society by allowing subject peoples to claim the protection of western adolescence. Although this culturally defined stage of quasi-adulthood restricted their autonomy, it forced an often uncaring colonial state to treat them as adolescents deserving of nurture and protection. Young Africans even voluntarily subjected themselves to incarceration in reform schools to gain the educational and vocational training the state accorded to western juvenile delinquents. These institutions could only accommodate a few hundred inmates but, ironically, they offered the best opportunity for poor African boys to acquire the relative security of a western-style childhood and adolescence.⁴

The Scout uniform was a means to a similar end. It disciplined its wearers but permitted greater freedom of movement because it sent the unspoken message to colonial officials, chiefs, and policemen that wearers were trustworthy adolescents. Independent African churches and schools sponsored their own Scout troops to claim the respectability and political legitimacy of the movement. Some rejected colonial notions of gender segregation in education by dressing their female students as "Boy Scouts." In other cases, uniformed conmen traded on the movement's respectability to collect funds for their own use. Some of the imposters claimed to be Scoutmasters, but others posed as boys. Petty criminals and even some registered Scouts also used the uniform to exploit the African public's tendency to assume that anyone in khaki, the near universal garb of the colonial administration, police, and army, had to be obeyed as a government servant.

The Boy Scout uniform thus acquired a significant measure of prestige in colonial Kenya that went far beyond anything that Baden Powell had ever imagined. Some African boys coveted the uniform because they sought the relative comforts of the western version of adolescence and the respect that came with membership in an internationally recognized youth movement. Others, however, used the Scout uniform to reimagine Scouting as either a means for promoting anti-colonial political resistance or a vehicle for personal self-enrichment. In some cases, African Scouts and the men and boys who dressed as Scouts embraced both the uniform's sanctioned and unsanctioned manifestations without contradiction, guilt, or reservation. European Scout officials were enraged by their actions, but the appropriation of the Scout uniform allowed Africans to use the movement's ties to respectability and political legitimacy to promote an alternate non-racial and more egalitarian vision of Kenyan society.

Youthful Uniforms in a Colonial Context

The multiple uses and meanings of the Boy Scout uniform in colonial Kenya reflect the dual and often contradictory roles that western clothing in general, and uniforms in particular, played in colonial society. The new styles of dress

that came with the imposition of European rule served as both an instrument of domination and a medium for collective and individual expression that were open to appropriation by subject peoples. Colonial governments and their mission and settler allies therefore vied with Africans to determine how the new civilian clothes and uniforms would be worn and interpreted.

European dress played an important official and unofficial role in the European subjugation of Africa. John and Jean Comaroff have shown how western clothes facilitated the colonization of nineteenth century southern Africa, a process they call "conquest by consumption," by inducing the Bechuana to covet western commodities. New clothes not only induced Africans to work for wages, but also opened channels of communication between the colonizer and the colonized that introduced western notions of respectability, morality, and legitimacy into subject societies.⁵ Simplistic standardized variations of western clothing also served as quasi-uniforms that confined Africans to specific stations in colonial society. Missionaries tried to dress their converts in simple clothes to teach them obedience and humility, while shorts and rude tunics were the near universal garb of unskilled laborers.⁶

In a similar vein, colonial officials sought to buttress white prestige and authority by denying Africans the privilege of wearing more elaborate manifestations of western clothing. Joyce Cary's novel *Mr. Johnson* graphically illustrates how upwardly mobile young men in West Africa faced ridicule and persecution from their European superiors for dressing as western gentlemen.⁷ In the same vein, Jean Hay has shown how Anglican missionaries in Kenya tried to "protect" their followers from contamination by western materialism, dressing them in simple styles based on clothing from the Swahili coast. Similarly, some European employers insisted that their African workers wear clothes that were distinctly non-western. Kenyan settlers dressed their African servants in oriental fezzes and embroidered vests, while Rhodesian administrators tried to ban urban Africans from wearing western garb in urban areas.⁸

Yet the flexible and multiple meanings of clothing allowed Africans to fashion new personal and collective identities by appropriating western clothes and styles and making them "their own."⁹ Wearing western dress allowed subject peoples to claim a measure of equality with their foreign rulers. Conversely, local communities could give new potentially subversive meanings to these same clothes by wearing them in ways that challenged the generational authority that underpinned the colonial regime.¹⁰ Prosperous Zanzibari clerks asserted their autonomy by spending money on bow ties, monocles, and cigarette holders that their fathers wanted invested in land or fishing boats. Similarly, young Onitsha men in Nigeria bought expensive western clothing over the objections of their elders, and colonial authorities in Kenya noted with concern that young men in trousers were often disrespectful to their elders.¹¹

The Africans most likely to covet, appropriate, and reinterpret European clothing tended to be those who had the greatest contact with western material culture. Generally speaking, these were the mission converts, school children, wage laborers, and urban migrants who most worried the authorities because they had the capacity to challenge the fragile social order in the colonies. In South Africa, members of Indlavini youth associations in 1930s Pondoland wore wide flapping bell bottom trousers to distinguish themselves from Christian converts who

tended to wear pants with narrow legs. They were mostly former labor migrants who often violently challenged rival groups and barely respected their elders. In the South African cities, even more aggressively violent youth gangs known as tsotsis dressed in tight fitting trousers and adopted styles of dress modeled after the gangsters and cowboys they saw in American movies.¹²

