

Mw ★ mko

# AFRICAN WOMEN LEADERS IN HISTORY

RUZUNA AKOTH



## About Mwamko

Mwamko is an idea turned organisation, whose gestation was born out of long conversations between young people who have spent a lifetime in the emancipatory currents and movements. It proffers a newness for a new context and age even as it connects itself to the longer genealogies of resistance and rebellion of the African people home and abroad.

We are coming together as a gathering of aspirations of a new generation of Africans who desire and want an Africa liberated from the clutches of both internal oppression and external dominance.

Mwamko focuses deeply on popular political education and knowledge production for liberation amongst and with organisers, activists and revolutionaries. It centres this as an ongoing need for clarity in our current struggles, which today are in disarray and fraught with confusion.

31st July 2023, the date of publication of this pamphlet, is annually commemorated as Pan-African Women's Day in honour of the founding of the pan-African Women's Organisation in Tanzania in 1962. This pamphlet seeks to make information about African women leaders in history more accessible to African readers, and will be expanded in future.

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With thanks to the entire team at Mwamko.



# Introduction

**O**ur history is replete with documented female monarchs, chiefs, traders, medicine women, priestesses, constitutional leaders and most importantly, women as contributing members of their communities. This pamphlet presents the stories of a few selected African women leaders in history. In highlighting these stories, the pamphlet hopes to make these stories more mainstream and available for the general public, particularly among children, younger people, and all those interested in comprehensive studies on the history of Africa and all its people.

This is hopefully the first of many pamphlets that seek to decentralise knowledge of African history and enhance its access and availability to all, regardless of class, identity or other factors. Still, by focusing on individual women's personalities, it captures a very narrow view of African women's histories, given that African women often, and have always acted collectively to pursue gendered, social, cultural, economic and political interests. It is important, therefore, to note that, while the women leaders highlighted here played critical roles at different times in history, they were not always acting individually but within the collective networks of the women in their communities. Thus, their legacies and contributions are also a result of numerous unnamed women working for the betterment of their communities and Africa at large.

Ruzuna Akoth  
Nairobi - 31 May 2023

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# Syokimau



**S**yokimau was a great Kamba prophetess and medicine woman born in the 1800s in Iveti Hills, present-day Machakos town. Through her prophecies, she predicted several historical events that came to pass, including the coming of the British. Rumours have it that she sprung out of a tree - and no one knew her mother, father, relatives, clan or even kinsmen. The Kamba people believed that she derived her ability to prophecy from an attack by a maimu- a benevolent spirit that possessed her when she was just a young girl. She could predict attacks from neighbouring communities such as the Kikuyu and the Maasai and prophecy which community would win a war. She also conducted prayers for the warriors under a designated tree that acted as a shrine called the ithembo, where she would also make sacrifices for the warriors to come home unhurt.

Syokimau predicted colonisation by the British, telling her people that 'people with funny skin' would beat them mercilessly, take over their land, and force them to discard their gods and worship a foreign(British) god. This prophecy came to pass in 1844 when German missionaries Johannes Rebmann and Johann Ludwig Krapf arrived in Kenya's interior to spread the gospel.

Syokimau also prophesied the construction of the Kenya-Uganda railway line and trains, with her prophecy indicating the arrival of a long snake-producing fire and smoke. In it were 'people with skin like meat who spoke unintelligibly like birds and carried fire in their pockets.' This also came to pass when the British commenced railway construction in 1896.

She also foretold the coming of a generation that would behave strangely. This generation would claim to be wiser, disrespect traditions, not fear taboos and even build houses on top of one another. This prophecy has come to pass, with today's generation disrespecting elders and traditions - while the many apartments and skyscrapers across our land are what Syokimau referred to as houses on top of one another.

The circumstances surrounding Syokimau's death remain a mystery. One random morning, villagers found her dead in her hut. As per tradition, they disposed of her body in the forest after waiting two days to confirm that she was dead. An interesting phenomenon happened on the second day after the disposal of her body. A crying voice could be heard in the forest, leading the villagers straight to where they had placed her body - and there was Syokimau. She lived for two more seasons (approximately two years) before dying and resurrecting again, this time as an older woman appearing before young girls who had gone to collect firewood. Although very old, she still performed miracles during this time, cured people and prophesied.

When Syokimau finally died for real, she was found with her mouth open and facing upwards. This, people believed was her posture when she spoke to the ancestors. She remains a legend to the Kamba people and to Kenya as a country. Syokimau, a fast-growing residential area where a Standard Gauge Railway station is located, is named after her.

