

# **WHAT'S IN A NAME?**

LIFE STORY OF INDOMITABLE

SARAH SARAI THARA

Mwarĩ wa Jommo wa Gĩchanga

na Berewa wa Wanuma

By

**Berewa R. S. Jommo**

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## DEDICATION

To my beloved mother, in gratitude for the legacy of immense wisdom and love you left behind in your diaries, notebooks, and the incomplete manuscript, *The Night They Came*. Mami, I deeply regret that it took so long to honor your work, but I now present this book as a tribute to your unwavering faith and indomitable spirit. May your soul rest in eternal peace.

This book is also dedicated to the Women of Kamiti, Sarai's beloved and steadfast companions who, despite unimaginable torture, cruelty, and loneliness, remained true to their nationalist vows. Their love, gratitude, and pride towards my mother have deeply moved me, even from those whose loyalty to the struggles was, understandably, sometimes questioned.

Memories of the loving care my brothers and I received from our Mami Munene and her children Njoroge, Njeri, Wanjiku and Mwara, Tata Njoki, the Salvation Army Children's Centre at Kariokor in Nairobi, and the families that sheltered us—Salome Nicodemus in Shauri Moyo, Njeri in Pumwani, the Kituri family in Jogoo Road Estate, as well as Honorable J. D. Kali in Ofafa Maringo—will remain with me to my last breath.

My loving daughter, Selaine, and my vivacious grandchildren, Sankara, Furaha, and Samora, inspire me to “keep young at heart! Never give up; never lose hope!” My dear friend, Philip

Ochieng (RIP), graciously provided an annotated table of contents for this book as a gesture of encouragement back in the 1970s. I owe him a great debt of gratitude, even as I take full responsibility for the entire content, including revisions.

## **ACKNOWLEDGMENT**

I hereby acknowledge a great debt of gratitude to Allan Onyango, Beat and Elena Jenny, Dawne Fletcher-Preiswerk, George Muhia, Gus and Margaretta Edgren, Hilda Wangare Mwathi, Jamila Sheikh, Jane Miano and her daughter Nyawira, Jean Genoud, Joe Muchemi, Kamoji Wachira, Khadi Sy, Marc Nerfin, Margaret Muthoni Chege, Njeri Kang'ethe and her sister Wambui, Peter Mwaura and Rachel Koigi as well as all other personal friends in scattered places, with and through whom I have braved hardship, navigated life's contours, and celebrated its joys. They carried me along with my vague dreams, nudging me to explore new vistas of opportunity, which allowed me to broaden my physical, academic, professional, emotional, and social horizons, and ultimately gather the courage and resolve to bring this book to life. May the souls of the departed rest in peace.

I also honor the brave men and women whose shared sense of humanity far transcended their roles, including the good guards who chose compassion over cruelty, oftentimes allowing moments of grace in the darkest times. To the unnamed who defied orders, risking their safety to smuggle me into detention centers—Nairobi's Industrial Area, Athi River, Isinya, Kajiado, and Kamiti—I offer my deepest respect. Your courage stands well in stark contrast to the 'ngati' who executed brutality with

zeal, but failed to break the spirit of those they sought to destroy.

Journalists and media professionals such as Phoebe Mũnene, Hilary Ng'weno, Muthoni Likimani, and Dorothy Kweyu Musopole have, over the years, brought summaries of this book to the public domain, the latest being *Pioneers and Transformers: The Journeys of Women Trailblazers in Kenya, Vol. I*, authored by the Kenya Yearbook Editorial Board Biography Series (pp. 189-192). For avoidance of doubt, I take full responsibility for all content, given that it was always provided in goodwill.

## **FOREWORD**

Born in November 1913, Sarah Sarai Jommo was deeply rooted in Kikuyu culture from an early age, introduced and nurtured by her family. She single handedly modernized her cultural heritage by enjoining herself to the so-called athomi (literate/educated people). In year 1928, she was baptized into Christianity by Rev. Dr. John William Arthur. Even as a child, she stood out among her peers, bravely confronting both her father and cultural barriers to pursue the highest level of education possible for an African girl at the time.

Her lifelong struggle for gender equality as well as Kenya's independence was a precursor to the fight for human rights and justice—as enshrined in Kenya's 2010 constitution—values now closely associated with her only and beloved daughter, Berewa Jommo. Together mother and daughter, respectively, played and continue to play a historic role in shaping the rights and freedoms we honor today.

I came to know Berewa closely during her time as the Coordinator of the African Community Education Network (ACEN), an NGO she founded in the early 1970s. Its core mandate was to revive and ignite the spread of indigenous knowledge and promote learning rooted in human dignity and gender equality. Through ACEN, Berewa bravely embodied the

same crucial values her mother had championed, particularly in helping Kenyans navigate the political crisis during the 1952 State of Emergency. She promoted dialogue among men and women facing ethnic and other conflicts not only in Kenya but also in other countries like South Africa, Zimbabwe, Somalia, and Sudan.

Sarai acquired a solid foundation in education and nursing, which allowed her to work across various parts of East Africa before eventually settling in Nairobi, where she took on the role of social welfare assistant while raising her children. Together with others like Jomo Kenyatta, she became actively involved with political activism, becoming the renowned fearless advocate in the push for gender, racial and socio-political equality. As Berewa clearly puts it, “Sarai fought tirelessly against racial segregation, a struggle she had carried since her days at the CSM School and hospital in Thogoto. In the process, she made the daunting and demoralizing discovery that the same patriarchal forces driving her father to forcefully circumcise her were also present in the missionaries’ efforts to educate her, but the extent to which she could emulate them was limited.”

In professional circles, she was engaged in a fierce battle against the monster in the form of a colonial framework that was

unprepared for the emergence of enlightened, and professional African women like her. Identity pocketbooks, forms, certificates of service, and other documentation were primarily designed for men. Every so often, colonial officials filling out these documents would demand bribes from women, in exchange for their not being shoddy in the work they were to deliver in the first place. Failure to comply led to what were sometimes intentional and spiteful situations. For instance, a certificate awarded to her stated “in recognition of his services...” instead of her services.

During her time, women did not expect from men the equality, mutuality, and reciprocity that the Holy Bible teaches—“Do unto others as you would have them do unto you” (Luke 6:31; Matthew 7:12).

In this book, Berewa expresses her belief that such a process would empower more women with the tools needed to liberate themselves from what she describes as “cultural and social slavery.”

I must admit that Berewa Jommo is truly her mother’s reincarnation. Before I elaborate on this, I want to emphasize that she is a staunch believer in justice, democracy, and human rights. Throughout the book as you will find, Berewa shares her

mother's selfless life, ultimately concluding that Sarai cared more for the wellbeing and freedom of others than for her own.

