REINVENTING AFRICA'S NATIONAL HEROES: THE CASE OF MEKATILILI, A KENYAN POPULAR HEROINE

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Abstract

A nation's heroes are rarely fixed and are frequently reassessed and reinterpreted by new generations. In the case of a number of African countries, the very masculine liberation heroes of yesteryear often prove divisive, emerging from very fraught histories. In this context, there are moves to broaden the pantheon of heroes and make history more inclusive. In Kenya, where the contested history of Mau Mau provides several heroes, Mekatilili wa Menza, a female figure from the coast who played a significant role in Giriama resistance against the British in 1913, has emerged as a national heroine. The article introduces this historical figure using published sources, and then traces the historical arc of her memorialization and evocation from post-Independence praise as a feminist icon to her recent elevation to the Kenyan pantheon of national heroes and heroines. In doing so, it illustrates the ways in which her story is being retold on the coast by Giriama organizations that have made her a central figure in local heritage movements. Finally, in the changed context of devolved Kenya since the 2010 constitution came into force after the 2013 election, this article shows how her story gained further salience as coastal politicians claimed her memory for regional goals. It argues that while figures such as Mekatilili may appear less divisive than Mau Mau, how their history is told and used is equally political.

HISTORY AND ITS MEMORIALIZATION have long posed particular challenges for post-colonial states in Africa, especially for those attempting to build national unity out of liberation struggles. Such struggles rarely leave a legacy free from contestation, and attempts to rally the nation through celebrating heroes associated with these struggles can prove divisive. Not everyone agrees on who should be celebrated or considered a hero. Much attention has been paid

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to southern Africa in this regard, including the identification of national heroes ranging from the Herero chief Samuel Maharero to President Robert Mugabe.[1] State-led efforts at commemoration have often failed to connect with a wider public, as forbidding, modernist and very masculine statues of war heroes do not always stir national pride. This has been vividly illustrated in the case of Namibia's Heroes' Acre, which divided rather than united the nation.[2] Very particular histories are selected for memorialization and very particular figures elevated to heroic status, excluding many from these narratives of nation-building. Those excluded are often those of non-dominant ethnicities or more marginalized regions. Women are almost always excluded. Even in South Africa where the government has long expressed itself committed to gender equality, few women have been memorialized as national heroes.[3]

Kenya also had difficulty constructing a heroic past out of its history, dominated as it is by the fraught and contested memory of Mau Mau and individuals such as Dedan Kimathi and the Kapenguria Six. Whether figures associated with the rebellion should be elevated to the status of national heroes has been a long concern of politicians and academics, and was notably discussed by Ali Mazrui in 1963.[4] However, in the 2000s a movement emerged in Kenya to bring about national unity through a celebration of the country's *mashujaa* (heroes, in Kiswahili) that would demonstrate how the fight for freedom was not limited to Mau Mau. The perceived need for this movement was heightened by the post-election violence of 2008, and calls for the country to move away from 'negative ethnicity'. To this end, figures were brought in from further back in time and from regions other than Central Kenya, the heartland of Mau Mau. These included historical figures such as Koitalel arap Samoei, the Nandi anti-colonial rebel killed in 1905,[5] and a Giriama woman from the early twentieth century, Mekatilili wa Menza, the focus of this article. In the past decade her fame in Kenya has spread, as a Giriama-led revival of interest in her has brought official memorialization and media attention to a woman billed as the earliest Kenyan freedom fighter and a heroic example for all Kenyans.

Mekatilili was born in the latter half of the nineteenth century and was politically active between around 1912 and 1915. She is considered to have played a significant role in encouraging Giriama resistance to colonial policies that culminated in the Giriama uprising of July and August 1913. The story of the uprising and her role in it has been told, re-told, added to, subtracted from, shaped and re-shaped, depending on the teller and the context. In this article, we look at how, when and by whom the Mekatilili story has been told. First, we examine the politics

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[1] On Zimbabwe, see Terence Ranger, 'The politics of memorialization in Zimbabwe', in Susana Carvalho and François Gemenne (eds), *Nations and their histories: constructions and representations* (Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, 2009), pp. 62-76. On Namibia see Heike Becker, 'Commemorating heroes in Windhoek and Eenhana: Memory, culture and nationalism in Namibia, 1990-2010', *Africa* 81, 4 (2011), pp. 519-543. On South Africa, see the work of Sabine Marschall, in particular *Landscape of memory: Commemorative monuments, memorials and public statuary in post-apartheid South Africa* (Brill, Leiden, 2010).

[2] Becker, 'Commemorating heroes'.

[3] On women and their erasure in national memorialization in South Africa, see Sabine Marschall, 'How to honour a woman: Gendered memorialisation in post-apartheid South Africa', *Critical Arts* 24, 2 (2010), pp. 260-283.

[4] Ali Mazrui, 'On heroes and Uhuru-worship', *Transition* 11 (1963), pp. 23-28.

[5] Chloé Josse-Durand, 'Exposer l'objet ethnographique, mettre en scène la nation: La muséographie incertaine des musées communautaires au Kenya', *Mambo!* 10, 5 (2012), pp. 1-6.

of heritage and heroes in Kenyan literature, and then assess what we can know of the 'real' Mekatilili through the limited traces of her in oral and written records. While her remarkable story of resistance to the British remained within Giriama collective memory, her story only caught the attention of wider Kenyan society in the 1980s, when activists began to use her as a feminist symbol of resistance. Recently, the Mekatilili story has been fervently 'reinvented' on both a local and national scale in the context of heightened concern for national unity after the post-election violence of 2008 and the growing push to unite the nation through its liberation heroes. It is hoped that her story will prove an unproblematic symbol of national reconciliation, unlike the fraught memorialization of the Mau Mau.

As a strong woman from a marginalized ethnicity, Mekatilili is certainly a very different heroic figure to those of Mau Mau fame, and to the patriarchal figure typical of nationalist history in Africa and elsewhere. Her story seems capable of resonating widely in Kenyan society. Yet in the changing political climate of Kenya where devolved governance has just been introduced and tensions between the county and national governments are palpable, contestations can arise as to whose heroine she is: one for women? for the coast? for Giriama? or for the nation? In this way, the article shows that it is not just the patriarchal figures more commonly valorized as heroes whose histories are hard to discipline into a nation-building narrative. The legend of this remarkable woman shows that all such heroic figures come with unruly histories.

