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ETHNOGRAPHY AND  
CULTURAL INNOVATION IN  
MAU MAU DETENTION CAMPS

Gakaara wa Wanjau's *Mihiriga ya Agikūyū*

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Gakaara wa Wanjau found his literary voice during the 1950s, while he was held—for eight long years—in colonial Kenya's detention camps. Superintended by British officials, the camps were places of extraordinary privation, where thousands of Gikuyu men and women who supported the Mau Mau movement were subjected to psychological coercion and physical maltreatment. For Gakaara, the experience of detention was an occasion for ethnographic work. He conducted research with other detainees and composed a series of manuscripts on Gikuyu religion, culture, and kinship. In 1956 Gakaara confessed before British officers to his involvement with Mau Mau. He was employed as a staff member as a reward for his cooperation. Under the watchful eye of the camp commandant, Gakaara wrote at least five plays for detainees to perform. He also edited the detention camp newspaper.<sup>1</sup> During his eight years in detention he also composed dozens of songs, carried on an extensive correspondence with his wife, negotiated through the mail over his sister's remarriage, directed litigation over land he had inherited from his father, and kept a diary.<sup>2</sup>

His greatest achievement was *Mihiriga ya Agikūyū*, "The Clans of the Gikuyu People," published in 1960, the year he was finally released. It is a work

of homespun ethnography, bursting with vivid details about the character, mentality, and accomplishments of each of the ten Gikuyu clans. Gakaara did not compose a literature of resistance. Neither did he defend Gikuyu traditions against the threat of cultural imperialism. His imaginative book was about the obligations wives bore to their husbands, about the character of Gikuyu womanhood, and about the civic institutions that upheld moral order and cemented kinship. The book was never translated into English, and it never found a readership outside Kenya. That is the point. This was a text directed to a specific audience who needed the instruction it could provide. *Mihiriga ya Agikūyū* was an entry in the large library of books through which colonized people worked to define their culture, organize gender relations, and earn a respectable place in the public sphere.

The historian Caroline Elkins has recently illuminated the awful inhumanity of colonial Kenya's detention camps. Her book, published in the United Kingdom under the title *Britain's Gulag: The Brutal End of Empire in Kenya*, documents the horrific abuses British officials perpetrated against Gikuyu men and women.<sup>3</sup> In Elkins's account the politics of 1950s Kenya are cast in a prefabricated pattern. Gikuyu were either part of a "Mau Mau population" or they were British loyalists who moved in "lockstep with the British to ensure their common collective interests."<sup>4</sup> Detention camps were machines for crushing Mau Mau sentiments. In the camps "space, time and social exchange were completely organized and routinized," Elkins writes. "Freedom was eliminated, and violence, or the threat of it, was part of every waking and sleeping moment."<sup>5</sup> Isolated from their kin, humiliated, and subjected to coercive indoctrination, long-term detainees were made "socially dead."<sup>6</sup>

In this chapter I argue that detention camps not only were places of punishment but also were crucibles for cultural innovation. In Kenya and elsewhere, decolonization occasioned a contest over moral (not only political) legitimacy. Africa's patriots sought to surpass their colonial rulers, to project an image of integrity and responsibility that testified to their fitness to govern themselves. "Why am I fit to rule?" is a hard question to face, for it is an audit of personal integrity.<sup>7</sup> The 1950s and 1960s—the era of African independence—was therefore also an occasion for moral reform. Dozens of ethnic welfare associations were founded. As spokesmen for Luo, Haya, Ganda, or Gikuyu people, the leaders of these associations sought to reform their people's manners and earn other people's respect.<sup>8</sup> Mau Mau partisans shared a sensibility and a project with these architects

1 of ethnic patriotism. In their violent guerilla war, Gikuyu men and women  
 2 struggled to uphold family life and defend their people from the debilitating  
 3 threat of cultural amnesia. Gakaara and the many other Gikuyu men  
 4 and women who took an oath in the late 1940s and 1950s were involved in a  
 5 moral project, not a straightforward political war. After they were detained  
 6 by the British, Gakaara and other entrepreneurs carried these discourses  
 7 about family life and political self-mastery forward. Lumped together in  
 8 cloistered cells with other men, isolated from their families, and uncertain  
 9 about their wives' loyalty, detainees did ethnographic work in order to  
 10 ensure their wives' fidelity, get leverage over brothers and clansmen, and  
 11 uphold their own reputations. *Mihiriga ya Agikuyu* changed the British Em-  
 12 pire by giving a colonized people resources with which to renovate their  
 13 family values.

#### 14 *Mau Mau and Moral Order*

15  
 16  
 17 Gakaara wa Wanjau spent most of his literary career casting about for a secure  
 18 position from which to write.<sup>9</sup> He had served in the colonial military during  
 19 World War II; on his return to Kenya he moved to the town of Nakuru, where  
 20 he worked for the local government. In a newspaper editorial he complained  
 21 at the poor quality of municipal housing.<sup>10</sup> "You would find an African em-  
 22 ployee, a driver, mechanic, clerk etc. wandering about during the night suffer-  
 23 ing for somewhere to sleep," he wrote. "It is even shameful to state how these  
 24 people sleep in one small room." Gakaara himself was living in a single room  
 25 together with other government employees. He had used his wartime salary  
 26 to finance his marriage, but in Nakuru his straitened financial circumstances  
 27 obliged him to live apart from his wife, who stayed in his parents' home. Early  
 28 in 1949 Gakaara, desperate for money, was compelled to hawk cigarettes and  
 29 foodstuffs.<sup>11</sup> It was during this dark period that he filled out an application  
 30 for a correspondence course at the "British Institute of Practical Psychol-  
 31 ogy." The application illuminates the way poverty had endangered Gakaara's  
 32 sense of volition. "I have much propaganda to make me a big man," he wrote,  
 33 "whereas I have no ways." When asked "Do you feel your life lacks purpose?"  
 34 he replied "Yes, because of poverty." And when asked "Are you inclined to  
 35 turn your eyes away when people look straight at you?" he replied "Big peo-  
 36 ple, more educated and very rich."<sup>12</sup>