Upon her arrest and detention 'under governor's orders' for seven years, Sarai's children—Berewa and her brothers—were left in the care of God's mercy, extended family, and well-wishers. Meanwhile, Sarai endured persecution akin to that of Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God, surviving the slaughterhouse without bitterness. While God calls upon everyone to care for one another's welfare, Sarai embodied this spirit, nurturing all people as if they were her own children. Berewa and her siblings are not the only ones she considers her children; she is a mother to all Kenyans. We owe her a great debt for our lives, dignity, liberties, and freedom, even though, unlike men such as Jomo Kenyatta, with whom she shared the harsh realities of prison life, she never sought to become the Member of Parliament for Kikuyu Constituency or the President of Kenya. After her detention, she settled in the Nairobi peri-urban village of Kĩnoo.

Unfortunately, scholars often emphasize the Mau Mau struggle for independence, focusing on some figures such as Field Marshal Muthoni Kirima—with all due respect—while neglecting Sarah Sarai. Yet among those who sacrificed their lives for freedom, Sarai stands alongside Jomo Kenyatta. It was freedom fighter Gitu Kahengeri who remarked that Sarai was

“one of the freedom fighters who brought freedom and justice to our country.” In 1974, she was described by Daily Nation journalist Phoebe Munene as “a humble Kĩnoo resident,” yet she was a fearless political intellectual.

I urge scholars to draw lessons from Sarai’s life as presented in this book, using her story to teach future generations how to blend femininity with motherhood and nationhood. There is much to learn from Sarai about selfhood, demonstrating that Kenya was not built by male nationalists alone; women like her were also at the forefront of the struggle.

The values that the life of Sarah Sarai epitomized, her daughter Berewa has eternalized in this well-written book that asks: “WHAT’S IN A NAME?” and answers... LIFE STORY OF INDOMITABLE SARAH SARAI...

Rev. Dr. Timothy Mũrere Njoya

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## **ABBREVIATIONS & ACRONYMS**

|       |                                           |
|-------|-------------------------------------------|
| AIM   | Africa Inland Mission                     |
| AOC   | African Orthodox Church                   |
| AWL   | African Women's League                    |
| CMS   | Church Missionary Society                 |
| CSM   | Church of Scotland Mission                |
| IDP   | Internally Displaced Persons              |
| LegCo | Legislative Council                       |
| KANU  | Kenya African National Union              |
| KAPE  | Kenya African Primary Examination         |
| KARI  | Kenya Agricultural Research Institute     |
| KISA  | Kikuyu Independent Schools<br>Association |
| KWA   | Kĩrĩnyaga Welfare Association             |
| MCN   | Municipal Council of Nairobi              |
| NAAC  | Nairobi African Advisory Council          |
| MAWL  | Nairobi African Women's League            |
| NFD   | Northern Frontier District                |
| OTC   | Overseas Transport Company                |
| UK    | United Kingdom                            |
| WWI   | World War One                             |
| WWII  | World War Two                             |

## PROLOGUE

*Strange dream. I dreamt I had made a meal for Jomo at Dedan Gĩthegi's house. He was so hungry, but men and women kept coming to see him. I tried to help move them away and they despised me. Jomo told them to wait at (Kũng'ũ) Karũmba's and he comforted me by saying that I would be in his office with him always.*

This excerpt from Sarai's diary, dated September 28, 1963, captures a pivotal moment in Kenya's transition from colonial rule to internal self-rule, and on to independence, December 12, 1963.

Do dreams reflect our deepest desires? What did Sarai's dreams reveal about her political ties with Jomo Kenyatta? By 1963, as Kenya approached independence, Kenyatta was set to become the country's President. Was it too familiar for Sarai to call him "Jomo," or did their political bond justify such familiarity? At a Jamhuri Day Garden Party, I witnessed Kenyatta warmly shake Sarai's extended hand with the greeting, "Wĩ Mwega Mwarĩ wa Jommo." Their bond solidified when they were arrested on the same night in their respective homes. In prison, Sarai once shared a tiny dungeon with Kenyatta's wife, Ngĩna (Mama),

supporting her and in the smuggling and reading of letters between the loving couple. This experience accentuates Sarai, Ngina and Kenyatta's shared commitment to the freedom struggle.

Born in 1913, the same year anti-colonial leader Mekatilili wa Menza was arrested, Sarah Sarai's resistance to colonial rule mirrored that of her predecessors. Despite her father's attempts to keep her from school, Sarai pursued education, eventually training as a nurse at CSM Kikuyu Hospital. Her father, Jommo, tried to resist European encroachment by moving his family to the Rift Valley, at least 100 miles away. The trauma of forced circumcision further fueled Sarai's resolve, inspiring her to engage in gender-based activism.

After basic education and nursing training, Sarai worked in healthcare across Kenya and Uganda before transitioning to social welfare, cycling through Nairobi's communities to support struggling families and combat malnutrition. Sarai founded the Nairobi African Women's League (NAWL) advocating for non-violent and assimilation approach in race relations, yet her efforts to organize women met hostility from the colonial government and limited support from a male-dominated

political landscape, which increasingly leaned toward armed struggle through the Mau Mau movement.

On October 20 1952, she and Rebeka Njeri Kairi were targetted for arrest alongside Kenyatta and the Kapenguria Six during the first wave of political arrests that launched the State of Emergency. Thousands of African activists faced detention, torture, and death during this period, and Sarai's arrest, ordered by the Governor, underscored her significance in the demands projected by the Africans.

Sarai documented her experiences in tiny 9cm x 7cm notebooks during her seven years of incarceration by the colonial government. Mami's compact handwriting often squeezed three days of reflections onto a single page, a habit formed from resource scarcity in prison.

From 1972 to 1980, Sarai hosted Tata wa Ciana (The Children's Auntie), a radio show for children. While entertaining her young audience, she took the opportunity to challenge harmful traditional practices that endangered their physical, mental, and spiritual well-being.

## MAMI AND I

Typically, standing up to straighten the back that was starting to protest against more than an hour of tilling and weeding, Mami held the tilling *jembe* (hoe) in one hand, wiped her brow with the other, and exclaimed, “Awuuii! This sun will boil our brains! Come, daughter, let’s go rest under the Mũkindũri tree!”

