

KABETE, KENYA · 1892

WAIYAKI

The Man They Chained to a Flagpole



HE WELCOMED THE BRITISH. HE DIED AT KIBWEZI.

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WAIYAKI



K A B E T E · 1 8 9 2

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*The Man They Chained
to a Flagpole*

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

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*“Raiding and shooting natives” had “turned the whole
country against the White man.”*

— Sir Gerald Portal, on Fort Smith, February 1893

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Prologue

FORT SMITH, KABETE. AUGUST 1892. NIGHT.

The man chained to the flagpole was a leader of his people.

His name was **Waiyaki wa Hinga**. Two years earlier, he had welcomed the British to his country and given them land. Now he was their prisoner.

He had a wound in his head from a sword. According to one account, it was his own sword. An iron chain was round his neck. He was fastened to the pole where the flag of the **Imperial British East Africa Company** flew.

He was left there overnight. By some accounts, two nights.

Within weeks, he would be sent down the caravan road towards the coast, under guard. He would never reach it. He died at a place called **Kibwezi**, hundreds of kilometres from home.

The official record says he died of his injuries and illness.

His people say something else. They say that at Kibwezi, the British buried him alive.

CHAPTER ONE

The Muthamaki

Waiyaki's family, according to one researcher, came from Maasai country. His father, **Kumale ole Lemotaka**, came down from **Laikipia** and was taken in by a Kikuyu family, who gave him new names, including **Hinga**.

What *Hinga* meant is itself debated. By different accounts it describes someone guarded, who doesn't give away his secrets; or it was a Kikuyu term for a Maasai living among them.

His son became a **muthamaki**. The British would later call him a "Paramount Chief," but the Kikuyu had no single king. A *muthamaki*, as one writer explains, was "a spokesman, the chairman of a territorial unit and leader of his age-set" — one of many influential *athamaki*.

Waiyaki's country was in the south of Kikuyuland, around **Dagoretti** and **Kabete**, on the edge of the forest where Nairobi now stands. He was wealthy and powerful. According to one account, he had more than ten wives. His family, it's said, held land stretching from **Karura** to the **Ngong Hills**.

It was a frontier. And in 1890, the frontier came to him.

CHAPTER TWO

The Captain

DAGORETTI. 10 OCTOBER 1890.

The caravan that arrived at Dagoretti belonged to the **Imperial British East Africa Company**, a British trading company that had been given the right to run the region for the Crown. It was led by a young army officer on his way to Uganda: Captain **Frederick Lugard**.

Waiyaki met him.

It went well. A treaty was made. Lugard was given land at a place called **Kiawariua**, today's Dagoretti, where the company would build a fort.

Lugard liked the Kikuyu he met there. "I had no hesitation in trusting myself almost alone among them," he wrote, "even when at considerable distances from the camp. I found them honest and straightforward."

The deal was simple. The people would supply the fort with food, and the company would pay for it.

On **1 November 1890**, Lugard left for Uganda. He left a man named **George Wilson** in charge of the unfinished fort.

CHAPTER THREE

The Burning

It went wrong almost immediately.

The company's porters and *askari* began taking what they wanted. Wilson broke the terms Lugard had agreed: he demanded food instead of paying for it. Accounts say the garrison looted farms and molested women.

Waiyaki told his people to defend their dignity.

In early **1891**, his fighters attacked the fort at Kiawariua. According to one account, five members of the garrison were killed. The fort was burned. Wilson escaped by night.

A man helped him get away. His name was **Kinyanjui wa Gathirimu**, a distant relative of Waiyaki who had once worked for him as a servant. He had joined the company as a porter and translator. He would become the most important African ally the British had in Kikuyuland.

Remember his name.

The company held an inquiry. Wilson was found to blame and demoted.

CHAPTER FOUR

Fort Smith

KANYARIRI, KABETE. APRIL 1891.

The company came back.

In **April 1891**, an expedition under **Major Eric Smith** built a new fort near the old one, at **Kanyariri**. It was called **Fort Smith**.

This time the British meant to stay.

Waiyaki's forces attacked it and laid siege to it. The fort held.

Fort Smith sat on the road between the coast and Uganda. Caravans came and went. And the company men inside it went out into the countryside to get food, by trade when they could, and by force when they chose.

The fort still stands at Kabete today.

CHAPTER FIVE

Thirty Villages

GITHUNGURI. 14 AUGUST 1892.

In August 1892, the tension broke.

According to one account, Waiyaki warned the people of the villages around **Riuki** of what was coming. On **14 August 1892**, the British burned **thirty villages** in the **Githunguri** area.

