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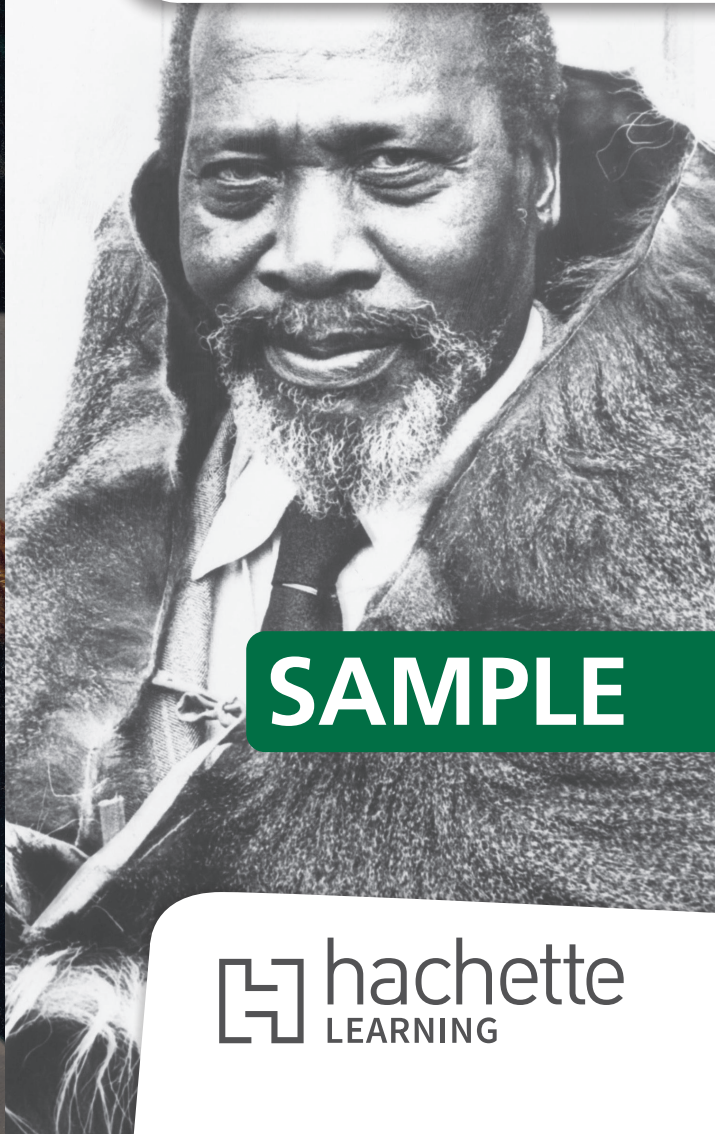


Independence and identity

The Haitian Revolution (circa 1780–1825)

Kenyan independence (1945–1978)

Mallory Cairo
Joy Nyokabi Karinge



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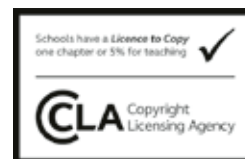
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How was independence achieved?

Kenya's independence in December 1963 marked a critical moment in African decolonization, representing both the victory of an anti-colonial struggle and the beginning of a new nation-state. Between 1952 and 1963, Kenya experienced one of Africa's most violent periods in the Mau Mau Uprising, followed by constitutional negotiations in London and the establishment of self-governing institutions. The Lancaster House Conferences (1960–63), where Kenyan leaders debated power distribution, minority rights and land management, established the constitutional framework for Kenya's transition. Throughout this period, Jomo Kenyatta emerged as the primary nationalist leader, becoming the symbol of Kenyan nationalism.

To answer the unit question on how Kenyan independence was achieved you will need to consider the following questions:

- ★ What were the economic, political and cultural factors that led to the Mau Mau Uprising?
- ★ What role did the Lancaster House Conferences and the emergence of multi-party politics play in establishing the constitutional and political framework for self-governance in Kenya?
- ★ What role did Jomo Kenyatta play in Kenya's independence movement, and what contradictions defined his political career?

