

BOOK REVIEW

Julie MacArthur, ed. *Dedan Kimathi on Trial: Colonial and Popular Memory in Kenya's Mau Mau Rebellion*. Athens: Ohio University Press, 2017. xxvi + 406 pp. Bibliography. Index. Paper. ISBN: 978-0896-803176

Dedan Kimathi on Trial demonstrates the extent to which the Mau Mau uprising remains an imposing scholarly theme in Kenyan, African, and, one can argue, global history. Of all prominent Mau Mau leaders, none has generated as much attention or proved as enigmatic as Dedan Kimathi. As the book demonstrates, this was true among Kimathi's colonial nemeses, both British and the Kikuyu—his clansmen—and to his apologists or followers in the postcolonial state. Edited by Julie MacArthur, this book is centered on this historical figure, focusing on the proceedings of the controversial Nyeri trial of 1956 by the British colonial administration that condemned Kimathi to the gallows.

This book is the most recent of studies that deal with imperial justice (Martin J. Weiner 2008), most notably those focusing on colonial Kenya (David Anderson 2005; Caroline Elkins 2005). Indeed, like the foregoing studies by Anderson and Elkins, *Dedan Kimathi on Trial* was prompted by the “recovery” of the missing Kimathi trial file and fits the category of “colonial cover-ups” histories (1, 4). The academic value of the book lies in its central subject, Kimathi, especially in the enigma of the individual generated by the complexities of his involvement with Mau Mau and its forest fighters and the perception of and response to those fighters by the British colonial state and its Kikuyu faithful. That value is reinforced by recent trends of renewed nationalism in Kenya, stoked by what MacArthur refers to as renewed memorialization of Mau Mau centered on Kimathi (4).

Micere Githae Mugo and Ngugi Wa Thiong'o provide an apt foreword to the book, a fitting contribution from two preeminent African playwrights who also provided the earliest critical analysis of Dedan Kimathi's role in the nationalism and decolonization of Kenya in their celebrated play, *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* (1976). Both scholars perceive *Dedan Kimathi on Trial* as a re-affirmation of the unmerited colonial demonization of Kimathi and the Kenya Land and Freedom Army that he led in the Mau and Aberdare Forests. For them, Kimathi's trial was a farce, a practice in “colonialist and imperialist injustice” (xiii). Kimathi's refusal to cooperate with his colonial

interrogators was a compelling moment in the history of resistance against colonial injustice.

Mugo and Thiong'o's emphasis on the shortcomings of colonial justice for its discrepancies, contradictions, and fallacies provides the thread for analysis of a number of the book's subsequent chapters. Kimathi, and to an extent Mau Mau, remains a constant in the critical analysis that defines those chapters. A very lengthy section—half of the volume—containing primary sources precedes the five chapters that comprise the book. These documents relate to Kimathi's "recovered" original trial transcript, exhibits to the trial, and letters by Kimathi to the colonial administration, to its agents, and to the public. These documents offer insight into the person of Kimathi, his political and social thought, and his vision for a postcolonial Kenya.

David M. Anderson's chapter maintains that Kimathi's trial illustrates the flawed nature of the imperial legal structure. Anderson uses detailed factual evidence from the historic trial to demonstrate the political stakes of the case in late colonial Kenya. He focuses on the nature and composition of the Special Emergency Assize court system under which Kimathi was tried to illustrate the double standards in trying imperial subjects: under this system, British legal officials sought to adhere "rigorously to the rules of the court" while denying the defendant a political platform that would turn him into a political martyr (234). Furthermore, jurors in the case, operating under the Emergency Powers regulations, had a premeditated verdict for Kimathi—execution. Yet by taking this approach to the trial, the colonial administration raised Kimathi's profile, guaranteeing his legacy as a hero and a martyr (253).

The concept of "moral economy" has been the focus of John M. Lonsdale's numerous studies on the Kikuyu and the outcome of their intersection with colonialism. Lonsdale meticulously applies this concept to the analysis in his chapter, in which he perceives Kimathi's defense as offering us an insight into a deeply polarized Kikuyu community. This splintering dates back to the early years of colonialism and played out vividly during Mau Mau and the backlash created by British counterinsurgency. At the center of this divide, and indeed, Kimathi's trial, were vexing questions about strategy and authority—thus, the means or channels of engaging the adversary (the colonial state), and the leadership for doing so. Kimathi's trial reveals how these two issues survived over decades of colonial rule, infiltrated and split Mau Mau, with Kimathi playing a central role. For Lonsdale, this divide is evidence of the persistence and importance of "strategic debates" with the larger Kikuyu community, which should be understood within the "moral economy" of colonial relations (261).

