



Project
MUSE[®]

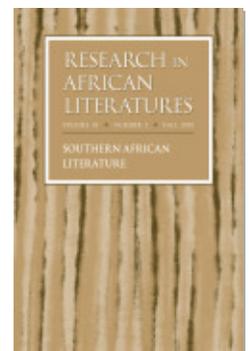
Today's Research. Tomorrow's Inspiration.

Casting Characters: Autobiography and Political Imagination in Central Kenya

Peterson, Derek R., 1971-

Research in African Literatures, Volume 37, Number 3, Fall 2006,
pp. 176-192 (Article)

Published by Indiana University Press



For additional information about this article

<http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/ral/summary/v037/37.3peterson.html>

Casting Characters: Autobiography and Political Imagination in Central Kenya

DEREK PETERSON

Selwyn College, University of Cambridge

ABSTRACT

The interpretation of African-language literature has been clouded by romantic assumptions about the organic connection between writers and their communities. This essay compares two Gikuyu-language autobiographies. The first, by the Presbyterian Rev. Charles Muhoro, works like a casting call: it lists duties, sketches heroic biographies, and summons readers to act as partisans of the church. The second, by Cecilia Muthoni Mugaki, is a tale of personal torment and salvation. Cecilia was an early convert to the East African Revival, which reached central Kenya during the late 1940s. Where Muhoro propels readers to act on principle, Cecilia publicizes the controversies that divided Gikuyu people. Charles Muhoro and Cecilia Muthoni wrote their autobiographies differently because Gikuyu could not agree about how their private interests should be balanced against political consensus. Once we dispense with the notion that vernacular literature must faithfully reproduce the values of local communities, we can glimpse the wider field of argument in which these texts took their place.

Autobiography was the most widely practiced literary genre in colonial Kenya.¹ Christian converts were inveterate autobiographers. They composed their life stories in vernacular-language classroom essays, assigned by missionaries to encourage self-examination and to teach compositional skills. Some converts and clerics got their autobiographies published, in English, on government or missionary presses (Kariuki; Olang'; Wanyoike). Kenya's nationalist movement was likewise an engine for autobiographical production. Over a dozen memoirs have been published detailing the authors' participation in the Mau Mau movement of the 1950s (Itote; Wachanga; Mathu; Otieno; see Clough). Political leaders also wrote their memoirs (Odinga; Thuku; Kaggia). And today, East African Educational Publishers and other Kenyan publishing houses are again producing biographies and autobiographies for sale on the school market (Kanogo; Wandiiiba; Wanyande; Ndege).

The fiction written by Kenya's writers has inspired a tremendous volume of literary scholarship. But Kenya's much more extensive body of autobiographies has largely been read as evidence, not literature. Scholars have used autobiographies to fill in details about history or ethnography. In his foundational book *Tell Me Africa*, for example, James Olney argues that autobiographies offer a unique means of accessing an African *mentalité*. Where a Western anthropologist's perspective can only be partial, the African writer "gives a complete rendering of interior, subjective, and African experience: how it feels, as an African, to look out at an African world and to look back over African experiences" (10). Olney argues that the African writer's artistic and political agency is inconsequential. Gikuyu authors "all seem to write the same autobiography: for them there is one archetypal Gikuyu life lived in turn by each successive embodiment of the Gikuyu spirit" (248). Scholars influenced by Olney have similarly treated autobiographers as spokesmen for a collective whole. Carol Neubauer maintains that the notional African "perceives himself not as a solitary individual [. . .] but rather identifies with the legendary history and social values of his clan." In Mau Mau autobiographies, therefore, "the self-portrait captures the story of many through the life of one."

In this essay I compare two very different autobiographies, both written in the Gikuyu vernacular. The first, typed by Rev. Charles Muhoro Kareri during the 1970s, is purposefully reticent about the intimacies of the author's private life. Born in Nyeri district, in northern Gikuyuland, Muhoro was one of the earliest students at the Church of Scotland's Tumutumu mission; later, he became the first African moderator of the Presbyterian Church of East Africa. His autobiography poaches shamelessly from missionaries' archive. He recrafts missionary-authored biographies, clips pages from church minute books, and devotes whole chapters to listing churchmen's duties. Muhoro hopes that his readers will cast themselves into the text. His collection of lists and pithy biographies are meant to get Gikuyu people acting purposefully for the good of the church.

Like Muhoro, Cecilia Muthoni Mugaki grew up in Tumutumu's classrooms. The daughter of an early convert, she schooled during the 1920s, became a teacher, and served with Charles Muhoro on several church and government committees. She wrote her autobiography in longhand during the 1980s. Where Muhoro's autobiography is a catalogue of lists and morality plays, Cecilia's life story is about her personal torment and salvation. Cecilia was an early convert to the East African Revival, which reached Tumutumu from faraway Rwanda during the late 1940s. Her autobiography is a testimony, a revelation of personal failing and religious redemption. It opens up Cecilia's private life for public discussion.

These competing autobiographies do not embody an underlying Gikuyu *mentalité*. Nor were Charles Muhoro and Cecilia Muthoni reflecting on a history that is past and done. Both Cecilia and Muhoro invite their readers to characterize themselves using the text. Muhoro's text works like a casting call: it summons readers to act as partisans of a cause. Cecilia, in contrast, is an agitator. Where Muhoro works to propel readers to act on principle, Cecilia's testimony lays bare the controversies that set Gikuyu people at odds. Charles Muhoro and Cecilia Muthoni wrote their autobiographies differently because Gikuyu people could not agree about how their private interests should be balanced against the homogenizing demands of political consensus. There is no representative Gikuyu story, for Gikuyu people disagreed about how their imagined communities ought to

be arranged. The tensions between revivalism and polity-building, between the practice of giving testimony and the public-spirited discipline that organizers demanded, between the intensely parochial and the antiseptically political are at the heart of Gikuyuland's intellectual history. These autobiographies illuminate how controversial, how political, was the composition of vernacular literature in colonial Kenya.

I

Charles Muhoro Kareri's autobiography is a collection of texts composed by other people. He traffics in diverse genres, shoehorning vampire stories, church council minutes, anthropology, adventure tales, and Biblical exegesis into the text. This intertextuality is central to Muhoro's purpose. Like the missionaries and African thinkers whose strategies he emulates, Muhoro the writer works to open up avenues of social and political action.

