

TWENDE PICTURES, AFROFILMS INTERNATIONAL, MUIRAQUITÁ FILMES

IN CO-PRODUCTION WITH AUTENTIKA FILMS PRESENT

OUR LAND, OUR FREEDOM

A film by **Meena Nanji** and **Zippy Kimundu**

Executive Producer **Mira Nair**



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SYNOPSIS

OUR LAND, OUR FREEDOM

KENYA | USA | PORTUGAL | 2023 | 100'

Our Land, Our Freedom tells the story of 2 extraordinary Kenyan women - a mother and daughter, Mukami and Wanjugu Kimathi - who share a mission to shine a light on the too-long-kept secret atrocities of British colonial rule in Kenya.

After the legendary freedom fighter, Dedan Kimathi, was hanged by the British colonial regime in 1957 for leading Kenya's 1950s independence struggle, they secretly dumped his body. Now, his daughter, Wanjugu, joins her mother's decades long quest, searching for his remains.

Along her journey she meets elder freedom fighters and land rights advocates who tell her of British concentration camps, torture, starvation and land theft that left hundreds of thousands of Kenyans destitute. Wanjugu's mission expands and, working closely with her mother, she transforms into a powerful leader, exposing colonial crimes, while building a grassroots movement for land resettlement.

This intimate portrayal of a daughter's mission to bring peace to her mother, exposes the dark chapter of colonialism in Kenya, and features Mukami and Wanjugu's powerful interventions to shift it's legacy: a story that will reverberate not only in Kenya, but also in countries impacted by colonialism across the world.



BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Kenya was colonized by Britain from 1895-1963. During this time, the British carried out a program of dehumanizing Kenyans in order to justify their reign of terror and massive theft of land. Colonial policies subjugated Africans in all spheres: they were not allowed to own land, their crops and livestock were severely limited and they were forced into wage labor. Beatings, sexual mutilation and torture were common with few, if any, avenues for recourse. With early attempts at negotiating a peaceful return of their land ignored by the British, armed resistance arose in the late 1940s through a movement called the Kenya Land and Freedom Army, led by Dedan Kimathi.

A lot of knowledge about this period of time has been buried. Information that does exist is still dominated by British perspectives that largely glorify British rule. Omitted is the daily violence of colonialism, as is the fact that the British set up concentration camps, indiscriminately detaining over a million Kenyans - and killing thousands - in their attempts to crush the independence movement. They also waged fierce disinformation and propaganda campaigns, terming the independence fighters as the "Mau Mau", and portraying them as "senselessly violent and bloodthirsty", powerful stereotypes that still persist today.

But the British were unable to stop the movement for freedom, and in 1963, Independence was gained. However, it was largely on British terms: the British handed political power and land to Kenyans that had collaborated with them: the "Loyalists", while marginalizing the Mau Mau. The first Kenyan President, Jomo Kenyatta, banned the Mau Mau - a ban that was to continue for 40 years, with those who spoke out, silenced. Mau Mau experiences have barely been recorded, and their history is not taught in schools. Many younger Kenyans have little knowledge about what really happened.

Now, people want justice. Not just for past atrocities, but to reclaim their history and their land. Wanjugu is one of those leading this fight.

ABOUT THE DIRECTORS



MEENA NANJI

Meena Nanji is Kenyan-born of Indian heritage. She is an award-winning director/producer of feature documentaries, experimental and fiction shorts. Her work has been recognized by the Sundance Documentary Fund, Just Films, Perspective Fund, IDA, IDFA Bertha Fund. Her films have screened on television and at film festivals internationally and largely focus on women and social justice issues, as well as race & gender rights and representation, including projects filmed in India, Afghanistan and Kenya. She is a co-founder of GlobalGirl Media, a non-profit organization that trains girls from underrepresented communities of the world in citizen journalism. She has also worked as curator/programmer for film/video festivals, served as juror for foundation grants, and led film workshops and trainings, including in the US, Morocco, S. Africa, and India. She is based in Los Angeles.



