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Retracing the Life, Works, and Martyrdom of David Koi (1820s-1895) of Forodhoyo in Kilifi County

By Gerald Ngumbao

David Koi (1820s-1895) was the first Giriama Anglican evangelist and pastor who played a significant role in the spread of Christianity in Forodhoyo and its surrounding areas. Before his conversion, Koi was a prominent community leader in Forodhoyo, a position that later enabled him to engage actively in both church affairs and local political matters.

Koi's Early Life

Koi was born in the early 1820s at Chapungu in Bamba, Kilifi County, though the exact date of his birth remains unknown. Following his birth, a traditional naming ceremony was held, and he was given the name “Kadzitsa.” “Koi” is his clan name, as the Giriama people are identified by their clans. Before his baptism, Koi’s full name was Kadzitsa Koi Kizi. Upon baptism, he was given the Christian name “David.” Koi was the youngest of three children. His elder siblings were Ndhundhi Kizi, the firstborn, and Mbitha Kizi, who sadly died at a very young age.

Koi's Ancestry

Koi’s father, Mwambire Ndhundhi, was a Mugiryama by ethnicity, belonging to the larger *Amidzichenda* community of Kenya’s lower Coast region. He was a member of the *Amwandhundhi* clan and was born in Chapungu, located in present-day Bamba Sub-County, Kilifi County. Due to the harsh climatic conditions at Chapungu, Mwambire, his wife Kizi, and their family relocated to Forodhoyo, where the environment was more suitable for farming, their primary source of livelihood. It is worth noting that the surname *Mwambire* was not used; instead, their mother’s name was preferred for easier identification. Koi’s family relocated to Forodhoyo, where the conditions were more favorable for farming, which was their primary means of livelihood.

Koi grew up as a village boy who displayed the qualities of a future leader from an early age. As a young man, he engaged in farming and occasionally tended to cattle and goats, living fully immersed in traditional village life. Eventually, Koi married and had two children, Sidi and Nyevu. As a result, he came to be known as “Abe Sidi,” though the correct Giriama phonetic spelling should be “Bi Sidi.”⁴ The exact date or

⁴ Julius and Teddy, interview with Gerald Ngumbao, January 24, 2023, Forodhoyo home, personal interview. In the Midzichenda community, a person’s name typically changes after marriage and the birth of children, with parents often being referred to by the name of their first-born son or daughter.

age of Koi's marriage is not known, but it was likely in his late twenties or early thirties, as marriage in the Giriama community typically followed soon after a young man had undergone initiation rites.

Koi received only traditional, primarily vocational, education. Later in life, Koi assumed the role of a local chief.⁵ However, it is important to point out that the Giriama people did not practice hereditary chieftaincy, unlike some other African communities. Therefore, it is likely that Koi served as a village elder. Koi came to faith through the preaching of Abe Goa, one of Rebmann's earliest converts.⁶ Abe Goa was a member of the local Giriama people who had been expelled from the tribe after being accused of causing a drought through witchcraft. Abe Goa traveled to Rabai and began inquiring about the Christian faith from Rebmann. However, his conversion appears to have been influenced more by the personal turmoil he experienced:

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.⁷

Koi met Abe Goa while en route to his maternal home in Duruma, passing through Rabai. It is possible that this journey to visit his maternal relatives played a role in his eventual conversion and calling to serve the Lord Jesus Christ. During this encounter, Abe Goa persuaded Koi to embrace Christianity, a message he accepted. He was later baptized by George David and given the Christian name David. Although the exact date of his baptism is unknown, it likely occurred between 1846 and 1847. The details surrounding his confirmation remain unclear, and it is not known whether he was ever confirmed, an issue that merits further investigation.

George David was the only one of the three men from Bombay who remained in East Africa, residing at Rabai. Since David Koi was illiterate at the time, George David took it upon himself to teach him with the primary goal of enabling him to read the Bible. Koi's deep interest in the Scriptures and his inquisitive nature reportedly contributed to his rapid spiritual development.

Koi's Mission and Community Involvement.

After David Koi had grown strong in his Christian faith and learned to read, George David took him to Petanguo in Godoma to assist with mission work. Petanguo was one

⁵ Colin Reed, *Pastors, Partners, and Paternalists: African Church Leaders and Western Missionaries in the Anglican Church in Kenya, 1850–1900* (Leiden, New York, Köln: Brill, 1997), 44–45.

⁶ Reed, 44.