This article is based on interviews and ethnographic fieldwork conducted over the last seven years in Malindi, Marafa and Bungale, all located within what, since the introduction of devolved government in Kenya in 2013, is called Kilifi County. The authors attended a number of Mekatilili Festivals over recent years in Malindi, and interviewed Zarina Patel, an activist who led an earlier revival of Mekatilili's memory, in Nairobi in 2012. The article is also based on archival research in Kenya and a close reading by both of secondary sources on the historical and mythical figure of Mekatilili. The article emerges out of a wider recent interest in cultural heritage in Kenya connected to the work of other scholars, such as Lotte Hughes, Karega-Munene, and Annie Coombes.[6] It is to this wider Kenyan context of the politics of heritage and heroes drawn out by such authors that we first turn.

The politics of heroism in Kenya

In contemporary studies of heritage and memory, considerable emphasis is placed on the fact that memories and histories have often only a tenuous link with a 'real' past.[7] Indeed, John Gillis reminds us that 'memories and identities are not fixed things, but representations or constructions of reality, subjective rather than objective phenomena' and that they serve particular interests and

[6] For an overview of this work in relation to Kenya, see Annie E. Coombes, Lotte Hughes and Karega-Munene, *Managing heritage, making peace: History, identity and memory in Kenya* (I.B. Tauris, London, 2013).
[7] Heike Becker, 'Beyond trauma: New perspectives on the politics of memory in East and Southern Africa', *African Studies* 70, 2 (2011), pp. 321-355, p. 325.

ideological positions.[8] While the case studies in his volume on commemorations are drawn largely from Europe and the United States, many of his assertions are highly relevant to twenty-first century Kenya, including that 'new nations as well as old states require ancient pasts' and his observation of the contradictory tendencies toward unification and disintegration that confront virtually every part of the world.[9] Kenya, a relatively new nation recently celebrating fifty years of independence, has faced many challenges in uniting its diverse citizens with their many ethnicities and languages within the nation, as witnessed tragically in the post-election violence of 2008. Campaigns running the slogan *najivunia kuwa Mkenya* ('I'm proud to be Kenyan') are promoted to foster a feeling of nationhood, while history is looked to as a source of unity.

However, for Kenya as elsewhere, there is much danger in turning to history as it can just as easily be a source of division. This is especially the case with the contentious history of the Mau Mau uprising from 1952 to 1958, the 'elephant in the room' in terms of creating a narrative of national liberation. If any aspect of Kenya's history can be interpreted through the prism of Elizabeth Jelin's accounts of 'the struggles around memories and meanings as reflected in public memorialization',[10] it is the events of these years. Mau Mau has become central in many imaginings of Kenya's past, however, especially since the organization itself was unbanned in 2003 by President Mwai Kibaki, after Jomo Kenyatta had made it an illegal organization in the interest of 'national unity'.[11] Its unbanning led to a flourishing of Mau Mau related memorialization and campaigns for compensation for the horrors suffered by veterans, which culminated in the victory of four veterans in a court case against the British government.[12] However, for many Kenyans the memorialization of Mau Mau is linked very much to the Kikuyu, seen by some Kenyans as the chief beneficiaries of political power and land redistribution after independence.[13] Tensions over the memory of Mau Mau were particularly evident in the construction of a statue to Dedan Kimathi, commissioned by Kibaki in 2003 and unveiled in 2007. The whole process generated debate about the centrality or otherwise of the role of the Mau Mau in the liberation struggle, and the place of Kenyans who collaborated with the British against the Mau Mau in that era,[14] or the memory of Kenyans who themselves died at the hands of Mau Mau in what amounted in some respects to a civil war. As Daniel Branch

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[8] John R. Gillis, (ed.) *Commemorations: The politics of national identity* (Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1994), p. 3.
[9] Ibid, p. 9.
[10] Elizabeth Jelin, *State repression and the labors of memory* (University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 2007), p. 138.
[11] Annie E. Coombes, 'Monumental histories: Commemorating Mau Mau with the statue of Dedan Kimathi', *African Studies* 70, 2 (2011), pp. 202-233; Lotte Hughes, '"Truth be told": Some problems with historical revisionism in Kenya', *African Studies* 70, 2 (2011), pp. 182-201.
[12] Four veterans were originally named as plaintiffs in this case, but one died in 2012 before the judgement in their favour in June 2013.
[13] Coombes, 'Monumental histories', p. 204. For an overview history of Mau Mau in colonial and independent Kenya, see Daniel Branch, *Defeating Mau Mau, creating Kenya: Counterinsurgency, civil war and decolonisation* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2009).
[14] Coombes, 'Monumental histories', pp. 214-19.

shows, the legacy of the war and the cleavages it wrought in Kikuyu society have persisted into the post-colonial era.[15]

This is the highly charged context in which a campaign emerged to widen the bounds of Kenya's heroes and heroines away from Mau Mau and incorporate those from other ethnicities. This campaign won government approval, and a 'Taskforce' was established by decree in 2007 to oversee the search for heroes and heroines.[16] The desire to identify and laud heroes of different types and from different communities became urgently necessary following the 2008 post-election violence, which involved appalling inter-ethnic conflict. The nation required urgent healing and unification, and the state looked to 'heroes' as one way of reminding Kenyans of what united them. Referring to the period following the post-election violence, Branch notes:

> Kenyans were constantly told [by everyone from politicians to international figures] that nationalism was the only way out of the chasm into which the country had fallen. Many of the subsequently enacted reforms, such as the establishment of a Heroes Day national holiday and the formation of the National Cohesion and Integration Commission…explicitly set out to encourage a greater sense of nationalism among Kenyan citizens.[17]

All those regarded as having played a role in fighting for liberation from colonial rule were potential candidates for elevation into a pantheon of national heroes and heroines, whatever their ethnicity or the era in which they lived. By emphasizing that it was not just the Kikuyu who produced heroes who fought for 'Kenya' (however anachronistic this motive might have been for earlier candidates such as Koitalel), it was hoped a strained nation might be helped to heal. The new constitution of 2010 designated 20 October (previously 'Kenyatta Day') as *Mashujaa Day* to be honoured by citizens and politicians alike, while plans were made to construct a site memorializing these historical figures at Uhuru Gardens in Nairobi.[18] Furthermore, a 'Kenya Heroes Act' was put into law in 2014, establishing a council to select the heroes and heroines worthy of being honoured and setting out the privileges for those declared national heroes.[19]

In recent debates over who is to enter the pantheon, the name of Mekatilili was constantly invoked, perhaps unsurprisingly given that she is a remarkable figure and one reckoned much less divisive than Mau Mau. Indeed, the identification of Mekatilili as a national liberation heroine opens the way to a consideration of Kenya's independence struggles through a relatively non-controversial figure, and a member of a minority group far from the Central Province homeland of the Kikuyu. This article considers the memorialization of Mekatilili and how it relates to the centrifugal and centripetal forces at play as Kenya moved past its fiftieth birthday in December 2013. First, however, we turn to the traces of the 'real' Mekatilili found in historical sources.

