

Kamoya Kimeu

By Louise N. Leakey and By Robert A. Foley

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Expert field palaeontologist who made many key discoveries about early human evolution in East Africa.

Kamoya Kimeu, who died in his mid-eighties on 21 July 2022, was one of a select band that made enormous contributions to science without any scientific training. Since Aristotle, science has advanced through observation, and even with the fanciest of analytical techniques, observation remains at the heart of science. Kamoya was one of the greatest observers, not with a sophisticated microscope or an electron probe, but with his bare eyes under the harshest conditions of the deserts of northern Kenya. He was the first among equals of the ‘*hominin gang*’, the team of fossil hunters who scoured the landscapes of East Africa for evidence of human evolution. His eagle eye and phenomenal and instinctive understanding of anatomy meant that he could spot and recognise small fragments of fossil, often leading to the uncovering of more complete ones. So much of what we know about early hominin evolution in Africa comes from the discoveries of Kamoya and his team, working in conjunction with larger groups of scientists.

Kamoya Kimeu was born in Makueni County, Kenya. He was sent to the local Christian mission primary school for his education. In his early twenties he heard of a job as a labourer working for the anthropologists Mary and Louis Leakey at Olduvai Gorge in Tanzania, “where they were digging for old bones of people,” he said in an interview. This was a cause for concern due to traditional beliefs that handling any human bones was disrespectful of the dead. In 2009, in an article in *The Christian Science Monitor*, he said, “Digging human bones was associated with witchcraft; it was a taboo in African custom. But I was just a young adventurous man, eager to travel and discover things.” Concerns notwithstanding, he interviewed for the position, joined the Leakeys and began his long career in palaeontological exploration.

Kamoya made many major scientific discoveries over the years. After working at Olduvai, he began a partnership with Richard Leakey in the 1960s that lasted half a century. His first



fossil hominin discovery was during a recce with Richard at Lake Natron in Tanzania in 1964 – a *Paranthropus boisei* mandible that reinforced the importance of ‘Zinjanthropus’ (renamed *Paranthropus* in the 1960s), found by Mary Leakey at Olduvai in 1959. In 1967, he was with Richard at Kibish in the lower Omo Valley in Ethiopia where the earliest known *Homo sapiens* fossils (now dated to more than 200,000 years ago) were found. This led to the famous work in Turkana, Kenya in the 1970s and 80s, where Kamoya led an expert team of fossil hunters and himself found key specimens – the most complete skull of *Homo habilis*, KNM-ER 1813 and what would be his greatest find, a small piece of skull at Nariokotome, which turned out to be part of a nearly complete skeleton of *Homo erectus*, dated to 1.6 million years old. Dubbed the Turkana Boy, it is eastern Africa’s most iconic find.

As he grew older, Kamoya became less active in the field, but he remained an inspiration to a younger generation. The respect and love of those who worked with him were never in doubt, but as a Kenyan fieldworker who left school in his early teens, he was not the likely recipient of national and international

honours. However, as times changed, recognition came. Ronald Reagan presented him with the John Oliver La Gorce medal from the National Geographic Society in 1985 at the White House. In 2021, in recognition of his contribution to palaeoanthropology, he received an honorary doctorate from Case Western University in Ohio, US.

Kamoya had a distinguished career with the National Museums of Kenya working with many other scientists, but it was his partnership with Richard Leakey that took centre stage. Richard placed his upmost trust in Kamoya, not only to find fossils, but also to locate places for field camps under trees along dry sand rivers. More importantly, he had to locate suitable clearings for precarious airstrips, a lifeline for bringing in fresh supplies and scientists over the coming months. These were sometimes a little short and often quite hard to find without the team waving bed sheets to catch Richard’s eye. He continued to join Meave and Louise Leakey at Turkana for shorter stints in the 2000s to share his experiences with their new teams of fossil hunters.

When Kamoya started work with Louis Leakey in the 1960s it seemed unlikely that the

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local fieldworkers would receive the recognition they deserved. Times have changed for the better, and there is more and more recognition of the key role that people beyond the academy can play in contributing to scientific discovery. Kamoya was not only a wonderful example of this, he was also someone who made the times themselves change.

He is survived by his wife, Mary, six children and five grandchildren.

Louise N. Leakey¹✉ and **Robert A. Foley**²✉

¹Stony Brook University, Stony Brook, NY, USA.

²King's College, Cambridge, UK.

✉ e-mail: louise.leakey@stonybrook.edu;
raf10@cam.ac.uk

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Additional information

Louise Leakey is a Research Professor at Stony Brook University, National Geographic Explorer at Large and a researcher at the Turkana Basin Institute. She worked alongside Kamoya from when she was a child. Robert Foley is Leverhulme Professor of Human Evolution Emeritus at the University of Cambridge and worked with Kamoya in the field at Lake Turkana.