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## Versions and Inversions: Mau Mau in Kahiga's *Dedan Kimathi: The Real Story*

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Peter Simatei

Through the subtitle of his novel *Dedan Kimathi: The Real Story*, Sam Kahiga situates the text at once at the center of the controversial discourse of Mau Mau historiography. The novel's subtitle makes no real claims to authentic historicity but it nevertheless signals the author's intention to contest the status of prior histories of Mau Mau, histories that he already implicitly considers "unreal." Indeed Kahiga finds it necessary to state in a note to the reader that "a considerable amount of research went into the writing of [the novel]"—an unusual statement from a writer of fiction but one that is meant to forestall stock accusations of inauthenticity, myth-making, and lack of research often leveled against Mau Mau novels by historians.

Kahiga's portrayal of Dedan Kimathi and the Mau Mau war of independence has been shaped by his awareness of and attitudes to the conflictual claims of prior fictional and historical texts. Kahiga's version of the story becomes "real" not because it actually displaces the other versions by its claims to factual verity, but ironically because it tends to present these versions as inevitable elements of the ever evolving Kimathi/Mau Mau narrative.

First, what is the nature of the controversy surrounding the reorganization of facts concerning the Mau Mau revolt? Both fictional and historical discourses on Mau Mau reveal two important tendencies that have in turn led to the classification of these discourses into two broad and contradictory categories. There is first the tendency to portray Mau Mau war as a mere internecine feud among the Kikuyu and in so doing deny its nationalist and liberative impulse. Historian William Ochieng', for example, admits that the revolt was motivated by the desire "to expel the British from Kenya" but goes ahead to emphasize the ethnic nature of the movement and also what he calls the degeneration of the war "into a Kikuyu civil war between the haves and the have-nots, the nationalists and the quislings" (28). The proponents of this view are often criticized for perpetuating the colonialist myth of the war and for colluding with the postindependent ruling class to transform the latter's "record of collaboration into a myth of national struggle by obliterating the social radicalism of Mau Mau" (Maughan-Brown 199).

Falling also into this first category are works of fiction—including autobiographies by former fighters themselves—that stress the degeneration of the freedom fighters into rival groups that, when not raiding each other for arms and food, are robbing villagers of their livestock and grain. Novels such as Godwin Wachira's *Ordeal in the Forest* and Wamweya's *Freedom Struggle* tend to do exactly this and so are autobiographies like Gucu Gikonyo's *We Fought for Freedom* and Kiboi Murithi's *War in the Forest*. The interest of Meja Mwangi in both *Taste of Death* and *Carcass for Hounds* lies more in the dra-

matic excitements of the clash between the colonial forces and freedom fighters than in any attempt at probing the social dynamics of the revolt. His portrayal of General Haraka, the Kimathi-like figure in *Carcass for Hounds*, is totally negative, focusing as it were on Haraka's deterioration into a blood-thirsty psychopath who is finally wasted away into a "living carcass" by gangrene he obtains through a bullet wound. An overwhelming sense of futility governs this novel so that Harish Narang's observation that "Mwangi is not only distorting the truth about the freedom struggle but is also proving himself to be a prophet of doom who holds no vision of hope for his readers" (248) holds true.

According to Ali Mazrui, one weakness of most thematizations of Mau Mau lies in their tendency to foreground "individual idiosyncrasies of participants in the movement" to an extent where "the broader social phenomenon which the whole revolt signified" is rendered obscure (9). Yet, and as Mazrui points out further, writings that dwell on its social significance end up painting a larger than life picture of the movement and its leaders. This is indeed the major anomaly exhibited by the second category of the writings that in most instances are offered as deconstructions of colonialist and conservative versions of the war. The major voices here are novelist Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o and historian Maina wa Kinyatti.

Kinyatti, for example, says that the purpose of writing *Thunder from the Mountains* "is to answer the anti-Mau Mau Kenyan intellectuals and their imperialists masters who until now, continue to deny the movements national character" (x). The book is a collection of resistance songs composed by Mau Mau and their supporters. Kinyatti emphasizes his role as a "translator" and not as writer or creator of the songs, meaning that no sophisticated historical methodology is required for their retrieval or interpretation. In writing *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi*, a play that incorporates "a good number of patriotic dances and songs . . . available in . . . *Thunder from the Mountains*" (Ngũgĩ 18), Ngũgĩ and Micere Mugo see themselves as making similar contributions whereas Ngũgĩ's novel *Petals of Blood* "insists at some length on revising Kenyan historiography" (Sicherman 352).