37 Gakaara was not alone in his predicament. In the late 1940s rural class  
 38 formation had left many Gikuyu men without land, endangering their so-

cial lives. Wartime profits invited wealthy farmers to expand their holdings, forcing tenants and junior men off gardens they had long cultivated. Lacking enough land for subsistence, smallholders became proletarians in increasing numbers. In 1943 and again in 1947, Nyeri—the district from which Gakaara came—produced the most migrant workers per capita of all districts in Kenya colony.<sup>13</sup> Without sufficient land with which to support their families, impoverished men found it impossible to claim other people’s attention or respect.<sup>14</sup> Commodity farmers used wartime profits to monopolize marriageable women, stifling young suitors’ hopes. They and other wealthy men drove up brideprice. The frequency of church marriages throughout central Kenya dropped precipitously in the 1940s.<sup>15</sup> Formal marriage was too expensive for the poor, who saw their path to adulthood closed off.

In 1948, Gakaara joined the Rift Valley Agikuyu Union, which was one of many ethnic associations that campaigned against the corruptions of city living. The Union expelled a number of prostitutes from the township; those who refused to leave were imprisoned.<sup>16</sup> The Union also had its eye on men: members resolved that “men who live on women’s earnings should be prosecuted.”<sup>17</sup> It was at this time that Gakaara published his pamphlet *Wanawake wa Siku Hizi* (Women of These Days). Its aim, Gakaara explained, was to “abhor the bad reputation brought up by lazy African women who roam about shamefully in town with nothing to do but prostitution,” while also encouraging “the African girls who lead good ways of life in progressing the country.”<sup>18</sup> The book was one of a series of pamphlets about marriage and family life that Gakaara composed during the late 1940s. His first book, *Ūhoro Wa Ūgurani* (Marriage Procedures), was published in 1946; the pamphlet *Kĩguni gĩa Twana* (Manners of Children) was published in 1949. *Kĩguni gĩa Twana* listed “some usual good manners which are common to Kikuyu children” and encouraged them to “respect their superiors and parents etc.”<sup>19</sup>

Spurred by the insecurity he felt over his own conjugal life, Gakaara wa Wanjau was creating a textual architecture to uphold a conservative social order. His literary and political work was part of a larger field of morally conservative thought. One newspaper editorialist complained that many Gikuyu girls, “beautiful, strong, very fit for mothers at home still loiter on Nairobi streets disguised as Alimas and Fatumas.”<sup>20</sup> Another editorialist wanted Gikuyu prostitutes to remember that “the result of the havoc they are doing will be to bring into existence a new tribe of half-castes and

1 bastards.” “Their fiendish game is one of the best ways of exterminating a  
2 tribe,” he averred.<sup>21</sup> “The evils of prostitution are a greater enemy than the  
3 Germans or the Japanese during the world wars,” wrote a third editorial-  
4 ist.<sup>22</sup> With their demographic future in mind, Gikuyu editorialists debated  
5 the mechanisms by which refractory women could be brought into line.  
6 One editorialist invited readers to subscribe money toward the building  
7 of a special jail wherein prostitutes could be confined.<sup>23</sup> Another wanted  
8 rural chiefs to nominate three people from their localities who would go to  
9 Nairobi, seek out prostitutes who came from their home areas, and compel  
10 them to return to their homes.<sup>24</sup>

11 Gakaara wa Wanjau took a Mau Mau oath in July 1952. He and other  
12 oath-takers promised to stay away from prostitutes’ lairs, support their  
13 families, deny themselves alcoholic drinks, and keep their mouths closed.<sup>25</sup>  
14 Gakaara was inspired by these promises, thinking them to be an inducement  
15 to moral discipline. In August he called two colleagues to his Nairobi  
16 office, where he had arranged to give them the oath.<sup>26</sup> He paid the fee re-  
17 quired of all Mau Mau oath-takers on their behalf.<sup>27</sup> When in September  
18 Gakaara saw one of his colleagues drinking beer at a bar, he reported him  
19 to Mau Mau authorities. Mau Mau partisans practiced a stern morality.  
20 Women, too, were obliged to comport themselves with honor. Mau Mau  
21 oaths demanded that young women commit themselves to their marriages,  
22 abjure the business of prostitution, nurture their children, and break off re-  
23 lationships with men who were not Gikuyu.<sup>28</sup> The thousands of young men  
24 who in 1953 and 1954 went into central Kenya’s forests as Mau Mau guerilla  
25 fighters were protagonists in this battle against moral indiscipline.<sup>29</sup> The  
26 young men of the forest named their mountaintop strongholds *cihaariro*,  
27 “council grounds,” historically the spaces where respectable elders had  
28 gathered to deliberate over matters of political importance.<sup>30</sup> The dispo-  
29 sessed men of Mau Mau were claiming the reputable status of elders, with  
30 family responsibilities. The guerilla leader Dedan Kimathi ran a centralized  
31 welfare system for deserted wives of Mau Mau partisans, sending money  
32 home in installments of 20 shillings.<sup>31</sup> Guerilla leaders often punished rapists  
33 with death. When Gucu wa Gikoyo came upon a Mau Mau fighter raping  
34 a woman during a raid, he and others hacked the man to pieces.<sup>32</sup> General  
35 Mwariama carried an abandoned baby for three full weeks, feeding it with  
36 food from his own mouth.<sup>33</sup>

37 The Mau Mau war was not a straightforwardly political battle between  
38 British loyalists and anticolonial nationalists. Its advocates were, like

Gakaara, marginal men whose marriages were endangered and whose access to land was increasingly foreclosed. In the Mau Mau movement they staked a claim to respectability. From a position of insecurity they created institutions and composed texts that aimed to uphold moral order, reinforce standards of sexual discipline, and bring a new generation to life.