KEY DATES

1952 Britain declares State of Emergency; Jomo Kenyatta arrested
1952–57 Peak years of Mau Mau military conflict; British counter-insurgency operations
1954 Swynnerton Plan introduced; Operation Anvil
1957 Dedan Kimathi executed
1959 Hola Camp massacre
1960 State of Emergency formally lifted

1960 First Lancaster House Conference
1961 Jomo Kenyatta released from detention
1962 Second Lancaster House Conference
1963 Third Lancaster House Conference; established the constitutional frameworks for independence
1963 (12 December) Kenya achieves independence; Kenyatta becomes prime minister

1 Mau Mau Uprising (1952–60)

► **Key question:** *What were the economic, political and cultural factors that led to the Mau Mau Uprising?*

Kenya's struggle for independence unfolded within a broader wave of decolonization that was reshaping Africa and Asia. Ghana's independence in March 1957 under Kwame Nkrumah proved that African self-rule was

Research

The decolonization of Africa and Asia after the Second World War took many different forms. Choose one of the following comparative cases and investigate how independence was achieved:

- Ghana (1957): How did Kwame Nkrumah build a mass nationalist movement, and what role did pan-Africanism play?
- India (1947): How did the experience of Indian soldiers in the Second World War, and the pressure of mass civil disobedience, accelerate British withdrawal?
- Algeria (1954–62): Why did France resist Algerian independence so violently, and how does the Algerian case compare to Kenya's?

How did the crisis of land scarcity in the late 1940s create conditions for armed resistance?

achievable, inspiring nationalists across the continent. Tanganyika's peaceful transition to independence in December 1961 under Julius Nyerere demonstrated that Britain could transfer power without prolonged conflict when settler populations were small. Kenya's fight for independence, however, was similar to that of Algeria, where France fought a brutal eight-year war (1954–62) against nationalist forces in a colony with a large European settler population. Where large European settler communities existed, colonial powers were far more reluctant to relinquish control, and the path to independence was far longer and far more violent. Like the Algerian National Liberation Front (FLN), Mau Mau fighters faced a colonial power determined to protect settler interests through military force.

Economic pressures and land hunger

By the late 1940s, several interconnected factors created conditions that made violent resistance in Kenya almost inevitable. The most fundamental of these was land hunger. The Kikuyu population had grown significantly, but the land available to them had shrunk. In Central Province, population density in reserves reached crisis levels. Some areas had more than 280 people per 2.5 square kilometres (1 square mile), while nearby European farms might have only a handful of settlers on many hundreds of hectares (thousands of acres).

In traditional Kikuyu society, young men acquired land primarily through patrilineal inheritance from their fathers, and through allocation by lineage (*mbari*) and clan elders within communal holdings (*githaka*). When young men reached adulthood and sought to marry, they expected their fathers or lineage elders to assign them plots that could be cultivated within the family holding. However, young Kikuyu men found it impossible to acquire land through traditional means, which threatened not only their economic survival but also their ability to marry and achieve adult status in Kikuyu society.

The situation was made worse by soil erosion in the overcrowded reserves. Continuous cultivation without adequate fallowing periods, combined with overgrazing, degraded the soil. Colonial agricultural officers attempted to impose soil conservation measures, but these were seen by many African farmers as another form of colonial interference. When the government tried to force terracing and other conservation measures, it often had to use coercion, which further alienated the African population. The colonial government's agricultural policies, though sometimes well intentioned from a technical perspective, failed to address the fundamental problem of land inequality.

Political frustration and the failure of constitutional reform

Political developments in the late 1940s and early 1950s also contributed to the turn towards violence. The Kenya African Union (KAU), founded in 1944 and led by Jomo Kenyatta from 1947, attempted to achieve reform through constitutional means. KAU organized mass meetings, submitted petitions and sought to unite different minority ethnic groups in the struggle for African rights. However, the colonial government and European settlers consistently blocked meaningful reforms.

