

DEREK PETERSON

## Translating the Word: Dialogism and Debate in Two Gikuyu Dictionaries\*

---

Much of the literature on missionaries and translation in colonial Africa has tended to view missionary or colonial authored texts (Bibles, dictionaries, and grammars in particular) as instruments through which foreign ways of thinking were imposed upon unsuspecting Africans. In a detailed comparison of two Gikuyu dictionaries—one authored by an Anglican missionary and the other by a Presbyterian missionary some ten years later—this article locates significant contradictions in meanings, particularly in words associated with religion and authority. By situating these contradictions within the social history of early twentieth-century Gikuyuland, the author is able to demonstrate that these contradictions are not “mistakes”; rather, such inconsistencies evidence the complex ontological and political debates provoked out of early evangelistic activity. For the author, who draws theoretical insight from Homi Bhabha and M. M. Bakhtin, mission texts like dictionaries are fundamentally dialogical, the product of sustained and contentious conversations between missionaries and African interlocutors. Thus, they not only shaped Gikuyu life, as earlier scholarship contended, but were profoundly shaped by contemporary Gikuyu debates over religion, power, and authority.

---

Early in 1946, a frustrated Presbyterian missionary named Arthur Barlow wrote of his difficulties in translating the Bible into Gikuyu, a language spoken in much of central Kenya.<sup>1</sup>

The further I pursue this work the more I realize my limitations, limitations which, I am sure, I share with any European who has to deal with the more complicated workings of the African mind as reflected in his language. Many a rendering which seemed to tally nicely with the English or the Hebrew, and which had the approval of this or that native helper, has broken down when put to the ruthless test of

---

1. Throughout the essay, I use the phonetic spelling “Gikuyu” for the group usually referred to as the “Kikuyu.”

---

\* This paper was first presented at the conference, “Africans Meeting Missionaries: Rethinking Colonial Encounters,” University of Minnesota, May 1997. I wish to thank the participants for their perceptive comments, and John Mowitz, John Lonsdale, and Kirk Allison for their close readings of earlier drafts of the essay. Research for this project was carried out with support from the Fulbright Program and the University of Minnesota’s MacArthur Program and Department of History.

Derek Peterson is a graduate student at the University of Minnesota.

questions such as, “What will this convey to the ordinary Kikuyu of average intelligence?” “What will it mean to the Kikuyu of another dialect?”<sup>2</sup>

Barlow’s lament—which could have easily been made by anyone engaged in the work of translation, or interpretation—highlights the paradox which I want to pursue in this essay. His question—“What will it mean?”—is an ambitious attempt to anticipate and predetermine Gikuyu readings of the translated text. It is also, paradoxically, a vexed admission that the same text will be shot through with meanings which he cannot control. By asking about meaning, Barlow recognizes that the translated biblical language will “break down”: it will be a new creation, conveying meanings and ideas which neither he nor his Gikuyu interlocutors could expect.

This paper attempts to evaluate and extend the current critical literature on colonizing discourses in Africa in light of the hermeneutical questions raised by Barlow’s lament. It proceeds on two levels. In the first instance, I want to suggest that the models of discourse proposed by postcolonial theorists (among others, Gauri Viswanathan, Homi Bhabha, and John and Jean Comaroff) fail to fully acknowledge questions about meaning because they represent missionary discourse as a self-referential totality. Following M. M. Bakhtin and H. G. Gadamer, I suggest that missionary discourses, inflected with multiple and often contradictory meanings as they were translated into African languages, must be seen as inherently hybrid precisely from the moment of their articulation.

I lend substance to these claims in the second part of the paper, which is a hermeneutical discussion of dictionaries and missionary translation in early colonial Gikuyuland. Missionaries, I show, were not the only “authors” of these texts: instead, the dictionaries were produced out of a sustained and highly charged dialogue with Gikuyu interlocutors. By unpacking the contradictory definitions of authority and religion offered in the lexicographies of two early dictionaries, I shed light on the ways in which these texts reconstructed European and Gikuyu idioms of chiefship, sin, and self within a new language, arising out of the fused but uneven semantic horizon of missionaries and Gikuyu. This new language gave voice to meanings and ideas which neither language alone could express, and marked out a potentially radical interpretive terrain for Gikuyu converts and politicians.

## I

Post-colonial theorists—at least the fellow-travellers of Edward Said—generally attend to colonial texts, highlighting the ways in which discursive representation created and naturalized “knowledge” of the colonizing self and the colonized other. This canon takes at least some of its theoretical coordinates

2. A. R. Barlow, Annual Letter, *Kikuyu News* 176 (1946) (file I/G/7 in archives of St. Andrew’s Church, Nairobi).

from Michel Foucault, whose “genealogical” approach delegitimizes the present state of affairs by radically historicizing social and cultural practices (the body, morality, sexuality) that are generally taken for granted as enduring and timeless.<sup>3</sup>

However useful they are, I want to suggest that the (re)constructive practices embraced by post-colonial theorists risk obscuring the limits and ambiguities integral to colonizing power. Because they insist that power is unitary and fundamentally monologic, theorists as diverse as Viswanathan, Bhabha, and John and Jean Comaroff screen off the interpretive “voices” of “native” others and ignore the ways in which these voices were embedded within the processual textualization of colonial power. As a result, the European subject emerges from these analyses as self-constituting, intextualized in the image of the theory by which, ironically, the theorist enacts the movement which she claims to be disabling. The native, the colonial “other,” is reduced to silence. Such a reading recreates the self-referential justification claimed by colonial power itself, and delegitimizes the suppressed knowledges which a more convincingly genealogical approach unearths.

A brief appraisal of Viswanathan’s work will illuminate the critique which I want to make. Viswanathan’s important study seeks to historicize the political origins of modern English studies in nineteenth-century India. She argues that the ascendancy of literature as a means of moral and religious instruction for “degenerate” Indians arose out of a long debate involving missionaries, colonial officials, and Fabian utilitarians, in which study of the “classics” emerged as a compromise between the imperatives of the civilizing mission and the utility of political control.

Significantly, Viswanathan argues that it is possible to study the development of this moralizing discourse “quite independently of an account of how Indians actually received, reacted to, imbibed, manipulated, reinterpreted, or resisted the ideological content of British literary education.”<sup>4</sup> This is true because, for Viswanathan, the colonial subject was essentially an empty set, a production of colonial representation: “In the absence of direct interaction with the indigenous population . . . the colonial subject was reduced to a conceptual category, an object emptied of all personal identity to accommodate the knowledge already established and being circulated about the ‘native Indian.’” The native interlocutor, in this account, was screened off from the conversation of power; his reading of colonial pedagogy “was so removed from the colonizers’ representation system, his understanding of the meaning of events, that it enters into the realm of another history of which the latter

3. Foucault’s “The Order of Discourse” (1970) here is exemplary. It is notable, though, that Foucault’s genealogy of power entails an examination of particular power regimes and how they shape and naturalize given patterns of social practice. Foucault is also concerned to unearth and “rehabilitate” local and suppressed forms of knowledge. As I will suggest below in my outline of Bhabha and Bakhtin, the tradition generated by Said tends to efface these local knowledges, assigning an intentionality and unidirectionality to power—a position to which Foucault would not subscribe.

