

# A BIOGRAPHY OF THE LATE SENIOR CHIEF KATHURU NYAGAH OF THAGICU- KITUI COUNTY, KENYA,1918-1998

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## Abstract

*The study of biographies of those personalities who have contributed in one way or the other in influencing history can be quite fascinating because it furthers our understanding of broader issues and processes in any given society. Quite a number of historians have written biographies of those among the colonial chiefs who in one way or another played important roles in shaping the destinies of their people and of this country to a certain extent. There were those who utilized every opportunity created by the colonial officials to improve education, agriculture, health, water and infrastructure in their areas. Such colonial chiefs included senior chief Waruhiu wa Kung'u, chief Musa Nyandusi, Odera Akong'o, Njiri wa Karanja and paramount chief Kinyanjui Gathirimu just to name a few. As I read through the literature on colonial chiefs, it occurred to me that there is no one who has written a biography on colonial chiefs in Thagicu District even though there were a few chiefs among them the likes of senior chief Kathuru Nyagah and chief Mwendwa wa Kitavi who played very important roles in shaping the destinies of their people. The mention of the name of senior chief Kathuru among the Thagicu rekindles memories of a leader who through collaboration with colonial officials played a significant role in improving the lives of Thagicu people. Hence it is for this reason that this research was carried out with a view to exposing who chief Kathuru was and how and why he had become what he was. This thesis was an attempt to write the biography of the Late Senior Chief Kathuru Nyagah of Thagicu community.*

## **1.0 INTRODUCTION**

This biographical approach relied on studying a single person and placing him within historical context. It was evident that the genesis of a great man is profoundly influenced by the society in which he resides. Guy Arnold and David Goldsworthy stated that study of biographies of individuals as brought episodes and events that enables better understanding of early societies.

Goldsworthy (1984) in his study about Tom Mboya brought to the light the labor movement in Kenya in the pre-colonial period and exposed the labor condition that existed in Kenya during colonial Kenya. Documenting the life of Senior Chief Kathuru Nyagah has helped to bring a very significant contribution towards understanding Kenyan colonial history in depth

## **2.0 Methodologies**

A combination of different methodologies was used to obtain essential data for this study. Accordingly, the research was based on the existing literature that is archival materials and oral interviews. Extensive document analysis of archival materials was conducted at the Kenya National Archive. Consulted archival material included both the available official and non-official documents. Field research was conducted in Thagicu area of Mwingi District. Oral interviews were not administered on structured questionnaires. However, some guiding questions were formulated on the spot to give researcher a wide margin for formulating additional questions as new issues arises. The informants were sort through snowballing method since they are scattered within and outside the location under study.

## Findings

### 3.1 Kathuru's career as a chief and councilor of thagicu

#### Location background to his appointment as chief

The colonial administration in Mwingi District was already aware of the good performance of Kathuru while in the K.A.R. Thus, when he returned home in 1948, the PC wanted to make him a chief just like his uncle, but people objected, saying that he was too young and had not yet married. People could not accept to be ruled by someone who was not married since it was considered to be a sign of immaturity and a taboo in accordance to Thagicu traditions. The D.C. was, however, determined to appoint him to a position of leadership, and so he ended up appointing him the headman of Kamatumo sub-location in 1949. It was not until two years later, in May 12, 1951, that he was made the chief of Kanthungu location.

Before Kathuru's appointment as chief, Kanthungu location had been under chief Mutegi Rug'ego, who was dismissed in order to pave the way for Kathuru whom the D.C. had been wanting to appoint as chief since 1948. It was Mr. Crewe-Read, by then D.C., who had appointed Kathuru a headman in 1949. Two years later, the D.C. Mr. Davenport made Kathuru a chief. This was after he had married his first wife, Karianyama as a result of which his appointment was duly approved by the elders of the location. The appointment of Kathuru to the chieftainship was not only approved by the D.C. but was also endorsed by the elders of the location. This was largely because the elders had seen the leadership qualities which Kathuru was endowed with. It was his record of service in K.A.R that convinced the local administration in Kitui and Mwingi that he was the best choice they could make at that time.

