

# From Midnight You Are Free

People at the heart of Kenya's independence have clear memories of the coming of freedom

BY WILHELMINA MABOJA

**I**t rained on the day but the weather couldn't dampen the occasion.

Growing up on the Northern slopes of Mount Kenya, in a small town called Meru, Peter Gakunu still remembers how the wetness had drenched his village.

In the years before, his was a village that was rocked by the war between Mau Mau insurgents and the colonial powers.

"During the time, the British army used to bomb the forest that was just behind my place. So I remember those days as running and hiding under the bed whenever the bombs were heard," he says.

In 1963, aged 15, Gakunu was a scout patrol leader of his village, a young man who would continue to serve his country until his grey years.

At midnight on December 12, he would become a part of the country's history.

"I think people didn't understand very much what independence meant, but for me and my colleagues who were in the scout movement and who spent the night on the hill, it was an experience that we still remember," he adds.

This year marks 50 years since Kenya's independence from Britain in 1963. Fifty years ago, among all his scout peers, Gakunu would be the one

chosen to mark the occasion.

"That night, at midnight, I raised the flag on Kuani hill."

In Nairobi, the fervor in the streets matched the heat of the day.

Joe Lithimbi, who was 17 years old, was among the throng of Kenyans in the capital city on their way to the national stadium. They would also be the first to witness Kenya's first president Jomo Kenyatta step into power.

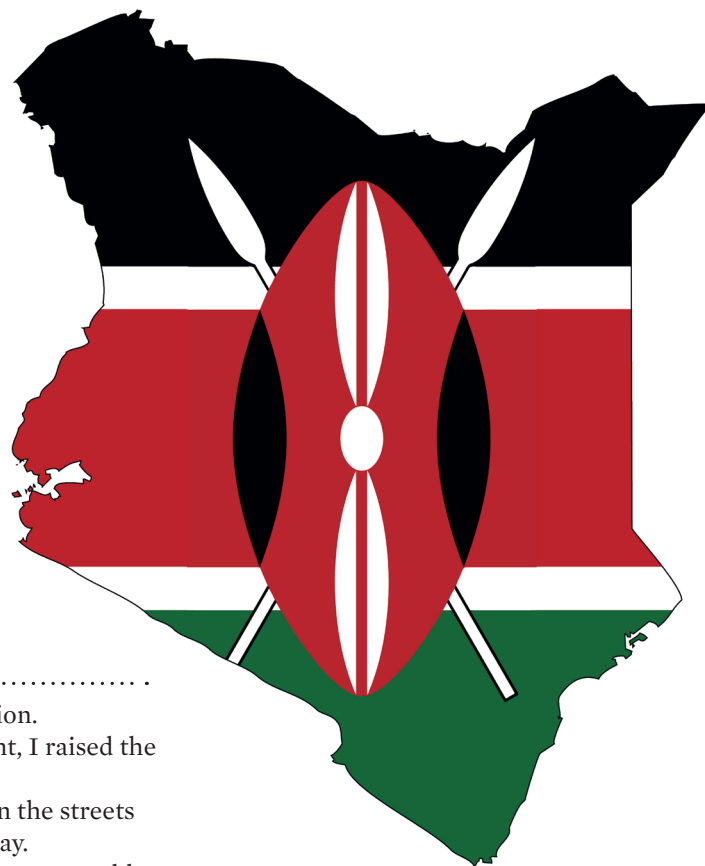
"The place was packed with people from all over Kenya. You walked along the road and there was one car here, one car there, because it was too crowded. Then we saw the British flag come down and a flag we had not seen before going up," Lithimbi explains.

"People were celebrating, they were singing. But we didn't really know what it is, independence," says Lithimbi, who is now the managing director of Associated Motor Assembly Kenya.

There is no landmark or memorial on Kuani hill that marks the spot where Gakunu raised the flag. Nevertheless his Meru house was built near the hill, which Gakunu still climbs up when visiting his village.

Despite now being in his sixties, Gakunu can still recall the mixture of pride and exhilaration he felt when raising the new Kenyan flag.

"The thing which I found



**"We saw the British flag come down and a flag we had not seen before going up."**

overwhelming was that I was the one to raise the flag. I was chosen among many people to do it," he adds.

Gakunu now works as a consultant and chairman of Karumasi Consultancy Limited in Nairobi. This is after having held various positions within the Kenyan government.

"If you look at Kenya, we actually fought for it, it wasn't that we negotiated and got it. So for us in Kenya we still feel uhuru very strongly," he explains.

"I really would like us not to forget it was not easy. This independence we are calling uhuru wasn't easy. It's something that people struggled to obtain. Power and wealth should not dominate us to the extent that we lose sight of what our independence was all about." 