

The (re)creation of a heroine: the case of Mekatilili wa Menza

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Introduction

In 2011 visitors to Malindi's Uhuru Garden, an open space near the town centre, could see a padlocked oval structure and, through its barred windows, an approximately life-sized human figure. In March the figure was totally wrapped in black, red and white cloth (figures 1 and 2). By August 2011 the head covering had been removed, and the figure "looks unmistakably a Giriama lady. She can clearly be seen by the public, smiling with a hen with chicks around her" (Robertson 2011). In front of the structure a large sign announced the renovation of Uhuru Garden (figure 3) but neither in March nor in August were there any signs identifying the figure. It had been installed on 20th October 2010, the first Mashujaa Day¹ under the revised Kenyan constitution. A newspaper story headed 'Mekatilili takes place of honour' includes a photograph of the figure (figure 4), and describes the event:

"A ceremony to honour Giriama heroine Mekatilili wa Menza dominated proceedings in Malindi yesterday. A statue was unveiled at the former Uhuru Garden of the woman who led the Giriama uprising against the British in 1913 and 1914. The garden was named Mekatilili wa Menza Garden in her honour. The celebrations continued overnight at the Madica Centre (Malindi District Cultural Association). In the morning, members of Madica and guests from Galana, Weruni and Godoma gathered at the Malindi Museum for a procession on Beach Road. The procession ended at Mekatilili wa Menza Garden where the statue was unveiled" (Nation 2010).

In the following pages we attempt to provide the background to this story, and to address some of the questions that it raises. Who was Mekatilili wa Menza, and what was her role in the

Giriama uprising? Why is she portrayed with a hen and chicks? What is the role of the Malindi District Cultural Association (hereafter referred to as MADCA) in contributing to her increasing prominence as Kenyan history is created and re-created on a local and national level? How is she portrayed, by different Kenya and foreign groups and individuals? It must be stressed that this is a preliminary report on a continuing story; the (re)creation of Mekatilili is very much a work in progress. We begin by looking at the variety of sources that provide information, opinions and interpretations of this woman who was a key figure in Giriama resistance to colonial rule nearly a century ago.

The sources

Primary sources are the Kenyan colonial archives of the second decade of the 20th century and oral sources. The oral sources include the transcripts of formal interviews, for example Cynthia Brantley's interviews with Hawe Karisa Nyevu Makarye and Ishmael Toya at Jilore on 14th and 15th December 1970 (Brantley 1981: 233, 271 and Brantley 1970a and b). Brantley also interviewed numerous other Giriama (1981: 173-175). Other authors cited oral sources but transcripts of the interviews are not now available. Temu draws heavily on what he describes as "oral traditions, records of which were collected during the 1968-69 vacations by two Giriama students" (Temu 1972: 217); his footnotes acknowledge particular individuals interviewed by the students. Elizabeth Nduaⁱⁱ thanks Reuben Kombe of Kaloleni for sharing his memories of Mekatilili with her (Ndua 2000: ix). Njau and Mulaki cite colonial records and an interview with "Mzee Elija Kalume of Jilore in Malindi District who says he knew Me Katilili [sic] and lived with her for a month as a young boy" (Njau and Mulaki 1984: 50). Other people tell of older family members who had stories about Mekatilili. Joseph Mwarandu, interviewed in

2009, said “Mekatilili is not a new subject to me particularly because my grandmother lived at the time when Mekatalili was alive and she lived at Garashi, and during the Giriama uprising she was a gal so she used to tell me about Mekatilili right at the time I was a young boy. But it didn’t occur to me that this was a very important person ...”. According to Mwarandu “basically all the Giriamas know about Mekatalili. What she did, where she was born, and what role she played in this country - they do not know” (Mwarandu 2009). As we shall discuss later, one of MADCA’s objectives is to increase Giriama knowledge of and pride in their culture and history, and making Mekatilili’s life and achievements widely recognized is an important part of this project.

Mwarandu sought out more oral narratives about Mekatilili in preparation for the first festival organized by MADCA:

“we were asking our members of our organization anybody who has information about Mekatilili wa Menza. Now luckily we got very close members of the Mekatilili family in our organization. So they told us everything, they said ok this one was born here, and her brothers were so and so and you know, where she got married and eventually where she died. That is how we got to know the site. So we reached both families, where she was born and where she was married, yes”. (Mwarandu 2009).

Mwarandu also acknowledged the information about Mekatilili that he obtained from Cynthia Brantley’s book and from other published sources. Ndua acknowledges Brantley as a major source (2000: viii); Njau and Mulaki cite colonial records and Thomas Spear (1978). Statements about Mekatilili’s life continue to circulate and re-circulate in speech and writing, so that it becomes very difficult to determine the ‘original’ source of particular parts of the narrative, which might be colonial archives from the early 20th century, interviews from the late 1960s and early 1970s (before written accounts of her life became generally available), or later interviews

with people who may or may not have read or been told about the written accounts of her life that have become available since the 1980s.