ZIPPY KIMUNDU

Zippy is an award-winning Kenyan Filmmaker who has been working in the film and television industry across continents as a director and editor for over a decade. She co-directed a short documentary, *A Fork, A Spoon and A Knight* with Mira Nair for Tribeca Film Institute's 'Power of Word Series', and was the assistant editor on the Disney film *Queen of Katwe*. Zippy holds a masters in Fine Arts from NYU's Tisch School of the Arts and is a film educator for under-represented communities at I'll Tell You My Story, who give storytelling workshops in Africa for teenage refugee girls. Besides this, she is the founder of AfroFilms International, a women-led film and TV production company and creative collective based in Nairobi and Kilifi, Kenya, and is currently working to ignite political consciousness, and action, across continents. Her short films have screened internationally and she continues to create both fiction and non-fiction content globally.

ABOUT THE CO-PRODUCER

ELIANE FERREIRA

Eliane is the founder of Muiraquitã Filmes, a production company based in Portugal and Brazil. Her first feature film as a co-producer was *Fish Dreams* by Kirill Mikhanovsky, winner of Prix Jeune at Critics Week of Cannes Film Festival 2006.

She produced award-winning documentaries such as *Fabricating Tom Zé*, best documentary by a popular jury in 2006 at both Rio IFF and São Paulo IFF, *Cinema Morocco* by Ricardo Calil, winner of Golden Dove at Dok Leipzig 2018, *I Owe You a Letter* about Brazil by Carol Benjamin, Honorable Mention at IDFA 2019 First Appearance Competition, and *The Repentants* by Armando Antenore and Ricardo Calil, Best Documentary at It's All True Festival 2021.

Besides working on *Our Land, Our Freedom* by Meena Nanji and Zippy Kimundu which premiered at IDFA Frontlight in 2023, she's producing *Regarding Memory and Neglect* by Ricardo Martensen, supported by IDFA Bertha Fund, Sundance Institute and selected at the competitive pitching at IDFA Forum 2021.

She is also preparing the release of four fiction features for 2024: *Portrait of a Certain Orient* by Marcelo Gomes, *Garden of Silence* by Henrique Dantas, *Cyclone* by Flávia Castro, and *Pasárgada* by Dira Paes.



DIRECTORS' STATEMENT

"Our Land, Our Freedom" is a documentary borne from personal and historical necessity. As directors who were both born in Kenya, our involvement in creating this film is deeply rooted in our own heritage and the legacies of our families, who were both part of the 1950s freedom movement against British colonial rule, albeit in different capacities. Our personal histories are intertwined with the larger narrative of Kenyan resistance, making this project profoundly significant to us.

For several years before our paths crossed, each of us had been independently working on projects addressing the impacts of British colonialism. This film represents a culmination of those efforts, driven by a shared belief that it is crucial for Kenyans to author their own history. During our education, we were taught a version of history that glorified British rule as benevolent, and whitewashed the violence that the British inflicted upon Kenyans. This colonial narrative, which still persists in schools today, largely omits the Kenyan perspective and ignores the widespread destitution that colonialism caused and continues to spread even now through its neo-colonial reach.

Our motivation for creating "Our Land, Our Freedom" is to challenge these British accounts and present an African-centered narrative from the viewpoint of those who lived and fought through these times. The film follows Wanjugu Kimathi, the daughter of the independence struggle leader Dedan Kimathi, on her quest to find her father's remains and seek justice for the atrocities committed by the British colonial regime. This journey uncovers the painful truths of concentration camps, land theft, and the ongoing impact of colonial legacies on contemporary Kenyan society.

What sets our documentary apart is its intentional focus on the Kenyan perspective. Unlike other documentaries on this subject, we do not rely on Western narrators or 'experts' to provide context. Instead, we elevate Kenyan voices, with their intrinsic authority and credibility, supported by hard evidence. The British voice is present through official documents and newsreel footage, providing a stark contrast to the lived experiences and testimonies of the Kenyan people.

In making "Our Land, Our Freedom," we aim to expose the atrocities committed during the colonial era and examine how these events continue to impact Kenya today. This film is a call for justice and a reclamation of our history, giving voice to those who have been marginalized and ensuring that the true story of Kenya's fight for independence is finally told.

INTERVIEW WITH THE DIRECTORS

How did the idea for *Our Land, Our Freedom* come about?