The history of Muhoro's autobiography begins in the library and archive at Tumutumu mission. Tumutumu was established in 1908, when Church of Scotland missionaries secured a five-acre freehold plot from Gikuyu landholders around Tumutumu Hill.² The son of a landholder, Muhoro began schooling at Tumutumu in 1913. He was immediately immersed in a world that revolved around biography. The earliest catechism course at Tumutumu concentrated on "the lives of extraordinary people."³ From 1909 onward, the standard reading primer for Standard III students was *Mohoro ma Tene Tene* (Stories of Long Ago). It featured the story of Nebuchadnezzar, the proud king who was humbled by God, and the story of the strong man Samson, whose weakness was his pride. Missionaries told stories like these to induce readers to reflect on their own lives, to measure themselves against the characters in the story. As Marion Stevenson explained in 1910, "[The stories] can be used as a help to raise their ideas. I remember the almost amused surprise with which tales of self-sacrifice used to be received; the other day the story of the Roman soldier at the gates of Pompeii roused a very different emotion. They are being helped to realize that a man's greatness is not always and everywhere measured by the number of wives he possesses" ("Widening Horizons"). Biographies were the means by which missionaries modeled morality, good conduct, and self-sacrifice for their students. The stories made for good reading. In 1929, one missionary thought *Mohoro ma Tene Tene* had "the largest sales in this Kikuyu tribe apart from the New Testament [. . .]. Every pupil aims to buy his own copy before leaving school so that he may take it away with him."⁴

As they advanced through the upper standards of Tumutumu's schools, students were expected to master the biographical genre for themselves. In 1930, prospective elementary school teachers at Tumutumu had to write an array of short biographical essays in their qualifying examinations. Their subjects, chosen by the headmaster, were Dr. Krapf, Mr. Wakefield, Sultan Barghash, Mbaruk, Sir William McKinnon, Carl Peters, and David Livingstone.⁵ In the early 1920s, Tumutumu missionaries established a library for the use of ex-students who wished to continue their education (see Philp, "Literary Experiment"). In 1922, there were no geography books, nor were there history books.⁶ Tumutumu's library was crowded with biographies. It contained English-language biographies of the missionary David Hill in China, King Khama of South Africa, the ill-fated Anglican bishop

James Hannington, Mary Slessor, the educationalist Dr. J. Aggrey, and Apollo the apostle to the pygmies.⁷ It also held *Pilgrim's Progress*, both in Swahili and in English (see Hofmeyer). By 1943, some 200 ex-students at Tumutumu were members of the library, having paid a small fee for borrowing privileges.⁸ Success in Tumutumu's schools meant mastering the biographical genre. Missionaries hoped Gikuyu readers would come alongside the characters portrayed in these stories, using their examples to chart the course of their own lives.

But it was more than missionaries' prompting that fed Gikuyu students' interest in biography. Tumutumu's students adopted exemplary biographies to orient their own life course. Catechumens in search of baptismal names ransacked Tumutumu's library, dug through the Bible, and read biographies voraciously. Arthur Kihumba read English history for his baptismal name, and chose Arthur "because it was the name of king."⁹ Jedidah Kirigu, baptized in 1934, similarly named herself after royalty. She chose the name Jedidah—the mother of the Old Testament King Josiah—from a list prepared by a friend who had "looked for those names in books."¹⁰ Their baptismal names positioned Gikuyu converts in the political world. In 1938 Kimamo, a squatter living on a white settler's farm in the Rift Valley, was baptized with his wife and children. He took the name Ibrahim; his son was Isaaka.¹¹ They were the names of the founding family of Israel, to whom God had once promised the land of Canaan. By their names, Ibrahim and Isaaka looked forward to a day when they would inherit the land unjustly worked by white taskmasters.

In writing his autobiography, Muhoro elaborates on a literary genre that missionaries and Gikuyu converts have invested themselves in for nearly a century. His autobiography is a book of names, meant to introduce new role models to inquiring Gikuyu readers. Toward the beginning of his autobiography, for example, Muhoro reflects on the life of his missionary teacher Marion Stevenson. Stevenson was the subject of an earlier, English-language biography titled *A Saint in Kenya*, written by fellow missionary Mrs. Henry Scott and published in Scotland in 1932. Muhoro had Scott's book at his elbow while constructing his biography of Stevenson. This easy intertextuality is most obvious in his analysis of Marion Stevenson's Gikuyu name, *Nyamacaki*. Mrs. Scott explained the name by describing how Stevenson had once been robbed of a checkbook: "Her house-boy might have been involved in the inquiry," she wrote, "but she refused to give evidence or to implicate anyone. This boy, who is now one of the ordained ministers, says that she called him 'son.' It was the turning point of his life. From the incident of the cheque-book came her native name Namachecki, or One-who-possesses-many-cheques" (125). In Mrs. Scott's account, *Nyamacaki* became a testament to Stevenson's Christian generosity. Muhoro adopts this definition in his own analysis of the name: "She was given the name Nyamacaki," he explains in Gikuyu, "after she refused to report a situation in which her checkbook and other things had been stolen. According to a book on her life, if she had reported the case, her houseboy would have been incarcerated. This man later became a reader and one of the very first church ministers [. . .]. He said that Nyamacaki called him her son" (15).

There are other ways in which Muhoro could have translated *Nyamacaki*. Cecilia Muthoni Mugaki and other elders I interviewed at Tumutumu thought the name meant "the thin animal." Their translation made *Nyamacaki* into a comment on Stevenson's dining habits. Stevenson was rumored to have eaten Chief Kariuki,

who died in 1915 while under treatment in Tumutumu hospital (Scott 207). She and the other missionaries were widely said to eat human flesh and to drink from human skulls.¹² At one of the small outschools near Tumutumu, students ran away in fright when one morning in 1922 she appeared in the schoolyard. Only six of the thirty-three students were willing to sit for the examination she administered.¹³ Jeremiah Waita, one of Tumutumu's earliest catechumens, remembered that on the first occasion he met Stevenson, "my eyes found that she had bad teeth."¹⁴ Tumutumu people had their eye on *Nyamacaki's* mouth.