Since the establishment of MADCA in August 2003 and the inaugural Mekatilili Cultural Festival the following year, there has been a fairly steady stream of articles in the Kenyan press reporting on MADCA, the run up to and events of the festival. Other articles deal with broader issues of cultural and environmental conservation, particularly with reference to the kaya forests, the ‘sacred groves’ of the Giriama and their eight related Mijikenda groups. These articles draw on a variety of sources (for example Caplan (2008) refers in detail to Ndua and Njau and Mulaki’s books) and present a variety of points about Mekatilili, mostly uncited and some internally inconsistentⁱⁱⁱ. Mekatilili has even earned an entry in Wikipedia (2011). We also have access to informal reports of our own and others’ visits to the Kenya coast, and to the various statements issued by MADCA, as well as the transcript of a lengthy interview with Joseph Mwarandu in July 2009 (Mwarandu 2009). From these sources we have attempted to unpack the different strands that make up the image of Mekatilili, and show how it continues to evolve. We begin with a short account of the key events of 1913 and 1914, drawing mostly from Brantley’s work (1973, 1981, 1986).

The Giriama uprising of 1913-1914

In the early years of the 20th century many forces were putting Giriama society in a state of flux, among them the breakdown of the indigenous governance system. The last ruling generation had taken power in the 1870s, but by 1900 the conditions for an orderly transfer of power to the subsequent generation no longer applied. Giriama leadership was weakened and divided, with tensions between younger and older men and between representatives of the

indigenous governance system and British-appointed headmen. At the same time, the British were putting increasing economic pressure on the Giriama, through taxation, attempts to control trade in palm wine and ivory, and by the recruitment of young men to work on plantations and public works projects.

As Giriama resistance to these demands hardened, Mekatilili's voice began to be heard. She played a major part in a key meeting held in Kayafungo, the ritual center of the Giriama, in July and August 1913, where she "led the discussions and [she] complained first about labour demands and then about the jurisdiction of the traditional elders being undermined. She indicated that vital customs were being spoiled and that wages which headmen received gave the government the belief that they could demand labour" (Brantley 1986: 340). And she further added "we are not to fear the Europeans". This meeting concluded with the swearing of powerful oaths that effectively prevented all Giriama from all co-operation with the colonial administration.

Mekatilili's public role in Giriama society was limited to a few years; colonial records show that she was arrested in October 1913 and sentenced to five years' detention. She and Wanje wa Mwadorikola, a male leader of the Giriama resistance, were deported to the far west of Kenya but escaped a few months later and found their way back to the coast, where they continued to organize against colonial rule before being recaptured. Kayafungo was destroyed by the colonial forces on 4th August 1914, but in the years that followed, the Giriama were allowed to regain it as their ritual center and in 1919 Wanje and Mekatilili were permitted to return from detention and move into the kaya as leaders of the men's and women's councils respectively^{iv}. A recent source (MADCA 2011) puts her death as late as the 1970s but a date in the 1920s (MADCA 2010) seems more probable.

Opinions differ as to the impacts (short, medium and long-term) of the Giriama uprising. According to Brantley, in the short term “The British won the war against the Giriama, and the Giriama were forced into a stringent peace settlement”, though in the medium term “the British government removed land restrictions and lightened labor demands. In this policy reversal the Giriama achieved the main goals for which they had originally fought” (1986: 152). In the longer term, the virtual withdrawal of the colonial administration from the Giriama hinterland may have contributed to its isolation and economic stagnation “As the colonial economy passed them by, the Giriama were left to become small-scale producers. Their local economy became subordinated to the colonial economy but was not linked to it in any productive way” (ibid.). Those who have traveled in the Giriama hinterland, including Mekatilili’s burial site at Bungale, can testify to the sense of isolation and rural poverty that hangs over these areas, a striking contrast to the bustling tourist centres of Malindi and Watamu.

Key issues: economic and socio-cultural

All sources agree that Mekatilili was motivated by the major economic and social changes that were being forced on the Mijikenda in the opening decades of the 20th century. She was particularly articulate about the issue of labour recruitment; according to Brantley “she wanted to prevent Giriama men from laboring for the British” (1981: 85) while the colonial officer Arthur Champion provided details of her words to a meeting of Giriama “[she] told them that the Government headmen had received each 1,000 R to sell young men to the Europeans, that the Europeans would send them over the sea and they would be sold as slaves and never see their native land again”^v. Her strong feelings on this issue have been linked to a personal tragedy. According to MADCA (2010) one of her brothers was captured in front of her eyes by Arab

slave traders. Ndua has a slightly different version, telling how Mekatilili's husband was "stolen to work in a British plantation far away" (2000: 36). Mekatilili's concern for the Giriama youth is vividly expressed in the 'hen and chicks' narrative that we discuss in a later section.