Hollywood films influenced the dress of rootless young African men throughout the continent. In Dar es Salaam, rebellious youths talked tough and wore wide hats, neckerchiefs, multi-colored shirts, and blue jeans. By the 1950s, British social welfare experts worried that these “African equivalent[s] of the English teddy-boy” were part of a “dangerous mob element” that might attach themselves to demagogic African politicians: “They are the unformed Hitlerjugend, as yet, their uniform jeans and a wide hat, their march the gun-on-hip cowboy slouch, waiting for a Fuehrer to give respectability to their longing to be admired, to be feared, to have a place in the sun.”¹³ While these warnings seem almost hysterical in hindsight, members of the National Liberation Movement, the youth wing of a political movement that sought to guarantee Asante autonomy in the post-colonial Ghanaian state, also dressed in cowboy-style clothing. They wore fringed jackets and boots with the initials NLM and “king force” spelled out in studs. Far from being exotic affectations, Jean Allman points out that the *de facto* uniforms of these young men constituted the attire of the “modern-day Asante warrior.”¹⁴

Scout uniforms shared many of the characteristics of these civil styles of western dress, but as with all formal uniforms, they must be treated as a special category of clothing. Although Africanists have paid close attention to the contested meanings of clothing in the past two decades, the meaning of uniforms in colonial society remains largely unexplored.¹⁵ Officially, military-style uniforms establish membership and rank within a group, display loyalty, demonstrate elite status, and suppress individuality. A uniform isolates the wearer from greater society and serves as a shorthand display of how she or he will behave when interacting with others.¹⁶ It can also be used to reinforce gendered notions of privilege and authority. For example, the metropolitan British police force dressed its female officers in a series of barely functional, unflattering, and often ridiculous uniforms over the course of the twentieth century.¹⁷

In theory, all members of a uniformed group wear exactly the same clothing and face sanction if they alter it to express personal or political views. In practice, however, there are always individual variations in uniforms. Even military organizations, which strive for near total uniformity in dress, use medals and symbols of rank to indicate status and power within the unit. Moreover, the institutional power and social legitimacy embodied in uniforms make them tempting targets for outsiders seeking to either trade on the privilege and status of a particular group or to appropriate and reimagine the values and ideals that those in authority assign to official clothing and decorations. Uniforms can signify order, conformity, and discipline, but they can also be fetishized to convey alternate moral values through pornography, transvestism, or vaudeville.¹⁸

Not surprisingly, uniforms therefore became a particularly contested category of clothing under British rule as Africans donned a wide variety of formal and semi-formal uniforms in the service of the colonial regime. East African governments relied heavily on African clerical and coercive assistance, and dressed

African chiefs, soldiers, policemen, watchmen, forest guards, game wardens, health inspectors, agricultural demonstrators, and labor supervisors in special clothing to affirm and demonstrate their elite status as servants of the colonial state. In most cases, these were khaki uniforms that were similar in color and style to Boy Scout uniforms, thereby often causing rural African communities to assume that Boy Scouts were also employed by the government.

Theoretically, all Boy Scouts in the colonies—be they European, Indian, Arab or African—were members of the same movement and thus entitled to wear the same uniform. The Fourth Scout Law declared that all Scouts were brothers, and thus Scouting allowed for no overt distinctions based on race or class among those who wore the Scout uniform. White Scout commissioners in South Africa tried to evade this uncomfortable reality by consigning African boys to a segregated Scout-type movement known as the Pathfinders. When political pressure forced them to allow non-Europeans to become full Scouts in 1936, South African Scouters introduced racially specific distinctions into the uniforms of the four “parallel” European, African, Indian, and Coloured sub-associations that made up the larger South African Scout Association.¹⁹ Although modifications like different colored hatbands might seem petty and minor at first glance, forcing African boys to wear subtly but distinctly different uniforms helped protect the racial stratification of South African society.

Missionaries and government officials in Kenya initially believed that African boys would not be able to grasp the fundamentals of Scouting, but once they opened the movement to Africans in the 1930s they rejected the South African example and disavowed racial distinctions in Kenyan Scouting. African, European, and Asian boys in the colony were therefore all entitled to wear exactly the same uniform. In practice, important variations and distinctions remained as few non-Europeans could afford the cost of a complete uniform. Nevertheless, Africans could claim full Scout status by donning bits and pieces of Scout regalia. Dressed in this way, they were less likely to be questioned by the security forces, had greater freedom to travel, and often got into public events free of charge because the colonial authorities assumed they could be trusted. Uniformed African Scouts also had considerable prestige in rural communities due to the quasi-official appearance of their khaki uniforms. The trust and respect accorded uniformed Scouts by district officers and policemen reinforced these beliefs.

Thus, there were powerful incentives for imposters to pose as Scouts and for actual African Scouts to use the uniform to claim even greater privileges from their membership in the movement. The tug-of-war between the colonial authorities and enterprising Africans for control of official Scout clothing exposes the contradictory power of uniforms. Although standardized formal dress is a powerful tool for building internal discipline and conferring elite status, uniforms are also open to appropriation and modification by outsiders who manage to lay their hands on them.²⁰ If Scout uniforms could capture and discipline African boys, then these same boys could appropriate the privilege and status of the movement by wearing its uniform in new and unapproved ways.

