



From Resistance To Resilience: Kenyan Independence In *The Trial Of Dedan Kimathi*

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Abstract: *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi*, a pivotal work by Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Micere Githae Mugo, reimagines Kenya's struggle for independence during the Mau Mau Movement. *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* is a representative East African drama that serves as a model for African historical plays dedicated to challenging incorrect preconceptions about Africans' historical lineage. The intent of the paper is to present the authors' intention to explore historical misconceptions about Kenya that marginalise the popular struggle that led to the country's independence and how memory is employed in the play to refute and oppose official accounts of history. The paper emphasises how the play acts as a channel for the collective memory of the Kenyan independence movement and the Mau Mau Movement. By situating *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* within the broader discourse of decolonial hope and planetary sustainability, the paper aims to show how the play not only recounts historical struggles but also offers a vision for a future shaped by solidarity and transformation. The decolonial notion of hope, as portrayed in the play, emerges as a praxis that re-centers erased non-hegemonic histories and knowledge, crucial for planetary recovery and healing.

The Trial of Dedan Kimathi (1976) by Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Micere Githae Mugo covers the time period of the Mau Mau Movement and Dedan Kimathi's persistent battle against colonialism in Kenyan politics and history, culminating in Kenya's independence in 1963.

Kenya, a nation on Africa's east coast, is known for its fertile agricultural areas and diverse landscapes. In the early nineteenth century, this rich land attracted the interest of several European nations. Explorers and missionaries from these countries ventured into Kenya's interior, establishing contact with the local communities. As European presence grew, so did their influence and control over Kenya's productive lands. Immigrants from Europe began to claim vast areas of fertile land for cultivation and commerce, often at the expense of the indigenous populations. Through a series of laws, the colonial administration reserved these territories exclusively for white Europeans, systematically excluding the native Kenyans. This

exclusion was formalised and enforced, leading to widespread dispossession and displacement of local communities. By the 1920s and 1930s, the British colonial administration had not only deprived Kenyans of their land but also forced many into labour for European enterprises. The narrative of Kenya's route to independence is often dominated by the Mau Mau revolt. The Mau Mau movement began in the early 1940s with a series of violent rural actions that included labour strikes, torching agricultural structures and crops, and injuring cattle. The Mau Mau war was a brutal one aimed at regaining the British-taken lush lands, where the native Gikuyu people, the land's landowners, were compelled to labour for British profit. The goal of the campaign was to regain their land and declare independence from British domination.

During the Mau Mau revolution, Dedan Kimathi was the guiding light and motivational force for the Kenyan people. Kimathi was his people's unquestioned hero, a legend that refuses to die. The portrayal of Kimathi as a freedom warrior, a leader of the Mau Mau rebellion, and a voice of the people, therefore, rejects the colonial narratives and glorifies Kenyan indigenous power to choose their future and create their own history. *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* is a representative East African drama that serves as a model for African historical plays dedicated to challenging incorrect preconceptions about Africans' historical lineage. Because the colonial understanding of the nation's history misrepresents the ordinary people who fought for Kenya's independence, the reconstruction of history is fundamental to Kenyan writing. Oyeniyi Okunoye in the article "Dramatizing Postcoloniality: Nationalism and the Rewriting of History in Ngugi and Mugo's *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi*" mentions, "Dramatic literature in Africa particularly lends itself to social function because it generally has social reference. Creative writers that are interested in history draw on the collective memory of their people and privilege the rehabilitation of historical figures or heroes who are often demonized in official histories" (6).

The intention of the authors to explore misconceptions in official Kenyan history, that marginalise the public fight that resulted in the nation's independence inspired the production of this play. The colonisers' history of the colonial region is an intentional fabrication of the colonised or oppressed. The British-written official Kenyan history portrays Kimathi as a villain, although he was a hero to the Kenyan people. As stated and explained in the play's preface, the production of *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* is an attempt to correct this misinformation. Just like The novel *Things Fall Apart* (1958) came as a response to Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* that treated Africa as a primordial and cultureless foil for Europe. Similarly, Kimathi is honoured by Ngugi and Mugo in order to restore him to his appropriate place in

Kenyan history, and he is rewritten into Kenyan history in the same manner that heroes of his magnitude are depicted in traditional epics. They emphasise that the work is driven by the desire to investigate a global problem based on localised experiences. The drama focuses on the hardships of peasants and workers before and after formal independence. As is mentioned in the preface, “It is an imaginative recreation and interpretation of the collective will of the Kenyan peasants and workers in their resistance to sixty years of colonial torture and ruthless oppression by the British ruling classes and their continued determination to resist exploitation, oppression and new forms of enslavement.”