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[15] Branch, 'Defeating Mau Mau'.
[16] See *Kenya Gazette*, 13th April 2007, Gazette Notice no. 3179, p. 1047.
[17] Daniel Branch, *Kenya: Between hope and despair, 1963-2011* (Yale University Press, New Haven, 2011), p. 292.
[18] Josse-Durand, 'Exposer l'objet ethnographique', pp. 3-4.
[19] *Kenya Gazette Supplement*, Acts 2014, Nairobi, 6 May 2014.
<http://kenyalaw.org/kl/fileadmin/pdfdownloads/Acts/KenyaHeroesActNo5of2014.pdf> (10 May 2014).

Historical Traces

Mekatilili is now in many ways the stuff of legends. However, there certainly was a real woman with a remarkable life story on whom the legends are built. Piecing her life together is difficult, though there are some sources. Her life and the broader subject of the Giriama Uprising have been subject to scholarly analysis.[20] These rely on colonial archive material, and also on oral testimony in the case of Cynthia Brantley and Arnold Temu. Brantley carried out interviews between October 1970 and June 1971, and also draws on interviews carried out on her behalf by a Giriama assistant in July and August 1971, while Temu's Mijikenda students conducted interviews on his behalf in 1968 and 1969. Brantley and Temu both draw on accounts by individuals who most likely were children or young adults when Mekatilili was politically active. Even those in their 40s or 50s might have had the opportunity to hear directly from older family members who saw Mekatilili and heard her address the community. However, over the ensuing decades the number of people with that personal link has decreased, and the likelihood that the 'recollections' (even of non-literate Giriama) have been influenced by published sources has increased.

For all these reasons, we will never know what the 'real' oral tradition of Mekatilili was during the decades between 1930 and the 1970s. However, we can trace her life and its historical context in broad outline, relying heavily on Brantley's research. In the early twentieth century many forces combined to put 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 meetings held in Kaya Fungo, the ritual centre of the Giriama, in July and August 1913.[21] The meetings concluded with the swearing of powerful oaths that effectively prevented all Giriama from co-operation with the colonial administration. She is also said to have traveled widely through Giriama country encouraging people to resist colonial demands,

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[20] For example, see Cynthia Brantley Smith, *The Giriama Rising, 1914: Focus for political development in the Kenyan hinterland, 1850-1963* (University of California, unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, 1973); Cynthia Brantley, *The Giriama and colonial resistance in Kenya, 1800-1920* (University of California Press, Berkeley, 1981); Cynthia Brantley, 'Mekatalili and the role of women in Giriama resistance', in Donald Crummey (ed.) *Banditry, rebellion and social protest in Africa* (James Currey, London, 1986), pp. 333-350; David Patterson, 'The Giriama risings of 1913-1914', *African Historical Studies*, 3, 1 (1970), pp. 89-99; Arnolf J. Temu, 'The Giriama War 1914-1915', in Bethwell A. Ogot (ed.), *War and society in Africa* (Frank Cass, London, 1972), pp. 215-236.

[21] Brantley, 'Mekatilili and the Role of Women', p. 340.

though it is uncertain how closely she was involved in oath administration.[22] Mekatilili's public role in Giriama society was limited in time; colonial records show that she was arrested in October 1913 and sentenced to five years' detention. While in captivity she made a statement in front of Arthur Champion, the Assistant District Commissioner in Giriama and the official primarily responsible for enforcing British policy on the Giriama.[23] In this statement Mekatilili focuses on issues related to cultural change and morality: the introduction of currency (cents and rupees), the short skirts being worn by Giriama women, and the resultant 'immorality' and inconsistent prices charged by Giriama women, possibly for sex. She describes the collection of materials to support sacrifices in Kaya Fungo, presumably to placate the *koma* (ancestral) spirits said to be 'destroying the country'. However, it is difficult to know how to interpret this source, which is likely to have been made under a degree of duress, but it does suggest the major upheavals of the age for Giriama society and the alarm that they brought. Soon after she made this statement, Mekatilili and Wanje wa Mwadorikola, a male leader of the Giriama resistance, were deported to the far west of Kenya. They escaped a few months later and found their way back to the coast, where they continued to organize against colonial rule before being recaptured. Kaya Fungo was partly destroyed by the colonial forces on 4 August 1914, but in the years that followed, Giriama were allowed to regain it as their ritual centre, 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.[24]

It seems clear that Mekatilili was motivated by the economic and socio-cultural changes forced on the Mijikenda in the early twentieth century. She was particularly concerned by the issue of labour recruitment. According to Brantley, 'she wanted to prevent Giriama men from laboring for the British'.[25] 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 Rupees 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'.[26] Other sources have described a broader economic and political agenda, including resistance to the payment of hut tax,[27] and to the colonial attempt to deny the Giriama access to land north of the Sabaki River.[28]

Mekatilili's message also had strong socio-cultural elements. She was concerned that the jurisdiction of the traditional elders was being undermined,[29] and spoke for a return to the

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[22] Brantley, *The Giriama and colonial resistance*, pp. 85-88.
[23] Arthur Champion, 'A statement made by the woman Menyazi wa menza alias Katalili – before me and at her own request. 17th October', document in the Kenya National Archives, file 'Giriama Rising', reference PC/Coast/1/12/160.
[24] The male council of kaya elders remains in existence in the early twenty-first century; the women's council centered in Kaya Fungo seems not to have survived Mekatilili's death.
[25] Brantley, *The Giriama and colonial resistance*, p. 85.
[26] Rupees were the currency of early colonial Kenya. 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, *The Giriama and colonial resistance*, p. 85.
[27] Elizabeth Mugi-Ndua, *Mekatilili wa Menza: Woman warrior* (Sasa Sema Publications, Nairobi, 2000), p. 38.
[28] Ibid, p. 43.
[29] Brantley, 'Mekatilili and the role of women', p. 340.

