

THE LIFE OF
**DEDAN
KIMATHI**



MAKENA BRANDON

The Life of Dedan Kimathi

A Biography

Makena Brandon



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For the Kimathi family, and for the families of all who died in the Emergency.

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Preface

Dedan Kimathi is one of the best known names in Kenya and one of the least documented. Schools, roads, a stadium and a university carry his name, and there is a bronze statue of him in Nairobi, yet most Kenyans can say very little about his life beyond the fact that he led the Mau Mau fighters and was hanged by the British in 1957.

This book sets out his life in order, from his birth in 1920 to the search for his grave in our own time. It draws on published histories, newspaper reports, the surviving trial papers and accounts by people who knew him or who lived through the Emergency. A list of sources is at the back.

The record has gaps and contradictions. Sources disagree on where he was born, on his father's name, on the dates of his army service, on how many children he had, and on some details of his capture and execution. Much of what survives was written by colonial officials who wanted to defeat him, and much of what was written later was written by people who wanted to honour him. I have used both kinds of material with care. Where accounts conflict, I give the different versions and say which one I think is better supported. I have not invented dialogue or scenes.

Kimathi was an organiser and a writer who led a large guerrilla force in the Aberdare forests. He also administered oaths under compulsion, and the war he fought caused the deaths of many Africans as well as Europeans. I have tried to describe all of this directly.

I thank the historians, journalists and archivists whose work I relied on, and the Kimathi family, who have kept his memory alive for almost seventy years.

Makena Brandon

Kenya, October 2026

CHAPTER ONE

Birth and Family

Dedan Kimathi was born on 31 October 1920 in the Nyeri district of Central Province, Kenya. His birth name was Kimathi wa Waciuri, which means Kimathi son of Waciuri. Accounts differ on the exact place. Some give Thege, a village near Nyeri town, and others give Kanyinya, also in Nyeri. Both are in the Kikuyu highlands below Mount Kenya.

He belonged to the Ambui clan, one of the nine clans of the Kikuyu, who are Kenya's largest ethnic group. His mother was Waibuthi. His father is usually named as Waciuri, also spelled Wachiuri. One account says that Waciuri died in 1918, two years before the birth, and that another man, Ng'aragu, was the child's biological father. Under Kikuyu custom a child could be raised in a dead man's name, so the two accounts need not contradict each other. Kimathi's mother raised him.

Kenya had been a British possession for about thirty years when he was born. In 1920 it was made a Crown Colony. The same year, the colonial government introduced the kipande, an identity document that every African man had to carry in a metal case on a string around his neck. It recorded his employer and his conduct. The Kikuyu families of Nyeri lived by farming and herding on land that the colonial administration was already reorganising for European settlers, and the effects of that policy shaped the whole of Kimathi's life. They are described in Chapter Three.

His family were small farmers. Nothing in the record suggests that they were wealthy or that they held any office among the Kikuyu. His later education shows that they were willing to spend scarce money and labour on his schooling.

School and Education

Kimathi started elementary school late. Sources say he was about fifteen when he enrolled at Karuna-ini, a primary school near his home. He then attended the Church of Scotland mission school at Tumutumu, in the hills above Karatina, where he studied for several more years.

Teachers and later biographers remember him as an able student. He was especially good at English and at writing, and he spoke well in public. The historian David Anderson adds that he was competitive, often aggressive with other pupils, and frequently disciplined by his teachers. He left Tumutumu without completing the course. The sources do not give the exact reason, and I have found no school records that settle the matter.

At this time Kikuyu parents who wanted their children educated could choose between mission schools and the independent schools that Kikuyu communities began to open in the late 1920s. The independent schools grew out of a dispute with the missions over female circumcision and over who should control African education. Kimathi attended mission schools only.

The mission education gave him a good command of written English, which few people in his district had, and a thorough knowledge of the Bible. Both mattered later. As a guerrilla commander he wrote orders, letters and statements in English, and his last letter, written in prison, shows that he still held the Christian beliefs he had learned there.

The colonial economy offered little to Africans with this kind of schooling. Clerks and teachers were poorly paid, could not rise into the higher grades of the civil service, and had no political rights. Many educated young Kikuyu of Kimathi's age became dissatisfied with colonial rule for this reason, and a number of them later joined the nationalist movement.

Colonial Kenya and the Land Question

The Mau Mau war cannot be understood without the history of land in Kenya, and Kimathi's own career grew directly out of it.

