

NANDI HILLS, KENYA · 1905

KOITALEL

*The Nandi Leader Killed
at a Peace Meeting*



HE OFFERED HIS HAND. HE NEVER LEFT KETBARAK.

GRAHAM KASINDO

KOITALEL



N A N D I H I L L S · 1 9 0 5

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*The Nandi Leader Killed
at a Peace Meeting*

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

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“I felt this disturbance inside me ever since my father told me about the British stealing Koitalel’s head.”

— Anne Machii Samoei, Koitalel’s granddaughter, 2024

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Prologue

KETBARAK, NANDI HILLS. THURSDAY, 19 OCTOBER 1905. 11 A.M.

It was supposed to be a peace meeting.

On one side was **Koitalel arap Samoei**, the Orkoiyot of the Nandi: their supreme spiritual and political leader. For ten years, his people had fought the British Empire to a standstill in these hills.

On the other side was a twenty-seven-year-old British officer of the King's African Rifles, Captain **Richard Meinertzhagen**.

The terms, according to Nandi accounts, were simple. Each side would bring five companions. They would meet in the open. They would talk.

Koitalel came.

According to the Nandi, when he reached out his hand to greet the British officer, Meinertzhagen shot him at point-blank range. His companions were cut down around him. Only one of them escaped.

Meinertzhagen told a different story. He said the Nandi leader had given a signal for him to be speared, and that he had fired first to save his own life.

Two versions. One dead man. And one question that the British Army would investigate three times.

KOITALEL

Koitalel's body was found about a hundred metres away, under a sacred fig tree.

It had no head.

CHAPTER ONE

The Orkoiyot

Koitalel arap Samoei was born around **1860** at **Samitui**, in **Aldai**, in what is now Nandi County.

He was born into the **Talai** clan, the family from which the Nandi took their *Orkoiyot*. The *Orkoiyot* was more than a chief. He was believed to be chosen by **Asis**, God. He foretold the future, blessed the warriors before a raid, and advised on war and peace.

His father, **Kimnyole arap Turukat**, was *Orkoiyot* before him. Kimnyole, it is said, predicted his son's death.

Sources disagree on when Koitalel took his father's place. Some say around **1885**, when he was about twenty-five; others say **1895**, after he defeated his brother, **Kipchomber arap Koilege**, in a struggle for the succession.

Either way, by the mid-1890s the Nandi had a new *Orkoiyot*. And a new enemy was coming up from the coast.

CHAPTER TWO

The Iron Snake

Koitalel, the Nandi say, had seen it coming.

He prophesied, according to the National Museums of Kenya, “the coming of a black snake, spitting fire, which would pass through the land of the Nandi.”

The snake was the **Uganda Railway**.

The British wanted to build it through Nandi country, on its way to Lake Victoria. Koitalel refused. He called up his warriors.

What followed was a long guerrilla war. The Nandi planned surprise attacks on the railway workers and on the British. They took the railway’s materials, the iron and the wire, and turned them into ornaments and weapons.

Accounts disagree on how long the resistance lasted: ten years, eleven, twelve, even seven. The simplest count is from **1895** to **1905**.

It was one of the longest wars of resistance in the history of British East Africa.

CHAPTER THREE

The Caravan

NANDI COUNTRY. 16 JULY 1895.

In 1895, a British trader named **Peter West** arrived at **Mumias**. He set out with a partner, **Dick**, to open a trade route through the region.

On **16 July 1895**, West's camp was attacked by the Nandi.

"All but eight of the expedition," one record says, "were killed without a shot being fired."

The British answer was to send soldiers.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Expeditions

1895. The British sent 400 armed *askari* with rifles and a **Maxim** machine gun. They burned villages and captured hundreds of livestock.

It didn't stop the Nandi.

1897. They sent 500.

It didn't stop the Nandi.

1900. They came again, bigger than ever. Under a commander named **Evatt**, an Indian contingent and companies of the Uganda Rifles moved into Nandi country, backed by 300 Maasai auxiliaries. In **October 1900**, the British recorded seventy-four Nandi warriors killed, and seized **1,039** cattle and **3,100** sheep and goats. They lost ten askari and one officer.

It didn't stop the Nandi either.

The railway was built anyway, reaching Lake Victoria in 1901. But in the Nandi Hills, the war went on. Burning villages had not beaten Koitalel. Taking cattle had not beaten him. Machine guns had not beaten him.

Someone decided to try something else.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Captain

Richard Meinertzhagen was born in **1878** into a wealthy British family. He arrived at Mombasa in **May 1902** to serve with the **King's African Rifles**.

He was clever, ambitious and ruthless. He was a talented map-maker and artist. He took part in the military operations that were extending British control across the colony.

By 1905, he was in the Nandi Hills.

And he had decided that the way to end the war was to end the man leading it.

CHAPTER SIX

The Truce

A meeting was arranged at **Ketbarak**, on the site of what is today the **Nandi Bears Club** in Nandi Hills.

According to the Nandi account, the terms were that each side would bring five people.

According to the same account, Meinertzhagen came with eighty armed men. Five went with him to the meeting. Seventy-five were hidden near the meeting place.

Koitalel came with his party. How many men he brought with him is itself disputed: one account says about twenty-two, another twenty-five.

The meeting was set for eleven o'clock in the morning, on a Thursday.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Ketharak

19 OCTOBER 1905.

Here, the two stories split.

The Nandi story is the one told by the National Museums of Kenya and by Koitalel's descendants. Koitalel stepped forward and stretched out his hand to shake the British officer's. Meinertzhagen shot him at point-blank range. The hidden soldiers opened fire. Koitalel's ministers and messengers were killed with him. Only one of his men got away.

