

The Trial of Dedan Kimathi returns to the Kenya National Theatre: The unresolved issues of the Mau Mau struggle

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Directed and produced by Stuart Nash; written by Ng?g? wa Thiong'o and Micere Githae Mugo.

At the Kenya National Theatre, June 19-29, 2025

The Trial of Dedan Kimathi, the powerful historical drama co-written by Ng?g? wa Thiong'o and Micere Githae Mugo, has returned to the Kenya National Theatre in Nairobi nearly 50 years after its original performance in 1976. This long-awaited revival comes just weeks after the death of Ng?g? on May 28 at the age of 87.

The performance ends in total darkness, with Ng?g?'s pre-recorded voice echoing through the theatre, urging the audience to "resist tyranny", a direct call to Kenya's youth to rise against the corrupt ruling elite and its imperialist backers.

The play presents a fictionalised account of the trial of Dedan Kimathi, a key leader in the Mau Mau uprising, Kenya's peasant-led armed revolt against British imperialism from 1952 to 1959. It was one of the first large-scale, sustained rural insurrections against imperialism in Africa after World War II. Kimathi was executed following a show trial in February 1957. His murder ranks among the most vile crimes committed by British imperialism, as it sought to brutally suppress anti-colonial uprisings and prop up its crumbling empire.

The production, directed by British expatriate Stuart Nash, is being staged alternately in English and Kikuyu (Ng?g?'s mother tongue). Ng?g? was closely involved in preparing the revival, participating in online meetings from his home in the US. He was also assisting with next year's revival of his musical *Mother, Sing for Me*, again under Nash's direction. Nash said Ng?g? was unconcerned about royalties, but was thrilled to see his plays return to the Kenyan stage.

Nash's productions are striking a chord with growing left-wing opposition among youth, workers, and sections of the middle class. Months after William Ruto became president in 2022, Nash revived *I Will Marry When I Want* by Ng?g? and Ng?g? wa M?ri?, a play exploring the betrayal of the anti-imperialist struggle by Kenya's post-independence elite. Then came *Mstinji*, adapted from Molière's *The Miser*, set in a country resembling Kenya, ruled by a dictator obsessed with wealth.

As Ruto introduced his first IMF-dictated austerity budget in 2023, accompanied by brutal crackdowns leaving dozens of protestors dead, Nash staged Francis Imbuga's *Betrayal in the City*, a scathing critique of state corruption and authoritarianism in postcolonial Africa. Last year, during the Gen-Z anti-austerity uprising, Nash revived his acclaimed production of *Sarafina!* for the third time, depicting the brutal repression of student uprisings under Apartheid South Africa.

On the first anniversary of the Gen-Z protests and following the election of fascist Donald Trump in the United States, Nash chose to revive *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi*. This brave decision comes despite intensifying repression in the arts, as with the recent violent crackdown on a political

play performed by Kenyan school students.

The Trial of Dedan Kimathi

The play opens with gunfire as Kimathi, portrayed with commanding intensity by Bilal Mwaura, is captured in a violent ambush by white colonial officers and the Home Guard—the African auxiliaries of British rule in Kenya. Setting the tone for the production, a British officer executes a captured Mau Mau fighter after unleashing a torrent of racist insults, not only against the Mau Mau but also against their own African collaborators.

Two Home Guards discuss Kimathi before his trial with a mixture of mockery, fear, ignorance and contempt. One cautions, "Kimathi is a hero of the people. They love him like anything."

This stands in stark contrast to the underlying project behind the "civilized" and "democratic" courtroom scene that follows.

The Woman (played by Lydia Gitachu) and the Boy (Thuita Mwangi) symbolising the Kenyan masses, meet in a crowded market. The Woman confronts the Boy, who has been quarrelling with his sister over money. "The same old story. Our people... tearing one another... and all because of the crumbs thrown at them by the exploiting foreigners. Our own food eaten and leftovers thrown to us—in our own land, where we should have the whole share."

She points to Kimathi's teaching: "Unite, drive out the enemy and control your own riches, and enjoy the fruit of your sweat."

She adds: "And you call yourself a man! ... The day you understand why your father died ... the day you ask yourself ... 'What can I do so that another shall not die under such grisly circumstances?' — that day, my son, you'll become a man."

Growing up is not about age, but about recognising injustice, taking responsibility, and standing in solidarity with others. She insists that they must find Kimathi, telling the Boy, "He is not alone in that cell. We are with him."

In the colonial courtroom, white settlers at the front and Africans squeezed in behind, Kimathi is brought before a judge, flanked by soldiers and officials. He remains silent as the judge explains the charges against him of being in possession of a firearm, which under emergency laws carries the death penalty.

Kimathi defiantly asks by what right the colonial judge dares sit in judgement over him. When the judge lectures him about "law," Kimathi says there are "Two laws. Two justices. One law and one justice protects the man of property, the man of wealth, the foreign exploiter. Another

law, another justice, silences the poor, the hungry, our people.”