Mekatilili's message also had strong socio-cultural elements, including the desire for a return to the 'traditional' Giriama governance system, and thus resistance to the authority of the British-appointed headmen; she "directly accused headmen of being traitors to the Giriama in order to get rewards" (Brantley 1981: 85). Brantley refers to her "anguish over the growing disintegration of Giriama society that led her to try to convince others to do something about it" (ibid. 87). Seeing the Europeans as a disruptive threat, she "called upon the Giriama to save their children – sons and daughters – and to end the conflict between elders and youth" (339). Furthermore, "She wanted a revival of the *kaya* and the traditional *kambi*^{vi}, a return to the many customs which had been "spoiled" and an absolute rejection of British demands for Giriama labor" (ibid. 87-88).

A Mijikenda scholar has expressed this explicitly: "What concerned [Mekatilili] most was that the *Midzi-chenda* [Mijikenda] codes of socio-political stability, economic foundations and religious potentiality were being undermined and uprooted" (Chidongo n.d.). Other sources have described a broader social and political agenda, including resistance to the payment of hut tax (Ndua 2000: 38) and to the colonial attempt to deny the Giriama access to land north of the Sabaki river (ibid. 43). More recently she has been described as "standing tall as the first Mau Mau (freedom fighter) in Kenya" (MADCA 2011) and as an activist who "advocated freedom and basic human rights to all" (MADCA 2010). We return in our concluding paragraphs to a consideration of what she means in modern Kenya.

Mekatilili's charisma

All accounts of Mekatilili describe her as charismatic: according to Brantley, “Her legitimacy must have emerged entirely from her charisma. She was an effective and emotional public speaker, and as she began to publicize the injustices she felt, she found many Giriama who agreed with her” (87-88). One of Njau and Mulaki’s Giriama informants tells how she “was highly feared and also respected because of her strength of character and dedication ... If she was alive today, many people would vote her into parliament” (51). Ndua stresses Mekatilili’s bravery, oratorical power and charisma “She had a spirit in her like a fire that would not be put out ...” (40).

Mwarandu goes into more detail about her sources of influence:

“Well, she must have been a very special person, I think. Because she was charismatic, and she had all the qualities of a good leader, and people used to listen to her - despite the fact that the Giriama at that time it was very difficult for them to listen to a woman because of gender differences. This one was a particular person, she had all the qualities of a good leader and she did it in a very tactful way, because she used to dance the Kifudu, you know the kifudu^{vii} is the mother of many dances in Giriama ... Now it was normally done during funeral ceremonies but she used to dance without the funeral ceremony, she used to dance from one village to another and when she dances this the ladies would follow her and men would be interested also. So after the Kifudu sessions, then she would preach to them, tell them ‘you see, this and this has happened and I object and I don’t think this is good for our society’ and she went on preaching like that. Then her word spread and her word was taken for it. Men had accepted her as a leader” (mwarandu 2009).

Mad? Witch? Prophetess?

Charles Hopley, who was the coast provincial commissioner from November 1912 to 1919 (and thus Arthur Champion’s superior), lays most of the responsibility for Giriama resistance to colonial labour and taxation policies to “an old blind rascal named Ngonyo” who “instigated a half-mad woman named Katilili to tour the country preaching active opposition to

Government” (Hobley 1929, 1970: 165). Champion is said to have described her as a witch (Njau and Mulaki 52-63, quoting Kenya National Archives PC/Coast/1/17/4), but the Giriama have a different interpretation of the source of her power. She has been described as a prophetess who “gave additional force to the oath in spreading the gospel of violence” (Temu: 232), though there is doubt as to the role she played in the administration of the powerful oaths that according to Brantley, were designed “not to fight the British but to try to win back those Giriama who had transferred their loyalties to the British – in short, to subvert the British efforts, in favor of Giriama government, culture and independence” (1986: 87). In this context Brantley quotes a contemporary Giriama source, one of the women who did “lay” the Mukushekushe women’s oath in 1913, saying that:

“Mekatilili’s business was to gather the people to checkmate the government’s request for labour. She was not however at the oath, nor is she one of our chief women. She was in the *kaya*, but her grade is too low to permit of her taking part in the oath” (1986: 86).

This differs markedly from a more recent Giriama narrative that Mekatilili “went to meet with Makaya elders to prepare for the oath (*Kiraho cha Mukushi*) for young adult and elderly men: to be religiously empowered in order to resist the British imperialism” (Chidongo, n.d.).

Chidongo is a Mijikenda Protestant priest who has studied inter-religious dialogue between Christianity and the indigenous Mijikenda religion. His account of Mekatilili describes her as “someone who received special favors from God and the ancestors” and who “received divine wisdom, boldness and courage which enabled her to challenge men to come forward and resist the British demands that interfered with the Midzi-Chenda way of life”, and indeed “was led to receive divine revelations from *Mulungu* (God) in order to educate the Agiriama [Giriama] to struggle for their independence ... She received divine insight and would tell the

Agiriama warriors when and where the British police (shikari) would come to invade their villages” (Chidongo n.d.). Others have seen her inspiration as coming from an earlier, more shadowy Giriama woman, the prophetess Mepoho or Mipoho.

