

# The Memoir, Ministry, and Martyrdom of David Koi (1820–1895) of Forodhoyo Kitoro Christian Community, Kilifi, Kenya

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## Abstract

Significantly, Evangelist David Koi was murdered at the Kenyan Coast two years before the execution of the famous Ugandan Martyrs. And yet, the story of East African Christianity is often told without any significant mention of his contribution. The purpose of this article is to reconstruct the story of David Koi using literary works, family oral narratives, and archival documents to document his memoir, ministry, and martyrdom. The article argues that whereas Koi was *ignored* by Church Missionary Society Europeans in Rabai as a unique leader of a *kitoro* African Christian village, *rejected* by his people, the Agirrama, as an African chief who advocated a “whiteman’s religion,” *hated* by Muslim Arabs as the one providing hiding haven for their run-away slaves, and *suspected* by the British colonial masters as the elitist leader who protected his people against intended taxes, Koi’s life, leadership, and death have never been appreciated enough as a hero of quite uncertain times.

**Keywords:** martyrdom; East Africa; missions; Church Missionary Society; slavery; colonialism



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## Introduction

The East African Coast region was an early recipient of various foreign cultures, religions and colonial regimes. First to arrive were Muslim Arabs during the 14th century, then the Catholic Portuguese led by Vasco da Gama came during the 16th century, and in the 17th century, in the year 1844, the British Protestant missionaries arrived, led by Dr Ludwig Krapf. As a region that uniquely witnessed confluent forces, cultures, and political interests, it is not surprising that it is associated with some historic and bitter religious martyrdoms. Carlos Alonso, OSA, in his book, *A History of the Augustinians and Martyrs of Mombasa* (1598–1698), writes that on 16 August 1631, attackers approached the hermitage of Our Lady of Grace, where a hermit who had taken vows of the Augustinian third order lived. Brother Diego de la Madre de Dios refused to become a Muslim and vowed never to renounce his faith. This was enough for the captors to kill him on the spot.<sup>1</sup> This happened during the reign of King Jeronimo Chingulia. Other martyrs in this order include Fr Antonio de la Natividad, Fr Antonio de la Pasion, and Fr Domingo del Nacimiento.<sup>2</sup> On 21 August, several men were shot with arrows to death in a procession to the fortress.<sup>3</sup> John Baur narrated the persecution and martyrdom of both Portuguese and Africans during the reign of Sultan Yusuf in Mombasa, where 300 persons, half of them Portuguese, half Africans, died for their faith in Christ.<sup>4</sup> Baur also mentions the killing of Koi by the Arabs at Forodhoyo Christian village.<sup>5</sup> William B. Anderson, in his book, *The Church in East Africa (1840–1974)*, named David Koi as the first East African martyr. It is noteworthy that Koi was killed<sup>6</sup> only two years before the famous incident of the Uganda Martyrs.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, the Uganda Martyrs have received much attention from church historians. Not so the story of David Koi, who is mentioned in passing by a few scholars. In his monograph, *The Church in East Africa- 1840–1974*, Anderson noted how Koi was involved in the planting of Christianity in Kilifi. Anderson observed that:

In 1882, the Church missionary society planted a colony of freed slaves at Mwaiba Hill, not far from Kilifi. David Koi, a Giryama, came there as a famine refugee and became a Christian teacher at Mwaiba Hill. Further inland, a large colony of ‘watoro’<sup>8</sup> had developed in a place called Fuladoyo.<sup>9</sup> Hearing the Gospel from Christians at Mwaiba

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- 1 Alonso, C.O. 2007. *A History of the Augustinians and the Martyrs of Mombasa*. Nairobi: Pauline's Publications Africa, pg.67–68.
- 2 ibid. pg. 69.
- 3 ibid. pg. 70–71.
- 4 Baur, J. 1994. *2000 Years of Christianity in Africa - An African Church History*. Nairobi: Pauline's Publications Africa, pg. 90, 231.
- 5 ibid.
- 6 Purcell, W. 1983. *Martyrs Of Our Time*. London: A.R. Mowbray and Co. Ltd, pg. 141–142
- 7 Anderson, W.B. 1977. *The Church in East Africa- 1840-1974*. Dodoma: Cambridge University Press, pg. 16–17.
- 8 The word means, runaways, it was translated from the Agirama word “Athoro.”
- 9 The findings of the research indicate that the place is known as Forodhoyo, not Fuladoyo as indicated by Anderson.