Kathuru was appointed chief at the age of thirty-three, and he served the colonial government for forty-seven years before he was assassinated in 1998 at the age of eighty. During his career as a chief, he rose through the ranks to become a Senior Chief in 1954, thus becoming the most powerful and influential chief in Mwingi District. Although he was appointed a chief in 1951, Kathuru did not receive confirmation until 1954 when his name was gazetted, and when he was given the chiefs' stave by the D.C. Commander Mackay. The three years between the appointment and confirmation appear to have been a probationary period during which time his performance was closely monitored.

During these years, Kathuru proved quite successful, for in 1954 his appointment was gazetted and the location was also enlarged. Kanthungu location was found to be too small for chief Kathuru, who had shown that he was capable of good leadership. Consequently, in April 1954, Kanthungu, Kamatumo and Tharaka locations were combined to form a new enlarged Tharaka location, which was also known as location . Chief Kathuru was appointed the chief of the new Tharaka location in April 1954. The new location was much larger than the original locations, and in fact it was the largest location in the district with an area of over 1000 square miles. The promotion of Kathuru was a result of the conviction of a criminal offence and eventual dismissal of chief Mutegi Kagwima. Mutegi was known to be a mischievous person who did not respect his superiors. He could at times fail to carry out orders from the D.O or even from the D.C. He could even fail to attend the D.C.'s baraza (meetings) without a proper reason.

By increasing the size of the location entrusted to Kathuru, the colonial officials showed they believed he had the capacity to control a much larger area. Thus it is no wonder that Tharaka location ended up being the largest in the district and also the most populous. Chief Kathuru controlled the new enlarged location effectively. This is evidenced by the D.C.'s comment in his Annual Report in 1955 to the effect that, "Chief Kathuru is a very good chief and has his people well under control". As a chief, Kathuru was in charge of a location which was the smallest administrative unit in the colonial administrative machinery. As a chief, he was directly responsible to the D.C. who could appoint and dismiss chiefs at will even though he had to make recommendations to the P.C. Kathuru was thus the direct representative and agent of the government in his location. He was answerable to the D.C. for anything that happened within his location.

The duties demanded of him as a chief included the maintenance of law and order, reporting crime, arresting criminals and issuing as the occasion required, instructions for certain definite purposes to be obeyed by the

inhabitants of his location. He was also responsible for the collection of local government taxes as well as the implementation of government policies and directives. In order for him to carry out these duties effectively and efficiently, chief Kathuru was assisted by a staff which included the tribal police commonly referred to as the tribal retainers appointed and remunerated clerks, headmen and a team of unofficial and unpaid sub-headmen and elders who owed their positions to the chief. Chief Kathuru performed the above duties extremely well. He made sure that taxes were collected promptly and that he did not wait for the D.C. to remind him when the taxes were due. Law and order were maintained and quite often offenders of such crimes as illicit beer-brewing, excessive drunkardness or theft were heavily fined to ensure that they did not repeat the offences.

### **3.2 kathuru's work as a councillor of the thagicu local native council (lnc), 1949-1998**

Chief kathuru served for nine, three-year consecutive terms as a councilor of the Thagicu LNC from its inception in 1949 until his death in 1998. From 1951 to 1964, he was one of the elected councilors for Mumoni Division, while he was a nominated councilor thereafter. The LNCs were intended to give the Africans a voice in the management of their own affairs in several ways. First, they had to assist in the formulation of legislation for their respective geographical areas. Secondly, they had to advise the district administration in matters pertaining to their own people. Thirdly, the councils were supposed to bring matters of importance, which affected their people, before those in authority. Fourthly, they had to show how the locations could be better administered. The Thagicu LNC, like all the other LNCs in the colony, was presided over and rigidly controlled by the DC.

Kathuru, being a powerful and an influential chief, was among the very few councilors who dominated the thagicu Council in his lifetime. This is attested by a number of factors. One, kathuru was very often proposed or seconded the Council bye-laws or resolutions as they were then referred to. Secondly, he often participated and contributed to most of the Council debates. Thirdly, he was every year chosen to be the chairman of at least one of the permanent LNC sub-committees - especially the Public Works, the Agriculture and Veterinary, and the Agricultural Show Sub-Committees. Fourthly, he was for many years the Council's representative in the Local Land Board and in the District Education Board. Fifth, he was always a member of the delegation which represented the Council at the joint Eastern Province LNC.s' meetings at Kitui. Lastly, he was frequently appointed to important temporary LNC sub-committees which were occasionally set up to investigate specified issues and report to the Council.

