

NAIROBI, KENYA · 1922

MUTHONI

*The Woman Who Shamed the Men
and Faced the Guns*



SHE PULLED UP HER DRESS. THEY PULLED THEIR TRIGGERS.

GRAHAM KASINDO

MUTHONI



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and Faced the Guns*

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

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“You take my dress and give me your trousers. You men are cowards. What are you waiting for? Our leader is in there. Let’s get him.”

— Mary Muthoni Nyanjiru, Nairobi, 16 March 1922

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Prologue

POLICE LINES, NAIROBI. THURSDAY, 16 MARCH 1922.

The crowd had been outside the police station for two days.

Thousands of people: men, women, workers from the town, people who had walked in from Kiambu. They were there for one man, locked inside. His name was **Harry Thuku**.

A delegation had gone in to ask for his release. It came out with the answer. Thuku would not be freed. He would be tried.

The men at the front began to drift back.

Then a woman stepped forward.

Her name was **Mary Muthoni Nyanjiru**. In front of the whole crowd, she pulled her dress up over her head, the gravest insult a Kikuyu woman could give, and she turned on the men.

“You take my dress and give me your trousers,” she said. “You men are cowards. What are you waiting for? Our leader is in there. Let’s get him.”

The crowd surged forward.

The police opened fire. And from behind the crowd, from the verandah of the Norfolk Hotel across the road, according to Thuku himself, white settlers opened fire too.

Muthoni was among the first to fall.

CHAPTER ONE

The Telegraph Clerk

Harry Thuku was born in **1895** at **Kambui**, in Kiambu. He went to school for four years at the Kambui Gospel Mission.

In Nairobi, he learned to set type for a settler newspaper, the *Leader*. By **1918**, he was a clerk and telegraph operator in the government **Treasury**.

He was one of a new kind of African in the colony: a young man who could read and write English, who worked inside the government's own offices, and who could see exactly how the system worked.

What he saw, he didn't like.

CHAPTER TWO

The Kipande

After the First World War, life for Africans in Kenya got harder.

African men working outside the reserves had to carry the **kipande**, an identity pass that recorded who they were and who they worked for.

There was the **hut tax**, enforced since 1901. There was **forced labour**, demanded by chiefs for the government and for settler farms.

Thuku started organising.

CHAPTER THREE

The Association

NAIROBI. 1921.

First, with **Abdalla Tairara**, Thuku helped found the **Young Kikuyu Association**, one of the first organisations to speak for Africans in the colony.

Then, in **July 1921**, he went further. He founded the **East African Association**.

It was something new. Its members weren't only Kikuyu. It was, historians say, the first political organisation in East Africa to bring together Africans of different communities.

The Association campaigned against the kipande and against forced labour. Thuku held meetings, wrote letters and travelled.

Crowds came to hear him. The colonial government noticed how many.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Arrest

NAIROBI. TUESDAY, 14 MARCH 1922.

On **14 March 1922**, Harry Thuku was arrested, and taken to the police station on the edge of the town.

The government was worried by his growing support, and by how militant he had become. It wanted him gone.

Word spread fast. People began to gather outside the police station.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Oath

NAIROBI. WEDNESDAY, 15 MARCH 1922.

By the next day, the crowd had grown.

That evening, according to historians of the event, more than **two hundred women** took an oath. In Kikuyu custom, oathing was for men. These women swore it anyway, binding themselves to act together.

Among them, according to her story, was Mary Muthoni Nyanjiru.

She came from **Weithaga**, in Murang'a. She lived in Nairobi with her stepdaughter, **Elizabeth Waruiru**. She was a supporter of Harry Thuku and his Association.

Nobody recorded her age. Nobody recorded her birthday.

By the next evening, everybody would know her name.

CHAPTER SIX

The Dress

OUTSIDE THE POLICE STATION. THURSDAY, 16 MARCH 1922.

By the morning of 16 March, the crowd outside the police station had grown to, by some estimates, seven or eight thousand people.

