

MASHUJAA · IVETI HILLS · 1800s

SYOKIMAU

*The Seers Who Saw
the Iron Snake Coming*



THE PROPHECY. THE RAILWAY. THE STATION.

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SYOKIMAU



M A S H U J A A

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*The Seers Who Saw
the Iron Snake Coming*

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

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*“A long snake, whose head was in the Indian Ocean and
the tail was in Lake Victoria.”*

— The prophecy of Syokimau, as the Kamba tell it

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Prologue

SYOKIMAU, SOUTH OF NAIROBI. 31 MAY 2017.

Kenya's newest railway was about to carry its first passengers.

The **Madaraka Express** was the passenger service of Kenya's new **Standard Gauge Railway**. It ran from Mombasa to a terminus just south of Nairobi. The service was inaugurated on **31 May 2017**, eighteen months ahead of schedule. The next day, Madaraka Day, the first fare-paying passengers climbed aboard.

The terminus stood at a place called **Syokimau**.

The place is named after a woman. She was a Kamba medicine woman and prophetess who lived in the hills near Machakos in the 1800s, long before any train had come to Kenya.

The Kamba say she saw one coming.

She described, they say, "a long snake, whose head was in the Indian Ocean and the tail was in Lake Victoria." A snake that spat fire and smoke. And with it, strangers with skin like meat, who spoke like birds and carried fire in their pockets.

She was not the only one. Across the land that would become Kenya, among the Kikuyu, the Maasai, the Nandi and the Kamba, the seers told the same story.

An iron snake was coming.

CHAPTER ONE

The Woman from Iveti

THE IVETI HILLS, NEAR MACHAKOS. THE 1800S.

Nobody knows exactly when Syokimau was born. The accounts say only that she was born and raised in the **Iveti Hills**, near present-day **Machakos**, some time in the 1800s.

Even her beginning is a legend. According to one account, the Kamba said she “sprung out of a tree,” with no known parents. According to the same account, her people believed her powers came from a *maimu*, a spirit that seized her as a child.

What the accounts agree on is what she became: a **medicine woman** and a **prophetess**. The National Museums of Kenya calls her one of the greatest Kamba prophetesses who ever lived.

She was useful to her people in a practical way. According to the accounts of her life, she could tell when the neighbouring **Maasai** or **Kikuyu** were about to raid, which gave the Kamba warriors time to prepare. She prayed for the warriors at a shrine under a sacred tree, the *ithembo*.

People listened to her.

So when she began to speak of stranger things, they remembered what she said.

CHAPTER TWO

The Snake

This is the prophecy as the Kamba tell it.

A long snake would come, spitting **fire and smoke**. It would stretch from one great water to another. Its head, in one version, would be in the Indian Ocean and its tail in Lake Victoria.

With it would come **strangers**. Their skin would be like meat. Their speech would make no sense, like the chirping of birds. And they would carry **fire in their pockets**.

According to one account, she warned that these people would beat the Kamba, take their land, and make them abandon their gods.

And there was more. A generation would come, she said, that would break the old traditions, and build houses on top of one another.

In the telling of her people, the snake was the railway. The strangers were the Europeans. The birdsong was English. The fire in their pockets was a box of matches.

The houses on top of one another were the tall buildings of Nairobi.

According to the National Museums of Kenya, she made these prophecies by the middle of the 1800s.

CHAPTER THREE

The Boy from the Forest

Kariara, Murang'a, near Thika.

To the north-west, the Kikuyu had their own seer.

According to tradition, a hunter named **Kibiru** was checking his traps in the forest when he found a boy alone. The boy's name was **Cege**. Nobody knew his parents. When the hunter asked where he had been, according to one account, the boy said he had been with *Ngai*: with God.

Kibiru adopted him into his family, of the **Anjiru** clan, a clan traditionally linked with prophecy. The boy grew up to be a healer, and became known as **Mugo wa Kibiru**.

His prophecies, as the Kikuyu remember them, were strikingly like Syokimau's.

Strangers would come, with skin as pale as a small pale frog that lives in the water. They would wear clothes as bright as butterflies. They would carry **magical sticks that made fire**, and fire in their pockets.