It is, therefore, evident from the above that kathuru, as a councilor, was a representative of the whole district because the LNC was primarily concerned with the welfare of the entire district.

As a consequence, he strongly backed diverse causes which he believed would benefit him and the people of the district. Such measures embraced many aspects of life such as education, health, agriculture, commerce, religion and hygiene, among others.

### **3.3 Kathuru's promotion of educational facilities**

The fact that chief Kathuru never acquired formal education doesn't mean that he did not value education. On the contrary, he was aware of the benefits which accrued from education. During his ten years' service in the K.A-R- he had travelled widely all over East Africa, and had met and interacted with many people. His interaction with those who had acquired education made him regard it with high esteem. His love for education coupled with the fact that as a chief he received orders from the D.C. to the effect that he had a duty to ensure parents sent their children to school, and also the fact that as a councilor he had to promote education in his location, this led Kathuru to be fully involved in educational matters.

The first school in Thagicu was constructed in 1951, the same year when he was appointed chief. This was the third school in Mwingi District after the Government school in Kitui Township and katse primary school in katse location. The school was completed in December 1952. Upon its completion, chief Kathuru called a meeting of the parents who had school-age children and explained to them the need to take their children to the newly built school. There was outright opposition from the parents, who argued that their sons were best suited to look after cattle. They could not comprehend why they were being asked to take their sons to school yet from the times of their

grandfathers, the occupation of young boys had been to look after their father's livestock. As a result there was a lot of resistance. On the other hand, the children themselves were not willing to be taken to school. Sometimes many would desert home whenever they discovered that there was a plan to take them to school. It is no wonder that chief Kathuru faced an uphill task of ensuring that the D.C.'s orders of having children sent to the newly built school were complied with. To ensure this was done, Kathuru would send word to a parent informing him that his/her son was among those nominated to go to school. The son was therefore to be sent to school, failure to which the parent would be arrested and fined as much as two cows.

Those parents who were wealthy ended up bribing the chief in order to have their children exempted from going to school. A parent could offer up to three bulls in order to have his child exempted. This way only the sons of those parents who could not afford to bribe the chief, together with the sons of chiefs and headmen, ended up attending the school when it opened its doors in December 1952. As a result, it was reported that most of the 39 pupils who were registered when the school opened were sons of the chiefs, headmen and home elders. Chief Kathuru's efforts to encourage parents to take their children to school were not in vain, for in the following years the number of those wishing to be registered increased. Though the school was initially intended to be a mixed institution, the parents could not agree to their daughters being taken to school. According to them daughters were supposed to stay at home helping their mothers with domestic duties until they reached a marriageable age. They would then be married off in exchange for dowry. Daughters were in fact a source of wealth to their parents. They often looked forward to the day when their daughters would be married so that they could receive the dowry. It was a common belief among the parents that if girls were taken to school they would become prostitutes since they would be away from their mothers and grandmothers who were supposed to ensure strict vigilance over them. As a result the girls would fail to get married and this would mean their parents missing dowry. No parent could afford to miss dowry since it was a source of wealth as well as a prestigious thing to have their daughters married. It is therefore no wonder that among the first 39 pupils registered in the newly built Ciampiu primary school, there was not a single girl. They were all young boys aged between fifteen and twenty years old.