4. Gauri Viswanathan, *Masks of Conquest: Literary Study and British Rule in India* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), 11.

has no comprehension or even awareness. That history can, and perhaps must, be told separately.”<sup>5</sup>

For Viswanathan, the relationship between colonialist discourse and the native other is essentially unmediated: it takes the form of A:B, the real, non-contradictory extremes postulated by Kant.<sup>6</sup> Her reading, therefore, unifies European knowledge: missionaries and government officials seem to only listen to themselves, working within a hermetically closed sphere into which “native” discourses cannot penetrate. Implicit in this approach is the assumption that power and discourse are entirely the preserve of the powerful—a critique which has similarly been made of Edward Said.<sup>7</sup> The native in this treatment becomes a voiceless “subaltern,” a powerless prisoner sealed in a “historically antagonistic universe.”<sup>8</sup>

In interesting ways, Viswanathan’s profoundly monologic account of knowledge production in India parallels John and Jean Comaroffs’ reading of missionary discourses in South Africa.<sup>9</sup> They suggest that during the “long conversation” initiated by Nonconformist missionaries with their Tswana converts, Africans became subjects to colonial “hegemony,” a non-indigenous symbolic order which privileged the cultural and symbolic languages of colonial elites. By looking at themselves in mirrors, and by engaging in rational modes of debate, Africans were suborned to an invasive, modernist regime, a regime in which the “explicit, systematic faith” of the missionaries was reproduced, even within expressions of resistance.<sup>10</sup>

Like Viswanathan, the Comaroffs largely represent hegemony as a production crafted among Europeans. Missionary narratives in this analysis are interwoven to such an extent that they composed a “tightly-knit cultural cloth, its internal pattern seldom unraveled.”<sup>11</sup> Africans’ roles in the weaving of this fabric are understated; their political and religious expression, in the form of voiced narratives, material practice or otherwise, rarely appear in the pages of the Comaroffs’ book.<sup>12</sup> For the Comaroffs, as for Viswanathan, the “others” of powerful discourses are unimportant: their whispered conversations are closed off from the loud monologue of power, becoming the backdrop against

5. Viswanathan, 12.

6. As recapitulated by Ernesto Laclau, “Populist Rupture and Discourse,” *Screen Education* 34 (1980): 88.

7. Particularly by Homi Bhabha. See Benita Parry, “Problems in Current Theories of Colonial Discourse,” *Oxford Literary Review* 9 (1987): 27–59, for a review.

8. I quote here from Ranajit Guha, “Dominance Without Hegemony and its Historiography,” in R. Guha, ed., *Subaltern Studies VI* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 220. Although Viswanathan does not cite Guha explicitly, her work is obviously in conversation with his.

9. John Comaroff and Jean Comaroff, *Of Revelation and Revolution: Christianity, Colonialism, and Consciousness in South Africa* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

10. Comaroff and Comaroff, 152; see also Jean Comaroff, *Body of Power, Spirit of Resistance: The Culture and History of a South African People* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985). Timothy Mitchell makes a similar argument in his *Colonising Egypt* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991).

11. Comaroff and Comaroff, 125.

12. J. D. Y. Peel criticizes the Comaroffs for their failure to attend to Africans’ ways of narrating their pasts and futures in his “For Who Hath Despised the Day of Small Things? Missionary Narratives and Historical Anthropology,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 37 (1995): 581–607.

which the politics of hegemony play themselves out. This formulation fails to draw attention to the dialogue between the creation of the colonial self and that which this creation disavows—namely, the knowledges and voices of native others.<sup>13</sup>

Homi Bhabha, in a critique of these monologic approaches, seeks to demonstrate the discursive limits of power, and to countermand the demand “that discourse be non-dialogic, its enunciation unitary.”<sup>14</sup> Central to Bhabha’s formulation is the idea of hybridity, the problematic of colonial representation which arises from the displacement of value from symbol to sign.<sup>15</sup> For Bhabha, the compelling authority of colonial texts like the Bible—the “insignia of colonial authority and signifier of colonial desire and discipline”—relies on commonly understood rules of recognition, reflecting consensual knowledge and opinion. In the transference of European symbols to the colonial situation, a slippage of meaning occurs: the symbolic book retains its presence, but it is no longer a representation of an essence. It becomes, Bhabha says, “a partial presence, a (strategic) device in a specific colonial engagement, an appurtenance of authority.”<sup>16</sup>

This is true because the enunciation of colonial authority relies on hybridization: the native readers of colonial texts read within disavowed frameworks of knowledge, mimicking English symbols with “native accents.” The native, the signified of colonial power, becomes the producer of signification in an act of discursive judo. For Bhabha, the native’s re-reading of colonial texts creates an autonomous, potentially radical space within colonial discourse: “When the words of the master become a site of hybridity—the warlike sign of the native—then we may not only read between the lines, but even seek to change the often coercive reality that they so lucidly contain.”<sup>17</sup> The native’s ruse of recognition, says Bhabha, terrorizes authority, giving rise to a series of questions framed within a hybridized language which colonials cannot easily answer. This terror is finally uncontainable: it breaks down the symmetry and duality of the self/other, inside/outside, dualisms on which colonial discourse relies.<sup>18</sup>

In Bhabha’s formulation, hybridity arises out of the process of communication: the Kantian relationship between A and B is continually mediated as the

13. The second volume of Comaroff and Comaroff, *Revelation and Revolution*, released in 1997 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), promises to address some of these criticisms. Unfortunately, the newer volume was not available to this author (located in Nairobi) at the time of writing.

14. Homi Bhabha, “‘Signs Taken for Wonders’: Questions of Ambivalence and Authority Under a Tree Outside Delhi, May 1817,” *Critical Inquiry* 12 (1985): 157.

15. Bhabha, 156.

16. Bhabha, 157. This reading is notably at variance with that of Comaroff and Comaroff, 237, who consider native appropriations of the Bible to be “misrecognition”, since Christianity and the Bible were “fundamentally antagonistic to their mode of existence.”

17. Bhabha, 159.

18. Leon de Kock, in his fascinating *Civilizing Barbarians: Missionary Narrative and African Textual Response in Nineteenth-Century South Africa* (Witwatersrand: Witwatersrand University Press, 1996) has begun to apply Bhabha’s insights regarding dualism and mimicry to the study of native Christian newspapers in South Africa. De Kock seeks to understand the ways in which native interlocutors voiced criticisms of colonial power within the dualistic paradigms offered up in missionary discourse.

native other interrogates and mimics colonial power. Like Stuart Hall, Bhabha works to highlight the alternative frames of interpretation through which native listeners decode colonial texts. The existence of these multiple frames of interpretation, say Bhabha and Hall, means that powerful speakers will not necessarily get the intended reading of their speech from their listeners: dominant meanings may be refracted or even opposed, as listeners interpret discourse according to what Hall calls the “relatively autonomous” codes of their own.<sup>19</sup>

Bhabha and Hall raise important criticisms of monologic readings of discourse. If Bhabha is correct, then it becomes difficult to reconstruct colonialist pedagogy apart from native reactions and readings, since the encoding authored by missionaries was necessarily and always decoded within competing and sometimes oppositional frameworks. The “other” postulated by Viswanathan and the Comaroffs, in this formulation, was not simply abjected or sealed off from power: rather, the enunciation of colonial pedagogy was split because it relied on the interpretation of native listeners.

I want to make a hermeneutical claim here which extends Bhabha’s formulation. The doubleness or “hybridity” of colonial texts was not only a function of native mimicry (Bhabha’s claim) or a product of decoding (Hall): rather, hybridity was embedded within (at least some) colonial texts themselves precisely because they emerged out of a sustained dialogue with native others. I suggest, following Bakhtin, that “native” readings can therefore be recovered from a close reading of colonial texts, not only from nationalist or other “native” literatures. This is true because some forms of colonial writing (such as dictionaries) were fundamentally dialogical.