Charles Muhoro has nothing to say about *Nyamacaki's* fabled dining habits. He translates snatches from *A Saint in Kenya* into Gikuyu, and thereby clears Miss Stevenson's name. He cribs from Mrs. Scott in describing *Nyamacaki's* personal discipline, her comparatively liberal politics, her love for students. He offers vignettes to highlight her qualities: we learn that "from the mission to wherever we were going, she went reading religious magazines, even though the paths were narrow and slippery" (16). And he concludes, "She offered herself to serve God and the people of this country." "This should challenge many women to offer themselves for the service of this country," writes Muhoro. He invites his readers to measure themselves against *Nyamacaki*, to take her moral character on themselves. "Many women named their baby girls *Nyamacaki*," wrote Muhoro. "The nickname stuck, because when the baby girls named *Nyamacaki* grew up and got married, their children were given the name *Nyamacaki*" (10–11).

Missionaries asked their charges to read biographies in order to impress them with the values of self-sacrifice, honor, and discipline. Gikuyu converts of the 1930s and '40s read biography strategically, to tap into the political and moral resources of British and Christian history. Muhoro invites personalized readings of his biographies. He uses missionaries' hagiography to suppress Gikuyu rumors about Miss Stevenson's eating habits. His sanitized sketches invite readers to cast themselves in her character.

II

As a biographer, Muhoro lays out paths of action and imagination for his readers to follow. As an archivist, too, Muhoro gives his readers directions. Muhoro became Tumutumu's part-time archivist in 1936. "I began by writing church registers, transferring the names of the people who had been baptized from the old record books to new ones," wrote Muhoro. "Anybody interested in seeing them can find them today at the Presbyterian church office at Tumutumu" (61). Muhoro's autobiography is a digest of the archives he knew so well. The book is packed with lists: lists of first baptisms, lists of ordination dates, and lists of church members. Muhoro also gives his readers clippings from Kirk Session minute books, church constitutions, reports, and sermon notes. And, in the penultimate chapter to the book, he reconstructs the hierarchy of the Presbyterian Church of East Africa, listing the duties of church officials and admonishing them to perform their tasks properly.

For Presbyterian churchmen of the 1920s and '30s, making lists was more than a bureaucratic formality. Record books literally constituted the membership of the church. Children or adults who passed through the catechumens' class had their names entered into a "book of the sacrament." This entitled them to take

Holy Communion, to conduct a church wedding, and to participate on church committees. Any member who transgressed church law was banned from communion. In the record book, the word *githengio* was carefully written against the sinner's name. The Tumutumu elders' book, for example, listed elders' names, their abode, their parish, the date of their ordination, and their status. The book was Muhoro's work, compiled by him during the 1930s and '40s. Keeping these record books updated was a vital business. In 1933, missionaries drew up a list of responsibilities for Tumutumu's Gikuyu pastors.¹⁵ The first item on the list, before preaching, Bible study, or any other spiritual vocation, was "[c]arefully entering up all church rolls, and seeing that those in the central station are also kept up to date." The second item was "[k]eeping a diary or a log book." Only in item three did missionaries admonish clerics toward "[c]onstant, systematic visiting, ridge by ridge." Bookkeeping was a primary pastoral duty.

These church record books did not merely reflect already-existing loyalties among Nyeri people. Keeping records was for church organizers a way to create a political community. In 1929, Presbyterian missionaries toured churches in central Kenya asking members to sign a pledge promising to forgo circumcision for their daughters. John Arthur, head of the Scots' Kenya mission, began the campaign in the northernmost Presbyterian station at Chogoria. Cecilia Muthoni Mugaki, then a teacher at Chogoria, remembers what happened in this way:

At Chogoria there was a doctor called Dr. Arthur. He was very tough, that guy. Very authoritarian. He went and got a book, and put it in front of the church, and said "From today in Chogoria there will be no-one circumcised, and that is an order, and anyone who agrees with that order come and write here." And the ones who were refusing were saying, "We do not want our girls circumcised because the Europeans want to marry our daughters." After a while Jonothan Muriithi went and signed, and after that ten people signed.¹⁶

Arthur's record book literally constituted a political division among Gikuyu people. Those who signed the book, at Chogoria and elsewhere, came to be called *ĩrore*. The term means "thumb-marks," the mark that Jonothan Muriithi and others put on Arthur's book. Those who rejected the anticircumcision program were called *iregi*, the "refusers." Gikuyu people's political identities were defined by their willingness to sign church record books.

At Tumutumu, the circumcision controversy never generated much heat (but cf. Thomas). Only at Mahiga church, over the Tana River in Othaya division, did significant numbers of members refuse to sign the pledge. In April 1930, the Tumutumu Kirk Session ruled that the names of 200 *iregi* at Mahiga should be removed from the communion rolls.¹⁷ Three months later, it established the policy whereby ex-communicated members could be returned to the communion list. The procedure went as follows:

- a. If a person requests readmission, he should first rectify the sins and other non-Christian activities. He has to show repentance.
- b. Upon attending the elders' court, he is given time to confess his misdeeds and his repentance. After this, the minister will tell him that he is readmitted. His name is then re-entered in the baptism book.

- c. The person is kept on probation for a period of not less than a month, during which time he learns the sacramental lessons again.
- d. After the probation ends, his name is entered in the book of the sacrament.¹⁸

Record books were more than a formality. These books were the pivot around which contending Gikuyu political communities formed in 1929–30. Who signed what, whose name was written where, who refused to sign—these were the questions around which this political controversy was mobilized.

The *iregi* learned their organizational technique from mission churches. With their names erased from Tumutumu's communion register, the "refusers" at Mahiga created their own roll books. In the wake of the circumcision controversy, they founded an "independent" church/school just down the hill from the Presbyterian church, at a place called Kagere. By October 1931, the church roll listed some 465 members.¹⁹ Some of the church members were shop owners at the nearby trading center in Kamakwa. Others were part-time wage earners, working as clerks for European planters in the Rift Valley. In 1931, a group of 58 petty traders formed the Kikuyu Traders Association (KTA) to raise funds for a proper school building at Kagere. Members' names were carefully arrayed in columns in the association's books, with the amount they had donated listed beside the name.²⁰ The association's "Rules to Members," penned in the midst of the fundraising campaign, went like this:

1. Anyone who wishes to join the school should put a signature that he is willing to assist with its work and abide by its rules.
2. He should agree to be like a firm soldier prepared to develop the country, willing to agree with what has been agreed upon. Who agrees can sign voluntarily, and those against will not be forced. Every signature is one shilling.
3. All deliberations by members should be put into writing. All agendas should arrive at the secretary's prior to meetings and any agenda that does not arrive will not be discussed.²¹

In its lists and roll books, the KTA identified contributors and, in so doing, created an imagined community. Members who refused to contribute funds had their name cancelled from the books.²² Those who contributed became "firm soldiers," joined in their shared pursuit of development, progress, and education. Like Dr. Arthur, the bookkeepers of the KTA used lists to define and solidify changeable human loyalties.