In 1951, a series of constitutional proposals was put forward by African leaders. They advocated having six African representatives on the Legislative Council. At the time there were fourteen representatives for the European population and two for the African population, despite African people comprising more than 97% of the population. These African representatives had been nominated (not elected), with Eliud Mathu appointed in 1944 and Benaiah Ohanga in 1946.

Even these minor reforms were opposed by many settlers, who feared any African political advancement, and the proposals were rejected by the council. African leaders were disappointed and frustrated. The intransigence of the settler community and the British government's unwillingness to challenge settler power convinced many African people that the colonial system would never reform itself voluntarily.

Cultural and psychological factors

Oathing

Oaths were an important part of traditional Kikuyu society, and were commonly used to unify the community. The Kikuyu Central Association had used **oathing** ceremonies in the 1920s to recruit members to their organization and guarantee their allegiance. Different oaths had different purposes. *Muma* was used when referring to 'Oath', and *Muma wa Uiguanu* when referring to the 'Oath of Unity'.

Mau Mau (otherwise known as the Kenya Land and Freedom Army) was an anti-colonial movement that emerged from grievances over land seizure by European settlers, exploitative labour systems like the Kipande and political exclusion under British rule. When Britain declared a State of Emergency in October 1952, Mau Mau fighters used guerrilla warfare and traditional oath-taking ceremonies to mobilize recruits and fight against the colonial forces.

As an underground movement, Mau Mau demanded strict secrecy as well as total commitment, and thus co-opted parts of the Kikuyu traditional initiation ceremony, judicial oaths and death curses, and modified others with the idea that it would be equally binding for all those who gave their allegiance to Mau Mau. In this way, oathing helped

Why did the failure of constitutional reform push many towards more radical forms of resistance by the early 1950s?

How did oathing, prophecy and racial discrimination prepare the cultural and psychological ground for the Mau Mau Uprising?

KEY TERM

Oathing Ceremony used to bind participants to the independence movement.

create bonds of solidarity that transcended ethnic origins and played a key role in developing an insurgency from the different roots of Mau Mau on settler farms, in the reserves and in the city. Those who refused to take the oath or violated its terms would face the threat of physical punishment or death. Even under torture, many refused to betray their oath, demonstrating its binding power.



What was the significance of the spiritual practice of oathing for Mau Mau in fighting this war?

Research skills

How does the context of this source (date, author background, purpose) influence the way Mau Mau is presented? What might be emphasized or omitted as a result?

ATL



According to Njama's account, what made oathing so effective in securing commitment to the Mau Mau movement? How does the nature of the source – an autobiographical account by a former Mau Mau participant, co-written and published post-conflict in 1966 – shape its portrayal?

SOURCE A

Extract from 'Who deserves to die? The moral logic of Mau Mau killings in colonial Kenya, 1952–56', by H Muoki Mbunga, *Journal of African History*, Cambridge University Press, 2024. H Muoki Mbunga is Assistant Professor of History at Tufts University. He holds a PhD in Modern African History from West Virginia University.

Oathing was the ritual of initiation administered to new Mau Mau recruits. No one could join Mau Mau without swearing the secret, sacred oath of unity, which denounced British annexation of Kenya and called on everyone to join hands to reclaim the stolen lands. Oathing sacralized the Mau Mau struggle by transforming commitment to the movement into a sacred communal duty. The oath bound individuals to a common cause, but it left them individually answerable to God, which fostered deep personal commitment to the movement. Unlike traditional Kikuyu oaths, however, which only the elderly, propertied, male heads of households were eligible to swear, Mau Mau oaths were administered en masse. Anyone could swear the oath and join Mau Mau irrespective of their age, gender, or socioeconomic status.