Nicholas K. Githuku's chapter reinforces the role played by Mau Mau and by Kimathi in that rebellion in sustaining the uneasy relationship between Britain and Kenya. He contends that this uneasiness has been apparent in recent scholarly works that have confirmed the extremes of British counterinsurgency against the Mau Mau in the 1950s and by renewed

nationalistic demands in Kenya in the early 2000s for the memorialization of Dedan Kimathi through a statue. Githuku uses a Foucauldian analysis to portray for the reader the “true” Kimathi: a “resistant subject” who was afforded a “privileged identity” by the 1950s crisis, a political actor vested with power relations that he used to mobilize an anti-colonial resistance (286–87). Those presiding over Kimathi’s trial failed to recognize this truth, leading Githuku to conclude that Kimathi’s acquittal was therefore “completely inconceivable.” This conclusion, then, reaffirms that of Anderson regarding the prejudices and farcical nature of imperial justice in the latter years of Empire.

Simon Gikandi makes a number of key observations in his chapter. One of these is that a sense of irony emerges from efforts by the first postcolonial government to erase the anti-colonial past, particularly Mau Mau legacies, from national memory in a bid to rewrite the anti-colonial narrative. For instance, Gikandi shows the vainness of Kenyatta’s refrain of “forgive and forget,” which was aimed at silencing the disaffected voices of Mau Mau veterans in the early days of independence, in the pursuit of national reconciliation and state building by the Kenyatta regime. Efforts at silencing the anti-colonial movement were, and have continued to be, rendered futile by widespread memorialization of Kimathi in Nairobi’s urban spaces and in the rural landscapes of Central Kenya, Kimathi’s ancestral home (317). Yet the importance of Gikandi’s chapter lies not in highlighting this irony, but in demonstrating the difficulty that has existed among historians and literary scholars in understanding Kimathi the historical figure. Thus, Kimathi cannot merely be reduced to a victim presented by colonial discourse, or a hero promoted by radical nationalism purports, but rather a persona that is open to multiple interpretations. As a way out of this dilemma, he suggests the need to perceive Kimathi as a “floating signifier”—after Claude Lévi-Strauss—thus, as an individual whose value “floats” between “the archival and the imaginative.” In between these two extremes exists the possibility for understanding the value that Kimathi lends to debates about colonial and postcolonial Kenya relating to history and memory (317–18). Indeed, his search between these two extremes allows Gikandi to depict the multiple versions of Kimathi existing in the eyes of those who interacted with him or have written about him: Kimathi as illegitimate, deviant, an avatar of the nationalist, traditionalist, and even Christian. Gikandi concludes by delving into alternative histories: How would Kimathi tell his story? Would such a story complicate or simplify our understanding of his life? He surmises that Kimathi’s own story would reinforce if not confirm the representation of his life in the established genre of Mau Mau memoirs: as one whom colonial excesses pushed to assume a responsibility for mobilizing collective action at a critical period of transition in colonial Kenya (321).

In the last chapter, Lotte Hughes reflects on the stark contradictions that exist between the heroic, non-compromising, “no surrender” images of Kimathi that emerge from pictures or descriptions before his capture, and those that emerge from the defense at his trial, containing confessions

of surrender and negotiation with his colonial tormentors. What are his faithful in the postcolonial state, particularly those who memorialize him in popular performance in the visual arts—hip-hop musicians and graffiti artists—to make of the seemingly subdued nature that emerges from his capture and is revealed by the “recovered” trial transcript? Hughes agrees that it is premature to project any “devastating revelations” that Kimathi’s fallibility might have for those who idolize him in popular spaces (339–40). This leads her to focus more on Kimathi’s legacies in popular memorialization in contemporary Kenya, especially on the production of memory practices centered on Mau Mau. With specific details, she argues that memory about Mau Mau has since independence been manipulated by political leaders as “official edits” and by different groups in the public arena to press for political recognition, compensation, and access to the fruits of independence (354). Consequently, national and local debates and demands have all contributed to efforts to rehabilitate Mau Mau’s past into Kenya’s “heritage spaces” in Nairobi and rural Central Kenya.

Dedan Kimathi on Trial is a rich addition to Mau Mau studies in general and to works relating to Empire and justice in particular. Its innovative contribution lies in its ability to use a popular historical figure to revisit and freshly narrate the entangled history produced by the complexities of the late colonial state in the 1950s. Telling that story from the standpoint of contemporary popular memory, and how that memory taps into a contested past, adds value to the book. The volume is a reminder that the uprising that shaped the way we view the end of the British Empire, and one that continues to define Kenya’s postcolonial state, still offers opportunities for ongoing research.

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For more reading on this subject, see:

- Luongo, Katherine. 2006. “If You Can’t Beat Them, Join Them: Government Cleansings of Witches and Mau Mau in 1950s Kenya.” *History in Africa* 33: 451–71. doi:10.1353/hia.2006.0017.
- Peck, RaShelle R. 2018. “Love, Struggle, and Compromises: The Political Seriousness of Nairobi Underground Hip Hop.” *African Studies Review* 61 (2): 111–33. doi:10.1017/asr.2017.143.