

ABERDARES · 1955 NAIROBI · 2003

MATHENGE

KENYA WELCOMED THE WRONG MAN HOME.



*The Field Marshal Who Vanished,
and the Stranger Kenya Welcomed Home*

GRAHAM KASINDO

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*“What am I going to say, and I don’t know their
language?”*

— Lemma Ayanu, the Ethiopian farmer welcomed to Kenya as General
Mathenge, 2003

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Prologue

JOMO KENYATTA INTERNATIONAL AIRPORT, NAIROBI. FRIDAY, 30 MAY 2003.

The plane from Addis Ababa landed, and Kenya waited to greet a ghost.

For almost fifty years, **General Stanley Mathenge**, one of the great commanders of the Mau Mau, had been missing. He had walked into the forests of the Aberdares in the 1950s and never come back. Now, the newspapers said, he had been found: an old man, living quietly in Ethiopia.

The government of the new President, **Mwai Kibaki**, had invited him home. He was to be a guest of honour at **Madaraka Day** on **1 June**. There was a reception party at the airport. There were cameras.

An old man came down the steps. He was 84, by one account. He greeted, in Amharic, his “fellow Mau Mau freedom fighters.”

He could not speak Kikuyu. He could not speak Kiswahili. He could not speak English.

Within a week, he would be quietly put on a plane back to Ethiopia.

His name was **Lemma Ayanu**. He was an Ethiopian farmer. And the real Stanley Mathenge was still missing.

CHAPTER ONE

The Soldier from Mahiga

Stanley Mathenge wa Mirugi was born around **1919** at **Mahiga**, in Nyeri.

Like thousands of young Kenyans, he went to war for the British. He fought in **Burma** in the Second World War.

He came home to a colony where Africans who had fought for the Empire still had little say over their own land.

Mathenge became one of the men who decided to fight for it.

CHAPTER TWO

The Forest

In the years before the Emergency, Mathenge was part of the **Forty Group**, the militant young men who backed the Kenya African Union, and he founded a fighting group he called **Kenya Riigi**.

When the Emergency came in October 1952 and the Mau Mau went into the forests, Mathenge went with them.

In **May 1953**, he became leader of a newly formed Mau Mau military body in Nyeri. He was one of the most senior commanders in the Aberdares.

He was, by the accounts of those who knew him, a tall man. He held to the traditional Kikuyu religion.

The British hunted him. They never caught him.

CHAPTER THREE

Two Generals

In the forest, the Mau Mau had two great leaders. One was **Stanley Mathenge**. The other was **Dedan Kimathi**.

They did not get on.

Accounts of the movement describe a deep rivalry between the two men, over authority, over strategy, and over who spoke for the fighters in the forest. It split the leadership at the very time the British were closing in. Historians of the movement say it damaged the Mau Mau badly.

Kimathi would be captured in October 1956 and hanged at Kamiti in February 1957.

By then, Mathenge was already gone.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Vanishing

THE ABERDARES. AROUND 1955.

Some time in the mid-1950s, Stanley Mathenge disappeared.

Nobody knows exactly when. Some accounts say **1953**. Most say **1955**.

Nobody knows exactly how.

The story told by his followers was that he had set out, with a group of fighters, to walk north to **Ethiopia**, to seek help from the Emperor, **Haile Selassie**.

Another story, told as a darker rumour, was that he had never left the forest at all: that he had been killed in the rivalry with Kimathi, and that the Ethiopia story was invented to cover it.

He was never captured. His body was never found. He never came home.

He left behind a wife, **Miriam Muthoni**, and a son, **Mirugi**.

CHAPTER FIVE

Waiting

Kenya became independent in 1963. The Mau Mau fighters who had survived came out of the forests and the camps.

Mathenge did not.

For decades, his family waited. Stories came and went: of old Mau Mau men living in Ethiopia, of a Kenyan general farming somewhere across the northern border.

His wife never gave up. She lived on in **Mweiga**, in Nyeri.

CHAPTER SIX

The Search

ETHIOPIA. 2001–2002.

In **December 2001**, a journalist, **Joseph Karimi**, travelled to Ethiopia with Mathenge's son, **Peter Mirugi**, to look for him.

According to later reporting, there were two trips to Ethiopia, one sponsored by the Standard Group and a second by the Nation Media Group.