Mekatilili and Mepoho

A number of Kenyan ethnic groups have traditions of ‘prophets’ who in the centuries or decades before the imposition of colonial rule spoke of ‘white strangers’ and ‘iron snakes’ that would appear and signify catastrophic events. Several of these prophets were women, among them Syokimau of the Akamba and Mepoho of the Giriama (Njau and Mulaki). The sources available to us show Mekatilili as drawing on the Mepoho narrative and also being interpreted by others in the context of this narrative. Brantley describes Mekatilili as drawing on Mepoho’s predictions, “that just as Arabs had vessels which traveled on the water, white men would come and travel just as fast on land, and even in the sky. The Giriama would no longer bear big children and the land would go bad. Youth would disobey and disrespect their elders. Boys would take snuff and chew tobacco, girls would marry young, and elders would no longer be able to exercise their power” (Brantley 1986: 338-339). Temu provides a further element to the Mekatilili – Mepoho link, telling how before Mepoho disappeared “she promised to return to get rid of the white man and to restore fortune and prosperity. The Giriama therefore saw the emergence of Me Katilili as the second coming of Mipoho [sic]” (233)^{viii}. Her disappearance has been described in this way “During a spiritual dance Mepoho sank with the ground and that was end of her. This site can be seen as Waruni Kaloleni near the Kaloleni women’s hall at Kaloleni trading center” (Mwarandu 2008).

Ndua is even more explicit in linking Mepoho and Mekatilili; her book begins with an account of Mepoho's prophecy that includes the statement that "a girl would be born in Kaya Giriama who would become a great leader. She would bring victory to the Giriama against a powerful enemy" (Ndua: 1-2). The relationship between these two women becomes even closer in the minds of young Giriama who have a limited knowledge of the traditions and history, leading to the perception that Mekatilili and Mepoho were one and the same. According to Brantley, this was believed by some of the people she interviewed, as long ago as the early 1970s (1986: 339), and Mwarandu repeated this opinion in 2009. However, recent efforts by MADCA to conserve the Mepoho site at Kaloleni (see below) may make the distinction between the two women more generally known.

'She feared no man': Mekatilili as a feminist icon

All who have written and spoken about Mekatilili have addressed the question of how a woman could play such a major part in events in a place and at a time when women's participation in public life was very limited. While Njau and Mulaki refer to the "generalized and distorted image of the African woman" (1) in African history, implying that women had a more prominent role in community life than is generally portrayed, most scholars would agree that prior to colonialism, Giriama society were extremely gerontocratic, with control of resources and most power in the hands of mature men, in particular the members of the *Gohu* and *Vaya* semi-secret societies. Women and young men acted as sources of labor for the household production units controlled by heads of household. Interpretations of Mekatilili address the contrast between the socio-cultural context of the early 20th century and her achievements in different ways. Njau and Mulaki use her story (and those of nine other women leaders from different parts of Kenya)

to show how “in many societies in Kenya, women were the backbone of the resistance movement against land alienation during the colonial era” (1). Drawing on accounts from Giriama informants, they describe Me Katilili wa Menza [sic] as a woman of strong personality who “She had power to order women to go round collecting fowls and goats to be eaten by the elders of the *Kaya* and the medicine men and no one dared turn down any of her request” (51).

Mwarandu told a similar story:

“but I think there is a story in Giriama that she didn’t care not a lot about what that [accepted gender roles] meant. She never gave up to what I call the supremacy of men. Because, I think it was at the time when she was very active, she would come to your home and talk to the head of that household and ordered them to carry things for her. For example, if she had been collecting vegetables and so forth in a basket, she would come to your home, she would order the man who is in charge of that home, to carry that basket to wherever she went and many never dared to say no. This is a story that all the Giriamas know” (Mwarandu 2009).

At the same time there were limits, which appeared when she is said to have approached the Vaya secret society “This society never admitted and still does not admit female members. Mekatilili wa Menza sought admission but her request was declined despite the service she delivered in the community” (Mwarandu 2008).