There follows one of the most politically charged scenes of the play. A stylised tribunal composed of a colonial administrator, Henderson (played by Nash himself), a banker, a politician and a priest calls on Kimathi to plead guilty. Henderson tells Kimathi they may spare his life if he pleads guilty. “We can work together—help us root out the others.” The Banker intervenes, complaining, “Your so-called rebellion disrupts stability... the tea plantations, the railways, the banks—they cannot thrive if there is no peace.”

The Politician, speaking for African elites and the aspiring post-independence administrators, urges, “Plead guilty, Kimathi, so that we may enter Parliament, build schools, open enterprises... Partnership in progress awaits.” He promises money for affordable housing, a jab introduced by Nash in a reference to Ruto’s promise to construct one million homes countrywide which is developing into a new state scam. The Politician cynically says, “We all fought for Uhuru [freedom] in our different way. ... There are no classes in Africa. We are all freedom fighters.”

The Priest tells Kimathi, “Plead guilty and ask God for forgiveness.” Kimathi challenges him, “Can it be wrong...in the eyes of your God for people to fight against exploitation?”

The Woman and the Boy’s continued quiet resistance, refusing to abandon Kimathi, show that the revolutionary spirit lives beyond the courtroom’s walls.

Kimathi, brutally tortured by Henderson, also grapples with the moral weight of armed struggle. In a flashback to the forest fight, when two captured colonial Indian soldiers are brought before a Mau Mau court, Kimathi says, “We are fighting against British colonialism and imperialist robbers of our land, our factories, our wealth. Will you denounce British imperialism?” They reply, “We are the Queen’s soldiers.” They are executed.

Later we see a trial of Mau Mau deserters, including Kimathi’s own brother. Kimathi offers clemency, saying he detests “spilling African blood.” The traitors take advantage of his mercy and escape.

This forest tribunal, raw and contradictory, is counterposed with the clinical, procedural cruelty of the colonial court. The imperial courtroom cloaks execution in the language of law and civility. Kimathi’s tribunal, imperfect and improvised, speaks with greater moral weight.

The colonial judge announces the inevitable verdict of death, but Kimathi refuses to “kneel before a foreign flag. I shall not die in silence.”

Boy cries out: “He is not dead. He lives in all those who will never kneel.” The Woman replies: “The struggle is not over. It is just beginning.”

Then, in total darkness, as Kimathi is hanged, we hear Ng?g?’s call to “resist tyranny.” An awed silence swept through the packed theatre, broken only by muffled sobs at Ng?g?’s rallying cry from beyond the grave.

The legacy of Kimathi and the Mau Mau

The Trial remains one of the most powerful works of postcolonial African theatre. Watching this revival, amid the Israeli genocide of Palestinians in Gaza, Western-backed wars against Iran, Yemen, and Russia in Ukraine, and deepening authoritarianism across the globe spearheaded by the fascist in the White House, its message hits with renewed urgency.

The play speaks to the enduring realities of imperialist oppression, including the hypocrisy of Western powers, kangaroo courts, justifications of genocide in the name of “self defence,” religious figures who preach

obedience, and a propaganda offensive that brands all resistance “terrorism.” The play’s insistence that the oppressed must resist, organise, and reject capitalist oppression could not be more relevant.

Ng?g?’s play was part of an attempt to reclaim the legacy of the Mau Mau rebellion, to challenge the post-independence narrative of the elites who had collaborated with British imperialism and enriched themselves through the continued dispossession of the rural masses. Jomo Kenyatta, Kenya’s first president, infamously denounced the Mau Mau as “a disease that had been eradicated and must never be remembered again”. Once in power, he ordered the execution of General Bamuingi, one of the last Mau Mau fighters who refused to disarm. Mau Mau veterans were abandoned, their role suppressed for decades, while the independence narrative was sanitised and co-opted by the postcolonial ruling class.

Ng?g?’s intervention was not merely artistic. Working closely with Maoist historians such as Maina wa K?nyatt?, Ng?g?’ sought to reinterpret the Mau Mau not just as an anti-colonial uprising but as a revolutionary socialist movement. He was an active member and public spokesperson of the underground Maoist organisations, the December Twelve Movement (DTM), and later the Mwakenya. As Kenyan British historian Shiraz Durrani, himself a former Mwakenya member, notes in a recent foreword to Ng?g?’s writings: “His theatre work with Ng?g?’ wa M?ri? at the Kamirithu Community Educational and Cultural Centre, and the writing and staging of *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi*, were part of his activism as a member of DTM.”

Ali Mazrui and Willy Mutunga, also former members, recall: “During our years in the organisation [DTM], all intellectual and scholarly projects of individual members—including Maina wa K?nyatt?’s *Thunder from the Mountains* and Ng?g?’ wa Thiong’o’s *Detained*—were essential projects of the movement.”^[1]

Ng?g?’s cultural output cannot be separated from the Maoist parties he belonged to that sought to complete Kenya’s “Second Liberation”, a project aimed at fulfilling the unfinished tasks of national independence through a bourgeois capitalist phase, with socialism deferred to an indefinite future (see Kenya’s Gen Z insurgency, the strike wave and the struggle for Permanent Revolution).