'traditional' Giriama governance system through resistance to the authority of the British-appointed headmen; she 'directly accused headmen of being traitors to the Giriama in order to get rewards'.[30] Brantley refers to Mekatilili's 'anguish over the growing disintegration of Giriama society that led her to try to convince others to do something about it'.[31] 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'.[32] Furthermore, '[s]he wanted a revival of the kaya and the traditional kambi,[33] a return to the many customs which had been "spoiled" and an absolute rejection of British demands for Giriama labor'.[34]

These interpretations of Mekatilili's life in earlier scholarship are interpretations of limited historical evidence, but they do flesh out some aspects of the historical figure and demonstrate that she lived a remarkable life in remarkable times. While Brantley and others' research shows that Mekatilili was still remembered by the Giriama in the first decades after independence, she was also to catch the imagination of a wider public especially from the 1980s.

Resistance, gender and the legacy of Mekatilili

Mekatilili was not totally absent from nationally published material after independence. Anna Obura shows a page from a Standard 4 history textbook published in 1973 in which Mekatilili is described as a great woman, a prophetess, a brave woman who united the Wagiriama against the British, and 'a courageous woman who wanted her people to be free'.[35] However, it was in the 1980s when her Kenya-wide fame grew stronger. To understand why Mekatilili's legacy began to be attractive beyond the Giriama at that time, it is important to consider two trends in Kenya during that decade. The first was the increasingly authoritarian rule of President Daniel arap Moi. The second was the increasing awareness of gender issues in Kenya, at least partly related to the 1985 Nairobi conference during the UN International Decade for Women, which generated much media attention focused on the role of women in development.[36] Besides his general suppression of dissent, Moi was particularly hostile toward female critics. In an account by Patricia Stamp of the 1987 court hearings over the right to bury the deceased Luo lawyer S. M. Otieno, which ended in defeat for his Kikuyu widow and victory for his Luo patri-clan, Stamp interprets the result as 'part and parcel of Moi's suppression of dissent',[37] and 'symptomatic of a process

[30] Brantley, *The Giriama and colonial resistance*, p. 85.
[31] Ibid, p. 87.
[32] Brantley, 'Mekatilili and the role of women', p. 339.
[33] Kambi: ruling council of the Giriama, composed of senior male elders.
[34] Brantley, 'Mekatilili and the role of women', pp. 87-88.
[35] John N. Osogo, *Kenya's Peoples in the Past: Pupils' Book for Standard 4* (Longman, Nairobi, 1973).
[36] Anna P. Obura, *Changing images: Portrayal of girls and women in Kenyan textbooks* (African Center for Technology Studies Press, Nairobi, 1991), p. 2.
[37] Patricia Stamp, 'Burying Otieno: The politics of gender and ethnicity in Kenya', *Signs* 16, 4 (1995), pp. 808-845, p. 814.

widespread in Africa: the relegation of women to a private sphere'.[38] Given a national climate of increasing suppression of dissent (including the detention without trial of university lecturers and other public figures), combined with a national and international focus on women's issues, it is possible to interpret the identification and memorialization of Mekatilili and other female historical figures as a relatively 'safe' way to challenge the oppressive regime. This was certainly safer than the use of the politically charged figure of Dedan Kimathi in resistance against the Moi regime.[39]

One example of evoking Mekatilili in resistance to the state is the work of Zarina Patel,[40] who in the 1980s used visual art to show Kenyans that they had a great past and that they could fight the oppression of the era. Zarina Patel is a Kenyan citizen of Asian origin and a respected member of Kenya's intellectual and human rights community. In 1983 she painted a series of scenes from Kenya's past, including one of protests by trade unionists in Nairobi and a scene of street hawkers in Nairobi stoning the city council. Among these was a painting of Mekatilili addressing the Giriama and urging them to resist oppression, a message that chimed with the political climate of the age.[41] Interviewed in Nairobi in March 2012, Patel told how she had heard of Mekatilili from Giriama friends and was interested in such a strong woman and her powerful liberatory message, but had little available information upon which to draw. Therefore, she decided to get in touch with elders in Kaloleni. They were keen to tell their history, and helped Patel prepare a leaflet in Kiswahili explaining who Mekatilili was, which could be exhibited alongside the painting. Patel's paintings were exhibited in church halls and other inconspicuous venues where they would not attract undue attention from the authorities for their potentially subversive implications.

From the 1980s, Mekatilili also featured in books showing the strength of Kenyan women. She is one of ten women featured in the book by Rebeka Njau and Gideon Mulaki, 'Kenya Women Heroes and their mystical power' published in 1984 and introduced as an 'attempt to put on record Kenya [sic] women's achievements in traditional society'.[42] A comparable volume edited by Wanjiku Kabira and Elizabeth Nzioki in 1993 was entitled 'Celebrating Women's Resistance'.[43] This is dedicated to 'Mekitilili [sic] and Mary Njanjiru [sic]'.[44] Kabira and Nzioki are much more outspoken in their comments about the position of women in 'traditional' Kenyan

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[38] Ibid, p. 843.
[39] Daniel Branch, 'The search for the remains of Dedan Kimathi: The politics of death and memorialization in post-colonial Kenya', *Past and Present*, 206, Supplement 5 (2010), pp. 301-320, p. 310.
[40] Her biography describes her as 'a writer, artist, human rights and race relations activist, environmentalist and campaigner for social justice', see George Gona, *Zarina Patel: An indomitable spirit* (Zand Graphics, Nairobi, 2014), back cover. She attended the Mekatilili cultural festival in August 2009.
[41] The image can be viewed online: http://www.open.ac.uk/arts/research/ferguson-centre/projects/managing-heritage/gallery-2 (accessed March 2015)
[42] Rebeka Njau and Gideon Mulaki, *Kenya women heroes and their mystical power* (Risk Publications, Nairobi, 1984).
[43] Wanjiku Kabira and Elizabeth Nzioki, *Celebrating women's resistance* (Women Perspective Publications, Nairobi, 1993).
[44] Njanjiru should read Nyanjiru: Mary Nyanjiru led a group of women demanding the release of Harry Thuku in 1922.

society than Njau and Mulaki, who state that 'oral traditions … present a picture of a happy woman, a woman who could own property and make decisions, a woman who was consulted before important decisions were made, a woman whose social and legal rights were clearly defined, and a woman who had a place in traditional religion'.[45] In contrast, Kabira and Nzioki describe a silent conspiracy among Kenyan communities in relation to the status of women, whom they characterize as being left out of political leadership, marginalized from decision making, by and large left out of major religious positions, and not inheriting, owning or making decisions on basic resources such as land and livestock.[46] This more assertive tone taken by Kabira and Nzioki, as compared to the idealization of traditional society presented by Njau and Mulaki, might represent an opening of the public discourse following the ending of one-party rule in Kenya in 1992.

