

GIRIAMA, KENYA · 1913

MEKATILILI

*The Widow Who Led the Giriama
Against an Empire*



SHE WALKED HOME ACROSS KENYA TO FINISH THE FIGHT

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Cover design by Graham Kasindo. Cover photograph: Mekatilili wa Menza (colourised).

First edition, 2026

*“This is what you will get if you try to take one of our
sons.”*

— Mekatilili wa Menza, holding up a hen and her chicks, Chakama, 13 August
1913

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Prologue

CHAKAMA, GIRIAMA COUNTRY, NORTH OF MALINDI. 13 AUGUST 1913.

The British officer had called a *baraza*, a public meeting, and the people had come.

His name was **Arthur Champion**, and he was the Assistant District Commissioner. He had come for young men. The government wanted Giriama sons to work for it, and it wanted them to go wherever they were sent.

Standing in front of him was a widow. She was not young. She had brought something with her: a hen, and her chicks.

The accounts of what happened next don't agree on every detail. But in the version the Giriama have told for more than a century, she held up the hen and told the white man that this was what he would get if he tried to take one of their sons. The mother would fight for her chicks.

In one telling, Champion reached for a chick and the hen went for him. In another, the woman slapped him in front of everyone. In others, Champion shot the hen, and his men opened fire on the crowd.

What everyone agrees on is this. Within two months, the widow was under arrest and on her way to a prison hundreds of

kilometres away. Within a year, the Giriama were at war with the British Empire.

Her name was **Mekatilili wa Menza**.

CHAPTER ONE

Hair Like Sisal

She was born **Mnyazi wa Menza**, in the village of **Mutsara wa Tsatsu**, in the hills of what is now Kilifi County. Some sources say she was born in the 1840s; others, the 1860s. She was the only daughter in a family of five children.

She grew up in the time of the slave caravans.

According to accounts of her family, one of her brothers was taken by Arab slave traders. Different sources give his name as **Mwarandu** or **Ngumbao**. He never came home.

The Giriama had a prophecy about strangers who would come with “hair like sisal.” In her childhood, the strangers were slavers. By the time she was old, they were British.

CHAPTER TWO

Mother of Katilili

She married. Sources give her husband's name as **Dyeka wa Duka**, or **Mulewa wa Duka**. They had children. One son was named **Katilili**.

In Giriama custom, a mother can be known by her child's name. Mnyazi became *Mekatilili*: the mother of Katilili.

Her husband died, and she was widowed while still young.

In Giriama society, that changed things. Historians who have studied her life point out that a widow had a freedom that a wife didn't. She could speak in public. She could travel.

She would use both.

CHAPTER THREE

The Tax and the Sons

The British declared a protectorate over the region in the 1890s. By **1913**, they wanted three things from the Giriama.

They wanted **taxes**. A hut tax was collected, and in **June 1913** the Provincial Commissioner, **C. W. Hobley**, toured the Sabaki valley demanding taxes before the harvest was in.

They wanted **control**. Colonial rules put limits on the Giriama's trade in palm wine and ivory. In **May 1913**, the British set up headmen and councils in twenty-eight locations to run things their way.

And they wanted **men**: young men to work as labourers, on settler farms and for the government.

The Giriama had watched their sons taken once, by the slavers. They were not willing to watch it again.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Dance

GIRIAMA COUNTRY. MID-1913.

Mekatilili started to travel.

She went from village to village. And she danced.

The dance was the **kifudu**, the Giriama funeral dance, sacred, performed to send the spirits of the dead to the ancestors. When Mekatilili danced it, crowds gathered. When the crowds gathered, she spoke.

She told them not to pay the tax. She told them not to give up their sons. She told them not to obey the headmen the British had chosen.

She found an ally: **Wanje wa Mwadorikola**, a medicine man, described in some accounts as her son-in-law. Together they called a great gathering at **Kaya Fungo**, the Giriama's most sacred place, a forest shrine in the hills.

There, the Giriama took oaths.

Men swore the **fisi** oath, the oath of the hyena. Women swore the **mukushekushe**, which was considered even more serious. The oaths bound them to resist the British and to refuse to help them.

The British officer in charge would later report the effect: “Every Giriama,” Champion wrote, “is much more afraid of the kiraho than of the government.” The *kiraho* was the oath.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Hen

CHAKAMA. 13 AUGUST 1913.

Champion called his *baraza* at **Chakama**. He had come for labourers.

Mekatilili came with a hen and her chicks.

“This is what you will get,” she is recorded as saying, “if you try to take one of our sons.”

The rest of that day survives in several versions, and they cannot all be true.

In one, Champion grabbed a chick, and the hen flew at him. In another, Mekatilili slapped him. In others, told in Giriama accounts collected long afterwards, Champion shot the hen, and his bodyguards opened fire on the young men in the crowd, killing people who had come unarmed.

No version has the British officer winning the argument.

CHAPTER SIX

Kisii

17 OCTOBER 1913.

Champion reported the oaths. The government moved.

