

THE POTENCY OF AFRICAN INDIGENOUS RELIGION: THE STORY OF MEKATILILI WA MENZA

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How to cite:

Mukundi, P. The Potency of African Indigenous Religion: The Story of Mekatilili wa Menza. Author: Paul Mukundi, Department of English and Language Arts, Morgan State University, USA. *Chemchemi International Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*, 12(1), a-b. <https://doi.org/10.33886/cijhs.v12i1.773>

Abstract

This article examines how the Giriama indigenous religion functioned as a powerful tool of resistance against British colonialism in Kenya, with a particular focus on the legendary figure of Mekatilili wa Menza. Despite the marginalisation of African indigenous religions in postcolonial Kenya—where Christians make up most of the population—the Giriama, guided by their elders, have continued to assert the validity of their traditional beliefs alongside global faiths. Drawing on oral accounts from the Malindi District Cultural Association elders, the article explores Mekatilili's veneration as the reincarnation of the prophetess Mipoho and the centrality of the Kaya (shrine) and sacred oaths to the Giriama resistance (1913-1914). It highlights how British colonial authorities misunderstood the spiritual significance of these sites and practices, notably in their failed attempt to relocate the Kaya. Ultimately, the article argues that the Giriama's steadfast adherence to their indigenous faith enabled them to resist colonial domination and exposes the limitations of the "white saviour" narrative. It concludes by discussing the continuing evolution and resilience of Giriama traditional religion, which survives today through syncretic adaptation, retaining its distinct identity while coexisting with other religions in postcolonial Kenya.

Keywords: resistance, oath, African Traditional Religion, Giriama, colonialism, *Kaya*

Introduction

African indigenous religions, often overlooked or dismissed by colonial and postcolonial societies, have demonstrated remarkable resilience and adaptability. Through the powerful narrative of Mekatilili wa Menza and the Giriama people, this article explores how spiritual beliefs have shaped resistance, identity, and communal cohesion, challenging prevailing assumptions about the supposed inferiority or disappearance of traditional African faiths.

In his article, “Is Giriama Traditionalism a Religion? Negotiating Indigenous African Religiosity in ‘Interfaith’ Cooperation in Coastal Kenya,” Erik Meinema reveals that elders of the Giriama community frequently point to similarities between their Indigenous religion on the one hand and Islamic and Christian practices on the other. These similarities, the elders argue, “strengthen the idea that Giriama Traditionalism is a religion that is similar and equal to Islam and Christianity” (Meinema, 1971: 346). This is significant because while actual figures are contested, an overwhelming majority of the Kenyan population identify as Christian and Muslim, while Hinduism and African indigenous religions represent a tiny minority (KNBS, 2019).

The assertion by the Giriama elders, whose *dini ya jadi* (traditional religion) is represented in the Coast Interfaith Council of Clerics—a regional association of priests drawn from different religions—is further noteworthy because African indigenous religions have continued to face annihilation, and their influence has almost disappeared. Indigenous African beliefs are not recognised as religions in many postcolonial African states and, as Amoah & Bennett (2008: 12) contend, “[a]lthough certain academics and traditional rulers are currently attempting to recover a sense of respect for African beliefs, there is every indication that they are in danger of disappearing”. While the intrinsic value of Indigenous religions continues to be underestimated, this paper examines the enduring strength and effectiveness of the Giriama Indigenous religion as embodied in the life and legacy of Mekatilili wa Menza.

Prophecy and Reincarnation in Giriama Belief

Within Giriama cosmology, prophecy and reincarnation are deeply intertwined, forming a cornerstone of the community’s spiritual worldview. The belief that a powerful ancestor’s spirit can return in a new individual, especially during moments of crisis, shapes both the collective memory and the resistance strategies of the Giriama people. This cultural framework is vividly illustrated in the tale of Mekatilili wa Menza, who is regarded as the reincarnation of the prophetess Mipoho and whose leadership exemplifies the potency and resilience of Indigenous faith.

One of the most enduring forms of African oral narratives—including fables, myths, and trickster tales—is the legend. Legends, particularly in precolonial Africa, were oral recitations of the historical exploits of heroes and heroines. While the word “legend” derives from the Latin *legenda*, which connotes reading a written account, African legends were part of oral traditions. They were verbally passed from one generation to another. In some communities, such as the Mande and Wolof of West Africa, griots—members of a hereditary profession whose work was to protect and teach a community’s history to the younger members of society—preserved legends.