In **October 2002**, Mathenge's wife, **Miriam Muthoni**, went to Ethiopia herself, to meet the old man said to be her husband. According to Karimi's report in the Daily Nation, the meeting was short, and the man was "reclusive and evasive."

She came home convinced.

"I recognised my husband," she said, "by the shape of his nose and teeth."

CHAPTER SEVEN

The Welcome

NAIROBI. 30 MAY – 6 JUNE 2003.

In 2003, the new government invited the man to Kenya.

He arrived at the airport on **30 May 2003**, with his family, to an official welcome. The MP **Koigi wa Wamwere** was among those there to greet him. He was put up at the **Sarova Panafric Hotel**. He was to be a guest of honour at Madaraka Day.

It unravelled almost at once.

He spoke only Amharic. Mau Mau veterans who had known Mathenge came to see him. “The man who was brought to Kenya was quite short,” said one of them, **General Kihithuki**, “and nothing like the Mathenge I knew.”

The real Mathenge, according to those who knew him, had a gap in his teeth and a scar on the back of his neck. This man had neither.

To the Ethiopian ambassador, the old man said: “What am I going to say, and I don’t know their language?”

He told the press that he was not Mathenge.

On **6 June 2003**, he flew home to Ethiopia.

CHAPTER EIGHT

The Bill

Kenya was embarrassed, and it wanted to know how.

The Minister for Internal Security, **Chris Murungaru**, acknowledged that the government had been deceived.

In Parliament, one MP asked how “the whole Government of the Republic of Kenya can make such a mistake by putting up a lavish airport reception, complete with publicity, both local and international, on what turned out to be fake.”

The accounts of the cost vary widely: a hotel bill of about **Sh165,650** in one, an estimated **Sh410,000** in total in another, and up to **Sh3 million** in a third.

CHAPTER NINE

The Test

The government ordered a **DNA test**.

It was done in **South Africa**. The results were presented to Parliament in **2007**.

Lemma Ayanu was not related to the Mathenge family. He was not Stanley Mathenge.

It had been obvious to almost everyone. But not to Miriam Muthoni.

“I am getting increasingly concerned,” her son, **Mirugi Mathenge**, said years later, “that my mother still insists that the man was my father, in spite of the fact that even DNA tests ordered by the government revealed that the man is not related to us.”

Lemma Ayanu died in Ethiopia in **2010**.

CHAPTER TEN

The Empty Grave

There is no grave for Stanley Mathenge.

Dedan Kimathi, his great rival, at least has a place in history, a statue on Kimathi Street and a grave that Kenya has spent decades searching for. Mathenge doesn't even have that. There is no body to look for, no place to dig, no date of death.

There is only the forest, and a walk north that may or may not have happened.

His brother, **Joseph Kiiru Mirugi**, died in **2009** in Othaya. His wife, by the most recent accounts, still believed the old man from Ethiopia had been her husband.

Epilogue

Mahiga, Nyeri. Today.

Of all the Mau Mau commanders, Stanley Mathenge is the one Kenya never found.

Kimathi was hanged. Others surrendered, were captured, or came out of the forest at independence to be honoured. Mathenge simply walked away from history.

In 2003, the country was so eager to bring him home that it welcomed a stranger at the airport with cameras and a reception party, and put him in a hotel, and planned to show him to the nation on Madaraka Day.

It says something about how much the Mau Mau still mean to Kenya that it wanted so badly for him to be real.

And it says something about the Mau Mau's lost men that, fifty years on, nobody could tell who he was.

The forest has kept its secret.

THE RECORD

NAME	Stanley Mathenge wa Mirugi
BORN	About 1919, Mahiga, Nyeri
SERVED	Burma, Second World War
MAU MAU	Senior commander in the Aberdares; Kimathi's great rival
VANISHED	1953 or, most accounts say, 1955
THEORIES	Walked to Ethiopia; or killed in the forest
THE STRANGER	Lemma Ayanu, Ethiopian farmer; arrived at JKIA 30 May 2003
LEFT KENYA	6 June 2003
DNA	Not related to the Mathenge family (reported to Parliament, 2007)
GRAVE	None

Kenya welcomed the wrong man home. The right one never came.

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.

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PAYBILL	522533
ACCOUNT	8129965
CLICK MTAA TECHNOLOGIES	

Asante sana.

— *Graham Kasindo*