Bakhtin’s complex view of dialogism relies on a hybridized view of language. For Saussure and his followers, the word is a two-sided sign, emblematic of a language system which exists somewhere above the uncomfortable commerce of articulation. For Bakhtin, in contrast, the word is a two-sided act, determined equally by whose word it was and for whom it was meant. The word is territory shared by both the addresser and the addressee, by the speaker and his interlocutor. As Bakhtin writes:

Language . . . lies on the border between oneself and the other. The word in language is half someone else’s. It becomes “one’s own” only when the speaker populates it with his own intention, his own accent . . . the word does not exist in a neutral and impersonal language (it is not, after all, out of a dictionary that the speaker gets his words!), but rather it exists in other people’s mouths, in other people’s contexts: it is from there that one must take the word, and make it one’s own.<sup>20</sup>

For Bakhtin, as for Bhabha, discourse is always hybrid: a conflictual heteroglossia pervades producers, texts, contexts, and readers. Each category is traversed by centripetal and centrifugal forces precisely because words do not simply belong to speakers/authors: words are “in the mouths of others,” and

19. Stuart Hall, “Encoding/Decoding,” in Stuart Hall et al., eds, *Culture, Media and Language: Working Papers in Cultural Studies, 1972–79* (London: Routledge, 1980), 136.

20. M. M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, ed. Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 293–4.

in order to speak, the author must take the word from alien contexts. This is Bakhtin's response to those whom he calls the "stylists," who pose a simple and unmediated relationship of the speaker to his unitary and singular language. Bakhtin, like Bhabha in his critique of Said, argues that the "stylist" approach acknowledges only a passive understanding of communication: the listener seems purely receptive, contributing nothing to the word under consideration.<sup>21</sup>

Bakhtin extends the critique of stylism by arguing that the word is born in dialogue, anticipating a living rejoinder within it. It is here that Bakhtin departs from Bhabha: unlike Bhabha, who locates hybridity in terrorizing answers of the native, Bakhtin says that dialogue is inscribed within the word of the speaker itself. In an argument which evokes Gadamer's "fusing of horizons," Bakhtin argues that

the speaker strives to get a reading on his own word, and in his own conceptual system that determined this word, within the alien conceptual system of the understanding receiver; he enters into dialogical relationships with certain aspects of this system. The speaker breaks through the alien conceptual horizon of the listener, constructs his own utterance on alien territory, against his, the listener's, apperceptive background.<sup>22</sup>

For Bakhtin, the word itself is dialogized, inextricably bound up in meanings which belong both to speaker and listener. Every speech act bears the mark of others' ideas, inherited from historical traditions and infused through the process of conversation. To return to the metaphor of Kant's oppositions: where Viswanathan understands the discursive relationship between the self and the other to be essentially unmediated (i.e., A:B), and where Bhabha sees A and B in continual and conflictual dialogue, Bakhtin argues that the words of others continually come into the language of the self. A and B here become fused together out of ongoing dialogue.

Gadamer would modulate this argument to say that the product of this dialogue, this fusion, is "true" because it does not fully belong to either conversant. It is a new creation which evokes meanings and ideas arising out of the conversation itself, out of the linguistic performance.<sup>23</sup> Textual translation is, for Gadamer, the fullest expression of this creative hybridity: in translation, the translator must come to an understanding with the text, bringing to life new concepts and inviting readers to think through them.<sup>24</sup> For

21. Bakhtin, 281.

22. Bakhtin, 282.

23. Gadamer would therefore not wholly agree with Bakhtin's formulation above, finding it too close to the psychologist argument which wants those who understand to transpose themselves into the psyche of the other. Gadamer thinks that this sort of transposition is not only impossible, but also harmful because it disavows precisely that which allows genuine understanding to take place—namely, the "prejudices" of he who understands. All understanding, for Gadamer, takes place within a fused horizon in which ideas and discourse belonging to both conversants and to "being" (*Dasein*) meld in creative synergy; for which, see H. G. Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (New York: Continuum Publishing, 1996), 265–307.

24. Translation is emblematic of understanding, for Gadamer, because he thinks that all understanding involves a creative fusion between the ideas of others and of the self. Gadamer elaborates on this argument in *Truth and Method*, part three.

Gadamer, as for Bakhtin, language is not the prison-house envisioned by post-colonials—rather, language is precisely the means by which understanding can occur.

Bakhtin and Gadamer offer a compelling alternative to formalist theories of language—and, by extension, they may provide an alternative to the overly essential models of discourse posited by postcolonialists like Viswanathan. To delineate the salient points in brief: first, where discourse theory treats discourse itself as a praxis, and isolates the European speaker from the native other, Bakhtin and Gadamer argue that language does not pass easily into the private property of speakers' intentions. Language is populated—indeed, overpopulated—with the intentions and meanings of others because it is already “under way” when speakers enter into discourse. Second, in distinction to Bhabha, Bakhtin argues that the dialogism of language is embedded within the formation of communicative acts, as speakers and listeners circumvent the process of othering in their attempts to make communication meaningful. Third, Gadamer therefore insists on the relative autonomy of this new language from the intentions of either conversant, suggesting that it belongs to history, to being, rather than to those who speak. Bakhtin, too, would have us attend to historical moments of utterance, in distinction to discursive accounts which tend to homogenize power and to reduce discourses to the technologies by which they are articulated.<sup>25</sup>

The hermeneutic account offered by Gadamer and Bakhtin opens possibilities for a more radical model of interpretation. The role of such a radical hermeneutic would be to illuminate the multiplicity of meanings given voice in authoritative discourse, pointing toward evidence of debates that are muffled by monological readings of power. Such textualized arguments, I suggest, are very much in play in early Gikuyu language dictionaries.

## II

Dictionaries raise important questions of authorship, questions which post-colonial theories of discourse are not equipped to address. Who authors a text which is supposed to be a usable guide to another's language? Dictionaries could plainly not come into existence out of the genius of creative missionaries. If they were to be helpful in the communication between missionaries and their Gikuyu converts, then the “authors” of the first dictionaries would have to enter into the play of Gikuyu language, into linguistic, cognitive, religious, and political narratives and debates already under way among those with whom they spoke. To treat missionaries as the essential authors of these texts would be to ignore the ways in which Gikuyu interlocutors shaped and

25. Bakhtin elaborates his concept of utterance in his essay, “The Philosophy of the Act”, taken up in Gary Morson and Caryl Emerson, *Rethinking Bakhtin: Extensions and Challenges* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1989). For a critique of Foucaultian constructions of capillary power, see Frederick Cooper's “Conflict and Connection: Rethinking Colonial African History,” *American Historical Review* 99 (1994): 1516–45.

crafted the language created in the dictionaries. Dictionaries were, of functional necessity, positioned at the point of fusion between the two linguistic traditions which they sought to render comprehensible.

