

KISII, KENYA · 1908

MORAA

*The Gusii Prophetess Who Sent
a Spear Against the Empire*



SHE BLESSED THE SPEAR. SHE PAID THE PRICE.

GRAHAM KASINDO

M O R A A



K I S I I · 1 9 0 8

MORAA

*The Gusii Prophetess Who Sent
a Spear Against the Empire*

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

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*“Faced with an ultimatum by the invaders to give up her
nephew or witness the massacre of the people, Moraa
chose to save her people.”*

— Ukombozi Review, on Moraa Ng’iti

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Prologue

KITUTU, GUSIILAND. JANUARY 1908.

The warriors came to the old woman before they went to war.

She was **Moraa**, wife of Ng'iti: a medicine woman and a seer of the Abagusii. The young men gathered in front of her. At their head was her nephew, **Otenyo Nyamaterere**.

The British had come to Kisii. They had taken the people's cattle, thousands of them, and they wanted taxes on every hut. Moraa had seen all of it coming, her people said. Now she had seen what had to be done about it.

She blessed the warriors. According to one account, she gave them protective charms.

Then they went out to wait for the British officer the Gusii called **Nyarigoti**.

His real name was **Geoffrey Northcote**. He was twenty-six years old. Within a few days, he would have a Gusii spear in his shoulder.

And within weeks, the British would kill more than a hundred and fifty people, seize thousands of cattle, execute Otenyo in public, and cut off his head.

CHAPTER ONE

The Seer of Kitutu

Her name was **Moraa moka Ng'iti**: Moraa, wife of Ng'iti.

She belonged to the **Bogeka** sub-clan of **Kitutu**, among the Abagusii, in the highlands east of Lake Victoria. Nobody recorded the year of her birth. By 1900, she was already a grown woman, probably middle-aged.

Her husband, **Ng'iti**, was a well-known healer. Moraa was a medicine woman and a seer in her own right. Her people believed her medicine and her foresight helped them in their wars.

She was, by the accounts that survive, humble and wise, and unusually outspoken for a woman of her time.

And she was, her people said, a prophetess.

CHAPTER TWO

The Prophecy

The Abagusii had been warned.

Their great prophet, **Sakawa**, also remembered by the name **Eliamwamu**, had foreseen the coming of the white strangers. According to one account, he said they would “stay for some time, and then they will go.”

Moraa had her own visions. She prophesied, according to accounts of her life, the arrival of the colonisers, the loss of land, the seizure of cattle and the conscription of the young men to work.

According to one account, she also warned the Gusii leaders that one of their own elders would betray them.

Her people remembered all of it later, when it came true.

CHAPTER THREE

The First Expedition

GUSIILAND. 1905.

The British came in force for the first time in **1905**.

Accounts of that expedition differ on who led it. By one account it was a harsh officer named **Milton**, with the young Geoffrey Northcote along with him. By another, the Commissioner, **Sir Donald Stewart**, sent Northcote, then twenty-four, with a hundred levies and fifty policemen.

The expedition lasted about a month. According to one account, more than a hundred Gusii warriors were killed and thousands of cattle were captured.

It was the beginning.

CHAPTER FOUR

Nyarigoti

KISII. 1907.

In **1907**, the British built a government station at **Kisii**. Work began in **May**. Geoffrey Northcote came back, this time as the man in charge of the district.

He was born on **9 February 1881**. He was young, ambitious and hard. The Gusii gave him a name, **Nyarigoti**, and they regarded him as their mortal enemy.

In **December 1907**, the station began collecting the **hut tax**.

In early **1908**, the British raided the cattle camps of **Kitutu**. According to one account, they seized more than **eight thousand** head of livestock.

Kitutu was Moraa's country.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Blessing

According to the accounts of her people, it was Moraa who decided it was time.

“Agitated and encouraged by his aunt Moraa,” one account says, “Otenyo assembled the finest of the Abagusii warriors with whom they received blessings from Moraa before leaving to confront the British officers.”

Otenyo was a young warrior with a small daughter, **Bosibori**. He had survived the British attacks on the Kitutu cattle camps. He lived near his aunt.