In the books written for Kenyan schools, the authors negotiate the balance between ‘feminism’ and ‘tradition’ in different ways. Ndua’s narrative includes many references to Mekatilili’s independence, anger, strength and “spirit in her like a fire that would not be put out” (40) but at the same time demonstrates her respect for Giriama tradition in the account of the preparation for Mekatilili’s marriage. Ndua describes the young woman as “not entirely happy” and wishing she could choose her own husband, but submitting to the customs of the Giriama as she prepares to marry the man identified for her by her parents (Ndua 2000: 33)

Orchardson-Mazrui's book^{ix} (1999) is introduced by the author as “an imaginary story about an eleven year old girl called Mekatilili or Menyaziwa. This imaginary girl is named after a real Mijikenda woman whose name was Mekatilili wa Menza”. The story is set in the late 19th and early 20th centuries and describes Mekatilili's early childhood, her kidnapping by men working for white missionaries, her escape and return home. While describing ‘traditional’ Giriama society vividly and respectfully, the author also depicts her heroine as questioning some of its practices, as in her questions to her mother “Why do girls always have to be the ones to stay at home, Mama? Why do girls have to be the ones to fetch water and collect firewood and cook? Can't boys do these duties as well?” (15). Most explicitly, and linking Orchardson-Mazrui's fictional Mekatilili to the historical figure, towards the end of the book the young girl is looking confidently towards the future with a girl friend who doubts that women can be leaders, telling her “Who says that boys and men are the only people who can be leaders? I know that nothing will stop me from becoming a leader. And nothing should stop you too. We will both become good leaders” (128).

MADCA and Mekatilili

Much, if not all, of the attention paid to Mekatilili over the last few years has been due to the activities of MADCA, the Malindi District Cultural Association, which was founded in August 2003, and is discussed in more detail elsewhere (Nyamweru 2010). One of its founders, the Giriama lawyer Joseph Mwarandu, has described the objectives of the association as “Tracing Roots of the Mijikenda and Coastal Communities and using History and culture as a component in Development and Policy making process” (Mwarandu n.d.). From Mwarandu's accounts, it appears that he and his fellow founders did not specifically have Mekatilili in mind

when the association was founded, but that the idea came some months later as they prepared to mark MADCA's first year of existence:

“So we thought, what do we celebrate at one year? Well we said look, there is this lady Mekatilili wa Menza, she is forgotten, nobody knows about her. Suppose we have a cultural festival that will be in her memory- this will be a great thing. So we said ok. In order to keep her history and maybe to keep her spirit alive we should organize a Mekatilili wa Menza cultural festival. That is how we got that...Yes; now when we were one year old, we were going to have an anniversary. But then we said, what are we going to celebrate on? There wasn't much progress, so we said instead of that we take on this Menza cultural festival and we take on a date when the first - when the Giriama uprisings started. In August 1913. So we took that one as the date for the festival, now we are saying - we are now celebrating our first anniversary and also remembering this heroine who did a lot of things for the Giriama people” (Mwarandu 2009).

Though Mwarandu describes Mekatilili as “forgotten, nobody knows about her” at the time of the first festival in August 2004, in fact by that time she had been the subject not only of scholarly research several decades earlier (for example by Temu and Brantley) but had featured prominently in the popular Kenyan literature cited above^x (Njau and Mulaki, Ndua and Orchardson-Mazrui). Mwarandu himself recognizes the debt he owes to Brantley's research, as well as oral information he had collected from other sources including members of Mekatilili's family (Mwarandu 2009)^{xi}.

Mwarandu's picture of Mekatilili brings together divergent strands: a woman who rejected accepted gender norms and advocated for the rights of children and the youth and at the same time acted as a champion of Mijikenda 'cultural rights' (Mwarandu 2008). His legal training and perspective may have contributed to his representation of Mekatilili as a fighter for 'basic human rights' and his suggestion that, despite being an illiterate woman, she was driven by the concept of justice:

“I think she was driven by this concept of justice. And justice is informed. Everybody has a notion of justice. If things are happening in a way they

shouldn't, you say 'ok this is not good enough', but we are realizing that somebody is doing injustice. It is somebody with a lot of courage to come up and say 'no, I don't like this', so she was, in my view, a person with a very great courage. Huge courage. That she would stand before men and say 'I object'. You see? But justice in respect to where you come from, or what type of education you have, your understanding in life or your status - justice is there. And her notion of justice would be, things belong the way she has seen them run all through her life, and if things are not run the way she knows then she sees something wrong with that" (Mwarandu 2009).

Evolution of the Mekatilili narrative in recent decades

One element of the Mekatilili narrative that has developed, at least since the 1970s when Brantley was doing her fieldwork, is the identification of Mekatilili as the central figure to challenge the colonial administrator Arthur Champion, known to the Giriama as Chembe, in the 'hen and chicks' confrontation. In a MADCA publicity circular produced before the 2009 festival, the event was described in this way:

“On 13/08/1913 at a public baraza Mekatilili wa Menza refused to allow the British colonial administrative officer enlist [sic] Giriama youth and in demonstration challenged Arthur Champion to take away a chick from its mother. When he did so the mother then became furious and fought back” (MADCA 2009).