SOURCE B

Extract from *Mau Mau from Within: Autobiography and Analysis of Kenya's Peasant Revolt*, by Karari Njama and Don Barnett, Monthly Review Press, New York, 1966. This extract is from the autobiography of Karari Njama, a former Mau Mau fighter, co-written with Canadian scholar-activist Don Barnett.

At the climax of the ceremony, each initiate wore a ring of the twisted cowhide around his neck and held a damp ball of soil against his stomach with his right hand – a symbol of the person's willingness to do everything in his power to assist the association in running and protecting the land belonging to the Kikuyu people.

Standing thus before the arch, I passed through it seven times while the oath-administrator uttered and I repeated the following vows:

- (1) 'If I am called upon at any time of the day or night to assist in the work of this association, I will respond without hesitation: And if I fail to do so, may this oath kill me.
- (2) If I am required to raise subscriptions for this organization, I will do so; And if I do not obey, may this oath kill me.
- (3) I will never decline to help a member of this organization who is in need of assistance; And if I fail to do so, may this oath kill me.
- (4) I will never reveal the existence or secrets of the association to Government or to any person who is not himself a member; And if I violate this oath, may this oath kill me.'

Racial discrimination

Racial discrimination practices also prepared the ground for rebellion. The colonial system's racial hierarchy placed the European population at the top, Asian people in the middle and the African population at the bottom. This hierarchy was enforced through everyday humiliations: separate and inferior facilities for African people; the requirement to step aside for European people on pavements (sidewalks); and the use of derogatory terms like 'boy' for adult African men. Education in mission schools, while providing literacy and new skills, also exposed African students to Christian ideas about equality and justice that contradicted colonial practice. This was further exemplified by the Second World War, where African men had been conscripted to serve the British Army in North Africa, Burma and Southeast Asia. Veteran soldiers demystified the myth of white invincibility and developed a new political consciousness about race and colonialism.

Independent schools

The independent schools and churches movement, which emerged in the 1920s and grew rapidly in the 1940s, provided spaces where the African population could develop their own institutions free from European control. These schools and churches became centres of political discussion and organization. They also helped preserve and adapt Kikuyu cultural practices that missionaries and the colonial government tried to suppress. The resulting increase in literacy levels provided audiences for vernacular newspapers and pamphlets, popularizing ideas like those of **Mugo wa Kibiru**.

Prophecy

Prophetic movements also played a role in preparing psychological ground for rebellion. Various prophets predicted the coming end of colonial rule and the restoration of African land and dignity. These prophecies, which drew on both Christian and traditional religious ideas, gave hope to the oppressed and suggested that dramatic change was both possible and divinely ordained. The prophecies of Mugo wa Kibiru, made in the late 19th century, were particularly influential. He had predicted the coming of the European settlers, the building of the railway and eventual freedom for the African population.

As colonial exploitation intensified and grievances accumulated through the early 20th century, Kibiru's prophecies took on new significance – they suggested that the current suffering was temporary and foreordained to end in African liberation. The prophecies became psychological sustenance for the oppressed, providing hope that freedom was divinely ordained rather than impossible. By the early 1950s, as the Mau Mau Uprising approached, many Kikuyu interpreted contemporary events through Kibiru's prophecies, believing they were witnessing the predicted restoration of African independence. Though Kibiru lived in

KEY FIGURE

Mugo wa Kibiru (19th century–uncertain death date) A Kikuyu prophet whose prophecies and spiritual leadership influenced nationalist consciousness across generations. Born in the 19th century, Kibiru lived through the arrival of the Europeans in Kenya and made predictions about profound transformations coming to Kikuyu society. His prophecies predicted the arrival of Europeans, the construction of the railway and ultimately the restoration of African freedom and sovereignty.

the 19th century and could not have directly participated in 20th-century nationalism, his spiritual legacy profoundly influenced the psychological and cultural dimensions of the independence struggle.

