

---

# Gakaara Wanjaũ: In Memoriam

## 1921-29 March 2001

---

*Kimani Njogu*

In January 2001, I shared tea in a cafe on River Road, Nairobi, with Gakaara Wanjaũ, the Kenyan writer and winner of the 1984 Noma Award for publishing in Africa. We reviewed issues of language and culture in Kenya, as well as the importance of nurturing a national literature and consciousness. The discussion was informed by our work together in ŨŨGI: The Gikũyũ Language Committee. Unknown to me, Gakaara would pass on two months later due to a troublesome illness.

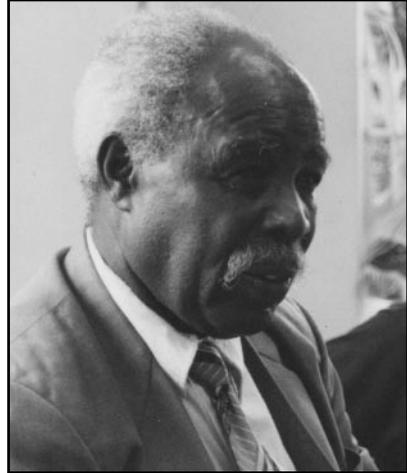
In *Moving the Centre: The Struggle for Cultural Freedoms*, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o pays tribute to the writings of Gakaara, especially in reference to postcolonial politics and cultures. Ngũgĩ shows that a cultural renaissance preceded the Mau Mau armed struggle. Newspapers and small publishing houses flourished:

Books of poem and songs, in African languages, were brought out. It was a period of literary upsurge. The energy came from the entire anti-colonial movement. Not surprisingly, when a state of emergency was declared in 1952, culture become under siege. Many books were banned. All the small presses publishing in African languages were closed down. Writers of banned books were imprisoned without trial. The most prominent of them was Gakaara wa Wanjaũ. (89)

Gakaara wrote in Gikũyũ during the colonial and postcolonial era. During the colonial era, he was detained without trial for nine years in different detention camps on account of his writings and in postcolonial Kenya he was imprisoned without trial for a month and badly tortured because of his intellectual work on language and culture.

Mzee Wanjaũ was born in 1921, the year Harry Thuku, leader of the workers movement, was arrested and about 150 people killed at a march demanding his release. It is the year Mary Nyanjirũ led women in a confrontation with the colonial police in the streets of Nairobi. That moment was captured in the Kanyegenyũri poetic compositions of the 1920s. It was to be captured again in the Mũthĩrĩgũ songs, sung according to the Pokomo rhythms of the Kenyan Coast.

In a sense, then, Gakaara came into the world at the moment of struggle. His eighty years of life were laden with the search for a more humane world. At the time of his death, he was the patron of ŨŨGI: The Gikũyũ



Language Committee, committed to the standardization and moderation of African languages.

He wrote for most of the twentieth century and set the stage for the growth of Gikũyũ literature. Gakaara's writing in the 1940/50s ought to be seen within the context of other writings of the period. For instance, Bildad Kaggia had been publishing the Gikũyũ newspaper *Inoorĩa Agĩkũyũ* and the Swahili weekly *Afrika Mpya*. The precursors of vernacular newspapers published in the 1940s, in form and content, was *Mũiguithania* (The Reconciler). Started by the Kenya Central Association (KCA) in May 1928 and with the motto "Pray and Work," its first editor was Jomo Kenyatta. In 1940 the colonial government proscribed the KCA and banned *Mũiguithania*. However, in 1945 the weekly *Mũmenyereri* (The Guardian) was started by the late Henry Mworĩ Mwanĩki. Further, the late 1940s saw a proliferation of African newspapers and magazines. These included Kenya African Union's (KAU) *Sauti ya Mwafrika*, Kaggia's *Inooro rĩa Agĩkũyũ* (The Whetstone of the Agĩkũyũ), John Cege's *Wĩyathi* (Freedom), *Mũthamaki* (The Stateman), *Hĩndĩ ya Agĩkũyũ* (The Time of the Agĩkũyũ), *Mwaranĩria* (The Conversationalist), *Wĩhũge* (Stay Alert), and *Mũramati* (The Caretaker). It is within that context of intense journalistic activity that Gakaara was to start his own *Gĩkũyũ na Mũmbi* magazine as well as the monthly *Waigua Atĩa* (What's Up?). In these, he published original articles and songs.