Outright imposters are an additional problem, and military organizations go to great lengths to protect their uniforms from misuse by outsiders. International

conventions ban soldiers from dressing in the clothing of their opponents during wartime, an offense most nations treat as a capital crime. In colonial Africa, the Kenyan government went to great pains to keep the uniform of the King's African Rifles, the East African colonial army, out of the hands of African civilians. KAR regulations required African soldiers to surrender their gear on discharge so it could be destroyed, and during the Mau Mau Emergency in the 1950s the "Emergency (Control of Second-Hand Uniforms) Regulations" made the sale or illegal use of military clothing an offense punishable by a fine of ten thousand shillings and/or two years in prison.²¹ Nevertheless, African civilians found it relatively easy to acquire colonial military uniforms and put them to new uses. After the Second World War, confidence men dressed as returning soldiers conned gullible British officials out of tens of thousands of shillings in back pay and remittances.²²

There were also more benign cases of Africans appropriating official colonial clothing in general and Scout uniforms in particular. The Beni dance societies of the Swahili coast, which T. O. Ranger describes as a satirical effort to capture the legitimizing symbols of colonial rule, staged competitive performances between rival hierarchically organized troops. These beni dancers dressed in bits and pieces of military uniforms, Scout uniforms, and other forms of western clothing. High-ranking civil and military officials worried that the Beni competitions undermined European prestige, but lower level KAR officers found ways to re-channel and defuse African appropriations of official clothing during World War II. Following informal KAR policy, John Nunneley's battalion allowed its soldiers to stage dances and beer drinks, known as ngomas, under the supervision of senior African non-commissioned officers. The dancers wore parodies of officers' uniforms and saluted the African sergeant serving as the General Officer Commanding (GOC) of the ngoma. British officers attended the party as spectators but did not wear their badges of rank in deference to this "GOC ngoma."²³ This mildly subversive but largely whimsical tug-of-war over official and semi-official western clothing helps to explain why many Africans found the Scout uniform appealing. Some used it to engage in larceny, but many boys used it to tweak colonial authority or to reimagine the conceptions of legitimacy, respectability, and citizenship represented by the uniform.

The Evolution of the Scout Uniform

Most of the work on uniforms has been focused on military clothing and pays surprisingly little attention to the Boy Scout and Girl Guide uniforms. Scholars that have examined Scout clothing tend to be overly fixated on their army origins and mistakenly interpret the Scout uniform as an expression of the movement's inherent militarism.²⁴ While there is no denying that young people in both Britain and Kenya found the military qualities of the uniform appealing, it must be noted that they donned it voluntarily. Scout clothing and symbols imposed a tenuous discipline on their wearers that lasted only as long as they were worn. Young men could reject the authority of official Scouting by simply changing their clothes. Although the British and Kenyan governments made it a crime to misuse the uniform, in most cases the worst sanction boys faced for altering the uniform was expulsion from the movement. Thus, the power of

Scout clothing rested primarily in their ability to entice adolescents to put them on and embrace the official values they embodied.

The idea of dressing a hierarchal youth movement in military-style clothing began with the Boy's Brigade in 1883. Established as an explicitly evangelical Christian organization in Glasgow by a Presbyterian Sunday school teacher named William Smith, the Brigade sought to reform potentially delinquent lower class "street corner boys." Smith made his movement more appealing and adventurous by dressing his charges in uniforms and drilling them with dummy rifles.²⁵ His success inspired several religiously affiliated imitators including the Anglican Church Lad's Brigade and the Jewish Lad's Brigade. Baden Powell initially flirted with the idea of developing a Scout component of the Boy's Brigade in 1903 when he returned to Britain as a hero of the South African War, but instead established Scouting as a separate non-denominational youth movement in 1907. He outfitted the boys who flocked to his call in a uniform based on the South African Constabulary, a paramilitary police organization he had founded after the war in South Africa. The new Scout uniform consisted of a khaki shirt and shorts, scarf, and the Stetson hat he made famous during his adventures as a colonial soldier in Africa.

Although Scouting proved widely popular in the pre-WWI era, Baden Powell's critics accused him of using the uniform secretly to prepare boys for military service. Indeed, historians of Edwardian Britain and its youth movements continue to debate whether he had an implicitly militaristic agenda.²⁶ Baden Powell denied these accusations and explained that the Scout uniform capitalized on the "gang-spirit" of boys by creating an exclusive and adventurous club that channeled their "natural" aggression and rebelliousness into wholesome endeavors. The military trappings of the movement were merely recruiting and training tools. Baden Powell further emphasized that the most common manifestation of the uniform featured shorts rather than long pants. "I have been in the habit of wearing shorts instead of knee-breeches when in Scout uniform, but I do it intentionally, not merely because I am much more comfortable in shorts, but because it puts me more closely on a level with the boys and less on the standing of an 'officer,' as we understand him in the army."²⁷ The Scout uniform marked its wearers as members of an exclusive, tough, but also chivalric youth gang. It tempered boys' energy and aggression with elitist conformity. The Scouts were not the only youth group in Edwardian Britain to wear military-style uniforms, but their successful blending of martial style with woodlore and social egalitarianism made them the most popular.