Chief Kathuru also encouraged missionaries in Kitui District to open schools in his location. The earliest missionary society to establish itself in Kitui District was the Africa Inland Mission/church (A.I.M.), which settled at Kitui town in 1915. It was followed years later by the Catholic Mission, the Holy Ghost Mission (H.G.M.) which established itself at the outskirts of Kitui town, in 1945. Apart from the mission of preaching the word of God, the missionaries engaged themselves in other humanitarian activities such as building schools and health centers. Some of their schools were aided by the government while others were exclusively managed by the missions. Chief Kathuru, himself an early convert of the A.I.M. was instrumental in prevailing upon the A.I.M. to build schools in his location. He believed that his people would be able to benefit from the mission schools since, apart from providing formal education, the mission schools also offered spiritual guidance. Thus Tharaka location was the beneficiary of some of the first mission-sponsored schools to be built by the A.I.M. in the district. The first school to be built by the A.I.M. in Tharaka location was Kamatumo primary school. It was also at Kamatumo where the A.I.M. had opened its first branch and two missionaries were stationed there permanently. The H.G.M. also made an effort to open a school in Tharaka location. On 28 April 1955, Fr. White, in charge of the H.G.M., wrote to chief Kathuru about a school plot. It was, however, not until 1958 that the H.G.M. opened a school at Nthangani in Kanthungu location. The delay in opening the school could have been occasioned by the fact that Kathuru did not offer outright support to the H.G.M. compared to the A.I.M., the obvious reason being that he did not share their faith. It can therefore be said that through his association with the missionaries, particularly those of the A.I.M., chief Kathuru was able to improve education in his location. This can be seen against the background of the many schools opened by the A.I.M. in Tharaka location as compared to other locations in the district. For example, by 1960, out of the eleven schools run by the A.I.M in Kitui District, four were built in Tharaka location while in the northern locations there was none. By 1960, there was one junior secondary school at Katse, a secondary school at Gankanga and twenty-six primary schools in the district. The schools were run by three bodies, namely; the District Education Board (D.E.B.), the A.I.C. But in Tharaka location alone, the A.I.C. ran four schools with the D.E.B. having two schools.

### **3.4 Kathuru and agricultural development**

Throughout his career as a chief and councilor, Kathuru was very much concerned with the improvement of agriculture in Thagicu. He was always at the center-stage encouraging his people to use modern methods of farming,

such as contour terracing and use of manure. In those days famines were quite frequent and it was advisable for the people to produce enough food for consumption and storage in case of a shortage of rainfall in the next season.

In Thagicu, increased agricultural production was encouraged, and through the effort of chief Kathuru the location cultivated locational shambas. This was occasioned by the increased demand for food, especially for the soldiers who were in the army during the Second World War. The administration in Kitui, as in any other part of the colony, encouraged the chiefs to increase their production so that other surplus food could be sent to those serving in the army. In addition to producing food for soldiers in the armed forces, surplus food obtained from the locational shambas was sold to other locations in need of it, hence earning some money for the location.

Chief Kathuru, having served in the K.A.R. knew that the men in the battlefield had to be supplied with food. He therefore believed that it was necessary that the people back home had to increase food production in order to have enough for themselves and also surplus to be supplied to the men serving in the army. With these ideas in mind, he organized for the cultivation of locational shambas in his locations. He formed a committee and appointed twelve elders chosen for their knowledge and experience to be in charge of the locational shambas. The elders were to act as managers of these shambas. Chief Kathuru kept the D.C. informed about the progress of the locational shambas. He even went ahead and requested the D.C. to register his committee, which he did, and the committee was approved on 1949.

Thagicu committee is said to have been the first co-operative venture in his location. It was a brainchild of chief Kathuru and it proved to be a success. Kathuru believed that one way of increasing food production in his locations was through working together as a group and it was with such an idea in mind that he organized for the cultivation of the locational shambas whereby everybody in the location was required to take part in one way or the other through planting, cultivating or harvesting. The idea behind the whole venture, apart from producing food for the soldiers in the army, for which the colonial government paid, was to create food reserves for the location. The large quantity of food produced on the locational shambas, was stored for future use in case of a famine or any other disaster. The food was also given to people in short supply, as well as to the families whose menfolk were taking part in the Second World War, though the food was not distributed freely. In 1951, when there was famine in the southern part of the district, the Thagicu-committee was able to sell food obtained from the locational shambas to the famine stricken areas.

The committee requested the D.C. to allow them to use Local Native Council Lorries to carry the food, and in December 1951 the committee sent seventy bags of various food stuffs to the southern part of the district as relief food. Two years later, in 1953, when there was famine in the northern parts of the district, the committee once more requested the D.C. to let them have a lorry. He obliged and in May that year the committee sent 300 bags of cassava, maize and beans to the northern locations. The money got from the sale of the food was deposited in the Post Office Savings Bank for future use. This money was also used to remunerate the persons employed on these shambas as well as the elders managing them.