*Cultural Work in Mau Mau Detention Camps*

On 20 October 1952 Gakaara wa Wanjau was arrested and accused of fomenting Mau Mau ideology. The government’s evidence against him was the “Creed of Gikuyu and Muumbi,” which Gakaara had published in 1952. It was a rewriting of the Apostles’ Creed. When Gakaara appealed against his detention, the British officers who reviewed his file concluded that he was “probably a sincere fanatic of unstable mental balance. If set at large he might be very dangerous.”<sup>34</sup> Gakaara was detained for eight years: first at Kajiado; then at Manda Island and Takwa camps, on the Indian Ocean coast; at Athi River camp; and finally at Hola Open Camp, in Kenya’s arid east. He was one of the tens of thousands of people, most of them men, who were crowded into Kenya’s 176 camps, prisons, and detention centers.<sup>35</sup> Kenya’s prison population in 1956 was ten times greater than Great Britain’s.<sup>36</sup> In all, more than 150,000 Gikuyu men and women spent some time in detention camps during the course of the rebellion.<sup>37</sup>

As detainees, Mau Mau partisans carried forward their long war against social and moral indiscipline. At Takwa camp, detainees made a point of honoring the wives of their warders. “We always tried to behave respectfully, and there wasn’t a detainee who would not try to help a woman on the path,” remembered Gakaara wa Wanjau. Their self-discipline earned them the respect of their jailors. Detainees regularly drank tea in their warders’ homes, and “even we loved their children; they greeted us with pleasure when they saw us.”<sup>38</sup> At Yatta camp, in eastern Kenya, detainees punished any among their compatriots who drank alcohol, took bhang, or consorted with loose women. Even “talking words of love to a girl” was punishable, and offenders were compelled to crawl, on their knees, back and forth on a concrete floor.<sup>39</sup> At Perkerra camp, where detainees lived in semisupervised open villages, the detainees’ committee resolved that inhabitants should be “men of strong character, and able to control their desires, which often led them into ruin.”<sup>40</sup> The committee ordered that women from the surrounding communities should be barred from entering the village at nighttime.<sup>41</sup>

1            Detainees were imposing impressively strict standards of discipline on  
2 themselves, but they could not be sure that their wives were doing the same.  
3 Outside the wire, detainees had alarmingly little influence. They were terri-  
4 fied that their wives, left to fend for themselves, would forfeit their fidelity.  
5 They had good reason to worry. In the mid-1950s, the ratio of women to  
6 men in central Kenya was seven to one.<sup>42</sup> Some abandoned wives, desper-  
7 ate for support, found it impossible to resist the advances of opportunistic  
8 suitors. “I know that any man cannot play around with you and convince  
9 you to offer them your body recklessly,” Gakaara wrote in a nervous letter to  
10 his wife.<sup>43</sup> “Never agree to such a thing as offering your body to anyone who  
11 comes with the lies that he will help you. These are all lies.” Worried over  
12 their wives’ fidelity, detainees also worried over their male relatives’ greed.  
13 Many detainees were junior members of their families, with older brothers  
14 who stood to inherit the bulk of their father’s property.<sup>44</sup> Detainees’ prop-  
15 erty was particularly imperiled after 1954, when government surveyors set  
16 out to consolidate Gikuyu landholders’ scattered gardens into larger, more  
17 economic units.<sup>45</sup> The scheme was part of the Kenya government’s larger  
18 effort to encourage the growth of a landed African peasantry. Detainees  
19 regarded the plan with trepidation. An editorialist in the detention camp  
20 newspaper warned readers that their property was in danger. “Land is being  
21 consolidated and it is only the owner of the land who may know every-  
22 thing concerning his land,” he wrote. “If you are in a camp far from home  
23 this will be difficult.”<sup>46</sup> Detainees had to rely on wives, brothers, or cousins  
24 to represent them before government surveyors. They worried that their  
25 greedy relatives would take advantage of the situation. In 1957 detainee An-  
26 derson Mureithi was refused parole by his village chief. His brother, Mu-  
27 reithi learned, did not want him to receive land from their father and so  
28 objected to his release.<sup>47</sup> Gakaara wa Wanjau was involved in protracted  
29 litigation against members of his own clan over land he had inherited from  
30 his father. “I have heard a lot of complaints here in detention from the de-  
31 tainees because they are shortchanged on land . . . even from people from  
32 the same clan,” he wrote to his wife.<sup>48</sup> But Gakaara had also heard “many  
33 women praised because of how strongly they defended their family’s land.”

34            For men like Gakaara, detention was not only a time of physical priva-  
35 tion. By making it impossible for them to exercise their duties as husbands,  
36 fathers, and kinsmen, the experience of detention made Gikuyu men feel  
37 that their family lives were in crisis. In reality detainees’ dystopian night-  
38 mares were exaggerated. In their husbands’ absence, most wives worked



faithfully to hold their families together. The hundreds of women held as detainees at Kamiti camp brought their infants with them, badgering warders for supplies of fresh milk and stitching children’s tattered clothes together.<sup>49</sup> They plied sympathetic British missionaries for news of home.<sup>50</sup> Shifra Wairire, Gakaara’s wife, was detained at Kamiti. “Do not think that I have forgotten the home people,” she wrote to Gakaara. “At every moment I am remembering the home.”<sup>51</sup> After her release in 1957 Shifra dedicated herself to her children, building a six-room, grass-thatched house for them to live in. Gakaara was discomfited by his wife’s hard work. “Sometimes I laugh on my own when I realize that I had never thought I would be asking you about such a thing as construction,” he wrote. “Just imagine that the things I ask you are the ones you are supposed to be asking me. Things have really changed.”<sup>52</sup> For Gakaara, as for other detainees, wives’ novel powers were an unwelcome reminder of their own failure of responsibility.