On **17 October 1913**, Mekatilili and Wanje wa Mwadorikola were arrested. They were sentenced to five years for sedition and sent into exile: not to a coastal jail, but to **Kisii**, in the far west of the country, hundreds of kilometres from home.

According to one account drawn from colonial records, each of them was given a hut, a blanket and ten cents a day for food.

In **December 1913**, the British closed Kaya Fungo.

They thought it was finished. The two leaders were on the other side of the country. The sacred place was shut.

It wasn't finished.

CHAPTER SEVEN

The Walk

KISII. 1914.

Mekatilili and Wanje escaped.

Sources disagree on the date. Several give **14 January 1914**. An account drawn from the historian **Cynthia Brantley**'s study of the Giriama puts it on **20 April 1914**. According to that account, the authorities assumed that the two of them would not survive the journey home.

They walked.

From Kisii to the coast is more than **seven hundred kilometres**. Some accounts say more than a thousand. They crossed the country on foot: an old woman and a medicine man, escaped prisoners of the British Empire.

They made it.

By the middle of 1914, they were back in Giriama country. And the resistance they had started had not gone away.

CHAPTER EIGHT

The Kaya Burns

KAYA FUNGO. 4 AUGUST 1914.

The British decided to destroy the resistance at its heart.

In **August 1914**, they came to Kaya Fungo. According to the account drawn from Brantley's study, they ceremonially blew up the entrance to the sacred forest and its main trees with dynamite, and burned the rest.

The next day, on the other side of the world, a much bigger war arrived. Britain was at war with Germany, and German East Africa was just across the border.

Now the British needed men more than ever: as soldiers, and as porters to carry loads for the army.

The Giriama would not give them.

Around the middle of **August 1914**, Mekatilili was captured again. This time, she was sent out of the country altogether: to prison at **Kismayu**, in what is now Somalia.

CHAPTER NINE

The War

GIRIAMA COUNTRY. AUGUST–OCTOBER 1914.

The Giriama rose.

The fighting lasted about a month. Accounts record attacks on the British; according to one, **Champion's camp was set on fire**. The British burned villages in return. People scattered. Crops were left in the fields, unharvested.

The historians who have studied the rising agree that the Giriama suffered far more than the British did. Nobody has an agreed figure for how many died.

In early **October 1914**, peace terms were reached, through a go-between, **Sheikh Fathili bin Omar**.

They were harsh. The Giriama were to pay a fine of **100,000 rupees**, about two goats or six rupees for every man. They were to hand over their weapons. They were to supply **1,000** men for labour. And they were to leave all their land **north of the Sabaki River**, some of the best farmland they had.

According to one account, only about **30,000** rupees were ever collected. Of the thousand men demanded for the war effort, **141** were delivered, and forty-three of them escaped.

The Giriama had lost the war. They had not given up.

CHAPTER TEN

The Return

The British could not rule the Giriama without them.

In **1917**, the Giriama were allowed back onto the land north of the Sabaki.

In **1919**, Kaya Fungo was returned to them. And in the same year, Mekatilili and Wanje were released.

How Mekatilili got out of Kismayu is part of the legend. Some accounts say she was simply freed. Others say she escaped again, “under unknown circumstances.”

Either way, she came home a heroine.

The British, having failed to crush the Giriama councils, now tried to work through them. Wanje became the head of the men’s council. Mekatilili was made head of a new women’s council at Kaya Fungo.

The woman they had exiled across the country was now part of the government of her people.

Epilogue

BUNGALE, NEAR MALINDI. ABOUT 1924.

Mekatilili wa Menza died around **1924**. Some sources say 1925.

The Giriama say she died at work, pounding grain. She was buried at **Bungale**, in the **Dakatcha** woodland, in the hinterland of Malindi.

The coast never forgot her. Every year, a **Mekatilili wa Menza festival** is held in her memory. In **2010**, the government recognised her as a national hero. On **9 September 2012**, a statue of her was unveiled in **Uhuru Gardens**, Nairobi. On **9 August 2020**, Google made her the subject of its home-page Doodle.

In **2026**, researchers working on the new Uhuru Gardens museum traced a photograph in a University of Cambridge collection, believed to be of Mekatilili herself, probably taken while she was in British custody. Local elders confirmed it by comparing her face with her granddaughter's.

In the photograph, she is looking straight at the camera.

THE RECORD

NAME	Mekatilili wa Menza, born Mnyazi wa Menza
BORN	1840s or 1860s, Mutsara wa Tsatsu, Kilifi
STAND	Chakama baraza, 13 August 1913: the hen and the chicks
OATHS	Fisi (men) and mukushekushe (women) at Kaya Fungo
ARRESTED	17 October 1913; exiled to Kisii
ESCAPED	1914; walked 700+ km home
WAR	Aug–Oct 1914; Kaya Fungo dynamited; land north of the Sabaki taken
SECOND EXILE	Kismayu, Somalia; home 1919
DIED	About 1924, Bungale, Malindi

She walked home across a whole country to finish the fight.

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*