

## 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 . . . Our historians, our political scientists, and even some of our literary figures were trying to document the same colonial myths [about] Kenyan people . . . 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* (Nairobi: East African Educational Publishers,  
2006, first pub. 1976, Repub. 2006)

*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 our Southern California communities, and indeed wherever, in the US or globally, injustice prevails, wherever ordinary people are oppressed under poverty, under racial, gender, and other dominations.

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 negative myths about Kimathi propagated by the British.

Kimathi was the leader of the armed guerilla struggle of peasants and workers, called the Kenya Land and Freedom Army, an organized, disciplined force, mainly peasants of the Gikuyu group and others in Kenya. Their goals, under leaders such as Jomo Kenyatta (the first President of free Kenya, 1964-1978), and Dedan Kimathi, the protagonist of *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* were to reclaim their stolen land and eliminate the colonial yoke.

The British misnamed this freedom struggle as "Mau Mau", sounding like mumbo jumbo driven by disorganized peasants on killing sprees. The British despised Kimathi and his guerilla tactics, and to root out the Mau Mau and their leaders, the colonizers imposed a State of Emergency (1952-1960)—a dark period of colonial brutality.

*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 draw evocative connections among freedom fighters in different struggles--Civil Rights battle in the US, other justice campaigns in the Middle East, Asia, Africa and the black diaspora in the Caribbean and in South America.

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, essayist, playwright, journalist, and editor, academic and social activist. Ngugi attended the Makerere University College (a part of London University), in Kampala, Uganda, and the University of Leeds, Britain. To date, Ngugi has received nine Honorary Doctorates.

Ngugi's creativity spans many genres-- novels such as *Petals of Blood*, *Weep Not Child*, *Devil on the Cross*, *A Grain of Wheat* and his latest, *Wizard of the Crow*, among others. His plays include *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* (with Micere Githae Mugo), and *I Will Marry When I Want* (with Ngugi wa Mirii). Ngugi's theoretical works include the highly influential volume of essays entitled, *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature*. He is a prolific essayist in volumes such as *Globalectics*, *Writers in Politics*, *Penpoints*, *Gunpoints and Dreams*, among others. His memoirs include *Dreams in a Time of War*, and *In the House of the Interpreter*.

Ngugi's work in community-based theater at the Kamiirithu Educational and Cultural Center, including the creation of *I Will Marry When I Want* with peasants and workers was so threatening to the post-colonial Kenyan regime that he was incarcerated 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. His novels were confiscated by undercover police in Kenya from all bookstores and banned from all Kenyan educational institutions. In exile, Ngugi worked with the London based Committee for the Release of Political Prisoners in Kenya, (1982-1998), which championed the cause of democratic and human rights in Kenya. He 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 Mũgo** a Kenyan by birth is a poet, playwright, literary critic and Professor in the Department of African American Studies at Syracuse University.

Mugo has published 6 books, 8 co-edited supplementary school readers, and 3 monographs and edited the journal, *Third World in Perspective*. Her works include: *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); *Daughter of My People, Sing!* (poetry); *Visions of Africa* (literary criticism), *African Orature and Human Rights* (monograph); *Gikũyũ, Shona and Ndebele Ethics and Aesthetics* (monograph); *Mũthoni wa Kĩrĩma, Mau Mau Woman Field Marshal: Interrogating Silencing, Erasure and Manipulation of Female Combatants' Texts* (monograph) and *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* (play, co-authored with Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o).

Mugo is the recipient of numerous honors--Distinguished Mwalimu Julius Nyerere Award from the University of Dar es Salaam; College of Arts and Sciences Award for Excellence in Master Level Teaching and Distinguished Africanist Award from the New York African Studies Association for her contribution to scholarship. At the Kenya 50<sup>th</sup> jubilee in December 2013, she was awarded the Elder of the Burning Spear Award, and in November 2002, The East African Standard Century listed her among "The Top 100: They Influenced Kenya Most During the 20<sup>th</sup> 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 especially as they have been historically denied to marginalized groups. She describes her daughters, Mũmbi 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**

In October 1952, British colonizers called for 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 who paved the road significantly to Kenyan independence from the chains of colonialism.