Do not fight them with spears, he warned. You cannot spear a butterfly.

And there would be an **iron snake** with many legs, like an earthworm, with a bushy head that bellowed smoke. It would swallow the white men, according to one account, and spit them out where it stopped.

His advice, as it has come down, was this: learn the virtues of the white man, but reject his vices.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Laibon

MAASAILAND. 1866–1890.

To the south, the Maasai had **Mbatian**.

His full name, according to the National Museums of Kenya, was **Mbatian Ole Supeet**, from **Matapato**, in what is now Kajiado. He inherited the role of *laibon*, the Maasai prophet and ritual leader, from his father in **1866**, and held it for twenty-four years.

He was a laibon of great power. Around the early 1870s, he united Maasai warriors against their enemies, the Laikipiak. In his time, the Maasai controlled a vast area of the plains, by one account from Lake Turkana to Mount Meru.

He, too, saw the snake.

He foretold, according to the accounts, “an iron snake that would split Maasailand into two.” He warned his people not to leave their ancestral lands, or they would die of smallpox. He warned that they would have to fight a powerful enemy, and that they would lose.

Mbatian died in **1890**.

He was buried at **Oldonyo Orok**, the Black Hill, in the Namanga hills.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Stolen Blessing

MAASAILAND. 1890.

Mbatian's death left a quarrel behind it.

He had two sons, **Senteu** and **Lenana**. According to the account preserved by Wikipedia, the old laibon was nearly blind by the end, with only one good eye. He meant to pass the laibon's insignia (an iron club, a medicine horn, a gourd, stones and a bag) to Senteu.

Lenana, the story goes, overheard. He hid in the calf-shed, and at dawn he reached his father first. Mbatian, unable to see which son stood before him, gave the insignia to Lenana.

"Thou shalt be great amongst thy brothers and amongst all the people," he said, according to that account.

The brothers split the Maasai between them. The fighting that followed, according to the National Museums of Kenya, reduced the Maasai population by half. Peace between the brothers came only in **1902**.

By then, the iron snake had arrived, and the British had come with it.

Today, the highest point in Kenya, the summit of Mount Kenya, is called **Point Mbatian**.

CHAPTER SIX

The Prophet They Stoned

NANDI. 1890.

In the Nandi hills, the seer was **Kimnyole arap Turukat**, the Orkoiyot, the spiritual and military leader of the Nandi.

He, too, is remembered for two prophecies: the coming of the “white tribe,” and the coming of **the Iron Snake**. According to the National Museums of Kenya, he spoke of “a black snake, spitting fire, which would pass through the land of the Nandi.”

But Kimnyole’s people did not thank him.

Around **1888**, a cattle disease, **rinderpest**, swept through the Nandi herds. Kimnyole was blamed for failing to warn the warriors that cattle brought back from raids were infected. He was blamed, too, for a raid that cost many Nandi warriors their lives. According to one account, his prophecy of white conquest upset the elders.

In **1890**, Kimnyole was sentenced to death. He was **stoned to death**.

His son, **Koitalel arap Samoei**, would become Orkoiyot after him. Koitalel led the Nandi against the railway for a decade, until he was shot dead at a peace meeting in 1905.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Many Seers, One Snake

The same image turns up again and again.

Among the Kamba, there was another sage, **Masaku**, after whom Machakos is named. According to one collection of these traditions, he predicted “a black snake coming and all the cattle disappearing.” Among the Embu, a medicine man named **Mwenda Mwea** is remembered for similar prophecies.

A Kamba prophetess. A Kikuyu healer. A Maasai laibon. A Nandi Orkoiyot. Different peoples, different languages, different gods.

And in the traditions of every one of them: strangers, fire in their pockets, and a snake of iron that breathed smoke.

CHAPTER EIGHT

The Snake Arrives

MOMBASA. 1896.

In **1896**, the British began to build a railway from Mombasa towards **Lake Victoria**, nearly six hundred miles inland.

More than **thirty thousand** workers were brought from India to build it. Thousands died before it was finished.

The line climbed from the coast through Kamba country. In **1899**, it reached a swampy place that would become **Nairobi**, and a station was built there. Then it went on, across the plains of the Maasai, splitting Maasailand in two, and up through the land of the Nandi. The Nandi, under Kimnyole's son Koitalel, attacked it. They made the telegraph wire and the iron from the track into ornaments and weapons.