Charles Muhoro's autobiography works in the same fashion as the KTA's membership lists. In chapter thirteen, Muhoro describes the "matters of the church and how it conducts its affairs," enumerating the duties of church elders, deacons, and ordinary church members. Elders' duties are listed under five headings: they include visiting the sick, administering Holy Communion, and shepherding the Christian flock. Deacons, warns Muhoro, should not underestimate their role. Like Stephen, who was stoned for being a follower of Jesus, deacons should "accept the work, performing it with humility and dedication" (90). Muhoro also gives directions to ministers, listing the "factors that may hinder a church minister from performing his duties." These include laziness, "desire for fame," "speaking with bad jokes," and debt. Missionaries and Gikuyu political organizers of the 1930s

used record books to hold members to account. Muhoro's memoir builds on this strategy of mobilization. His lists of duties and responsibilities invite church-people to play the part they have been assigned.

Muhoro's life story leads people to characterize themselves. As a biographer, Muhoro asks readers to invest themselves in other people's exemplary life stories. As an archivist, Muhoro reminds church members of their duties and, in so doing, holds them responsible for their actions. This autobiography is an aid to the political imagination. It builds on the motivational literature that Gikuyu had already been acting out.

III

Cecilia Muthoni Mugaki grew up alongside Charles Muhoro. Baptized at Tumutumu in 1920, she earned her English leaving certificate in 1924, passed the junior teachers' examination in 1927, and served alongside Charles Muhoro on several church committees during the 1940s and '50s. But where Charles Muhoro's autobiography is silent on the details of his personal and marital life, Cecilia fills her text with an intimate story of her sin and redemption. At the center of her autobiography is the story of her conversion to the East African Revival. The first large-scale Revival convention was convened in 1935, at the Anglican mission station in Kabale, Uganda (Church, *Quest* ch. 13). At this as at later Revival meetings, converts publicly confessed to private sins: adultery, thievery, drunkenness, and other vices. In December 1947, the Anglicans at the Kahuhia mission station organized a Revival convention that drew some 3,000 people. Among the attendees was Doris Nyambura, the sewing instructor for the Tumutumu Women's Guild. She became the first evangelist for the Revival in Nyeri district. By 1950, Tumutumu churches were filled with revivalists, many of them women.²³

At conventions, in fellowship meetings, and in private conversation, revivalists made a practice of narrating how God had saved them from sin. A number of these "testimonies" (as they were called) have now been published (Church, *Quest*; Smoker; Wiseman; Church, *Awake, Uganda!*). They are an intensely personal autobiographical literature, embarrassingly intimate in their catalogues of private sin. But an effective testimony was not an unrehearsed inventory of private life. A missionary observer described a 1949 convention in southern Gikuyuland in this way:

Imagine at the end of the day member after member of the audience coming forward, making confession of sin, and relating what Christ has done for him. Some of these, men and women known to be devout, are received quietly. The signature chorus of the Revival is sung, and there is an occasional word or handshake from those nearby. Others known or felt to be insecure or partial in their witness are received in silence or by the singing of a hymn enjoining them to seek salvation. Still others, known to be careless or evil livers, whose witness rings true, or those hitherto opposed to the movement, are received in scenes of great enthusiasm. People start to their feet, singing. (MacPherson)

Testimonies were a carefully practiced literary form. In 1944, revivalist leader Heshbon Mwangi warned converts to be careful about their testimonies. "We must not joke or talk lightly of sin or play with it," he wrote in a circular letter. "Worldly

people speak soft words like butter and those who have not wisdom to discern what they are after, are deceived and fall."²⁴ Speaking well was a spiritual virtue. Converts had to structure their testimonies according to the formulas of the genre. Those who spoke without regard to convention were liable to be met with silence, or with admonishing hymnody.

In Nyeri as elsewhere in central Kenya, a depiction of marital disharmony was an essential backdrop in any testimony of conversion. Tales of warring husbands and wives populate revivalists' life stories. Geoffrey Ngare, for example, converted while attending a revival convention in 1948. He described his past life in this way:

I saw that there were times when I was with my wife and she faced one way and I faced the other, we were too angry to speak to one another, perhaps because of something a child had done. Then if we heard someone knocking at the door, immediately we began to smile and talk normally. . . . When I was angry I would beat her with angry words, I threw them at her violently until she cried bitterly. But I was content, because if anyone heard her or saw her, I could say, I don't beat her.²⁵

George Kimani Kirebu testified how, after a visit from a revivalist preacher in January 1940, he ran from his house, overwhelmed with the "realization of my own doomed life."²⁶ While praying, he felt a bucket of cool water flowing over his head, then saw a vision of the heavens opened. He immediately went to his wife and confessed his sins. "I had told her some lies," he testified. "I had ill treated her, I'm sorry to say I had even beaten her not once nor twice." He was overjoyed when his wife forgave him. Some converts spiced their confessions with overtly lurid detail. At the Anglican mission in Kabete, missionaries complained in 1944 about "competitive confessing, sometimes of sins which are better not mentioned in front of large mixed audiences containing a fair proportion of children."²⁷ The stress, argued missionaries, "should be on deeds, not words, on what newness of life in Christ is, rather than on what life with an emphasis on Kikuyu customs was like, or worse still, life in a detribalized godless state around about Nairobi."

