

MACHAKOS, KENYA · 1938

MUINDI MBINGU

*The Kamba Herders Who Marched
on Nairobi and Won*



THEY SAT DOWN UNTIL THE GOVERNOR LISTENED.

GRAHAM KASINDO

MUINDI MBINGU



MACHAKOS · 1938

MUINDI MBINGU

*The Kamba Herders Who Marched
on Nairobi and Won*

GRAHAM KASINDO

Copyright © 2026 Graham Kasindo
All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means without written permission from the author, except for brief quotations in reviews.

This is a work of narrative nonfiction. Events, names and quotations are drawn from public accounts.

Cover design by Graham Kasindo

First edition, 2026

*“Twenda kwikala ta maaui maitu, tuithye ngombe ta
maaui maitu, nundu nthi ino ni ya maaui maitu.”*

*We want to live as our grandfathers lived, and keep
cattle as our grandfathers kept them, because this land
belongs to our grandfathers.*

— Muindi Mbingu to Governor Brooke-Popham, Machakos, 1938

Contents

Prologue	8
CHAPTER ONE The Letter Writer	9
CHAPTER TWO Too Many Cows	10
CHAPTER THREE Liebig's	11
CHAPTER FOUR The March	12
CHAPTER FIVE Polo	13
CHAPTER SIX Our Grandfathers	14
CHAPTER SEVEN The Arrest	15
CHAPTER EIGHT The Cattle Come Home	16
CHAPTER NINE Lamu	17
CHAPTER TEN 1953	18
Epilogue	19
A Note from the Author	21

Prologue

KARIOKOR, NAIROBI. JULY 1938.

They came on foot, from the hills of Machakos.

Men. Women. Mothers carrying babies. Thousands of them, walking more than fifty kilometres to the capital of the colony.

They were Kamba herders, and the government had taken their cattle.

They didn't come with spears. They came with a demand: to see the Governor. When they reached Nairobi, they sat down on open ground near **Kariokor** and waited.

The Governor, **Sir Robert Brooke-Popham**, didn't want to see them. By one account, he preferred to go and play polo.

So they kept waiting. For weeks.

At their head was a former policeman, a man who wrote letters to the newspapers and knew how the colonial government worked. His name was **Samuel Muindi Mbingu**.

By the end of the year, the Kamba would have their cattle back.

And Muindi would be a prisoner on an island at the far end of the colony.

CHAPTER ONE

The Letter Writer

Samuel Muindi Mbingu was born, by one account, in **1893**. He came from the **Ngelani** area of Machakos, in the Kamba country east of Nairobi.

He went to mission school at **Kamuthanga**, and later to **Kabete Technical School**. He worked for the power company. For four years, he served in the colonial **police**.

He knew the system from the inside.

By the 1930s, he was a well-known figure in Ukambani: an eloquent speaker, and a prolific writer of letters to the *East African Standard*. He was a leader of the **Ukamba Members Association**, with **Elijah Kavulu**, **Isaac Mwalonzi** and **Simon Kioko**.

In 1938, all of it would be tested.

CHAPTER TWO

Too Many Cows

For the Kamba, cattle were more than food. They were wealth, marriage, inheritance and standing. A man's herd was his bank, and his family's future.

For the colonial government, the Kamba had too many.

Since the early 1920s, officials had worried about overgrazing and soil erosion in the Machakos reserve. In **1929**, the Agriculture Department reported that the land held about **245,000** cattle but could support only about **53,400**. Between 1929 and 1934, one report after another recommended *destocking*: cutting the herds.

But the Kamba had also lost land to white settlers. Their reserve was crowded because it had been made small.

The historians who have studied the crisis point out something else. Destocking, one says, was “the first step in a broader programme of cattle control” in the colony.

And someone was about to profit from it.

CHAPTER THREE

Liebig's

ATHI RIVER. 1937.

In **1937**, a meat-packing and canning company called **Liebig's** built a factory at **Athi River**, on the edge of the Kamba and Maasai grazing lands. It cost **£120,000**. It was designed to process **70,000** cattle a year.

It needed cattle. The Machakos reserve had cattle.

In **1938**, Governor Brooke-Popham introduced compulsory destocking in Machakos. Herds were counted. Quotas were set. Cattle were seized and sold, at prices below the market rate, and the factory at Athi River was waiting.

According to accounts of the time, more than **2,000** Kamba cattle were taken.

CHAPTER FOUR

The March

MACHAKOS TO NAIROBI. JULY 1938.

The Kamba asked to see the Governor. He refused.

So they went to him.

In **July 1938**, Muindi Mbingu led a march from Machakos to Nairobi. Accounts put the number of marchers at between **2,000** and **3,000**, and the distance at fifty to sixty kilometres.

