

MASHUJAA · MUTHONI WA KIRIMA

FIELD MARSHAL

*The Mau Mau Woman
Who Waited for the Flag*



SHE WOULD NOT COME OUT UNTIL SHE SAW THE FLAG.

GRAHAM KASINDO

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M A S H U J A A

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*The Mau Mau Woman
Who Waited for the Flag*

G R A H A M K A S I N D O

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“I said yes because freedom is priceless.”

— Muthoni wa Kirima, on joining the Mau Mau

Contents

Prologue	8
CHAPTER ONE The Herdsman’s Daughter	9
CHAPTER TWO The Oath	10
CHAPTER THREE The Beating	11
CHAPTER FOUR The Forest	12
CHAPTER FIVE The Weaver Bird	14
CHAPTER SIX The Rank	15
CHAPTER SEVEN The Flag	16
CHAPTER EIGHT The Mayor’s Office	17
CHAPTER NINE Seventy Years of Hair	18
CHAPTER TEN The Cutting	19
CHAPTER ELEVEN The Last Night	20
Epilogue	21
A Note from the Author	23

Prologue

THE FOREST ABOVE NYERI. DECEMBER 1963.

Kenya was free. The Union Jack had come down at midnight on 12 December 1963, and the new black, red and green flag had gone up in its place.

In the forest, a woman in her thirties did not believe it.

She had been in the forest for about ten years. She had lived on raw cabbage pulled from farms at night. She had slept in trees. She had lost a baby there. She carried a gun, a sword and an axe.

The new Prime Minister, **Jomo Kenyatta**, sent a car for her.

She refused to get in.

Before she came out, she said, she wanted to see the flag.

Her name was **Muthoni wa Kirima**. The fighters called her the **Weaver Bird**. She would become known, in time, as Kenya's only female **Field Marshal**.

And for almost sixty years after she came out of the forest, she wore the dreadlocks she had grown in it, and would not cut them.

CHAPTER ONE

The Herdsman's Daughter

NAIRUTIA, NYERI. ABOUT 1930.

She was born **Muthoni Waihuini**, around **1930**, at **Nairutia**, on the road from Nyeri to Nyahururu. Some accounts give the year as 1931, and some place her birth in **Tetu**, the Nyeri constituency that would later be her home.

Her father was **Kirima Nguya**; her mother, **Wanjira Kirima**. She was one of eleven children in a polygamous household. Her father worked as a herdsman on a settler's farm, and as a child, Muthoni worked beside him, as a labourer on a pyrethrum farm.

She never went to school.

"I know neither English nor good Kiswahili," she said many years later, "because when others were in school, I was in the forest fighting."

In **1948**, she married **Mutungi Gichuhi**. They worked as casual labourers and traders in Nyeri and Nairobi.

CHAPTER TWO

The Oath

NYERI. 1952.

In **1952**, Muthoni took the Mau Mau oath.

“I said yes,” she said, “because freedom is priceless.”

“We wanted our land,” she said on another occasion, “and we wanted our freedom.”

She began in the underground, as an intelligence operative. With her sister-in-law, **Wanjugu**, she gathered information on the colonial government’s loyalist Home Guards and passed it on to the fighters in the forest.

According to one account, she was arrested early in 1952 by the colonial chief of the area, **Chief Muhoya**, for supporting Mau Mau.

It did not stop her.

CHAPTER THREE

The Beating

NYERI. 1953.

In **1953**, her husband went into the forest to fight.

After that, according to her own account, the Home Guards kept coming to her home, looking for him. They came three times. On the fourth visit, they beat her so badly that she ended up in hospital.

“When they found out I was spying on them,” she said, “they beat me up and left me for dead.”

About a week later, she went into the forest herself. According to one account, it was **May 1953**. In her own testimony, recorded years later, she dates her going into the forest to 1952.

She was in her twenties.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Forest

THE ABERDARES AND MOUNT KENYA. 1953–1963.

On her first night in the forest, she said, an antelope led her to a great tree, and she slept under it.

The fighters hid in the forests of the **Nyandarua**, the Aberdares, and of **Kirinyaga**, Mount Kenya. Muthoni refused to shelter in caves. “Hiding out in the caves,” she said, “would have been like prescribing a death sentence.” The soldiers would search them.

They ate what they could find. “If we found cabbage,” she said, “we would yank it off and eat it raw.” They were silent by day, and sang only at night.

She began, like most women in the forest, in support: cooking, carrying supplies. Then she fought. According to the accounts of her life, she led raids for food and livestock, used her knowledge of the ground, and was a good shot. She was chosen to sit on the Mau Mau forest court, which was rare for a woman.

At some point in the forest, she was wounded. By one account, a bullet stayed in her arm for the rest of her life. By her family’s account, the wound was in her chest, and it hurt her until she died.

In the forest, too, she miscarried. She never had a child.

“Kenya,” she said later, “is my only child.”

CHAPTER FIVE

The Weaver Bird

In the forest, she worked alongside **Dedan Kimathi**, the Mau Mau leader, and **Stanley Mathenge**.

Kimathi, according to the accounts, gave her a name: *Nyoni ya Thonjo*, the **Weaver Bird**. It was, one account says, because of “her knack for weaving brilliant strategies.” In the forest, she has said, she was known as *Mama Thonjo*.

In **August 1953**, according to one account, she was present at the **Mwathé** meeting, the great gathering of forest fighters at which Kimathi was made **Field Marshal**.

Kimathi was captured in October 1956 and hanged at Kamiti in February 1957. Mathenge disappeared into the forest and was never seen again.

Muthoni stayed.

The British war against the Mau Mau was, by 1956, effectively over. But she and her husband, and a small number of fighters who had never been caught, stayed in the forest for seven more years.

