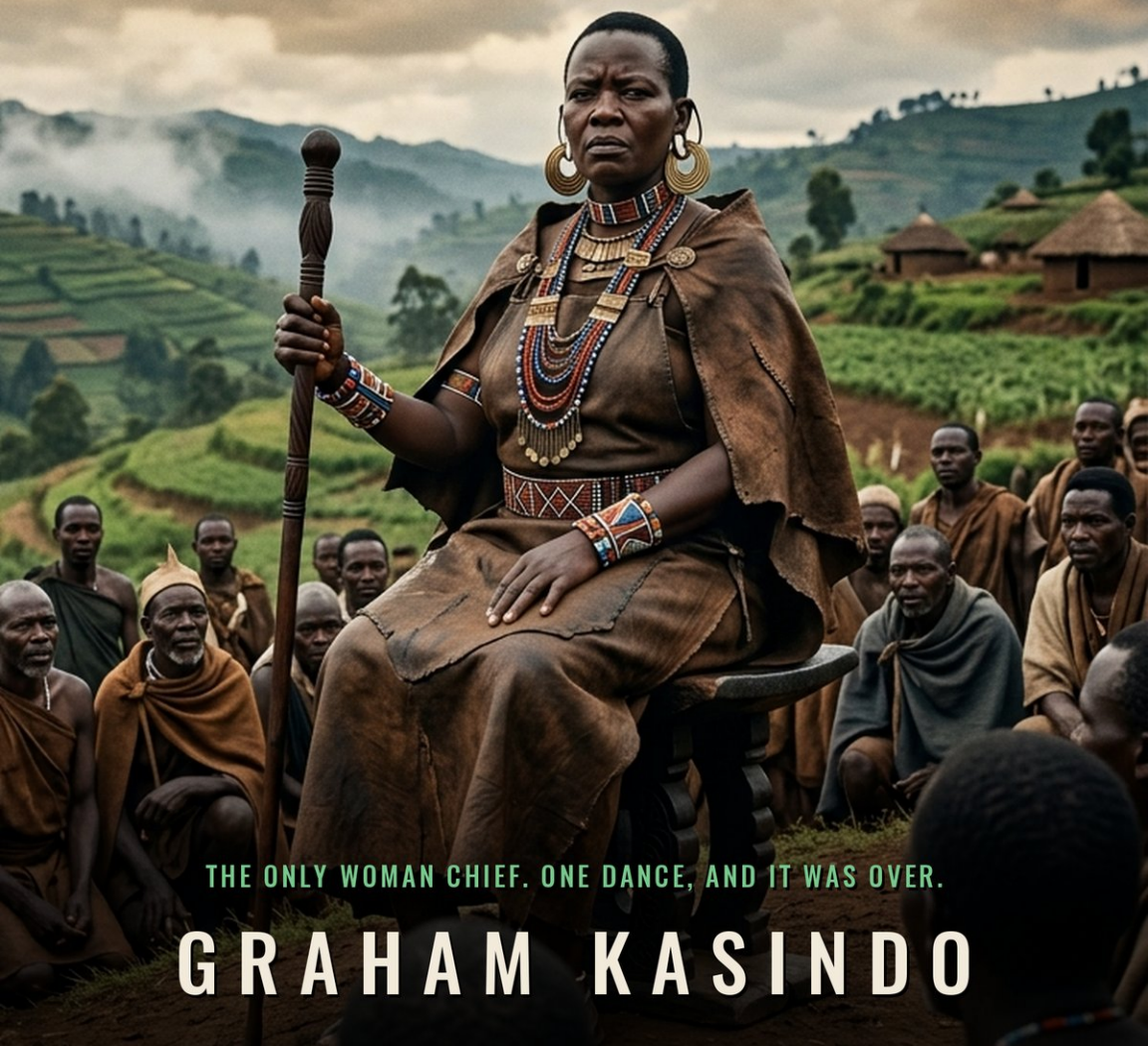


MASHUJAA · MURANG'A · 1909

WANGU WA MAKERI

*The Only Woman Chief, and the
Dance That Brought Her Down*



THE ONLY WOMAN CHIEF. ONE DANCE, AND IT WAS OVER.

GRAHAM KASINDO

WANGU WA MAKERI



M A S H U J A A

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Dance That Brought Her Down*

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

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Cover design by Graham Kasindo

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*“The first and only female headman of the entire
colonial period.”*

— Mary W. Wanyoike, *Wangu wa Makeri* (2002)

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Prologue

WEITHAGA, FORT HALL DISTRICT. 1900S.

The story everyone in Murang'a knows goes like this.

When the woman chief held court, she did not sit on a stool. A man knelt before her, and she sat on his back.

She collected the colonial government's taxes. Those who didn't pay were locked up. And the paramount chief who had appointed her was said to be her lover.

Her name was **Wangu wa Makeri**. She was the only woman to serve as a headman in Kikuyuland in the whole of the colonial period.

She held power for about seven years. Then, one day in June 1909, she danced a dance that no woman was allowed to dance, and it was over.

A century later, Kenyans still argue about her. To some, she was a pioneer, a woman who took power in a world that gave women none. To others, she was a harsh servant of the colonial state.

Both sides tell the same story about the seat.

Nobody can prove it happened.

CHAPTER ONE

The Farmer's Wife

Wangu was born around **1856**, in the village of **Gitie**, in what is now Murang'a. Her father was **Gatuika Macharia**; her mother was **Wakeru**.

She had no schooling. She worked on her parents' farm.