As she worked, she was completely absorbed in song. I listened, immersed in the imagery of a river of blood flowing from the heart of Jesus, stretched out on the cross atop a hill. I felt the beauty of the melody, and the magic of Mami’s distinctive voice as the notes soared and she repeated—twice or thrice all the verses of an old Christian hymn:

*“There is a Fountain filled with Blood, drawn from Immanuel’s veins...”*

*Kwĩna rūũi rwa thakame ya Immanueli mwene*

*Nao ehia marikĩĩtio ruo, mathiraga gĩko biũ!*

*Magathira gĩko gĩothe, magathira gĩko gĩothe biũ*

*Nao ehia marikĩĩtioruo, mathiraga gĩko biũ!*

*Mũici wambanĩirio na Jesũ niakenire nĩ thakame ĩyo*

*O na nĩ ndagĩũka kũĩ we, yahota gũtheria biũ*

*Yahota gũtheria guothe, yahota gũtheria guothe biũ*

*O na nĩ ndagĩũũka kũĩ we, yahota gũtheria biũ*

*Kuuma ndaruona rũĩĩ rũu, rũkiuma nguraro cia Jesũ  
Ndũire ngumagia wendo wake, ndigatiga ona ndakua  
Rũimbo rwakwa no rwa Jesu, rũimbo rwakwa no rwa Jesũ rĩu  
Ndũire ngumagia wendo wake, ndigatiga ona ndakua*

*Ndarĩkia gũkua ngainaga, rũĩmbo rweka mũno kwĩ rũrũ  
Rũĩĩmĩ rũrũ rwakira, ngamũinĩra igũrũ  
Ngainĩra Jesu wega, ndĩmũinagĩre wega ma  
Rũĩĩmĩ rũrũ rwakira, ngamũinĩra igũrũ*

Mami sang and worked, worked and sang. Meanwhile, I stood or bent and listened, skipping a few feet of weed to keep up with her, so that the patch behind me bore all the hallmarks of inept, inattentive engagement. When Mami observed this, she simply went back and dug up the weeds, rather than interrupt her song. Then came another song, in English:

*Where He may lead me, I will go  
For I have learnt to trust Him so  
And I believe it was for me that Jesus died on Calvary*

*Jesus shall lead me day by day  
Jesus shall lead me all the way*

*He is the truest friend to me  
Jesus my friend of Calvary*

She repeated that verse, unaware that she was being ‘recorded’. I learnt it by heart, and started singing along, except that as she crescendoed “*Jesus shall lead me all the way...*” my vocal cords literally ran out of fuel.

Sometimes she would yank out some small sweet bananas from a bunch she had earlier covered with dry fronds to hide the ripening bananas from marauding birds, borers and boys. Then we would sit down to eat in the shade of the Mũkindũri tree. “Not too many on an empty stomach, lest you develop flatulence,” she counseled. Then, as I marveled at the sweetness of the banana, she’d start to narrate one of her “*Hĩndĩ ĩmwe tene, tene...* (Once upon a time...)” stories related to bananas. Or she’d explain the difference between bananas for cooking and sweet bananas, cautioning me against cutting the ‘heart’ of the banana before it had filled out; she’d try to impress upon me the importance of propping them up with a ‘Y’ pole when in season so the trunk won’t break and fall under the banana’s weight before it was ready.

These moments with Mami were priceless to me. It had never been like that when she was away. I remembered, and still do

even now, being constantly scolded for being lazy, or gauche, or not fast enough—there had always been something I was not doing right. But with Mami, it was different. She was ever so patient in showing me how to hold the *jembe*.

It was usually on Saturday mornings, or during school holidays, when I was promptly deployed to a *kashamba* (a vegetable garden) at the edge of Makadara in Nairobi’s Eastlands, where I’d lived with Mami Mūnene since my Auntie Njoki handed me over to be cared for by Mami’s sister.

But, back to the *jembe* story. Somehow, Mami got for me a *jembe* my size, and a *rūhiũ*—a weeding tool—that was also my size. Priceless! Unlike the heavy kind Mami Mūnene had me use, which sometimes caused me to lose balance and fall backwards when I lifted it too high.

So, we would be working together in the shamba, though I invariably wandered off from the patch on which we were working—or to which I had been assigned—chase a frog, a butterfly, a locust, a squirrel or a mole, which always disappeared into the ground in a flash, leaving me flummoxed! Often enough I would be carried away with fascination for a lovely brown two-segment insect I had dug up—called a ‘*wakaguku*’ by the locals—asking him, as Mami had taught me, to point out the North, South, East, West. “Wakagukuu-ĩ, rūgūrũ

nĩ na kũ?” (Which way is westward?) He would obediently point out while responding, through me, of course, “nĩ na gũkũ!” (This way!)

In spite of ‘Nature Study’ lessons in the 5<sup>th</sup> year of primary school, I couldn’t quite see how this creature, a pupa, could possibly be in transition to the exotic butterfly. I still do not quite understand.

Mami and I were forever in conversation. In essence, she never tired of recounting stories, and I was always eager to listen. Stories about Gĩkũyũ and Mũmbi, “our ancestors”; Wangũ wa Makeeri—the lady general who commanded Agĩkũyũ warriors, until they plotted her downfall; stories about members of her extended family. I got to learn the names of all—or so I hope—the wives of Mami’s paternal grandfather—Gĩchanga wa Maina wa Gatuune, and Wanuma wa Wawerũ—her maternal grandfather. She tried, in vain really, to get me to memorize the complex, polygamous, paternal and maternal family trees that sometimes roped in Maasai girls and children looted in cattle-raid outings. She told of the Aathi (*Dorobo*), a forest-based hunter-gatherer nation to the west of the swampy stretch of land that is now Nairobi. According to stories handed down generations, they had sold the land in the Kabete-Kikuyu-Limuru area to the Agĩkũyũ settlers from Mũrang’a, who, apparently,

had migrated to these parts less than seven generations earlier. These stories held me spell-bound.

Then there were stories about ‘*jela*’; her seven years of incarceration in colonial jails. There was always something to inspire a story. I’d be collecting farm implements and loading uprooted sweet potatoes into the *kĩondo*,<sup>1</sup> but also trying to locate that elusive *wakaguku* that I intended to show off to my playmates, and Mami would exclaim: “Berewa, you’re a typical Mũgacikũ<sup>2</sup> girl. Look how long it’s taken you to prepare to go home. Since I asked you to collect the sweet potatoes, you’ve been going round in circles. At this point, let me point out that Agacikũ girls used to take so long adorning themselves for the dance festival that they’d arrive when everybody else had danced all night and was getting ready to go home. Additionally, *Agacikũ girls would take forever negotiating their firewood back-packs. By the time they arrived home the mothers would have despaired and devised other means to ensure food was ready for respective families.*”

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<sup>1</sup> The Kiondo is a sisal fiber wicker basket that was carried on the back by Kikuyu women.

<sup>2</sup> The Agacikũ are one of the ten clans in the Kikuyu socio-cultural identity system.