This version has no further mention of Mekatilili's contribution at this event, but a later communication from MADCA goes into more dramatic detail:

“On the eventful day, Makatilili took a hen and her little chicks. She then traveled to Chakama to meet Chembe "kwa Hawe Wanje" (the homestead of Hawe Wanje where the public meeting was to be held). She arrived when the meeting had already started and after listening to the demands made by the colonial administrator, she came forward and engaged him into a duel. She pointed out that no Giriama youth would go into military service for the white man. She demanded to know where her brother and son were after being captured. All was quiet at the gathering. One would have sensed the faint thump of a falling pin. All warriors present held their breath. Mr. Chembe, not knowing who Mekatilili was brushed her comments aside but the iron lady held her position and firmly demanded an explanation.

Seeing the arrogant attitude of the administrator, she methodically bent low and released the hen and its chicks (she had been carrying it on her back like a baby). She then challenged Chembe to pick one of the chicks and observe what the mother hen would do. This open challenge irritated Chembe who asked one of his armed guards to pick a chick. On doing so, the mother hen noticed the move and ferociously attacked the enemy who let the chick go off! Chembe realized that he was not facing an ordinary woman. Annoyed by the show down, he pulled out his gun and shot the hen. He then brutally commented "that those who refused would face the same fate".

Mekatilili swiftly moved in and hit Chembe in the face so strongly that he fell down. Now another guard who knew Mekatilili wa Menza nervously pulled the trigger of his gun and shot one of the Giriama warriors standing nearby. This ignited the charged crowd and war broke immediately" (MADCA 2011).

In contrast are the narratives of two of Brantley's informants, interviewed in 1970: I quote from the transcripts made available to me from the archives of the University of California (Davis) by kind permission of Professor Brantley:

"The Europeans had camped at marafa at Ngonyo's, yes, they wanted people to be carriers to go and fight somewhere. And the Giriamas said, who will give his son away to go and be killed? Try taking the chicks. Chembe took a chick and then the hen flapped and then attacked Chembe. And then the Giriama said, do you see what the hen has done. If you take our sons we will do the same ... and this is the cause of the war" (Brantley 1970a).

And, from another sources:

"Giriama say suppose you take chick. Champion says the hen would not agree to me taking the chicks. Giriama say we also do not agree. No one will give you their children. And Champion said if the hen makes trouble, and I shoot the hen, then I get the chicks. And the Giriama said, then you take the chicks and Champion said that is what I will do. And that is how the war started at Vitengeni" (Brantley 1970b).

Although Brantley's sources agree on the importance of this confrontation as triggering the subsequent conflict, neither of them specifically mentions Mekatilili as having been present or challenging Champion, referring instead to 'the Giriama' in general.

These transcripts also contain comments about Mekatilili's role in the uprising: "Wanje wa Madori and Mekatilili did not play any part in organizing the Giriama to resist the Mzungu. Let me explain. This is because in those days the Giriama were very independent minded and they wouldn't take orders from anybody" (Brantley 1970b: narrative of Ishmael Toya).

Interviewed with Ishmael Toya, a local subchief (Daniel Ngumbao) had more to say:

"Let me answer your question about Mekatilili in a different way. She was a woman who had the power of prediction. She predicted that you would be seeing vessels passing in the air, in the ocean, see a little kid taking snuff, but Mekatalili did not lead the resistance against the Mzungu it was all of the Giriama who refused to give their children to the Mzungu so that he could fight the Germans. Each man individually refused to give their child to fight the war" (Brantley 1970b).

In Ngumbao's narrative we have an indication of the conflation of Mekatilili with the prophetess Mepoho, mentioned earlier. Mekatilili's role as described by Toya and Ngumbao contrasts with the image presented of her as having "led the Giriama uprising against British colonialists between 1913 and 1914" (Nyassy 2009), and further in MADCA's recent publicity materials, of her being captured "after fighting hot guerilla styled battles with the British forces" and of Mekatilili and Wanje as "great generals" (MADCA 2011).

Another development in the Mekatilili narrative, and a significant part of MADCA's activities over the last seven years, has been the development of the site at Bungale (Ulaya kwa Jele) that is said to contain her grave. According to Mwarandu "Where she was buried - at the time when we discovered it, that area was bushes, was desert. But they [members of her family] moved from there a long time ago. But they are not staying far away from there. Yeah so they are living in the proximity of that area" (Mwarandu 2009). Over the years that the annual cultural festival has been held, it has come to include events in Malindi and at Bungale, and even a three

day walk between the two sites (Mitsanze pers. comm.). Developments at the Bungale site have included the erection of a *kigango* in 2007, sadly stolen within a few weeks (Mwarandu 2009), and a *koma*^{xii} (memorial statue) in August 2010 (Mwarandu 2010b). On our visit to Bungale in March 2011 we were taken to visit the grave, which we were not allowed to photograph. It is approached through a narrow passage way between makuti (palm frond) panels and lies under an open-sided makuti shelter. In March 2011 the grave consisted of a low rectangular mound covered with two panels of faded blue and white cloth pegged down at the corners, and two small memorial posts at one end. We were also shown a little grove of trees with some broken pieces of pots on the ground. We were told that Mekatilili used to practice as a diviner and healer here, and that women diviners still practice at this site (Nyamweru 2011), though other sources do not refer to her as a healer or diviner. The rest of the site (where photography was allowed and where we were entertained by Giriama dance groups and shared a meal of chicken, green vegetables and ugali^{xiii}) is an open sandy area with several small makuti and grass shelters (figure 5).