The Kikuyu held land through families and clans. A family's right to a plot came from the work its ancestors had done in clearing it, and the elders administered the right. Land that was lying fallow was not unowned, but British officials treated it as available. In the 1890s rinderpest, famine and smallpox had reduced the population of some Kikuyu areas, and this made it easier to claim that the country was empty.

After the Uganda Railway reached Lake Victoria in 1901, the government encouraged European settlement to produce freight and revenue. About seven million acres in the Central and Rift Valley regions were reserved for settlers. This area became known as the White Highlands. Africans were confined to reserves.

Several measures forced Africans to work for wages. A hut tax was introduced in 1901 and a poll tax in 1910, both payable in cash. The Masters and Servants Ordinance of 1906 made breach of a labour contract a criminal offence. The kipande was introduced in 1918. In 1934 the Carter Land Commission reviewed African land claims and mostly confirmed the existing boundaries.

Many Kikuyu lived on European farms as squatters, working for the owner in return for the right to cultivate a plot and graze animals. In 1939 a new ordinance removed the squatters' tenancy rights and allowed farmers to demand up to 270 days of labour a year. Large numbers of squatters were evicted and moved back to the overcrowded reserves or to Nairobi.

The Second World War added to the pressure. More than ninety thousand Kenyan Africans served in the British forces, and many returned to find that their service had earned them nothing. Political organisation among the Kikuyu had begun in the 1920s with the Kikuyu Central Association, and an early leader, Harry Thuku, was arrested in 1922. The Kenya African Study Union was founded in October 1944 and became the Kenya African Union (KAU) in 1946. Jomo Kenyatta returned from Britain that year and became its president in 1947. The KAU asked for land reform, political representation and an end to racial discrimination, and the government gave little in reply.

Younger members of the KAU, especially ex-servicemen and evicted squatters, concluded that petitions would not work. Many of them joined a secret movement that took oaths of loyalty and prepared for armed resistance. Kimathi was one of them.

CHAPTER FOUR

Early Jobs and Army Service

The years between Kimathi leaving school and joining the KAU are poorly documented, and the sources contradict each other on several points.

He moved to Nairobi in the late 1930s or early 1940s. At some point he joined the army. One account gives 1940 and another 1941 as the year he enlisted. BlackPast says he enlisted as a sweeper with the King's African Rifles and deserted after he learned how African soldiers were treated. Another says he was discharged after about a month for drunkenness and violence. A third source gives 1944 as the year he was discharged for misconduct. I cannot reconcile these. The consistent points are that his service was short and ended badly.

After the army he held a series of jobs. He worked as a swineherd, and he taught at a primary school, reportedly the one he had attended. David Anderson and other sources say he was dismissed from teaching after accusations that he had beaten pupils. The colonial government later had reasons to portray Kimathi as a violent man, and nationalist writers later had reasons to portray him as a saint, so claims from both directions should be read with caution. He was probably a forceful and quarrelsome young man, which agrees with the descriptions of his school years.

By the late 1940s he was working in the Ol Kalou area, on the edge of the Aberdare range in what is now Nyandarua County. The district had many Kikuyu squatter families on European farms, and the KAU had an active branch there.

Politics and the Kenya African Union

Kimathi became active in politics through the Kenya African Union branch at Ol Kalou. Sources date his involvement from about 1947, and by 1950 he was the branch secretary. The post involved keeping membership records, collecting subscriptions, writing letters and reporting to the party in Nairobi. In a district full of squatters facing eviction, the branch also took in complaints about land and labour.

The work suited him. He wrote good English, spoke well and could organise people. By about 1950 the Ol Kalou branch was controlled by militant supporters who no longer believed that petitions would change colonial policy. A Special Branch profile of Kimathi, quoted in a later newspaper article, described him as a "councillor and coordinator".

The KAU leadership under Jomo Kenyatta wanted constitutional change through delegations, speeches and appeals in London. Many younger members in the branches wanted something faster. Some of them had already joined a secret movement that administered oaths of loyalty and prepared for armed resistance. Its members called it the Kenya Land and Freedom Army. The colonial press called it Mau Mau. The origin of that name is unknown. Stories about it include a settler's mishearing of a Kikuyu phrase, a code word, and a Swahili expression about the foreigner returning to Europe. The movement's own members did not generally use the name.