⁷ Reed, 44.

of the Christian settlements established by the Church Missionary Society (CMS). Koi was tasked with leading morning worship and interpreting the Bible for the local community. Under his leadership, worship became more vibrant and contextualized. From the outset of his time in Petanguo, Koi stood out as the only Christian in the area with both the confidence and determination to deepen his understanding of the faith. This commitment led him to travel frequently to Rabai and Frere Town for further instruction. The main challenge was that Petanguo was primarily a settlement of fugitive slaves, people without rights and without a recognized leader. As a community leader, Koi had, in a sense, also lost his people.

Despite the challenges, the Christian faith provided the village with a new sense of identity and a hopeful vision of forming advantageous political alliances. However, this hope was not realized, as European missionaries remained loyal to the colonial administration and did not actively support such alliances. The Petanguo Christian community eventually faced increasing difficulties: limited support from the CMS, constant threats and attacks from slave traders, and the infertility of the surrounding land. These pressures led to internal divisions. Some Christians returned to their traditional ways of life, while others migrated to more fertile areas in search of better prospects.

The Birth of Forodhoyo Church

Around 1879, Koi left Petanguo and returned with his family to his home in Forodhoyo, where he settled. He was soon followed by Jeremiah Mangi, his family, and a few other Giriama converts. Deeply committed to the Christian faith, Koi established a church at Makoroboini, approximately five kilometers from his home. The church in Forodhoyo grew rapidly, largely due to Koi's influence as a respected community leader. His leadership and the growing congregation led Rev. Sparshott to write to the CMS, arguing that the emergence of the church around Abe Sidi (David Koi), the Giriama Church, was strong evidence that CMS should continue its mission work along the East African coast of Kenya.

In the 1860s, the CMS in London had seriously contemplated abandoning its mission in Kenya due to numerous challenges. However, the emergence of an indigenous church became a compelling reason for CMS to continue its work in the region. One key figure in this development was Koi, who dedicated himself to evangelism in the Forodhoyo area, immersing himself in Scripture and prayer. Koi demonstrated strong leadership and contributed significantly to the well-structured worship life of the Forodhoyo Christian community. Forodhoyo became a beacon of Christian hope and transformation for both locals and foreigners. This center of faith served as a vital bridge, enabling the Gospel to engage meaningfully with the surrounding tribal society.

Koi was not only an evangelist and religious leader, but also a mediator between the colonial government and society. Koi's active involvement in church, community affairs, and the politics of the region was largely enabled by his ability to read and write. He became the voice of the oppressed villagers against the brutal treatment of the

British administrators during “*Pekeshe*” raids.⁸ Koi was not only an evangelist and religious leader, but also a mediator between the colonial government and the local community. Koi became a powerful voice for the oppressed villagers, especially during the brutal crackdown by British administrators during the “*Pekeshe*” raids.⁹

Koi’s Working Methodologies

As an evangelist and community leader, Koi’s methodologies remain vividly remembered and deeply ingrained in the collective memory of the people of Forodhoyo. One notable approach he employed was incorporating ancestral and traditional worship resources, such as traditional drums, *kayamba*, *ndema*, and other locally available instruments. This contextualized worship resonated deeply, ministering directly to the hearts of the community. Additionally, Koi was a well-rounded Christian leader who actively championed social justice for his people, a commitment that earned him widespread respect and popularity among his villagers.

The Problems and Death of Koi

The mission along the Coast of Kenya was fraught with challenges. Those engaged in spreading the Gospel faced numerous obstacles. At the outset of his mission work in Petanguo, Koi encountered various difficulties, including opposition both from within the Christian community and from outside it. Among the Giriyama people of Petanguo, he was unpopular, viewed as a betrayer of their traditional religion. At Forodhoyo, there was a notable lack of financial and moral support from the CMS stations at Rabai and Frere Town. Koi had anticipated assistance from the CMS, but his hopes were ultimately unfulfilled. The reasons behind the CMS’s distancing from these indigenous Christian centers remain unclear, though it is possible that political motives played a role. Nevertheless, these challenges did not deter Koi from faithfully carrying out his God-given mandate of shepherding the Church until his death. Koi’s death has been explained in various ways by different historians. To address this question, this article proposes three possible theories.

The first theory is known as the Arab theory, which is the most widely accepted view among many church historians. According to this theory, Koi was hiding while

⁸ “*Pekeshe*” is a Giriyama word meaning “raid.” During the colonial period, the British often sent *askaris* (soldiers) into villages to conduct brutal and inhumane tax raids. At that time, David Koi played a critical role in resisting these operations. Stationed at Mwaiba Hill, Koi would intercept and read letters from the British administrative headquarters before they reached local chiefs. The messengers carrying these letters typically passed through Forodhoyo, giving Koi the opportunity to discreetly open, read, and reseal them. Upon discovering plans for upcoming raids, he would alert the villagers in advance. As a result, many who had not paid the taxes would flee into the forests before the *askaris* arrived, effectively rendering the tax raids unsuccessful.

