

MASHUJAA · WEBUYE · 1895

CHETAMBE



*The Fort on the Hill and the
Last Stand of the Bukusu*

SPEARS AGAINST A MAXIM GUN.

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CHETAMBE



M A S H U J A A

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Last Stand of the Bukusu*

G R A H A M K A S I N D O

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*“We then cut down a section of mud wall by Maxim fire
and advanced to the attack.”*

— Charles Hobley, colonial administrator, on Chetambe, 1895

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Prologue

CHETAMBE HILL, ABOVE THE NZOIA RIVER. 1895.

The fort sat on top of a hill overlooking the Nzoia River, near where the town of Webuye stands today.

It was not a small thing. A trench twelve feet deep ran round it. Behind the trench rose a wall twelve feet high, with gates that could be barred in stages, and holes in the wall through which the defenders could watch without being seen. Inside, it covered about four acres, the size of four football fields.

It belonged to a Tachoni elder named **Chetambe Ifile**. Now it was full of Bukusu fighters, their families and their cattle, who had fled there from another fort that the British had already broken.

Outside the walls, the British were coming. With them came Sudanese soldiers, the warriors of their ally **Nabongo Mumia**, and two weapons the defenders had never faced: a **Hotchkiss** gun that fired shells, and a **Maxim** machine gun.

The Maxim gun cut the wall down.

When it was over, according to later accounts, more than **450** defenders were dead and **300** were captured.

CHAPTER ONE

The Bukusu

In the 1890s, the **Bukusu** lived on the rich, open country between Mount Elgon and the Nzoia River, in what is now Bungoma. The British called them the *Kitosh*.

They were cattle people and farmers, and they were not weak. They built great walled forts, *olukoba*, to protect their homesteads and herds from raids.

To the south lay the kingdom of the **Wanga**, ruled by **Nabongo Mumia** from his capital at **Mumias**. Mumia had grown powerful through his alliances with Swahili and Arab traders. When the British came, he became their most important ally in the region.

The British set up their post at Mumias.

The Bukusu and the Wanga were old rivals. Now one of them had the British on its side.

CHAPTER TWO

Wakoli

Among the Bukusu, there was a wealthy man named **Wakoli**.

According to accounts of the period, Wakoli had acquired guns from the traders' caravans that crossed the region. He supplied the traders and their fighters with food.

Guns were beginning to enter Bukusu country. Some came from caravans. Some came from soldiers who had deserted from the traders' expeditions. According to one account, Bukusu men had bought guns from traders with cattle, and then taken the cattle back while keeping the guns.

To the British at Mumias, armed Bukusu were a threat.

They decided to take the guns.

CHAPTER THREE

Lumboka

OLUKOBA LWA LUMBOKA. 1895.

The officer in charge at Mumias was a man named **Spire**. He sent twenty-five Sudanese soldiers to the Bukusu fort at **Lumboka** to demand that the rifles be handed over.

It went wrong at once.

The colonial administrator **Charles Hobley** later described what happened. “A gun went off during the palaver,” he wrote. The Bukusu “attacked the detachment of Sudanese. They fought gallantly but were speared one by one and eventually annihilated.”

Twenty-five soldiers of the British administration were dead.

The British would not let it pass.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Expedition

MUMIAS. 1895.

Charles Hobley had arrived to take charge of the region in **1895**. The Bukusu came to call him *Opilo*.

He assembled a punitive expedition. Its military commander was a man named **Grant**, whom the Bukusu called *Chilande*.

It was a big force. There were Sudanese soldiers. There were warriors from the Wanga of Nabongo Mumia, and from the Baganda, the Teso and the Bukhayo. The expedition's doctor was **William Ansorge**, who would write his own account of what he saw.

And there were the guns: rifles, a Hotchkiss gun, and a Maxim. They marched on Lumboka.

CHAPTER FIVE

The First Fort Falls

The Bukusu at Lumboka fought. But Lumboka fell.

According to the Daily Nation's account of the battle, the fort suffered heavy casualties before it was swiftly overpowered.

The survivors fled. They crossed the **Kuywa** and the **Nzoia** rivers. According to one account, some of those escaping, among them women and children, drowned at the crossings.

They went where they could still be defended.

They went to Chetambe.

CHAPTER SIX

Chetambe Ifile

Chetambe Hill.