Hill, they begged for a school. David Koi volunteered as the teacher evangelist. (Anderson 1977,16)

This article aims to reconstruct the story of David Koi using literary works, family and church oral narratives, and archival documents to document his memoir, ministry, and martyrdom. Whereas literary and archival sources tend to be more accurate with details such as names and dates, they are deficient in attitudes, persuasions, and narration. These are well complemented by oral sources. Therefore, the article relied on a methodology that combines three qualitative methods, namely archival, orality, and literary analysis. The article argues that, whereas David Koi was *ignored* by the Church Missionary Society Europeans in Rabai as a unique leader of a *kitoro*<sup>10</sup> African Christian village, *rejected* by his people, the Agirama, as an African chief who advocated a “whiteman’s religion,” *hated* by Muslim Arabs as the one providing hiding haven for their run-away slaves, and *suspected* by the British colonial masters as the elitist leader who protected his people against intended taxes, Koi’s life, leadership and death has never been appreciated enough as a hero of quite uncertain times. The article is organised into three main sections. The first section describes David Koi’s life and family, whereas the second delves into his converted service to Christian ministry. The third section focuses on his martyrdom and analyses three perspectives in interpreting the circumstances that led to his killing.

## Family and Life of Koi

David Koi was born to the family of Mwambire Ndhudhi and belonged to the Giryama tribe of the lower Coast region in the larger Mijikenda<sup>11</sup> group of tribes. He was a descendant of “amwandhundhi” clan.<sup>12</sup> His father was called Mwambire Ndhundhi and his mother was Kizi, but some called her “Chizi.”<sup>13</sup> According to Julius Mwambire, the

10 In line with the usage of Kitoro, a Swahili word for defiant, the concept of “Kitoro Christianity” has been used to describe the religion of fugitive slaves of East Africa paralleled to the “Krio Christianity” of the recaptives of West Africa. See Mark Shaw. 1994. “The Kingdom of God in Africa: Or How to get Africa into the Western Church History Curriculum Africa.” *Journal of Evangelical Theology* 13(1):13–25. See also Joshua, S. M., and Mutati, C. 2024. “Africans on the Vanguard: Historicizing the Origin of Anglicanism in Akamba of Kenya.” *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae* 50(3) 15 pages. <https://doi.org/10.25159/2412-4265/13840>

11 Mijikenda is a Swahili word that literally means “nine towns.” It is used in Kenya to refer to a collection of non-Bantu tribes that are ethnically close and are settled in the coastal region of the country. See Yaa, M. D., Joshua, S. M., and Chidongo. T. M. 2019. “An Analysis of the Burial Rites Conflicts between Agirama Christians and African Religious Adherents, Kilifi County Kenya.” *Journal of Philosophy, Culture and Religion* 2(1):67–92. Retrieved from <https://www.iprjb.org/journals/index.php/JPCR/article/view/980>

12 Mwambire, J. and Hon. Teddy. Interview by Gerald Ngumbao. Personal interview. Forodhoyo home 24 June 2019.

13 The change of name is determined by the pronunciation, which is determined by the tribe one comes from among the Mijikenda. The Agirama, for example, use “Ki” while others like the Duruma, where David Koi’s mother came from, use “Chi.” This is also applicable to the Rabai, Chonyi, Kauma, and Ribe, just to name a few.

member of parliament of the region and a close family relative, “Mwambire and Kizi were blessed with three children, Ndhundhi Kizi, who was the first-born, followed by Mbithia Kizi, who died at a very tender age, and lastly, Koi Kizi (David Koi), who was born in the late 1820s.”<sup>14</sup> Mwambire Ndhundhi, the father of Koi, had more than one wife. The children, therefore, used their mother’s name for easy identification.<sup>15</sup> This is the reason why he was called Koi Kizi. Koi grew up in the village and demonstrated the ability of a future leader. Later in life, Koi got married, and not long after marriage, a baby girl named Sidi was born to them. Their second baby was also a girl, whom they named Nyevu.<sup>16</sup> Koi came to be called by his first daughter’s name as “Abe Sidi,” as Collin Reed observed.<sup>17</sup> However, in the Giryama language, it reads, “Bi Sidi” or in full “*Babaye Sidi*,” rendered as “father of Sidi.” The use of Abe could be a result of interaction with other tribes among the Mijikenda, such as the Rabai or Duruma.

Koi acquired Giryama traditional informal education, which was mostly vocational. Later in his life, Koi became a local chief.<sup>18</sup> Giryama people did not have hereditary chiefs as was with some other African communities. Therefore, what the outsiders considered chiefdom leadership for Koi might have simply been a local village elder.

As Colin Reed observed, Koi came to faith through the preaching of Abe Goa, one of Rebmann’s first converts.<sup>19</sup> Abe Goa was a man from the local Giryama people who had been expelled from the tribe for allegedly causing a drought through witchcraft. As Colin explained, this man went to Rabai and started to inquire from Rebmann about the Christian faith. Therefore, his conversion was a result of threats that were surrounding him as a person. Reed explained it as follows:

Later, when drunk, he had an argument with his wife and attacked her with an axe. She was badly injured and Rebmann sent her to Mombasa to be cared for. William Jones and Ishmael Semler took her and were responsible for caring for her. While she was in Mombasa, she suddenly died. Abe Goa felt terrible remorse and sought comfort from the German missionary. This is where he became one of Rebmann’s first converts.<sup>20</sup>

It was at Rabai where Koi met Abe Goa as he was on his way to Duruma to greet his mother’s relatives. Julius Mwambire observed that Koi’s journey to his maternal

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14 Mwambire, J. and Hon. Teddy. Interview by Gerald Ngumbao. Personal interview. Forodhoyo home, 24 June 2019.