Revivalists identified themselves by their colorful confessions of sexual sin or marital conflict. They punctuated their loud testimonies with catch phrases learned from the Baganda evangelists who had first preached revival in Gikuyuland. The Luganda phrase *Tukutendereza Jesu* (Let Us Praise Jesus) became a password for the group. Revivalists greeted one another by calling out "*Tukutendereza Jesu*" and identified other "saved ones" based on their reply (Smoker 161). Revivalists also salted their language with the phrase *Mwathani arogocwo*, "Praise the Lord" in Gikuyu. Church elders at Tumutumu complained that revivalists spoke to one another in a "foreign dialect."²⁸ Critics elsewhere in Gikuyuland similarly complained that converts "try to speak a new language to deceive people into thinking it is the language of the Spirit."²⁹ Converts' public discourses constituted the Revival at Tumutumu, and marked revivalists off from bureaucrats like Charles Muhoro.

Cecilia Muthoni Mugaki's autobiography is a transcript of a testimony she composed, practiced, and polished in dozens of public gatherings. Like other revivalists, she plots her testimony around marital strife. She married school-teacher Eustace Mugaki in 1937. But marriage did not bring Cecilia happiness:

The devil became jealous of us in 11 Sept. 1937, when we got married. The happiness which we had enjoyed was destroyed by the devil and we became a couple of fighting people, complaining again and again, until I declared that the devil had come into our prayers, that this was not my real choice . . . We spent ten years with domestic problems which were uncalled for such that love and joy between us ended completely.

In June 1938, the Tumutumu Kirk Session heard evidence that Cecilia had married Eustace while pregnant by another man.³⁰ She denied the accusation, and the Session admonished the couple to live together in peace. But Cecilia could find no satisfaction in marriage. Her only pleasure in marriage was in procreation: "There was nothing in our home that attracted me apart from getting a child which I could not get on my own," she wrote.

In January 1948, Cecilia met the Revival evangelist Doris Nyambura, who was returning from a convention. At an evening meeting with Nyambura and three other revivalists, Cecilia was discomfited when she was asked, "Teacher, how is your relationship with Jesus?" When she half-heartedly confessed to having lost her passion for Bible-reading, the revivalists sprang to their feet, singing *Tukuten-dereza Jesu* and rubbing her head. "I was so afraid that I kept silent," wrote Cecilia. "I was saying nothing for I felt very foolish of what was being talked about." That night, though, Cecilia's mind moved to the hereafter. "I started understanding what the whole thing was about," she wrote. "It's me who woke them up at 6:00 AM to pray. I told the Lord to forgive me for I was a sinner. Tears poured out." It was then that Cecilia began practicing her testimony:

From there I got a testimony which I never knew I would have . . . I confessed how I fought with my husband for thinking that he is stupid and I was clever. I thought he was not clever because he had come from school much later than me, and he had not traveled as much as me. He would then think I was belittling him, that I did not think he was supposed to be the head. I confessed all this, and the fruits of pride. As I said all this they would praise.

Her husband was suspicious when Cecilia asked for his forgiveness. On 27 November 1948, though, Eustace was saved. Revivalism gave them relief from their marital difficulties. "With both of us being brethren, our work for the Lord became lighter and lighter with time," wrote Cecilia. "Now it is very light and I praise the Lord when I see in retrospect my foolish attitude to issues. I used to say that it was devils who had invaded our home, yet it was me who failed to commit everything to the Lord."

Charles Muhoro and other Tumutumu elders would have heard this testimony many times. Eustace and Cecilia were leading revivalists at Kiriko, a church/school supervised by the Tumutumu Parish. During the late 1940s and early 1950s, they organized day-long meetings at Kiriko, often without the pastor's permission.³¹ In 1953, missionary Donald Lamont reported that the revivalists at Kiriko were causing trouble for church leaders. "Unsaved teachers [are] held in contempt by children," he wrote. "A little child of Standard One will tell a Form One (unsaved) where he gets off. In short, very factious."³² At Kibirigwi, a church/school near Kiriko, revivalists were banned from using the church building for their meetings. They broke into the church building, and during their testimonies

they likened Pastor Johanna Wanjau to the devil himself.³³ At Tumutumu church, some revivalists called Presbytery moderator Charles Muhoro Kareri “gum tree” and compared him with the walls of Jericho.³⁴ Others dismissed his faith as “salvage Christianity” and accused him of preaching only for his pay.³⁵ Muhoro, in reply, ordered church members to “beat [the revivalists], excommunicate them, and imprison them.”³⁶

There was more than personal animosity at stake in church leaders’ confrontations with revivalists. Revivalists were scornful of church bureaucracy, and dismissive of church leaders’ authority. In January 1948, six months after her conversion, Cecilia publicly accused Charles Muhoro and other bureaucrats of mishandling their duties.³⁷ No receipts were issued for money collected in church, she complained. And church leaders were involved in business ventures, making some people wonder whether their offerings to the church were being used as start-up capital for greedy clerics. Moreover, church laws about marriage, female circumcision, and beer-drinking were being ignored with ministers’ connivance. When in 1949 Charles Muhoro spoke to a group of revivalists about the church’s position on the revival, revivalists argued that “he must not speak as he is full of sin.” Missionaries, they thought, were “greatly deceived by [his] collar.”³⁸ Revivalists refused to take communion from the hand of Muhoro or any other of Tumutumu’s pastors, except Solomon Ndambi, who had been saved in 1949.

Church elders were appalled at revivalists’ incendiary talk. One former deacon remembered that the revivalists “recited Bible verses like poetry but they were empty in [their] hearts.”³⁹ Revivalists’ many words ignited private vendettas. Charles Muhoro condemned the revivalists in 1950 for “preaching because of existing disagreements.”⁴⁰ Other critics complained that revivalists “have filthy conversation in their meetings in secret.”⁴¹ Their preaching about private sins reminded some elders of the gossiping busybodies condemned in I Timothy chapter five (MacPherson). At some point in the 1940s, Nyeri people began using the verb *-goco*, the root of the revivalists’ oft-repeated phrase *Mwathani arogocwo* (Praise the Lord), to mean “purposeless, idle talk; disturbing chatter causing disorder or discord.”⁴² Thirty years later, the daughter of an Anglican clergyman remembered how divisive revivalists’ talk could be. In her 1974 novel *They Shall be Chastised*, Muthoni Likimani spent two full chapters describing how revivalists ruined parties, broke marriages, and destroyed reputations with their never-ending public confessions.