By promising to discipline working and lower middle class boys, Scouting reassured social critics and military leaders who worried that industrialization and urbanization had weakened the moral fabric of Edwardian Britain. The movement promised to reform adolescents who rejected the values of their elders and had grown soft on vice and inactivity.²⁸ Although most poor boys initially disdained the Boy Scouts, Tami Proctor demonstrates that by the inter-war period many were indeed drawn into the movement by its uniform. They found Scout clothing appealing because it blurred social boundaries and helped establish their independence from suspicious working class parents who still tended to see Scouting and its material trappings as an unnecessary expense.²⁹

Scouting spread quickly beyond the United Kingdom in the years before the First World War and grew into a truly international movement in the 1920s. Private individuals working on their own initiative began most of these early overseas troops. Groups in the British colonies and dominions grew into overseas branches of the metropolitan British Scout Association under the supervision of its Imperial Headquarters. Scout organizations in sovereign nations were largely on their own until the British Scout leadership created the International Bureau in 1920 to ensure that national youth groups claiming Scout status adhered to the core values of the movement and made proper use of its uniform.

Baden Powell actively promoted Scouting as a force for international brotherhood during this period. He also promised that it would foster imperial unity by building ties between boys throughout Britain's overseas territories. "If the ties of the brotherhood can be strengthened by the mutual interchange of correspondence and of visits, a further link will be forged for consolidating our Empire by the development of personal sympathy and sense of comradeship between the manhood of all the different overseas States and the Mother Country."³⁰ Baden Powell was referring to white boys, but he also acknowledged that non-Europeans could be Scouts even though he doubted their capacity to understand the full meaning of the movement. He promoted non-European Scouting as a "civilizing" force and suggested that the movement would persuade young Africans to serve the Empire by helping them "too see things from the white man's point of view."³¹

Baden Powell and the Imperial Headquarters made no formal effort to dress these non-European Scouts in different uniforms. They allowed local branches of the movement to select uniform styles and secondary badges that fit local circumstances but, for the most part, overseas Scouts usually wore uniforms that were not very different from the khaki shirt and shorts of their metropolitan British counterparts. Baden Powell believed deeply in the implicit brotherhood of the movement and saw the Scout uniform as an important bridge between boys from different national, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds.

While this policy had relatively few consequences in territories that were not divided sharply by race or ethnicity, Scout uniforms proved highly problematical in societies that practiced some form of institutional discrimination. In South Asia, British authorities resisted opening the movement to Indian boys due to concerns that it would be taken over by Indian nationalists.³² Similarly, segregationists in the southern United States were passionately opposed to allowing African Americans to become Scouts. Whites in Chattanooga threatened to burn Scout uniforms on the city hall steps if black troops opened in the city, and a North Carolina Presbyterian pastor justified his opposition to integrated Scouting on the grounds that "white boys here did not like the idea of having negroes wear the same uniform as the white boys and going through the same drill, etc."³³ In South Africa, non-European community leaders appealed to the metropolitan British Scout leadership to uphold the principles of Scout brotherhood by intervening on their behalf, but Baden Powell and the Imperial Headquarters were adamant that local branches and associations had the final say on matters of membership, Scout status, and uniforms.

Early Kenyan Scout Uniforms

Scouting began in Kenya as a European institution before the First World War and did not include significant numbers of African boys until the 1930s. The colonial Kenyan state protected the interests of the small but politically influential settler community through racially discriminatory legislation and unwritten customary practices known popularly as the color bar. The settlers tried to prevent mission and government schools from offering Africans a classical literary education, but they were largely indifferent to the idea of African Scouting because there were few schools that had the resources or inclination to found an African Scout troop before the 1920s. The Church of Scotland mission's African Boy's Brigade company at its Kikuyu station was unproblematic because there were no corresponding European companies in the colony.³⁴

In contrast to the South African case, Kenyan boys and their elders made no attempt to gain admission to Scouting during the early years of the movement. With no overt expression of African interest, it took European leadership to begin African in Scouting in Kenya. In 1924, a senior administrative officer in Central Province suggested that the King's African Rifles might use Scouting as a military recruiting tool by exploiting the wide appeal of uniforms in colonial society.³⁵ In practice, post-war economic retrenchment scuttled plans for an expanded colonial army, and government officials, missionaries, and social welfare experts were initially not sure whether Kenyan boys were ready to become Scouts.

They began to reconsider this position in the 1930s in response to growing concerns over the breakdown of the "tribal" identities and institutions that were the cornerstone of British rule. Kenyan officials hoped Scouting might help correct some of the underlying contractions that had begun to destabilize colonial society. They invoked "tribal tradition" to legitimize their reliance on "native rulers" to govern the African majority under indirect rule, but they also introduced western schooling to train African auxiliaries and demonstrate their humanitarian intentions. Colonial officials worried that western education taught African students to reject "tribal" authority and therefore embraced Scouting as an instrument of "retribalization" to re-integrate young educated Africans into rural communities. Properly regulated gender relations were also a key to the viability of indirect rule, and the movement promoted conceptions of masculinity that reinforced the authority of chiefs and elders over younger generations of men and women.