15 The Mijikenda system of naming was that children were given clan names. In a family where the father has more than one wife, a name was shared by both children of either mother. Using the mother’s name as the surname was an easy way of identifying the children.

16 Mwambire, J. and Hon. Teddy. Interview with Gerald Ngumbao. Personal interview. Forodhoyo home 24 Jan 2023.

17 Reed, C. 1997. *Pastors, Partners and Paternalists. African Church Leaders and Western Missionaries in the Anglican Church in Kenya, 1850-1900*. New York: Brill, pg.44.

18 ibid. pg.45.

19 ibid. pg. 44.

20 ibid. pg.44.

relatives through Rabai met his conversion and a call to serve the Lord Jesus Christ. Abe Goa convinced Koi to become a Christian, which he accepted and was later baptised by George David under the name David Koi.<sup>21</sup> Reed records that of the three African freed slave men from Bombay, only George David was remaining in East Africa. By then, he was based at Rabai.<sup>22</sup> The other two “Bombay Africans” were William Jones and Ishmael Semler, who were ordained by Bishop James Hannington of Mombasa in 1885.<sup>23</sup>

Since David Koi could not read and write, George David took the responsibility of teaching him how to read and write so that he could read the Bible. When Koi had become a strong Christian and could read, George David kept him in charge of a church that was near his home, Forodhoyo. He became the elite of the area who could read and interpret the Bible message to the people. The church Koi used to shepherd was built at a place called Makoroboini, about five kilometres away from his home.<sup>24</sup> As a local elder in the society, his conversion moved him to the periphery, to the margins of society. Reed observed that Koi became the leader of a community of fugitive slaves who were people with no rights and without a leader. As such, Koi became a leader who had lost his people.<sup>25</sup> Reed further observed that Christian faith gave the village a new identity as well as the hope of new and advantageous political alliances. By the mid-1870s, some 35 people in David Koi’s village had openly confessed the Christian faith, and there were many more adherents.<sup>26</sup>

In the 1860s, the CMS committee in London had been seriously considering abandoning the mission in Kenya as it was faced with many difficulties. In 1867, Rev T.H Sparshott was sent to work with Rebmann but was taken ill at Mombasa before doing any work. He was sent to the Seychelles to recuperate. He then went back to Mombasa, where he rented a house. Sparshott wrote to the CMS arguing strongly that the emergence of the Church around Abe Sidi (David Koi), the Giryama church, as he called it, was sufficient justification for the society to continue its work on the East African Coast.<sup>27</sup> The emergence of this indigenous church became the justification for the mission to continue its work in Kenya. Koi was very passionate about the work, and he devoted most of his

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21 Mwambire, J. and Hon.Teddy. Interview with Gerald Ngumbao. Personal interview. Forodhoyo home 17 Jan 2023.

22 Reed, C. 1997. *Pastors, Partners and Paternalists. African Church leaders and Western Missionaries in the Anglican Church in Kenya, 1850-1900*. New York: Brill, pg.45.

23 Joshua, S. M., and Mutati, C. 2024. “Africans on the Vanguard: Historicizing the Origin of Anglicanism in Akamba of Kenya.” *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae* 50(3), 15 pgs. <https://doi.org/10.25159/2412-4265/13840>

24 Mwambire, J. Interview with Gerald Ngumbao. Personal interview. Forodhoyo home 17 Jan 2023.

25 Reed, C. 1997. *Pastors, Partners and Paternalists. African Church Leaders and Western Missionaries in the Anglican Church in Kenya, 1850-1900*. New York: Brill, pg.45.

26 Gleaner, C.M. 1878. pg. 8, quoted by Reed Colin. 1997. *Pastors, Partners and Paternalists. African Church Leaders and Western Missionaries in the Anglican Church in Kenya, 1850-1900*. New York: Brill, pg.45.

27 CM Register 1873, pg. 383.

time to reading the scripture. Koi was not only an evangelist or a religious leader. He also acted as a mediator between the colonial government and society. What contributed to Koi's active participation in both the church and community activities and the politics of the region was his ability to read and write.<sup>28</sup>

## Ministry of Koi

Apart from Rabai, Forodhoyo was the only place on the Kenyan Coast where the hope of the Christian faith and message had been enthusiastically received as early as the mid-1800s. Contrary to the case of Rabai, Forodhoyo was uniquely established and organised with total independence from European Missionary Societies. As an early expression of "Kitoro Christianity," a Christian village run by Africans, Forodhoyo was a place where people, especially freed slaves, ran to and enjoined in an independent, orderly, and prosperous Christian community.<sup>29</sup> Forodhoyo was originally the settlement of a small, splinter group of Giryama Christians who were loosely attached to the Church Missionary Society mission at Rabai. Understandably, the story of Forodhoyo is highly undocumented, partly because its peak of success came at a time when CMS missionary efforts in Rabai were facing closure following a perceived retarded growth.<sup>30</sup>