In all this literature Mekatilili is portrayed as a strong, independent woman. However, feminists would express concern that she does not meet the standards expressed by Mikyoung Kim in her study of Korean heroines who 'do not simply imitate heroes … They have changing and diverse faces that preserve tradition while simultaneously challenging the oppressive norms'.[47] A twenty-first century interpretation of Mekatilili might see her as having challenged the oppressive norm of colonialism, but, in her adherence to Mijikenda 'tradition', failed to challenge the oppressive norm of patriarchy. In Kenya, the latest wave of Mekatilili discourse continues to present her as a 'superwoman', and recent media reports praise her as a 'Woman who stood where men trembled'[48] and a 'Woman warrior who feared no man'.[49] In all this, her heroism emerges from masculine qualities, reflecting the point made by Tong in her summary of the message of Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*, '[t]o be a full human being is, in short, to think and act like a man'.[50]

Reviving a heroine for the twenty-first century

These earlier waves of awareness of Mekatilili demonstrate how her legend can serve different political impulses: to express resistance to the authoritarian state of the Moi era, and to find strong female role models in an era of increased gender-awareness. However, the latest revival of her memory emerged initially on a more local level, focused squarely on her meaning for the Giriama, a group who throughout much recent history has been marginalized politically and economically, while ethnic and religious identities have hardened between the Giriama and other

[45] Njau and Mulaki, *Kenya women heroes*, p. 1.
[46] Kabira and Nzioki, *Celebrating women's resistance*, p. 23.
[47] Mikyoung Kim, 'The changing faces of heroines: Korean women in folklore', *Memory Studies* 6 (2013), pp. 218-231.
[48] Amos Kireithe, 'Women who stood where men trembled', *The Standard*, 2 September 2012.
[49] Jeckonia Otieno, 'Woman warrior who feared no man', *The County Weekly: Kikwetu*, 19 – 25 March 2012.
[50] Rosemarie Tong, *Feminist thought: A comprehensive introduction* (Westview Press, Colorado, 1989), p. 31. Betty Friedan, *The feminine mystique* (Penguin, London, 1963), p. 29.

coastal people such as the Swahili.[51] This revival was in large part the work of the Malindi District Cultural Association (MADCA). The MADCA was founded in August 2003,[52] as part of a growth industry of community-based culture and heritage organizations in East Africa flourishing in an era where heritage is increasingly seen as a means for empowerment for the marginalized.[53]

One of MADCA's founders, the Giriama lawyer Joseph Mwarandu, 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'.[54] 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… and we take on a date 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… remembering this heroine who did a lot of things for the Giriama people.[55]

In the years since the first festival in 2004, MADCA has used Mekatilili to foster renewed pride in Giriama culture, with many participants parading through Malindi wearing traditional Giriama dress. Festivals have been held in August each year since, involving celebrations in Malindi with processions, dancing and much emphasis on Giriama culture and ceremonies. Despite the focus on Giriama culture, the events have been multi-ethnic, with a few Kikuyu, Meru and others from upcountry joining a broad mix of coastal residents, tourists and local dignitaries. From 2006 the festival took a more political turn, with Mau Mau veteran groups, the Kenyan Human Rights Commission (KHRC) and the Centre for Multiparty Democracy in attendance as well. The KHRC, which is involved in the struggle for reparations for Mau Mau veterans, was keen to explicitly link Mekatilili with Mau Mau at the event in 2009, describing her as the original rebel against the colonialists and an example that it was not just Kikuyu who fought for freedom.[56]

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[51] Janet McIntosh, *The edge of Islam: Power, personhood and ethnoreligious boundaries on the Kenya coast* (Duke University Press, Durham: NC, 2009).

[52] Celia K. Nyamweru, 'Identity politics and culture in coastal Kenya: The role of the Malindi District Cultural Association', in Linda Giles and Rebecca E. Gearhart (eds) *Contesting identities: The Mijikenda and their neighbors in Kenyan coastal society* (Africa World Press, Trenton, NJ, 2014).

[53] Lotte Hughes, Annie E. Coombes and Karega-Munene, 'Introduction: Special issue of African Studies on heritage, history and memory', *African Studies* 70, 2 (2011), pp. 175-181.

[54] Joseph Mwarandu, 'Role of Mekatilili wa Menza in the independence struggle in Kenya'. Undated, unpublished manuscript, pp. 1-8 (internal evidence suggests a date in the second half of 2009 for this document).

[55] Interview, Joseph Mwarandu, Malindi, 16 July 2009.

[56] Hughes, 'Truth be told', p. 192.

There is a direct connection in this regard, as Mwarandu was also involved in campaigns for reparations for Mau Mau veterans, visiting the UK in 2009 as part of an entourage supporting those bringing a case against the British for atrocities suffered in the 1950s. The festival includes events at Bungale, a village inland from Malindi, where Mekatilili is said to be buried. Her grave and the homestead surrounding it have been turned into a memorial site in the process, where ceremonies are held in her honour each August.

In 2010, as part of the ceremonies in Malindi, a wooden statue of Mekatilili was erected in Uhuru Garden in the town centre. Through such activities, Mekatilili has become a key part of cultural heritage on the coast, and politicians are keen to associate themselves with her memory. At the festival there is provision for strong women leaders to be awarded the honorary title of Mekatilili wa Menza. The first recipient of the title in 2010 was Ruth Njoroge Engeseni (not from a coastal community),[57] who received the honour 'for her commitment to community work and dedication to preserving the culture and traditions of Kenyan communities',[58] and apparently underwent various ceremonies at Bungale. More recently a coastal politician has lobbied for the honour of the title, as discussed below.