The clash between these two positions, or "rival mythologies" as Sicherman calls them (352), becomes even more acrimonious when it touches on the function of literature in the representation of historical facts. Historian critics fault fiction on what they see as its infidelity to historical facts or its inability to portray historical characters realistically. As shown by Ochieng's discussion of Ngũgĩ and Kahiga, expectations of realism and/or fidelity to historical facts appear to be the main standard used by historian critics to judge Mau Mau fiction. According to Ochieng', Kahiga's *Dedan Kimathi: The Real Story* is "the most important work of fiction on Mau Mau so far written" (*Dedan* 133). Kahiga succeeds where others have failed—he mentions specifically Ngũgĩ and Charles Mangua—because of his "meticulous reading and research" (*Dedan* 133). Kahiga's novel does reflect intense research into historical material, but there is no doubt that Ochieng's admiration of this novel has something to do with Kahiga's reluctance to give the Mau Mau story an ideological interpretation, something that Ochieng' detests in Ngũgĩ's style of "distorting

characterization and historical facts in order to further his political and ideological positions" (*Dedan* 133).

Kahiga's Kimathi appeals to him because he is "a mwananchi (common citizen), a real product of his time, society and humble colonial education" (*Dedan* 134). This Kimathi contrasts sharply with Ngũgĩ's Kimathi who, Ochieng' argues, "has been elevated to the ranks of Mao, Lenin and Guevera" (*Dedan* 134). Ochieng' is certainly referring here to *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi*, a play that another historian, Caroline Neale, dismisses as "one of the simplistic products of Anglophone nationalistic literatures" (314). Unlike Ochieng', Neale is, however, sympathetic to the historical revisionism of *Petals of Blood*.

Whereas Ochieng's criticism of Ngũgĩ's style is valid in certain contexts especially when it touches on the latter's "misuse of the omniscient authority in forcing characters into articulating predetermined ideological stances" (Kasongo 158), his own position is often undercut by a tendency to privilege the historical method despite the fact that "invention also plays a part in the historian's operations" (White 342). In fact, seen from Simon Gikandi's convincing position that African literature ought to be seen as "an instrument which wills new African realities into being, that imagines alternative configurations of our 'real histories' to either affirm or transcend them" (2), then the absence of a broader sociopolitical interpretation in Kahiga's present novel is its weakness rather than strength. And yet Kahiga's lack of interest in ideology has something to do with his express intention, that is, to present a story that is faithful to historical facts and accuracy, an objective that, as will become clear, is nevertheless undermined by what Gikandi calls "the utopian impulse that underlies the novel as a genre" (4). In the treatment of the three themes central to the Mau Mau debate, namely, historiography, the movement's status, and the character of Dedan Kimathi, Kahiga tries to negotiate the middle course between the two conflicting discourse positions. Aware of the historians' criticism of fiction's tendency to distort historical facts, he chooses to foreground one very important activity of Mau Mau fighters hitherto unexplored by other writers. This is the documentation by the fighters themselves of the events in the forest.

The activity of recording or writing is presented as an essential element of the struggle and the fighters are shown to be chroniclers of their own history. They record events as they unfold before them and Kimathi himself never conducts a meeting before looking for someone to record the minutes. Captain Theuri, Kimathi's closest aide, keeps a diary in which he records the most important aspects of the war. The novelist often withdraws his omniscient narrator in order to allow important facts to be told through this diary, a technique that dissolves the fictive sense of the story and creates instead one of actuality.

The fighters themselves engage in this activity of writing because they believe these records will in future stand not only as testimony to the sacrifices they made for freedom, but also as important sources for the writing of their history or, as they put it, "remembrance" by future generations. Part of Captain Theuri's diary, for example, reads:

Major Ruanjane said we must write our history and songs. The songs should be sent to Kimbo Mutuku who collects them in a book. . . . In this book (his diary) I have written very important things about our history, the things we have done and seen with our eyes. (180)

Kimathi, too, thinks that “writing details” about the contributions and tribulations of individual fighters is very necessary “so that later generations may think about them and honor them” (182). Mugane Kago, another character, argues:

It made a lot of sense to keep records for how, in the end could anybody show what he had contributed in the struggle? How could anybody be compensated for his losses without records? (202)