In elders’ view, revivalists’ chatter undermined social order. They knew that “home affairs must not go into the open,” in the words of one proverb (Barra 4). Soft words made homes cool and prosperous.⁴³ Public argument between husbands and wives, in contrast, destroyed families. “Too much talk breaks marriage,” warned a proverb (Barra 6). Revivalists’ testimonies laid home affairs open for public discussion. There were rumors that traveling evangelists had sexual rights to women converts.⁴⁴ Tumutumu elders attacked the group for destroying women’s virtue. A Presbyterian committee appointed to investigate the revivalists condemned the group for “their manner of greeting which involve kissing and hugging and ecstatic jumping.”⁴⁵ Moreover, revivalists called each other by intimate names reserved for the closest of kin. As a result, the committee maintained, they broke up marriages, “creating strife instead of harmony between husband and wife.”

Converts' politics were questionable as their morals. Revivalists were contemptuous of church bureaucracy, and disrespectful toward elders' laws. The investigating committee criticized the Revival on 21 counts. Fully thirteen of the committee's criticisms related to revivalists' disdain for church order. Revivalists were said to "fail to respect the church leaders" and to "cause confusion in the church [. . .] as they are in the habit of rising up and staggering (in the fashion of drunks) when prayer is in session." To church elders, revivalists were subversives. Gikuyu politicians similarly doubted revivalists' integrity. In 1946, it was rumored that Revival evangelists traveling through Kiambu and Fort Hall districts were marking out Gikuyu land for expropriation by white settlers.⁴⁶ In 1950, many people thought that the revivalists, meeting 15,000 strong at a convention in Kabete, had sold the Nairobi City Charter to the British. It was said that revivalists sang so happily at Kabete because they had auctioned their families' land to the Europeans.⁴⁷ In their irresponsible wordiness, revivalists looked like traitors, or dupes.

Tumutumu's elders disciplined the revivalists by shutting their mouths. Early in 1948, the Kirk Session ruled that the revivalists could not be allowed to speak in church gatherings. Later in 1948, the Session went further, ruling that revivalists should not meet even in private homes for prayer.⁴⁸ The Presbytery's ban on revivalist speech was called the *mūhingo*, the "closed door." Church discipline was meant to close revivalists' mouths, stifling their public preaching. There was a second, protective meaning to the "closed door." By closing converts' mouths, church leaders hoped to close off private household affairs from the public ear. But revivalists would not shut up. "[In the church] I could not even greet people, or even tell them what I was doing," remembered Peterson Muchangi. "But when we walked out we built our church outside under the trees, and we started singing, and giving testimonies. So outside we took advantage."⁴⁹ In 1952, Tumutumu parish voted to review the ban on revivalist preaching. When Pastor Meshak Muurage announced the decision at Kiriko church, Eustace Mugaki and Cecilia Muthoni rose to their feet and began singing *Tukutendereza Jesu*.⁵⁰

Mau Mau rebels similarly sought to shut revivalists' mouths. Silence was civic duty for Mau Mau partisans. The "oath of unity" promised that those who revealed Mau Mau's secrets would have their tongues pierced with a red-hot iron, their eyes plucked out, and their hands cut off.⁵¹ Mau Mau organizers sent spies to Revival meetings, learning converts' manner of greeting and listening in on their testimonies (Smoker 78). They used violence to silence revivalists who talked too much. The preacher Ephantus Ngugi was slashed on the mouth and had his front teeth knocked out by forest fighters. They also smashed his megaphone, saying that "this will never speak again" (Smoker 111). Heshbon Mwangi, another preacher, was struck repeatedly in the mouth by Mau Mau partisans (Smoker 89). James Karanja, after taking the oath in Nairobi, was waylaid by Mau Mau loyalists when he attended a revivalist meeting. They told him that his head would be severed and grass would grow from his mouth should he speak about the oath.⁵²

Mau Mau rebels' distrust of chatty converts illuminates how much they shared with church elders. Like Charles Muhoro, Mau Mau's organizers sought to turn a divided people into partisans serving a purpose larger than themselves (Peterson ch. 8). Like Muhoro, Mau Mau's leaders sought to convince people

that self-sacrifice was, in fact, a profitable investment. And like Muhoro and other church leaders, Mau Mau's organizers were deeply challenged by converts' insistence on making divisive, private matters subjects of public discussion.

IV

In his recently published review of *The Life of Charles Muhoro Kareri*, Wunyabari Maloba complains that Muhoro "does not succeed in helping us explore the interior lives of African individuals and communities." Muhoro is evasive about key historical controversies: he makes no mention of the "cultural and political divide that haunted Gikuyuland" during the 1929–1930 circumcision controversy, and deals with the Mau Mau rebellion in a few short pages. Moreover, Maloba suggests, Muhoro is derivative: he makes "very minimal deviation [. . .] from the details, examples, and emphasis already set by white missionaries in their accounts." About his personal life, too, Muhoro is silent: save a short description of a railway-station parting with his wife, Muhoro has virtually nothing to say about his marriage.

Muhoro's silence about his personal life makes his autobiography hard to read. I argue, though, that his reticence itself has a history. Muhoro has little to say about a divisive, contentious past because he and other organizers were committed to papering over the disputes that divided Gikuyu people. Like missionaries, like the organizers of Mau Mau, Muhoro sought to turn people into activists. They used record books and biographical writing to convince people to overlook the personal, private issues that set them at odds with each other. Revivalism attacked this discipline by opening up sexual and marital disputes for public discussion. Where Charles Muhoro invites his readers to be single mindedly devoted to a cause, revivalists' testimonies made long-kept secrets public, dividing families and destroying concord.

The issues that divided Charles Muhoro and Cecilia Muthoni also divided Gikuyu people in general. At issue were their contending models of political discourse. How far should personal life be subject to public discussion? Could Gikuyu people overlook their private differences and enlist themselves, as partisans, in imagined communities? Cecilia Muthoni and Charles Muhoro disagreed over these and other questions. Their contending autobiographies made their contending political projects thinkable.