Mwarandu expressed his hopes that the Mekatilili Cultural Festival will unite the coast: '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'.[59] Despite this seemingly more local scope of her power to unify, this MADCA-led revival has also contributed to her elevation to the status of a national heroine through accounts of her as the first freedom fighter. According to an academic at Pwani University, Dr. Chidongo, Mekatilili 'not only ignited the spirit of freedom fighting within the Midzi-Chenda [Mijikenda] community, but also through her patriotic will and action, activated other Kenyan communities to emulate her inspired example'.[60] Mwarandu has gone so far as to describe her as 'the first person to take part in Kenya's Independence struggle'.[61] Daniel Nyassy describes her as having 'led the Giriama uprising against British colonialists between 1913 and 1914',[62] and her rebellion is said to have 'later inspired other groups such as the Mau Mau' by her actions as she 'led a daring combat

[57] Her name suggests a Kikuyu or possibly Maasai father or husband.
[58] See the article by Alphonce Gari, 'Nominated MP fails to become Mekatilili', *The Star*, 15 August 2013.
[59] Joseph Mwarandu, speech at the Mekatilili wa Menza Cultural Festival 2010 at Bungale and Malindi, 12-15 August 2010.
[60] B.M. Chidongo, 'The role played by Mekatilili wa Menza in Kenya's independence struggle', undated, unpublished manuscript, pp. 1-10.
[61] Letter to Celia Nyamweru from Joseph Mwarandu, 2010. This ignores the resistance of, for example, the Abagusii (Kisii) people between about 1905 and 1908; events in which a charismatic female figure, the 'medicine woman cum prophetess' Moraa, is also recalled as having played a significant part. The earlier resistance of the Nandi led to the murder of their leader Koitalel arap Samoei by a British officer in 1905. Mangat's account of the celebration of Koitalel's legacy in 2008 quotes a statement from one of the Nandi organizers of the event describing Koitalel as 'Kenya's first freedom fighter'. Rupi Mangat, 'Murder that shaped the future of Kenya: Marking the 103rd anniversary of Koitalel arap Samoei's murder at the Nandi Bears Club', *The East African Magazine*, 5 December 2008.
[62] Daniel Nyassy, 'Kenya: Malindi honours freedom heroine', *Daily Nation*, 18 August 2009.

against the British rule from August 13, 1913 and sustained the fight against the super power for a year'.[63]

Mekatilili is thus increasingly portrayed as a 'figure of national myth', akin to figures such as Robin Hood, Joan of Arc, and Bonnie Prince Charlie. For example, Kireithe, writing for a Sunday newspaper in September 2012, a few weeks after the 2012 Mekatilili Cultural Festival, stated that: 'When Kenya exploded into open revolt against colonial oppression, the freedom fighters who confronted the Government were following a script crafted four decades earlier by a pioneer woman freedom fighter. The author of the script was a woman who had no formal military training but outwitted career soldiers for years'.[64] According to Raphael Samuel and Paul Thompson, 'These figures of national myth are creatures of excess and this is no doubt one of the sources of their popular appeal. Even when they take their name from real-life originals, they belong to the realm of the fabulous'.[65]

Mekatilili and the realm of the fabulous

In this recent revival, the bare bones of the historical record of Mekatilili's life have been fleshed out, often using wider aspects of Giriama culture as the blueprint for doing so. For example, Mekatilili is portrayed widely as being involved in secret societies and oathing, although according to the historical record her actual role in these is ambiguous. She is described as having played a key role in administering an oath to strengthen resolve against the British. According to Chidongo, 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'.[66] Brantley's sources cast doubt on the role played by Mekatilili in the administration of the powerful oaths that 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'.[67] 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.[68]

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[63] Patrick Beja, 'Honouring a woman of war', *The Standard*, 26 August 2010.
[64] Kireithe, 'Women who stood where men trembled'. Note how the one-year struggle cited by journalist Patrick Beja in the previous quotation has expanded into 'years' in Kareithi's account.
[65] Raphael Samuel and Paul Thompson, 'Introduction', in Raphael Samuel and Paul Thompson (eds) *The myths we live by* (Routledge, London, 1990), pp. 1-22, p.3.
[66] Chidongo, 'The role played by Mekatilili wa Menza'.
[67] Brantley, 'Mekatilili and the role of women', p. 87.
[68] Ibid, p. 86.

Furthermore, in the revival movement, she is also ascribed the powers of a diviner and healer, powers that are much prized by Giriama who have a long history of famous healers. Next to Mekatilili's grave site at Bungale is a little grove of trees with some broken pieces of pots on the ground. Upon our visits to the site in 2009, 2011 and 2013, we were shown this and were told that Mekatilili used to practice as a diviner and healer there, and that women diviners still practice at this site.[69] On a subsequent visit, Giriama informants emphasized the importance of her role as a diviner and healer, suggesting that any monument to her should reflect this.[70] And on another visit, we were escorted to the site by three mature Giriama women in 'traditional' dress, which included necklaces and bracelets of blue and white beads that were said to be the insignia of the diviners. Though the historical record is unclear as to Mekatilili's actual involvement in healing and divination, these Giriama practices are easily ascribed to her.

Thus, while the historical Mekatilili remains hazy, such ascriptions of various powers suggest that her revival has been shaped and influenced by various ideas of what a Giriama hero should be. Indeed, the recent revival demonstrates how her memory has entered the 'realm of the fabulous' through two particularly significant discourses: the Mepoho story and the 'hen and chicks' narrative. The Mepoho story is one of several among different Kenyan ethnic groups, namely 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. Some of these prophets were women,[71] one of them being Mepoho of the Giriama, who is said to have ended her life at a particular site in Kilifi County in the following manner: 'During a spiritual dance Mepoho sank into the ground and that was the end of her. This site can be seen as Waruni Kaloleni near the Kaloleni women's hall at Kaloleni trading center'.[72] Sources available to us show Mekatilili referring to the Mepoho narrative, and being interpreted by others in the context of this narrative, and Brantley describes Mekatilili as drawing on Mepoho's predictions.[73] However, some Giriama have conflated the Mekatilili and Mepoho into one and the same person. According to Brantley, some of the people she interviewed as long ago as the early 1970s believed they were the same person,[74] and Mwarandu mentioned this conflation in a conversation in 2009.