The growth of Forodhoyo Christianity was fascinating and encouraging, even among white missionaries. From a few Giryama converts under the leadership of Koi, Forodhoyo grew very fast and drew the attention of many, including Western missionaries, such as Reverend William Salter Price. As Julius Mwambire reported, Forodhoyo Christian community was born out of the break of the Godoma and Petanguo villages in the now Ganze sub-county.<sup>31</sup> At its initial stages of establishment, the Christian community of Godoma-Petanguo was a success. The community grew from a very small number of Giryama converts who used to converge around their leader, then Abe Goa.<sup>32</sup> There were signs of reasonable growth at Petanguo in the early 1870s. The settlement attracted persons of different respectable calibre, such as "Yaa wa Menza" of Ganze, who was a wealthy Giryama Muslim trader and slave owner.<sup>33</sup> The growth of Godoma Petanguo Mission was surprising given the lack of support from the Church Missionary Society mission at Rabai. Johann Rebmann, the missionary who was at Rabai, was at the time losing his sight and more so his enthusiasm for missionary

28 Mwambire, J. and Hon.Teddy. Interview with Gerald Ngumbao. Personal interview. Forodhoyo home 17 Jan 2023.

29 Canon, S. T. Interview with Gerald Ngumbao. Personal interview. Dabaso home 20th May,2023.

30 Isichei, E. 1995. *A History of Christianity in Africa: From Antiquity to the Present*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company. Pg. 137.

31 Mwambire, J. and Hon. Teddy. Interview with Gerald Ngumbao. Personal interview. Forodhoyo home 17 Jan 2023.

32 Abe Ngowa, was one of Rebmann's first converts. He was a man from the local Agiriamra people, who had been expelled from the tribe for allegedly causing a drought by witchcraft. As Colin explained, this man went to Rabai and started to inquire from Rebmann about the Christian Faith

33 George, D. Godoma report (1875) CMS CA5/06.

work. At the same time, Rebmann's assistants, William Jones, Isaac Nyondo, and George David were also irked under Rebmann's overbearing direction, and this made it difficult for them to carry out their mission.

After 1875, the Giryama settlement at Godoma and Petanguo ran into many difficulties. Julius Mwambire spoke of a severe drought that hit the area and made farming difficult. The land was also depleted due to population increase in the region. Another problem was division within the group. Some were anxious about their future as Giryama Christians without the assistance of the Western missionaries. As a result of these challenges, some of the people left the Christian settlement and went back to their non-Christian ways of life. The old Abe Goa was among the first people to leave. He settled at Jilore, where he met his death in 1876. Yaa wa Menza also left after losing his Ganze property through a terrible fire.<sup>34</sup> The other group that consisted of David Koi, Jeremiah Mangi, and their families was much smaller, but it demonstrated more confidence.<sup>35</sup> Through small but steady losses, the community reduced in number and by 1877, there remained about 22 persons, nine of whom were little children. In spite of the influx of new missionaries along the Kenyan coast after 1875, the Church Missionary Society's attention and focus were to rebuild Rabai and to establish Frere Town as a new strategic direction of using freed slaves' agency in evangelism. The challenges at Godoma and Petanguo settlements were a benediction in disguise. It was out of them that Forodhoyo was born under the leadership of David Koi, commonly known as Abe Sidi.<sup>36</sup> In early 1879, David Koi left Petanguo and took his family northward to look for a new place to settle. As Julius explained, Jeremiah Mangi and his family also followed him, leaving very few Christians in Petanguo. They moved to Forodhoyo, the home of David Koi and established a settlement in his father's land. The reasons for his move, as Collin Reed observed, were infertility of the land at Godoma and Petanguo as well as security concerns as the group sought somewhere more secure and easier to defend because of the constant threats from the slave owners.<sup>37</sup>

From the beginning of his stay in Petanguo, Koi demonstrated great confidence and determination in learning more about the Christian faith. This made him travel more often to Rabai and Frere Town for instruction. He was later followed by Jeremiah Mangi, who also showed similar interest and enthusiasm. The two were the only Giryama Christians who were fully literate. David Koi's abilities made him a natural leader, replacing Abe Goa in 1875. Unfortunately, there was a growing dissent among the villagers over Koi's leadership. Henry Binns is remembered for his statement that "Koi is not a favourite among the people of Godoma. I'm afraid that the village will

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34 Journal of William S. Price, 18 May 1876.

35 Mwambire, J. and Hon.Teddy. Interview with Gerald Ngumbao. Personal interview. Forodhoyo home 17 Jan 2023.

36 The prefix Abe means the father to in the Rabai dialect. The right pronunciation ought to be "Bi Sidi" meaning Father to Sidi in the Agirama dialect.