Reference:  
\*(Nyatuoro, n.d.)



# **Prophetess Moraa**



**P**rophetess Moraa, a renowned healer and prophet of the Gusii people led the resistance movement against the British colonial administration in present-day Kenya. Moraa prophesied the coming of the British and urged young men to fight against their occupation of Gusii land. She foretold how a local man named Ombati would betray the Abagusii people. In 1907, Ombati became a collaborator of the British Masters.

Moraa was also a revered spiritual leader who gave young warriors protective potions to prevent them from being harmed by the bullets of the colonial army. The Kisii were fierce in their resistance to British colonialism, launching several successful raids. The British retaliated and killed many men, women, and children. Some Kisii chiefs consequently yielded and collaborated with the British, but Moraa remained resolute and relentlessly incited her people to revolt.

Around 1905, the colonial authorities quashed the Kisii rebellion. They killed many people, burned homes, and destroyed livestock and crops. British officer Geoffrey Northcote, who was most hated by the Kisii people, ruthlessly killed the locals. When asked what he thought about the Kisii people, he responded regarding Moraa;

"Oh ! They're peaceful enough, but it is their high priestess that causes me anxious moments. She has been aloof and broods, with anger in her heart and suspicion."

Understandably, Moraa did not like Northcote. She incited the entire community against him. She told them that Northcote was a sick man because only very sick people were yellow or white. She then urged her nephew Otenyo Nyamantere, one of the best warriors on the land and who she had trained years earlier, to lead an attack on Northcote.

Otenyo gathered the best Kisii warriors and went after the British. With poisoned arrows and spears, they lay an ambush in the path of the British, who had seized another herd of livestock. Northcote was in charge of that expedition. Otenyo speared him on the right shoulder and as he collapsed, his men scurried off. Otenyo's bravery and the success of this incident encouraged Kisii warriors, sparking a rebellion by the Gusii. The British quelled this uprising because of advanced weaponry, killing approximately 120 people. They then launched a man-hunt for Otenyo, caught up with him and executed him.

The British considered Moraa a threat to their mission to occupy Gusii land and used their wiles to get some members of the Gusii community to betray her. Moraa was betrayed by locals who revealed her whereabouts. She was arrested and tortured, but she never denounced her will to resist British slavery. Not much is known about how she died or where she was buried.



# **Mekatili wa Menza**



**B**orn in the 1840s, Mekatilili Manyazi wa Menza was a woman prophet of the Giriama people in Kenya, who led a resistance against the British colonial administration. Drawing on the tradition of the Giriama woman prophet Mepoho, who prophesied the coming of the white men. She travelled to each kaya (homestead) in the region, persuading people to join the resistance.

By 1912, the British had imposed forced labour, increased the 'hut tax' and restricted indigenous trade in palm wine and ivory, intensifying Giriama's resistance to their rule. Mekatilili first mobilised many women through established indigenous women's networks. These women raised funds for the resistance and united the youth and elders behind their quest to save their sons and daughters.

She also employed the traditional Giriama funeral dance, kifudu, together with her oratory skills, to rally the Giriama people against British rule. This dance is performed to bring communities together to help transport the spirits to the realm of ancestors and to express solidarity in difficult times. Thousands of Giriama people converged at the kaya fungo, a ritual centre, from early July to August 1913. Mekatilili led discussions at the kaya, demanding an end to forced labour and respect for traditional elders. The decisions made at the congress were sealed with an oath, referred to as the mukushekushe oath among women and fisi oath among men, through which they vowed to defy colonial authorities.

On August 13th, 1913, the Giriama people held one of their most famous acts of rebellion. During a meeting with Arthur Champion, a coloniser who was trying to diminish local resistance and recruit youth to fight in World War I, Mekatilili walked into the venue with a chicken and its chicks. She challenged Champion to get a chick from its mother hen, but it pecked his hand. Mekatilili looked at him and said, "this is what you will get if you try to take one of our sons". Members of the IBEA delegation opened fire, indiscriminately killing Giriama people and destroying houses. Mekatilili and her son-in-law, Wanje wa Mwadorikola, an active participant in actions of resistance, were arrested and imprisoned in Kisii near Lake Victoria. That same year, in his tour of inspection across the Giriama areas, Champion documented the grassroots resistance in his October report, admitting that "every Giriama is much more afraid of the kiraho (oath) than of the government."

While in prison, Mekatilili told the British that her people rejected colonial tactics of indirect rule through government-appointed chiefs - insisting that the British must respect Giriama culture, and her people's space and freedom.

