

MASHUJAA · THE COAST · 1895

MBARUK

*The Last Mazrui and the
Coast That Would Not Kneel*



NEVER BOWED TO ZANZIBAR. NEVER BOWED TO BRITAIN.

GRAHAM KASINDO

M B A R U K



M A S H U J A A

MBARUK

*The Last Mazrui and the
Coast That Would Not Kneel*

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

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*He “never rendered tribute to the Busaidi, nor
recognized their sovereignty over East Africa.”*

— on Sheikh Mbaruk bin Rashid, *Encyclopedia.com*, “Mazrui”

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Prologue

MWELE, IN THE HILLS BEHIND GAZI. 1895–96.

The stronghold stood on a hill in the bush behind the south coast.

The men dragging the gun up to it were sailors and marines. The gun was a seven-pounder cannon. There was no road. They hauled it through the woods and up the slope by hand.

At the top was **Mwele**, the fortress of **Sheikh Mbaruk bin Rashid al-Mazrui** of Gazi.

He had been fighting the rulers of the coast for more than forty years. First it had been the Sultans of Zanzibar. Now it was the British.

The British commander, **General Lloyd Mathews**, had been here before. Fourteen years earlier, he had besieged this same hill for eighteen days.

This time, the gun reached the top. It levelled the stronghold to the ground. Mathews himself was wounded in the shoulder.

Within months, Mbaruk and some three thousand followers had crossed into German territory. They never came home.

CHAPTER ONE

The Masters of Mombasa

For almost a hundred years, Mombasa had belonged to one family.

The **Mazrui** were Arabs from Oman. They came to the East African coast as governors for the rulers of Oman, and from **1741** they held Mombasa and its great Portuguese-built fortress, **Fort Jesus**.

Then they stopped taking orders. When a new dynasty, the **Busaidi**, took power in Oman, the Mazrui refused to accept it. Mombasa became, in effect, their own.

For decades the Busaidi tried to take it back. The Mazrui held on.

In **January 1828**, according to one account, the Mazrui signed a peace treaty with the Busaidi ruler, **Sayyid Said**. It did not last.

In **1837**, the Busaidi finally took Mombasa. The leaders of the Mazrui family were deported. According to one account, all of them died in prison.

The rest of the family fled. Some went to **Takaungu**, north of Mombasa. Others went south, to **Gazi**.

They had lost their city. They never forgave the men who took it.

CHAPTER TWO

The Son of the Governor

One of the Mazrui of Gazi was a man called **Mbaruk**.

He was the son of **Rashid**, the last Mazrui governor of Mombasa. According to one account, Rashid was deposed and murdered on the orders of Sayyid Said. According to another, he was deported with the other leaders and died in prison.

Either way, the Busaidi had destroyed his father.

Mbaruk grew up to lead the Mazrui of Gazi. And, in the words of one encyclopedia, he “never rendered tribute to the Busaidi, nor recognized their sovereignty over East Africa.”

The Busaidi, who now ruled from **Zanzibar**, tried to force him to submit, in the 1850s and again in the 1870s.

Both attempts failed.

CHAPTER THREE

Vanga

THE SOUTH COAST. 1870S.

Mbaruk made war the way the coast had always made war: with raids.

In **1871**, according to one account, he sacked and burned **Vanga**, the port of the district next to Gazi, and raided **Likoni**, just south of Mombasa. Another account dates his attack on Vanga to **1873**.

The Sultan sent Baluchi soldiers against him. They failed. In **1872**, he sent a larger force of **four hundred** men.

Mbaruk was not beaten. For thirty years, according to one account of the region's history, the country between Gazi and Vanga was "the most turbulent and least secure part of Mijikenda country," because of the constant fighting between Mbaruk and his neighbours.

The Sultan held the towns. Mbaruk held the bush.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Siege of Mwele

MWELE. 1882.

In **1882**, Mbaruk killed the Sultan's representative at Vanga. Then, according to one account, he looted and destroyed the town. According to another, he raided it with two thousand warriors. He had made allies among the Maasai.

The Sultan sent his new army against him. It was commanded by a British officer in the Sultan's service, **Lloyd Mathews**, with **1,200** men.

Mbaruk fell back to **Mwele**, his stronghold in the hills. It was surrounded by a stockade, and by pits full of sharpened stakes, hidden under a thin layer of earth and grass.

Mathews laid siege to it for **eighteen days**. Then he took it, and dismantled it. According to one account, he took four hundred prisoners.

Mbaruk survived.

He made his peace with the Sultan. He was allowed to go back to Gazi on his promise not to fight again. The accounts differ on when: one says he surrendered in **1884**; another, that he was reinstated at Gazi in **November 1885**.

It was a truce, not a surrender. And the coast was about to change hands again.

CHAPTER FIVE

The New Masters

MOMBASA. 1895.

By the 1890s, the Sultan of Zanzibar still ruled the coast in name. But the power was passing to the British.

In **1895**, Britain declared the **East Africa Protectorate**. The Sultan's coastal strip was run from Mombasa by British officials, who kept the Sultan's local governors, the *liwali*, in place.

For the Mazrui, it was the same enemy in a new uniform.

In **February 1895**, the liwali of **Takaungu, Salim bin Khamis**, died.

He was a Mazrui. The question of who would take his place would start a war.