How did the Mau Mau Uprising unfold, and how did the British colonial government respond?

→ The events of the uprising

Declaration of Emergency

On 20 October 1952, **Governor Evelyn Baring** decided to implement Section 3 of the Emergency Powers Order and declare a **State of Emergency** over Kenya. This declaration followed months of increasing violence and unrest, including the assassination of **Senior Chief Waruhiu wa Kungu**, a prominent Kikuyu leader loyal to the colonial government. (Mau Mau targeted fellow Kikuyu who were loyalists because they were seen as traitors who had profited from their people's dispossession.) The Emergency gave the colonial government sweeping powers to arrest suspects without trial, impose collective punishments and restrict movement. Within hours of the declaration, police arrested Jomo Kenyatta and more than 180 other African leaders and trade union organizers, most associated with the KAU. The government blamed these leaders for organizing what it called 'Mau Mau' (see below), though most historians now recognize that this declaration did not respond to an existing armed rebellion – it helped create one. Rather than suppressing unrest, the declaration sparked the very insurgency it was meant to prevent. Before the Emergency, no guerrilla armies existed in the forests; the forest fighters emerged as a direct reaction to the mass arrests and military crackdown that followed.

KEY TERM

State of Emergency A legal framework used by Britain across its empire to grant colonial governments sweeping security powers without formally imposing military rule. Applied in Kenya from 1952 to 1960.

Governor Evelyn Baring (1903–73)

Evelyn Baring was born in 1903 into the British aristocracy and followed a career path typical of British imperial administrators. He arrived in Kenya in 1952 to assume the position of colonial governor, replacing Philip Mitchell, just as the Mau Mau Uprising was beginning. Where Mitchell had dismissed warnings about rising unrest and assured London there was 'no serious danger', Baring took a starkly different view. Within three weeks of his arrival, he declared the State of Emergency that initiated eight years of counter-insurgency operations.

As governor, Baring oversaw the military campaign against guerrilla forces, the villagization programme and a detention system that held up to 150,000 suspects. Yet the violence that characterized the Emergency was not the work of any single official. It emerged from a whole apparatus of colonial governance, comprising district officers who ran screening camps,

settlers appointed as temporary administrators, African Home Guards who enforced compliance, military commanders who conducted forest sweeps, and officials in London who authorized compelling force while maintaining plausible deniability.

Declassified documents reveal that Baring and senior officials in London were aware of and regulated the violence occurring in the camps. Baring's tenure in Kenya made him one of the last governors of a major British colony and positioned him at the centre of one of the most violent decolonization processes in Africa. After his governorship ended in 1959, Baring returned to Britain, never to face accountability. He died in 1973.



SOURCE C

Extract from declassified documents (the Hanslope Disclosure), containing a letter from Attorney General Eric Griffith-Jones to Governor Evelyn Baring, June 1957, cited in 'Learning the lessons from the cutting edge: The Mau Mau case', by Daniel Leader, paper presented at the Public Law Project Conference, London, 4 March 2014. Daniel Leader was a lead litigator for the Mau Mau case for compensation.

June 1957, Eric Griffith-Jones, wrote to the Governor, Sir Evelyn Baring:

The mistreatment of the detainees is 'distressingly reminiscent of conditions in Nazi Germany or Communist Russia'. In order for abuse to remain legal, Mau Mau suspects must be beaten mainly on their upper body, 'vulnerable parts of the body should not be struck, particularly the spleen, liver or kidneys', and it was important that 'those who administer violence ... should remain collected, balanced and dispassionate'. In a separate memo to the Governor he also reminded the Governor that 'If we are going to sin, we must sin quietly.'

