

Field Marshal Muthoni-Kirima

WARRIOR WOMAN

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The Mau Mau movement, or Land Freedom Army, operated both covertly, in urban and white-settled areas, and overtly, in the countryside and on the margins of colonial society. The movement, which is most closely associated with the "KEM" communities—Kikuyu (Gikuyu)–Embu–Meru—had roots in established organizations, the Kikuyu Central Association and the East African Trades Union Congress. It had been growing clandestinely for several years before 1952, when the British government in Kenya declared a state of emergency and arrested Jomo Kenyatta and other resistance leaders. The movement's ideology and strategy continues to be a subject of historical debate. Isolated groups often became fragmented through casualties; contacts with other fighters carried risks of betrayal; and the central task force providing supplies and information was increasingly hampered by the close scrutiny of the British government.

Muthoni-Kirima joined the Mau-Mau as a married woman. Though her parents worked on a European farm, after her marriage she moved to a village in the "reserve," the land set aside for Africans, close to Nyeri. Most women involved in liberation movements worked as carriers of information and supplies, as Muthoni herself did to begin with. However, she became one of the few women to claim active work as a fighter.

Muthoni describes much movement on foot, from Nyeri to the Aberdares, Thika (Chania), and Gilgil. Traveling was dangerous work, and individuals needed to be able to cover their tracks. It would have been highly unusual for fighters to move in a group of twenty, as in the plan Muthoni describes to obtain arms from Ethiopia.

Mau Mau leader Dedan Kimathi, who plays a central role in Muthoni's narrative, was captured and executed in 1956, a decisive step in the British progress toward winning the battle and losing the war. Muthoni asserts that her group learned of the release of Kenyatta and of forthcoming independence by observing changes in civilian behavior. Possibly these freedom fighters were so isolated that they had to fill in gaps of knowledge by conjecture or accept unreliable information. Muthoni joined other Mau Mau who laid down their weapons at the ceremony marking Kenya's full independence, at Ruringu Stadium in December 1963. After this point, her story clearly expresses the feelings of many of the thousands of freedom fighters who either surrendered their arms or were released from the brutal detention centers where they were kept between 1956 and 1963. Muthoni gives poignant voice to the disillusion they suffered because they were offered little recognition or reward by independent Kenya. The old landscape of scattered homesteads was never re-created, and in most cases the title-deeds issued while many claimants were shut away in detention camps were not reviewed. Muthoni was given permission to collect and sell "wild" ivory, until the trade was banned in 1976. She was nominated as councillor to Nyeri County Council in 1990.

Marjorie Oludhe Macgoye and Naomi L. Sbitemi



I grew up on a colonialist's farm. That is one of the reasons why I developed the need to fight for independence. My parents used to tell us that these people were foreigners and that was why they made us work like slaves.

I took my first Mau Mau oath in the African reserves and then introduced my husband, Mutungi, to the movement. In fact I looked for the goat used to administer the oath to my husband without his knowledge. By then I already knew that by doing so I was helping the movement.

Then, when I later learned that Field Marshal Dedan Kimathi was leading fighters in the Aberdare forest, I started supplying his troops with food and information. Such information included the movement of Home Guards and their patrols into the forest.

When my husband became fully aware of the importance of fighting for freedom he went into the forest and joined the fighters.

The Home Guards who monitored life in our village noticed that my husband was missing. They came and asked me where he was. I told them that he had taken some eggs to the market in Nyeri town.

On that night I had some money, Sh. 800, which I had to forward to the forest fighters. After the Home Guards had left me they went on their patrol into the forest but they came back at night. Their leader, Elijah, woke me up and demanded to know where Mutungi, my husband, was. I told them that he had not come back from the market. On hearing that they beat me up very badly.

One day before this incident I had learned that the British soldiers commonly known as Johnnies were going on a forest patrol towards where Dedan Kimathi was administering oaths. I ran ahead of the soldiers and warned Kimathi. The oathing stopped.

On my way home I met with the Johnnies. They roughed me up but later let me go. At the edge of the forest I put on a heavy coat that I had, in order to disguise my looks, and hide my bruises. To avoid being seen I crawled on my stomach towards our village. By the time I got home my stomach was so badly bruised that I had to use hot water with salt and liniment to treat the bruises. Village women and friends had to help me because by now my body was all swollen from beatings with military boots.

After three days the Home Guards came to my house and started beating me again mercilessly. Blood was oozing through my mouth and ears. All the house was blood stained. They ransacked the house looking for money. Luckily I never kept any money inside the house. I always hid it in the grass outside.