37 Reed, C. 1997. *Pastors, Partners and Paternalists. African Church leaders and Western Missionaries in the Anglican Church in Kenya, 1850-1900*. New York: Brill, pgs. 77-78.

soon be broken up, and they say that if he goes one way, they will go another.”<sup>38</sup> Reed Colin observed that the annual report of 1882 contained a letter from Henry Binns stating that fugitive slaves constantly arrived at Rabai, but he was unable to admit them into the community because of the agreement with the slave owners. He was obliged, therefore, to send them on.<sup>39</sup> One wonders where he sent them. Presumably, he sent them over to Forodhoyo because Binns himself recognised its existence, and he acknowledged David Koi as the presiding elder there. Reed Colin consented as follows:

Binns’ report revealed clearly the duality of thought that existed. On the one hand, it instructed the missionaries that the society, and they themselves, were in no way responsible for the group at Forodhoyo. On the other hand, directed them to regard ‘Abe Sidi’ (David Koi) as the presiding elder there. Therefore, it assumed responsibility, it did not ignore Abe Sidi nor direct the missionaries that his Church has nothing to do with them. There is also the point that Binns saw himself as having oversight of the centers and the Church missionary society committee did not dispute thus.<sup>40</sup>

What could be the implication of such a direction regarding David Koi as the presiding elder? Arguably, this was for the sole purpose of reaffirming that David Koi’s work was a result of the missionaries and that he was under their authority. This evidence is supported by Reed, who opined that the Church Missionary Society, in a way, maintained a strange, contradictory position. On the one hand, it continued to have close and strong ties with the Kitoro Christian Church among the Giryama, claiming credit for its very existence, but refused to staff the Church. On the other hand, it claimed no authority over it, refused to staff and fund it, and disassociated with it in legal or treaty affiliations.

Rev William Salter Price, during his visit to East Africa in 1882, commented very positively about the church at Forodhoyo and its leader, David Koi. In his observation, Koi proved to be well-informed about the leadership of the church and that the Forodhoyo Christian Community was well-organised in worship. Rev Price’s statements gave the CMS approval of the Christian Village at Forodhoyo. The expectation of Rev Price was quite different from what he found on the ground. He expected to find a community of desperate, impoverished, and frightened believers herded together in disorder and confusion. He explained as follows:

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38 Henry K. Binns, Annual letter Nov.1878, CMS.

39 Gleaner, C.M. 1882, pg. 91, quoted by Reed, C. 1997. *Pastors, Partners and Paternalists. African Church Leaders and Western Missionaries in the Anglican Church in Kenya, 1850-1900*. New York: Brill, pg.77.

40 Reed, C. 1997. *Pastors, Partners and Paternalists. African Church leaders and Western missionaries in the Anglican Church in Kenya, 1850-1900*. New York: Brill, pgs 77–78.

On the contrary, I found a comfortable, settled, and well-ordered community meeting together morning and evening in a place of worship that they have put up at their own cost, to hear the word of God and to join in prayer and praise.<sup>41</sup>

It was on account of Koi's ministry and leadership that Rev Price witnessed a well-ordered service and worship. The call to prayer was done through a bell rung as early as 6:30 a.m. As Reed observed, Koi conducted an organised Church of England service in Swahili using Steere's Prayer Book. During the divine service, there were hymns and a sermon. The congregation joined in the general thanksgiving, confession, and the Lord's Prayer.<sup>42</sup> Indeed, Forodhoyo Christianity was prosperous and well-organised. Worship was vigorous, demonstrating church life and a well-organised communal life. Forodhoyo gave more opportunities and possibilities for further outreach in East Africa.

## Martyrdom of Koi

The work of Christian evangelism on the East African Coast was risky and challenging, partly due to varying interests of involved parties such as the Muslim Arabs, who owned and traded in African slaves, the British colonial masters who controlled resources and people movements, as well as the African traditional leaders who protected the communities' cultural beliefs and practices. When Dr Ludwig Krapf arrived in Mombasa in 1844, he had to get a letter from the Sultan of Mombasa to allow him to evangelise the locals. Due to the foreseen competition from Christianity, the Omani Muslim rulers in charge of the Zanzibar region did not allow him to evangelise the island, where Arabs and Swahili were the main inhabitants. Instead, he was allowed to reach the local African communities on the coastline, such as the Mijikenda. He resorted to establishing a station among the Rabai people. As Julius Gathogo has argued, the Arabs had surrendered to the British before their arrival and occupation of Mombasa,<sup>43</sup> and as such, European missionaries were not an easy target for would-be persecutors. When Africans became evangelists and leaders of Christian missions, this perceived protection was highly minimised. Godoma-Petanguo Christian village was started as an offshoot of the CMS Rabai<sup>44</sup> as the Giryama converts gathered around their own leader, Abe Ngowa.<sup>45</sup> Abe Ngowa, whose other name was Mwaringa, used to congregate at a place called Mwaeba. He later shifted to Petanguo, where he became a teacher.<sup>46</sup> Some of these were runaway slaves who came to seek refuge from their masters. It is important

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41 Henry K. Binns, recollections, pg.17, MS, Kenya National Archives; CMS Annual Report 1882, pg. 38.