Meena Nanji (MN): I was born in Kenya but left when I was about nine years old. I had such an incredible childhood there and it was always very vivid in my memories. We went from Kenya, which was this paradise, to England, which was very cold and grey and miserable. As a kid I was always fascinated by the independence movement, but it wasn't until recently around 2012 that I read a book by Caroline Elkins titled *Britain's Gulag: The Brutal End of Empire in Kenya*. For the first time on a mass scale, the author exposed concentration camps in Kenya run by the British. I had sworn never to do documentary again and was working on fiction and experimental films, but after reading the book, I knew I had to make a documentary about this. I did not want to do it alone, so I asked a few friends in Los Angeles for recommendations of people to meet before going back to Kenya. I had met Wanjugu already and she came on board. Wanjugu then insisted I meet her mother, Mukami Kimathi and that was the same night I was meeting Zippy for the first time. A day after meeting Zippy I knew she was the person I wanted to work with, so we went for this interview with Mukami together. It was supposed to be a research interview, but it was so powerful it ended up in the film. From that day we knew we were somehow going to get the film made.

Zippy Kimundu (ZK): I got a frantic cold email from this person that I didn't know but we had mutual friends who had recommended me. My entry point into this history was that in film school I wanted to adapt Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's *Weep not, Child* into a feature. I started developing the script, but it was hard to get any information about the past. When Meena came with this idea, I thought this would make for great research for my fiction film. I really thought it would take one or two years and then back to my fiction project but eight years later, here we are. I come from a family that had embraced a culture of silence regarding this part of our history but also because it was banned. My family had people who were Mau Mau and people who were collaborators on the other side. Making the film was an opportunity to learn my history.

In addition, the issue of land is deeply personal to me. In 2002, during Kenya's first multi-party elections, our family home was burnt down, and our land was seized amidst the political turmoil that erupted due to ethnic divisions rooted in the British Colonial tactic of 'Divide and Rule'. Sadly, these divisions continue to afflict our nation today and it is our hope that this film can be a source of inspiration for fostering unity, promoting reconciliation, and facilitating national healing.



Can we talk a bit about the historical and political context? Why is the Mau Mau struggle so pivotal to Kenyan history?

MN: Kenya was a protectorate 1895 and by 1920 it became a colony. The British government started to steal peoples land and there was immediate resistance. Then, during World War 2, many Kenyans were recruited to fight for the British, and were sent to Burma and Asia where they learned how to use guns, and also they saw Indians fighting for their independence. In Kenya the fight wasn't initially for independence of governance, it was to get their land back.. After the experience abroad, people came back home to organize and from that point it became a political fight as well, because land justice would not happen without political independence. They were interlinked. Dedan Kimathi was one of those who saw that the only way to do this was through armed struggle. This was what the British feared the most and they responded with heavy repression and warfare, bombing villages, imposing collective punishment and thrwoing people into concentration camps, women and children included. Additionally, the British unleashed a propaganda war: every single department from film, tv, radio to academic texts, anthropology, news media was deployed to depict the Mau Mau as senseless terrorists and thugs. They called them extreme, insane, irrational, savages. But who are the savages here really? Who was indiscriminately bombing people and denying them their basic rights? The origin of the name "Mau Mau" isn't quite known. The freedom fighters called themselves the "Kenya Land and Freedom Army", but at some point, the British picked up "Mau Mau" and then the freedom fighters decided to reclaim this name for themselves. The fight for independence did capture the imagination of other anti-colonial struggles elsewhere. Nelson Mandela for instance was very inspired by what was happening in Kenya, so were Malcolm X and the Black Panthers. Dedan Kimathi himself was regarded as the Che Guevara of Africa during that time.

Wanjugu, who is Dedan Kimathi's daughter, is the lead subject of the film. She started out on the project as a fixer, what was that journey like for her?

MN: Our initial idea was to do a hybrid experimental film where we would focus on the experience of the Mau Mau who had fought in the independence movement and were still alive. Because history has always been told from the British perspective and never the Kenyans. The documentaries that were made centered on the British and always had these foreign experts weighing in. We thought we would intercut these interviews with a play by Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o. Wanjugu had offered to introduce us to the freedom fighters that she knew. They are incredible people, but they do not trust or talk to a lot of people because they are marginalized. Wanjugu trusted us so they trusted us. We would have her act as a translator and at a certain point she conducted one interview herself and she was amazing, carrying on conversations that we never could have because we did not have her background or knowledge.