The plan, according to one account, was simple: the warriors would waylay the British officers.

CHAPTER SIX

The Spear

NEAR RUGA. JANUARY 1908.

The attack came in the middle of Northcote's own punitive expedition, at a place accounts name as **Got Ong'ong'o**, near today's **Ruga** market.

Otenyo waited. When Northcote came, he struck.

The spear went down into Northcote's **right shoulder**.

The British officer survived. According to one account, he was badly wounded and kept out of sight for months as he recovered.

The date is recorded as **18 January 1908**. One account gives 12 January.

The Gusii thought they had killed him. They hadn't. And Northcote had already sent a message to **Kisumu**.

He wanted reinforcements.

CHAPTER SEVEN

The Reckoning

GUSIILAND. JANUARY–FEBRUARY 1908.

They came fast.

According to one account, the provincial commissioner, **John Ainsworth**, sent police reinforcements within days. Then a full punitive expedition was sent in, under **Lieutenant Colonel J. Mackay**. According to the same account, it had fourteen British officers, more than three hundred askari and fifty Nandi levies.

Its results, as recorded in that account, were **5,636** cattle and **3,281** sheep and goats taken, and more than **150** Abagusii killed. Other records give the final death toll as **160**.

CHAPTER EIGHT

The Choice

The British wanted one man: Otenyo.

And here, again, the accounts divide.

According to the Ukombozi account of Moraa's life, the British gave her a choice. "Faced with an ultimatum by the invaders to give up her nephew or witness the massacre of the people, Moraa chose to save her people. She and the Abagusii elders then gave up Otenyo to the colonial administration."

Other accounts say Otenyo was captured by the British in battle, in what is now **Manga**.

Either way, the British had him.

He was tried in public. He was executed by a firing squad at what is now the **Kisii Stadium**. Then his head was cut off.

According to several accounts, it was sent to Britain.

His headless body was left at a bridge in Kisii, riddled with gunshot wounds, as a warning. Gusii elders took it down and buried it on the **Manga** escarpment.

CHAPTER NINE

The Cell

Moraa was arrested too.

What happened to her next is, once more, told two ways.

According to one account, she was “detained at Kisii police station where she was tortured in an effort to coerce her to submit and cooperate with the colonial administration.” She would not.

According to another, the British let her go because she was too old to put on trial.

Either way, she outlived the war. She looked after Otenyo’s family after he died.

The British hadn’t finished with her family. In **1921**, her son, **Ongere**, was arrested and deported to **Kismayu**, the same prison on the Somali coast where Mekatilili had been held.

Northcote went on to a long career in the Colonial Service. In **1937**, he became Governor of **Hong Kong**. He died in England in **1948**.

CHAPTER TEN

The Songs

Moraa died in **1929**, of old age.

In Gusiiland, they sang about her. Many songs, her people say, have been composed in her honour.

Otenyo is remembered too. There is a shrine to him at **Manga**, in Nyamira County. In **2015**, Gusii elders formally demanded that Britain return his skull.

It hasn't come home.

Epilogue

Kisii. Today.

Kisii is a busy town now, the capital of its county. Its stadium is full on match days. It was once an execution ground.

Moraa wa Ng'iti was not a queen, or a chief, or a general. She was a wife, a healer and a seer. She had no army, only a nephew and the young men who trusted her.

Her people say she saw it all coming: the land, the cattle, the taxes, the forced labour. She sent the spear against it anyway.

And when the British demanded a price, by her people's account, she chose to pay it herself.

THE RECORD

NAME	Moraa moka Ng'iti, medicine woman and seer
CLAN	Bogeka, Kitutu, Abagusii
NEPHEW	Otenyo Nyamaterere
THE SPEAR	January 1908, Northcote wounded in the shoulder
REPRISAL	~150–160 Gusii killed; 5,636 cattle taken
OTENYO	Shot by firing squad, Kisii; beheaded
MORAA	Arrested; tortured or freed as too old (accounts differ)
DIED	1929
OTENYO'S SKULL	Never returned

She blessed the spear. She paid the price.

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
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CLICK MTAA TECHNOLOGIES	

Asante sana.

— *Graham Kasindo*