Dictionaries were sometimes quite literally authored by more than one person, since missionaries relied on the advice of native interlocutors in much of their work. Bible translation, the paradigmatic missionary activity which codified much of the language offered up in early dictionaries, was usually accomplished through the combined and consultative work of both African and missionary linguists. Their work was frequently referred to outside readers for suggestions and advice.<sup>26</sup> Harry Leakey, one of the missionaries who worked to translate the Bible into Gikuyu, described the process of compilation in terms which highlight the role of native translators:

Mathayo has now got prepared for our work together a draft, or as I generally call it a skeleton translation of the remaining books between Leviticus and about Ezra VII . . . He is at present writing the above mentioned Genesis for me, and we have just in the last few days got the first three chapters in the form in which we would let them go to press.<sup>27</sup>

This critical question of authorship—which, as Leakey’s quote suggests, is integrally connected to the process of dialogization—is effaced in poststructuralist readings of colonizing discourse. The problem is similarly obscured in historians’ recent readings of dictionaries in Africa, which tend to focus on the textualization of native vernaculars as a part of the larger “invention” of ethnicity in Africa.<sup>28</sup> Neither literature takes the dictionary itself very seriously, preferring to examine its function within colonizing discourse.

The two dictionaries on which I want to focus—one published in 1914 by Barlow, a sometime renegade Presbyterian, and the other in 1904 by A. W. McGregor, an Anglican—exhibit a range of sometimes incompatible meanings in their translation of important terms connoting power, authority, and religion.<sup>29</sup> I suggest that these contradictions are not simply phenomenal “mistakes”: rather, the curious language offered up in these dictionaries was shaped

26. The most recent and perceptive work on missionaries and Bible translation is Andrew Walls’s collection, *The Missionary Movement in Modern History: Studies in the Transmission of Faith* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1996).

27. Leakey to Smith, 21 March 1934, quoted in John Karanja, “The Growth of the African Anglican Church in Central Kenya, 1900–1945” (PhD diss., University of Cambridge, 1993), 151.

28. I refer here to Terrence Ranger’s important “Missionaries, Migrants and the Manyika: The Invention of Ethnicity in Zimbabwe,” in *The Creation of Tribalism in Southern Africa*, ed. L. Vail (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1988), which argues that the textualization of vernaculars in missionary-produced dictionaries created the grounding for a hegemonic Manyika culture—that is, a culture which was used to suppress alternative formulations of ethnicity and language. I suggest that Ranger’s argument, useful though it may be, fails to ask important interpretive questions of the dictionaries, namely, what kind of linguistic meanings were being conveyed in the dictionaries, and how were these meanings created historically? Ranger’s piece does not examine the language contained within the dictionaries; as a result, these texts seem to be functional tools of the colonizing enterprise.

29. A. Ruffell Barlow, *Tentative Studies in Kikuyu Grammar and Idiom* (1914; reprint, Edinburgh: William Blackwood, 1931), and A. W. McGregor, *English–Kikuyu Dictionary, compiled for the use of the CMS mission in Eastern Africa* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1904).

by, and itself informed, ongoing political and economic debates raging in early colonial Gikuyuland.

McGregor's definitions of the Gikuyu word *muthamaki* (a title connoting power and wealth for its male holder) marks the ways in which missionaries' location within Gikuyu debates informed the translation of political languages.<sup>30</sup> An agent of the British-headquartered Church Missionary Society (CMS), McGregor first settled at Fort Smith, a trading encampment near the Kampala–Nairobi railway line, with the acquiescence of the Imperial British East African Company. In 1901, Karuri wa Gakure, the state-appointed chief of the newly created Fort Hall district, invited McGregor to open a mission station in Weithaga, a hilltop site some ten miles east of Karuri's own home in Tutho.<sup>31</sup>

Karuri, McGregor's patron, was one of the new class of Gikuyu "big men" created out of the growth of profitable long-distance trading in the late 1800s. The son of a medicine man (*mundu mugo*), Karuri had attached himself to the British adventurer and trader John Boyes in the late 1890s, helping Boyes obtain ivory and foodstuffs for trade with the European and Swahili caravans which crisscrossed the region.<sup>32</sup> Karuri used his alliance with Boyes to great effect, deploying Boyes's contingent of Swahili *askari* against his enemies and raiding surrounding people without discrimination. Karuri's political position was strengthened during the disastrous famine of 1898, which hardened the implicit stratification of Gikuyu society by making traders with access to liquid capital—particularly in cattle—increasingly wealthy.<sup>33</sup> The colonial conquest state, searching for effective African leaders in northern Gikuyuland to extend its control beyond the immediate reaches of Kiambu, capitalized on Karuri's economic network and social position by naming him chief of the newly created Fort Hall district. Karuri reciprocated by assisting the government in its punitive expeditions in northern Gikuyuland, which continued until 1905.<sup>34</sup>

The colonial state's administrative elevation of capitalist "big men" like Karuri was part of a larger crisis of leadership in Gikuyuland. At issue was the pivotal question of power. Gikuyu politics were parochial: there was no overarching political organization which united the different landholding lineages (*mbari*) into a cohesive "tribe."<sup>35</sup> Domestic virtue and open-handed

30. Parts of the discussion which follows are formulated in my "Colonizing Language? Missionaries and Gikuyu Dictionaries, 1904 and 1914," *History in Africa* 27 (1997): 257–72.

31. Johanna Muturi and Paul Mbatia, "Weithaga Jubilee Report" (1953) in St Paul's Divinity School archive, Limuru. See also Robert Strayer, *The Making of Mission Communities in East Africa: Africans and Anglicans in Colonial Kenya, 1875–1935* (London: Heinemann, 1978), 44–5.

32. Karuri is pictured in Swahili dress in Cagnolo's early memoir, *The Agikuyu: Their Customs, Traditions and Folklore* (Nyeri: Consolata Press, 1933), 230, highlighting his identification with the powerful caravaners. For Karuri's involvement with the caravans, see Godfrey Muriuki, *A History of the Kikuyu, 1500–1900* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974), 160–1.

33. David Feldman, "Christians and Politics: The Origins of the Kikuyu Central Association in Northern Murang'a 1890–1930" (PhD diss., University of Cambridge, 1978), 43.

34. Peter Rogers, "The British and the Kikuyu, 1890–1905: A Reassessment," *Journal of African History* 20 (1979): 265–8.

35. Greet Kershaw, *Mau Mau from Below* (London: James Gurrey, 1997), 81. Anthropologist Richard Leakey argued differently, identifying a highly organized system of territorial councils up to the *bururi*, the nation of Gikuyu, in *Mau Mau and the Kikuyu* (London: Methuen, 1956). As I will suggest below, *bururi* as nation must be understood within the changing context of Gikuyu debates about politics and class.

wealth were the fertile grounds on which political power was built: wealthy men dispensed largesse (*tha*) in the form of land or food to clients and relatives, sometimes incorporating land-hungry clients as members of their *mbari*.<sup>36</sup> Wealthy men could afford to accommodate many of these clients; they could also afford the goats required for their own membership in *mbari* and other councils of elders. Poor men, while they might not hope to become senior elders, could at least earn virtue through hard labour which gave them the access to land from labour-poor *mbari* landholders.<sup>37</sup> “Big men” (sometimes called *athamaki*) therefore emerged out of long process of argument and negotiation, in which poor men and women continually demanded material proof of their wealthy virtue.

By the late nineteenth century, however, this argued-out moral economy had begun to break down. The famine of *Kirika*, which lasted through much of the 1890s, made land more valuable in Kiambu district and caused *mbari* elders to begin to limit the amount of land offered to needy clients.<sup>38</sup> Land-poor after *Kirika* rarely found *mbari* willing to incorporate them as equals; landholders now offered land to clients as *ahoi*, tenants, who reciprocated by giving livestock and produce to the landholding *mbari*.<sup>39</sup> The hardening class divisions between landed and landless, wealthy and poor were exacerbated when, over the last decade of the nineteenth century, thousands of acres of Kikuyu land was alienated for the use of European settlers and colonial administrators. Kiambu lost the most land by far; Muranga (later Fort Hall) and Gaki (Nyeri district) suffered relatively fewer losses.<sup>40</sup> *Mbari* elders, faced with increasingly demanding clients and holding scarce supplies of land, were compelled to repudiate clients. The poor were left with few options beyond wage labour in Nairobi or the settled areas, labour which was patently unproductive. No-one bought virtue with cash.