It was out of this sense of anxiety that Gakaara composed “Which Clan Do You Belong To?”—the work later published under the title *Mihiriga ya Agikũyũ*.<sup>53</sup> The manuscript was written, with a pencil, in six exercise books, spirited out of Manda Island camp in the hands of a colleague, and stored at the bottom of a box by Gakaara’s wife.<sup>54</sup> For Gakaara the detention camps were an opportunity to conduct ethnographic research. In the preface to the published work he thanks his “former detention colleagues” whose “inspiration and rich source of information about each clan enabled me to write this book.”<sup>55</sup> Drawn together from distant corners of central Kenya, detainees compared their customs and developed a comprehensive picture of each clan’s character. Gakaara’s book lists ten different clans, identifying each clan’s “behavior,” its “manners,” “statesmanship and courage,” “wealth,” “witchcraft,” and “attraction to women.”<sup>56</sup>

These stereotypes were a novelty. Never before had the psychology and character of Gikuyu clans been described in print. Gikuyu clans were alliances of convenience, not lineages with a shared culture and history. They had been formed by the immigrant people who settled in central Kenya and set to work clearing its forests in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.<sup>57</sup> The earliest ethnographies emphasized the culturally and linguistically disparate origins of the Gikuyu clans. One government administrator, writing in 1908, heard leaders of the Anjiru clan claim descent from the Chuka people. Aceera people claimed to have come from the Kamba, while Ethaga people said that they had sprung from the Chagga people of Kilimanjaro.<sup>58</sup> “Anyone enquiring into the descent of those present at a meeting of Kikuyu elders



1 will find an extraordinary number of tribes represented,” the administrator  
 2 reported. No one could agree on the number of clans: in 1910 two ethnog-  
 3 raphers reported that the Gikuyu people were divided into thirteen clans;  
 4 in 1911 a government officer counted nine; in 1921 another officer thought  
 5 there were twelve.<sup>59</sup> As is fitting for a people with diverse origins, Gikuyu  
 6 people embraced disparate origin myths. One story held that the original  
 7 couple had been a brother and sister, virgins both, who devoted themselves  
 8 to hunting. When they partook of the waters of a flowing stream, they were  
 9 overcome with lust, copulated, and became the parents of all living people.  
 10 The story contrasted the unproductive, shiftless work of hunting with the  
 11 biologically and socially procreative labor of irrigated agriculture.<sup>60</sup> An-  
 12 other origin story similarly defined Gikuyu people by their shared commit-  
 13 ment to agriculture: it described how God had given his Maasai son a spear  
 14 with which to defend his cattle, his Okiek son a bow and arrow for hunting,  
 15 and his Gikuyu son a digging stick.<sup>61</sup>

16 The creation of a singular Gikuyu cultural system—with a dominant  
 17 origin story and a standard set of institutions—occurred in the space of the  
 18 imperial commons, the area of textual exchange wherein imperial subjects  
 19 could borrow, plagiarize, and expound on texts generated elsewhere.<sup>62</sup> The  
 20 key text was the 1924 reading primer *Karirikania*, the set text for all Gikuyu-  
 21 language learners in Kenya’s Protestant schools. The first line in the primer  
 22 went:

23 Ngai nīaheete Gikūyū būrūri mwega ūtaagaga irio kana maī kana gīthaka.  
 24 Wega no Gikūyū kīgocage Ngai hīndī ciothe nī ūndū anagītanahīra  
 25 mūno.<sup>63</sup>

26  
 27 God has given Gikuyu a good country that lacks neither food nor  
 28 water nor forested land. It is good that Gikuyu should be praising  
 29 God always, for he has been very generous to them.

30 The Scots missionary who composed the primer meant to impress a sense  
 31 of gratitude on Gikuyu people. But for early Christian converts—called  
 32 *athomi*, “readers” in the Gikuyu language—these sentences were the out-  
 33 line for an origin story. They positioned a singular ancestor—the man  
 34 Gikuyu—in a direct relationship with God and defined an Edenic land-  
 35 scape as Gikuyu’s personal possession. No other origin story was so much  
 36 expounded on or so politically useful. In 1929, the Kenya government ap-  
 37 pointed a committee of inquiry to look into Gikuyu people’s complaints  
 38