The company's man in charge at Fort Smith was **Purkiss**. He called Waiyaki in to talk.

CHAPTER SIX

The Sword

FORT SMITH. AUGUST 1892.

What was said at that meeting is not recorded.

What happened is described in the accounts in roughly the same way. The talk turned into an argument. The argument turned into a fight. Waiyaki drew his sword and struck Purkiss, drawing blood.

Waiyaki was overpowered and disarmed. He was cut on the head. Several accounts say it was with his own sword.

He was arrested. The accounts differ on the date: **14 August** or **16 August 1892**.

He was beaten, and chained by the neck to the company's flagpole. He was left there through the night. One account says two nights.

CHAPTER SEVEN

The Road to the Coast

KABETE. 1892.

Waiyaki was sentenced to deportation to the coast.

Again, the dates in the accounts don't agree. One says he was sent off on **17 August 1892**. Another says **6 September**, from the courthouse at **Kabete**.

The caravan set off down the long road towards Mombasa. One account names the officer in charge as **Major H. H. Austin**.

Waiyaki had a head wound that hadn't healed. He was a prisoner, in chains, walking away from everything he had.

The caravan reached **Kibwezi**, about 378 kilometres from his home.

It went no further with him.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Kibwezi

KIBWEZI. 1892.

Waiyaki died at Kibwezi. That much everyone agrees on. Everything else is argued over.

The official story is that he fell sick, that his head wound kept him from going on, and that he died. He was buried, according to one account, in the cemetery of the Scottish mission station at Kibwezi.

His people's story is different. According to Kikuyu oral history, Waiyaki was shot and buried alive near **Kakangani**, in Kibwezi, across from where the police station stands today, by the railway crossing. Some accounts go further: that he was buried alive upside down.

According to one account, the British believed no one from the interior would ever learn what happened at Kibwezi. But, the story goes, scouts had followed the caravan, and they came home and told what they had seen.

No grave has ever been identified. No inquiry has ever been held.

In one account, Purkiss himself died at Kibwezi soon afterwards, on his way to the coast for leave.

CHAPTER NINE

Kinyanjui

Waiyaki was gone. The British needed someone else.

They chose **Kinyanjui wa Gathirimu**, the man who had helped Wilson escape the burning fort.

Kinyanjui had become the company's most useful ally: an intelligence agent, a supplier to the garrisons, a leader of punitive raids. He helped with the sale of land to white settlers from **1902**. In **1908**, the Protectorate made him a senior chief. After the First World War, he became the only Kikuyu ever to hold the title of **paramount chief**.

Waiyaki's family, according to one account, lost most of their land, without compensation.

In **February 1893**, just months after Waiyaki's death, the British envoy **Sir Gerald Portal** reported to his superiors that at Fort Smith "raiding and shooting natives" had "turned the whole country against the White man."

CHAPTER TEN

The Road

Today the name **Waiyaki** is on one of Nairobi's busiest roads.

Waiyaki Way runs west from the city centre through Westlands, towards Kikuyu and Limuru and the long road to Uganda — the same road that ran past Fort Smith.

His family did not forget him either. His great-granddaughter, **Wambui Otieno**, took the Mau Mau oath as a schoolgirl in 1952 and became one of the best-known women of the struggle for independence.

In **2014**, one hundred and twenty-two years after Kibwezi, his descendants asked the government to find and exhume his remains, give him a hero's burial and build a monument to him.

It hasn't happened.

Epilogue

Kibwezi. Today.

The railway runs through Kibwezi now. So does the road from Nairobi to Mombasa. Thousands of people pass through every day.

Somewhere near there, if his people are right, lies Waiyaki wa Hinga: the man who welcomed the British, who struck back when they broke their word, and who was chained to a flagpole for it.

Nobody knows exactly where.

In Kikuyu, it's said, *Hinga* means a man who does not give up his secrets.

Kibwezi has kept his.

THE RECORD

NAME	Waiyaki wa Hinga, muthamaki of southern Kikuyuland
MET LUGARD	10 October 1890, Dagoretti; treaty and land for a fort
FORT BURNED	Early 1891, Kiawariua (Dagoretti)
FORT SMITH	Built April 1891 at Kanyariri, Kabete
VILLAGES BURNED	30, Githunguri, 14 August 1892
ARRESTED	August 1892, after a fight with Purkiss
DIED	1892, Kibwezi, on the way to the coast
OFFICIAL CAUSE	Illness and his wound
ORAL HISTORY	Buried alive
GRAVE	Never found

Chained to a flagpole. Buried at Kibwezi. Still waiting for a grave.

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*