Recently, MADCA has also attempted to preserve the site near Kaloleni where Mepoho is said to have lived and disappeared into the ground. An event organized by MADCA at the Mepoho site in Kaloleni in April 2010 included cleansing rituals by spiritual leaders and overnight spiritual dances “intended to appease the spirit of Mepoho that it can bless the people” (Mitsanze 2010a). Later that year it was reported that “We are holding another major activity this weekend from 20th-22nd November (2010). The objective is to increase awareness about the importance of the holy shrine of the legendary prophetess Mepoho at Kaloleni. For several years MADCA had been putting a request to NMK to conserve the shrine, in vain. This time, we have decided to go ahead and mobilise the community to support the conservation of the shrine”

(Mitsanze 2010b). However it appears that there are land title issues connected with the Mepoho site, which is at risk of degradation by waste dumping and construction projects (Mwarandu 2010 or 2011).

Linking Mepoho and Mekatilili can be seen as appealing to a Giriama sense of their own history, with the focus on these two powerful Giriama women. MADCA has used Mekatilili quite specifically to foster renewed pride in Giriama culture, with many participants in the annual festival parade through Malindi town wearing traditional Giriama dress (see figure 6). Mwarandu's account of the events in Malindi during the 2010 Mekatilili cultural festival is specific:

“There was also the launching of the Hando and Kifudu^{xiv} at the main round-about near town Hall. The significance of the hando and Kifudu was that Mekatilili wa Menza wore “Hando” during her lifetime. She also used Kifudu to propagate her message in the struggle against British Colonial Rule ... The occasion could not be completed without exhibiting these two aspects of the Giriama Culture” (Mwarandu 2010b).

At the same time Mwarandu stresses the contribution of cultural pride to national unity “Malindi can unite through History and culture ... Each province in Kenya can start a Festival around their Heroes and heroines as a way of creating unity amongst Kenyan Communities” (ibid.). One aspect of this has been the involvement of Mau Mau veterans and representatives of other ethnic groups at the Mekatilili Cultural Festival, beginning in 2006. Mekatilili is now described as a national heroine, who “not only ignited the spirit of freedom fighting within the Midzi-Chenda community, but also through her patriotic will and action, activated other Kenyan communities to emulate her inspired example” (Chidongo n.d.), and as “the first person to take part in Kenya's Independence struggle” (Mwarandu 2010a). Her rebellion is said to have “later inspired other groups such as the Mau Mau” who “Led a daring combat against the British rule from August

13, 1913 and sustained the fight against the super power for a year” (Beja 2010). Her name is invoked in comparison with today’s leadership, to the disadvantage of the latter, “we observe that despite the fact that Mekatilili wa Menza’s ideals were very noble we do not have any evidence of any leader/s who took over and developed her ideals” (Mwarandu 2008).

A similar comparison is directly specifically at today’s Kenyan women, with statements such as “She is standing even taller today challenging the modern woman to raise up and take a more patriotic position in matters of this land and the world in general” (MADCA 2011). On the occasion of the first Mashujaa celebrations in Malindi (when Mekatilili’s statue was erected in the town) the Malindi District Commissioner castigated women leaders for snubbing the celebrations, saying that “the new constitution has given the women free seats in Parliament and the Senate, but it is only those who will come out that will ascend to those seats” (KBC News 2010).

One of the central issues engaging the Giriama, and other Mijikenda groups today is that of the continued threat to the sacred kaya forests (Ringa 2010, Nyamweru 1996, 1998, 2003, 2008). MADCA has been particularly concerned with the threat to Kayafungo, the central Giriama kaya and the focus of several of the key events in the 1913-1914 uprising. It is said that when Mekatilili and Wanje finally returned from their second exile in 1919, they were allowed to settle in Kayafungo (Brantley 1981: 139), though apparently Mekatilili did not die there but moved to Bungale before her death. This being the case, and given her position as a champion of indigenous Giriama culture, it is perhaps surprising that Mekatilili has not been invoked more explicitly in the conservation narrative. The only explicit reference that we have been able to locate is by a foreign journalist, “Were she [Mekatilili] alive today, she would have been

delighted at the news last week of the recognition by Unesco of the kayas of the coast as World Heritage Sites” (Caplan 2008).