After a few months in prison, Mekatilili and Wanje were freed and trekked over 1000 kilometres back to Kilifi, on the coast of Kenya, and continued to organise against colonial rule. The colonialists retaliated by shooting dozens of men, women, and children, capturing animals, burning food stocks, homes, and bombing the sacred Kaya. They even burnt the bodies of the murdered Giriama in the same fire as sheep.

These attacks against lives and grassroots symbols sparked an intense uprising, which reduced British colonial control over the territory.

Mekatilili was arrested again on August 16th, 1914. This time, she was sent to Kismayu, Somalia. In 1919, Mekatilili was released from prison and returned to the Kaya, taking on the role of leadership in the women's council. Mekatilili wa Menza died in 1924, and was buried in Bungale, Kilifi County.





**Margaret  
Tabaigoí Bartiony**

**IV**

**F**reedom fighter Margaret Tabaigoi Bartiony was a member of the Talai clan and daughter-in-law of the legendary Nandi freedom fighter Koitalel Arap Samoei. She aided Talai men in resisting colonial imposition and protected young boys from being captured. While we may not have the exact dates of Tabaigoi's resistance, historical documents point towards her being active around the time of the Laibons [Talai] Removal Ordinance of 1934 which saw the banishment of the Talai to Gwasi location on the shores of Lake Victoria, where they remained under severe restriction until 1962. Tabaigoi helped to hold together the Talai clan as the British colonialists sought and killed their fathers and sons.

The Talai clan were the spiritual leaders of their community. They had authority and influence over their people to instigate resistance against the British colonialists. The British, who viewed the Talai clan's divine powers as seers as a threat to their colonial administration, were hostile to them and instituted laws such as the Laibons [Talai] Removal Ordinance of 1934.

During this period, Tabaigoi would hide boys and men from the British who were hunting them down. According to her stepson, in one incident, Tabaigoi was taking boys from the community into hiding when white settlers attacked them, demanding to know whether the boys were from the Talai clan. She remained defiant, asserting that they were actually Nandi people on an excursion. However, coercion by the British frightened the women in her posse to cave and tell the truth. The British arrested the boys and took them into detention. Nevertheless, she safeguarded many of the young boys who were in danger of being transported to be integrated into the Luo community through the implementation of the ordinance.

Tabaigoi and other women also gathered intelligence on the British, and would relay information to the men during prison visits. Some of them also sought employment in British homes, assuming new identities to gather information for the resistance. It was these very women who again facilitated prison breaks by sneaking in weapons undetected to the detained Talai men.

According to her granddaughter, Tabaigoi was widowed at an early age but stayed vigilant - protecting and caring for her children. Because of her work against the British, she was arrested and sent to prison. Upon her release, she escaped with her family to the Ugandan side of Mt. Elgon to avoid further harassment and imprisonment.





# **Muthoni Wa Kirima**

**V**



*Muthoni wa Kirima (Image Courtesy of ThisisAfrica.me)*

**A**rguably the most visible female freedom fighter in Kenya's war for national liberation, Muthoni Wa Kirima served in the Kenya Land and Freedom Army - popularly known as the Mau Mau Movement - in the 1950s as a spy, mobiliser, organiser and a hands-on militant combatant in the forest. Born in 1930 in Nyeri, she grew up witnessing the atrocities of the British colonial regime which helped to shape and inspire her to join the liberation movement.

Muthoni took her first Mau Mau oath in 1952 and began collecting intel for the guerilla fighters. The colonial regime and their home guards didn't think women were capable of espionage work. So every morning, Muthoni would wake up early and head to the forest, ostensibly to feed her livestock. She used this as an opportunity to convey important information about what the British colonialists were up to. Muthoni would then head back home to her unsuspecting husband and continue working on the day's chores like the 'good wife' she was expected to be.

In early 1953, Muthoni began helping with the oathing of other people who wished to join the Mau Mau - while her husband was contemplating joining the Kamatimu (home guards). Her subversive activities were soon found out by sell-out Chief Muhoya who arranged for her arrest and detention at Kamakwa, Nyeri. This small hiccup didn't stop her - she still found a way to gather intel from contacts and relay it to the fighters through women supporters of the movement.

In May 1953, Muthoni and her husband joined the guerilla fighters in the forest. She first joined the non-combat wing of women providing care work for the fighters, and soon after became a hands-on combatant in the forest. Several Mau Mau veterans remember her for being a fierce fighter.

Muthoni and her husband Mutungi were amongst the last group of Mau Mau fighters to leave the forest where they had lived for over a decade. She officially retired as a fighter on 16th December 1963 at Ruringu Stadium in present-day Nyeri County.