about the land that British settlers had expropriated from them. Gikuyu witnesses used the 1924 primer to cement their claim over disputed land. “God set us here and gave us the land,” argued a delegation from Fort Hall district. “We began to cut the forest and to cultivate. We have no tradition of having migrated here from elsewhere.”<sup>64</sup> The origin myth pruned away Gikuyu pioneers’ history of migration, positioning them as autochthons, with better claim to Kenya’s productive soil than British émigrés. This myth also helped to paper over the diverse, multicultural genealogies of disparate Gikuyu clans. “We are descended from one ancestor named Mugikuyu, and various clans are named after his daughters,” the Fort Hall delegation told the commissioners. The notion that Gikuyu clans were descended from a single ancestor was a novelty: knowledgeable observers had not heard of it prior to the late 1920s.<sup>65</sup> Invented or not, the origin story helpfully shrouded Gikuyu people’s disparate origins.<sup>66</sup> Christian readers found it particularly good to think with. Writing in the Gikuyu-language journal *Mwigwithania* in 1929, the same year the commission was collecting evidence, an editorialist personified the origin story: he referred to “our ancestor, Kikuyu,” to whom God, from his seat on Mount Kenya, had given the land from Kabete to Meru.<sup>67</sup> Another writer noted that “there is a name for the father of a man, but what is the name of a man’s mother? Know that a man’s mother’s name is Muumbi.”<sup>68</sup> As the father and mother of all Gikuyu people, Gikuyu and Muumbi turned disparate clans into a homogeneous people with a common parentage. It was this origin story that was piped into the English language through Jomo Kenyatta’s 1938 book *Facing Mount Kenya*. Kenyatta—who had begun his career as editor of *Mwigwithania*—told his British readers that “according to the tribal legend,” the man Gikuyu had been taken to a mountaintop by God and shown a place to settle, an Eden full of fig trees called Mokorwe wa Gathanga. There he was given a beautiful wife named Muumbi. Their daughters were the founders of the Gikuyu clans.

The story of Gikuyu and Muumbi was not born, whole, from the Gikuyu past. It was assembled through the expository writing of Gikuyu intellectuals, who used a snippet from a missionary reading primer as a prompt with which to develop a new theory their people’s origins. In subsequent decades Gikuyu autoethnographers devoted themselves to developing and elaborating on the story. In his 1947 book *Kĩrĩra kĩa Ūgĩkũyũ*, M. N. Kabetu asked his readers “Was Gikuyu created at Mukurue-ini wa Gathanga, or was he settled there by God from elsewhere?”<sup>69</sup> The answer, Kabetu admitted, was difficult to know,

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1 since there are “not many older Gikuyu people at present who can . . . nar-  
2 rate the story.” In the absence of confirmation from oral history, Kabetu  
3 thought the best evidence could be found in the 1924 reading primer. “At  
4 the beginning when people started to live on the earth, that is the point at  
5 which Gikuyu was given this land by God his creator, just as it used to be  
6 said,” Kabetu wrote.<sup>70</sup> In Gikuyu and in English, Kabetu’s sentence echoes  
7 the phraseology of the 1924 primer. It was common knowledge, a phrase  
8 that a whole generation of Gikuyu readers came to know as a fact through  
9 their basic reading lessons. For Kabetu, the phrase established the reality of  
10 the Gikuyu ancestor’s presence at the very beginning of time.

11 Gakaara wa Wanjau’s *Mihiriga ya Agikūyū* shows that Mau Mau detain-  
12 ees were very much interested in these discussions over culture and origins.  
13 Gakaara had Kabetu’s 1947 book at his elbow as he completed his ethno-  
14 graphical work in the late 1950s. In a few paragraphs he quotes word for  
15 word the whole of Kabetu’s discussion regarding the location of Gikuyu’s  
16 creation.<sup>71</sup> Like Kabetu, Gakaara and his colleagues thought it important  
17 to establish Gikuyu’s presence as an autochton, indigenous to colonial Ke-  
18 nya’s landscape. What was new about Gakaara’s account was his emphasis  
19 on the personality, the psyche, of each of the Gikuyu clans. Earlier authori-  
20 ties had nothing to say on the subject. The consolidated account of origins  
21 birthed out of the late 1920s discourses about Gikuyu and God had pruned  
22 away the disparate histories and experiences of each of the Gikuyu clans. It  
23 would have been positively dangerous to reflect on the specificities, the dis-  
24 tinctiveness, of each clan. When the earlier autoethnographers mentioned  
25 clans, they did so in numbered lists, identifying the name of the founding  
26 matriarch and the name of the clan she birthed. That was as much as Ke-  
27 nyatta felt able to say in *Facing Mount Kenya*. The Presbyterian schoolmas-  
28 ter Stanley Kiama Gathigira offered slightly more material in his 1933 book  
29 *Mūkarire ya Agikūyū* (The Ways of Staying of the Gikuyu).<sup>72</sup> He was will-  
30 ing to describe the distinctive shouts that women of each clan gave when  
31 they were surprised or astonished, but beyond these bare facts he was silent  
32 about the identities of the Gikuyu clans.

33 Gakaara’s book is bursting with idiosyncratic, judgmental insights into  
34 the specific mentality of each clan. The book helps us see how detainees’ ex-  
35 egetical discussions must have proceeded: each section begins with a folktale,  
36 or a proverb, and then expounds on the text to derive insights about the clan’s  
37 character. Concerning the Aceera clan, for example, the book describes how  
38 a Ceera man, traveling with a friend to look at a piece of property, crossed

a river on a log and then turned and removed the log before his companion could cross. The Ceera man then raced ahead and claimed the land as his own. The story gave detention-camp ethnographers the evidence with which to make judgments on Ceera men's character. Hasty and acquisitive Ceera men "are not good friends of the poor," says the book, and they are "impatient before they understand a matter."<sup>73</sup> The character of the Airimu clan is similarly diagnosed by reference to a folktale. The book describes how a young Irimu man once happened on a beautiful young girl while cutting firewood. He offered to assist her in her work and then pretended to have been wounded when a tree fell on him. Carried away to the girl's father's home, he impregnated her and claimed her hand in marriage. The story helped detention-camp ethnographers show that Irimu men were "poor courtiers" and were "not good at womanizing."<sup>74</sup> In documenting the personalities of central Kenya's several clans, Gakaara and other detention camp ethnographers were doing something quite new in Gikuyu intellectual history. Where earlier homespun ethnographers had pruned away the multilingual histories of the Gikuyu clans, Mau Mau detainees populated the sparse architecture of clanship with human psychology, dispositions, and sentiments.