The Ol Kalou branch brought the open party and the secret movement together. Kimathi, as secretary, was in a position to recruit members of one into the other, and the evidence suggests that he did.

The Mau Mau Oath

The oath was central to the Mau Mau movement and was the main reason the colonial government and the settler press described it as savage.

Among the Kikuyu, solemn oaths had long been used to settle disputes over land, and a person who swore falsely was believed to bring misfortune on himself and his family. The movement used this tradition to bind its members to the cause and to secrecy. Later versions of the ceremony were more elaborate. Many descriptions of them come from testimony given to colonial investigators by people who had reason to tell their questioners what they wanted to hear, so the more sensational accounts are unreliable. It is clear, however, that the oath was often taken under pressure.

Kimathi was an oath administrator. According to David Anderson's account, he presided over oaths at Ol Kalou and used beatings to compel members, and he carried a double-barrelled shotgun. In 1951 he took the oath himself and joined the Forty Group, the militant wing of the banned Kikuyu Central Association. Later that year he was arrested briefly and escaped with the help of local police, which indicates how many people inside the colonial administration sympathised with the movement.

The scale of the oathing was very large. One estimate is that by the middle of the 1950s about ninety per cent of the Kikuyu, Embu and Meru people had taken some form of it. Many did so under compulsion, but a figure of that size also reflects wide support for the movement's aims.

The State of Emergency

Sir Evelyn Baring arrived in Kenya as Governor on 30 September 1952. On 3 October a European woman was killed at Thika, and on 9 October Senior Chief Waruhiu, a government loyalist who had spoken against the movement, was assassinated near Nairobi.

Baring declared a State of Emergency on 20 October 1952. The next day, in Operation Jock Scott, the government arrested about 180 people it believed to be leaders. They included Jomo Kenyatta, who was tried with five others at Kapenguria in a case that most historians regard as rigged. A key witness was later shown to have been bribed. Kenyatta was sentenced to seven years' imprisonment.

The arrests removed most of the older political leaders and left the movement to younger people. Thousands left the reserves and the towns for the forests of the Aberdare range, which the Kikuyu call Nyandarua, and for Mount Kenya. Kimathi went to the Aberdares before the end of 1952. The exact date is not recorded.

The government responded with collective punishments, curfews and cattle confiscations against entire districts, and it raised and armed the Home Guard, a force of loyalist Africans. In March 1953 a Mau Mau group attacked the loyalist village of Lari and killed more than seventy people, many of them women and children. Security forces and Home Guards killed a larger number of suspected supporters in reprisal over the following days, and the total is disputed. I have found no source that says Kimathi ordered the Lari attack. The Lari killings turned British public opinion against the movement and strengthened the government's hand.

Life in the Forest

The Aberdare range rises to nearly four thousand metres. The lower slopes are covered in bamboo and cedar forest, and the upper areas are cold moorland. Rain is frequent, and the forest holds elephant, buffalo and leopard.

The fighters who gathered there included ex-servicemen, evicted squatters, young men escaping arrest and a number of women. They called themselves the Land and Freedom Army. In the beginning they were organised in bands under local leaders, each with its own area and supply lines.

Kimathi worked to give these bands a common structure. Sources credit him with introducing ranks, units, discipline and a system of written orders and records. In 1953 he is said to have convened a war council and formed the Kenya Defence Council to coordinate the groups in the forests. He held the rank of Field Marshal. Other leaders given the same rank in sources include Baimungi M'marete, Musa Mwariama, Kubu Kubu, Waruhiu Itote (known as General China) and Muthoni Kirima, one of the few women to hold senior command. Kimathi's area, the central Aberdare forests, was the largest.

His authority was not universal. Commanders on Mount Kenya had their own bases and followers, distances were large and communication was slow. The Defence Council never worked as a single command in the way he intended.

He wrote a great deal. A collection of his papers, edited by the historian Maina wa Kinyatti and published as *Kenya's Freedom Struggle: The Dedan Kimathi Papers*, includes orders, letters and statements of the movement's aims. The authorship of some documents attributed to him is uncertain, but the collection shows that he regarded the fighters as an organised army with a political programme and tried to present them that way. By several accounts he used a typewriter in the forest.

Mukami Kimathi

Kimathi's wife was Mukami Kimathi. Her wartime role is documented only in fragments, and part of what has been written about her comes from newspaper features that repeat each other.