The colonial creation of administrative chiefs like Karuri lent legal force to this crisis of morality. Where “big men” had previously earned power through patterns of clientage, in colonial thinking chiefs were supposed to be impartial arbiters of justice. Where *athamaki* had dispensed *tha* as a proof of their fitness for power, colonial chiefs were supposed to collect taxes and mobilize corvée labor (*gitati*) in a most unforgiving fashion. Where *athamaki* had emerged out of a long process of debate, chiefs were chosen from among the younger, cattle-rich traders according to colonial *realpolitik*.

McGregor, the Anglican missionary whose dictionary I wish to analyse, entered into this charged context as a *muhoi*, a client asking his patron, Karuri, for access to land. Johanna Muturi, one of the first three *athomi*

36. Those so incorporated were called *agendi*, visitors; once they joined the lineage they received full rights as landholders and, potentially, as elders. See Kershaw, 25–6.

37. See John Lonsdale, “The Moral Economy of Mau Mau: Wealth, Poverty and Civic Virtue in Kikuyu Political Thought,” in *Unhappy Valley: Conflict in Kenya and Africa*, ed. Bruce Berman and John Lonsdale (London: Currey, 1992), 335–7, for an explication of the Gikuyu labour theory of value.

38. Kershaw, chap. 2.

39. For a fuller discussion of *ahoi*, see Muriuki, *inter alia*. Kershaw argues that the institution of *ahoi* in Kiambu came into existence only after *Kirika*: see Kershaw, 46–7.

40. Muriuki, 171–7; Lonsdale, 366.

(readers) at Weithaga, remembers that McGregor visited Karuri at his home in 1903 to ask for land on which to build a new station. Karuri complied, telling him to choose any site ten miles north of Mbomaini (Fort Hall).<sup>41</sup> Karuri also supplied McGregor with his first students, sending two of his junior sons—Daudi Gakure, Joshua Karuri Ngari—and Muturi himself to study with McGregor.<sup>42</sup> By 1905, McGregor had some fourteen boys living with him at Weithaga, several among them related to Karuri.<sup>43</sup>

McGregor's dictionary, published in 1904, provides ample evidence that the rise of the newly wealthy had provoked considerable debate among Gikuyu. McGregor translated the term *muthamaki* in ways that bridged, uncomfortably, Karuri's new title as the government's chief to the Gikuyu idiom of virtue and power. Five of the words used to define *muthamaki*—"monarch," "prince," "emperor," "ruler," "king," and "prince"—signalled the hierarchical meanings implied by the word, and themselves reflected Karuri's position within the hierarchy of partially capitalist Gikuyuland. The other five defining words—"magistrate," "officer," "governor," "minister (of state)," and "administrator"—are Weberian terms, evoking the administrative structure of the legal-rational colonial state.

The meanings which McGregor's dictionary attached to *muthamaki* are hybrid: the Weberian legalism of the colonial state and the new, capital-based Gikuyu authority meet, unmediated and conflictually, in one definition. A similar process of hybridization is at play in the definitions of key words which support *muthamaki*. McGregor's dictionary offers *hinya*, a term which connotes male virility and strength, for "authority," and suggests that the "yoke" of service is similarly *hinya*. So too does McGregor's dictionary uncomfortably claim Gikuyu idioms of political organization for the new *muthamaki*: a *mbari* here becomes a "nation," while *muhiriga* is simultaneously defined as "nation" and "family."

The vocabulary of power displayed in McGregor's dictionary melds, unevenly, older Gikuyu terms of political debate with the new terms evoked by Karuri and others' rise to administrative power. This dictionary suggests that Gikuyu lexicons of political legitimacy were themselves subject to the destabilizing tensions arising out of class formation: the *mbari*, previously the crucible of domestic virtue, had migrated to the new vocabulary of "nation," while the *muhiriga* retained its local connotations uncomfortably with "national" overtones.

If Gikuyu vocabularies of power are conspicuously unstable in McGregor's dictionary, so too is the lexicon of poverty. McGregor's definition of terms connoting dispossession and servitude bear evidence of the heated political debate which arose in the wake of British conquest. *Hinya*, McGregor's term

41. Johanna Muturi, interview, transcript, St Paul's Theological College archive, Limuru.

42. Paul Mbatia Gakobo, who attended classes at Weithaga from 1904, interview, transcript, St Paul's Theological College archive, Limuru.

43. Feldman, 76. Karuri did not limit his connections to the CMS but also assisted the Consolata Fathers, the rivals of the Anglicans, in settling close to his home near Murang'a town (see Strayer, 45).

for authority, is also herein a “yoke,” and being yoked meant *okombo*, the state of “slavery” and “servanthood.” The new chiefs’ authority, McGregor’s Gikuyu interlocutors seem to say, meant slavery for the poor of Gikuyu. So too was the term *onogi*, a term which seems to have connoted tiredness, translated for “tyranny,” while the related verb *konogia* became “to trouble” and “to be cruel.” *Mutheni*, the most often used of Gikuyu terms for a poor person, in this dictionary became a “destitute person” and “hapless,” while the adjectival *a otheni* became “penury,” “poverty,” and “trouble.”

Poverty here is blamed on the *athamaki*, who had compounded the tiredness of their clients and made them destitute. For the poor, sweated labour no longer earned wealth or virtue together with physical exhaustion: tiredness was bred by tyranny, by the unaccommodating power of the new *athamaki*. These new *athamaki* were blatantly ungenerous: *tha*, the term for largesse, does not appear in McGregor’s dictionary. “Gift” here becomes *kiheo*, a loan which was expected to be repaid to the giver. “Alms” is translated as *kigongona*, the ritual sacrifices by which the wealthy head of an *mbari* propitiated the ancestors and asked for blessings upon the land. Such alms were of little use to the landless *ahoi*, impoverished by their ungenerous patrons. The words used to translate “pity” and “compassion,” which the Gikuyu poor could reasonably have expected from wealthy patrons prior to the rise of the newly wealthy, were no longer *tha*. In a wild reversal of meaning, “pity” is here given as *korakaria*, connoting to cause anger, and *komakaria*—to cause fright. Demands for *tha* from the poor now met only with the angry rejection of their more privileged patrons.

McGregor’s dictionary echoes with the arguing voices of poor and wealthy, arguments intensified by the agonizing process of class formation in which patrons steadily repudiated clients and in which the poor could no longer look to agricultural labour or generous land-sharing as a redemptive means to wealth and respectability. In comparison, A. R. Barlow’s 1914 dictionary seems a fairly placid affair. Barlow, a Presbyterian, had first come to Kenya in 1905 at the age of seventeen, working to begin a boarding school at the 3,000 acre Church of Scotland mission station at Thogoto.<sup>44</sup> Barlow was expelled from the colony in 1907 for consuming Gikuyu food and beer and for dancing at initiation ceremonies, activities which the nascent European community found threatening to the integrity of its racial identity.<sup>45</sup> By 1908, however, Barlow had returned to Kenya on the promise not to repeat his past activities. He was sent north, to the southern slopes of *Kirinyaga* (later Mount

44. Brian McIntosh, “The Scottish Mission in Kenya, 1891–1923” (PhD diss., University of Edinburgh, 1969), 189; Robert MacPherson, *The Presbyterian Church in Kenya* (Nairobi: PCEA, 1970), 36. For a history of the Thogoto mission, which was modelled after the well-known Blantyre industrial mission in Malawi, see MacPherson, *The Presbyterian Church*. For a history of land disputes surrounding the mission, see Nancy Uhlar-Murray, “The Need to Get there First: Staking a Missionary Claim in Colonial Kenya,” *Journal of African Studies* (Winter 1985–6), and John Lonsdale’s “The Prayers of Waiyaki: Political Uses of the Kikuyu Past” in *Revealing Prophets: Prophecy in East African History*, ed. David Anderson (London: James Currey, 1995).