At first, European officials and clergymen worried that Scouting itself might also become a detribalizing force by increasing African boys' familiarity with the trappings and ideologies of western material culture. James W. C. Dougall, a Presbyterian missionary, tried to address this concern in his role as the first principal of the Jeanes School, a teacher training school outside Nairobi inspired by the industrial curriculum developed by Booker T. Washington in the segregated southern United States. The Jeanes faculty believed in the value of Scouting but sought to create a specifically African version of the movement that would reinforce what they considered to be core "tribal" values. Arguing that Baden Powell had based Scouting on African institutions encountered during his colonial military service, Dougall taught his African teachers to create "native" Scout troops

that would articulate the values of Baden Powell's movement in an African vernacular:

Our idea would be to see what indigenous practices could be adapted in this direction rather than adopting all the conditions of membership in the Scout organisation. This is not due to colour-feeling as between Europeans and natives. In Kavirondo the people of one tribe had the custom of giving a kind of praise-title to individuals who were conspicuous for their conduct through courage, initiation or service. A man who acquired this reputation was called 'Mugosi.'³⁶

It fell to a Luhya Jeanes graduate named Jeremiah Segero to establish the Vagosi (the plural of Mugosi) at the Friends African Mission station at Kiamosi in northwestern Kenya. Justin Itotia began a similar "native" youth organization for Kikuyu boys called *Endwo ni Iri na Iriri*, which he translated as "blessings obtained by actions and good character."³⁷ Itotia's movement never really got off the ground, but Segero recruited a troop of roughly thirty boys and dressed them in a uniform consisting of black shirts, khaki shorts, a red leather belt, a headband with a white feather, and bracelets and anklets made from the skin of the colobus monkey. He chose the colobus monkey as the group's totem on the grounds that they set an example for his "village helpers" by moving together in a harmonious group. Baden Powell ignored Segero's attempts to secure Scout status for his movement in the 1930s, but in the short term, the Vagosi appear to have been genuinely popular with Luhya schoolboys.³⁸ With no official Scout troops to set an alternative example, the Vagosi uniforms were sufficiently appealing to confer privileged status on Segero's version of adapted Scouting.

Formal African Scouting began at the elite Alliance High School (AHS) in 1928. This first troop started as a "class" in Scouting run on a probationary basis to show the European leadership of the Kenya Boy Scout Association (KBSA) that African boys could grasp the fundamentals of the movement.³⁹ Its limited membership made it an exclusive organization at the school, and the Alliance schoolboys clamored to join the troop to demonstrate their sophistication and claim the rights of full imperial citizenship. They wore full Scout uniforms and often bested Nairobi's European troops in competitive Scout exhibitions and jamborees.⁴⁰

Yet the Kenyan Scout authorities considered Alliance's 6th Nairobi troop to be a special case and remained unwilling to open the movement to all African boys until faced with the prospect that Africans might take it upon themselves to appropriate Scout methods and symbols. In the early 1930s, the KBSA began to receive complaints from civil officials and local Scout leaders that drunken Africans holding Sunday "ngomas" in Mombasa were misbehaving while dressed in Scout uniforms. It is highly likely these reports were describing beni dance competitions. The Mombasa Municipal Board did indeed try to crack down on the dance societies in 1932 by making it illegal to wear official uniforms without police permission.⁴¹ Yet at this point the KBSA did not have formal legal claim to the Scout badge or uniform. The Kenyan Police were therefore powerless to prevent unauthorized people from wearing the uniform in Mombasa, nor could they block Indian merchants from selling Scout equipment to private Africans who started unauthorized troops on their own initiative in the native reserves.⁴² Faced with the prospect of losing control over Scouting in

the countryside, the Kenyan Scout authorities joined with their counterparts from neighboring Uganda, Tanganyika, and Zanzibar, where African Scouting pre-dated the First World War, to formally open the movement to Africans in 1935.

As a result, there were over 1,500 African Scouts in Kenya by the close of the decade. Generally speaking, most were between twelve and twenty years old and were members of school-based troops run by European Scoutmasters. The “native” troops begun by Jeanes schoolteachers faded away when faced with competition from formal Scouting. Colobus monkey skins could not match the status and prestige of official looking khaki uniforms, and most Vagosi eventually became Scouts.

There are few surviving members of the early formal African troops, but it is clear that these boys were not unthinking supporters of the British Empire. Far from accepting colonial Scouting’s message of social conformity, they invoked the Fourth Scout Law, which declared a Scout was a brother to every other Scout, to challenge racial discrimination in colonial society. African teachers and community leaders who lacked the opportunity or inclination to begin sanctioned troops often founded their own unauthorized Scout groups. This was most common at institutions run by the Kikuyu Independent School Association (KISA) in central Kenya. Kikuyu independent Scouting was part of what Derek Peterson has convincingly described as “contracting colonialism.” Seeking to force the government to treat them as citizens rather than subjects, Kikuyu intellectuals sought to appropriate the rules and customs of colonial institutions.⁴³ Scout troops were one of these institutions. The European Scout authorities tried to prevent local communities from re-interpreting Scouting in this fashion, but African boys and their elders used these technically illegal Scout troops to claim the legitimacy and authority embodied in the movement. Many would eventually give their loyalty to anti-colonial nationalists. As noted, some independent troops even promoted alternative masculinities and blurred gender divisions by dressing female students in Scout uniforms to include them in the group as “Boy” Scouts.⁴⁴