The interpretation of African literature has been clouded by romantic assumptions about the organic connection between authors and their vernacular communities. James Olney can therefore assert that the "autobiography of a Gikuyu individual is virtually co-terminus—identical in event, in pattern, and in significance—with the autobiography of the Gikuyu people" (85). But the autobiographies of Cecilia Muthoni and Charles Muhoro do not betray an underlying unity of purpose. Gikuyu were never of one mind about their culture or their politics. Once we dispense with the notion that vernacular literature must faithfully reproduce the values of local communities, we can begin to glimpse the wider field of action in which these texts took their place. Both Cecilia and Muhoro were doing political work in their writing: they were marshalling constituencies, creating imagined communities, chastening sinners, and holding people to account. And both were poaching from literature composed by other people, roping testimonies

of conversion, English-language biographies, and record books into their life stories. These autobiographies take their place in a field where other people were already composing, casting characters, and plotting out courses of action. As autobiographers, Cecilia Mugaki and Charles Muhoro remind us that a *persona* is a character to be played.

NOTES

1. Research for this project was funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities (USA), the Pew Charitable Trusts, and the College of New Jersey. Audiences at Yale University and at the African Studies Association (UK) 2004 meeting offered astute criticisms. Karin Barber's comments led me to sharpen the argument. Archival sources are referenced as follows: *PCEA*: Presbyterian Church of East Africa archives, Nairobi; *AIM*: Africa Inland Mission archives, Nairobi; *ACK*: Anglican Church of Kenya archives, Nairobi; *EUL*: Edinburgh University Library archives; *TT*: Tumutumu church archives, Nyeri; *KNA*: Kenya National Archives, Nairobi; *KTA*: Papers of the Kikuyu Traders Association, Othaya; *Murray papers*: Papers of Jocelyn Murray, London Mennonite Centre; *NLS*: National Library of Scotland; *CMS*: Church Missionary Society archives, Birmingham. Transcripts of oral interviews are on deposit at the Kenya National Archives.

2. Land Office to Scott, 15 Oct. 1908, *PCEA I/A/1*.
3. Stevenson to Barlow, 2 Feb. 1915, *PCEA I/A/19*.
4. "School textbooks," 1929, *AIM* "Government Education, 1930–33" file.
5. Headmaster at Tumutumu to Director of Education, 2 July 1930, *PCEA II/E/6–8*.
6. Grieve to Watson, 22 Feb. 1922, *PCEA I/C/7*.
7. This list is derived from "Mbuku maria ma library ya kanitha Tumutumu," Nov. 1941, *TT* Presbytery of Tumutumu file.
8. Tumutumu Annual Report, 1943, *PCEA I/B/7*.
9. Interview, Arthur Kihumba, Othaya town, 7 July and 16 Sept. 1998.
10. Interview, Jedidah Kirigu, Magutu location, 12 Aug. 1998.
11. Barlow to P.C. Central Province, 2 Aug. 1938, *PCEA I/A/40*.
12. Interviews, William Mwangi, Ruare location, 3 Apr. 1998; Elijah Kiruthi, Mahiga, 15 June and 16 Sept. 1998; Gerard Gachau King'ori, Gitugi location, 19 June and 8 July 1998; and Ngunu wa Huthu, Magutu location, 12 Aug. 1998.
13. Stevenson, "Elementary Education," July 1922, *PCEA I/E/10*.
14. Waita, Memorial to Miss Stevenson, n.d., *PCEA I/C/47*.
15. "Pastoral Work," 1933, *TT* "Ministers" file.
16. Interview, Cecilia Muthoni Mugaki, Tumutumu, 25 July 1996 and 16 Sept. 1998.
17. Tumutumu log book, 19 Apr. 1930, *PCEA I/Z/6*.
18. Kirk Session minute for 8 June 1930, *TT*.
19. "Mariitwa ma Athomi a Mahiga: New Promise," 26 Oct. 1931, *KTA*.
20. "Members, Kikuyu Traders Association, Kamakwa," n.d., *KTA*.
21. "Rules to Members," Mahiga, 1932, *KTA*.
22. "Agenda," 14 June 1931, *KTA*.
23. Tumutumu Annual Report, 1950, *PCEA I/C/2*.
24. Heshbon Mwangi to revivalists, 1949, *PCEA II/D/30–34*.
25. Interview, Geoffrey Ngare, n.d., *Murray papers*.
26. "Personal Testimony of George Kimani Kirebu," n.d., *Murray papers*.
27. O. Wigram, annual letter, July 1944, *CMS*.
28. Muhoro, "Memorandum on the Matters of the PCEA Church: Confusion of teaching," March 1950, *PCEA II/D/30–34*.
29. Harrison Kariuki, "Some Errors of Ruandaism," Nov. 1957, *AIM* "Papers on Isms" file.

30. Committee of Presbytery minute for 27 June 1938, *TT*.
31. Calderwood to Muhoro, 17 Apr. 1951, *TT* Correspondence with Kikuyu file.
32. Lamont to Calderwood, 27 May 1953, *PCEA II/C/22*.
33. Muhoro to Calderwood, 9 Apr. 1952, *PCEA II/C/25*.
34. Muhoro to Irvine, 19 Apr. 1952, *TT* Correspondence with Chogoria file.
35. Muhoro to Geoffrey Ngare, 1 June 1950, *TT* Marua makonii synod file.
36. Irvine to Lamont, 25 Apr. 1952, *PCEA II/C/25*.
37. "Issues addressed at Tumutumu meeting," 25 July 1948, *TT* Presbytery of Tumutumu file.
38. Philp, notes on conversation with revivalists at Tumutumu, 1949, *PCEA II/D/30-34*.
39. Interview, Muriuki Kiuria, Magutu location, 13 May 1998.
40. Muhoro, "Memorandum on the Matters of the PCEA Church," *PCEA II/D/30-34*.
41. Harrison Kariuki, "Some Errors of Ruandaism," Nov. 1957, *AIM* "Papers on Isms" file.
42. Barlow, notes on *-goco*, *EUL* Gen. 1785/1.
43. Barlow, "Kikuyu Linguistics," *EUL* Gen. 1786/6.
44. "Report on Ruanda Activities," 10 Aug. 1950, *AIM* "Papers on Isms" file.
45. "Subcommittee Investigating Persons associated with the 'Ruanda' Revival," 28-29 Oct. 1949, *PCEA II/G/2*. Reproduced in Kareri 100-02.
46. Calderwood to Beattie, 30 Nov. 1946, *NLS* Acc 7548/B/270.
47. Martin Capon, prayer letter for 1950, *ACK* North Highlands Rural Deanery file.
48. Philp to Barlow, 1948, *KNA* MSS Bible Society 1/8.
49. Interview, Peterson Muchangi, Tumutumu, 15 Sept. 1998.
50. Lamont to Calderwood, 23 Apr. 1952, *PCEA II/B/5*.
51. Pittway, letter to prayer partners, 23 Jan. 1954, *ACK*.
52. James Karanja to church elders, 22 Dec. 1954, *PCEA II/G/4*.