Successive post-colonial regimes have done little to honour the legacy of Mau Mau fighters, though Muthoni received the Head of State Commendation award in 2014 for her bravery.

Muthoni wa Kirima, now aged 93 years, lives a quiet life in a suburb of Nyeri town.

Reference:  
(Africa, 2022; Kiragu, 2016; "Profile of Field Marshall Mûthoni Wa Kîrîma,"  
2022)





## **Chelagat Mutai**

'A firebrand, hard to crush'

**VI**



**C**helagat Mutai landed in trouble with the Kenyan government for fighting for the landless, calling out wanton corruption, questioning illegal arrests and highlighting the general disregard for human rights. She was the youngest person ever elected to parliament at age 24, winning the Eldoret North seat in 1974 with more votes than all male candidates put together.

Chelagat Mutai was born in 1949 in Terige village in Ol'Lessos, Nandi County. She went to Highlands Girls School (present-day Moi Girls High School, Eldoret) where she was expelled for organising a students' strike. She subsequently studied political science at the University of Nairobi, where she became a student leader and editor of the student newspaper, *The Platform*. Her radical ideas and firm political stand frequently got her suspended from the university.

At 24, Mutai was thrust into the turbulent world of post-independence politics in 1973 after her uncle, William Saina, Member of Parliament Eldoret North, was jailed for incitement. In parliament, Mutai spoke against corruption, political assassinations and land injustices. In 1975, she opposed and voted against the state's attempt to give the presidency greater powers to pardon election offenders through a constitutional amendment. She asserted,

'We must ask ourselves if government policies allow corruption to take centre stage. For one to get a job in government, he or she must pass through the back door. You don't just send your application. I cannot fear saying the bitter truth because I don't need anybody's favour.'

She criticised Jomo Kenyatta's government, speaking out against his decision to make land pacts with the British. She was arrested in January 1976 and charged with 'Public disturbance and incitement' when squatters in her constituency 'invaded' a sisal farm in Ziwa. Chelagat had mobilised her people to purchase the farm, but the Indian 'owner' refused to surrender the title deed despite receiving payment. Chelagat was infuriated by this injustice and urged her people to occupy the farm as it was rightfully theirs. She was imprisoned at Langata Women's Prison, where she was mostly kept in solitary confinement. She served the full two and half year sentence until her release in September 1978, a month after Jomo Kenyatta's death.

In 1979, she made a return to parliament and joined a group of politicians derisively branded the 'Seven bearded sisters' by the then attorney general Charles Njonjo. Njonjo saw the seven as upholding Marxist ideals and used the phrase to imply that the group had the intention of overthrowing the government.

Chelagat Mutai ferociously demanded explanations and accountability for the infamous Nyayo House chambers, the disastrous famine of 1980 and the glaring corruption that plagued Moi's government. In response, Moi tyrannised the now eight 'bearded sisters' and, before long, he had scattered them. On September 21, 1981, she was charged with 48 counts of making false



mileage claims. She denied the charges and was released on bond, awaiting the hearing. But she knew she was going to be jailed, regardless of the validity of the claims, and fled to Tanzania in 1981. Chelagat returned to Kenya in 1984 to check on and take care of her ailing mother, who died days later, but she did not return to politics, opting instead to lead a quiet life thereafter.

In 2006, Chelagat was involved in a road accident that left her with a broken spine and permanently confined to a wheelchair.

"I think our country has three forms of government: one that meets in secret, plots in secret and implements things in secret, another government where leaders meet to flatter each other and the government where people work", Chelagat Mutai said in her last public appearance in 2011.

Chelagat Mutai was not limited by the socio-political and economic confines of tribe, gender and class. Described variously by journalists as 'some form of living deity', 'a firebrand hard to crush', and 'a flame that could not be extinguished', she lived and remained true to these descriptions till her death. Even the prospect and reality of living a life in poverty in her later life never shook her conviction to stay true to what is right for her people. She died of a heart attack in 2013.

Reference:

*("Chelagat Mutai," 2023; Kasuku, n.d.; Korir, 2020; Maloiy, 2018; Tinderet Information Center, 2020)*



# **Risper Khayanga Twang'a**



**R**ispa Khayanga Twang'a Was born in Bokoli Village, Bungoma (present-day Kenya) around 1900. That was the time of the Nandi Resistance by Koitalel Arap Samoei in Nandi and the Bukusu Resistance in Mateka (Present day Bungoma). She grew up during a period of high colonial tyranny when all land in Bungoma was owned by three British colonialists - Charlese Hobley, William Grant and Gunter Wagner.