In 1954, Thagicu was invaded by locusts which destroyed the crops. This brought about a threat of famine. Once more the locusts invaded the location and destroyed the crops the following year. When the askaris were returning home from the army, again there was considerable famine in the district which became more serious by 1956 The committee then utilized the money which it had got from former sales, which this time had of course accumulated considerable interest, to buy food for the people in the location.

This project of cultivating locational shambas seemed to have been quite different from other „forced“ projects such as dam-building. The fact that chief Kathuru was able to organize such a project successfully is quite revealing. The success of the project required the cooperation of so many persons, and it is a clear indication that Kathuru was able to convince the people of the importance of the project to the extent that even those who hated and disliked him because of the way he handled other projects, were able to offer their support to this particular project.

It can thus be seen that Kathuru being both the chief and councilor of his location, was totally committed in the field of agricultural development. He ensured the cooperation of his people in order to increase food production. He also worked in cooperation with the agricultural officers in the district, who were always available to give advice and instructions whenever it was necessary. However, lack of enough agricultural officers was a hindrance to the development of agriculture in the district. For example, though there was one agricultural officer in the district in 1958, any progress in agriculture was very limited since his staff was small and instructors were paid by the LNC

whose funds were also very limited. Thus, there was hardly enough agricultural officers in the district, though with time more and more assistant agricultural officers were trained and their work became invaluable to the success of agriculture in the district.

Another secret to chief Kathuru's splendid performance in the field of agriculture was that he quite often liaised with the agricultural officer to ensure that assistant agricultural officers were sent to his location. He further liaised with the D.C. and his D.O.s for the services of agricultural officers. For example, in a meeting with the D.O., Mr. F. R. Wilson, after touring Thagicu location in 1957, Kathuru out rightly expressed the desire to have an agricultural officer sent to his location to assist in giving instructions on how the terraces were to be dug. Kathuru also quite often took the advice of the agricultural officers very seriously, which he would later disseminate to his people. As a result the people of Thagicu benefited from the expertise of the agricultural officers in the district. Likewise chief Kathuru, through the co-operation of the agricultural officers in the district, encouraged the use of modern methods of farming, especially the digging of terraces and cut-offs to prevent the top fertile soil from being washed away from the shambas. He also encouraged the use of manure and fertilizers, which were intended to boost food production. In 1956, the agricultural officer in the district had an occasion to report that there was increased activity in the planting of fodder crop in areas where it had never been grown before in Thagicu location. There was also an increased use of manure.

Another factor which contributed towards the uplifting of agriculture in Thagicu, from chief Kathuru's commitment to ensure the same, was that he set himself as an example for the others to follow. His shambas were well terraced, and he applied manure to increase production. They were so well maintained that they were used by the agricultural officers for field-days trips and demonstration purposes. As a result, those who saw how well his shambas were maintained would endeavor to have theirs look the same.

Kathuru is also credited with having been the first to start a dairy farm in the location. He was, however, at pains with the fact that the cattle of Thagicu were small and that through lack of grass they could only lactate for one month at stretch. He consulted the agricultural and veterinary officers about the possibility of acquiring grade cattle like the many he had seen on European farms in the central province. It was found that the climate of Thagicu could not guarantee the survival of grade cattle. All the same, chief Kathuru selected the most healthy and best looking cows which he kept for milk production. He also encouraged his people to start dairy farms to ensure increased milk production.

It was concluded that Kathuru's involvement in agricultural matters in his location was outstanding, an indication that he was concerned with Improvement of the living standards of his people. Though it was the policy of the colonial government to improve agriculture in the district, without the efforts of chief Kathuru as a leader of his people, Thagicu could not have attained much of what was attained in agriculture. The efforts of the government were fully implemented. There was always enough food in store obtained from the locational shambas in case of a famine. Thagicu was also able to export food to other locations whenever the need arose.