45. Duane Kennedy highlights whites’ nervousness concerning racial mixing; see his *Islands of White: Settler Society and Culture in Kenya and Southern Rhodesia, 1890–1960* (Durham, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1987).

Kenya) to the new Presbyterian station called Tumutumu, in the eastern part of the new Nyeri district.<sup>46</sup>

The region in which Barlow settled had only recently been “pacified” by force of British arms: the last pockets of resistance to colonial authority in the region of Mathira had been wiped out late in 1904 at the cost of 1,500 Gikuyu lives.<sup>47</sup> The colonial administration in the region was centred around the figure of Wangombe wa Ihura, a long-distance trader in ivory and food in pre-colonial times who, like Karuri, allied with the British administration during the conquest. Wangombe’s levies had raided as far as Karuri’s territories before the British arrived.<sup>48</sup> As with Karuri, the British capitalized on Wangombe’s military and political power to further their administration of the northern parts of Gikuyuland.

Compared with McGregor’s dictionary, produced in the charged context of Karuri’s new realm, Barlow’s 1914 grammar offers a reading of Gikuyu political language which lays emphasis on older, consultative meanings of social power. Barlow defines *muthamaki* as “one capable of leading others by advice and counsel,” and subdivides the authority of the *athamaki* into *muthamaki wa ihi*, the “head of the uninitiated boys,” and *muthamaki wa riika*, the “head of the age set.” The myriad of administrative and political functions assigned to the *muthamaki* in McGregor’s dictionary are not articulated in Barlow’s rendition: he chooses not to define “prince,” “king,” “judge,” “administrator” or any of the Weberian terms offered by McGregor. Barlow’s closest equivalent to *muthamaki* is *mutongoria*, which he defines as “leader.” So too is *hinya*, McGregor’s term for authority, disabled in Barlow; here, *hinya* becomes simply “strength.”

Barlow’s translation of terms of political organization similarly moves Gikuyu political lexicon away from the vexed bureaucratic vocabulary of McGregor. Barlow’s *muhiriga* is a “clan”; the *bururi* is “the community, the country”; *mbari* does not appear in Barlow. No “nation,” “kingdom,” or “tribe” is offered up in Barlow’s vocabulary. McGregor’s political nation, led by the *muthamaki*, finds no resonance in Barlow’s lexicon.

If the vocabulary of political power is denaturalized in Barlow, so too are the most wrenching manifestations of agonizing class formation largely subdued. *Mutheni* is in Barlow, as in McGregor, a “poor person, a sufferer,” though she is not “destitute” or “troubled” as in McGregor. An *ngombo* in Barlow is not a “slave” as in McGregor: here she is a “servant, one provided for by another.” Barlow does offer *minyamaro*, which had not appeared in McGregor, as a term for “trouble” and “suffering”—but in Barlow’s vocabulary, the sufferer can at least appeal for *tha*, which here is translated as “pity, compassion.”

Thus, while Barlow’s grammar bears ample evidence to demonstrate the salience of class as an idiom within northern Gikuyu lexicon, the poignancy

46. Tumutumu mission was founded in 1908 by Petro Mugo, a Gikuyu evangelist, and was later occupied by Barlow in 1909. See text below for a condensed history of the creation of the mission.

47. Muriuki, 164–5.

48. A description of one of these raids is in Cagnolo, 101–3.

of this vocabulary bears little of the animosity evidenced in McGregor's dictionary. Though there are poor people in Barlow's linguistic world, they could conceivably rely on being "provided for by another" as clients or as *ahoi*. This strategic open-handedness was not offered to the poor of Karuri's region, where requests for *tha* earned only anger.

How may we explain the obvious differences between these two vocabularies of class, given that they were authored within ten years of each other in locations separated by less than thirty miles? John Karanja's important dissertation suggests that *muthamaki* took on meanings of "king" and "emperor" out of the process of Bible translation, as missionary and Gikuyu translators struggled to find adequate words to express the irreducible authority of the Hebrew kings.<sup>49</sup> The Kikuyu Language Committee (KLC), a body of missionaries and Gikuyu converts, published the first complete Gikuyu translation of the New Testament in 1926 and followed with the Old Testament in 1950. The KLC chose *muthamaki* for "king" throughout, setting up a homologism between the two terms which, Karanja argues, vitally shaped Kikuyu understandings of political power in the 1920s and '30s.

Bible translation, both formal and informal, undoubtedly played an important role in the creation of the king/*muthamaki* in McGregor's 1904 dictionary. The Swahili language Bible was available in central Kenya from the early 1900s, and it is reasonable to expect that the first Gikuyu preachers were quick to translate the Swahili text, including the Old Testament, into their native tongue for all variety of evangelistic and political purposes. They were certainly doing so by the 1920s, when Jomo Kenyatta and other Gikuyu politicians offered a steady diet of Lamentations for the readers of the Kikuyu Central Association journal *Mwigwithania*.<sup>50</sup>

It is significant, however, that the earliest text taken up by missionaries was not Kings or Lamentations but The Gospel of John, translated by McGregor in 1903.<sup>51</sup> McGregor's 1904 Gikuyu vocabulary was shaped by his efforts to translate John: many of the terms which he translates (rabbi, high priest, herald, Lucifer, and messiah to name a few) can only have arisen out of the work of Bible translation. I do not have access to McGregor's John—but I would note that John, among the four canonical Gospels, would seem to make the fewest demands on political vocabulary. In other Gospels, Christ makes frequent references to the "Kingdom of God" in parables, which stands as a trope for the meta-community (*bururi* or *mbari*?) of the elect. John's Christology, in contrast, is other-worldly: a pre-existing son/*Logos* takes leave of his father in heaven, descends to earth, and then ascends to his father.<sup>52</sup> John's Christ is a stranger from another world—there is no birth narrative in

49. Karanja, chap. 5, *inter alia*. Karanja has expanded this argument, to great effect, in his paper, "Muthamaki for Kings?" (African Studies Association [U.S.A.] Annual Meeting, 1997).

50. See, for example, Kenyatta's translation of Lam. 5:1 in *Mwigwithania* 4 (August 1928), in Kenya National Archives DC/Machakos/10B/13/1.

51. Karanja, 138.

52. This typology of John is taken largely from Dennis Duling's *The New Testament: Proclamation and Parenthesis, Myth and History* (Fort Worth: Harcourt-Brace, 1994). Some critics have considered John to be a Gnostic heresy, presenting Christ as other than fully human.

John; Christ is incarnated in the flesh as the Word, not as an infant. When Christ speaks, he makes few political claims on his listeners: one of his few "Kingdom of God" references is to say that his kingdom is "not of this world."<sup>53</sup> John's Christ, in other words, is an unlikely candidate for McGregor's *muthamaki*.