Rispa and her brother Jonathan Chenjeni were key players in Dini ya Msambwa, a religious movement that opposed the colonial labour system, colonial tyranny, and cultural annihilation. Its founders were Elijah Masinde, Johash Walumoli, Benjamin Wekuke, Israeli Khaoya and Andrea Wekuke.

But Rispa Khayanga, a key leader in the movement, was and still is overlooked because of her gender. It is said that people mistook her for the daughter of Chenjeni instead of his sister.

As a follower of Dini ya Msambwa, Rispa stayed in the bush to avoid being arrested. She had run away from her home, leaving her five children to live in the bush as a religious guerrilla warrior. She prophesied, composed war songs, carried military contraband, took food to the bush for freedom fighters and spied on enemy homes. Rispa survived the Pokot massacre in which the British killed over 500 Pokot followers of Dini ya Musambwa.





# **Yaa Asantewaa**



**Y**aa Asantewa, Queen Mother of the Ejisu, led the Ashanti in a war against British colonisation between 1900 and 1901. As a woman who understood the dangers of outsiders taking hold among her people, she became assertive and rallied the Ashanti men to battle the British:

"How can a proud and brave people like the Asante sit back and look while white men took away their king and chiefs, and humiliated them with a demand for the Golden Stool. The Golden Stool only means money to the white men; they have searched and dug everywhere for it. I shall not pay one predwan to the governor. If you, the chiefs of Asante, are going to behave like cowards and not fight, you should exchange your loincloths for my undergarments"  
(Yaa Asantewaa)

After this rallying call, she is said to have seized a gun and fired a shot to emphasise the gravitas of the matter. She then led them to war.

The rebellion 'laid siege to the fort at Kumasi where the British had sought refuge.' The resultant war dragged on for several months, with the British at a disadvantage, until the British governor eventually sent a reinforcement force of 1400 soldiers to stop the rebellion. Yaa Asantewaa and her closest advisers were captured and sent into exile to the Seychelles, where she died on 17 October 1921.

Reference:  
(Acheampong, n.d.: "Yaa Asantewaa," 2023)



# **Nehanda Nyakasikana of Zimbabwe**

**IX**





**N**ehanda Charwe Nyakasikana (1840–1898) was both a prophetess and a resistance leader of the Shona people in Zimbabwe between 1896- 1898. She was a svikiro, or spirit medium of the Zezuru Shona people, who led a resistance against the British colonial rule in Zimbabwe, for which she and her ally Kaguvi were executed in 1898. Nehanda remains a powerful symbol of resistance among Zimbabwean people, with her spirit and symbolism employed to mobilise resistance.

The spirit Nehanda is said to be the mhondoro - a royal mudzimu (ancestral spirit) or "lion spirit". This spirit had at one time resided in Nyamhika, the original Nehanda, and one of the daughters of Nyatsimba Mutota who was the first leader of the Munhumutapa state. When Nehanda Nyakasikana was born, she was considered to be the female incarnation

of the great oracle Nehanda. As the medium of the spirit Nehanda, Nyakasikana made oracular pronouncements and performed traditional ceremonies that were thought to bring rain and good crops.

Nyakasikana at first promoted good relations between the Zezuru people and European pioneer settlers. However, following the imposing of a "hut tax" by the British South Africa Company in 1894, both the Ndebele and Shona people revolted in June 1896, in the First Chimurenga war (war of liberation) or the Second Matabele War. This war was unique given the leading roles played by three traditional spiritual leaders or mhondoro: Mukwati in Matabeleland, Kagubi in western Mashonaland, and Nehanda, the only woman in Central and Northern Mashonaland.

After the rebellion in 1897, Nyakasikana was captured. She was charged with the murder of Native Commissioner Pollard - and found guilty, then hanged after eyewitnesses claimed she had ordered an associate to chop Pollard's head off. Stories from the public hanging include accounts of difficulty in killing Nehanda Nyakasikana, along with her resounding statement: "Mapfupa angu achamuka! (my bones will surely rise!)"

Nehanda's heroism became a significant source of inspiration in the struggle for the national liberation of Zimbabwe in the 1960s and 1970s, also known as the second Chimurenga. Her name is now usually prefixed by the respectful title of Mbuya, or grandmother, and she is today referred to as "Mbuya Nehanda" and "Mbuya Charwe". She is also referred to as the grandmother of present-day Zimbabwe.