CHAPTER SIX

The Rank

Was she really a Field Marshal?

She said she was. Kenya came to call her one. Her obituaries called her the only woman to hold the rank.

But the record is not simple. According to one careful profile of her life, critics have pointed out that the only Mau Mau leader known to have been formally made a Field Marshal was Kimathi himself. The same profile notes that “Mau Mau had its own ranking procedure,” and that her promotion came not for commanding in battle, but for her resourcefulness: for keeping fighters fed and cared for when there was no food.

What nobody disputes is that she earned it. She went into the forest in her twenties and did not come out until the country was free.

CHAPTER SEVEN

The Flag

NYERI. DECEMBER 1963.

On **12 December 1963**, Kenya became independent.

In the forest, according to her own account, Muthoni found a newspaper that gave the date. But she did not come out.

According to the Daily Nation, Kenyatta sent a car to bring her to the celebrations. She refused. She was not convinced the war was over. First, she said, she wanted to see the Kenyan flag.

In her own account, women who supported the fighters brought her clothes, shoes, a headscarf and a hired car. Chief Muhoya, the same colonial chief who had once arrested her, confirmed who she was. She was taken to Nairobi, to the **Jeevanjee** building, to meet Kenyatta. He gave her a flag.

On **16 December 1963**, at **Ruringu Stadium** in Nyeri, she came out of the forest, among the last of the fighters to leave it. Her husband came out with her.

They had been apart, she said, for eleven years.

CHAPTER EIGHT

The Mayor's Office

NAIROBI AND NYERI. 1960S–1990S.

Freedom did not come with a house.

Like many who came out of the forest, Muthoni had nothing. According to one account, she went to the office of the Mayor of Nairobi and sat there. “I was not going to leave,” she said, “until he gave me a place to stay.”

She got a house in Nyeri, and lived in Nyeri for the rest of her life.

She found a way to live. According to the Daily Nation, she persuaded Kenyatta to give her a licence to trade in **ivory**, on the strength of her knowledge of tusks that had been hidden during the war. She traded from **1966** until the ivory trade was banned in **1976**. She transported farm produce to Nairobi. Later, according to the Nation, she ran a security firm in Nyeri.

In **1990**, she became a nominated councillor on the Nyeri County Council.

CHAPTER NINE

Seventy Years of Hair

Through all of it, she kept her hair.

She had grown her dreadlocks in the forest. They were, by the end, about six feet long. She wore them wrapped in a white scarf.

She said she would not cut them until she saw the benefits of independence for the people who had fought for it: land for the freedom fighters, and recognition for those still alive.

In **1998**, President **Daniel arap Moi** gave her a medal for distinguished service. In **2014**, President **Uhuru Kenyatta** gave her a Head of State Commendation.

She kept the dreadlocks.

CHAPTER TEN

The Cutting

NYERI. 2 APRIL 2022.

On **2 April 2022**, she cut them.

The locks were cut in a ceremony by **Mama Ngina Kenyatta**, the widow of the man who had once sent a car to bring her out of the forest. According to The Standard, the cut locks were wrapped in the Kenyan flag and placed in an African basket, which was handed to her.

She explained why. “My desires as a freedom fighter,” she said, “have been met by the government.”

And, according to another report: “I have forgiven those who were hunting us down.”

CHAPTER ELEVEN

The Last Night

NYERI. SEPTEMBER 2023.

She lived to be about ninety-two.

In her last months, according to one report, she met President **William Ruto** at the Sagana State Lodge.

She died in early **September 2023**. According to her grandson, **Samuel Kariuki**, she had no illnesses of old age. The only thing she complained of was pain in her left chest, from the old bullet wound. One night, she developed a fever. She began coughing and sweating. Neighbours helped carry her to a car to take her to hospital.

She died before she got there.

She was buried at **Gitungi** village, in Tetu, near the place where, sixty-seven years before, Dedan Kimathi had been captured.

Epilogue

Tetu, Nyeri. Today.

Muthoni wa Kirima went into the forest in her twenties, and came out a woman in her thirties, with no child and no house, into a country that was free.

She spent the next fifty-eight years waiting for that country to keep its promises to the people who had fought for it. She wore the forest on her head the whole time.

When she cut her hair, she said she had forgiven.

Not everyone who writes about her agrees that the country did its part. “What hurts Field Marshal Muthoni the most,” one tribute said after her death, “is that we’ve not done our part.”

She had asked to see the flag before she would come out.

She got to see it. Kenya is still deciding what it owes to the people who carried it.

THE RECORD

NAME	Muthoni wa Kirima (born Muthoni Waihuini)
BORN	About 1930 (some say 1931), Nairutia, Nyeri
HUSBAND	Mutungi Gichuhi, married 1948
OATH	1952
FOREST	1952 or 1953 to 16 December 1963
NAME IN THE FOREST	Nyoni ya Thonjo, the Weaver Bird, given by Kimathi
RANK	Field Marshal: the only woman to hold it (the rank itself is debated)
CAME OUT	16 December 1963, Ruringu Stadium, Nyeri
HONOURS	Moi, 1998; Uhuru Kenyatta, 2014
DREADLOCKS	About 70 years; cut 2 April 2022 by Mama Ngina Kenyatta
DIED	September 2023, aged about 92

She wanted to see the flag first.

Cover illustration: an artist's impression.

A Note from the Author

If this story stayed with you, you can buy me a coffee. It keeps the research going and helps bring the next one to you.

LIPA NA M-PESA	
PAYBILL	522533
ACCOUNT	8129965
CLICK MTAA TECHNOLOGIES	

Asante sana.

— *Graham Kasindo*