Their ethnographic work was part of a wider effort to create crosscutting institutions that could impose order on the camps' disparate inmates. The most pertinent question detainees faced was this: by what authority could they oblige other detainees to act with a unity of purpose? In August 1953 Gakaara and other members of the Mau Mau Central Committee in Manda Island resolved to go on strike in protest against the manual labor their British warders compelled them to perform.<sup>75</sup> Not everyone shared their convictions, and in exchange for better rations and other preferments several detainees agreed to cooperate fully with their British warders. It was, Gakaara wrote, a time of "great hatred between non-cooperators and cooperators." He injured his hand while throwing notes "accusing people who wanted to work" over the barbed-wire fence that divided his compound from his neighbors.<sup>76</sup> Central Committee leaders secretly convened trials wherein the cooperators were subjected to a variety of fines—from a fat ram to a tin of honey to a bull—to be paid after their release.<sup>77</sup> These proleptic sanctions were never enough to impress the cooperators. When the cooperator John Mungai was called before Gakaara and his colleagues on Manda Island, he refused to be tried, saying that he would not acknowledge the court's legitimacy. It was in this context that detainees conducted their

1 ethnographic inquiries into clanship. Their work was urgent and impor-  
 2 tant, for it helped to create a structure by means of which to hold other de-  
 3 tainees accountable to the public will. Associations proliferated in Manda  
 4 Island camp. Detainees were organized into districts; each district had its  
 5 own chairman and secretary. There were associations of age groups—five  
 6 in number—and members’ names were written in a register.<sup>78</sup> Clans were  
 7 likewise bureaucratized: each clan had a chairman and a membership roll,  
 8 so that every “member of the clan should know each other.”<sup>79</sup>

9 *Mihiriga ya Agikūyū* was animated by this organizational work. Its ste-  
 10 reotypes about the behaviors and mentalities of each of the Gikuyu clans  
 11 reflected detainees’ efforts to invest cultural institutions with authority, to  
 12 make people feel beholden to purposes larger than their own self-interest.  
 13 The book illuminates detainees’ urgent search for cultural footings on which  
 14 to organize themselves. *Mihiriga ya Agikūyū* was an aspect of a larger effort  
 15 to codify men’s political and social commitments.

16 The book was also a guidebook to the feminine mystique. Cut off from  
 17 their families, desperate detainees were casting about for intellectual and  
 18 rhetorical leverage over their wives. The book helps us see how detain-  
 19 ees worked to predict, and control, their wives’ eccentricities. Chapter by  
 20 chapter, it chronicles the personalities of each clan’s women. The exem-  
 21 plary woman of the Anjiru clan is said to “love her husband and always  
 22 protects his property.” She is “very open handed and will take care of guests  
 23 very well,” and she is “very particular about firm boundaries. Should a fight  
 24 break out at her home she quickly takes part in it.”<sup>80</sup> Women of the Aga-  
 25 chiku clan are not said to be “very kind in giving food but will take care of  
 26 their husbands and guests.” Their great strength is their industriousness:  
 27 the Gachiku woman “marks her garden boundaries well in advance by  
 28 plaiting grass and so she has few boundary quarrels.”<sup>81</sup> Ambui women are  
 29 said to “stick to their husbands when they marry, and help their husbands  
 30 to earn more.” But Ambui women are also known to be “domineering and  
 31 can dominate their husbands in case they relax.”<sup>82</sup> Detainees needed to  
 32 know whether their wives would guard their interests. Many of them were  
 33 depending on their wives to protect their property. *Mihiriga ya Agikūyū* il-  
 34 luminates the anxious conversations that detainees were conducting about  
 35 the managerial capacities of Gikuyu womanhood.

36 Mau Mau detention camps were full of advice about household manage-  
 37 ment and other technical skills. In October 1956 the staff at Athi River de-  
 38 tention camp launched a newspaper called *Atiriri*. Typed and duplicated on

a Roneo machine, some one thousand copies of *Atiriri* appeared in Gikuyu language each week. Gakaara wa Wanjau—who by that time had confessed to his involvement with Mau Mau—edited the newspaper under the supervision of the camp commandant. The greater part of *Atiriri* was populated with advice columns. There was a feature titled “Manners and Speech.” There was a series of articles titled “An Advocate and His Profession.” There was a long-running column about banking, interest rates, checkbooks, and other aspects of financial management. The contributors were Gikuyu men and women employed in government service. The world they conjured up was full of possibilities. Detainees were urged to interest themselves in world affairs, cultivate gentlemanly hobbies—stamp collecting was the subject of a long series of articles—and develop managerial capacities. British officers thought that *Atiriri* and other “rehabilitation” programs could help to “re-educate these Africans and . . . convince them that our plans are better and hold promise of a brighter future than those of the Mau Mau.”<sup>83</sup> The newspaper was a tremendously popular undertaking: the editors had space to publish just a third of the contributions they received each week.<sup>84</sup>

The chief concern of *Atiriri*’s correspondents was conjugality. Gakaara, the editor, set the tone. Over the course of several editions he published a novel titled “She Must Quit This Home.” Its subject was the difficulty of managing kin relations from afar. It featured a young man, recently married to a woman of whom his mother did not approve. While the young man labored in a faraway place, his bride, residing with his parents, was subjected to nighttime visitations from a threatening, ghostly voice. Overcome with fear, the young woman sank into an incoherent stupor. It was only when the young man returned to his home that the truth came out: the ghostly voice had been the man’s mother, who had hoped to intimidate the young woman into separating from her son. Gakaara’s message was clear: household management required men’s constant attention. *Atiriri* gave its readers the skills they needed to supervise their families from afar. A series of over twenty articles titled “Family Life” featured technical advice about the organization of social occasions. Wedding parties had to be carefully planned; brides and grooms should ensure that invitations were sent out well in advance, so that the appropriate amount of refreshments could be prepared for the guests’ enjoyment.<sup>85</sup> Each guest could be expected to consume two sandwiches, two cakes, and one scone.<sup>86</sup> The series “The Woman and Home Cleanliness,” in which the author described the configuration of the ideal village house, with garden plots measuring one hundred by



1 fifty yards, hedges four feet in height, kitchens in an orderly and sanitary  
 2 arrangement, and walls painted white.<sup>87</sup> In *Atiriri* family life was stripped  
 3 of its sentimentalities and made into an enterprise demanding technical  
 4 competence.