She worked outside the forest, among the Kikuyu villagers. Women were the only group still free to move around the countryside, since most men had either fled or been detained. Mukami is said to have helped organise dances that began with songs about love and gradually took on political and patriotic themes, which she used to recruit young people. She also helped run a network of women who acted as spies, oath administrators, suppliers of food and carriers of messages to the forest.

The fighters called her "the Wasp". Accounts say she would walk into Kimathi's meetings without being asked and criticise him openly. One report quotes him as saying he hated and loved her. I could not verify the quotation, but it fits the general descriptions of their relationship.

Sources give different numbers for their children. Some say two sons and seven daughters, others two sons and eight daughters. One son was named Wachiuri, and he is mentioned in Kimathi's last letter.

Mukami was later arrested and was held at Kamiti Maximum Security Prison, where she was still detained when her husband was executed. She published her own account of the war, *Mau Mau Freedom Fighter*, in 2017. She died on 4 May 2023, aged 96.

The War Turns Against the Fighters

General George Erskine arrived in Kenya in May 1953 as commander of the security forces and introduced a more systematic campaign. From November 1953 the Royal Air Force bombed the forest camps. Avro Lincoln bombers flew sorties until July 1955 and dropped nearly six million bombs. The bombing did little direct damage to the fighters but forced the camps to move constantly.

On 15 January 1954 General China was captured. He was interrogated for sixty-eight hours and gave the British valuable information about the movement's structure. In April 1954, in Operation Anvil, about 25,000 troops and police sealed off Nairobi and screened its African population. About 20,000 suspects were detained at Langata and about 30,000 were sent back to the reserves. The operation destroyed the Nairobi network that supplied the forest with recruits, money and goods.

In June 1954 the colonial War Council decided to move the rural Kikuyu population into fortified villages, so that they could be watched and could not feed the forest fighters. Within about eighteen months over a million people had been resettled in some 800 villages. Suspects were sent into a chain of detention camps known as the Pipeline, in which detainees were classified as white, grey or black according to how far they had cooperated. Conditions were harsh, and torture and abuse were widespread. In 2012 the British government accepted in court that detainees had been tortured, and in 2013 it announced compensation for more than five thousand survivors. In 1959 guards at Hola camp beat eleven detainees to death, which caused a political scandal in London.

The British also turned captured fighters. Men who were offered their lives in return for cooperation were armed and sent back into the forest as "pseudo-gangs" that posed as Mau Mau groups in order to locate the real ones. By one account these offers were rarely refused. An amnesty was offered in January 1955 and withdrawn in June. By 1956 fewer than 1,500 active fighters remained.

The police effort to find Kimathi was led by Ian Henderson of the Special Branch, who made his capture his main task.

Capture

By autumn 1956 most of Kimathi's officers had been killed, captured or turned, and the forest was full of patrols and pseudo-gangs. According to the Standard, hunger forced him out of the forest toward the edge of the Kikuyu reserve, where Home Guard patrols were active.

He was shot and captured on 21 October 1956 at Kahiga-ini, in Tetu, Nyeri district. The official account credits Ndirangu Mau, a Tribal Police constable who had joined the colonial forces in 1940, with shooting him in the leg. One source says the arrest took place in the emergency trenches the government had dug between the reserve and the forest, and describes the circumstances as contested. Ian Henderson, who had directed the hunt, was in Nairobi at a ceremony in his honour that day. He later wrote an account, *The Hunt for Kimathi*, and received the George Medal.

A local man, Meshack Wang'ombe, who was seventeen at the time, described the scene to the Daily Nation many years later. He and a friend ran toward the gunfire and found tribal policemen standing over Kimathi, who was wounded and lying on the ground. He was wearing a leopard skin and a wristwatch. The two boys made a stretcher from posts and bark and helped carry him out. Wang'ombe recalled Kimathi telling them that the event was the fulfilment of a prophecy. At the trading centre of Ihururu someone tried to take his watch, and Kimathi refused, saying that a person does not give up his belongings while he is alive.

He was taken to the government hospital in Nyeri, where, according to Henderson, police surrounded the building to protect him from angry crowds. Henderson visited him there a few days later. It was their first meeting.

The government printed more than 120,000 leaflets showing Kimathi being carried on a stretcher and distributed them in the countryside to discourage the fighters still in the forest. Historians generally treat his capture as the end of the Mau Mau campaign as an organised force, although small groups, mainly Meru units under Musa Mwariama, continued fighting for some time.