As Mami and I always got home late, our cooking would be done as my younger brother Njūgūna and I dozed around the pot cooking on the three-stone woodfire. We would greedily guzzle on a tasty sweet potato or young maize-cob roasted in the hot ashes of the wood-fire as the pot with food simmered away on top. Mami always served these “appetizers,” and in the process acquired the personification of an angel. During her period of absence, one would stretch a hand to pick something that was being extended your way, only for the hand extending whatever it was to be quickly withdrawn, in the process turning into a stick which hit you, with the admonition: “*shame on you, greedy child!*” I believe greed used to be an abomination in the Kikuyu culture until, post-independence, when the abhorrent culture so-called ‘get-rich-quick-by-whatever-means’ set in, encouraged by such public pronouncements by senior politicians as: “*kanyoni gakwa wĩhithahithe, na wonwo ndũrĩ wakwa (hide, my little bird, for if you’re caught, you’re no longer mine!)*”

Anyway, let’s go back to the tilling, the story telling, and our endless conversations. I would ask questions, or give her my version of some of the naughtiness for which I had become notorious during her absence, such as licking sugar. I’d tell her how I was punished by being made to lick a whole tin of sugar, or how they cut the back of my hands and my bum with a

razorblade and inserted ground chillies. I'd turn around and show her the scars on my buttock and on the back of my hands! I'd see tears welling up in her eyes and stop the narration. She'd explain to me how her sister had become bitter after her marriage to Mr. Guchu failed. She nursed nothing but gratitude and love towards her sister for taking care of us for the long period of her incarceration.

Later, as the damage and traumas of her long years of absence started to manifest, especially in my brothers, her sister would appear, never losing a moment to taunt her, "all those years in jail, for what? Tell me, why couldn't you surrender and come back to take care of your children?" Mami would recoil into an inscrutable facial expression—anger and bitterness at war with sadness and hope. Was it not optimism that the country was moving forward? Was she not enjoying the fruits of my mother's rebellion? I have often wondered.

In our early shamba days, she would regale me with stories of the happy days in House No. 140 Ziwani, where Wanyina (as she and her sister called each other) would turn up with a huge basketful of goodies when her daughter Elizabeth Mwara lived with Mami. But before long, confronted with the double barrelled mischief of Mwara and Jommo (my first-born brother) at the same time, Wanyina would soon declare: "Me, I feel like

taking off to Eldoret, just to get away from these two imps!” Such a declaration would elicit good behavior, every time they reminded each other about ‘Eldoret’.

As a result, Eldoret, Elburgon and Eldama Ravine, have since been used to elicit good behavior subsequent generations of children in our home. Decades later, Mami would say “I’d planned on taking y’all to Elburgon, but now...” And my daughter Selaine and her cousins would instantaneously put on their best behavior, in the hope that the invitation would still stand, in spite of “but now...” Later, Mombasa was added to the list, with the searing and most tantalizing rider—“....by train! But now...” Selaine and her cousins would burst into tears of frustration at their inability to earn a train ride to Mombasa. They’d then embark on yet another futile resolve to demonstrate good behavior: which actively involved avoiding the enchanting orange-coloured fruit hanging from high up the guava tree in the shamba, and keeping away from the mud slides (*“kurutoki”*) from which they’d arrive home looking like they had dived, fully clothed, into the red-soil mud-pits along the nearby Dagoretti stream. Indeed, the ‘diving’ they had also done, in solidarity with Selaine’s cousin Wanuma, who diligently caught the tiny mudfish resident in the stream and brought them home. He kept trying to nurture them into maturity but, alas, the fingerlings

couldn't buy into his vision, whatever it was. They all died before long.

The two Wanyinas—Mami and her older sister Tabitha Waikonyo (or Wangarĩ)—were two of the three daughters of Jommo wa Gĩchanga and his first wife, Berewa wa Wanuma. Since Mami had left home before 5 years of age to accompany her elder sister, Mwara, to her matrimonial home in Gĩchungo, near Dagoretti, and on to Thogoto (Mambere School, kwa Bibi Watson) for education, the two Wanyinas had not quite grown up together.

In time, Mami acquired basic education (8<sup>th</sup> year of Primary School), trained as a nurse, and went on to work in various parts of East Africa. By the time she settled down in Nairobi, *Wanyina* had gone into and out of a marriage. Her teenage children Njoroge, Njeri, Wanjikũ and Mwara visited their aunt or stayed with her for one reason or another. At the time of my birth, Mwara was more or less a permanent feature in Mami's family, while Wanjikũ and her baby son Gĩchanga had taken refuge at our home in Ziwani. When Mami was arrested, the two big girls looked after us for a few weeks before eviction by the city authorities. It always hurt Mami when Wanyina spoke as if only she (Tabitha) had looked after her younger sister's children.

## **What, indeed, is in a Name?**

“You know; Sarah Sarai was never really my name.” Mami started, earnestly, conspiratorially. “For my baptism in April 1928 at age 15 I told Rev. Dr. John Arthur that my Maasai name was Selaïne—or was it Saleina? I think that’s how Yeiyũ<sup>3</sup> used to pronounce it when I was very small, but as I grew up everybody called me “Tharainĩ.”<sup>4</sup> So I also told Dr. Arthur that my Kikuyu name was Thara, or Tharainĩ. Obviously confused, but a typical missionary driven by the callous assumptions of cultural superiority, he compounded the names into ‘Sarah Sarai.’ Both were variations of the names of Abraham’s wife, the mother of the Jews, but also rhymed with my Kikuyu and Maasai names. At first, I was confused—was I Sarah, Sarai, Saleine, Salaina, Thara or Tharainĩ? However, in those days, people were being baptized into all sorts of names from all over the Bible. So I settled for Sarah Sarai Thara wa Jommo. I may be the only Sarah Sarai Thara in the world!”

We laughed, then she went on with the story.

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<sup>3</sup> Yeiyũ – or Yeyo – is the Maasai word for mother.

<sup>4</sup> The Kikuyu alphabet has no noun/name starting with an ‘S’, so Mami figured they meant Selaine.

“By the time of my birth, Yeiyũ had had seven miscarriages and stillborn births in succession. Yeiyũ, the midwife and her assistants were not going to take chances by naming me ‘Gathoni’—my father’s younger sister, whose turn it was to be named, according to the Agĩkũyũ system of naming newborns. As my first shriek rendered the air, confirming I was alive, they quickly concocted a “gũthara.” This was a traditional Kikuyu ceremony meant to symbolically ‘snatch’ me from death’s jaws.”

That was vintage Mami. She taught me through story-telling, holding my young imaginative mind captive as I pictured a “gũthara” ceremony. “What’s a gũthara ceremony?” I would ask. And Mami would patiently say, “You’ve just been born. You yelp. They cut your umbilical cord. Then they pass you through the stilts anchoring the granaries while invoking the spirit gods for your life and safety. Afterwards, of course, my father offered a “*mbũri ya igongona*,” sacrificially slaughtering a goat to thank or appease the ancestors. Thus, I was called Thara. I am not named Gathoni! Those who call me so are re-naming me. It’s wrong. I am called Thara.”