42 Reed, C. 1997. *Pastors, Partners and Paternalists. African Church leaders and Western Missionaries in the Anglican Church in Kenya, 1850-1900*. New York: Brill, pgs. 77-78.

43 Gathogo, J. 2020. "The Leven House Factor in the Birth of Digo Mission and Christian Empire in East Africa." *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae* 46(1):1-14. <https://doi.org/10.25159/2412-4265/5004>

44 Mwambire, J. and Hon. Teddy. Interview with Gerald Ngumbao. Personal interview. Forodhoyo home 17 January 2023.

45 Abe Ngowa, was one of Rebmann's first Converts. He was a man from the local Agiriamma community who had been expelled from the tribe for allegedly causing drought by witchcraft.

46 Canon, S.T. Interview with Gerald Ngumbao. Personal interview. Dabaso home 20 May 2023.

to note here that the runaway slaves' agenda was more political than Christian, but they adopted the Christian lifestyle to suit their mission. Other leaders who were at Godoma were David Koi, who was among the students of Abe Ngowa, and Jeremiah Mangi. Difficulties arose in 1875, and most of the converts turned to their traditional way of life. Julius reported that the old Abe Ngowa became the first among the people who left. David Koi was left alone as the leader of the Community at Ganze. This marked the start of Koi's troubles. The movement weakened the community. It was a difficult task to convince the Giryama people to embrace Christianity, as they viewed it as a *Mzungu* (white man) culture. To them, Christianity was a destruction of their traditional culture. This made Koi unpopular but not unfavourable among his own people.<sup>47</sup>

The perception of the locals concerning the Christian settlements in the form of isolated villages was also a challenge. Elizabeth Isichei observed that when Christian settlements were perceived as collections of former slaves, accused witches and other undesirables, Christianity seemed less attractive.<sup>48</sup> This led to a decrease in the number of those who joined the faith.

There was also a lack of financial and moral support from the CMS stations at Rabai and Frere Town. The distancing of the CMS had a political view. They wanted to remain loyal to the Arab-Swahili leadership of the coast region by then. According to Canon Shadrack, this was "a betrayal of the faith."<sup>49</sup> Roland Oliver, in his book, *The Missionary Factor in East Africa*, wrote, "Mombasa Arabs had early taken a vow to make soup of the missionaries' livers, and in Ramadhan 1880, Frere Town was attacked."<sup>50</sup> After this dreadful attack at Frere Town, the CMS missionaries changed and became more concerned about their safety and well-being, leaving the Christian communities in the interior with no support. In addition, there arose internal conflicts within the Christians at the Godoma-Petanguo mission, which affected the fabric of the Giryama Christian community. Shadrack made it clearer that the conflict was between the leaders, Abe Ngowa and David Koi. According to Shadrack, David Koi was more intelligent and influential than Abe Ngowa felt threatened. This made Koi shift to his home in Forodhoyo with a few converts.<sup>51</sup> Could these challenges have contributed to Koi's assassination? Whereas the circumstances leading to Koi's martyrdom are easier to reconstruct, the motive behind his killing is more mysterious. There are three perspectives for explaining the motive: slavery, the missionary, and the colonial. These are further discussed below.

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47 Henry K. Binns, Annual letter Nov.1878, CMS.

48 Isichei, E. 1995. *A History of Christianity in Africa: From Antiquity to the Present*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company. Pg. 135.

49 Canon Shadrack Thoya. Interview with Gerald Ngumbao. Personal interview. Dabaso home 20th May 2023.

50 Oliver R. 1952. *Missionary Factor in East Africa*. Longmans. New York, pg 55.

51 According to Shadrack, the word "school" was used among the Agiriama to mean a place of instruction, in the Agiriama language "*mushikithi*". For Koi, it was a place of religious instruction.

## The Slaves Theory

This is the most popular view held by many church history writers. It proposes that Koi was hiding and using runaway slaves, largely from Takaungu plantation, for his gain. William Anderson, one of the notable scholars, said:

One day a band of Arabs arrived at his home Fuladoyo, led by a man, Mbaruk. David Koi welcomed them into his house. He decided to share the Gospel with them, but the Arabs brushed aside David's talk about the religion and asked some pointed questions. Is this your place? Are these your slaves? Do they work for you? No, David replied, only for themselves, to cultivate their own food. But what do you get out of it? Koi replied, I don't do it for gain, except I want these people to have religious instruction...". The Arabs were not satisfied. David Koi could not convince the Arabs that he gained nothing from the Fulodoyo watoro. Switching to Arabic, the Arabs discussed matters, and then some of them left the house. They returned later and dragged David Koi outside, placing him in a hole they had just dug, they buried him up to his neck, then in front of the *watoro*, one of the Arabs cut off David Koi's head.<sup>52</sup>