⁹ Julius and Teddy, interview with Gerald Ngumbao, January 17, 2023, Forodhoyo home, personal interview.

simultaneously exploiting runaway slaves, mainly from the Takaungu plantation, for his own benefit:

One day, a band of Arabs arrived at his home, Fuladoyo (Forodhoyo as used in this thesis), 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 Fuladoyo *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.¹⁰

Based on the above perspective, two possible explanations emerge. First, the Arabs may have killed Koi because he was preaching the message of 'Bwana Issa,' which was unwelcome among the Muslim Arabs. Alternatively, they may have suspected Koi of harboring runaway slaves, an act from which he was believed to be personally benefiting.

The second theory is the missionary theory, which holds that Koi died because of his Christian faith. This is why Anderson concluded that Koi was the first East African martyr. However, the proponents of these two theories present conflicting accounts, particularly regarding the date of the event. It is important to note that dates are crucial in the writing of historical narratives. Anderson suggests that Koi died in 1882, while Bengt Sundkler & Christopher Steed¹¹ and Reed place his death in 1883 and 1885, respectively.

The third theory surrounding Koi's death is what may be termed the local theory, which carries a more political tone. Koi was killed by the colonial authorities because he stood up for the rights of his villagers against the brutality of the tax raids. As one oral account put it, "*Kodi were ni suthi kila mudzi urihe*" (Was tax to be a suit demanded from every village?).¹² Being the only educated elite in the village, Koi would often persuade messengers from the colonial administration offices at Mwangea Hill or Ganze to let him read the letters they were delivering to local chiefs. Upon reading

¹⁰ William B. Anderson, *The Church in East Africa, 1840–1974* (Dodoma: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 16–17.

¹¹ Bengt Sundkler and Christopher Steed, *A History of the Christian Church in Africa* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

¹² This is a Giryama expression meaning that paying tax was compulsory; every household was expected to contribute.

them, Koi would promptly inform the indigenous people about the colonial authorities' plans. As a result, many tax defaulters would flee into the bush to avoid arrest and the payment of *kodi* (tax). The repeated failure to collect taxes and apprehend defaulters eventually prompted the colonial administrators to investigate the cause.

One of the messengers reported that Koi often opened official letters before they reached their intended recipients. Upon hearing this, the colonial administration officers were enraged. They stormed Koi's village, arrested him, and forced him to dig a hole. After tying his limbs, they made him stand in the hole and buried him up to his neck. In full view of his family and several villagers, they beheaded him and carried away his head to an unknown location, one that remains undiscovered to this day. Koi is said to have died on October 3, 1895, at his home in Forodhoyo, an account that challenges Anderson's claim that Koi was the first East African martyr. This is the most likely position, given that the church in Forodhoyo did not include runaway slaves. Instead, its members were primarily local residents from the surrounding area, including some of Koi's own family members. In conclusion, Koi's death recalls that of Alexander Kipsang Muge, the outspoken Anglican Bishop of Eldoret, who boldly opposed political injustices during President Moi's regime in Kenya in 1990. Like Muge, Koi died a Christian hero, remembered for his unwavering stand against the social injustices of his time.¹³

Conclusion

Koi was a natural-born leader, consistently standing up for the rights and welfare of his people, a legacy the contemporary Church would do well to emulate. The Church is called to be the voice of the voiceless. As a pioneer in mission, Koi emerges as the first Giryama evangelist to proclaim the message of salvation in Forodhoyo, a village deeply rooted in traditional practices. Koi served God with deep passion, dedicating both his time and personal resources to the work of the ministry.

Koi exemplified a true minister of the Church, one who served selflessly, without expecting anything in return. He supported himself, his family, and his followers through farming, leading by example. After his death, the church in Forodhoyo struggled to thrive, and many people gradually reverted to their traditional ways of life. Between 2000 and 2003, Pentecostal churches began to emerge rapidly in the area. Although the Forodhoyo Church faced decline during this period, it is important to recognize that it paved the way for expanded mission opportunities along the Kenyan Coast, particularly in the North-Western region. In fact, it was after the closure of Forodhoyo that the mission outreach grew even stronger.

¹³ **Editor's Note:** The term '*Christian hero*' reflects the author's personal viewpoint. However, in keeping with DACB standards, Koi is classified as a *martyr*, which denotes an individual who dies as a result of their Christian witness and subsequent actions, whether political or not.

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