In any case, Gathoni was not her real name. She was named after her aunt Wangare who was an in-law to the Gĩchanga family. But her big brother Jommo—who was very spoilt for

having only sisters around him—endlessly teased her for her diminutive frame. Finally, the nickname Gathoni (the little in-law) stuck onto me. Culturally, you shouldn't transfer a nickname to someone else. As she adamantly maintained, it wasn't her real name, as she was also Waikonyo, which is funny because it should be a Maasai name; she was named after her mother Berewa's mother, who gave her daughters Berewa and Tubuge Maasai names. She was of the Matapato clan, having been taken as "war booty" after the Agĩkuyu defeated the Maasai in one of their long running livestock raiding encounters. Berewa's mother was Maasai Chief Lenana Ole Batian's step-sister. Berewa never tired of throwing the fact of her royal lineage at Jommo wa Gĩchanga and indeed, this—coupled with her privileged status as the first of six wives—secured her authority, to the chagrin of her first co-wife Wambũi.

Mami was very particular when it came to names. "You," she insisted, "are Phellewan."<sup>5</sup> You are named after your grandma, my mother, who was part Maasai and got her name from the banks of a stream named as such near Bissil in Maasailand where she was born to the Matopato Clan. Those who call the children named after her Wanjikũ are making a terrible mistake,

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<sup>5</sup>With a soft P in Maasai, or Berewa (Bĩrĩwa) in Gĩkũyũ, because the Agĩkũyũ alphabet has neither a soft 'p' sound nor letter 'l.'

naming a child after the Kikuyu Agacikũ clan. Your namesake cousins may be faced with identity distortions that leave them hanging.” We’d laugh, as we bent down again to continue with the weeding, or carefully digging up humongous *ngwacĩ* (sweet potatoes), the first crop from the one-acre piece of land Mami bought in 1949. Having lain fallow for all the years of her detention in colonial jails, it was very fertile.

I’d soon get tired, bored, and frustrated because in spite of my best effort to avoid uprooting the bean plants, my patch was strewn with dead and dried up weed as well as crop plants, provoking exclamations and expletives in Kimaasai that went something like “*nyagaisere*” or in Kikuyu “*Na kaĩ rūtirĩaga no gũkerera thĩĩnĩ-ĩĩ*”; *Berewa nĩ kwananga wananga irio hande?*” (O pain that won’t devour but aches on and on from inside... Berewa, how could you destroy growing food plants?)

Such admonition made me feel awful, because I so much wanted to please Mami, whose praises came in double, or triple measure: “Well done, my darling daughter.” Oh the approval, the endearment, the affirmation of that special bond in the relationship—and, to cap it all, in English! It served to draw me closer still. To me she was the next best thing to God, whom I had learnt to secretly appeal to during her years of absence. It was a far cry from the life in Makadara, where orders were

barked at me, crowned with a rebuke, such as, “Go fetch water, lazybones!” With mami, the rebuke would be directed elsewhere, for instance: “Oh no, you boys aren’t going to enslave my baby girl. Everyone must chip in!” My brothers would have to do their share of tasks considered “girl duties” in Agĩkũyũ families.

This was so unlike the time when she was in jail. I recall once being sent to my uncle Abram’s home for school holidays, basically to save me from going overboard as an immoral woman—“*mũka wa ihĩĩ*.” Mami Mũnene discerned sexual innuendos and maneuvers at every twist and turn of a young girl’s life. One day, she took me from Makadara all the way to Eastleigh where Dr. Mwathi had his clinic—the first African to open a private medical practice, I believe. She announced to Dr. Mwathi that I had been “messed up by men,” whereupon the good Doctor examined me and said to Mami Mũnene’s utter dismay, I suppose—that there was no sign I had been interfered with, not even on the surface of things. I was then in Primary 3, aged 8 years. On our way home Mami Mũnene, still not believing, could not stop insisting that I must have somehow developed some means of hiding my sins.

My Uncle Abraham was multitalented,—a master builder, carpenter and farmer. This was all thanks to the training he had

received at the Scots Agricultural Laboratories<sup>6</sup> in Kabete. In the early 1920s he was employed as a Farm Manager and driver by the settler Major Diamond in Kitale, then known as the White Highlands of Western Kenya. Mami said that as an enthusiastic convert to Christianity, he volunteered his free time as an evangelist with the emergent Baptist Church. He lost one leg when, still a young bachelor, he fell from a tree in Mt. Elgon Forest where he was felling trees for timber for construction of a church. Upon losing the leg, the missionaries who had engaged his services failed to honor their promise to get him an artificial limb. He became so bitter; Mami said he had not always been harsh to the point of the cruelty I had come to know in him. On this one, I beg to differ, since his sister Mami Mũnene and their younger brother Mama-wa-Juja both embodied a very frightening streak of harshness that forms a very significant content of my childhood memories.

So it was that I spent the long—and oh boy was it long—July to August holidays living at my Uncle Abraham's in Kĩnoo. The suffering and anguish I endured was excruciating. First, it was awfully firewood-smoky in the house, especially the kitchen—the family's assembly point for social interaction. My eyes and nose were running full time, which everybody found hilarious.

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<sup>6</sup>Present day KALRO – Kenya Agricultural & Livestock Research Organization.

Then we children had to work in the *shamba* from early morning till lunch time. I couldn't figure out how my cousins covered the rows of potato plants with soil (*kuumbĩkĩra waaru*). I would dig a hole and put the soil in a 'basket' hollowed out from my skirt, carry it to my patch, squat and proceed to make nice mounds around the potato plants with my hands. I could not use the small weeding hoe without cutting the plants' roots—this was my rationale. My cousins were tickled silly! When they gathered around me to watch tilling à-la-City, whispering "this is how they till in Nairobi," I'd wow them with stories of the city, or rather '*mtaa*' (ghetto) life that included what we children had seen or heard adults do behind the curtains in our one-room homes.

Well, as would become of them, being children, they also reported everything that had transpired in the *shamba* to their father, whereupon I was promptly deported back to the city! Several years ago, my cousin-in-law Kĩyo wa Kareng'e reminded me that one early evening as a little boy of about 10, he found me crying at the bus stop, when buses to Nairobi were no longer running. He took me to his home and, on learning that I was my mother's daughter, his parents smothered me with love, food, and a place to sleep. His dad traveled to his workplace in the city the following morning, with me happily in tow.

Notwithstanding the fact that we lived way beneath and away from the few existing lines of communication, and this was decades before the mobile phone, Mami Mũnene would come to know—as grown-ups are wont to do—that I had been expelled by Uncle Abraham for being naughty, noisy or lazy. That I had taken with me my nasty habit of licking sugar! She'd seek advice on what to do about me from one of our neighbors, reputed to be a medicine-woman who circumcised girls (*Wangarĩ Mũruithia*)! Luckily, I was a little too young for that nasty route, but the whacking I got sent chills down my friends' spines, the immediate effect being that they kept away from me for almost half a day!

