

UCIRVINE | CLAIRE TREVOR  
SCHOOL of the ARTS  
DEPARTMENT of DRAMA

with

Office of the Provost, School of Humanities, School of Law, School of Social Ecology,  
School of Social Sciences and University Extension

present

# THE TRIAL OF DEDAN KIMATHI

by

NGUGI WA THIONG'O AND MICERE GITHAE-MUGO



choreographed by  
Sheron Wray

directed by  
Jaye Austin Williams

8 - 16 March 2014

# DRAMATURG NOTES

## Justice Matters: From Kenya to the US and Beyond

There was no single historical work written by a Kenyan telling of the grandeur of the heroic resistance of Kenyan people fighting foreign forces of exploitation and domination . . . We agreed to co-author a play on Kimathi . . . a hero of the Kenyan masses.

Preface, Ngugi wa Thiong’o and Micere Githae Mugo,

*The Trial of Dedan Kimathi*

*The Trial of Dedan Kimathi*, a powerful drama co-written by Ngugi wa Thiong’o and Micere Githae Mugo communicates across time and space from its setting in 1956 Kenya to speak to us in 2014 United States about issues of justice, and about ongoing divisions of race, language, gender, and class in our society. The play, resonating from within Kenya’s heart and its history, reaches across continents to touch us locally, in Southern California, and indeed wherever, in the US or globally, injustice prevails.

Ngugi and Mugo excavate a misrepresented segment of Kenyan history, “reconstructing it imaginatively”, even “resurrecting Dedan Kimathi” as a hero of the Kenyan people, disrupting British propagated negative myths about Kimathi. The colonizers also used the weapon of language to misname the freedom movement as “Mau Mau” evoking mumbo jumbo tactics used by peasants on killing sprees. In reality, the name that the freedom fighters used for their organized, disciplined war was the Kenya Land and Freedom Army.

*The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* takes us into the heart of this segment of Kenyan history. The Kimathi story resonates today “wherever imperialism still exists.” Black history--slave trade, forced removal of Africans--opens the drama in a dance/ movement pageant with drumming. This scene and the play as a whole evoke connections among struggles for justice worldwide—in Asia, in Africa and the black diaspora in the Caribbean, in Central and South America, in the US during Civil Rights, and recently in the Middle East where ordinary people invade city squares demanding democratic rights.

Ngugi and Mugo succeed in what they note as “the challenge to truly depict the masses (symbolized by Kimathi) in the only historically correct perspective: positively, heroically, and the true makers of history” (Preface).

## The Co-Authors of *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi*

**Ngugi Wa Thiong’o**, Distinguished Professor of English and Comparative Literature at the University of California, Irvine (UCI) was born in Kenya in 1938 into a large peasant family. He is a novelist (*Wizard of the Crow*, *Petals of Blood* and others), essayist, playwright, theorist (on issues of language, culture, and politics such as *Globalectics*, *Penpoints, Gunpoints and Dreams* among other volumes), memoirist (*Dreams in a Time of War*, and *In the House of the Interpreter*) and social activist. Ngugi attended

the Makerere University College in Kampala, Uganda, and the University of Leeds, Britain. To date, Ngugi has received nine Honorary Doctorates.

Ngugi's work in community-based theater at the Kamiirithu Educational and Cultural Center, including the play, *I Will Marry When I Want* with peasants and workers was so threatening to the postcolonial Kenyan regime that he was incarcerated in 1977 and held without charge at Kamiti Maximums Prison for eleven months. While in prison, Ngugi made the decision to write his future fictional works exclusively in Gikuyu, his mother tongue. While in prison, he wrote his first novel in Gikuyu, entitled, *Caitani Muthrabaini*, translated into English as *Devil on the Cross*. Upon release, Ngugi was forced into exile.

Ngugi has held positions at many prestigious institutions, including Yale and New York University, and received numerous awards, including the 2001 Nonino International Prize for Literature. We are honored to have Ngugi wa Thiong'o, the recipient of the 2013 UCI Medal, among our treasured faculty at the University of California, Irvine.