Mekatilili's potential to absorb wider Giriama traditions is further demonstrated by the ascription to her of the 'hen and chicks' narrative. This narrative recounts a 1913 confrontation with the British colonial administrator Arthur Champion, where Giriama challenged him to take chicks away from a hen. The hen's violent reaction was used to demonstrate symbolically how they would resist colonial attempts to recruit Giriama youth for the army or for plantation labour. When we conducted research among Giriama in Marafa (the area in which the Bungale burial site is located) in 2009, we were told that Mekatilili was the chief protagonist of the story, and in

[69] We have not been able to locate other sources that identify Mekatilili as a healer or diviner.
[70] His visit in 2009 pre-dated the installation of Mekatilili's statue in Malindi, which does not include any imagery reflecting a role as diviner or healer.
[71] Syokimau of the Akamba is one of them: see Njau and Mulaki, *Kenya women heroes*, pp. 55-59.
[72] Mwarandu, *The formation of Malindi District Cultural Association*.
[73] Brantley, 'Mekatilili and the role of women', pp. 338-339.
[74] Ibid, 339.

a MADCA publicity circular produced before the August 2009 festival, the story was told 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.[75]

Other accounts go into more vivid detail, suggesting Mekatilili even hit Champion in the encounter. Such a narrative was told by one of the MADCA organizers in front of Mekatilili's statue in the Malindi town square during the cultural festival events in August 2013, and was visually represented by carved wooden hen and chicks at her feet.

Two of Brantley's informants described a similar confrontation between Giriama and Champion.[76] However, 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 that appear to reduce Mekatilili's role in the uprising: 'Wanje wa Madori and Mekatilili did not play any part in organizing the Giriama to resist the Mzungu [European]. Let me explain. This is because in those days the Giriama were very independent minded and they wouldn't take orders from anybody'.[77] Thus, in all of this recent revival and elevation of Mekatilili to the status of national liberation hero, we see the haziness and contradictions of earlier conceptions of Mekatilili and her role in the Giriama uprising dissipating.

People such as Mwarandu are aware of historical work on Mekatilili, such as that by Brantley, and cite their indebtedness to such researchers. However, they do not rest on these accounts, but allow other Giriama traits, stories and figures to coalesce around her legend, generating an Every-Giriama Hero. Given the context of the heroes and heroines campaign, they are also happy for her to become a national hero too, taking pride in her as one of the earliest figures to resist the British and in her invocation on the national level. Mekatilili is now much referenced by national politicians as a heroine, including by then President Kibaki in a speech celebrating the inaugural Mashujaa Day of 20 October 2010, where he said: 'On this historic day, I salute our early Mashujaa who resisted colonisation. We remember the courage of Mekatilili wa Menza and the bravery of Koitalel arap Samoei'.[78] She was also included in the 'Story of Kenya' exhibit at the National Museums of Kenya in 2010, which represented her as a 'resister' and problematically contrasted her and other freedom fighters with 'collaborators' such as Lenana

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[75] MADCA, *Mekatilili wa Menza Cultural Festival 2009. Theme: Culture for peace harmony and conservation* (2009).

[76] Transcripts of interviews from the archives of the University of California (Davis) by kind permission of Professor Brantley.

[77] Ibid.

[78] A full transcript of the speech is available online at < http://www.capitalfm.co.ke/news/2010/10/kibaki-s-mashujaa-day-speech/> (accessed June 2016).

and Mumias.[79] In this way, a strong narrative has emerged of a remarkable woman who led a push for liberation not only on behalf of the Giriama, but also on behalf of the Kenyan nation. Of course, this is anachronistic, as it is unlikely that Mekatilili had any conception of herself as a Kenyan, and as we have seen, quite how pivotal her role was in the Giriama resistance is debatable. Mekatilili has entered the realm of the fabulous, offering material through which a strong past can be created and a strong future imagined for the Giriama, for the coast and for Kenya.

Mekatilili and devolution

However, while Mekatilili is claimed as a national heroine, a transformed political context marked by changes connected with the 2010 constitution resulted in competition at the regional level over what her legend means. The constitution enacted devolution in which significant amounts of power were transferred from the central government to 47 county governments, and it also designated 20 October as national Mashujaa Day.[80] These elements can be seen as pulling in opposite directions: devolution tends to strengthen the presentation of Mekatilili as a local, Kilifi County figure, while celebrations of Mashujaa Day involve a more national emphasis in which she joins the pantheon of those who 'heroically struggled to bring freedom and justice to our land'.[81]

Certainly, the introduction of devolution has led to a switch from national to county politics at the Mekatilili Cultural Festival. The tenth such festival, from 10-13 August 2013, was the first to be held after the devolution provisions of the 2010 constitution began to be implemented following the March 2013 national elections. It was also the hundredth anniversary of the key events of the Giriama uprising. The eleventh festival took place in 2014. Both in 2013 and 2014, there was significant involvement of elected officials of Kilifi County government, including the Governor, Amason Kingi, and elected members of the national Senate and House of Representatives (representing coastal constituencies). Several of the elected officials were women, who in 2013 spoke out assertively and at length, to the extent that the closing speech by the governor and presentation of trophies to various local youth groups had to be rushed as darkness was setting in. The tone of the discourse was more formally political than at earlier festivals, and there was emphasis on how the coastal people could best negotiate their new position under devolution (*ugatuzi*) to their benefit.

[79] Hughes, 'Truth be told', p.194.
[80] Kenya's constitution was officially published on 6 May 2010, replacing the 1963 (independence) constitution. In a national referendum on 4 August 2010 it was approved by 67 percent of Kenyan voters and was promulgated on 27 August 2010. The first national elections to be held under the new constitution were on 4 March 2013. Under this constitution Mashujaa (Heroes') Day replaces Kenyatta Day (20 October) and Moi Day (10 October) in the calendar of Kenya's public holidays.
[81] Constitution of Kenya (2010), preamble, p. 12.

During the 2013 festival, a wide range of funding sources ('partners') were acknowledged, including local businesses, local and foreign NGOs, and foreign governments.[82] This appeared to be a wider support base than in earlier years, when local driving schools and a children's charity supported by Italian donors seemed to provide most of the support for events in Malindi. In 2014, the bulk of the funding appeared to come from the Kilifi County government, who provided among other things much of the food for several hundred participants for several days, as well as rented school buses and the brand-new county garbage collection lorry to carry the participants between the different venues. It was not possible to identify members of Kenyan human rights organizations or Mau Mau veterans at the events in 2013. In contrast, in 2014 there was no event at Pwani University, but there was the prominent presence of Gitu wa Kahengeri, the chairman of the Mau Mau veterans, and a number of members of this organization. This shows how the link between Mekatilili and those she is said to have inspired continues to be made.