CHAPTER SIX

Two Heirs

TAKAUNGU. 1895.

The British chose Salim's son, **Rashid**.

But there was another heir. His name was **Mbarak**. He was Rashid's elder cousin, and a favourite nephew of old Mbaruk of Gazi. By Mazrui custom, according to one account, he was senior, and his claim was stronger.

Mbarak refused to accept Rashid. He withdrew to **Gonjoro**, near Takaungu, with an army of retainers and a stock of ammunition. According to one account, his uncle at Gazi was secretly supporting him.

In **February 1895**, according to another account, Mbarak attacked the Zanzibari troops sent against him, under an officer named **Arthur Raikes**.

Gonjoro was destroyed. Mbarak and his brother **Aziz** fled south. They went to their uncle, at Gazi.

CHAPTER SEVEN

The Uncle Chooses

GAZI. 1895.

The British demanded that Mbaruk hand his nephews over.

He refused.

He had spent some forty years fighting for his family against the rulers of Zanzibar. He would not give up his own blood to the men who had taken their place.

So Mbaruk went to war one last time.

He and his nephews left Gazi for **Mwele**, the hill he had held against Mathews fourteen years before. According to one account, they left “a trail of destruction behind them.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

The Rising

THE COAST. 1895.

Others joined him.

Khamis bin Kombo, the Swahili chief of **Mtwapa**, joined the rising. So did **Tamim**, of the **Nine Tribes** of Mombasa.

The fighting spread along the coast, through the districts of **Vanga, Mombasa** and **Malindi**.

In **August 1895**, according to one account, Mbaruk's fighters attacked Vanga again. It was the most brutal of all his attacks on the town. Vanga was, in the words of that account, "all but razed."

The British had declared their protectorate only that year. Now the coast was in revolt.

CHAPTER NINE

The Gun on the Hill

MWELE. 1895–1896.

The British sent Lloyd Mathews back to Mwele.

This time, he brought the navy. Sailors and marines **dragged a seven-pounder cannon** through the woods and up the hill. They used it, according to one account, to level the Mazrui stronghold to the ground.

Mathews was wounded in the shoulder.

The accounts differ on when this happened. One puts it in **1895**. Another puts the final battle for Mwele shortly after **March 1896**.

Mwele was gone. But Mbaruk was not caught.

CHAPTER TEN

The Baluchis

MOMBASA. MARCH 1896.

In **March 1896**, a regiment of Indian soldiers arrived at Mombasa from Bombay: the **24th Baluchistan Regiment**, under **Lieutenant Colonel Alfred Pearson**.

They did not try to storm another hill. According to the regiment's record, they brought the rising under control "by occupation of food centres and relentless pursuit of insurgents by battalion columns."

The rebels could not eat. They could not rest.

They went south, towards the border.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Across the Border

MOA, GERMAN EAST AFRICA. 24 APRIL 1896.

South of Vanga lay the border with **German East Africa**.

Mbaruk crossed it. With him, according to one account, went some **three thousand** fighters and followers.

On **24 April 1896**, at **Moa**, on the German side, the rebels laid down their arms. They surrendered not to the British, but to the Germans. They were interned at **Dar es Salaam**.

In **July 1896**, the Baluchi regiment went home to Quetta. The British had their coast.

According to one account, a further amnesty was offered in **1909**. Mbaruk and his sons **Sebe** and **Ayub** chose not to return.

Mbaruk bin Rashid died on an estate outside Dar es Salaam in **1912**.

He never set foot in Kenya again.

Epilogue

Gazi and Takaungu. Today.

It is easy to tell Mbaruk's story as a story of Arab aristocrats fighting for their privileges, and there is truth in that. The Mazrui were a ruling family. Takaungu, in its best years, according to one account, grew rich on slave villages of three and four hundred people each.

But it is also the story of one of the first risings against British rule in what would become Kenya. The protectorate was barely a year old when the coast rose against it. It took a naval brigade, a cannon dragged up a hill, and an Indian regiment to put it down.

And it is the story of a man who, for more than forty years, refused to bow to anyone who ruled from somewhere else. The Busaidi could not make him submit. The British could not make him submit. He chose exile instead.

The Mazrui are still on the coast. Their land claims are still in the courts.

Mbaruk lies in Tanzania.

THE RECORD

NAME	Sheikh Mbaruk bin Rashid al-Mazrui, of Gazi
FATHER	Rashid, last Mazrui governor of Mombasa (fell 1837)
FAMILY	Mazrui, rulers of Mombasa and Fort Jesus, 1741–1837
EARLY WARS	Against the Sultans of Zanzibar: Vanga, Likoni, 1870s
FIRST SIEGE	Mwele, 1882: 18 days, against Lloyd Mathews
THE SPARK	Takaungu succession, February 1895
THE RISING	1895–96; Vanga, Mombasa and Malindi districts
BRITISH FORCE	Naval brigade, a 7-pounder, the 24th Baluchistan Regiment
SURRENDER	Moa, German East Africa, 24 April 1896
DIED	1912, in exile near Dar es Salaam

He never bowed to Zanzibar. He never bowed to Britain.

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.

LIPA NA M-PESA	
PAYBILL	522533
ACCOUNT	8129965
CLICK MTAA TECHNOLOGIES	

Asante sana.

— *Graham Kasindo*