**Micere Githae Mugo** a Kenyan by birth is a poet, playwright, literary critic and Professor in the Department of African American Studies at Syracuse University. Mugo is the author of *Writing and Speaking from the Heart of my Mind* (selected essays and speeches); *Art, Artists and the Flowering of Pan-Africana Liberated Zones* (monograph); *My Mother's Poem and Other Songs* (poetry); *The Long Illness of Ex-Chief Kiti* (play); *Visions of Africa* (literary criticism), *African Orature and Human Rights* (monograph); *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* (co-authored with Ngugi), among other works.

Mugo is the recipient of numerous honors such as the Distinguished Mwalimu Julius Nyerere Award from the University of Dar es Salaam. She was awarded the Elder of the Burning Spear Award at the Kenya 50th jubilee in December 2013; and in November 2002, The East African Standard Century listed her among "The Top 100: They Influenced Kenya Most During the 20th Century."

Mugo is a member of numerous organizations and serves on advisory/executive boards locally and internationally. A committed community activist, Micere is a passionate advocate for human rights. She describes her daughters, Mumbi and the late Njeri, as her best friends and indispensable comrades in the struggle for social justice.

### **Kenya's Road to Independence: The Mau Mau Freedom Fighters**

British colonial power established direct rule in the East Africa Protectorate in 1895. Kenya gained independence in 1963. From 1952 to 1960, British colonizers imposed a State of Emergency in Kenya in response to growing anti-colonial

activity. Their energies focused on the eradication of the Kenya Land and Freedom Army, (derogatorily named by the British as Mau Mau), a movement of dedicated revolutionary fighters against colonialism.

The Mau Mau guerilla struggle was a violent one dedicated to reclaiming the fertile "White" Highlands stolen by the British, where the indigenous Gikuyu people, the owners of the land, were forced to labor for British profit. The movement aimed to reclaim their land and assert independence from British rule. The Mau Mau put a high value on loyalty, inducting members into the movement through a secret oath ritual.

Colonial security forces sent captured Mau Mau to "re-education" camps where they endured brutal conditions, including physical and psychological torture. The British, who lost less than 100, killed over 11,000 Mau Mau with over 14,000 lives lost in total. The colonizers also used propaganda to demonize Mau Mau as terrorists, hence these freedom fighters were decried by Kenyans themselves especially the noncommissioned African officers known as the King's African Rifles (KAR) who served the British. The British colonial tactic of divide and rule effectively divided Kenyans who were loyal to the British crown from their kinsmen belonging to the Mau Mau.

**Dedan Kimathi** (1920-1957), belonging to the Gikuyu ethnic group, was one of the most influential and charismatic leaders of the revolutionary struggle for independence. Kimathi was well educated and spoke Gikuyu, Kiswahili, and English fluently. He taught at the Karunaini Independent School in Nyeri, before becoming a freedom fighter. His fellow soldiers gave Kimathi the titles of Field Marshal and Prime Minister. In 1955, during the State of Emergency, the British, recognizing his growing influence, offered a bounty for his capture. He was hunted down (October 1, 1956) by British officer Ian Henderson, followed by a "fake trial" where ironically, rather than accusing Kimathi of leading the armed revolution, he was charged with carrying a firearm. He was executed at Kamiti Maximum Security Prison, the same prison where Ngugi himself was held without charge decades later. Kimathi's legacy was obscured for years thanks to British propaganda (he was buried in an unmarked grave) until only recently when Kimathi has been honored as a significant architect of Kenya's independence struggle.

### **Summary of the Play**

*The Trial of Dedan Kimathi*, in three movements unfolds in a continuity that encapsulates the past, present, and future. The settings include a Courtroom, a street and Kimathi's jail cell in the present with flashbacks to the past. Although Kimathi is in a literal prison, for Ngugi and Mugo, all people living under oppression, or under neo-colonial leaders are equally incarcerated, mentally and psychologically.

The “trial” opens in the Courtroom with white Judge Henderson who also plays Prosecutor, the “friend/enemy of the African people.” The play portrays a cast of Kenyan revolutionaries—Kimathi, “a great man of courage, of commitment to his people” (Preface), a courageous Woman, “symbolic of all working mothers” with tenacious commitment to Kenya’s liberation, ordinary Kenyans, British and co-opted African soldiers, Generals and “hooded collaborators” who betray their own people to the British. A young Boy and Girl, deeply influenced by the Woman, represent the nation’s youth and its future.