Despite colonial attempts to demonise and erase African oral traditions, legends and other orature forms have persisted and evolved, now existing both in written and oral versions. However, the preservation of these narratives by scholars has led to variations and discrepancies across different versions. The legend of Mekatilili wa Menza, which is central to this article, exists in multiple forms—featured in books such as Mugi-Ndua (2002) *Mekatilili wa Menza: Woman Warrior* and Orchardson-Mazrui (2002) *The Adventures of Mekatilili*. For the purposes of this study, I draw primarily on oral narratives from elders of the Malindi District Cultural Association (MADCA), who serve as the custodians of Giriama heritage and the keepers of Mekatilili’s story and gravesite.

The coming of Mekatilili, the Giriama elders asserted, had been foretold by another prophetess, Mipoho,

centuries before. Mipoho had prophesied that White people would in future invade Giriamaland and cause misery. Before she sat on a traditional three-legged Giriama chair and sank miraculously into the ground at Kaloleni, Mipoho had promised that her spirit would return in another Giriama woman and drive the Whites away, restoring prosperity among the people. This reincarnation was possible because, according to Giriama Indigenous religion, an individual's spirit never dies; instead, it moves between the unborn, the living, and the dead. Therefore, the spirit of a dead individual may inhabit an unborn member of the community and, upon birth, continue with the work that the individual had committed to undertake when s/he was alive. Mekatilili was and remains viewed by the Giriama as the promised reincarnation of Mipoho; her heroic acts thus fulfilled the decades-old prophecy.

As the reincarnation of Mipoho, Mekatilili was regarded as a prophetess whose role transcended ordinary social boundaries. Her rise to leadership—despite being a woman and a widow in a patriarchal society—was legitimised by her spiritual mandate. Drawing authority from the sacred Kaya (shrine), supported by the respected elder and medicine man Wanje wa Mwadorikola, and invoking the spiritual power of the kifudu funeral dance, Mekatilili galvanised the Giriama against British colonial impositions and the forced conscription of their youth during 1913-1914.

The Conflict

Although the Imperial British East Africa (IBEA) had arrived in Kenya in 1888 and embarked on hegemonic activities before transferring the territory to the British government's East African Protectorate in 1895, the Giriama had been mainly tolerant of the mild British domination—which included a small tax and some forced labour—until 1913. During this year, Arthur M. Champion was appointed Assistant District Commissioner for Giriama and charged with enforcing tax collection and mandatory labour among the Giriama. There were also plans to capture young men and forcibly enlist them in World War I (1914-1918). These efforts were met with resistance.

To demonstrate her community's refusal to surrender their youth to fight in World War I, Mekatilili confronted Champion. During the confrontation, she brought with her a chicken with her chicks and challenged the colonial administrator to grab one of the chicks. As expected, the mother chicken responded ferociously to protect her chicks. This was how Mekatilili promised Champion the Giriama would fight to shield their sons from conscription into the foreign war. In the ensuing clash, Mekatilili defiantly slapped Champion in the face, signalling the onset of the fierce resistance she had just promised.

However, the climax of the Giriama-British conflict, in which the community burnt down Champion's camp, resulted from the dynamiting of the Kaya by the colonial rulers on August 4, 1914, after the Kaya elders refused to move it, saying that "they could not move the *Kaya* and remain one" (Temu 1971:178). It was then that Mekatili and Wanje, with the blessings of the *Kaya* elders, administered the oath at the destroyed *Kaya*. K. David Patterson (1970) writes: "In late June or early July, many Giriama met at the ancestral *Kaya* and took an oath (*kiraho*) to kill headmen, government employees, and all who wore European dress" (op cit, 93). This oath was followed by the Giriama arming themselves with bows, arrows, and swords and attacking colonial administrators. Champion's camp was burned, as were the jail and police officers' houses.

Although Mekatilili and Wanje were arrested and exiled to Kisii, far from their homeland, the resistance did not cease. Remarkably, the two escaped captivity and returned to their people, inspiring renewed

defiance. As British forces brought in reinforcements, the Giriama adopted guerrilla tactics—attacking swiftly and retreating into dense forests. Ultimately, colonial authorities conceded that they never truly defeated the Giriama; instead, the community remained on the offensive, their resilience and strategic prowess fuelled by the sacred oath led by Mekatilili.