When my women friends saw the condition I was in they were filled with compassion. They took me from our home at Njoguni to Kihigaini, near where my sister-in-law, Wanjugu, lived. It was near the forest edge.

The village women there started treating me. When I felt a bit well I would go out to the forest edge collecting firewood, but I was actually spying on how I would escape into the forest.

After four days of planning I ran into the forest. I can't remember the date.

On my first day in the forest the only living thing I saw was an antelope. It

coughed. Then I walked for about two kilometers into the forest and sat down to pray:

“God, you know why I have come into this forest. I pray to you to help me, for you know the reason best. Help us expel the foreigners from our land. God, you know how I have been mistreated. As I don’t know where Kimathi is, help me to contact them, God.”

I remained on the scene quietly until at about 4 P.M., when I started searching for Kimathi.

In those days there were very few people in the forest. Fighters would go into the forest and come out without much trouble. For many hours I would sit at a water fetching point, expecting to find people in search of water, but no one would come.

For two weeks I found no one. At night I would climb trees to avoid being trampled by elephants.

But in the village people were looking for me. When they failed to know where I was, they assumed that I must have gone into the forest.

One day, after two lonely weeks, I noticed ten people coming to the watering point. I noticed Kimathi’s brother, Wagura Wambararia, and another called Gitungu. These are the ones who took me to Kimathi’s camp.

My first assignment in Kimathi’s army was in the group that went looking for food. We would raid European settler farms for cattle, goats and sheep. We once launched a raid from Rugoti bush [camp] into Karimurio farm, which was guarded by the colonial soldiers. We had a heavy battle in which we killed one white soldier and two African scouts. . . .

I had learned about the struggle for freedom when I was very young. I used to see fund raising meetings for somebody called Jomo Kenyatta. I would ask my mother, and she would tell me that the money was for a big man who would go overseas and then come back to free us. Sometimes I would be asked to keep the money . . . and I knew it was a secret to be hidden from the white settlers.

As the fighting continued in the forest there was hope that it would last only three months and then the country would be free.

Then came the aeroplanes. First it was the spotter planes, which produced sad sounds. These were followed by the bombers with slow and heavy sound, which created fear. This time we were up in the moorlands of the Aberdares.

Our camps were guarded a mile apart on each of the approach paths.

My experience of my first bombing is memorable. We saw the bottom of the bomber open and then something drop. Some of us said, well, so they also go to the toilet.

A man among us said it was a bomb and we should lie low, count to five and we would hear the explosion. Just as we counted to five the earth shook many miles around. Then shrapnel started flying past, above our heads. Some trees were falling like there was one big axe swinging past. Each bomber used to drop between five and ten bombs.

Just when we thought all was over they came again, spraying us with

machine gun fire. We used to call it Bebeta. God is great, the greatest, because we survived all the strafing, which was like a tractor is ploughing the field. And we survived all these! . . .

Because of the situation we had found that it was a waste of time to slaughter an animal in the normal manner. One would only cut a chunk, together with the skin, and put it in the rucksack. This way we left no trails.

Mau Mau Parliament and Dedan Kimathi

Dedan Kimathi used to call meetings at Chania with people like Karari Njama taking notes.

Kimathi was a leader, very merciful and wise. The things he used to say, if people followed them, some of the bad things which have happened would not have happened. One of the things which was ignored was to reward freedom fighters. . . .

One time he asked: "What do you think should happen to Kamatimu (the Africans fighting on the side of colonialists) when we become free?"

Some said: "Execute them and their families." Others said: "Try them."

But Kimathi said: "Kamatimu have helped in some ways. We should not kill them. But something will be done like being made to work for us. If they are killed how shall they know what we are fighting for?"

But some people were very annoyed with him.

Kimathi would then say: "Kamatimu are producing children with our wives back in the reserves. Let them live and see that we were fighting for justice."

Kimathi's philosophy was proved right at Independence. He had prevailed upon the freedom fighters not to kill Chief Muhoya. It was Chief Muhoya who had signed the death warrant for Kimathi. But Muhoya lived to see Independence. (And because he had sworn that there would be no Independence, he was killed by one of his bulls immediately.)

Then there were people like Eliud Mahihu, who used to fly over the Nyandarua [Aberdares] broadcasting: "I am sure that no Independence will ever come. So surrender and come out holding green branches . . ."

Mahihu saw Independence and became a senior and prosperous civil servant. . . .

Split

One of the major splits among the Mau Mau fighting forces came not long after a Parliament was formed. It came during a trial.