From the above view, there are two possible explanations. One is that the Arabs could have killed Koi because he was preaching the message of "*Bwana Issa*," which the Muslim Arabs did not want to hear. The second explanation could be that Arabs killed Koi because they suspected him of hiding the runaway slaves, and that Koi was personally benefiting from them. According to Anderson, the second explanation of the cause of Koi's death is clearer than the first. The Arabs were bitter because they thought Koi was gaining a lot from the Watoro. Anderson believed this event took place around 1882. The same Arab slavery theory was held by Collin Reeds, who observed that in 1885, Abe Sidi was attacked and died a horrible death at the hands of the Swahili. He was "buried up to the neck, then was decapitated."<sup>53</sup> Sundkler Bengt and Steed Christopher, in their book, *A History of the Church in Africa*, also support the Arab slavery theory, that there was an Arab-Swahili attack in 1883 that obliterated the community, at least in its Christian form. Abe Sidi was killed, becoming a Christian martyr. In fact, they referred to Forodhoyo as another illustration of the refugee factor in an East African setting.<sup>54</sup> The view held here is still on the runaway slaves or "*Athoro*" and that Koi was killed by Arabs for hiding their slaves. During an oral interview with Rev Canon Shadrack Thoya, the same view was developed further. He explained that the Arabs from Takaungu were complaining that their domestic slaves were being taken away and that they were being mistreated. A word was sent from the district commissioner to the district officer to investigate the allegations. The district officer reported back, but the district commissioner never took any action. Thoya continued to

52 Anderson, W.B. 1977. *The Church in East Africa- 1840-1974*. Dodoma: Cambridge University Press, pgs, 16–17.

53 Reed, C. 1997. *Pastors, Partners and Paternalists. African Church Leaders and Western Missionaries in the Anglican Church in Kenya, 1850-1900*. New York: Brill, pgs. 79–80.

54 Sundkler, B. and Steed, C. 2004. *A History of the Christian Church in Africa*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pg. 555.

narrate that after the district commissioner failed to take action on the report, the Arabs stormed Forodhoyo village and arrested Koi. Thoya gave two explanations on the events that took place after Koi's arrest. The first was that the Arabs took Koi to a far-off place called Mutsanganyiko, which is in today's Ganze sub-county in the larger Kilifi County. No one knows what happened to Koi since he never came back. The second explanation is Anderson's, which indicates that Koi was buried to the neck, and his head was chopped off.<sup>55</sup>

## The Missionary Theory

William Anderson observed that, “*Kitoro* Christianity produced East Africa’s first Christian martyr in modern times.”<sup>56</sup> This statement by Anderson opens up the discussion of the missionary theory, which states that Koi’s death was a result of the Christian mission. Proponents of this perspective maintain that Koi’s faith and passion for the mission, without considering the dangers before him, led to the murder. They maintain that a group of Muslim Arabs, agitated by the fast-growing Christianity among their circles, attacked the village and killed Koi by cutting off his head. This theory agrees with the slavery theory execution story and differs with it on the actual motive for the murder. It presupposes that religious rivalry, as opposed to slavery and trade, was the real motive. Retired Canon Shadrack explained during an interview at his home in Dabaso that Koi was passionate about seeing Christian growth and conversions, and therefore, he admitted anyone who showed an interest in the Christian faith, including the *watoro*.<sup>57</sup> Shadrack was certain that Koi’s death was a result of preaching the Gospel of Jesus Christ, which was a threat to the Islamic Arabs in Mombasa. Could this be the reason why Anderson concluded that Koi was the first East African Martyr and that he died for the faith? The Anglican Church of Kenya, in a way, supports this position as it celebrates Koi as a martyr every year. In the year 2023, the celebration was set for 4 October.<sup>58</sup> The irony is that there is nothing one can trace in memory of this great hero, not even a stone to indicate that the church recognises him for the missionary work he did during his time. As discussed in the previous section, Koi’s problems, Western missionary attitude, split loyalty between the society (CMS) mandate and the political class of the time, and disassociation of the CMS from the Christian communities started by the local evangelists were some of the challenges that destabilised the mission work along the Coast. Could the missionary affiliation with the Arab leadership have also contributed to Koi’s death in any way? At Rabai, for example, the relationship between the European and the African Church workers, as Reed observed, was tense. The tension was due to their different views on how to conduct the missions. Africans were more on the holistic approach and involvement of the community, while the Europeans were

55 Canon, S. T. Interview with Gerald Ngumbao. Personal interview. Dabaso home, 20 May 2023.

56 Anderson, W.B. 1977. *The Church in East Africa- 1840-1974*. Dodoma: Cambridge University Press. pgs, 16–17.

57 Canon, S. T. Interview with Gerald Ngumbao. Personal interview. Dabaso home, 20 May 2023.

58 *Church Diary and Lectionary 2023. The Anglican Church of Kenya*. Nairobi: Zima Publishing House.

concerned much more with individual conversion. Certainly, there were clear differences among the Christian leaders. However, it is not conclusive whether these differences and tensions could have led to Koi's assassination. The conflicts between the CMS and African leaders led to a divided response to the political Arab leadership. The loyalty approach taken by the CMS in a way exposed and endangered the local Church leaders as a whole.