The Significance of the Shrine

The Giriama are believed to have migrated from Shungwaya, near Fort Dumford in present-day Somalia, to Kaya Fungo in what is now Kilifi, Kenya, in the 17th century (Temu 1971:167). Initially called *Kaya Giriama*, the *Kaya* was strategically created as a haven against the attacks by warriors from the Maasai and Galla ethnic communities. Due to such attacks, Patterson reveals, “the Giriama were forced to construct *Kaya* or fortified villages on densely forested hilltops” (op cit, p90). Although the Giriama community’s population continued to grow with time, leading to their occupation of the surrounding areas, its members remained true to their religious beliefs and customs, and “*Kaya Fungo* continued to be their capital and their ancestral home” (Temu 1971:169). This shrine was especially significant because “[i]n the *Kaya* were buried Giriama pots, the sacred political and religious symbols of authority” (op cit, p167). This site was, therefore, central to the community’s indigenous beliefs because of the buried sacrosanct symbols and because it was directed by the community’s elders, who served as undisputed political leaders.



Mekatili's Gravesite (photo by Author)

The importance of a sacred symbol in any religion cannot be overemphasised. Indeed, asserting that every religion centres on a symbol that has a deeper meaning Durkheim (1995) argues that “[t]he most bizarre or barbarous rites and the strangest myths translate some human needs and some aspect of life, whether social or individual” (p.2). It is unsurprising that Mekatilili drew her powers from this *Kaya*, not only because the elders supported her endeavour, but also, more importantly, because the indigenous deity it represented could propel her mission.

As outsiders, colonial administrators could not decipher the importance of the *Kaya* to the Giriama. Jung (1931:113) argued, “[n]o matter what the world thinks about religious experience, the one who

has it possesses the great treasure of a thing that has provided him with a source of life, meaning and beauty and that has given a new splendour to the world and mankind". In Jungian terms, therefore, the *Kaya*, along with the supreme being, beliefs, rituals, and edicts that it represented, had value that only the Giriama could understand and depend on. Indeed, indigenous religions such as the one practised by the Giriama, which had existed for centuries before the arrival of colonial religions, had inherent value to their believers. Kamara (2000) observes that "the three tenets [of African Traditional Religion] as God, ancestors, and a never-ending world". This connection between the deity, the people, and the world ensures a harmonious, inviolable co-existence of human beings with their past, present, and future. Any African traditional religion is authentic because "[a]s in the case of all religions, [the] African Traditional Religion operates on moral codes that the followers must abide by to ensure a just and amicable society" (p. 508). To signify the centrality of moral values in the African traditional religion, Kamara defines the religion as "the observance of rules of conduct in the way the individual conducts his or her daily life, the practice of rituals, and the recognition of the ever presence of the living-dead (ancestors) to allow the person to coexist in harmony with other members of the community and nature" (op cit, p. 503) to please a local deity.

One therefore understands the vanity of the stance Champion took when he referred to the *Kaya* as a "dilapidated refuse heap" (Patterson 1971:92) and ordered that it be replaced with a new one at Vitengeni, a different physical location. This planned relocation of the community's sacred site was intended to dilute its religious and cultural foundation. The colonial administrator planned "to bind the Giriama into obeying and accepting the colonial administration instead of their traditional government with its centre at *Kaya Fungo*" (Temu 1971: 177). The *Kaya*, however, was not just a structure they could quickly move, for sacred sites and places of worship cannot be moved at the whim of outsiders. As expected of any believers handling holy sites and artefacts, the community's elders refused to move the *Kaya* as instructed. The description of the *Kaya* by Champion was typical of European colonisers' attitudes towards African indigenous religions. Meinema (1971:350) noted that colonial administrators "frequently criminalised African practitioners, practices, and objects that in the eyes of Africans themselves were thought to engage spiritual forces for beneficial ends. In fact, from the onset, European colonisers viewed African indigenous religions as impotent and deemed them witchcraft. As Knighton asserts, African indigenous religions were perceived as "amount[ing] to nothing more than the propitiation of the Devil and the practice of witchcraft and sorcery through evil spirits" (op cit, p147-148). These beliefs were especially assailed if they were perceived as aiding Africans to resist colonial subjugation. Indeed, Meinema reveals that "[t]he British also used the term 'witchcraft' to demonise political opposition to their rule" (op cit p351). It is noteworthy, then, that colonial powers attacked African religious beliefs when such beliefs were utilised as a means of resistance to domination.

Fake Oath

In *Psychology and Religion*, Carl Gustav Jung writes that religion is "a consciousness which the experience of a numinosum has altered" (1938:6). He states that rituals of any religion are crucial because they are "[t]he practice and the reproduction of the original experience" and that such rituals "are carried out for the sole purpose of producing at will the effect of the numinous by certain devices of a magical nature, such as invocation, incantation, sacrifice, meditation and other yoga practices, self-inflicted tortures of various descriptions and so forth" For the Giriama, this "numinosum" could only be achieved at the *Kaya*, with the blessings of the elders. Consequently, the oath that Mekatilili administered was an example of the Giriama's *numinosum*. While Mekatilili did administer the oath to areas that were far from the *Kaya*,

it is to be noted that this was only an extension of the *numinous*, for it was only after the initial oath had been administered at the *Kaya* and in the presence of and support by the *Kaya*'s elders that she embarked on this endeavor that was meant to rally all the Giriama to the cause at hand.