5 Emboldened by the expertise they derived from *Atiriri*, guided also by  
 6 their ethnographic insights into women's competence and character, de-  
 7 tainees kept up a correspondence with their families. They used the postal  
 8 system to project their supervisory authority into a domestic arena where  
 9 they otherwise had little leverage. Early in 1956 Gakaara sent his wife a pack-  
 10 age containing several handkerchiefs, an Oxford reader, two exercise books,  
 11 and a fountain pen. "Get one educated woman to teach you English," he told  
 12 her. "I want you to improve your handwriting. It will be of much help to you  
 13 and me in future."<sup>88</sup> The next year he sent his wife a copy of the government  
 14 newspaper *Tazama*, calling her attention to a feature story about how to wel-  
 15 come visitors. "I would very much like you to read the story keenly," wrote  
 16 Gakaara. "I have marked with pen all the area I think are important."<sup>89</sup> In the  
 17 same package he sent his wife a set of teacups. "Keep them from children and  
 18 maybe you should be using them only when you have visitors," he advised  
 19 her. Gakaara was managing appearances from afar.

20 In its evaluations of women's capacities, skills, and aptitudes, *Mihiriga ya*  
 21 *Agikuyu* was an instrument that detainees could use to exert a supervisory  
 22 authority over their complicated family lives. The book was a curriculum  
 23 vitae, offering men information about their wives' competences and ad-  
 24 ministrative skills. There was no space here for independent women. The  
 25 book placed husbands—their property, their interests—at the center of  
 26 family life. One of the first chapters in the book described how—in the an-  
 27 cient past—Gikuyu men had thrown off the despotic government of their  
 28 wives. Husbands had once been subject to all manner of indignities: they  
 29 were obliged to care for children while their wives governed; they were  
 30 made to sit quietly while their wives danced; they were beaten, scourged,  
 31 and mocked by their domineering brides. One day, the book recounts, hus-  
 32 bands took matters into their own hands: they impregnated their wives at  
 33 once, and when the women were incapacitated by pregnancy, they physi-  
 34 cally overcame them and established a patriarchal government over Gi-  
 35 kuyuland. The parable was a fantasy, allowing detainees to imagine a time  
 36 when they, like their ancient forefathers, would assert patriarchal authority  
 37 and reclaim their place as family heads.<sup>90</sup> *Mihiriga ya Agikuyu* is a record of  
 38



the reassuring stories that anxious men must have told themselves as they worried over their wives' apparently excessive powers.

Lifted from a missionary reading primer, a two-sentence fragment became the framework wherein the architects of Gikuyu moral community could define what held them together. As the sparse text passed through the hands of successive Gikuyu writers, it was populated with new characters, inhabited with sociology and culture, and codified into common knowledge. *Mihiriga ya Agikūyū* was one fruit of this ongoing work of textual self-imagination. In its stereotypes regarding the particular characteristics of Gikuyu clans, the book made clans into substantial, sociable organizations that deserved support. And in its judgments on women's capabilities, the book gave worried men resources that would enable them to involve themselves in their families' lives. The men who composed *Mihiriga ya Agikūyū* were themselves detainees. That is why they found ethnography so important. They were renovating institutions that promoted social order. Their literary and intellectual work gave them means of holding their families accountable to a patriarchal moral discipline.

### *Postcolonial Literature*

Gakaara wa Wanjau emerged from his long incarceration in Mau Mau detention camps in 1960. He had a substantial amount of material ready for publication: there were manuscripts titled "How Kikuyu Governed Themselves Before the Whiteman Came," "Brideprice and Marriage," and "Mysteries of the Kikuyu Witchdoctor" and manuscripts on several other subjects.<sup>91</sup> He initially planned to publish the whole of his ethnographic work in one large volume, but financial constraints made it necessary for him to print each manuscript separately. His first publication was *Mihiriga ya Agikūyū*. It came out in January 1960, the same month the Kenya government finally lifted the State of Emergency. Lacking funds with which to finance the printing costs himself, Gakaara convinced the printer to produce advance copies, sold them, and used the profits to finance a larger print run. He hoped to place the book on the official syllabus for Kenya's intermediate schools. "Ninety percent of our present children and even some grown up young people of our tribe have no knowledge of Kikuyu clans," he told the minister of education. He meant his book to "play an important part in teaching [young people] . . . our customs and traditions."<sup>92</sup>

1 The government official who reviewed the book disputed the accuracy of  
 2 Gakaara's ethnographic stereotypes. He averred that Anjiru women—who  
 3 in Gakaara's book were said to “love [their] husband[s] and always protect  
 4 his property”—were actually harridans. They were “known to be the most  
 5 inhospitable, very harsh, and they like to possess anything they can lay their  
 6 hands on,” the official argued.<sup>93</sup> This criticism notwithstanding, *Mihiriga*  
 7 *ya Agikūyū* became a recommended text for use in central Kenya's inter-  
 8 mediate schools. Gakaara reprinted the book four times over the course  
 9 of the 1970s and 1980s. In 1998 he rewrote much of the content and pub-  
 10 lished it again, with line drawings that he crafted. The new edition featured  
 11 five pages of questions, meant to remind the reader of the key points in the  
 12 text.<sup>94</sup>