The play is not merely a factual representation of Kimathi’s trial; it is actually a creative regeneration written in three movements, integrating Gikuyu songs and dances to introduce the Kenyan point of view. *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* is a probing conversation with history, an endeavour to transcend the bounds of political, economic, social, and cultural isolation. The drama is notable because it connects three main periods in African history: pre-colonial, colonial, and post-independence. The pre-colonial Kenya is depicted through collective dances and songs sung in between the trials. The depiction of Kenya's magnificent past emphasises the cultural collaboration, solidarity, and power of the Kenyan masses prior to colonisation. The colonial oppression of the Kenyans is pictured through flashbacks in different movements. The dramatization of black people’s history showcases the significant moments in the history of African exploitation, especially the slave trade, the exploitation of black labour, and the continuation of the anti-imperialist resistance. The four phases of black man’s history which are enacted in the first movement illustrate the history of Africa accurately, from depicting a “white hungry-looking slave trader” to the portrayal of “slaves roped and chained” together and then finally showing an “angry procession of defiant blacks” (5-6). The past, present and future move in a continuous spectrum via flashbacks and flashforwards in the narrative. The play's setting powerfully conveys the people's animosity of the conquerors, the black man's history, and the harsh authority of the white masters who would use force, intimidation, and torture to control the locals. Kimathi's speech to his companions in the forest camp, urging them to be cautious against the forces of evil, is evocative of Kenya's history, the battle for freedom, the courage of its inhabitants, and their vigilance against tyranny and injustice.

The majority of the characters in the drama are not given proper names: Boy, girl and woman have been used as names of characters which is a deliberate attempt of not differentiating between individuals in Kenya and implying that Kenya was a collective close knit society. The Kenyans in the

drama are oppressed and forbidden their basic human entitlements. Their opinions are suppressed. When black troops are asked to assemble Mau Mau combatants for scrutiny and inquiry, this is conveyed then when one of the locals attempts to protest, he is mistreated and humiliated so that others might draw an instruction. Kimathi is also subjected to unfair and exploitative enquiry. He is being probed by a multitude of people, indicating widespread inequality.

Throughout the four trials, Bankers, a Business Executive, Politicians, priests etc. try to entice Kimathi away from the cause and bribe him to give up the fight and reveal his accomplices in crime, illustrating Kenya's capitalist control. The banker discusses Kenya's economic development during the colonial period. He planned to make money by constructing “large Hotels... resorts... Night Clubs... Casinos..... oil refineries and pipelines” (45) for business. The business executive saw the partnership as a new magical mantra via which the blacks might attain success. Kimathi, on the other hand, desired absolute freedom for Kenya and accused such tempters of selling out national interests for petty advantages. The offerings of these people are neo-colonialist in nature, with the masses continuing to suffer, face punishment, and obey the methods of the white rulers even after freedom. Okunoye’s article “The continuity created between the experience of slavery and the neocolonial exploitation of Africans underscores the fact that the problem of Africa has not changed; it is, at best, only taking different forms. And in line with their materialist outlook, there is no attempt at making any distinction between the white and the black along racial lines.” (9)

How Europe Underdeveloped Africa by Walter Rodney examines the concept of history as a political weapon of conflict. The book demonstrates how oppressive governments and institutions have utilised 'history' to establish and preserve their authority. Ngugi is a great believer in Rodney's concept of history as a weapon in the reshaping of society. *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* consistently elevates the past of bravery and resistance while denouncing the history of compromise. *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* is a glorification of the unbridled spirit of freedom that Kimathi represents—the spirit that is preserved by the boy and girl, as well as many other Kenyans. The natives of Kenya believe in Kimathi because he embodies the perpetual spirit of freedom. Although the Kimathi died, the spirit of the revolution lives on in the thoughts of the people who emerge at the end singing a freedom song. The drama concludes on a hopeful note: a leader who is already devoted to change has persuaded his people that fighting is the only way to oppose imperialist powers.

In conclusion, *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* by Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Micere Githae Mugo is not just a historical drama but a powerful statement against colonialism and a tribute to the enduring spirit of resistance in Kenya. Through the depiction of Dedan Kimathi and the Mau Mau Movement, the play challenges the distorted colonial narratives that have long overshadowed the true heroes of Kenya's independence struggle. By intertwining historical facts with creative dramatisation, the authors honour Kimathi's legacy and the collective will of the Kenyan people to fight for their freedom. The play underscores the importance of reclaiming history from the oppressors and celebrates the resilience and unity of the Kenyan masses. As the characters of the boy and girl carry forward Kimathi's spirit, the play concludes on a note of hope and continued resistance, reminding us that the struggle against oppression and exploitation is ongoing, and the dream of true freedom remains alive in the hearts of the people. Therefore, composed in three movements that symbolically integrate the past, present, and future of African history, the drama presents a clear contrast between indigenous struggle and various types of colonisation.

Works Cited and Consulted

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