It would not be possible for anyone other than an individual "anointed" by the Giriama elders at the *Kaya* to lead the Giriama people to a *numinous*. Just as a Christian pastor or an Islamic sheikh are priests of specific religions, leaders of the Giriama Traditional religion are group specific. Indeed, as Durkheim (1995) asserts, "religion is an eminently social thing. Religious representations express collective realities; rites are ways of acting that are born only during assembled groups and whose purpose is to evoke, maintain or recreate certain mental states of those groups" (p. 4). The religious realities and rites of one society differ from those of another, and members of one group may find no value in the beliefs of other groups. Durkheim argues that "[a]t the foundation of all systems of beliefs and all cults, there must necessarily be a certain number of fundamental representations and modes of ritual conduct that, despite the diversity of forms that the one or the other may have taken on, have the same objective meaning everywhere and everywhere fulfil the same functions. These enduring elements constitute what is eternal and human in religion" (op cit). Durheim implies that rituals, such as those practised in African indigenous religions, regardless of how barbaric they may appear to others, fulfil the same roles as those of other religions. Thus, while Christians use objects such as the cross and repeat vows after priests, the Giriama indigenous religion's equivalents are traditional relics and oaths, such as the one Mekatilili administered.

The discussion is crucial in evaluating the oath that Champion forced the Giriama to take. To be sure, Champion ordered the Giriama to take another oath at Vitengeni, an oath that he believed would undo the one that Mekatilili had administered. This oath was, unmistakably, of no consequence as far as the Giriama indigenous religion was concerned, for:

Such an oath could neither undo the effects of the earlier one nor bind the Giriama to accepting the colonial administration. In the first place, it was not conducted with the sanction of the *Kaya* elders, and it was not even held at the *Kaya*. The Giriama agreed to *take* it to mislead the administration. (Temu 1971:178)

By taking the oath, then, the Giriama duped the colonisers to believe that resistance against the relocation of the *Kaya* and, by extension, opposition against colonial oppression, had been terminated. However, this oath was, in Jungian terms, a nullity for it could not lead to a "numinosum." Consequently, contrary to Champion's contemplation, resistance against colonial domination had not been dealt a single blow.

The Failed Mission of White Saviourism

At the end, while "casualties had been light on both sides, only a few police were killed and wounded, and the Giriama had been wise enough not to attempt mass assaults" (Patterson 1970: 95), the Giriama never stopped resistance against the British colonial powers, and the latter never had total control. It is for this reason that "A new A.D.C [Assistant District Commissioner—who replaced Champion] for Giriama reported to his superior in 1916 that "a generation of beneficent rule will hardly suffice to obliterate this hatred of European Administration" (op cit, p.96). The success of Mekatilili and Wanje, and, by extension, of the entire Giriama community, in using traditional cultural-religious tools to fight colonisation shows the potency of indigenous religions. Durkheim (1995:2) writes, "Fundamentally, then, there are no religions that are false. All are true after their version: All fulfil given conditions of

human existence, though in different ways”. The African indigenous religions, then, to quote Durkheim, are not and were never false or powerless as the success achieved by Mekatilili demonstrates.

Contrary to colonial stereotypes that cast Africans as “uncivilised” or “uneducated,” the Giriama—like many other communities targeted by missionary and colonial interventions—maintained strong, functional traditions that they valued deeply. Their steadfast refusal to abandon their indigenous faith, even amid the arrival of Christian missionaries and the establishment of mission stations, preserved the community’s unity and spiritual strength. Mass conversions often left Africans at a perilous cultural crossroads (Achebe 1975:119); but the Giriama’s choice to uphold their own religion protected their identity and enabled effective resistance.



Public School near Mekatili's Gravesite (photo by Author).

Today, Giriama indigenous religion endures, but its survival has required a degree of syncretism. In a postcolonial context that often undermines traditional faiths, the Giriama have strategically adapted aspects of mainstream religions while maintaining the core of their own spiritual beliefs. McIntosh (2005) notes that, although many Giriama may identify as Muslim or Christian, most hold a pluralist worldview in which the deities of different religions coexist but remain distinct. This resilience and adaptability underscore the enduring potency and unique identity of Giriama religious traditions.

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