### **Song in Her Soul**

Mami had a song for every occasion. We'd sit around the three-stone wood fire in the evenings, telling stories as the evening meal seemed to take longer and longer. My best effort at keeping awake would fail, and suddenly, Mami would burst into song:

*Î naa ndĩrarathĩrwo nĩ mũgo ũrĩ Ndia  
Mũcũnga ũtukũ niekũgwaaa  
Nĩegũikio riko nĩ ngomaaa...*

(A seer in Ndia revealed to me  
An evening dozer will fall  
Thrown into the fire by the evil ogre ...)

The first part of the song was done with high pitch notes, loud enough to rouse the sleepy heads; the second part repeated the lyrics of the threat, while demonstrating her vocal range—from high octave soprano to the depths of alto that brought to life the fearsome ogre, ready to strike! And so we would spring up and rub our eyes to shake off sleep. One time, someone started the song “*Abide with me, fast falls the eventide...*” in Kiswahili, but 8-years old Njũgũna had recomposed the song in Gĩkũyũ, which we sang with great zeal:

*Shaitani ndangĩhota kũnyita*  
*Na mbarathi kana mũithikiri*  
*Ona ingĩhaisha mũkibikibi*  
*Ndorete kwa Ngai, ndangĩnyita*

(Satan can't catch me no way  
[Be he] On horseback or bicycle  
Even if I jump onto a motorbike  
Headed God's way, he won't catch me!)

Mami laughed until tears were streaming down her cheeks. Njũgũna, who was under two years of age when Mami was arrested and locked up in prison, was her darling baby. He would soon run away from home, breaking Mami's heart permanently, but, I refuse to digress.

Seated around the fire, we sang. Mami referred to us as the Sarai choir. I'm not sure how my brothers felt, though we were all enjoying ourselves thoroughly, but as for me? I imbibed my joy in our reunion with Mami, and my world was complete. My ever-so-present sleep would miraculously disappear to the thin air, albeit momentarily, depending on how much longer it would take for the food to be served, and the amount of play squeezed into the day on top of chores, because unlike her sister in Makadara, Mami didn't deny us the opportunity to play. When I sprung awake, her melodious voice burst into laughter that rings in my ears to this day. And the mirth turned into song for the whole family, seated around the three-stone open fire. Gĩchanga would be strumming on a contraption he had gone into great trouble to build from a rectangular metal tin, one flat side in the middle of which he had oh-so-carefully bored a big round hole, with a plank that passed through the tin lengthwise—left longer on one side—and the wires he was forever collecting neatly threaded from the short end to the longer end of the plank. This served as the guitar for the Sarai

Family Choir. For drums, Jommo would pick up a stick, or the wooden ladle—*mwĩiko*—and hit the metal cover to the cooking pot on the fire and any other nearby utensils. Njũgũna and I sang and clapped.

*Nĩ tũkaina nyĩmbo njega... igũrũ*  
*Nĩ tũkaina nyĩmbo njega igũrũ, hingo ĩyo*  
*Nĩ tũkaina nyĩmbo njega –a-a-a*  
*Tũkainagĩra Ngai igũrũ....*

(We shall sing beautiful melodies... up on high...up on high,  
When the dawn breaks  
We shall sing praises unto God!)

Mami always had a song in her heart and on her lips. I'd listen, enthralled, to stories of how her voice reverberated against the thin-skinned *mabatis*—corrugated iron sheets—in the old church at Thogoto.<sup>7</sup> The elders were totally disdainful of the young girl who had the temerity to imitate the Europeans—dress like them, refuse to shave her head, sing like them, and

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<sup>7</sup> Now a somewhat neglected monument of the Presbyterian Church of East Africa (PCEA) opposite the Church of the Torch in Thogoto, near Kikuyu. That church, according to Mami, was prefabricated in Scotland and the mabati panels brought by ship to Mombasa then by rail to Thogoto, near Kikuyu Town, with the new converts press-ganged to cart the enormous pieces to the Mission site where the church was finally mounted near Thogoto.

even wear ‘their’ shoes! The native church elders branded her ‘*malaya*’<sup>8</sup> (prostitute) and tried to ex-communicate her; but she was Bibi Watson’s darling, so she stayed.

Mami’s singing voice is the earliest memory I have of her. I must have been about 5 years old when Reverend Josiah Kang’ethe (God rest his gracious, fervently caring soul in peace eternal!) smuggled me into Kamĩĩ Women’s Maximum Security Prison in his wooden-bodied Bedford station wagon. Mami Mũnene had walked from Makadara, while I breathlessly trotted behind her and every now and then she’d stop and shout, “Lazy bones Rothi, I don’t have all day!” Then she’d hold my hand, and by the time we reached St. John’s CMS Church in Pumwani, I was ready to collapse from exhaustion. My Mami Mũnene has to be one of the fastest walkers ever! Anyway, we got to the church, where Rev. Josiah Kang’ethe was waiting for us.

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<sup>8</sup> This was a turbulent, transitional period. The arrival of Europeans was soon followed by the arrival of the railway, with a station in the nearby Kikuyu hamlet. These events were, in turn, accompanied by strange forms of socio-economic behavior, such as commercial sex. The oldest inter-gender trade on earth had defied the lions of Tsavo to travel up the railway line, keeping the all-male workers company, to become integrated into the settlements forming around the train stations. The Wagĩkũyũ had never known the practice, and could only use the Swahili term “*Malaya*”, since their traditional polygamy, dowry (bride price) and “*wakinĩ*” culture – like the Maasai spear planting – had kept prostitution under socio-cultural wraps so effectively that there still exists no direct translation apart from “*mũceri*” (the wanderer”).

I was warned to be very good and not talk “*tekele, tekele*” to Bwana (Rev.) Josiah, as I had the “nasty habit of doing when talking to grown-ups.” I was placed in the front passenger seat and we set off. Nice Bwana Josiah didn’t seem to mind my “*tekele tekele*” talk. He kept asking me questions, like “do you go to school?” “Where?” “Who are your teachers?” “What subject do you love the most?” We kept up a conversation as he manipulated the driving wheel around corners or kept his hands on either side of it, looking straight ahead on long stretches of tarmac. After what seemed like hours, he stopped the car and came over to my side. He gently explained that I was not to be afraid, but I was to be very quiet and still for the rest of the journey. He folded me into a fetus position on the floor of the passenger side, covered me with a dark blanket – leaving breathing space around my face, and placed newspapers, bibles and other stuff on top of me. Then he drove up to the prison gate.