Concluding points

- Coastal Kenya is still impoverished and isolated, despite the existence of pockets of wealth focused mostly on the tourist resorts. Its people are poor and suffer from poor health, malnutrition and lack of access to basic services such as transportation, clean water, health and education. The issues may not be exactly the same as those that engaged Mekatilili nearly a century ago, but the overall situation is such that the inspiration of Mekatilili as a heroic leader against injustice and repression still has powerful resonance.
- Her image continues to evolve, currently shaped largely by MADCA activities and rhetoric. In the years following the post-election violence of the first months of 2008, the stress on peace between Kenyan communities is not surprising, but it is perhaps slightly ironic, in view of the many references to her as a ‘woman of war’ and ‘woman warrior’ it is slightly ironic that the most recent function at Bungale, in August 2011, is said to have included the erection of the “Mekatilili wa Menza Pillar of Peace” (Mwarandu 2011).
- Does it ‘matter’ that the slender ‘historical’ evidence about Mekatilili’s life is being overlain and replaced by these other narratives? Much mythologizing about her departs from what is known about the historical Mekatilili – but her life was clearly extraordinary, and it is understandable that people – men and women, Giriama and other Kenyans, are drawn to portray and respect her as a heroine.

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ⁱ Mashujaa (Heroes' Day) on 20th October replaces Kenyatta Day (20th October) and Moi Day (10th October) in the calendar of Kenya's public holidays named under the revised constitution of 2010.

ⁱⁱ The book by Kenyan educator Elizabeth Ndua (not a Giriama) is one of a series of Lion Books published in Nairobi by Sasa Sema Publications as supplementary readers for upper primary school. They are short bibliographical accounts of notable African figures including Nelson Mandela, Jomo Kenyatta, Ronald Ngala and Dedan Kimathi, and one other woman, 'Mwana Kuponu: poetess from Lamu'. The author acknowledges Brantley as her most helpful source; she also cites Spear (1978) and thanks the many people in Giriama land "who offered me their information about Mekatilili herself and the places she went to" (viii). First published in 2000, the book was in its fifth printing by 2007.

ⁱⁱⁱ For example Nyassy (2009) who truncates her life story; she leads the resistance in 1913-1914, is captured, exiled to Kisii, escapes, is recaptured, exiled to Kismayu, escapes and returns home to die at Bungale, all in 1914!

Wikipedia (downloaded 21st August 2011) has a similarly confused chronology and locates her place of exile as “Mumias in Western Kenya”.

^{iv} The male council of kaya elders remains in existence in the early 21st century; the women’s council centered in Kayafungo seems not to have survived Mekatilili’s death.

^v This statement is in a report by Arthur Champion dated October 1913 titled “October Report on the Present Condition of the WaGiriama” (KNA: CP 5/336-1) and quoted by Brantley (1981: 85).

^{vi} Kambi: ruling council of the Giriama, composed of senior male elders.

^{vii} Kifudu: Brantley describes kifudu as a women’s secret society that controlled the *mwanza* oath and “was best known for ecstatic dances performed at funerals” (1986: 337); as well as being the oldest of the Mijikenda funeral dances and a family-based healing cult controlled by women (Udvardy 1990).

^{viii} More information about Mepoho’s life and dramatic disappearance is given by Thompson (1990: 102-105).

^{ix} This is one of a series of supplementary readers for lower secondary school pupils.

^x Although it is doubtful how widely available these books were and are in the resource-poor schools of the Giriama hinterland, or even in towns such as Malindi and Kilifi.

^{xi} According to Mwarandu, Mekatilili was probably born in the 1840s and died in the 1920s. Her maiden name was Minyazi wa Menza, ‘daughter of Menza’. He also names her four brothers, her clan and subclan and her husband, Mulewa wa Dhuka. Mwarandu explains her suspicion of foreigners as arising from a tragic event in her childhood, when one of her brothers was kidnapped by Arab slave traders in front of her eyes (Mwarandu n.d.).

^{xii} Kigango (plural vigango) are the carved memorial posts erected in commemoration of distinguished Giriama elders (only men): koma are smaller simpler wooden posts that may be erected in commemoration of men and women. Kigango have for several decades been the objects of theft from the homesteads for onward sale to local and international dealers (Udvardy and Giles 2007).

^{xiii} Ugali: the stiff maize porridge that is the staple carbohydrate food of the Mijikenda and many other Kenyan ethnic groups.

^{xiv} Hando: the skirt made of many meters of pleated cotton that is the traditional dress of Giriama women; usually white but also seen in dark blue and multicolours; see figure 6. Kifudu: see footnote vii.

Figure 1: Mekatilili wa Menza Garden in March 2011 (Celia Nyamweru photograph)



Figure 2 Mekatilili wa Menza's statue in March 2011 (Celia Nyamweru photograph)



Figure 3: Mekatilili wa Menza Garden in March 2011 (Celia Nyamweru photograph)



Figure 4: Mekatilili wa Menza statue in October 2010 (Robert Nyagah, Nation, 20th October 2010)



Figure 5: Bungale site, March 2011 (Celia Nyamweru photograph)



Figure 6: Giriama traditional dress, March 2011 (John Mitsanze photograph)