The colonialists had suggested a truce, that the Mau Mau forces and the colonialists start exchanging letters before they could meet physically and negotiate a ceasefire.

Several letters had been exchanged through "dead letter drops" but Kimathi was not happy about it. So he called a meeting of all senior officials in the Aberdares. All camps in Nyandarua East and Muranga district were represented. The venue of the meeting was guarded in a ten mile radius. Kimathi's

message was that those who had agreed to the exchange of letters did not understand the trick the colonialist was playing.

When the meeting assembled Kimathi explained the meaning of this letter game. He said the colonialist wanted to know the intelligence and the thinking of the Mau Mau. He said that at the proposed meeting the colonialist did not want to capture us nor kill us, but he would come with sweet talk, then we would be bitter and then tell all our secrets.

Kimathi ruled that from then on no one should cooperate with the colonialists. He said we should forget the dead letter drops.

He reasoned this way: how can two fighters separate themselves? It was only the politicians who could meet and talk.

He then ruled that anyone found contravening that ruling would be tried by the "big court" (Parliament).

I was a member of the Parliament and I had been elected by secret ballot.

General Mathenge Mirungi was also an elected member of the Parliament, and I was his junior.

Soon after this meeting, General Mathenge went ahead and met the colonialists. He was accompanied by one girl named Wangechi.

At the secret meeting with the colonialists Mathenge gave his gun to the enemy and the enemy gave him his. Mathenge's gun was the catapult version, which had become very effective. The colonial soldier studied the forest gun keenly before he returned it to Mathenge.

When Kimathi discovered that Mathenge had met the enemy against the ruling he had made, he summoned Parliament to meet at Chania. Mathenge was called and Parliament sat under a red flag. Mathenge was put on trial.

Kimathi: Mathenge, were you at the meeting which ruled against further meetings with the colonialists?

Mathenge: Yes.

Kimathi: Since you were there, then why did you go and meet them and disclose our secrets? Do you want us to be defeated? You, being a heroic fighter and everyone depends on you, do you know what your enemy is doing? Do you know that you are betraying yourself? What was on your mind? Are the colonialists your brothers?

Mathenge, do you want us to judge you for that action? Do you want to surrender? Tell us. If you want to surrender, go alone. Do not take us with you. Today this Parliament will judge you.

A member said: Mathenge should not be forgiven. He should be killed, for he went against the decision of this Parliament, so that no one else does like him.

Then all members of Parliament were asked their opinions.

I raised my hand before the group answered. I said I did not favour the death sentence. . . .

Other members of Parliament agreed with me. Then Mathenge and company [who had been tied to trees during the trial] were untied.

After one week we received reports that Mathenge continued to meet the colonialists. Kimathi was very annoyed. He ordered that Mathenge be sought and brought to him alive.

Since Mathenge knew what was happening he started hiding himself.

This incident happened towards the end of 1954. Just before it happened, Mathenge, myself, Karari Njama, Karuri wa Gakure—about 20 of us, had been selected to go to Ethiopia to seek help for ammunition. But before our journey could start was when Mathenge started meeting the colonialists secretly. His only companion on such missions was the girl Wangechi. Any time he was on secret meeting it was said he had gone to Nairobi.

We looked for Mathenge and did not find him. He had his own group. Then came the rumour that he had gone to Ethiopia.

Enthronement of Kimathi

Sometime in 1954 Dedan Kimathi had called an important meeting somewhere in Muranga. We from Kabage area had to go. Many were unable to attend because the security situation was very bad. On the way I felt like thousands of barrels of guns were pointed at me.

I had been told that we were attending a case. But it turned out to be a ceremony. I was one of those selected to attend the ceremony.

I met two old women from Muranga who dressed me in traditional regalia, all made of animal skin. They included “Nyathiba” (upper wear), “Muthuru” and “Mwehio” (for lower wear), and “hang’i” (earrings).

These two old women were accompanied by two old men of “Ndungu” age group. That means they were so old that they could not walk without support.

Before the ceremony took place we spent a week of prayers and feasting. We rarely slept.

On the 9th day Kimathi was dressed in a “githii” [cloak] and a colobus monkey headgear. I stood behind, dressed in my regalia. Then the old women brought some oil in a gourd. The oil was a mixture of sheep fat and castor oil. The oil was blessed with prayers in Kikuyu traditional style.

Then the old men took the oil and poured it on Kimathi’s head. It dripped on his cloak. All this time there were chants of “Ngai Thaa!” When the oil was poured on Kimathi’s head I rendered some adulation. Then an old woman picked some of the remaining oil and smeared it on my face and back as she said: “Ngai Thaa!”

