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# Mukami Kimathi and the Scramble to Own Mau Mau Memory

By Lotte Hughes



May the scramble for memorialisation commence. The body of Dedan Kimathi's widow was barely in the ground before the wannabe Mau Maus began using her to score cheap political points. The line between "rebel" and "loyalist" is blurred once again, as it was during and after the liberation struggle. Just as hotly contested is the struggle for control of Mau Mau memory and memorialisation. Who owns Kimathi? Who owns Mukami? The usual suspects, most of whom had nothing to do with Mau Mau, came running to stake their claim.

Kenyan politicians love a good death—captive audience, media spotlight, the chance to dress up, and a feast to follow. Predictably, they made a meal out of this one.

Attempts to control the narrative kicked off at the burial, and in tributes reported in the media. Raila Odinga and William Ruto went head to head, the president [declaring](#): "Mama Mukami Kimathi courageously withstood the brutality of colonial oppression, proudly wore the scars of battle, and bore the terrible losses of war with admirable fortitude." Whether she actually took part in physical combat, as this implies, is neither here nor there.

Fans of Raila took to Twitter to claim that he had taken better care of Mukami and her family than his political opponents had. "Baba used to look out for the late Field Marshall Mukami Kimathi. "Hao

*wengine ambao wanajiita* [those others who call themselves] ‘sons of Mau Mau’ never met Mukami until she passed away.” Other tweeps spoke of a “showdown” between former Mungiki leader Maina Njenga and Vice President Rigathi Gachagua at the burial. “Who is the true son of Mau Mau between Maina Njenga and Riggy G?”. One young woman scathingly noted: “There is nothing Mau Mauish about Mukami Kimathi’s burial. That MC was the worst very sad. Watoto wa home guards have hijacked the burial.”

This story isn’t really about Mukami as a person or as an activist. It doesn’t need to be. It discusses what has been projected onto her, and will continue to be projected onto her and Kimathi, in the slippery process of memorialising Mau Mau (more properly, the Land and Freedom Army; its members never called it Mau Mau). It also draws some parallels between Mukami and Winnie Mandela.

As Julie MacArthur [wrote](#) in the introduction to her edited volume *Dedan Kimathi on Trial*, “Kimathi’s legacy was never a simple exemplar of patriotic martyrdom, and his place in the postcolonial imagination reflected the complicated legacy of the Mau Mau rebellion: at times suppressed or downplayed, at others lauded and filled with mythic importance, but always contested.” This landmark 2017 book ran five “critical essays” by scholars—alongside a transcript of Kimathi’s trial—from primary documents which MacArthur had discovered. It was an exciting find of archival papers everyone had “long thought lost, hidden or destroyed”. She described how, when Nelson Mandela visited Kenya for the first time, in July 1990, he was surprised to find that Eloise Mukami (as MacArthur calls her) had not been invited to the festivities, and “lamented” her absence. He also queried the absence of a proper grave for Kimathi, and said he would have liked to have paid his respects there, as one freedom fighter to another. The face of then President Moi, as he listened to this homage, was reportedly stony. At that time, Kimathi was not considered the right kind of hero. Mandela had publicly embarrassed him.

## **Winnie and Mukami**

It is fitting that we refer to Mandela here, since there are some interesting parallels to be drawn between Winnie and Mukami. Both were iconic as the wives of famous freedom fighters, though Winnie differed from Mukami in being a huge political figure in her own right. Both led underground networks, of ANC activists in Winnie’s case, and (if reports are correct) of Mau Mau fighters and supporters in Mukami’s case. The two couples both spent more time apart than they did together, exchanging precious letters. “He talked with letters,” Mukami told interviewer Wambui Kamiru; they used a secret code. The Mandelas, too, relied on letters, albeit heavily censored ones. It can also be argued that Winnie suffered more on the outside, during her husband’s 27-year incarceration, than he did on the inside. She was constantly hounded, held under house arrest, vilified and spied upon. In May 1969 she was arrested and jailed for 491 days, 400 of them in solitary confinement. In his new [biography](#) *Winnie and Nelson: Portrait of a Marriage* Jonny Steinberg writes that by the mid-1960s “the security police expended astonishing energy to render her life unlivable”. This included hounding those close to her; for example, her brother Msuthu was arrested and jailed for vagrancy. Then, when it became known that Winnie had taken other lovers, even before Nelson was imprisoned on Robben Island, she was vilified as a cheating wife. A man in the same circumstances would have escaped blame. If anything, it would have enhanced his reputation. (Kimathi reportedly had many lovers in the forest, while banning his fighters from cohabitation outside marriage.)