The Mau Mau guerilla struggle was a violent one dedicated to reclaiming the fertile Highlands taken 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, pledging allegiance to the cause and vowing to carry out tasks without question.

Colonial security forces killed over 11,000 Mau Mau with over 14,000 lives lost in total. The British, whose death toll was less than 100, used propaganda to criminalize the Mau Mau, labeling them as terrorists and a threat to the Kenyan people. Such demonization led to opposition to the Mau Mau even from fellow Kenyans, such as those in the King's African Rifles (KAR), a group of noncommissioned African officers in service to 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, legendary leader of the guerilla movement, was a pillar of strength, unity and courage in his defiance of the British. Despite the State of Emergency, Kimathi and his fighters continued their armed fight from the forests, where members were in constant danger of capture by the British and KAR. Upon capture, many were tried in court and sent to "re-education" camps where they endured brutal conditions, including physical and psychological torture. With Kimathi's capture in the Nyeri forest by British officer Ian Henderson on October 21, 1956, the movement began to decline, disbanding in 1960 when the State of Emergency was lifted. In 1963, political leaders of Kenya's Republic at first largely

ignored the Mau Mau survivors as a driving force behind independence. Since then, however, the Mau Mau has been recognized for its pivotal role in the anti-colonial fight. *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* celebrates these brave forest fighters, portraying their legacy through Dedan Kimathi's fierce leadership and the Kenyan people's unbreakable spirit.

## A Brief Timeline

1895:	British colonial power establishes direct rule in East Africa Protectorate
1895:	30,000 workers from British colonial India brought to Kenya for railway construction
1920:	British settlers appropriate the Highlands naming them, "White" Highlands
Oct. 1952:	British impose State of Emergency; height of Mau Mau struggle
Oct. 21, 1956:	Kimathi captured; Mau Mau movement begins to decline
Feb. 18, 1957:	Kimathi executed
Jan. 1960:	British lift State of Emergency
Dec. 12, 1963:	Kenya gains independence from British rule

**DEDAN KIMATHI** (b. Oct. 31, 1920-executed, Feb. 18, 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 joining the Kenyan Land and Freedom Army, misnamed Mau Mau by the British. His freedom fighters gave Kimathi the titles of Field Marshal and Prime Minister. In 1955, the British Colonial government, recognizing his growing influence, offered a bounty for his capture. He was hunted down, 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 co-author Ngugi wa Thiong'o was held without charge decades later. British propaganda obscured Kimathi's legacy for years (he was buried in an unmarked grave) until only recently when Kimathi has been honored as a pivotal freedom fighter in 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 "flow(ing) into one another." The settings include a Courtroom, a street (visible from the Courtroom), 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 oppressive colonial rulers or under neo-colonial leaders in post-independence times, 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." Kimathi "remains silent, defiant" as the Judge reads out his "crime." The scene demonstrates a distinct racial division of whites seated comfortably and "Africans squeezed on rough benches." By the play's end, there is a distinct shift in the courtroom of some Black African collaborators joining the whites.

The play portrays a cast of Kenyan revolutionaries--Dedan 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. The cast also includes 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 bankers--European, Asian, African--their capitalist purpose overrides their race. Other visitors include a generic Priest, and Politician. All spout platitudes about "progress, development, and investments" while the immediate issues of restoring land and livelihood to ordinary Kenyans is hardly mentioned.

The final "Third Movement" goes into a flashback--Kimathi recalls a meeting in the forest when he faces the moral dilemma of dealing with his own brother, a collaborator with the colonizer. Despite the foregone conclusion of Kimathi's execution by the British, the play ends on a positive note of hope and continuing struggle with ordinary "workers and peasants" who invade the stage "at the center of which are Boy and Girl, singing a thunderous freedom song."