The Trial

Kimathi was not charged with leading the rebellion, with murder or with treason. He was charged under Regulation 8A(1) of the Emergency Regulations, 1952, with unlawful possession of a firearm and unlawful possession of ammunition. The weapon was a .38 Webley Scott revolver, and the ammunition was six rounds. Under the Emergency Regulations the firearm offence carried the death penalty.

A Daily Nation analysis argues that the government chose a simple charge because it was easy to prove, and because a trial for rebellion would have forced the court to hear the grievances behind it. The same analysis says the government wanted a death sentence as a warning to other anti-colonial activists.

The trial took place in Nyeri before Chief Justice Sir Kenneth O'Connor, with African assessors. Kimathi was still recovering from his wound, and several accounts say he was convicted and sentenced while in a hospital bed. The best-sourced date for the verdict is 19 November 1956. He was sentenced to death on the firearm charge and to seven years' hard labour on the ammunition charge. His appeal was dismissed, and he was transferred to Kamiti Maximum Security Prison in Nairobi.

His lawyer was Ralph Millner. Millner's private papers, which included the trial file, were later given to the Senate House Library at the University of London. The file was returned to Kenya, and Chief Justice Willy Mutunga arranged for a certified copy to be given to the family and for the original to be exhibited in the Judiciary museum.

The trial attracted foreign journalists. The South African trade unionist Solly Sachs said afterward that Kimathi was no criminal and that Africans would always remember him as a man who fought for the freedom of his people.

Imprisonment and Execution

Kimathi spent about three months in the condemned cell at Kamiti. During that time officials discussed how he should be hanged. The papers of Alistair Matheson, a district information officer in Nyeri who died in 2002, record that white settlers in the Mount Kenya region wanted a public execution as a deterrent. The Colonial Office in London refused. It regarded public hangings as offensive to British opinion, expected criticism in Parliament, and feared that a public execution would strengthen the fighters and win sympathy for the Kikuyu from other Kenyans.

One Kenyan media report, based on the same papers, says that a temporary wooden tower covered with canvas was built outside the Nyeri court so that the hanging could be carried out in secret. I have not been able to confirm this against another source. The more common account, which agrees with the other documents I have seen, is that he was hanged at Kamiti.

The Catholic priest Father Joseph Whelan spent the night before the execution with him and later described him as intelligent, cultured and well educated. At about one in the morning Kimathi wrote a letter to Father Marino of the Catholic mission at Mathari, near Nyeri. In it he wrote, "I am so busy and so happy preparing for heaven tomorrow." He asked that his son Wachiuri be educated under the priest's care, and that his wife Mukami, who was held in the women's section of the same prison, be looked after by the Catholic sisters. He ended with a farewell to the world and all its belongings. Some writers see the letter as a sign that he had turned from traditional Kikuyu belief to Christianity. It is also the practical letter of a father arranging for his family.

On the morning of the execution Mukami was allowed to see him, and they talked for nearly two hours. According to accounts of the meeting, he told her that the British were determined to hang him, that he had committed no crime other than leading a liberation army, and that his blood would water the tree of independence.

He was hanged in the early morning of 18 February 1957 at Kamiti. He was thirty-six. His body was not returned to his family. It was buried in an unmarked grave, and one account says this was done to stop his supporters from making a shrine. Among the Kikuyu,

burial and the rites that go with it matter greatly, and the refusal to return his body has been the main grievance of his family ever since.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Kimathi After Independence

Kimathi was not given official honour after Kenya became independent on 12 December 1963. The Mau Mau movement remained banned, and many former fighters received no land, pensions or recognition. In 1962, before independence, Tom Mboya opened an exhibition that honoured Kimathi as a hero, but this was not followed by state recognition.

Jomo Kenyatta had been released in 1961 and became the first president. Sources say that Kenyatta and his successor, Daniel arap Moi, viewed Kimathi unfavourably. Kenyatta had been named by the British governor as the leader of Mau Mau, which he always denied, and he had spent the war in detention. His government stressed unity and reconciliation, and the Mau Mau war had also been a conflict between Kikuyu loyalists and fighters. Recognising the fighters raised questions the new state preferred to avoid.

Mukami's detention had ended, and the family lived in poverty for many years.

Outside Kenya, Kimathi became a symbol for writers and activists. In 1976 Micere Mugo and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o wrote the play *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi*. Both later lived in exile. In July 1990, five months after his release from prison in South Africa, Nelson Mandela visited Nairobi and asked to see Kimathi's grave and to meet his widow. Nobody could say where the grave was. At Kasarani Stadium Mandela praised Kimathi and the other Mau Mau leaders. He met Mukami and two of her children in 2005.