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To my knowledge Mukami was never accused of being unfaithful (is that even possible for a widow?) but some of this also applies to her. She suffered for decades after Dedan was executed, living in poverty and struggling to bring up four children alone (some reports say ten). Wambui Kamiru (widow of the late Safaricom CEO Bob Collymore) refers to “the cost she paid for freedom” in her unpublished Master’s thesis “Memorialising the Kimathi Family”, based largely on informal interviews with Mukami at her home in South Kinangop. (My thanks to Wambui for sharing a copy of this long ago.) Mukami’s biographer, [Wairimu Nderitu](#), has also described her struggles and incarceration, ultimately in Kamiti Prison.

However, accounts of Mukami’s time in the forest do not add up. While some writers including Nderitu claim that she spent years in the forest, led a platoon and was quarter-master of a fighters’ camp, other accounts contradict this. Writes Kamiru: “Although Mukami had initially followed Kimathi into the forest in 1952, when their eldest son Waciuri became a toddler, Kimathi asked her to leave the forest so that the child and the family to come would be raised outside of war.” Which is it? In the weeks and months to come, we can expect more “active forest fighter” tributes to Mukami. Her story is already becoming embellished.

### **Why Mau Mau memorialisation is still contested**

It shouldn’t be necessary to repeat this, 60 years after independence. Mau Mau was not a unifying movement. It remains an open wound on Kenya’s body politic. Its sheer ambiguity makes it so, and no single figure was more ambiguous than Kimathi. Kenyan scholar Simon Gikandi, writing in the MacArthur collection of essays cited earlier, calls him “neither the demonic figure of colonial discourse, nor the heroic subject of radical nationalism, but what the anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss famously called a ‘floating signifier’, a term intended ‘to represent an undetermined quantity of signification’, but is in ‘itself void of meaning and thus apt to receive any meaning’. Kimathi is a signifier with a value, but what this value represents is variable and open to multiple interpretations”. In other words, anyone can project onto him whatever they wish. He represents whatever they want him to. Now people will do the same, to a much lesser extent, with Mukami.

Another problem is this. Millions of Kenyans have forebears who were what I call neither-nors - neither Mau Mau nor so-called loyalists. Many may have moved up and down a spectrum that had Mau Mau and loyalists at each extreme, ducking and diving when necessary. Naturally, many of their descendants don’t want to be reminded of this; it’s all too painful. Historian Daniel Branch has described the complex blurring of allegiances in [Defeating Mau Mau, Creating Kenya](#). He notes, for example: “In late 1952 and through much of 1953, Home Guards repeatedly assisted Mau Mau units”. As in any civil conflict (and yes this became one, despite what the naysayers claim), some people play a double game in order to survive. They may also, as Branch describes, join a particular side not for ideological reasons but in order to settle private scores. As he put it, “The violence of the conflict became privatised as individuals assumed the labels of Mau Mau or loyalist to pursue rivals who had declared for the other group.”

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Why do I refer to naysayers? Because the struggle within a struggle (including that between Kimathi and his own fighters, some of whom turned against him) is dismissed by some as yet another colonial invention. All this messy complexity is now brushed aside, in an effort to present a seamless metanarrative of freedom struggle—not least by the state.

Moreover, the entire population of “peasants” did not rise up and join Mau Mau, despite Ngugi’s best attempts to claim that they did. (Calling them peasants is a tad derogatory, isn’t it? Pastoralists, for one, are not peasants, but they too revolted against the colonial state at various times. And Kimathi had been a teacher, not a peasant.) If some readers are harrumphing as they read this, and want to accuse me of heresy, that proves my point: Mau Mau is still utterly divisive, but critique is healthy and necessary, in this or any other discussion of the past. The critical essays in MacArthur’s volume, written by eminent Kenyan and British scholars with a Foreword by Ngugi and Micere Githae Mugo, attest to that. Many other Kenyan scholars have previously written critically about Mau Mau, notably E.S. Atieno Odhiambo, Bethwell Ogot and others in [Mau Mau and Nationhood](#). Ogot has argued that the narrow focus on Mau Mau as the sole actors in the independence struggle obscures the role that others (such as trade unionists, intellectuals) played in achieving the goal of *uhuru*. He wrote of how “the heroes and heroines are identified with the forest fighters in the 1950s, and the rest of our freedom fighters are supposed to suffer a second death like Fanon”. The anticolonial movement, he argues, was much larger than that. Most scholars would agree: the uncomfortable fact is that Mau Mau failed militarily, and may even have delayed independence.