WORKS CITED

- Akristiano Omĩrĩru a Afrika*. London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1931.
- Arthur, John. "The Old Order and the New." *Kikuyu News* 18 (April 1910).
- Barlow, Arthur. "Some Early Memories." *Kikuyu News* 186 (Dec. 1948).
- Barra, G. *1000 Kikuyu Proverbs*. 1939. Nairobi: Kenya Literature Bureau, 1994.
- Beecher, Leonard. *Kikuyu-English Dictionary*. Nairobi: CMS Bookshop, 1938.
- Benson, T. G. *Kikuyu-English Dictionary*. Oxford: Clarendon, 1964.
- Church, Joe. *Quest for the Highest: An Autobiographical Account of the East African Revival*. Exeter: Paternoster, 1981.
- . *Awake Uganda! The Story of Blasio Kigozi and His Vision of Revival*. Kampala: Uganda Bookshop P, 1957.
- Clough, Marshall. *Mau Mau Memoirs: History, Memory, and Politics*. Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 1998.
- Hofmeyer, Isabel. *The Portable Bunyan: A Transnational History of The Pilgrim's Progress*. Princeton: PUP, 2004.
- Itote, Waruhiu. "Mau Mau" *General*. Nairobi: East African Publishing House, 1967.
- Kaggia, Bildad. *Roots of Freedom, 1921-1963: The Autobiography of Bildad Kaggia*. Nairobi: East African Publishing House, 1975.
- Kanogo, Tabitha. *Dedan Kimathi: A Biography*. Nairobi: EAEP, 1992.

- Karanja, John. *Founding an African Faith: Kikuyu Anglican Christianity, 1900–1945*. Nairobi: Uzima P, 1999.
- Kareri, Charles Muhoro. *The Life of Charles Muhoro Kareri*. Ed. by Derek Peterson. Madison: U of Wisconsin African Studies Center, 2003.
- Kariuki, Obadiah. *A Bishop Facing Mount Kenya: An Autobiography, 1902–1978*. Nairobi: Uzima P, 1985.
- Kershaw, Greet. *Mau Mau From Below*. London: James Currey, 1997.
- Kikuyu, 1898–1923: Semi-Jubilee Book of the Church of Scotland Mission, Kenya Colony*. Edinburgh: Blackwood, 1923.
- Likimani, Muthoni. *They Shall be Chastised*. Nairobi: Kenya Literature Bureau, 1974.
- Lonsdale, John. "The Moral Economy of Mau Mau." *Unhappy Valley: Conflict in Kenya and Africa*. London: James Currey, 1992.
- MacPherson, Robert. *The Presbyterian Church in Kenya*. Nairobi: PCEA, 1970.
- . "The East African Revival." *Kikuyu News* 193 (Sept. 1950).
- Maloba, W. "Christianity in Colonial Kenya." *Journal of African History* 45 (2004): 343–44.
- Mathu, Mohammed. *The Urban Guerilla: The Story of Mohammed Mathu*. Ed. Donald Barnett. Richmond, British Columbia: Liberation Support Movement, 1974.
- Motherwell, Miss. "A Horrid Custom." *Kikuyu News* 9 (Jan. 1909).
- Mugaki, Cecilia Muthoni. "History ya Eustace Mugaki na Cecilia Muthoni Mugaki." Unpublished manuscript, n.d.
- Ndege, Peter. *Olonana Ole Mbatian*. Nairobi: EAEP, 2003.
- Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o. *Decolonizing the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature*. London: James Currey, 1986.
- Odinga, Oginga. *Not Yet Uhuru: An Autobiography*. Nairobi: Heinemann, 1967.
- Olang', Festo. *Festo Olan': An Autobiography*. Nairobi: Uzima, 1991.
- Olney, James. *Tell Me Africa: An Approach to African Literature*. Princeton: PUP, 1973.
- Otieno, Wambui. *Mau Mau's Daughter: A Life History*. Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 1998.
- Oxenham, John. *The Scottish Mission in Kenya Colony*. Edinburgh: Church of Scotland, 1927.
- Peterson, Derek R. *Creative Writing: Translation, Bookkeeping, and the Work of Imagination in Colonial Kenya*. Portsmouth: Heinemann, 2004.
- Philp, Horace. *God and the African in Kenya*. London: Marshall, Morgan and Scott, n.d.
- . "The First Funeral at Tumutumu." *Kikuyu News* 29 (June 1911).
- Philp, Robert. "A Literary Experiment at Tumutumu." *Kikuyu News* 166 (Dec. 1943).
- Smoker, Dorothy. *Ambushed by Love: God's Triumph in Kenya's Terror*. Fort Washington, Penn.: Christian Literature Crusade, 1994.
- Stevenson, Marion. "Widening Horizons." *Kikuyu News* 21 (July 1910).
- . "Another Landmark at Tumutumu." *Kikuyu News* 55 (June–July 1915).
- Thuku, Harry. *An Autobiography*. Nairobi: Oxford UP, 1970.
- Tumutumu Hospital*. Kenya: Church of Scotland Kenya Council, 1926.
- Wachanga, Kahinga. *The Swords of Kirinyaga*. Nairobi: East African Literature Bureau, 1975.
- Wandiiba, Simiyu. *Masinde Muliro: A Biography*. Nairobi: EAEP, 1996.
- Wanyande, Peter. *Joseph Daniel Otiende*. Nairobi: EAEP, 2002.

Wanyoike, E. N. *An African Pastor: The Life and Work of the Rev. Wanyoike Kamawe, 1888–1970*. Nairobi: East African Publishing House, 1974.

White, Luise. "They could make their victims dull: Genders and Genres, Fantasies and Cures in Colonial Southern Uganda." *American Historical Review* 100 (1995): 1379–1402.

Wiseman, Edith. *Kikuyu Martyrs*. London: Highway P, 1958.

Wright, Marcia. *Strategies of Slaves and Women*. New York: Lilian Barber, 1993.