In 2003 the government of President Mwai Kibaki lifted the ban on the Mau Mau. Vice President Moody Awori said it had taken forty years.

Memorials and Recognition

On 11 December 2006 Vice President Awori laid the foundation stone for a statue of Kimathi in Nairobi. President Kibaki unveiled it on 18 February 2007, the fiftieth anniversary of the hanging. The bronze figure is about 2.1 metres tall and stands on a graphite plinth at the junction of Kimathi Street and Mama Ngina Street. It shows him holding a rifle and a dagger.

In 2009 the government built a three-bedroom house for Mukami on her farm at Kinangop in Nyandarua County, and in 2012 it gave her a double-cabin pickup truck.

In 2012 the British government accepted in the High Court in London that detainees in the Emergency camps had been tortured. In June 2013 it announced compensation of about twenty million pounds for more than five thousand Kenyans and expressed regret. A Mau Mau memorial funded by Britain was unveiled in Uhuru Park, Nairobi, on 12 September 2015. The 2010 Kenyan Constitution provides for the recognition of national heroes.

Places and institutions named after Kimathi include Dedan Kimathi University of Technology in Nyeri, Dedan Kimathi Stadium in Nyeri (formerly Kamukunji Grounds), Dedan Kimathi Memorial High School, and streets or roads in Nairobi, Nyeri, Nanyuki, Mombasa and Eldoret. There are also Dedan Kimathi Road in Lusaka, Kimathi Avenue in Kampala, Kimathi Crescent in Mwanza and Dedan Kimathi Street in Embalenhle, South Africa. Jabali Afrika recorded a song about him in 2011. Books about him include Ian Henderson and Philip Goodhart's *The Hunt for Kimathi* (1958), Samuel Kahiga's *Dedan Kimathi: The Real Story* (1990), Joseph Karimi's *Dedan Kimathi: The Whole Story* (2013) and Mukami Kimathi's *Mau Mau Freedom Fighter* (2017).

The Search for His Grave

The best documentary evidence says Kimathi was buried within the grounds of Kamiti Maximum Security Prison. A 2001 newspaper article, listed in the references of a modern summary, claimed instead that he was buried at Lang'ata. No grave marker, burial register or map has been published. The Kenyan government and the Kimathi family have for decades asked Britain, which held the colonial records, to help find the grave, and the British government has not said where it is.

In 2010 Mukami Kimathi asked for the search to be renewed. On 25 October 2019 the Dedan Kimathi Foundation reported that the grave had been identified in the Kamiti prison grounds. No exhumation or reburial has been carried out as a result. Mukami died on 4 May 2023 and was buried at Njabini in Kinangop, after waiting more than sixty-six years.

On a royal visit to Kenya, civil society groups raised the question of Kimathi's remains and those of other Kenyans, among them the Nandi leader Koitalel Arap Samoei, who was killed by the British in 1905. In 2024 and 2025 the family urged the government again to carry out the exhumation it had promised, and President William Ruto had said he would honour the request. I have seen no confirmation that this has been done.

Assessment

Kimathi's career is described differently by different groups. The colonial government called him a terrorist and a criminal. Kenyan nationalists called him a hero. Neither description covers the evidence.

He was an educated man who found that the colonial system had no place for him, and he became one of the most capable organisers of the armed movement against it. He gave the forest fighters a command structure and a written record. He also administered oaths under

compulsion, and the war he led killed many Africans, including civilians. The colonial authorities, for their part, used torture, mass detention and forced resettlement, and killed many thousands. Total deaths during the Emergency are estimated between about twenty-five thousand and fifty thousand by different historians, and some give higher figures.

Most historians treat the trial as unjust. Kimathi was condemned to death for owning a revolver, and the government hid his body to prevent him from being remembered. Kenya became independent six years after his death, but the state did not formally recognise the Mau Mau movement until 2003. The question of his grave has still not been settled.

I have written this account because Kimathi's name is familiar and his life is not. A fuller public record of the Emergency, including the release of the colonial files and the locating of his grave, is still needed.