The line reached Lake Victoria, at Port Florence, now Kisumu, in **December 1901**.

Its head was in the Indian Ocean. Its tail was in Lake Victoria. It spat fire and smoke.

CHAPTER NINE

The Question

Did they really see it coming?

This book can't answer that. Nobody can.

The prophecies of Syokimau, Mugo wa Kibiru, Mbatian and Kimnyole come to us through **oral tradition**: stories told and retold, and written down later. None of them, as far as the record shows, was written down before the railway came.

That doesn't make them false. The Kamba, the Kikuyu, the Maasai and the Nandi kept their history by speaking it. Most of what we know about Kenya before the 1890s comes to us that way.

But it does mean we can't know how much the stories changed in the telling, after the snake had come.

What we do know is that these prophecies mattered. They were remembered because, to the people who lived through the coming of the British, they explained what had happened. The strangers had not taken them by surprise. Their seers had warned them.

CHAPTER TEN

Died Three Times

Syokimau's death, like her birth, is a legend.

According to the accounts of her people, she died in her hut in Iveti. And then, the story goes, she came back. She “died and resurrected twice,” according to the National Museums of Kenya, “before dying for good the third time.”

Nobody recorded when.

Mugo wa Kiburu left a prophecy of his own about endings. A great **fig tree** at Thika, he said, would die when the white men left. According to tradition, the colonial settlers fenced the tree to protect it. According to one account, it was struck by lightning and died on **12 December 1963**, the day Kenya became independent; according to another, it was struck “shortly after independence.”

Mbatian and Kimnyole both died in **1890**, before the railway reached their lands.

None of them lived to see the snake.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

The Station

SYOKIMAU. 2012–2017.

Syokimau's name lives on in a place.

According to the National Museums of Kenya, another prophetess, **Syonguu wa Kathukya**, from Athi River, named an area after her. The Wikipedia account is more cautious: it says the area was possibly named by Syonguu. Nobody recorded when.

Today, Syokimau is a residential area just south of Nairobi and the airport, in Machakos County.

On **20 November 2012**, President **Mwai Kibaki** opened a new commuter railway station there. It cost **Sh400 million**. It was called **Syokimau**.

Five years later, the new Standard Gauge Railway ended there too. The **Nairobi Terminus** of the line from Mombasa was built at Syokimau, next to the old station.

Today, according to the National Museums of Kenya, a statue of the prophetess stands at the railway station that bears her name.

Epilogue

Syokimau. Today.

Every day, trains come in from the coast, from the Indian Ocean to Syokimau.

The passengers who step off at the terminus may not know whose name is on the station. They may not know that more than a century ago, a Kamba medicine woman in the hills near Machakos is remembered for describing something very like the train they have just stepped off.

Nobody can prove she did.

But her people believed it, and remembered it, and told it to their children. And when the time came to name a railway station, they named it after her.

The snake came. The seers were right, or they were remembered as right.

Either way, the iron snake now stops at her door.

THE RECORD

SYOKIMAU	Kamba prophetess and medicine woman, Iveti Hills, 1800s
THE PROPHECY	A snake of fire and smoke from the ocean to the lake; strangers with fire in their pockets
MUGO WA KIBIRU	Kikuyu seer of Kariara, Murang'a; the iron snake with many legs
MBATIAN	Maasai laibon, 1866–1890; a snake to split Maasailand
KIMNYOLE	Nandi Orkoiyot; stoned to death, 1890
THE RAILWAY	Begun at Mombasa 1896; Nairobi 1899; Lake Victoria, December 1901
THE RECORD	Oral tradition, written down after the fact
SYOKIMAU STATION	Opened 20 November 2012
SGR TERMINUS	Madaraka Express inaugurated at Syokimau, 31 May 2017

They said it was coming. Then it came.
 Cover illustration: an artist's impression of Syokimau.

A Note from the Author

If this story stayed with you, you can buy me a coffee. It keeps the research going and helps bring the next one to you.

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Asante sana.

— *Graham Kasindo*