### **3.5 Chief Kathuru and soil conservation measures**

On the list of government policies which the colonial chiefs were required to implement in their locations was that of soil conservation. Chiefs were under instructions that their people were made aware of the importance of preventing soil erosion and as such the colonial government, through the co-operation of the chiefs, sought to put measures in place to ensure that soil erosion in the district was properly controlled. This was one area where chief Kathuru excelled.

The topography of thagicu is such that the area is covered by alternating high and narrow ridges. The high ridges with steep sides were very prone to soil erosion. As a result, thagicu attracted the attention of the government's soil conservation campaign. Chief Kathuru was quick to notice the importance and benefits of digging contour terraces. Thus he embarked on a campaign to ensure that terraces were dug communally and individually throughout the location.

In order to set an example to others, chief had terraces dug in all his shambas and also on his land which was not under cultivation. This way, he hoped that his people would be able to emulate his example. However, he was disappointed to learn that his people were not willing to dig terraces. After all, farming land was in plenty and people practiced shifting cultivation, abandoning a piece of land when it became less productive. Given these circumstances, they could not comprehend the importance of digging terraces.

When chief Kathuru was issued with the order to ensure that terraces was dug all over his location, he moved into action with a lot of vigor. His first course of action was to request that the assistant agricultural officers be sent to Thagicu to do the work of the contour terraces in every shamba in his location. He then made it compulsory for the people to dig terraces in their own shambas. Those who were not willing to work voluntarily were forced to do so and those who failed to comply with the chief's directive were arrested and prosecuted at Thagicu Tribunal Court. At times chief Kathuru personally imposed fines on those who failed to dig terraces by their livestock confiscated. Thus, the location became the scene of a having compulsory anti-soil erosion terracing campaign, a policy which created a lot of friction and bad feeling between the administration and the local people.

In order to ensure that his orders were fully followed, Kathuru worked in close collaboration with his aides. He instructed his tribal retainers, together with the headmen, to go round the location checking on how well the terracing work was progressing. They would then report back to him with names of those whose shambas were not terraced. This made it easier for Kathuru to identify those who were not taking the work seriously and also made it hard for people to exempt themselves from the exercise. Through that terracing was extensively carried out in the entire location. With regard to soil conservation measures, Thagicu location became a shining example to other locations. By 1953, of the three locations which were leading in the work of terracing, Thagicu was far ahead of the other two. Any government official who visited Thagicu could not fail to notice the impressive work on terracing being undertaken in the location. Chief Kathuru could not have received all this praise for nothing. Of course his work on soil conservation was outstanding compared to other locations, and this is why his superiors were always full of praise for him. Though he had at times to force many of his people to dig the terraces by threatening them with fines and prosecution in court, he nonetheless produced good results which were all that his superiors wanted.

Other than forcing people to dig terraces in their shambas, chief Kathuru also employed other strategies in order to ensure that soil erosion was controlled. He held numerous barazas during which he explained to the people the importance of digging terraces on the uncultivated land and the fallow land which had been cultivated and abandoned. He also had terraces dug in those areas which looked more prone to soil erosion, such as along the banks of streams and valleys and on hill sides. He issued orders to his headmen and tribal retainers to recruit labor force in large numbers and those who showed non-cooperation were arrested and fined.

During the numerous barazas which Kathuru held throughout the location, he used to tell his people that though they were not willing to dig terraces, they would only realize the benefit of the same in future. That, though they were getting free services from the assistant agricultural officers, in future they would pay for the same services. This way many realized the importance and benefit of conserving the soil and with time more and more people came to appreciate his efforts. Even those who at first thought that chief was harassing them by forcing them to dig terraces against their will, later realized that he was only doing that for their own benefit. One respondent was quick to point out that chief Kathuru was surely like a prophet for most of the things he told us came to pass. It is thus no wonder that this culture of digging terraces has persisted where most of areas are heavily terraced.

## **Conclusion**

Chief Kathuru was certainly a forceful personality in the sense that he did not hesitate to use force whenever his people showed unwillingness to obey his orders. On other hand, the fact that he held barazas to explain to the people the importance of his directives means that he was by no means thoroughly coercive. During such meetings he would persuade and convince the people to dig contour terraces even those who were at first opposed to the idea. Thus, chief Kathuru used coercion and persuasion together as a means of obtaining compliance from his people.

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