**Nzinga Mbande  
of Ndongo  
(Angola)**





**Q**ueen Nzinga (Nzinga Mbande), the monarch of the Mbundu people, was a resilient leader who fought against the Portuguese and their expanding slave trade in Central Africa.

The Portuguese had established a fort and settlement at Luanda in 1617, encroaching on Mbundu land. In 1622, they invited Ngola (King) Mbande to attend a peace conference in Luanda to end the hostilities with the Mbundu.

Mbande instead sent his sister Nzinga to represent him in the meeting with Portuguese Governor Joao Corria de Sousa. Nzinga was aware of her diplomatically awkward position. She knew of events in the Kongo which had led to Portuguese domination of the nominally independent nation. She also recognized, however, that refusing to trade with the Portuguese would eliminate a potential ally and the major source of guns for her own state.

In the first of a series of meetings, Nzinga sought to establish her equality with the representative of the Portugal crown. Noting that the only chair in the room belonged to Governor Corria, she motioned to one of her assistants who fell on her hands and knees and served as a chair for Nzinga for the rest of the meeting.



Despite that display, Nzinga made accommodations with the Portuguese. She converted to Christianity and adopted the name Dona Anna de Souza. Shortly afterwards, Nzinga urged a reluctant Ngola Mbande to order the conversion of his people to Christianity.

In 1626 Nzinga became Queen of the Mbundu when her brother committed suicide in the face of rising Portuguese demands for slave trade concessions. Nzinga, however, refused to allow them to control her nation. In 1627, after forming alliances with former rival states, she led her army against the Portuguese, initiating a thirty-year war against them. She exploited European rivalry by forging an alliance with the Dutch, who had conquered Luanda in 1641. With their help, Nzinga defeated a Portuguese army in 1647. When the Dutch were defeated by the Portuguese the following year and withdrew from Central Africa, Nzinga continued her struggle against the Portuguese. Now in her 60s, she still led troops in battle and orchestrated guerilla attacks on the Portuguese, which would continue long after her death and inspire the 20th Century armed resistance against the Portuguese that resulted in independent Angola in 1975.

Repeated attempts by the Portuguese and their allies to capture or kill Queen Nzinga were unsuccessful, and she died peacefully in her eighties on December 17, 1663.

Nzinga is also known for having assigned places to women in important government offices in today's Angola. Women were recruited to take up leadership and combat positions in her army. And two of her war leaders are said to be her sisters. Her staff of advisers included many women, including the sisters mentioned, Princess Grace Kifunji and Mukumbu, later Queen Barbara.

Reference:  
*(African History, 2020; Queen Ana de Sousa Nzinga Mbande of Ndongo (Angola), n.d.)*





# QUEEN AMINA

**XI**



**Q**ueen Amina (also known as Queen Aminatu) was the eldest daughter of Queen Bakwa Turunku, founder of the Zazzau (Zaria) Kingdom and its ruler from 1536 to 1566. Princess Amina became the heir of her mother in 1549 at 16 with Amina's younger brother Karama, taking power in 1566 until his death 10 years later. During this period, Amina trained with the Zazzau cavalry and emerged as a distinguished soldier. Her reign, from 1576, would cause amassing of the largest territory under one rule in the region that is today known as Nigeria.

Known as a great military strategist, the cavalry-trained Queen Amina fought many wars that expanded this southernmost Hausa kingdom. According to the Sankore Institute of Islamic-African Studies International reporting on the region:

"These seven regions witnessed many unusual and strange events. The first to establish government among them, as it has been claimed, was Amina, the daughter of the Amir of Zakzak. She made military assaults upon these lands until she proclaimed herself over them by force. The lands of Katsina and Kano were forced to hand over levies to her. She also made incursions into the lands of Bauchi until she reached the Atlantic Ocean to the south and west. She died in a place called Attaagar. For this reason, the kingdom of Zakzak was the most extensive among the kingdoms of Hausa, since Bauchi included many regions."

Amina controlled the trade routes in the region, erecting a network of commerce within the great fortified earthen walls (Amina's walls) that surrounded the Hausa cities within her dominion. According to the Kano Chronicle, she conquered as far as Nupe and Kwarafa, ruling for 34 years.

It is said that Amina died in a military campaign at Atagara near Bida in Nigeria. Her legendary expeditions earned her the title of 'Amina, daughter of Nikatau, a woman as capable as a man.'

Reference:  
("Queen Amina of Zaria - Warrior of Present Day Nigeria," 2018; Queen Amina of Zazzau, n.d.)