The Struggle for the Scout Uniform

Although the Kenya Boy Scout Association virtually shut down during the Second World War, the movement grew considerably in the later half of the 1940s when it received increased state funding and official sanction as part of the Kenyan government’s post-war welfare and development programs. Seeking to stem the tide of urban migration and arrest the breakdown of “tribal society,” colonial social welfare experts looked for ways to keep young people gainfully occupied in the countryside. They continued to hope that Scouting might promote “retribalization” by teaching young people respect for parental and “native authority” within the context of imperial citizenship. In 1948, the Chief Native Commissioner issued a circular letter directing District Commissioners to lend their full support to Scouting that specifically cited the Scout uniform as a useful way of reaching African youth.⁴⁵

Most Kenyan boys were unmoved by the government’s largely unrealistic community development initiatives, but African interest in the movement grew

steadily during the 1940s. This was due in large part to the popularity of the Scout uniform. It was quite similar to the clothes worn by the relatively wealthy and worldly veterans of the Second World War, and the Scout belt, which was the most sought after item of Scout gear, could be used to open bottles or swung as a weapon. Matthew Kipoin bought his uniform with the money his brother sent home while serving with the KAR in Burma, and recalled with pride that he was the only student at the Government African School at Narok to have a complete set of Scout clothing.⁴⁶ Most former Scouts from this period cite the uniform as a key reason for joining the movement, and Scout officials found that recruitment cooled off when shortages and shipping problems made it difficult to get Scout badges and regalia in the native reserves.⁴⁷

The Scout uniform became a particularly potent symbol of status in post-colonial Kenya because it appeared to confer a measure of sophistication, respectability, and semi-official authority on the wearer. Boys in uniform had an easier time getting jobs and found that policemen and district officers trusted them and treated them more courteously.⁴⁸ Moreover, Scout clothing and badges were exclusive because they were relatively expensive and thus beyond the reach of most young Africans. The Scout belt alone cost from four to seven shillings in the late 1940s at a time when the average agricultural worker earned just twelve shillings per month.⁴⁹ Scout leaders reassured anxious boys that a Scout uniform could consist of nothing more than the main *fleur-de-lis* Scout badge pinned to a school shirt, but most African Scouts understandably considered this a poor substitute. Reflecting a common misconception about Scouting's status as an independent organization, they often asked why uniforms were not free because "Scouting was a Government movement."⁵⁰ Colonial officials and private employers often exploited this powerful desire for the Scout uniform to get young Africans to work. Students at the Jeanes School dug latrines to earn money for uniforms. Similarly, an estate manager in Machakos District ran a Scout troop to give his Kamba laborers a greater incentive to earn their wages.⁵¹

Yet the Scout uniform could also complicate and undermine institutions of colonial authority. In the late 1940s, Kenyan Scout leaders were surprised to discover that independent Kikuyu Scouting had expanded considerably while the KBSA lay dormant during the war. Demonstrating that Scouting could be both an instrument of social control and an equally potent expression of social protest, the Kikuyu troops freely modified the Scout uniform and canon to reflect political and social values that were becoming increasingly nationalistic after the Second World War. When F.H.J. Dahl, the Imperial Headquarters' Overseas Traveling Commissioner, inspected some of these independent groups in 1948 he considered their uniforms to be "ragged" and unorthodox but was generally impressed by their enthusiasm.⁵²

Dahl advised the KBSA to co-opt the unauthorized troops into the formal Scout movement. The unworkability of this suggestion became evident in the early 1950s when the Kenyan government concluded that the Kikuyu independent schools were actively involved in the uprising against the colonial government and its Kikuyu allies in the reserves that became known as the Mau Mau Emergency. Alarmed Scout commissioners found that Kikuyu Scout groups had substituted "Jomo Kenyatta" for "God" in Scout songs and hymns.⁵³ The KBSA recovered swiftly from this shock and used the Emergency to secure even greater

levels of government funding by promising to help with the moral rehabilitation of Kikuyu youth. In effect, Kenyan Scout officials succeeded in depicting the movement as a progressive “anti-gang” that would recapture Kikuyu boys who had been seduced by Mau Mau.

While Kenyan government moved to swiftly to shut down the independent Kikuyu troops along with their sponsoring schools, the turmoil of the Emergency created an even greater incentive for young Africans to appropriate the Scout uniform. At a time when the colonial government’s draconian measures against the Mau Mau denied Africans basic civil liberties, the uniform afforded African Scouts extra security because school officials and the security forces assumed they were trustworthy. Military and security forces captured and killed men and boys serving with the forest fighters while dressed as Scouts.⁵⁴ It is difficult to determine their actual status, but there can be no doubt that the uniform provided a useful means of moving through the British lines. Moreover, there are tantalizing echoes of the *beni* and *ngoma* traditions in the way that Mau Mau participants used Scout clothing. The personal papers of the last British intelligence director in Kenyan contain obviously staged photographs of a mixed sex guerilla band led by a man wearing a Scout-type shirt with Scout badges running down his sleeves.⁵⁵ These pictures were most likely taken well after the end of the Emergency in the early 1960s to draw attention to the unresolved grievances of impoverished young Kikuyu. Nevertheless, it is quite possible that Mau Mau units reinterpreted the Scout uniform and decorations to create new institutions of authority and symbols of hierarchy within the context of the rebellion.