Overall then, the 2013 and 2014 Mekatilili Cultural Festivals were larger and more focused on coastal politics than earlier festivals. References to Mekatilili herself continue to be made in the politicians' speeches. In 2013, Kilifi County Governor Kingi referred back to history: 'it is 100 years since Mekatilili slapped the *mbeberu* [colonialist] – that was an important blow "sasa ukiona mzungu [European] humwogopi"'.[83] At the same festival, the nominated Mombasa senator Emma Mbura stated that 'people call me Mekatilili … Eve was brighter than Adam … The Mijikenda had a woman hero who loved her people, defied the wazungu [Europeans], fought for us all including the Arabs'. Mbura is said to have lobbied MADCA to receive the title Mekatilili for 2013, donating money for the privilege. This money was returned to her because, according a media report, the organizers were concerned that it might appear she had 'bought' the title.[84] However, Mbura still appears determined to link her name with Mekatilili's, for example through calling for the establishment of a Mekatilili University in 2015.[85] In a recent interview, she described Mekatilili wa Menza as her 'mentor' and called herself 'Mekatilili wa Jeri' ('Jeri … is a Giriama word meaning true'), stating that she felt 'that [Mekatilili's] spirit is not dead but living within me'.[86] As a member of Uhuru Kenyatta's The National Alliance party, deeply unpopular on the coast, Mbura's attempt to link herself to Mekatilili is clearly a tactic to increase her popularity.

Thus, the memory of Mekatilili as revived by MADCA a decade ago has become highly resonant in the politics of Kilifi County, with politicians of various backgrounds attempting to associate themselves with this powerful historical figure, some even allegedly willing to pay for the privilege. Having expanded from a local to a more national focus, it seems that the memory of Mekatilili is strongest within a regional context, one more salient following the

[82] USAID, through the Youth Bunge program, and the American Presence Officer for Coast Province of the US Embassy were present at the festival on August 12th and 13th.
[83] Kiswahili for 'Now if you see a white person you do not fear him'.
[84] See article by Alphonce Gari, 'Nominated MP fails to become Mekatilili', *The Star*, 15 August 2013.
[85] See article by Charles Mghenyi, 'Senator Mbura plans Mekatilili University', *The Star*, 12 February 2015.
[86] Angela Oketch, 'I once worked as a househelp in UAE', *Sunday Nation*, 8 March 2015.

implementation of the 2010 constitution. The story of Mekatilili has been crafted once more to fit the contemporary concerns of the Kenyan coast.

Conclusion

Kenya is abuzz with talk of heroism and how the bounds of heroism can be extended beyond Mau Mau. Just as South Africa has tried to rewrite its history of heroes in the post-apartheid era,[87] Kenya has tried to be far more inclusive in its heroic pantheon. Since the creation of the heroes' taskforce in 2007, figures such as Koitalel and Mekatilili have become highly salient as examples of non-Gikuyu freedom fighters, and an ongoing rewriting of history holds their story of local resistance to the British as a prototypical nationalist and anti-colonial movement. Political leaders at national level initially drove the heroes' project, but since devolution, it has been increasingly driven by political leaders at the county level. However, it has also caught the imagination of civil society groups eager to engage with the politics of identity and belonging and to claw local benefits from national initiatives. In the process, the finer points of historical accuracy have become redundant, and as elsewhere throughout the world, many people were content to embrace the 'realm of the fabulous'. The complexities and ambiguities of real historical figures often are lost, as the legends associated with these figures become social facts. Of course, as Branch warns, citing the case of the 'false hero', Ethiopian farmer Ato Lemma Ayanu who was hailed as a returning Mau Mau war veteran Stanley Mathenge in May 2003, that 'history that appears simple, without ambiguity or contradiction is, rather like the reappearance of Mathenge, too good to be true'.

However, the case study of Mekatilili also reveals that the rewriting of history around legendary figures is scarcely a new phenomenon in Kenya. As we have seen, her remarkable story has long been attractive for various political motives, whether resisting state or gender oppression, or claiming her legend to boost political legitimacy on the coast. In this regard, her more localized significance as a figure of resistance for the Giriama, and the coast more broadly, might yet challenge use of her as a symbol of national unity, particularly in a fraught political context where there is much discontent with the political status quo. This discontent finds its most extreme expression in the rise of the Mombasa Republican Council, a secessionist movement that feeds off the perceived marginalization of the coast and the only-too-real poverty in a region whose main economic industry of tourism has suffered from insecurity.[88]

While the Giriama people connected with the revival of Mekatilili have so far been at ease with her appropriation by the state as a national heroine, even playing a key role in facilitating this, it is possible that Mekatilili might become a symbol of broader coastal resistance against the state.

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[87] Marschall, 'How to honour a woman'.

[88] On coastal marginalization, see Justin Willis and Ngala Chome, 'Marginalization and participation on the Kenya coast: The 2013 elections', *Journal of Eastern African Studies* 8, 1 (2014), pp. 115-134. On the Mombasa Republican Council, see Justin Willis and George Gona, 'Pwani C Kenya? Memory, documents and secessionist politics in coastal Kenya', *African Affairs* 112, 446 (2013), pp. 48-71.

At present this is expressed largely in terms of Islamic identity. There certainly is potential for Mekatilili's message of local control and freedom from foreign exploitation to resonate strongly along the coast, where poverty continues to bite hard and those seen as outsiders are often scapegoated, especially in inland areas such as Bungale so deeply connected to this legendary woman. Mekatilili might have been chosen as a national heroine as an apparently neutral figure, yet her memorialization has always been politically charged, and she might not prove the nationally unifying figure the government had hoped. After all, as its evocation in the 1980s demonstrates, the memory of this remarkable woman can easily be used as a symbol of resistance to the Kenyan state when that state is perceived as corrupt and oppressive.

It is certainly salutary to move beyond the patriarchal liberation figures so common in African and global iconography of national heroism, and beyond dominant ethnicities as the Gikuyu in Kenya, when expanding the pantheon of a nation's heroes. However, this is not necessarily a straightforward way of building greater national unity, especially in a context of inequalities and political marginalization. Potent figures of the past such as Mekatilili are rarely neutral, and their unruly histories are hard to discipline within the continuing project of nation building in Africa and beyond.