Senior Chief Waruhiu wa Kungu (?–1952)

Waruhiu wa Kungu was a senior chief in Kenya's colonial administrative hierarchy, representing the category of Kikuyu who collaborated with British colonial authority, and benefited from that collaboration through power, prestige and economic privilege. As a prominent loyalist chief, Kungu controlled access to employment, trading licences and government resources within his territory, giving him considerable local power. His assassination in 1952 by Mau Mau fighters represented the movement's willingness to target African collaborators alongside Europeans. The movement targeted not only prominent collaborators such as chiefs, but also ordinary Kenyans suspected of disloyalty by oath organizers.

The colonial government used Chief Waruhiu's death to justify the immediate declaration of the State of Emergency, presenting his assassination as proof that 'terrorism' had reached such heights that extraordinary military measures were necessary. In reality, Chief Waruhiu's death represented a political statement by nationalist forces that collaboration with colonialism would not be tolerated and that African 'sell-outs' were legitimate targets of resistance. Chief Waruhiu's assassination and the subsequent emergency created a tragic dilemma for Kikuyu society – any action interpreted as loyalty to the colonial system could result in death at the hands of Mau Mau fighters, while any action the colonial authorities perceived as sympathy for the insurgency could result in detention, torture or execution by colonial authorities.

The political choices forced upon Kikuyu during the Emergency created wounds that persisted long after independence, with questions about how to deal with loyalists and their descendants remaining contentious throughout Kenya's postcolonial history.

Mau Mau

The term **Mau Mau** itself remains controversial. The fighters called themselves the Kenya Land and Freedom Army, reflecting their goals of recovering stolen land and achieving freedom (*ithaka na wiyathi*). The origin of the name Mau Mau is unclear; some historians suggest it could be an anagram of the Kikuyu words *uma uma* ('out out') or a mispronunciation of *muma* (oath). However, it was used by the colonial

What does Eric Griffith-Jones' June 1957 memo to Governor Baring reveal about British awareness of detainee abuse during the Mau Mau Emergency?

**TOK**

Why is it important for historians to assess bias and reliability in a source even when the writer did not intend the document to be objective, and how does this affect the way the source can be used as evidence in historical interpretation? (Perspectives, Scope, Methods and tools, Ethics.)

**KEY TERMS**

Mau Mau Name used for the anti-colonial uprising; the fighters preferred 'Kenya Land and Freedom Army'.

Ithaka na wiyathi Kikuyu term used by the Kenya Land and Freedom Army to reference the movement's military objectives: land and freedom.

**T
O
K**

? Why was the Mau Mau movement considered a 'mystery'?

**T
O
K**

SOURCE D

A black and white photograph of two Black men in military uniforms kneeling in a field. The man on the left is holding a rifle and looking directly at the camera with a surprised expression. The man on the right is holding a rifle and looking directly at the camera with a serious expression.

Extract from the *New York Times*, by journalist Raymond Daniell, 7 December 1952. Daniell served as the *New York Times*' London Bureau chief at the beginning of the Second World War in Europe and again from 1945 to 1953.

AWAITING PERMISSION

Initially, the uprising consisted mainly of attacks on isolated European farms and on African people who were perceived as collaborators with the colonial regime. The fighters, armed primarily with home-made guns, *pangas* (machetes) and traditional weapons, used **guerrilla tactics**. They operated from bases in the forests of Mount Kenya and the Aberdare Mountains, areas they knew intimately. The forest fighters, numbering perhaps 12,000 at their peak, were supported by a much larger passive wing that provided food, information and recruits. This support network extended throughout Central Province and into Nairobi, involving hundreds of thousands of people. By the end of the war, 32 European civilians and about 1,800 loyalist Africans had been killed.

SOURCE F

A home-made gun typical of those belonging to, and made by, Mau Mau fighters



KEY TERM

Guerrilla tactics

Unconventional military methods using small-scale ambushes, raids and hit-and-run attacks designed to avoid direct confrontation with a larger, better-armed force.

What does this home-made weapon suggest about the limited resources of Mau Mau fighters? What tactics did they use to fight against the British, who had more sophisticated weapons?

?