The guards politely ushered the man of God through, having enquired after his health. He drove to a hall turned into God’s sanctuary for the day—where the service had already begun, unloaded his cargo and quickly ushered me in, leaving me at the entrance with a woman guard in uniform. She held me on her lap until the congregation of women prisoners stood up to sing a hymn. Then I heard the voice—a sweet, melodious soprano,

trembling as it soared into the high notes. This had to be my mother! And it was!

My minder whispered, “that's your mother.” We were seated at the back of a large hall. The width struck me because, when the sympathetic guard finally gave in to my silent agitation having been very firmly admonished to be good and quiet—crawled forever in a straight line and crossed the aisle separating the guards from the inmates. I was, however, unable to navigate my way to the voice before the hymn came to an end and the congregation of hundreds of women sat down. I did get to the prisoners’ area, though I was still several rows behind and had to wait for the next hymn. The prisoners couldn’t pass me between them while uninterruptedly seated, without attracting the attention of senior warders seated up front. When the congregation next stood up to sing, the women prisoners bent and hugged me, squeezing my shoulders or my hand as they passed me on between the benches, tears streaming down some faces. The good Reverend Josiah made sure to sing and pray very loudly, covertly tracking my progress. Finally, my journey between the rows of those pitiful women came to an end when Mami, with a jab and a look, wordlessly but imperiously showed me a space to sit on the floor between two women prisoners. I was once again signaled to be very still and quiet. My young heart was swelling to breaking point as I

watched them sing again, that melodious voice rising to the rafters. Confidently distinct, a natural vibrato—trembling like a *mzungu's*, I thought—it soared above hundreds of other women's voices, raised in affirmation of God's love, singing *"What a friend we have in Jesus..."* ("Yesu kwetu ni Rafiki...")

The women prisoners, shuffling close together in a cluster with me in the middle, took me into their dormitory. My experiences at both Kajiado and Kamĩĩ are of warders who were prepared to look the other way, even when not actively facilitating the 'heinous act' of smuggling me into and out of prison. We arrived at the dormitories, where the women congregated to see, touch, hug, or just simply look at me. My mother's 'bed' (a mat and a rough blanket) on the floor was the tidiest. In typical childhood curiosity, I explored every corner of it—not that there was much else to explore, anyway. I spied a dress of hers, folded neatly and placed under the blanket, a makeshift pillow. Of course, the luxury of an actual pillow was unheard of. I put on the dress, and it flowed all around me. I was in seventh heaven! The women laughed through their tears and when I saw that, I clowned around some more, catwalking on imaginary high heel shoes—I'd seen my cousin Elizabeth Mwara wearing the newly introduced fashion accessories. Obviously, I'd never seen—leave alone been on—a catwalk. But it was easier dealing with laughter by grownup women with funny odors, in funny smelling

clothes that made scraping sounds as their wearers sat or stood, than with their tears.

All too soon it was time for me to be smuggled back outside, which was done by some friendly warders who took me outside the gate and left me some distance on the road, away from the gate. God—in the form of Rev. Josiah Kangethe in his old Bedford station wagon—then picked me up for the journey back to Makadara. Now it was my turn to cry, which I did. Silently. Since I'd lived with tata Njoki—who was childless and had no time for crybabies—and at Mami Mũnene's, I'd learnt to cry silently. Copious salty streams rolled down my cheeks, almost all the way home.

I was but a child, but the eyes of the women at Kamĩĩ prison left an indescribable, indelible, impression upon me. Those eyes haunted the rest of my childhood. And then, in my 50s, I saw the eyes of women in IDP—Internally Displaced Persons—camps in Kenya and Darfur in Sudan, and the haunting was rekindled. Those eyes that appeared to be all made up of pupils, no whites, extraordinarily deeply-set in their foreheads. What happened to the whites?

This was not the first or last time Rev. Josiah Kang'ethe smuggled me into prison to see Mami, but it is the first time I remember. The very first time, I was too young to remember.

Mami told me that, as officially recognized evangelist to the prisoners, he conspired with some guards to smuggle me through an opening in the barbed wire fence while she was in a holding facility in Kajiado, where she was taken after short stints in camps within the Nairobi Industrial Area, Isinya and Lukenya.

But at Kĩrigiti and Gatamaiyũ where she was sent in preparation for release, I was not smuggled in, because she was allowed visitors. Of all her children, thanks to Rev. Josiah, I was the only one privileged to visit Mami in all prison facilities where she was incarcerated, before and after Kamĩĩĩ. My brothers joined me on visits to the holding centers at Kĩrigiti and Gatamaiyũ near Kiambu when, once again, she was subjected to some ping pong treatment in the process of so-called rehabilitation. When we visited her at Kĩrigiti, we were informed it was only a matter of weeks before she came home. The authorities then changed their mind and took her to Gĩtamaiyũ, where we visited her, before she was taken back to Kĩrigiti. At long last, at the end of 1959, she was released into a year of restriction in her colonially-determined home village of Kĩnoo.

## The Family Tree

Mami had a passion for family and ardently dug up the family tree on both her father's and mother's sides. A liberated woman, she refused to uphold the patriarchal systems of both her Kikuyu and Maasai heritage, whereby the place and role of women as mothers was (and still largely is) downplayed to the point that they became obscure or irrelevant, in terms of identity. This was more so as polygamy, adoption and other cultural practices – such as *“waakinĩ,”* whereby peers and younger friends quietly fathered their friends' children – served to cover up for male weaknesses or ensure genetic survival/spread.

Given that both her parents came from deeply polygamous cultures, Mami's grasp of not only the names of wives and their children, through two or three generations, but also their clan identities, was simply amazing. Her grandfather Gĩchanga was the son of Maina and Wanjirũ; Maina was the son of Gatune. Our grandfather Jommo was from Gĩchanga's second wife, Mwara, whose other children were all girls. Wanjikũ became a wife to Mũnyua wa Waiyaki; Nyamweya migrated to Njoro and was not heard of again. There was a Gathoni wa Kamangũ, otherwise known as Wangarĩ. Another sister was married in Ukambani. The story was told how, when her brother visited her

years later, she failed to recognize him and when she did, exclaimed: “*Nzomo*<sup>9</sup> *wa mwaito, ninatumanije!*” (Jommo, my brother, I have become dumb in the extreme!) It became a family joke passed down to our generation.

Other Jommos were named Ndũng’ũ, as was Guka, since they all belonged to the Mũtũng’ũ age set. But there were other Jommos who were cousins to Guka, and were named Gachomo (the diminutive form that is also used to express endearment) or Gĩchomo (the big one). There were other Jommos in Guka’s family: Jommo from his step-mother Njeri, daughter of Richũ; Gĩchanga’s third wife was called Gachomo. Gĩchanga’s fourth wife—who was my Guka’s step-mother—Nyambura’s Jommo was killed in Burma (Asia) where he had been taken to fight for the British during WWI. According to Mami, Gĩchanga chose to give the name Jommo (some members of the extended family spell it ‘Njomo,’ others ‘Jomo’—but not the Kenyattas) to the sons he named after his father Maina, to increase the psychological distance his forebears had put between themselves and families left behind in Gaturi, Mũrang’a County, whose lives were apparently steeped in the feared witchcraft. Accounts of the peregrination included how one of the wives of Guka’s grandfather, Maina wa Gatune, accidentally dropped a

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<sup>9</sup> Jommo/Njomo = Nzomo in Kikamba

child in the River Chania as the family was crossing, leading the patriarch to declare that his descendants should “*never go back.*” Mami said this translated into a curse that affected children of descendants.