## The Colonial Theory

The colonial theory is also critical in assessing and analysing the causes and death of Koi. The *Pekeshe* (tax raids)<sup>59</sup> activities by the colonial masters are the basis for this theory. In an interview with Julius and Teddy Mwambire, relatives of the late Evangelist Koi, they rejected the view that Koi was killed by the Arabs. They explained that Koi was the only one in the region who knew how to read and write, and therefore, in a way, he became a critical link between his community and the colonial administration. By then, paying tax was a must, and all households were required to pay it. Julius explained it in Agirama language as follows, "*Kodi were nisuthi kala Mudziumboza* (payment of tax was a must)."<sup>60</sup> Being the only elite in the village, Koi used to convince the messengers from the local administration offices of Mwangea Hill or Ganze to let him see what was written in the letters they were sending to the chiefs. It is important to note that Forodhoyo Village is located between Mwangea and Ganze and, therefore, all messengers were to pass through Forodhoyo to get to the other administrative offices. This worked to Koi's advantage as explained by Julius.<sup>61</sup> Hence, Koi would read the letters, re-seal them and then hand them over to the messengers to be dispatched to the addressee. If he found that the letters were an alert on a planned tax raid, he would immediately inform the indigenous people about the intentions of the colonial masters. Many of the tax defaulters used to run and hide in the bush to evade arrest and payment of *kodi* (tax). The failure of the administrators to collect taxes, as well as the failure to arrest defaulters, frustrated the colonial administrators, leading to an investigation. When the administrators learnt of Koi's role, they came to Koi's village, arrested him and forced him to dig a hole. They later tied his limbs and pushed him into the hole he had dug. They covered him with soil to the neck and cut off his head in front of his family members and some villagers. Julius reported that they carried his head to an unknown destination. According to Julius, the assassination of Koi took place on 3 October 1895.

Whereas the motive of Koi's killing may remain highly speculative, the Arab slaves theory is most popular given the context where Koi was seen to have been a slave trader

59 .“Pekeshe” is a Agirama word which was used to mean tax raid. During the colonial period, colonial administrators used to send their officers for tax collection. The raids were unpleasant and harsh; those who failed to pay were arrested and ill-treated. They were subjected to hard labour by the authorities.

60 “*Kodi were nisuthikilaMudziumboze*”- Tax was a must for every household to pay.

61 Mwambire, J. and Hon.Teddy. Interview with Gerald Ngumbao. Personal interview. Forodhoyo home 17 January 2023.

or a sympathiser with run-away slaves and hence angering the master Arabs who were losing on both the services as well as the business. Whereas the sources are scanty for this position, its proponents disagree on the exact date of the murder. Collin Reed, for example, cited William Anderson on several occasions, but contradicts himself on the date. According to Anderson, Koi's assassination took place in 1882, while Reed records 1885. Sundkler and Steed recorded that the attack and murder of Koi took place in 1883.<sup>62</sup> Similarly, the rendering of Koi as an enemy of the colonial master is factual. Koi was a political activist who used his earned literacy to protect his people against taxes and the growing appetite of the British to control the region. Most fundamentally, Koi was a zealous missionary who would do anything for his faith and conviction in Christ. Any alternative view would dethrone him from being a martyr, let alone the first for the Christian faith in the region. It is not a contradiction that a martyr would be a defender of slaves, his people the Agiriama and still maintain an evangelistic zeal to serve the Christian Church. Such was Koi.

## Conclusion

Through a reconstruction of Koi's life, ministry, and martyrdom, the article has demonstrated that Koi was a born leader who was always ready to fight for the rights and welfare of his people. He stood against injustices and mistreatment from the British administration as well as from the Omani Arab rulers. His education, faith, and position as a church leader set him apart as a kingpin of the Agiriama community at Forodhoyo. He was the light of both his family and village.

The article has argued that Koi ought to be remembered and celebrated as the first Christian martyr in East Africa who served during a very complex time that witnessed convergence of three main religions, that is, Islam, African Indigenous Religion, and Christianity, as well as competing interests of two main colonial powers, that is, the enslaving Arabs and the colonising British. He ought to be remembered as a national hero in Kenya alongside Mekatelili wa Menza, the Agiriama lady freedom fighter who in 1914 led a military revolt against British rule in the region.<sup>63</sup> Indeed, Koi ought to be celebrated as a great religious leader who not only provided African agency to the missionary project in East Africa<sup>64</sup> but also became a critical figure in African response to the presence of Christianity by establishing *Kitoro* Christian village. It is not enough that the Anglican Church of Kenya has a memorial day in his honour. National heritage education and memory would do well to recognise such a hero in the fight against slavery and colonialism.

62 <http://www.baylor.edu/oral history>. Accessed on 31 October 2023 at 12:43 a.m.

63 Patterson, K. D. 1970. "The Giriama Risings of 1913-1914." *African Historical Studies* 3(1): 89–99.

64 Oliver, R. 1952. *The Missionary Factor in East Africa*. Jerusalem: Longmans, 14.

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