13 Gakaara had great plans for his publishing business. His aim, he told a  
 14 visiting British publisher, was to “run a big and popular bookshop, where  
 15 while writing I can deal with selling of books from other countries, be  
 16 an agent for books and periodicals, school materials, stationeries, sports  
 17 equipment etc.”<sup>95</sup> But his finances were always precarious, and for the  
 18 whole of his career Gakaara spent much of his time negotiating over debts  
 19 he owed, keeping accounts, and searching anxiously for sources of revenue.  
 20 He applied for a government loan in 1960 to finance the purchase of his  
 21 own printing machines, telling the director of trade and supplies that “we  
 22 have great need to keep records of our happenings, old and new.”<sup>96</sup> In 1966  
 23 Gakaara opened a print shop in his hometown, Karatina. Over the course  
 24 of three decades he brought out dozens of books: there was a clutch of  
 25 reading primers for students of Gikuyu, Dholuo, Kalenjin, and Kikamba;  
 26 a series of moralistic novelettes; hymnbooks, ethnographic texts, and his-  
 27 torical studies. Many of these texts had been conceived during his long in-  
 28 carceration in Mau Mau detention camps. Even the name of his first book  
 29 series—“Atiriri” (I Say to You)—was borrowed from the title of the deten-  
 30 tion camp newspaper.

31 In 1986, the eminent Kenyan writer Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o famously an-  
 32 nounced that he would henceforth write entirely in the Gikuyu language.  
 33 Ngũgĩ argued that vernacular languages grow directly out of the historical  
 34 experience of a people: language is “inseparable from ourselves as a com-  
 35 munity of human beings with a specific form and character, a specific re-  
 36 lationship to the world,” he wrote.<sup>97</sup> But in fact the relationship between a  
 37 particular people and a particular language has never been straightforward.  
 38 The Gikuyu vernacular was a site of cultural and intellectual innovation,

not a repository for a people's unique historical experience. In the early 1980s Gakaara went through the government-approved reading primer, highlighting places where words from other languages were used instead of Gikuyu terms. The adulterated language taught in the official reading primers, he argued, was a "shame to Gikuyu people." "It is difficult to rightly [teach children their culture and history] without first teaching them how to read and write correctly in their own language," he wrote.<sup>98</sup> In 1991 Gakaara brought out a series of three reading primers, published under the title *Mwandikire wa Gũgikũyũ Karĩng'a* (Writing of Proper Gikuyu). It established a new standard of Gikuyu grammar and orthography, a standard Ngũgĩ himself now uses in the composition of his Gikuyu-language novels.

Gikuyu vernacular literature was made through the creative work of intellectuals like Gakaara wa Wanjau. Gakaara and his colleagues were not spokesmen for already-established cultural norms. They worked from a position of extreme insecurity, and this insecurity lent urgency to their ethnographic and cultural work. It is on this grounding that the library of Kenya's postcolonial literature stands.<sup>99</sup>

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83. Tom Askwith, <i>From Mau Mau to Harambee</i> , ed. Joanna Lewis (Cambridge: Cambridge African Studies Centre, 1995), 101.	5
84. James Breckenridge, <i>Forty Years in Kenya</i> (Bridport, England: Creeds the Printers, n.d.), 237; Kame Muhoro, editorial letter, <i>Atiriri</i> 2, 6 (9 November 1957), AB 11/61, KNA.	6
85. Njeri, “The Family Life,” pt. 17, <i>Atiriri</i> 2, 2 (12 October 1957).	7
86. Njeri, “The Family Life,” pt. 18, <i>Atiriri</i> 2, 3 (19 October 1957).	8
87. Milika Wanjiru Jackson, “The Woman and Home Cleanliness,” <i>Atiriri</i> 2, 7 (16 November 1957).	9
88. Gakaara to Shifra, 26 January 1956, “Detention Correspondence” file, GW.	10
89. Gakaara to Shifra, 2 July 1957, “Detention Correspondence” file, GW.	11
90. Kenyatta’s <i>Facing Mount Kenya</i> , ch. 1, contains a similar account of an ancient matriarchal tyranny.	12
91. Gakaara wa Wanjau to Director of Trade and Supplies, 27 July 1960, “Correspondence, 1959–70” file, GW.	13
92. Gakaara wa Wanjau to Secretary to the Education Minister, 18 September 1960, “Correspondence, 1959–70” file, GW.	14
93. The critic was Fred Kago, author of a series of three reading primers published under the title <i>Wirute Gũthoma</i> (Nairobi: Evans Brothers, 1953). Fred Kago, Education Officer, Keruquoya, to District Education Officer, Nyeri, 16 November 1960, “Correspondence, 1959–70” file, GW.	15
94. Gakaara wa Wanjau, <i>Mihiriga ya Agikũyũ</i> (Karatina: Gakaara Press, 1998).	16
95. Gakaara to Alden Clark of Franklin Publications, 14 April 1964, “Correspondence, 1959–70” file, GW.	17
96. Gakaara to Director of Trade and Supplies, 27 July 1960, “Correspondence, 1959–70” file, GW.	18
97. Ngugi wa Thiong’o, <i>Decolonizing the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature</i> (London, 1986).	19
98. Gakaara wa Wanjau, “The Gikuyu Language Committee,” n.d., “Correspondence, 1960s, 1970s” file, GW.	20
99. This argument is developed in Peterson, <i>Creative Writing: Translation, Bookkeeping, and the Work of Imagination in Colonial Kenya</i> (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2004), ch. 9.	21
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