**Huda Sharaawi**

**XIII**



**H**uda Sharaawi was a revolutionary leader in the struggle for Egypt's independence and the strive for the emancipation of Egyptian women. Her work and efforts were integral to the achievement of Egypt's independence and also ensured the protection of some women's rights, initially denied them. Huda Sha'arawi was born in Egypt in 1879 into a wealthy and highly influential family. She was educated from a young age, a privilege that came only with status but wasn't, however, immune to cultural gendered dictates of womanhood. At five, her father died, leaving her under the legal guardianship of her much older cousin, who married her at thirteen.

Her husband, Ali Sharaawi was equally an influential political figure. Soon after their marriage in 1892, Huda became involved in her husband's activities. When women were still confined to the harem, Huda began advocating for women's rights to education. She organised public lectures for women outside of the harems, and in 1910, opened a school for girls where they were taught academic subjects rather than skills like homemaking.

At the end of WW1, Egypt was agitating for independence from British rule. Both Huda and her husband became key players in the independence movement under the Wafd Party. In the 1919 Revolution, she organised a women-led protest, bringing together women from different backgrounds. The women who were protesting British occupation and demanding the release of imprisoned nationalist leaders stood firm despite orders to disperse. According to her granddaughter, Huda stood in the way of a British soldier, parted her dress at the chest and said, "You will have to shoot me. Much trouble for you, but you will have to do it."

On January 12, 1920, the women gathered at St. Mark's Cathedral where they created the Wafdist Women's Central Committee (WWCC). Huda Shaarawi was elected president of the WWCC. The WWCC undertook several vital tasks during the national independence struggle. When male Wafdist leaders were jailed or exiled, Wafdist women took charge. They maintained contact with Wafdist men, as well as with the British authorities. They handled finances, kept up morale, supported workers' strikes, organised boycotts, sold shares in the National Bank, and collected money and jewellery to finance the cause as they broadened their networks across the country. The women opposed the formation of any new government before the return of all those exiled. Even after her husband's death, Huda Shaarawi continued her work in the WWCC, telling her fellow women;



"Neither illness, grief, nor fear of censure can prevent me from shouldering my duty with you in the continuing fight for our national rights. I have vowed to you and to myself to struggle until the end of my life to rescue our beloved country from occupation and oppression... repeated hardships... will not deter me from fighting for the full independence of my country."

In 1923, she helped found the Egyptian Feminist Union and was elected the president. During the International Woman Suffrage Alliance conference, she and her companions did not wear veils and thought it hypocritical to continue to do so. Upon return, they descended from the train with their faces uncovered. They were met by a moment of stunned silence, following which all the women of their circle who were waiting to welcome them also removed their veils.

Huda and her colleagues published a statement listing the nine main principles of the EFU which sought the institutionalisation of women's social, political, economic, legal and moral interests in the constitution and beyond. However, the 1924 elections left the women badly disappointed. They had imagined, perhaps naively, that with the Wafd in power, they would henceforth be regarded as half of the nation. This was not to be

Huda Shaarawi continued to push the government to meet women's demands while embarking on more practical social activities, like opening a free clinic for the poor and a school for girls. She also founded Mabarrat Mohamed Ali, the first philanthropic society run by Egyptian women to offer services for poor women and children, and formed the Intellectual Association of Egyptian Women to improve women's intellectual and social lives.

Shaarawi was head of the Egyptian Feminist Union until her death in 1947. She advocated raising the minimum age for marriage, putting restrictions on polygamy, and issuing stricter divorce laws for men. She also campaigned for girls' higher education and by 1930, female students were admitted to universities.

In 1944, she formed the Arab Feminist Union and became its president. But despite her efforts and life dedication to women's empowerment, Shaarawi was never able to vote, a political right she campaigned strongly for. But with the continuous and relentless efforts of other women who followed in her path, Egyptian women were granted the right to vote in 1954.

Reference:  
(Badran, 1996; Kinias, 2022; Lanfranchi & King, 2012; *Who Was Huda Shaarawi?*, 2021)



**Leymah Gbowee**

**XIII**



Leymah Gbowee won the Nobel Peace Prize in 2011 because of her work during the Liberian Peace process. Before the war, Leymah and her sisters had lived comfortably in Monrovia, Liberia. They



attended the best private schools and in March 1990, Leymah began classes at the University of Liberia, studying biology and chemistry. War arrived at their doorsteps less than three months later and a girl who had never had to take responsibility or make important decisions learned these things quickly, while simultaneously experiencing deaths and witnessing the brutality of soldiers on both sides of the war.