They came from **Ngelani**, from **Koma Rock**, from **Mitaboni** and **Matungulu**. Old men, young men, and women, some of them nursing mothers with their babies.

In Nairobi, they camped on open ground near **Kariokor**, the old Carrier Corps depot, near the racecourse.

And they sat down to wait.

CHAPTER FIVE

Polo

NAIROBI. JULY–AUGUST 1938.

The Governor didn't come.

According to one account, Brooke-Popham preferred to play polo rather than meet the protesters.

The Kamba stayed. Days turned into weeks. Accounts of how long they camped range from one month to six weeks.

It was cold. According to one account, the Governor's wife saw the nursing mothers sitting out in the Nairobi chill, and was moved by it.

It was a peaceful protest. There were no spears and no riots, just thousands of people sitting on the ground in the capital of the colony, refusing to go home without their cattle.

According to one account, the pressure on the Governor mounted, including from outside Kenya.

Finally, Brooke-Popham agreed to meet them. Not in Nairobi, but at **Machakos**.

CHAPTER SIX

Our Grandfathers

MACHAKOS. AUGUST 1938.

At Machakos, Muindi Mbingu stood in front of the Governor of Kenya.

He handed over an **eight-page memorandum**. It demanded the unconditional return of the seized cattle, and it said the government, not the Kamba, should take responsibility for soil erosion.

Then, according to accounts of the meeting, he spoke to the Governor in **Kikamba**.

“Twenda kwikala ta maau maitu, tuithye ngombe ta maau maitu, nundu nthi ino ni ya maau maitu.”

We want to live as our grandfathers lived, and keep cattle as our grandfathers kept them, because this land belongs to our grandfathers.

On **25 August 1938**, the government announced an end to the compulsory sales. Destocking quotas remained, but the forced seizures were over.

CHAPTER SEVEN

The Arrest

SEPTEMBER 1938.

The government had given ground. It didn't forgive the man who had made it do so.

In the autumn of **1938**, Muindi Mbingu was arrested. The date is given as **17 September** in one account and **4 October** in another.

He was deported to **Lamu**, the island off the north coast of Kenya, hundreds of kilometres from Machakos.

He would be held there for years.

CHAPTER EIGHT

The Cattle Come Home

MACHAKOS. DECEMBER 1938.

On **2 December 1938**, the colonial government suspended compulsory destocking in Machakos “for an indefinite period.”

The seized cattle, about **2,500** of them, were returned to their owners.

A peaceful protest had forced the colonial government to back down.

The man who led it wasn't there to see the cattle come home.

CHAPTER NINE

Lamu

LAMU ISLAND. 1938–1940S.

Muindi Mbingu spent years in detention on Lamu. The accounts disagree on how long: seven years in some, eight in another. One account says he was not released until **1952**.

The reason for holding him so long is also disputed. According to one account, the colonial authorities later linked his words to the Governor about the grandfathers, *maau*, to the Mau Mau movement. That can't be the reason he was arrested in 1938, since Mau Mau didn't exist until the late 1940s. But it is how the story is told.

When he came out, the world had changed. Kenya was heading into the Emergency.

CHAPTER TEN

1953

What happened to Muindi Mbingu after his release is the least certain part of his story.

He died in **1953**, during the State of Emergency. That much is widely recorded.

How he died is not settled. Some popular accounts claim that the colonial government pressed him into working as an informer against Mau Mau, that this turned his old supporters against him, and that he was killed for it. No historian's published work that could be checked for this book confirms any of it.

The man who had led thousands of people in peaceful protest, and won, died in the worst years of Kenya's colonial war. The full truth of how he died has not been written down.

Epilogue

Muindi Mbingu Street, Nairobi. Today.

In the centre of Nairobi, a busy street runs past the City Market. It used to be called **Stewart Street**. Today it's **Muindi Mbingu Street**.

One writer says his story has “faded into obscurity.”

In Machakos County, there is a **Muindi Mbingu Secondary School**. On **Mashujaa Day** in **2016**, President **Uhuru Kenyatta** unveiled a bronze statue of him.

In 1938, thousands of Kamba walked to Nairobi and sat down until the Governor listened. They got their cattle back.

The man who led them paid for it with his freedom.

THE RECORD

NAME	Samuel Muindi Mbingu
FROM	Ngelani, Machakos
THE POLICY	Compulsory destocking, 1938; cattle to Liebig's, Athi River
THE MARCH	July 1938; 2,000–3,000 Kamba to Kariokor, Nairobi
THE CAMP	One month to six weeks
THE MEETING	Machakos; an eight-page memorandum
ARRESTED	17 Sept or 4 Oct 1938; deported to Lamu
THE WIN	2 Dec 1938: destocking suspended; ~2,500 cattle returned
DIED	1953, during the Emergency
REMEMBERED	Muindi Mbingu Street; statue, 2016

They sat down until the Governor listened.

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*