After this solemn ceremony Kimathi said that we would go up to the Aberdares summit. There we hoisted flags with Kenya’s national colours mounted on bamboo poles. There was a flag on each of the three peaks.

We were very tired after climbing. When the ceremony was over we went looking for camps where we could rest.

It was at this meeting of the ceremony that I was promoted to General. It

was at the same meeting that Kimathi said that anyone who will fight to the end of the war will be called Field Marshal.

Before I was made a General people in our camp were in desperate state of hunger. They were afraid of going out and seeking for food. So I sacrificed myself by risking to go to the farm of one settler known as Lord Cole, who was growing crops by irrigation. His farm was tightly guarded.

That night I used my tactics and, avoiding security, dug under the fence, got into a maize plantation and noiselessly filled a sack with maize cobs. Then I crawled with my sack out of the farm, filled the hole under the fence, and returned to camp without leaving any trails.

When the people in the camp saw me back with maize, they carried me shoulder high. . . .

This year the air raids increased. We could not move from camp to camp. We did not see Kimathi. At one time he had sent a man to look for me, Nyina wa Thonje and my husband, Mutungi. At that time we were looking for him also.

People in the reserves did not give us food any more because they claimed we would be betraying them. This was so because they did not trust anyone any more due to the activities of the pseudo Mau Mau.

There were three types of pseudo gangs: those who persuaded one to leave the forest, others would run out of sight, and those who killed on sight.

We decided to avoid the villages. We could not trust any stranger. One had to answer the call of nature in sight of others.

When food was not available I lived on juices of tree fibres. At one time I was like the picture of Eve on being chased out of Garden of Eden. I used leaves to cover my breasts and genitals. . . .

It was around this time that we heard that Jomo Kenyatta had been released from detention. Then we started seeing members of the public coming close to the forest without fear like before. . . .

With the help of some friends I obtained a dress, shoes and a headscarf. Then I changed my skin dresses, which were made of hyrax skins.

People who were faithful to the Mau Mau movement arranged for my transport to Nairobi. They took me to an office near the Jevanjee Gardens where they tried to make an appointment for me to see Kenyatta. Kenyatta was busy with meetings but he directed that I be kept comfortable until he would see me.

After one week I met Jomo Kenyatta. This was in November, 1963. I told Kenyatta that I had come because of rumours that there would be freedom in Kenya. I told him that since you are the one who can tell the truth, tell me, because maybe people just wanted me to come out of the forest.

Kenyatta asked me with a lot of sadness, in a pensive mood and looking at me right in the eyes:

"Nyakinyua (Madam), is it not a joke that you have been in the forest all these years?"

"No, it is not a joke, Mzee (Elder). Are you doubting?"

Kenyatta did not say anything. He just stared at me and wept.

I told him: "Mzee, do you want me to prove to you? Just because you see new clothes . . . these were bought for me so that I could come to see you. I have come from the forest where I have been since 1952. If you want to believe . . ."

I removed my headdress and my hair came down. He extended his hand and touched my hair and asked: "How did you do it?"

I told him: "If you look carefully you will find lice eggs in the hair."

Kenyatta said: "I can see, and I believe. Now how many are you?" I told him: "We were many but now I know of only one who is with me. Some died and others surrendered."

He said: "And now with all that rain and sunshine you have lived there?"

I told him, yes, and that the weather could get worse.

He told me: "I will say nothing. And when you go say that Uhuru (freedom) is on December 12, and say it was Kenyatta who has told you. Go and announce to the others who might be there."

After asking him how we shall know that Uhuru was there truly without seeing the flag, Kenyatta told me that I would be picked from my forest hideout on the Uhuru day by his own vehicle. He also said that if there were more fighters in Mount Kenya forest they would be sent for, to meet at Ruringu on December 16, 1963. But for me I would be picked from Nyeri on December 12 for night ceremonies in Nairobi.

When I came out of the forest I could not look at the sun because the light was burning my eyes. At Ruringu is where I met people like Dr. Muniya Waiyaki [then Minister of Defence], who did a good job calming us.

I had thought that all those people who had left the forest first, those who had been in detention and other places, would have come to celebrate with us. But I was wrong because after one week I was brought some poisoned soda. That soda was intercepted by a young man called Nderitu.

That was when I found out that I was wrong when I thought I had lived with animals in the forest. It was now that I had come to animals.

Even when the ceremonies were over and we were told to go home I had to go to an uncle of my husband and build my own house. That was traditionally wrong. . . .