While the demand of Bible translation may have played a role in McGregor's rendition of Gikuyu political vocabulary, that role must have been indirect. The unlikely range of *muthamaki*'s definitions can best be explained, I suggest, by positioning the two dictionaries squarely within locally specific debates over class formation and bureaucratic chiefship. McGregor's dictionary, produced in the highly fraught regions of southern Fort Hall, provides ample evidence that new sources of political and chiefly power were subject to acrimonious debate among rich and poor, who were progressively drawn apart by the logic of colonial bureaucratic capitalism.

Barlow's translation, conversely, offers evidence that processes of class formation, while certainly in play in Nyeri by the 1910s, had not yet led to the same terrifying distancing between rich and poor as in the southern reaches of Gikuyuland. Class politics around Tumutumu may have differed from southern Gikuyu politics on at least four grounds. First, Nyeri had not experienced the same degree of land alienation as had the south; in north-eastern Nyeri, in fact, the eviction of Masai herdsman had opened up new grazing land for Gikuyu cattleowners.<sup>54</sup> Not until the late 1910s was the northern Gikuyu frontier of settlement thrown back by European settlers. Second, northern *mbari* landholders were not so pressed by land-hungry clients as were their southern counterparts. Kiambu, jostled against a growing Nairobi, had the fastest growing population in Gikuyuland at the beginning of the century; many of the migrants were young men from the north who sought out a plot of land while simultaneously working for wages in Nairobi.<sup>55</sup> Third, Nyeri had not been subject to the same economic pressures arising out of the caravan trade as had the north: while Wangombe and other Nyeri *aonjoria* (traders) had been involved in the trade, British settlements in the south directed much of the trade to the Gikuyu who sold food and ivory to administrators and passing caravaners. As a result, Nyeri traders were not so quickly incorporated into market relationships as were their compatriots to the south, and hence their position was relatively less abetted by British economic and military power.<sup>56</sup>

Fourth, and perhaps most to the point, the two missions had entered into the Gikuyu politics of landholding in substantially different ways. McGregor had obtained land at Weithaga as a *muhoi*, a client asking his powerful patron Karuri for land. The Presbyterians who founded the mission at Tumutumu in 1908, in contrast, seem to have obtained their land not as clients but as

53. John 18:36, answering Pilate's query about his political provenance.

54. Lonsdale, "Moral Economy", 362; Muriuki, 174; Michael Cowen, "Differentiation on a Kenya Location" (Institute of Development Studies, Nairobi, 1965).

55. Lonsdale, "Moral Economy", 366, citing Fazan's survey of the Gikuyu reserves.

56. Peter Rogers has advanced this argument most effectively in his "The British and the Kikuyu, 1890-1905: A Reassessment," *Journal of African History* 20 (1979): 255-69.

partners, as (at least initially) allies of local landowners. One early convert, the grand-daughter of the senior elder named Gacece who controlled the land on which the mission was built, remembers that her grandfather's *mbari* had left much of their land as *weru*, pasturage for cattle. When the missionaries (John Arthur and Henry Scott, both of the older station at Thogoto) asked to buy a thirty-acre plot of the *mbari* flat land outright, her grandfather replied:

If I sell that place to you, and you plant crops, if my cows will stray (into your land), you will say "Didn't you sell this land? Pay for the damage." . . . we prefer that people who border one another should stay in a loving (reciprocal) relationship. So when my cow strays to your place you will run and lead it back to my compound, and when yours come, I will also guide it, but there will be no counting of damage.<sup>57</sup>

Gacece's call for a "loving relationship" with the missionaries does not evoke the calculus of clientage implicated in McGregor's dealings with Karuri. Instead, the missionaries at Tumutumu seem to have been understood as *agendi*, visitors, according to a Gikuyu logic in which land-rich *mbari* holders sought out powerful allies to take up residence on their land.<sup>58</sup> Such a relationship, for elders like Gacece, offered the *mbari* access to the wealth and power of their allies, and solidified their claim to the land which they occupied.

Politics around Tumutumu, in short, were conducted within a different vocabulary than were politics in Fort Hall and the more southerly reaches of Gikuyuland. In the south, by the turn of the century, the progressive coarsening of class relations had fractured the tenuous moral language on which older political discourse had relied. The fragments of this political terror appear, in truncated form, in McGregor's dictionary, in the echoed complaints of impoverished and disavowed tenants. At the same time, McGregor's dictionary gives voice to the proud claims to power made by wealthy *athamaki* like Karuri, claims based on a bureaucratic rationale which belonged to the colonial state. Barlow's dictionary voices a different political language, one which evokes an older model of morality wherein poor could still make tentative claims for largesse, *tha*, and in which the rich still sought out reciprocating means to make their wealth legitimate.

The divergent political lexicons of McGregor and Barlow make sense in light of the rigorous but geographically specific Gikuyu debate about class and patronage. There is tantalizing but incomplete evidence in these dictionaries that a similar debate was conducted concerning religious language. The labyrinthine and contradictory etymology of the Gikuyu term *ngoro*, a term which came to mean the Platonic, rational "soul" in Christian praxis, offers a point of entry into this debate.

"Soul" was first translated in McGregor's 1904 dictionary in an open, fundamentally intersubjective language. McGregor offered *ngoro* for "heart"

57. Cecilia Muthoni Mugaki, interview, 8 August 1996, in Mathira division, Nyeri.

58. This point is made tentatively, pending further research on the history of land acquisition at and around Tumutumu. For a description of *agendi* landholding relationships in Kiambu, see Kershaw, 25–6.

and “soul” and the adjectival *a ngoro* for “internal,” “inward,” and “mental.” *Ngoro*, in this lexicon, was a spatial, not an ontological category. “Mind” was not *ngoro*: “mind” was, significantly, *thikererio*, a term which has at its root the Gikuyu verb “to listen.” “Reason,” for McGregor, was similarly open to debate: he offered *mbuguiro* as one term for “reason.” *Mbuguiro* has at its root the verb *igua*, to feel or to hear.

Gikuyus called themselves the *mbari ya atiriri*, the “clan of I say to you,” highlighting the argued-out dialogue in which Gikuyu ethnic and political idioms were rehearsed and made operative. It seems that McGregor’s Gikuyu could as easily have called themselves *andu a atiriri*, the “people of I say to you,” for debate seems to have informed subjectivity as much as it did politics. In McGregor’s rendition of “mind,” Gikuyu became themselves by listening, by hearing: cognition was a function of received knowledge, not a product of creative genius.

Poor people must have spent much time listening to their more wealthy patrons: those who had only paid one or two goats were allowed to attend meetings of *mbari* councils but were not allowed to speak.<sup>59</sup> Only the wealthy could afford the extensive fees required to assume the higher positions within councils. The wealthy were also privy to the deepest political and religious knowledge, *kirira*, knowledge of which marked the most powerful from others. Speech-making and knowledge of politics, in other words, was a privilege of wealth; those who were too poor or too young were compelled to listen.

For McGregor’s interlocutors, many of whom were themselves junior men, self-hood took shape within communal debate, a debate which involved careful listening and which demanded wealth-producing labour of active participants. Later missionary lexicons, Barlow’s among them, were more convinced of the need to extract the Gikuyu “soul” from the debated narrative in which it took shape; by doing so, they helped to locate an essential spiritual centre liable for Christian conversion.<sup>60</sup> The theological quandary for Barlow lay precisely in the question of sin and self-ness. In translating “sin,” Barlow initially considered the term *thahu*, the dangerous “ritual cleanliness” which Gikuyus thought troubled them when they transgressed rules that kept life and sex separate from death and blood, bush out of the homestead, and wild game away from domestic stock.<sup>61</sup> The idea of *thahu* regulated the Gikuyu social order, keeping dangerous substances within their proper places. “Unclean” people transgressed a fluid set of social and communally defined prohibitions, not an absolute set of laws.