Constraint as it were by its focus on the profile of Kimathi which dictates in turn that the narration ends with his capture, this novel cannot fully confront the nightmares of the post-uhuru (independence) era, but it nevertheless imagines a postcolonial audience which must bring its present experiences to bear on the meaning of the novel. For example, the future that the freedom fighters yearn and fight for has been realized in the “Now” of the reader, but in an ironical manner in which the fighters’ quest to be remembered, honored, and compensated is negated rather than fulfilled. Because of this special relationship between the novel’s historical status and the reader’s awareness of the conditions of its negation in the present, reading this novel involves a simultaneous eavesdropping on an anti-nationalistic postcolonial “discourse of duplicity, repression . . . division and domination” (Gikandi 113). Kimathi’s optimism that future generations will remember and honor them is starkly confronted years later by Kenyatta’s denunciation of Mau Mau as a “disease which had been eradicated and must not be remembered again” (Buijtenhuijs 49). “Tusahau yaliyopita” (let us forget the past), Kenyatta’s rallying cry, was to become the foundational principle of post-uhuru discourse of negation and henceforth “building the nation” in independent Kenya was ironically to involve repression of that historical consciousness which had given rise to the very idea of the nation in the first place. One therefore cannot help regarding the fighters’ yearnings for the future, cited above, ironically.

Ochieng’ and other historians hold that no matter how nationalistic the motivations of the Mau Mau war were, the fighting was to degenerate into a civil war. In *Dedan Kimathi: The Real Story*, this pattern of degeneration is exhibited, but it is a degeneration not into a civil war but into a directionless war that reflects more on an initial failure of the fighters to come to terms with the implication of their choice to participate in the war. Most fighters have no clear convictions why they are in the forest; others are there to hide: they are fugitives running away from the colonial law. They constitute the *Komerera* gangs, renegade fighters who have disengaged from Kimathi’s units. It is a group fighting for survival and one shown to occasionally raid other Mau Mau units for food and arms. The *Komerera*

have no political aims and they fight the white man for the same reasons they are fighting their fellow Africans:

They were wild, very quick on the trigger . . . they shot at anything and anybody. They robbed even Mau Mau supporters. They were not really in the war. They were survivors, fugitives from their own leaders, the British and even God. (70)

The Komerera phenomenon is what gives Mau Mau the image of nihilism and anarchy an image that colonialist accounts of the revolt stress in an attempt to slur the whole movement. Kahiga treats this phenomenon as an inevitable outgrowth of a war fought out of desperation. In other words, he admits that fighting among the fighters existed, but only for reasons related to Mau Mau as war and not as a civil war, or as one motivated by atavistic forces. Yet not even Kahiga escapes the temptation to dwell at times more on the feuds among the fighters, to the detriment of the meaning of the war as conceived by the fighters.

In this novel the picture we get of Kimathi and the other leaders like Gen. Mathenge and Gen. Kago is not that of visionary idealists, but of simple mortals grappling with the uncertain and irreversible situation which their decisions and actions have put into motion. As told in this novel, their story is one of defeat, of near annihilation, but it is a defeat shown to arise from an understandable array of human factors so that it becomes more the "victory of the vanquished" than total defeat. The relationship between Kimathi and the other leaders is not always one of mutual understanding and respect. It is an uneasy relationship that arises from the feelings of the other leaders that Kimathi is not directing the war well.

In terms of real frontline engagement with the colonial forces, Gen. Kago, whose unit operates in Murang'a district (Kimathi is based in the Aberderes area), seems to eclipse Kimathi. Indeed, some historians have argued that Kimathi was a mere paper-tiger general when compared to Kago. In a recent study, Kathryn Tidrick, in what appears an extremely biased assessment of Mau Mau, charges that Kimathi was the most prominent of the fugitives in the forest "who whiled away the hours arranging the imaginary disposition of forces and deciding who could be a field marshal but who rarely ventured outside the forest" (40). Gen. Kago, she claims, provided a more serious challenge to the British colonial authorities than Kimathi. Kahiga, as already stated, does indeed present Kago as a frontline person, but he shows Kimathi to be engaged in the equally important task of organization and coordination. Kimathi's major concern is how to build a solid and unified structure from the many scattered units of Mau Mau.

