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Petition to Mombasa County Assembly: Renaming Mama Ngina Waterfront Park

Names are often windows to the past. Place names, in particular, are an important part of the intangible cultural heritage of a people. Such names contain information that tell us something about the place and the circumstances at the period of time the name came into being. They are also a valuable resource for the study of language history. It is partly for these reasons that Okoa Mombasa Coalition considers the name 'Mama Ngina' Waterfront Park to be a gross deletion and obfuscation of an important aspect of the history of the people of Mombasa.

Still standing today is an old stone inscription at the entrance of the Old Law Courts, now the Court of Appeal of Mombasa, engraved by the Portuguese around 1677 CE, that refers to the area under consideration here as Ras Mzimli. There is sufficient historical evidence to suggest that the location was populated by three Swahili sub-groups commonly referred to as the Thelatha Taifa, a term used interchangeably with Taifa Tatu. These groups included the WaKilindini, WaChangamwe, and WaTangana. As a result, the area also came to be popularly known after its residents, Thelatha Taifa or Taifa Tatu.

Then between 1912 and 1936, the British colonial administrators in Mombasa levelled a huge section of the Taifa Tatu area and turned it into a public park. Adopting an old term of uncertain origin referring to the East African coast, the British now gave it the name "Azania Drive," though in time, the space came to have limited access to the public due colonial concerns about the security of the harbor.

It was during the post-colonial period under the presidency of Jomo Kenyatta that, yet another name was imposed on the area, with the waterfront now becoming Mama Ngina Drive in honor Kenyatta's wife. That was in 1963, soon after Kenya gained its independence from the British. Some 56 years later, in 2019, Ngina's son, President Uhuru Kenyatta upheld his mother's name by renaming the refurbished area, the Mama Ngina Waterfront Park.

With a quick stroke of a pen, then, the entire history of the place was erased, followed by attempts to inscribe instead a historical memory alien to the place and its local inhabitants. For many, the switch in names was emblematic of the state of "internal colonialism" that was beginning to consolidate itself at the Coast of Kenya. Jomo Kenyatta and his successor, Daniel arap Moi, came to exercise enormous powers over the area, virtually treating the park as a personal property. Together they gave away huge chunks of the land to their political sycophants and business cronies, all to the detriment of Mombasa residents.

It is against this historical backdrop that Okoa Mombasa Coalition is petitioning the Mombasa County Government to conduct a forum with structured public participation with a view to changing the name of the park. Importantly, the selected name should signal a reclamation of the historical and cultural heritage of the people of Mombasa, in particular, and the Coast, in general. Towards this end, one

proposal would be to rename the park Mzimli Waterfront Park as a way of reconnecting it with its earlier historical past.

An alternative name, about which Okoa Mombasa Coalition feels equally strongly is MeKatilili Waterfront Park. This name would link the park not with its pre-colonial history, but with its desired future as a liberated zone. As we know, MeKatilili, or MeKatilili wa Menza, is a Coastal woman leader who led the Giriama community to rebel against the British Colonial Administration and policies in 1913-1914. Her heroism instilled fear in the colonial master, leading to her capture and imprisonment. This colonial action triggered a major uprising among her followers which became a crucial first step in the quest for freedom from colonial rule. In naming the park after MeKatilili, then, Mombasa would not only be honoring one of Kenya's first freedom fighters but also, and in line with Okoa Mombasa Coalition's mission – Mombasa would be exercising local participation for local resources. Resultantly, it would be making a statement about the “park we want,” a space for the people, liberated from colonial and neocolonial appropriation by the corrupt classes in power.

The campaign to change the name, which Okoa Mombasa began before the park was opened on October 20, will seek the people's consensus. This is vital in protecting devolution, which we envision as giving locals more power to decide on the control and use of resources within their jurisdiction.