Let’s take the contradictions and anomalies that swirl around Jomo Kenyatta. He is hailed as the founding “father of the nation”, while Mau Mau is simultaneously seen as the foundation story. Yet there is no evidence that Jomo was ever in Mau Mau. How can these two opposites be reconciled? Though he swung between denouncing Mau Mau and occasionally embracing it, Jomo declared it to be “a disease which had been eradicated, and must never be remembered again” (speech at Githunguri, September 1962, just after he was released from detention). Scholar Marshall Clough has said of this: “Kenyatta’s use of criminal analogies and disease metaphors directly recalled the British discourse on Mau Mau, and suggested not only a political repudiation of the movement but a certain degree of personal distaste.” (I quote from his chapter in *Mau Mau and Nationhood*.) As I have previously written in the MacArthur volume, “On coming to power, Jomo Kenyatta ushered in a period of orchestrated amnesia about Mau Mau, which served his political purposes.” Those purposes included the urgent need to unify a divided post-conflict nation. They included the need to obscure his own role (or lack of it) in the freedom struggle, at least that part of it involving actual physical combat. He also wanted to fend off what he saw as veterans’ unrealistic demands for compensation, free land and jobs, and possibly to avoid the expense of erecting memorials to liberation heroes. That only started once Mwai Kibaki came to power and embarked on a mausoleum-building spree.

Let me quote from the horse’s mouth. My late informant Paul Thuku Njembui was a war veteran with the best of credentials—he claimed to have sheltered Kimathi in his home for a while. He spent seven years in British detention camps, where he learned some English. In conversation with me (we spent many hours talking at his home in Karima Forest near Nyeri; funnily enough Wambui Kamiru was briefly my research assistant), he was adamant that Jomo was never in Mau Mau. “Kenyatta was not a Mau Mau,” he told me. “Who could have become the first president of Kenya? Is it Kenyatta or Kimathi? Kimathi continued fighting for freedom up to the end of his life, but Kenyatta surrendered, he betrayed his people ... Mau Mau fought for land and freedom, but it is the children of the loyalists who got the land. The truth only comes from us [veterans], other sources may not have been accurate.”

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It is a refrain often heard from veterans, both living and dead. It belies the Jomo-led official mantra

“We all fought for freedom”; that is, all communities, not just Gikuyu and the few members of other ethnic groups who joined Mau Mau. Thuku also believed that Kenyatta told the British to execute Kimathi: “He was there to say [to the British]: ‘Kill Kimathi! Let him die!’ Because he knew that he would [otherwise] have no chance of being president.”

That was obviously a myth, but it served a purpose in Thuku’s mind: it made sense of the past. His past. Myth forms an important part of what scholars call regimes of memory, which simultaneously feature “forgetting”, myth, occlusion, absences, contradictions, and often a surfeit of memory. Memory can be both individual and collective. It is vulnerable to manipulation and appropriation, as French historian Pierre Nora famously wrote, particularly where the construction and reconstruction of nationhood and national history are concerned. His description of memory as “susceptible to being long dormant and periodically revived” applies to Mau Mau memory, as Clough has previously pointed out. Equally, it also applies to its memorialisation, which has taken on a life of its own.

This is where it gets doubly tricky: when the government of the day uses select narratives to construct the official “story of the nation”. Nowhere is the struggle to produce a coherent story of Kenya, most particularly the story of Mau Mau, more apparent than in the permanent history exhibition at Nairobi National Museum, which opened in 2010. (See my chapter on “The Production and Transmission of National History” in Annie E. Coombes, Lotte Hughes and Karega-Munene, [\*Managing Heritage, Making Peace. History, Identity and Memory in Contemporary Kenya\*](#).) In the “Armed Struggle” room, Kenyatta’s role in the fight for independence is fudged. When I last visited some years ago, I asked a guide what connection, if any, there was between Kenyatta and Mau Mau, since this was not at all clear from the display. “He led Mau Mau but he pretended that he did not” came the reply. Oddly, his photograph was not included in a display showing three of the Kapenguria Six, who were jailed with Kenyatta. The caption read: “The militant leaders of the Mau Mau movement” rather than members of the militant wing of the Kenya African Union (KAU). Other questionable features of the exhibition included displays presenting “collaborators” and “resisters” as binary opposites, and a video showing interviews with Mau Mau veterans, who all happened to be Gikuyu—thereby contradicting the line that Mau Mau was multi-ethnic. These displays may have changed since I was there.

And so we have returned, with the burial of Mukami, to the idea that “We all fought for freedom”. This is not said in so many words, but it is implied, and is being relayed once again as a unifying message from a new president to a divided nation.

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