For Barlow, *thahu* ultimately failed as “sin” because it did not prescribe a sense of individual grievance toward God: uncleanness brought suffering on

59. Kershaw, 65–6.

60. Paul Landau has made a homologous argument in his “Explaining Surgical Evangelism in Colonial Southern Africa: Teeth, Pain and Faith,” *Journal of African History* 37 (1996): 261–82. According to Landau, missionaries in Tswana societies sought to extract Christian subjects from their communal frame by pulling teeth, an act which located healing with the physical, as opposed to the social, body. I argue that a similar process of subjectification is at play in Barlow’s dictionary, below.

61. See Lonsdale, 344, for a discussion of *thahu*.

the transgressor and on the community, but not divine condemnation. Barlow compared the dangerously unrepentant Gikuyu to the Israelites before Sinai, and took it upon himself, as an ambitious Moses, to teach them the “law of God and responsibility to him.” Barlow’s inquirers class at Thogoto spent some six months reviewing the teaching on the law, from the fall to the exodus, in an effort to imbue them with a proper respect for individual sin.<sup>62</sup>

This formulation of *thahu* is at play in Barlow’s dictionary, which defines *thahu* as “impure in the Levitical sense.” The dictionary thereby located the Gikuyu language of uncleanness within a prior covenant of pollution and death, and introduced adherents to new languages of sin and grace. “Sin” became *mehia*, a word connoting “whispers” and “lies” which does not appear in McGregor’s earlier dictionary as a pejorative.

If this personalized version of sin was to take hold, though, Barlow and his Gikuyu translators were compelled to locate some identifiable, individualizing language with which to identify the guilty sinner. They needed to extract sin, and the Gikuyu subject, from the communal frame in which moral pollution was located by ethnic thought: they needed a religious subject. Thus, where McGregor’s *ngoro* evoked an almost Hebraic conception of the self, Barlow offered *ngoro* as the definitive location of the Platonic self on display in the letters of Paul.<sup>63</sup> Barlow defined *ngoro* as “chest, heart, mind, affections, whole ‘inner man.’” *Thikererio*, which McGregor had offered for “mind,” is in Barlow simply defined in its verbal form, *thikereria*, “to listen to.” Neither *mbuguiro*, which McGregor had offered as “reason,” nor *ogi*, which McGregor had offered for “mind,” is translated in Barlow’s grammar.

Barlow sought to modulate the potentially destabilizing ambiguities of McGregor’s reading of the soul by naming the spiritual centre of the newly created subject. Gikuyu subjects, for whom mind/*ngoro*/spirit were diffusely held at various points within and without the body, were here metamorphosed into reified moderns, imbued with language and consciousness out of an act of linguistic creativity.

It is impossible to say with certainty which of the two renditions of *ngoro* rang more true with Gikuyu understandings of self-hood. As with *muthamaki*, different *ngoro* probably belonged to different groups of Gikuyu. Early Christian converts in Gikuyuland were usually younger men, the children of poorer families, who used their connections with the missionaries as licence to thumb their noses at the wisdom of the elders.<sup>64</sup> Christian “readers” were known to sleep in graveyards, to drink out of “skulls,” and to destroy the divination

62. Ward, 85.

63. In Hebrew, the “soul” is usually rendered as *ruach*, which connotes “soul,” “breath,” and “wind,” and as *nephesh*, connoting “life,” “blood,” “mood,” “state of mind,” “whatever makes living beings.” Cf. Deut. 6:5: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul [*nephesh*] and with all your strength.” The passage goes on to enjoin ancient believers to “impress” the truth upon their children, to tie the word around their hands and foreheads. For ancient Hebrews, then, the “soul” took meaning out of a continually reinforced community of faith, and included (and transcended?) the whole body. This is in distinction to the Pauline definition (as it is usually exegeted), which inflects Platonic conceptions of “soul” to make the self into a “mind.” A Hebraic definition of soul would approximate McGregor’s *thikererio*. My thanks to Bob Clark for this insight.

64. Feldman, chap. 3; Lonsdale, 367–9.

tools of elders.<sup>65</sup> Others refused to be initiated.<sup>66</sup> All of these activities were serious violations of *thahu*, and marked early converts for the special opprobrium of elders, who were nervous about the doom which they and their families might contract from such licentious activities.

Barlow's dictionary bears incomplete evidence that this struggle over meaning was conducted in ontological as well as familial and political terms. Barlow's *ngoro* may well have been a term engineered to suit the needs of missionary evangelism; it might also have been part of a larger effort by *athomi* to free themselves of the ideological control of their elders. Rebellious young men would probably have found *mehia* useful as "sin," since principled violation of *thahu* had become a mark of conversion. They might also have found the individualized *ngoro* liberating, since it freed them of the need to "listen" to their elders.

Barlow's dictionary suggests that debates over religious language and ideals of self-hood were as much at stake in Gikuyu debate as were terms like *muthamaki*, with its more overtly political implications. By the end of the colonial period Barlow's *ngoro* had carried the field: Benson's 1964 dictionary defines *ngoro* as "heart, spirit, conscience, mind, soul, inner man."<sup>67</sup> It is clear that this *ngoro*, like the various *athamaki*, emerged out of a long and tense dialogue between Gikuyu converts and missionary translators, in which Gikuyu debates played as much a role in determining key translations as did missionaries' intentions.

This reading suggests dictionaries were about more than rendering Gikuyu into the language of colonial administration. Gikuyu idioms were not merely "reduced" in these dictionaries into an instrumental code of phrases for the use of British colonial administrators and evangelists.<sup>68</sup> Instead, the language conveyed in these dictionaries itself became an object of debate, as Gikuyu struggled over old questions of politics, age, self-hood, and virtue. They also argued about European institutions like the chiefship and the notion of the "soul," bringing new vocabularies to bear on political and religious concerns. The language which missionaries and converts invented out of this long conversation was a hybrid, sitting uneasily at the intersection of coercive missionary discourses and Bakhtinian dialogue.

65. For Gikuyu elders, the white cups that converts drank out of were "skulls," an impression which rebellious *athomi* did little to allay. William Githaiga, for example, remembers that his father "wanted to go to school but they could not be allowed to go because their fathers thought that they would drink water with the human skull, and this human skull is the bowl" (interview, 15 August 1997, in Magutu location, Nyeri district). For skulls, see interview with Benjamin Mbugua (transcript in St Paul's Divinity School Archives, Limuru), and Ward, 113; for graveyards and destroying divination implements, Sandgren, 45.

66. Canon Paul Mbatia, for example, remembers that when the time for his circumcision came and he refused to be initiated, "my father grew very wild with me and intended to kill those who taught me Christianity. They planned to have me by force for circumcision but McGregor calmed them down by threatening them that he would take them to Chief Karuri" (St Paul's Divinity School Archives, Limuru).

67. T. G. Benson, *Kikuyu-English Dictionary* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1964), 313.

68. I refer here to the Comaroffs, who argue that the missionary systematization of the Tswana languages gave rise to a rationalist model of culture, as the "capturing" of *seTswana* in dictionaries cemented the discursive boundaries between the colonial world and the African "other."