ZK: Before that we had been invited for IDFAcademy Summer School in Amsterdam. The mentors kept pushing us about the viability of making a film about these very old people talking. We stuck to our guns and insisted that that was the film we wanted to make. We were always talking about how amazing Wanjugu was when one of the mentors pointed out that she was actually our lead character. But it wasn't until we went back to Kenya and found out that just a few kilometers outside the city, they had discovered this mass grave. We brought Wanjugu with us as a test and she was amazing, so it made sense that she would lead the film. It was great also because she has a personal story. At first it was about finding the remains of her father but along the way, she blossomed and instead of us telling her what we wanted to make, we started listening to the things she was interested in.

The story has these twists and turns that defy scripting. It moves from finding Kimathi's remains to land justice. How did the film change over the eight years that you spent making it and how did you keep track?

ZK: We both had a different idea of what this film would be but what we knew for sure is that we wanted to tell a story from the point of view of the fighters who were actually in the forest. When we started, we were very interested in looking for the remains of Dedan Kimathi, just like Wanjugu wanted. But this search was frustrating even though we were committed. Now from the beginning of the struggle, it was always the Kenyan Land and Freedom Army and they made it clear that they were fighting for freedom but also for land. They never got the economic freedom because they never got the land that was taken from them. Land in Kenya is sacred because it is your life really. While the search for her father's remains was yielding no results, Wanjugu herself really turned towards the idea of helping her people get resettlement and that became her fight. That is how we went along with her and it was a blessing for us.

We still tell the story from the Kenyan perspective, specifically the Mau Mau, but were able to accommodate something like the contemporary story of Kakuzi. That for me made the film complete because then it becomes not a story of the past but one with ties to the present.

The film makes use of archival footage generously and effectively. What did you want to communicate with the archives and why was this inclusion important?

MN: We wanted to give evidence in the form of text and visual materials. First of all, for many decades after Independence, the elders weren't allowed to speak about their experiences in the liberation struggle: the Mau Mau was banned by the first president: if anyone spoke out them, they might be killed or otherwise punished. Later on, after the ban on the Mau Mau was lifted in 2003, their stories were dismissed as anecdotal. The British did destroy a lot of colonial policy documents on the eve of independence, but a lot of them survived, and were hidden until Caroline Elkins started doing her research and found them in Britain. These documents went into great detail on colonial era policies, and so proved that the stories of the Mau Mau were accurate accounts of what was done to them by the British. We also always wanted the visual archive, and our aim was to subvert the original purpose of newsreel footage, which was essentially British propaganda that depicted Africans or Kenyans largely as 'savage', and in need of 'civilising'.

So we wanted to subvert this footage, and did that by removing the newsreel voiceover. When you strip that away what do you see? In very rough terms, you see White people brutalizing Black people, and that was exactly what was going on. And when you add voiceover from the freedom fighters' perspective to that imagery, you understand the same footage very differently. So as well as showing how footage can be used in a propagandistic way, we also wanted to show, visually, what so many Kenyans experienced at the hands of the colonial authorities on a daily basis.



On some level the film is also about legacy and the transfer of knowledge from one generation to the next so the next one is more empowered. Can you talk a bit about this?

ZK: Wanjugu is very brave, but I don't think it is a normal thing that this relatively young woman would know so much about this history. Because even in the books, it is all from the British perspective. For Wanjugu, her mother had been carrying her along since she was a child but even, she was finding out new things with us as we made the film. And her kids as well, initially they were teenagers and not really interested in their mother's work but over the years they got interested because we were interested. They would become our contact for logistic stuff when Wanjugu was too busy. We would like the film in Kenyan schools but also in British schools because there should be educational tools to teach our history. We want a huge impact campaign to spark these conversations. It is so important that we understand where we come from because we have been so thoroughly colonized.

MN: I think what our film is trying to do is open issues up, we are not concluding anything, and we are really only scratching the surface. To me the end of the film is a new beginning. The Kakuzi issue was sort of a separate story, a parallel group fighting for thousands of acres that now belongs to this British multinational. Through her work, Wanjugu linked up with that community's struggle and what we hope to show is that while there are these different communities across Kenya fighting for the same thing, now they are starting to find each other and build allies. One of our goals is not only to have our film added to both Kenyan and British curricula but to change the books that are assigned for teaching of history. We want to work with the ministries of education. I am hoping we can do that to expand what is assigned as history to include these first-person sources that have always been marginalized. We must foreground the Kenyan version because that is our own perspective and that is where Kenyans are at the center of their own history. When people have exposure to different perspectives you get a more complete picture.

*- Interview by Wilfred Okiche
October 2023*



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