A Timeline

1920	31 October: Kimathi wa Waciuri is born near Nyeri, in the Ambui clan. Kenya becomes a crown colony; the kipande identity pass is in force.
c. 1935	Enters elementary school at Karuna-ini; later attends the Church of Scotland mission school at Tumutumu.
1940–44	Brief and disputed army service; casual jobs, including as a teacher, in and around Nairobi and Nyandarua.
1946	The Kenya African Study Union becomes the Kenya African Union (KAU). Jomo Kenyatta returns from Britain.
c. 1947–50	Serves as KAU branch secretary at Ol Kalou.
1951	Takes the oath and joins the Forty Group. Briefly arrested, escapes.
1952	20 October: State of Emergency declared. 21 October: Operation Jock Scott. Kimathi goes to the Nyandarua forests.
1953	Forms the Kenya Defence Council. March: the Lari attack. The Kapenguria trial ends with Kenyatta imprisoned. November: RAF bombing of the forests begins.
1954	15 January: General China captured. 24 April: Operation Anvil in Nairobi. June: forced villagisation is decided.
1956	21 October: captured at Kahiga-ini, Tetu, near Nyeri. 19 November: sentenced to death at Nyeri.
1957	18 February: hanged at Kamiti Maximum Security Prison, aged 36. Buried in an unmarked grave.
1959	Eleven detainees beaten to death at Hola camp.
1963	12 December: Kenya becomes independent.
1990	July: Nelson Mandela asks to see Kimathi's grave in Nairobi; it cannot be found.
2003	The Mau Mau ban is lifted under President Kibaki.
2007	18 February: Kimathi's statue is unveiled in Nairobi.
2013	June: Britain announces compensation for more than five thousand Kenyans tortured during the Emergency.
2015	September: a Mau Mau memorial is unveiled in Uhuru Park, Nairobi.
2019	25 October: the Dedan Kimathi Foundation reports that his grave has been identified at Kamiti.
2023	4 May: Mukami Kimathi dies at 96.

Notes on Sources

This is a work of popular history, and I have written it from published material, not from archives or interviews of my own. The dates and facts come from the following, and where they disagree I have said so in the text.

Books and papers referred to. I know the following chiefly through the press and reference summaries listed below, and I cite them as the sources those summaries cite. Maina wa Kinyatti, *Kenya's Freedom Struggle: The Dedan Kimathi Papers*. Ian Henderson and Philip Goodhart, *The Hunt for Kimathi* (1958). Samuel Kahiga, *Dedan Kimathi: The Real Story* (1990). Joseph Karimi, *Dedan Kimathi: The Whole Story* (2013). Mukami Kimathi, *Mau Mau Freedom Fighter* (2017). Micere Mugo and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi*.

Further reading. David Anderson, *Histories of the Hanged*, and Caroline Elkins, *Imperial Reckoning*, on the wider war and the detention system.

Reference and press. The entries on Dedan Kimathi and on the Mau Mau rebellion in the online encyclopaedia Wikipedia; the EBSCO Research Starter and BlackPast entries on Kimathi; Encyclopedia.com; the Daily Nation's "Shadows of October: how Dedan Kimathi spent his last days" and its reports on his trial papers; the Standard's "Politics of death: how Dedan Kimathi was captured"; Kenyans.co.ke on the debate over the hanging and on Mukami Kimathi; and Eastleigh Voice's "Beyond the shadows: in search for Dedan Kimathi".

A caution. Several details of Kimathi's life have more than one version: his birthplace, his father's name, the dates of his army service, the number of his children, and the place of his execution. I have not resolved them, and a reader who needs certainty should go to the primary sources, especially the trial file in Kenya's Judiciary and the colonial records in London. Quotations attributed to Kimathi come from the reports named above and are translated or reported, not verified against originals.

About the Author

Makena Brandon is a Kenyan author, poet and publisher whose work moves through literature, philosophy, faith, social reflection and youth empowerment.

He is the founder of Discussion Publishers PLC and the Discussion Newspaper Publishers Network. His books include *The Future*, *Lost Soil*, *The Law of Human Meaning* and *The Resilient Scholar*.

His serialized poetry and essays explore family, dignity, poverty, sin, digital life, faith and the inner conflicts that shape modern African readers.

MAKENA BRANDON

Dedan Kimathi is one of the best known names in Kenya and one of the least documented. Schools, roads, a stadium and a university carry his name, and there is a bronze statue of him in Nairobi, yet most Kenyans can say very little about his life beyond the fact that he led the Mau Mau fighters and was hanged by the British in 1957.



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