Kimathi faces “four trials” in his cell, with visits from politicians and bankers – European, Asian, African – whose capitalist purpose overrides their race. The flashback to the forest portrays Kimathi facing crucial moral dilemmas. Despite the foregone conclusion of Kimathi’s execution, the play ends on a positive note of continuing struggle with ordinary “workers and peasants singing a thunderous freedom song.”

Along with drumming, freedom songs in Gikuyu and Kiswahili, dance/movement sequences depicting Black people’s history, this play presents a powerful theatrical experience for today’s audiences.

### **Kiswahili words/phrases in *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* (Translated in English)**

|                    |   |
|--------------------|---|
| Afande/fande/bwana | Boss/Master                                     |
| Askari             | African Soldier                                 |
| Hapana             | No  |
| Kabisa             | Absolutely                                      |
| Kondo              | A small basket made of sisal, a natural fiber   |
| Kulima             | Farming   |
| Kuja               | Come  |
| Kwenda             | Go [go away] (rough connotation)                |
| Matunda            | Fruit seller                                    |
| Mzungu             | Refers to any white person; or an outsider      |
| Ndio Afande!       | Yes, sir!                                       |
| Pasi               | Passbook?                                       |
| Pesi! (Or) Haraka  | Quickly!  |
| Posho              | A daily food ration, usually of corn meal.      |
| Shamba             | Plot, field, farmland                           |
| Sikia              | Listen! Do you understand!?! (Rude connotation) |
| Simama kabisa!     | Stand up straight!                              |
| Uhuru!             | Freedom!/Independence                           |

### **Glossary**

**Colour Bar:** Segregation on the basis of race

**Gikuyu:** An ethnic group in Southeast Africa, and the largest ethnic group in Kenya.

Gikuyu also refers to this group's spoken Bantu language. Gikuyu members were primary in Mau Mau along with other Kenyans.

**Iregi generation:** Ngugi recognizes this as a “generation of revolutionary rebels” from whom many Mau Mau fighters descended.

**Karunaini and Manyani:** Prison camps where Mau Mau were treated brutally.

**Koitalel:** Koitalel Arap Samoei (1860 –1905), a courageous Chief who led a ten-year guerilla rebellion against the British-led construction of the Uganda Railway. The British killed him in a trick encounter.

**Lenana, Wang’ombe, Karurui, Gakure, Njiri, Waruhiu, Luka, Kinyanjui, Mumia:**

African chiefs who collaborated with the British.

**Majimbo/ism:** Swahili for “regions.” This controversial concept refers to the delegation of power from the central government to the regions. In Kenya, it is believed that the term came from European settlers in the White Highlands, who wanted to maintain control through ethno-regional divisions among Kenyans in the classic British strategy of “divide and rule.”

**Operation Anvil:** A two-week roundup in Nairobi (1954) of 20,000 when suspected MauMau were taken to detention camps; 30,000 transported to reserve lands. Section 89 of Kenya’s Penal Code: Regarding firearm possession. The law applied only to Kenyans since Whites carried firearms freely including into the courtroom as the Settler does in *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi*.

**Stanley Mathenge:** (1919-unknown) One of three key Mau Mau leaders, with Kimathi, and General China, Waruhiu Itote (1922-1993) whose name refers to the 1949 Chinese Revolution. Mathenge supposedly fled to Ethiopia to get support for the armed struggle for independence in Kenya.

**Wanjiru:** A leading, historical, female Mau Mau fighter who worked with Kimathi in the forest. She was captured by Ian Henderson (noted in his book) but remained strong-willed under pressure. Ngugi tells us that it is useful to “read through the silences of what Henderson writes” in order to extract historical information from his biased account.

Ketu H. Katrak, *Dramaturg*

Sonia Desai, Allison Rotstein, *Assistant Dramaturgs*

*Thanks to Ngugi wa Tihong’o and Njeeri wa Ngugi for assisting with pronunciation of the Ki-Swahili and Gikuyu languages.*

*For the complete Dramaturgical Notes please visit <http://drama.arts.uci.edu/onstage.html>*