Chetambe Ifile was a **Tachoni** elder of the **Avangachi** clan, a landowner who farmed and kept livestock on the hill above the Nzoia.

His people had built a great fort there. According to the Kenya News Agency's account, it had four main gates and two minor ones. The Tachoni used it as a refuge in time of war.

Chetambe opened the gates to the Bukusu.

It was, in a sense, a choice to go to war. The fort held Bukusu fighters and their families, the Tachoni who lived there, and the cattle they had saved.

The British followed.

CHAPTER SEVEN

The Maxim

CHETAMBE. 1895.

At first, according to the accounts of the Tachoni, the fort held. The defenders could see out through the holes in the wall. They could strike at anyone who came close.

Then the British brought up their guns.

“We opened fire on one of the gates with a small Hotchkiss gun,” the doctor, Ansorge, wrote. “We shelled the huts.”

Then Grant brought the Maxim gun into position.

Hobley wrote down what they did next. “Grant then adopted another plan... moved the Sudanese Company round to another gate... We then cut down a section of mud wall by Maxim fire and advanced to the attack.”

The wall that had stood twelve feet high came down.

CHAPTER EIGHT

The Dead

The attackers went through the broken wall.

Nobody kept a careful count of the dead. According to the figures most often cited, published by the Daily Nation in 2011, more than **450** Bukusu fighters were killed at Chetambe, and **300** were captured. The Kenya News Agency also records **37** Tachoni dead.

According to the account drawn from Bukusu elders, women and children were among those shot.

The British counted their own losses as significant, but the accounts give no figure.

It was the end of Bukusu military resistance.

CHAPTER NINE

Chetambe's Escape

Chetambe Ifile did not die in his fort.

According to the accounts of his people, he escaped through a rear gate as the fort fell. He moved away, to **Magemo**.

He lived for years afterwards. The accounts differ on when he died: in **1902**, by one, or **1906**, by another, in his eighties.

The British had their victory. Nabongo Mumia's Wanga became the base of colonial rule in the west. And the Bukusu, the people who had speared the Sudanese at Lumboka, had to live under it.

Fifteen years later, a Bukusu boy named **Elijah Masinde** would be born at Kimilili. He would grow up to tell the British to leave.

CHAPTER TEN

The Hill Today

Chetambe Hill. Today.

The fort at Lumboka is gone. Decades of ploughing have flattened its walls and filled its ditches.

Chetambe's fort is still there, just. The hill is farmed by Chetambe's descendants, but the outline of the great trench is still visible, running round the four-acre site. One of his great-grandsons, **Nelson Kakai**, has worked to preserve it.

The Tachoni Council of Elders has sued the British government for compensation over the attack, including, according to the Kenya News Agency, for thirty-six houses burned and land lost.

From the top of the hill, you can see Webuye town, and the Nabuyole Falls on the Nzoia River.

Epilogue

The story of Kenya's resistance is often told as a story about Central Kenya and the Mau Mau.

But fifty years before the Mau Mau went into the forests, the Bukusu and the Tachoni stood behind a twelve-foot wall on a hill in the west, with spears and a few captured rifles, and faced a Maxim gun.

They lost. They were always going to lose.

The wall came down. The hill is still there.

THE RECORD

PLACE	Chetambe Hill, near Webuye, above the Nzoia River
YEAR	1895 (one account says 1894)
THE FORT	12-foot trench and wall; about 4 acres; Tachoni refuge
ITS ELDER	Chetambe Ifile, Tachoni, of the Avangachi clan
THE SPARK	25 Sudanese soldiers killed at Lumboka over surrendered rifles
BRITISH FORCE	Hobley and Grant, with Sudanese troops, Wanga and other allies
WEAPONS	Rifles, a Hotchkiss gun, a Maxim gun
DEAD	450+ Bukusu, 300 captured (Daily Nation); 37 Tachoni (KNA)
CHETAMBE	Escaped; died 1902 or 1906

A twelve-foot wall. A Maxim gun.

A Note from the Author

If this story stayed with you, you can buy me a coffee. It keeps the research going and helps bring the next one to you.

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PAYBILL	522533
ACCOUNT	8129965
CLICK MTAA TECHNOLOGIES	

Asante sana.

— *Graham Kasindo*