

**A Woman  
Of  
Culture and Ambition**

**Madam Yoko**

A story from Sierra Leone history sent to  
Emscote Infant School

By

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Bo, Sierra Leone



MADAM YOKO

## **A Woman of Culture and Ambition Madam Yoko**

Madam Yoko (Mammy Yoko) was a brilliant and ambitious woman who used her friendship with the British to gain control of Kpeomende. However, in the end that very friendship may have destroyed her.

As a child, she was called Somo, but acquired the name Yoko at her Sande initiation where she attracted admiration for her beauty and graceful dancing.

After an unsuccessful first marriage, Yoko became the wife of Gbenjei, Chief of Taima and although she couldn't have any children, Gbenjei made Yoko his head wife. Eventually Gbenjei died.

Then Yoko married Gbanyo Lango, a powerful war-chief at Senehun. In 1875, she saved her husband from a long imprisonment by the British because she made a personal plea to the Governor who was charmed by her beauty and feminine graces. Therefore, he agreed to release her husband from prison.

Gbanyo found Yoko was very good at diplomatic missions to the British and to other Chiefs so this became her job.

In 1884, after the death of her husband—Gbanyo and his successor, Yoko became the "Queen of Senehun".

Within a few years she became ruler of all of the Kpaamende region (now 14 chiefdoms!) She did this through alliances (making friends with the different chiefs) using warfare and her ability to call on support of the friendly British troops, she could get them to help her fight to win the other chiefdoms.

She established a famous Sandebush in Senehun where she trained girls from the area of Kpaamende. She sometimes gave the most beautiful girls in marriage to the sergeants of the frontier police or important chiefs.

Madam

Yoko

Amber  
Murphy



English policeman



Madam Yoko



Queen Victoria

When the British declared their protectorate in 1898, Madam Yoko Commanded her people to pay the new tax—but her sub-chiefs rebelled. They held a secret meeting, blaming Yoko for “spoiling the country by supporting the British police, paying taxes and forced labour.”

Yoko hid in the police barracks which withstood several attacks by her own subjects. She was later awarded a silver medal for her loyalty by Queen Victoria.

Madam Yoko ruled as the paramount chief in the new British Protectorate until 1906, when it appears that she committed suicide at the age of 55.

If this is true, her reasons have never been altogether clear. A British official wrote that she had obtained all there was to be had in life—love, fame, wealth and power and felt there was nothing more to look forward to.

However, her attempts to manipulate the support of her people, and perhaps she was bored and saw nothing challenging in Britain's new and tightly controlled protectorate.

Sent to us by Miss Tenneh Koroma  
(a teacher from New Gerihun Road School in Bo, Sierra Leone)

## **Madam Yoko**

Some history from Sierra Leone (simplified for younger children)

1. Madam Yoko lived a very long time ago, born in 1861 in Sierra Leone, Africa. She was a very clever and ambitious woman.
2. Her name as a child was Soma—but later changed to Yoko because she was a good dancer and very beautiful.
3. After her first marriage didn't work, she married a Chief of Taima called Gbenji becoming his head wife. (A chief would be like a ruler of his area. Taima is the name of a place.) When he died she married again.
4. Her third marriage was to Gbanya Lango—a powerful chief of Senehan. (Senehan is a place in Sierra Leone.)
5. In 1875 Yoko saved her husband from being kept in prison by the British because she spoke very nicely to the British governor.
6. Gbanya realized his wife was clever in persuading people, so sent her to talk to other chiefs and the British who were there at the time.
7. In 1884 Gbanya died and eventually Yoko became Queen of Senehun.
8. Soon she was ruling 14 Chiefdoms in the Kpaamende Region of Sierra Leone because she won at going to war with some of them, persuading them and asking the British to help her. (Kpaamende is a place.)
9. In 1898 the British decided they ruled Sierra Leone calling it a Protectorate. Madam Yoko commanded her people to pay tax to the British.
10. However, the chiefs she was ruling were angry and held a secret meeting blaming Yoko for spoiling their country, because she was working with the British police, collecting taxes for them and making them work for the British.
11. Yoko had to hide in the police barracks.
12. The British Queen at the time—Queen Victoria awarded Yoko a silver medal for working with the British.

13. At age 55 in 1906, Madam Yoko was the most important chief in Sierra Leone but working for the British.

14. However at age 55 she died and some people think she committed suicide.  
(This means killed herself.)

15. If this is true people wonder why. One idea some wondered -was she unhappy working for the British, because she was no longer in charge of her own land?

## Questions for Madam Yoko

1. What was Madam Yoko's childhood name?
2. What was her second husband's name?
3. Who was her third husband?
4. How did Yoko save her husband in 1875?
5. After 1884 what was Yoko's title?
6. How many chiefdoms did she rule?
7. Why did Yoko have to hid in the police barracks?
8. What did Queen Victoria give Yoko?
9. How old was Yoko when she died?