It is through the eyes of a female character, Agnes Nderitu, that Kimathi is introduced to the reader. Nderitu, who has just fled to the forest after murdering an informer in the village, is like everyone else outside the forest in harboring a larger-than-life image of Dedan Kimathi. This image is gradually replaced with that of the true Kimathi:

. . . a tired, rather melancholic man with books and stack of papers, obsessed not with the killing but with organising the killing. He

hardly ever left the forest, hardly ever fired a shot, for he didn't need to, and many outside the forest had the wrong image of him. (128)

Kimathi cannot, therefore, be in the frontline, because he is charged with the more important task of organizing the war. This does not go down well with the other leaders like Kabuku, Mathenge, and Kago, who see him as more of a talker than a fighter. Indeed, one of the reasons Kago rebels against Kimathi's leadership and forms his own unit is because he cannot stand Kimathi's dictatorship and his idea of how the war should be fought. Like Kabuku, Kago finds Kimathi's style intolerable:

Kimathi tried to hang me because I was impatient, impatient with all those cowards who just hide in the bush, only coming out when they are hungry. (90-91)

Kimathi's fame among the ordinary people outside the forest owes nothing to his military skills but to some kind of mysticism that surrounds his personality. Rumors and myths about his indomitability and invincibility are propagated and accepted by the ordinary Kikuyu who have never seen him, but who nevertheless hope that his reported outmaneuvering of the colonial army is true. This is a myth that Kahiga tries to deconstruct in order to achieve a realistic depiction of Kimathi, but he finds it difficult to dispense with, especially towards the end when Kimathi is to be betrayed and captured.

At this juncture the narrative focuses mainly on the turbulence in Kimathi's mind and it is here that Kahiga concentrates on the supposed mystical qualities of the person. He is shown to have not only a keen instinct for danger, but also a rare gift of premonition. Ruku, a member of the pseudo-gangs hunting for Kimathi, is unable to shoot him when he bumps into him, because his gun jams. He, however, refuses to believe that this was just an ordinary failure:

It was Kimathi . . . but when I pulled the trigger, the gun wouldn't fire. He is not an ordinary man, now I am sure of it. (323)

Tales of Kimathi's superhuman qualities have a direct influence on the behavior of Ruku, and the latter's decision to join the hunt for Kimathi is in a sense underlined by a repressed desire to prove Kimathi's invincibility. Suffice it to say that the story here does not affirm Kimathi's larger-than-life image but confirms, instead, the influence of myth and rumor on human attitudes and action. Hence Ochieng's criticism of Ngũgĩ's mythical portrayal of Kenyatta in *A Grain of Wheat* (Ochieng' 31) misses this point.

In Kahiga's novel, events that surround Kimathi's death are equally interpreted in a biblical sense. When Kimathi is hanged by the colonial regime we hear from one of the voices which has taken over the narration:

The tree he loved most in the forest [fell]. It fell as a sign that the God of our fathers was with him. He had done his work. He went to rest. He is with God now. He can see from wherever he is. (337)



The novel ends with this perceived messianic image of Dedan Kimathi, an image whose emphasis here tends, however, to undermine not only the novel's historical genre but also the author's own intention to relieve Kimathi of similar myths encoded in prior texts. In the novel, Kimathi sees his role of liberation as somehow akin to that of Christ, and his admirers see him in terms of legendary figures like Moses, Absalom, and Christ. Recourse to such paradigmatic figurations has the effect of mystifying the subject, although it is obvious that Kahiga deploys them here in order to situate the text within the messianic discourse of salvation.

The messianic motive, for example, justifies rejection and persecution as the fate that meets the individual who offers to lead liberation. In this sense the novel connects intertextually with an archetypal pattern that is partly Judeo-Christian and it is this pattern that to some extent provides the structuring elements in Kimathi's narrative. Kimathi is therefore to be viewed variously as a Christ-like figure, a black Moses, or simply an Absalom. The fighters grouped under him are designated later as "followers," a term that unmistakably recalls Judeo-Christian apostleship. As he nears his end, Kimathi, like Christ, becomes apprehensive of the loyalty of this group and selects a few of the most trusted ones to keep close by him. At this point, he has actually abandoned faith in his military ingenuity and becomes instead more and more religious, trusting in the magnanimity of the Kikuyu God, Ngai.

The parallelism drawn between the significance of Kimathi's death and that of Christ is quite deliberate in the novel and the diction that inscribes this parallelism echoes the New Testament's account of the death and ascension of Christ. The idea of Kimathi's popular tree falling upon his death recalls the curtain in the Jewish temple that tears apart as Christ dies on the cross. This parallelism appears imposed as a kind of *deus ex machina*, but one that is deployed here to try to deflect the pessimism that the narrative seems to be forcibly moving towards. This parallelism in a way impacts negatively on the novel as it functions to constrain any development of a visionary ethos. As it is, with the death of Dedan Kimathi, all else seems to collapse—a pessimistic closure that casts unnecessary gloom on this otherwise powerful rendition of Kenya's war of independence.

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