She married a man named **Makeri wa Mbogo**. They had six children. In Kikuyu custom, a woman could be known by her husband's name: she was *Wangu wa Makeri*, Wangu of Makeri.

For most of her life, there was nothing to mark her out.

Then the colonial government came to Murang'a, and brought a new kind of power with it.

CHAPTER TWO

The Paramount Chief

The British needed African allies to run the country for them. In Murang'a, then called **Fort Hall**, their most important ally was **Karuri wa Gakure**, whom they made a paramount chief.

He was powerful and wealthy. According to one account, he had sixty wives.

On his travels, Karuri camped at Wangu's village and stayed in her husband's home. According to the story told about them, Wangu brought him food: sour milk, fresh milk, meat.

The accounts agree on what happened next. Wangu and the paramount chief became lovers.

CHAPTER THREE

The Headman

Karuri needed headmen to rule each location under him, collecting taxes and supplying labour for the government.

According to the accounts of her life, he first offered the post in Wangu's area to her husband, **Makeri**. Makeri turned it down.

So Karuri offered it to Wangu.

She accepted.

The year is given as **1901** by her biographer, **Mary Wanyoike**, and as **1902** by other accounts. She became headman of **Weithaga** location.

She was, in the words of one account, “the first and only female headman of the entire colonial period.”

CHAPTER FOUR

The Tax Collector

The headman's job was to serve the colonial state.

That meant collecting the **hut tax** from her people. It meant providing men for labour when the government demanded it. It meant keeping order.

Wangu did all of it. The accounts of her rule describe her as harsh and authoritarian. She intimidated those who didn't pay. She had them locked up.

In **1903**, according to the accounts of her life, she sent her son to a mission school, one of the new schools the Europeans were building.

She was powerful, and she used her power.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Seat

And then there is the story of the seat.

At her *baraza*, her public meetings, it is said, Wangu refused to sit on a stool. Instead, a man would kneel before her, and she would sit on his back.

It is the most famous thing anyone knows about her. It is told and retold, and it has become a Kenyan joke.

It may even be true.

But it comes from oral tradition, not from any colonial record. And her biographer, **Mary Wanyoike**, in a study published in **2002**, set out to examine what she called the negative stereotypes that had grown up around Wangu, and how much of her story had been shaped by the tensions between traditional authority and colonial rule, not by her character alone.

Was she a tyrant, or a woman whose power made men uncomfortable, and whose story they told in a way that made her a monster?

The record can't tell us.

CHAPTER SIX

The Legend of the Women

There's an older story behind Wangu's.

According to a Kikuyu legend, there was once a time when women ruled the Kikuyu, and a woman named **Wangu** was their leader. The men, the legend says, overthrew them by getting the women pregnant all at the same time, and took power while the women could not resist.

It is a legend, and there is no evidence that it happened.

But when a real Wangu came to power in Weithaga, a woman ruling men, the old story was waiting for her. Her life has been told alongside it ever since.

CHAPTER SEVEN

The Kibata

FORT HALL. 2–4 JUNE 1909.

The end came at a dance.

Between **2 and 4 June 1909**, the **Kibata** was danced. It was a dance for men only, warriors' dancing.

Wangu joined in.

What happened next is told several ways. In one version, she danced naked. In another, her traditional skirt fell off as she danced. In another, male dancers cut it.

In every version, the result was the same: a woman had joined the men's dance, and had been seen naked in front of them.

For the Kikuyu of Weithaga, it was a scandal that could not be forgiven.

CHAPTER EIGHT

The Fall

Wangu was forced to resign.

Her power, which had come from Karuri, the colonial government and her own will, was gone.

She was replaced as headman by a man, **Ikai wa Gathimba**.

She had ruled for about seven years.

CHAPTER NINE

After

What happened to her after 1909 is not well recorded.

Even the date of her death is disputed. Some sources say she died in **1915**. Others say **1936**, when she would have been about eighty.

Her son, **Muchiri**, later became headman himself, of the same location his mother had ruled.

CHAPTER TEN

Heroine or Villain?

For more than a hundred years, the Kikuyu have argued about Wangu wa Makeri.

Some see a tyrant: a collaborator who helped the colonial state tax and control her people, and who humiliated men for the pleasure of it.

Others see a pioneer: a woman with no education who took power in a society where women had none, and held it for seven years against colonial officials and male elders alike. Today, she is often celebrated as one of the first women in Kenyan public leadership.

Both are probably partly true.

She was a woman of her time, working inside a colonial system she did not build, with the only tools that system gave her.

Epilogue

Weithaga, Murang'a. Today.

Every Kenyan knows the joke about Wangu wa Makeri and the men she sat on.

Very few know her name was Wangu, of Gitie; that she was a farmer's daughter with no schooling; that she ran a location for the colonial government for seven years; or that she lost it all for joining a dance.

History remembers her for a seat that may or may not have existed.

It might be fairer to remember her for the chair nobody else would let a woman sit in.

THE RECORD

NAME	Wangu wa Makeri
BORN	About 1856, Gitie, Murang'a
HUSBAND	Makeri wa Mbogo; six children
APPOINTED	Headman of Weithaga, 1901 or 1902, by Paramount Chief Karuri wa Gakure
DISTINCTION	The only female headman in Kikuyuland in the colonial period
RULE	Tax collector; described as harsh and authoritarian
THE SEAT	Said to sit on kneeling men; oral tradition, unverified
THE DANCE	The Kibata, 2–4 June 1909
REPLACED BY	Ikai wa Gathimba
DIED	1915 or 1936

The only woman chief. One dance, and it was over.

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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Asante sana.

— *Graham Kasindo*