At 19, she met and married Daniel, who was kind in the beginning but turned out to be violent, abusive and controlling. She had four children with him before she could finally get out of the relationship. Meanwhile, she began doing trauma healing work under UNICEF. The interactions she had with the women and other victims of the war not only propelled her to mobilise for peace but also helped heal her personal trauma. As the women shared experiences, Leymah realised that 'women are the sponges,' soaking the pain of their husbands, children, communities and belief systems and holding it in. Through their sessions, she was squeezing it out.

She thereafter started a peace-building network for women called the Christian Women's Peace Initiative. The Christian women rallied women across all denominations across the country. Asatu, the only Muslim woman at the church camp, also rallied Muslim women across the country. They handed out fliers and talked to all to join them and agitate for peace. Gradually, their numbers grew.

On 11th April 2003, hundreds of women wearing white T-shirts gathered at the steps of City Hall to demand 'an immediate and unconditional ceasefire.' They next arrived at a field near the fish market - strategically chosen because President Taylor passed it as he travelled to the Statehouse and embarked on a sit-down - making it their home for months. As their numbers grew, the movement came to be called the Liberian Women's Mass Action for Peace.

Determined to bring the war to an end, Leymah Gbowee and the women mobilised and extended their sit-down at the peace talks. For days, the women sat and watched as mostly male delegates filed past them with no progress on the peace talks. Eventually, Leymah would lead the women to move their sit-down inside the negotiation hall in front of the warlords, political parties, and civil society groups.

“No one will come out of this place until a peace agreement is signed,” she said. The police were immediately sent to arrest them, but Leymah and another woman named Sugars, began to strip, sending fear across the hall. Having gotten the attention of the delegates, they vowed to continue their protest until their demands were met. And they were.

“What we have done today is send out a signal to the world that we, the Liberian women in Ghana, at this conference, are fed up with the war, and we are doing this to tell the world that we are tired of the killing of our people. We can do it again- and we will do it again!” - Leymah Gbowee.





# **Funmilayo Kuti**

**XIV**



**F**unmilayo Ransome-Kuti was a teacher, writer, anti-imperialist organiser, and a women's rights activist who presided over the Abeokuta Women's Union which led the revolt against poll taxes in Nigeria in 1947.

Funmilayo was born as Francis Abigail Olufunmilayo Thomas in 1900 in Abeokuta, Southwestern Nigeria. When the British came in 1918, they realised that women were wealthier from their trading activities and imposed gender-differentiated taxes, subjecting market women to high taxes. They additionally realised that women had socially and culturally sanctioned rights to participate in the political arena - rights that they lost under colonialism and sought to reclaim.

In 1922, Funmilayo returned home to Nigeria having completed her studies in England and dropped her Christian name. In 1925, she married Reverend Israel Oludotun Ransome-Kuti - both were teachers and active in various union activities. By the time of the revolt, Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti was directly and indirectly involved in the politics of nationalism, anticolonialism and trade unionism.

By 1947, the increasing poll taxes were unbearable. Ransome-Kuti, who had formed the Abeokuta Lady's Club, expanded it to include market women and together they rallied against the poll tax. From November 1947, she led thousands of women in a series of mass rallies throughout Abeokuta and vigils in front of the palace of the traditional king - the Alake - Ademola II. Their protests gained popularity and increased in intensity over time, such that by December 1948, the British declared the town totally uncontrollable.

The colonial government was caught between their strong support for Alake Ademola II, the traditional ruler of Abeokuta, and the increasing popularity and general support of the women's protests. The Alake was forced into temporary exile having been paid by the colonial government to impose unfair taxes on the women, and for stripping, beating and searching the women's houses.

She joined the National Council of Nigeria and Cameroons Party, which was Nigeria's leading political party. Subsequently, she participated in the constitutional conference in London. During the conference, she is said to have lashed out at British colonialism and called out discrimination against women by Nigerian men. Her travels to the Soviet Union and China where she met Mao Zedong got her expelled from the national party because her party members were against communist values. Later in 1970, she would be awarded the Lenin Peace Prize.



Ransome-Kuti's concern for the poor working-class people and other marginalised groups also led her to form parties such as the Commoners' People's Party and the Nigerian Women's Organization. She left national politics after independence and focused more on Abeokuta.

In February 1977, soldiers raided her son Fela Kuti's home where she lived. She was thrown off a second-storey window and sustained serious injuries. She succumbed to her injuries at a Nigerian hospital on April 13, 1978.

Reference:  
(Byfield, 2016; Hallgren, 2016; Johnson-Odim & Mba, 1997)



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