Organization and leadership of the forest fighters

The forest fighters organized themselves into various units with different leaders. **Dedan Kimathi** emerged as one of the most prominent of these, eventually claiming the title field marshall. Kimathi, a former teacher and KAU organizer, proved to be a skilled military leader and organizer. He attempted to coordinate the various forest groups and establish a unified command structure, though this was never fully achieved. Other important leaders included General China (Waruhiu Itote), Field Marshall Musa Mwariama and Stanley Mathenge, who commanded forces in Mount Kenya and the Aberdares.



According to this map, what were the major Mau Mau battlefronts during the State of Emergency in Kenya?

SOURCE G

Map of colonial Kenya (1953–59), showing the major battlefronts during the Mau Mau war, based on a map by Carolyn Talmadge, Tufts University Research Technology



Field Marshall Dedan Kimathi c.1925–57

Dedan Kimathi was born in the Murang'a district of central Kenya in the mid-1920s. He represented a new type of nationalist leader: educated, articulate and politically conscious, rather than operating from purely traditional authority. Kimathi received mission education and became a teacher, positioning him within Kenya's small educated African class. He served briefly in the King's African Rifles, fighting for the British in the Second World War, and was involved in politics in the years immediately before 1952.

When the Mau Mau Uprising began in 1952, Kimathi transitioned from teacher to military commander, eventually claiming the rank of field marshal in the Kenya Land and Freedom Army. He emerged as one of the most prominent forest commanders, organizing guerrilla operations in the Mount Kenya region with tactical, strategic and political skill. Kimathi wrote manifestos on nationalist ideology and attempted to set up unified command structures among various forest fighter groups. He pictured post-independence Kenya as a nation restored to African ownership and control, with land returned to the landless masses.

Captured in October 1956 after four years of guerrilla warfare, Kimathi was tried, convicted and executed by hanging in February 1957 at Nairobi's Kamiti Prison, and then buried in an unidentified grave. His remains have never been found. His execution transformed him into a martyr for the nationalist cause, and his memory became increasingly central to how Kenyans understood their independence struggle. The 1976 play, *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi*, by Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Micere Githae Mugo, reclaimed his history from the colonial narratives that had depicted him as a terrorist and criminal. The play presented him instead as a hero of liberation who had fought for genuine African freedom. However, Kimathi's radical vision of what independence should mean – a return of land and political power to the masses of peasants – was largely abandoned in the post-independence era. Kimathi's life and death embodied the gap between the radical aspirations of armed resistance and the compromises of negotiated independence.

SOURCE H

Letter dated 3 April 1954 from Dedan Kimathi to Governor Baring, General Erskine, and the British Prime Minister, cited from *Kenya's Freedom Struggle: The Dedan Kimathi Papers*, by Dedan Kimathi and Maina wa Kinyatti, 1986, published by Zed Books, London.

This excerpt is from a letter written by Mau Mau Field Marshal Dedan Kimathi to British authorities, demanding the release of detained KAU leaders as a precondition for any ceasefire. It reveals both Kimathi's political demands and his rejection of colonial-appointed African representatives.

1. If the ceasefire is to be arranged with immediate effect, our people here are only ready to listen to the African leaders now in detention camps. It is only the release of these leaders that would convince [us] and the world that the [British] Government really wants peace.

3. It is useless to expect the African members of the Legislative Council to conduct such negotiations. It must be borne in mind that up to now they are not our chosen representatives, they are [Colonial] Government African nominated members. How can you expect us to have confidence in them?...

6. We are not fighting for an everlasting hatred but are trying to create a true and real brotherhood between white and black, so that we may be regarded as people, as human beings who can do each and every thing.

7. No green branches will be raised in Kenya. In other words, there will be no ceasefire until our demands are met.

According to Source H, what does Kimathi's rejection of the African members of the Legislative Council reveal about the relationship between the colonial government and the Mau Mau movement?

?

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