These journalists worked closely with Asian businessmen in putting out the papers and magazines, such as the Regal Printers, V. G. Patel, and G. L. Vidyathi. Patel and Vidyathi were later to go to jail for printing *Mũmenyereri* and *Sauti ya Mwafrika*, respectively. In order to curb the spirit of resistance and the discourse of freedom and self-determination of these newspapers, the colonial government started its own paper, *Mũcemanio*, which lasted for only three months. Other regional newssheets were also started.

In 1940 Gakaara joined the army as a clerical officer and on returning from the war in 1946 founded the African Book Writers Ltd., with some of his friends. He published *Uhoro wa Ugũrani* (On marriage), the first fictional narrative published in Gikũyũ. Then in 1948 he published his first political treatise in Kiswahili—*Rohoya Kiumene na Bidii kwa Mwafrika* (The Spirit of Manhood and Resilience for the African). Three years later he founded Gakaara Book Service and the monthly newsletter *Nwagua Atĩa?* (What's Up?).

It was in 1951 that Gakaara reprinted his first work of fiction, on marriage, under a new title, *Ngwenda Unjũrage* (I Want You to Kill Me!). He also published *Ihu nĩ Rĩa U?* (Who Is Responsible for Pregnancy?); *O Kĩĩma Ngagũta* (To Any Destination); *Mũrata wa Mwene* (My Buddy); and the poetry *Marebeta Ikũmi ma Wendo* (Ten Love Poems). He translated his earlier Kiswahili piece on African dignity as *Mageria No Mo Mahota* (Success Comes with Persistence).

Gakaara was very active in generating, publishing, and distributing popular anticolonial songs. Towards this end, he worked closely with

Kĩnũthia wa Mũgĩa and Mũthee Cheche. Some of those songs featured prominently in the Jomo Kenyatta Kapenguria trial.

In August 1952 he composed and published a political creed modeled on the Christian creed, *Wĩtĩkio wa Gĩkũyũ na Mũmbi*. This creed and the book *Roho ya Kiume na Bidii kwa Mwafrika* featured prominently in his detention during the Mau Mau war. Working with Kĩnũthia wa Mũgĩa and Mũthee Cheche, Gakaara compiled political songs such as *Nyĩmbo cia Ciana cia Gĩkũyũ na Mũmbi* (Songs of the Children on Gĩkũyũ and Mũmbi). Most of these papers and songs were banned at the time of the Emergency and featured prominently in the Kenyatta 1952 Kapenguria trial.

Gakaara was arrested on 20 October 1952 under Operation Jock Scott when the State of Emergency was declared (the same night Jomo Kenyatta, Bildad Kaggia, Ochieng' Oneko, Fred Kubai, and Paul Ngei were arrested). He served detention in Kajiado, Manda Island, Athi River, Hola, Takwa, and many other detention camps. He was released in 1959 and restricted until June 1960.

Later he set up Gakaara Press in Karatina so that he could continue writing and publishing easily. He started the *Gĩkũyũ na Mũmbi* magazine, which contained the serialized stories of Kĩwaĩ wa Nduuta in 1976. Kĩwaĩ wa Nduuta appears in at least forty-two episodes of the serialized narrative. Most of the information on his detention can be found in his book *Mau Mau Author in Detention*, first published in 1983 by Heinemann Kenya (now EAEP) as *Mwandiki wa Mau Mau Ithamĩrioinĩ*. It is the Gĩkũyũ version that won the first Noma Award for Kenya in 1984.

Through Gakaara Press, he has published numerous primers in Gĩkũyũ, Dholuo, Kalenjin, Kiswahili, Kikamba, and many other Kenyan languages. He used his meager resources in the advancement of knowledge.

Let us pay tribute to Gakaara Wanjaũ for recognizing that language cannot be meaningfully abstracted from the forces of social history. Gakaara devoted his life to the pursuit of knowledge and he shared this with others through his writings.