Along with drumming, freedom songs in Gikuyu and dance/movement sequences depicting Black people's history, this play presents a powerful theatrical experience for today's audiences. The play is as much about Kimathi as it is about heroic and ordinary black people in Kenya and elsewhere in the black diaspora, resisting oppression and injustice with indomitable spirit.

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

Afande/fande	Boss/Master
Ahsonde soona	Thank you (spoken incorrectly to make fun)
Askari	African Soldier
Ati pasi?	My passbook?
Bwana:	Boss (for any white person)
Fungua	Open
Hapana	No
Kabisa	Absolutely
Kangari, karuba, busaa, chang'aa	Names of illegal liquor (bootleg)
Kazi yako?	[What is] your work?
Kondo	A small basket made of sisal, a natural fiber
Kulima	Farming
Kuja	Come
Kwenda	Go [go away] (rough connotation)
Laini	Line up
Lazima	Must/necessary
Leta karatasi yako	Show your papers
Matunda	Fruit seller
Mimi?	Me?
Mzungu	Refers to any white person; or an outsider
Ndio Afande!	Yes, sir!
Ngai!	God! (name of a Gikuyu god)
Ngoja!	Wait!
Pesi! (Or) Haraka	Quickly!
Posho:	A daily food ration, usually of corn meal.
Rudia	Repeat!
Saidia maskini, sah	Help the poor, sir (a beggar's call)
Sema Afande.	Say, Master
Shamba	Plot, field, farmland
Shenzi	Barbaric/savage
Sikia	Listen! Do you understand!?! (Rude connotation)
Simama kabisa!	Stand up straight!
Simama nyinyi!	You, stand!
Sina	I don't have (my papers)
Tayari Bwana!	Ready master!
Toa! Toa! Weka chini, upesi!	Take it out! Put it down quickly!
Uhuru!	Freedom!/Independence!
Unafanya kazi wapi?	What is your work?
Uuu—u! Nduri ici ni kii giki?	Profanity.... what is this!?! (Gikuyu language)
Wapi passbook?	Where is your passbook?
Wewe Na shati nyekundu	You in the red shirt
Wote	All/everyone

Ketu H. Katrak, Dramaturg.  
Sonia Desai, Allison Rotstein, Assistant Dramaturgs

## Glossary

Central Province: One of Kenya's eight former provinces, in Central Kenya, with capital Nyeri, home to Kenya's Gikuyu ethnic group to whom Kimathi and many Mau Mau freedom fighters belonged.

Colour Bar: Segregation on the basis of race

Coolies: Unskilled manual laborers of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, mainly from South and Southeast Asia used by the British to build the railway connecting Kenya to Uganda.

George Medal: A British civil award for recognition of bravery or merit, established in 1940 by King George VI of Great Britain and Northern Ireland (1936-1952).

Gikuyu: An ethnic group in Southeast Africa, and the largest ethnic group in Kenya. Gikuyu also refers to this group's spoken Bantu language. The Mau Mau were made up of primarily Gikuyu members.

Gymkhana: British club in colonial territories

Iregi generation: Ngugi recognizes this as a "generation of revolutionary rebels" from whom the Mau Mau fighters descended.

K.A.R. Soldiers: King's African Rifles was a British colonial regiment of African soldiers in East Africa (1902 to mid 1960s). These African soldiers worked for the British, even against the Kenyan people. Some K.A.R. Soldiers fought with the British in the World Wars.

Karunaini and Manyani: Prison camps where Mau Mau 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,' the controversial term 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."

Mathare Valley: Part of a slum in the Nairobi area and one of the poorest areas in Kenya today

Molotov cocktails: a bottle based grenade or firebomb

Oathing centers: Secret locations where Mau Mau members were sworn into the movement

Olkalau: The capital of Nyandarua County in Kenya's former Central Province, part of the White Highlands. Known as a part of Happy Valley where Europeans enjoyed extravagant lifestyles.

Operation Anvil: A two-week roundup in Nairobi (1954) of 20,000 suspected Mau Mau 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.

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