Despite its dramatic power and enduring relevance, *The Trial* also reflects the limitations of its Maoist and nationalist framework. The Mau Mau struggle, for all its heroism, was not socialist. It was a peasant rebellion, largely confined to the Kikuyu, Embu, and Meru communities, and led by a radicalised segment of the rural poor. It emerged amid the postwar wave of anti-colonial resistance, but remained politically and organisationally disconnected from the working class, both within Kenya and internationally.

Its demands did not centre on socialist internationalism and the socialist restructuring of the economy but on capitalist independence and the end of racial discrimination. It sought the Africanisation of the state and economy, a process that did not challenge foreign capital or end exploitation but instead looked to replace colonial administrators with local elites and allow for indigenous capitalist participation.

At its core, the Mau Mau uprising called for land redistribution. Its methods—guerrilla warfare, oathing ceremonies, and Kimathi’s increasingly desperate appeals to the feudal King of Buganda, the Stalinist bureaucracy in the Soviet Union (which refused military assistance under its policy of “peaceful coexistence” with imperialism), British Labour MPs and even to US Secretary of State Adlai Stevenson—exposed the movement’s political limitations. The Mau Mau never made a break with the conservative leadership of the Kenya African Union (KAU), led by Kenyatta.

As one historian notes, “In all their songs in the forest, there is no denunciation of the old KAU leadership and its aims. In fact, in the songs categorized as ‘detention songs’, they sang with praise about their

national heroes who had been detained... specifically of their leader who was, of course, Kenyatta.”^[2]

This loyalty reflected the inability of the radicalised peasantry to see its interests as different and even opposed to those of the bourgeois nationalist elite. The movement failed to forge the unity with the working class necessary to transform anti-colonial revolt into a revolutionary struggle against capitalism and imperialism.

The peasant-based national liberation movements that did take power, like the MPLA in Angola, ZANU-PF in Zimbabwe, and FRELIMO in Mozambique—all of which, unlike the Mau Mau, claimed falsely to be socialist—ultimately established repressive one-party regimes that crushed independent working-class organisations, enforced structural adjustment programmes dictated by the IMF and World Bank, and maintained the same exploitation under a new flag.

Artistic license through a Maoist prism

Ng’g? and Mugo stated clearly in their 1976 preface that *The Trial* is “an imaginative recreation and interpretation of the collective will of the Kenyan peasants and workers in their refusal to break under 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”.

But when artistic license extends to reshaping the political character of a movement, transforming it into something it was not, it risks obscuring the essential lessons new generations must draw from that period. At times, *The Trial* leans into nationalist myth-making. Its repeated invocation of “the country,” “patriotism,” and “Kenya” reflects the limitations of Ng’g?’s Maoist and nationalist outlook, which comes at the expense of a more grounded and historically accurate engagement with the past.

Today, Kimathi’s image is everywhere in Kenya, but the historical questions his struggle raised remain unanswered. The independence settlement enshrined capitalist rule under a new elite. The land was not returned to the peasantry but redistributed among the Kenyan bourgeoisie. Imperialist control over finance, trade, and resources was never broken. This is why it is not enough to simply venerate Kimathi and the Mau Mau fighters as national heroes.

For many young people, Kimathi and the Mau Mau are admired for their personal bravery, sacrifice, and commitment to struggling against injustice. They stand in sharp contrast to Kenya’s contemporary capitalist elite and affluent middle class, where status is flaunted through luxury cars, vast estates of stolen land, and lavish church donations. That layer has itself cynically attempted to co-opt Kimathi’s image, manufacturing a hollow narrative of “national unity” while presiding over a society riven by grotesque inequality. In 2006, the Kenyan government erected a statue of Kimathi, instructing artists to present an idealised image of “heroic patriotism.”

For all the heroism of their struggle against British imperialism, the radicalised peasantry would not and could not resolve Kenya’s fundamental democratic and social questions. The task of defeating imperialism then and today falls to the working class.

This overdue revival of *The Trial* is welcome. It is to Stuart Nash’s credit that such plays are again on Kenya’s stages, even as Ruto moves to silence artists voicing social opposition. But if these productions are to serve as more than nostalgic paeans to national heroism, they must become a catalyst for a deeper reckoning. Workers, youth, and the best layers of the middle class and intelligentsia must study the bitter lessons of the Mau Mau and the dead-end of bourgeois nationalism, and turn decisively to the program of international socialism.

Both quotes can be found in Durrani, Shiraz (June 9, 20205), “Ngugi’s Untorld Contribution to Politics and Publishing in Kenya”. Foreword to Ngugi wa Thiong’o *Writing Against Colonialism* (2025), p. i.

Maloba, Wunyabari (1994), *Mau Mau and Kenya: An Analysis of a Peasant Revolt*, p. 130.

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[2] Maloba, Wunyabari (1994), *Mau Mau and Kenya: An Analysis of a Peasant Revolt*, p. 130.



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