There were also more pragmatic incentives to dress as Scouts during the Emergency. Although metropolitan British Scout officials forbade Scouts to hitchhike, the KBSA waived the ban for rural African members. Some Scouts inevitably took advantage of these privileges. The main character in Charles Mangua’s semi-autobiographical novel *Kenyatta’s Jiggers* used Scouting as a cover to travel about Nairobi during the Emergency, and he invoked his Scout credentials to join the police training school even though he had dropped out of school for disciplinary violations.⁵⁶ Similarly, the uniform testified that the wearer would be a reliable employee because he adhered to the Scout Law and Promise. The Scout badge offered protection from the government’s mass expulsion of Kikuyu from Nairobi and reassured European employers that an African candidate was trustworthy and hardworking. This perquisite of membership became even more important over the course of the 1950s when widespread unemployment diluted the value of formal school certificates.⁵⁷

Growing popular impressions of colonial Scouting as a powerful and lucrative organization in the later decades of British rule were at the root of African attempts to capture the movement through independency and local adaptation. In the 1950s, rising unemployment, coupled with the KBSA’s closer ties to the colonial regime during Mau Mau, created a strong incentive for enterprising Africans to use the Scout uniform to raise funds and claim special privileges. One certainly did not have to be a registered Scout to enjoy the advantages of membership. In most cases, any young African male wearing even a fragmentary part of the Scout uniform could claim the perquisites of Scouting.

The KBSA’s efforts to make the movement accessible to poor boys made it extremely easy to masquerade as a Scout. With the exception of the elite 6th

Figure 1



Propaganda photograph of a Mau Mau “gang” wearing pieces of the Scout uniform. Rhodes House Library, Oxford University, Papers of M. C. Manby, RHL, Mss Afr. s. 2159/Manby/Box 2.

Nairobi Alliance High School troop, most Kenyan Scouts in the 1950s wore a simplified uniform consisting of a clean shirt and shorts (often a school uniform), a pinned on badge, and a monotone Scout scarf. In theory, the KBSA's Scout Shop was the sole legal supplier of Scout paraphernalia in the colony after the Second World War. In 1955, it sold badges for fifty cents each, scarves for two to four shillings, stockings for nine shillings, berets for six shillings, and Scout belts for seven shillings. This was at a time when the average primary school tuition was fifteen shillings per year. Yet many poorer African Scouts made great sacrifices to buy these badges and uniform accessories to demonstrate their authenticity as Scouts. The late Kiraithe Nyaga, the Director of the Africa Regional Office of the World Scout Bureau until his death in a plane crash in 2000, and his three brothers had only a single uniform to share among them.⁵⁸

Sometimes uniformed “imposters” genuinely believed that they were living up to Scout ideals as they defined them. In the late 1940s, Kenyan Scout officials began to notice boys in partial uniforms offering assistance at public events. These “unofficial” Scouts most likely felt that they were justified in collecting money for their service. The Ugandan Scout officials’ “gorgeous creature” caught

sneaking across the border claimed to be a member of a Mombasa troop on a project to collect official stamps from police stations, district headquarters, and other government offices. Scouts often did indeed collect stamps and other sorts of government memorabilia as part of a civics project, but these kinds of stamps were also valuable to forgers and other criminals. The colonial police frequently detained imposters caught soliciting donations for Scout expeditions to finance their travels throughout East Africa. Their motives might have been an innocent sense of adventure or a cover for smuggling. Sometimes there were simple pragmatic reasons to impersonate a Scout. Boys desperate to find work masqueraded as Scouts to impress potential employers. These pseudo-Scouts usually claimed membership in another territorial Scout association to make it harder for local authorities to check their credentials.⁵⁹

In other instances, the imposters were simply conmen. The yearly Bob-A-Job programs and other Scout fundraising initiatives were tempting targets. In Kenya, the situation became so serious that the Chief Scout Commissioner Sir Geoffrey Rhodes wrote to the *East Africa Standard* warning potential Bob-A-Job employers not to let thieves disguised as Scouts into their homes.⁶⁰ In 1950, the Kenyan Police arrested Philip Maina, an ex-Scout, for illegally collecting money and selling raffle books. As a repeat offender, he received nine months in jail. Nine years later, the police arrested Christopher Mutingi for collecting money from Nairobi shopkeepers to supposedly fund a Scout hike from Dar es Salaam to Kampala. Mutingi declared that he wore the Scout uniform because "people [were] kinder to him."⁶¹

Adult men also posed as Scoutmasters or even adolescent Scouts. One particularly brazen imposter set himself up as a touring Area Commissioner from Zanzibar and charged a large tea party at the Queen's Hotel in Nairobi to the Zanzibar Scout Association. In 1958, the Kenyan Police caught James Kamau with a forged Scoutmaster's warrant and found that he was meeting with local troops in Kiambu without permission. Kamau wore an elaborate uniform with badges covering both arms, and claimed authority over 101 Scout troops. The colonial authorities suspected he was administering Mau Mau oaths and prosecuted him for embezzlement and impersonating a Scout. However, he managed to escape conviction on the grounds of "mental illness."⁶² Pretending to be a Scoutmaster fed the egos of pompous and grandiose individuals like Kamau and offered the prospect of a decent living for the more successful impersonators.