A delegation of leaders went in to negotiate. They came back out and told the people what the officials had told them. Thuku would get a hearing. The crowd should go home.

Some of the men began to move away.

The women didn't.

They pushed forward, accusing the men of cowardice. And Muthoni did the thing that the crowd would never forget. She lifted her dress over her head, the act known in Kikuyu as *guturamira ng'ania*, an insult so grave it shamed every man who saw it.

"You take my dress and give me your trousers," she said, according to the accounts of what she said. "You men are cowards. What are you waiting for? Our leader is in there. Let's get him."

The crowd came forward, towards the station.

CHAPTER SEVEN

The Guns

The police and askari opened fire.

Muthoni was among the first to be killed.

The firing didn't only come from the front. According to Thuku, the white settlers at the **Norfolk Hotel**, across the road, fired into the crowd from behind while the police fired from the front.

Nobody is sure how many died.

The official figure was **21** Africans dead, four of them women, and **28** wounded. Other official figures put it at 25. According to one account, the Africans who worked in the mortuary counted **56**. Other estimates go higher still, to more than a hundred.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Kismayu

Harry Thuku was not tried in any ordinary court.

He was sent into exile. Not to a Kenyan prison, but to **Kismayu**, on the coast of what is now Somalia, then part of Kenya's Northern Frontier.

It was the same prison where Mekatilili wa Menza had been held, and where Moraa Ng'iti's son was sent the year before.

The East African Association was banned.

Thuku would spend **nine years** in exile. He was not allowed home to Kiambu until **January 1931**.

CHAPTER NINE

The Song

Muthoni was dead. But she wasn't forgotten.

The Kikuyu made a song about her. It was called **Kanyegenuri**. It remembered the woman who had shamed the men and led the crowd.

Years later, during the Emergency, *Kanyegenuri* became one of the songs of the Mau Mau. The colonial government banned it.

Muthoni is the only woman whose name was recorded from that day. The other women who died beside her are still unnamed.

CHAPTER TEN

The Other Harry Thuku

The man who came back from Kismayu in 1931 was not the man who had gone.

In **1932**, Thuku became president of the **Kikuyu Central Association**. But he soon broke with its more radical members, and in **1935** he founded a more moderate group, the **Kikuyu Provincial Association**.

When the Mau Mau war began, Thuku sided against it.

On **12 December 1952**, he broadcast a message: “To-day we, the Kikuyu, stand ashamed... because of the crimes perpetrated by Mau Mau.” In **January 1954**, he joined twenty-two other Kikuyu leaders in an appeal to renounce Mau Mau.

He became a coffee farmer at Kabete. In **1959**, he became the first African on the board of the Kenya Planters Coffee Union.

He lived to see independence. He died on **14 June 1970**.

The man for whom thousands had risked their lives in 1922 ended up on the other side from the fighters who sang *Kanyegenuri*, the song about the woman who died for him.

Epilogue

Central Police Station, Nairobi. Today.

The police station is still there, in the centre of Nairobi. So is the Norfolk Hotel.

There's a **Harry Thuku Road** in Nairobi now.

The two hundred women who took the oath, the four women who died, the dozens or hundreds of others shot outside the station: almost none of them have names in any record.

One of them does. She stood in front of a crowd, in front of the guns, and pulled her dress over her head.

And she told the men what to do.

THE RECORD

LEADER ARRESTED	Harry Thuku, 14 March 1922
HIS CAUSE	Against the kipande, forced labour and the hut tax
THE CROWD	7,000–8,000 outside the Nairobi police station
THE WOMEN'S OATH	200+ women, 15 March 1922
THE WOMAN	Mary Muthoni Nyanjiru, from Weithaga, Murang'a
THE SHOOTING	16 March 1922; police in front, settlers from the Norfolk behind (per Thuku)
OFFICIAL DEAD	21 (4 women)
OTHER COUNTS	56 (mortuary workers); estimates above 100
THUKU'S EXILE	Kismayu, 1922–1931

She pulled up her dress. They pulled their triggers.

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*