Meinertzhagen's story is in his *Kenya Diary*. In a summary of his account, the Nandi leader gave a signal for him to be speared, and he pulled out a hidden gun and shot him first.

Nobody disputes the rest.

Koitalel was dead. Most of his party was dead. His headless body was found under a sacred fig tree, about a hundred metres from where he was shot.

Meinertzhagen's diary admits the killing. It mentions that he took "two stone-headed knobkerries" from the dead man's belt. It doesn't mention the head.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Three Inquiries

That same day, the British launched what they called the **final Nandi campaign**. According to one account, around **250** Nandi were killed on that single day. Hundreds more were killed in the weeks that followed, and the Nandi were driven out of much of their land.

With their Orkoiyot dead, the resistance collapsed.

But what happened at Ketbarak didn't stay quiet.

At first, the killing was covered up. Then Meinertzhagen claimed self-defence. The Army held a court of inquiry. Then another. Then a third.

At the third inquiry, **Brigadier William Manning** cleared him.

He was cleared, but he was finished in East Africa. When the true circumstances became known, Meinertzhagen had become a liability. On **28 May 1906**, in one account's words, he was "trundled back to England in disgrace and in disgust."

He went on to a long career in British military intelligence and a reputation as one of the great adventurers of the empire.

CHAPTER NINE

The Talai

The British didn't stop with Koitalel.

His brother, **Kipeles arap Kimnyole**, succeeded him. The British set out to break the Talai clan's power for good.

In **1919**, Koitalel's son, **Barsirian arap Manyei**, became Orkoiyot. Four years later, on **16 October 1923**, he was arrested with four other elders, just before a great Nandi ceremony, the *saget ap eito*. The colonial government feared he would use the gathering to organise resistance.

He was deported to **Meru**. He was held there, then on **Mfangano Island** in Lake Victoria, then at **Kapsabet**.

He was released in **1964**, after independence. He had been detained for **forty-one years**. He has been described as Kenya's longest-serving political prisoner.

He died on **10 April 1974**, living as a squatter.

The rest of the Talai were pushed out too. In **1919**, according to one account, about thirty Talai families, at least 150 people, were banished to an isolated village called **Kapsisiywo**. One of Koitalel's grandsons, **Cheruiyot Barsirian**, remembered the place of their exile: "We were always sick from malaria because of the mosquitoes. And there were so many snakes. I remember never being able to sleep."

CHAPTER TEN

The Diary

In **1957**, half a century after Ketbarak, Richard Meinertzhagen published his *Kenya Diary 1902–1906*.

It was the main written account of what happened on 19 October 1905. It was also, it later turned out, the work of a man who could not be trusted.

In **2007**, forty years after Meinertzhagen's death, the writer **Brian Garfield** published *The Meinertzhagen Mystery*. It showed that the famous adventurer had been a large-scale fraud. He had stolen bird specimens from museum collections and falsified their records.

The man who wrote the only British account of what happened at Ketbarak had spent a lifetime falsifying records.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

The Skull

2005–2006.

A hundred years after Ketbarak, Kalenjin scholars went looking for what Meinertzhagen had taken.

In **2005**, they found three of Koitalel's sacred wooden staffs in Britain. The staffs stood for the three powers of the Orkoiyot: military, spiritual and administrative. "These staffs were the core symbol that held together the office of Koitalel and the previous leaders," said **Kibnyaanko Seroney**, a Kalenjin linguist who helped recover them.

In **2006**, they were returned to the Nandi. Thousands gathered in Nandi Hills to receive them. Today they are displayed in the **Koitalel Samoei Museum**, built next to the fig tree where he died.

The head has never been found.

The Talai believe it was taken to Britain. The families and researchers have looked at the **Pitt Rivers Museum** in Oxford, which says it doesn't have it. They have looked at the **British Museum**, the **Natural History Museum**, and at Cambridge University. They have looked at the **Hunterian Museum** of the Royal College of Surgeons, where Meinertzhagen is known to have

donated three skulls, and which was bombed in 1941, destroying its records.

It has never been found in any of them.

The Talai clan has petitioned **King Charles III** to return it.

Epilogue

NANDI BEARS CLUB, NANDI HILLS. EVERY 19 OCTOBER.

Every year, on the anniversary of the killing, people gather at Ketbarak.

There is a mausoleum in Nandi Hills now, and a museum beside the fig tree. There is a school named after him, and a university.

Anne Machii Samoei, Koitalel's granddaughter, is in her late eighties.

"I felt this disturbance inside me ever since my father told me about the British stealing Koitalel's head," she said in 2024. "Ever since I was a small girl until now, in my old age, I have never lost this disturbed feeling. It still affects me."

The railway still runs. The staffs came home. The man who shot him was found out, a century too late.

But somewhere, a skull sits in a drawer or a box or a basement, or doesn't exist at all.

And the Nandi are still waiting.

THE RECORD

NAME	Koitalel arap Samoei, Orkoiyot of the Nandi
BORN	About 1860, Samitui, Aldai
RESISTANCE	About 1895–1905, against the Uganda Railway
KILLED	19 October 1905, Ketbarak (now Nandi Bears Club)
BY	Capt. Richard Meinertzhagen, King's African Rifles
HIS VERSION	Self-defence
NANDI VERSION	Shot while offering his hand at a truce
INQUIRIES	Three; cleared by Brig. William Manning
STAFFS	Returned 2006
SKULL	Never found

A handshake, a shot, and a head that never came home.

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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CLICK MTAA TECHNOLOGIES	

Asante sana.

— *Graham Kasindo*