The Scout authorities tried to reign in unauthorized Scouting through tight control over Scout uniforms and documents. Yet even though the police and courts sympathized with the Scouts, there was little that the KBSA could do to limit African adaptations of the movement. Some legitimate African Scoutmasters ordered extra Scout decorations for resale. Individual Scouts often did the same by claiming to have lost their badges and selling the duplicates. In other cases, imposters simply forged the necessary credentials to buy Scout materials. Scout officials in Uganda discovered that several false Scouts in Kampala used identical fake documents purporting to come from the Tanganyika Scout association. The uniformity of these warrants and membership cards suggests organized groups of criminals recognized the Scout uniforms' value.⁶³

Scout belts became a particularly difficult problem in the 1950s. Hugely popular with Scouts and non-Scouts alike, their smart appearance and utility con-

ferred considerable status on the wearer. As a result, there was a steady flow of Scout belts into the hands of imposters in all three East African territories. In the mid-1950s, the situation became so bad in central Kenya that the police detained every African wearing a Scout belt until they produced proof they were authentic Scouts or Scoutmasters. The Education Department also encouraged teachers to check their students for unauthorized belts. Although the crackdown was partially successful, Kenyan Scout officials had to issue African Scouts special membership cards to prevent the police from confiscating their uniforms. The KBSA tried to require Africans wishing to purchase Scout materials to produce a letter from their Area Commissioners, but the belts had such a high resale value that legitimate Scouts often sold them to raise money for living expenses and school fees.⁶⁴

Conclusion

The popularity and contested meanings of the Boy Scout uniform in Kenya both confirm and qualify Phyllis Martin's powerful declaration that "clothing matters and dress is political."⁶⁵ Scout uniforms, like civilian clothing, were tangible but malleable archives of social reality that enabled their wearers to imagine, if not create, new identities and realities. They were indeed a "social skin" that influenced how Africans interacted with colonial officials, European settlers, and local Kenyan communities.⁶⁶ By appropriating Scout clothing and symbols and turning them to new purposes, they challenged the established colonial order and proposed new social identities. Yet uniforms constituted a special category of clothing that is largely missing from broader studies of African dress. It seems that scholars have largely assumed that the disciplined and regimented nature of these kinds of clothes protected them from capture and modification by both authorized and unauthorized wearers.

To be sure, uniforms conveyed great power in colonial Kenyan society. The colonial regime used them to discipline and empower the African soldiers, policemen, and civil servants who extended its reach into urban and rural African communities. The uniforms of these colonial proxies conveyed the standardized message that their wearers represented the authority of the state and accepted its guidance and discipline regardless of who they actually were. Yet the institutionalized power embedded in uniforms also made them vulnerable to appropriation. Their conformity and enforced anonymity meant that anyone putting them on could claim the authority and privileges they represented. Ironically, the uniform's suppression of individualism could be empowering and liberating in the right context. This is why armies and other hierarchical institutions go to such great lengths to deny their clothing to outsiders.

At first glance, Scout uniforms would appear to be the least potent and most inconsequential kinds of uniforms. They are worn by juveniles who have the freedom to reject their inherent discipline and regimentation simply by taking them off and quitting the movement. Moreover, they do not grant the wearer any formal rights or privileges beyond the formal recognition that he is a Scout. In the colonial Kenyan context, however, the Scout uniform stood for respectability, sophistication, political legitimacy, and limited autonomy. In essence, it was the uniform of a western conception of adolescence that was simultaneously

restrictive and liberating. Although it subjected registered Scouts to the discipline of the movement on the grounds that they lacked the maturity to behave as adults, it also helped Africans to demand protection and support from the colonial state as adolescents.

It is therefore not surprising that the Scout uniform became the center of a fierce struggle in colonial Kenya between Africans who sought to turn it to their own uses and the colonial authorities who recognized that it had the ability to undermine British rule by blurring racial, class, and gender lines. Uniforms exposed one of the most fundamental and potentially disruptive contradictions of African Scouting. Francesco Bonami and his co-authors remind us that: "To make things uniform means to make them equal. Making individuals equal means abolishing distinctions of class and demographics."⁶⁷ Scout uniforms were more than just a "social skin," they also represented flexible political, gendered, and adolescent skins. Most Europeans in Kenya considered all African males to be permanent "boys" and were never certain of their actual chronological age. Thus an African man could pose as a trusted and protected adolescent just by putting on the Scout uniform. Similarly, girls could also become "Boy Scouts" simply by donning the right clothes. In doing so they did not seek to fool observers by pretending to be boys. Rather, they claimed the privileges and status that many African communities, who did not grasp or respect the gendered segregation of the movement, accorded the Scouts. Nevertheless, there were limits to how far Africans could go in modifying or reinterpreting the movement. Drastic alterations would have rendered the clothing unrecognizable as a Scout uniform and ended its political and social effectiveness. At the end of the day, uniforms had to retain a measure of uniformity to be effective.

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ENDNOTES

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