My grandmother, Berewa wa Wanuma, also had only sisters: Tubuge, Nūngari wa Mūnyua, and Mūgūre. Their only brother, Wawerū, was staked up a tree in Thirime forest (near present-day Alliance High Schools) by order of chief Mūnyua wa Waiyaki, acting as judge and jury, on accusation of selling his father’s goats to strangers—the Europeans—without permission. They said it took him a long time to die, during which time he pronounced any number of woes and curses. For instance, one of the curses was “*mūrothūūrwo nĩ mbegū ya kahĩ!*” (“may you be despised by the male seed!”) Men are the cultural custodians of family wealth, so a curse that disempowers or compromises this role is viewed as grave, haunting to generations in the family line. According to Mami, this translated into a situation whereby his sister, Nūngari, married to the same chief Mūnyua wa Waiyaki who had her brother executed, had only one son whose wife mistreated him and his mother till her cousin deserted the family.

Mami recorded the names of all her six mothers and their children. The first wife—accorded the status of ‘*nyakĩambi*—

was Berewa, the daughter of Wanuma and Waikonyo. She may have gotten into the Wanuma family through adoption after a Gĩkũyũ cattle raid outing to Maasailand. Berewa's children were Abram Gĩchanga (Gĩtukui), married to Grace Gathoni wa Mũrĩu; Elizabeth Mwara (aka Thĩga), born about 1898 and married to Baranaba Regerũ—aka Nyoike wa Mũgo wa Cuhĩ; third-born Tabitha Waikonyo (Wangarĩ)—our Mami Mũnene; fourth-born Sarah Sarai Thara; fifth-born Socrates Njũgũna, married to Elizabeth Wanjikũ wa Hũmbũ and, after her death, to her step-sister Wambũi.

The second wife was Gacherũ, who was the daughter of Ngoko. Her children were Elizabeth Mwara (Mũria), married to Njoroge wa Mbiũ (Ngũgĩ), and Damaris Wambũi (Wakori), married to Livingstone Kahara wa Waiyaki.

The third wife was Mũrugi, who was the daughter of Wanene and sister to Joseph Ngwacĩ, Francis Mũndia, Kĩhuha and Wanyoro; her children were Alice Nyairegi (Mwara), Livingstone Wanene, Wandaho, Wangarĩ, Esther Wanyoro, Wanini and Mũrathe (Njũgũna).

The fourth wife was Wambũi, daughter of Kiũndi; the mother to Karen Mwara, Virginia Mũgũre (married to Geoffrey Ng'ang'a wa Kebatta of Mũgoiri), Pauline Njeri (married to Socrates Gitaũ

wa Mĩĩĩyo), Kairigo (Gathoni), married to Ngũgi wa Kabia; Moi (Wangare), married to Kahĩa wa Njũgũna.

The fifth wife was Kĩmotoku (Wambũi), mother to Gĩchanga, Mũkunga wa Mwaũra, Mwara, and Gathoni (Nyamũitung'a).

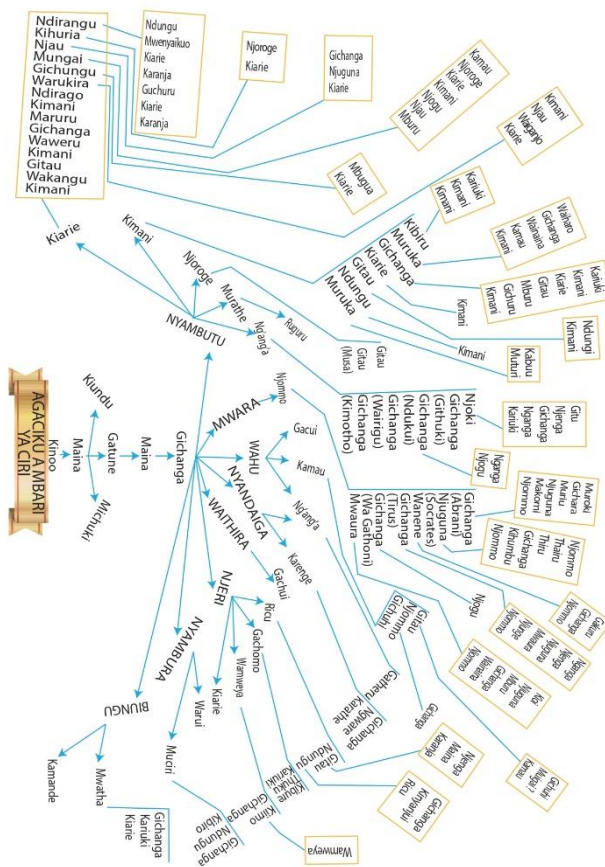
The sixth wife was Gathoni, mother to Gĩchanga (Wa rĩmwe), Mwara, Mũgũre and Gichau (Ngũgi).

Mami made a point of introducing us to as many of her family members as she could find. Once, in the 1960s, we even took a more than 50 km detour to Mũrang'a (Mũgoiri) to check out her step-sister, Virginia Mũgũre (daughter of her father's fourth wife, Wambũi) as we headed back home after attending a wedding ceremony for a relative to her friend, Nancy Gacheke Moll,<sup>10</sup> in Nyeri. Such adventure was unheard of given our very modest situation, though miraculously, Mami had put together enough money to buy a rickety, old, Ford-10 (which we named "Blue Bus") for Jommo, to appease him of the pain of her seven-year absence. The wonderful (for us children) and confounding thing about our trips is they were never planned in advance and,

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<sup>10</sup> Nancy Gacheke Moll was another example of mutual attraction and camaraderie in Mami's friendships. Mme Moll was a Community Development Social Worker trained by the colonial government to attend to the rehabilitation of prisoners. A professional who nursed no prejudices towards her target clientele, she and Mami became solid friends, a friendship that her daughter, Dr. Jane Miano, and I inherited.

therefore, never announced. Yet when we arrived there was always such tremendous joy, the warmest of hospitalities and celebration sometimes drawing in neighbours and/or surrounding communities.



## EARLY YEARS

Rev. Musa Gitaũ was Mami’s first teacher—a deeply loving, honest and meticulous man, she said, who calculated her date of birth as November 13, 1913. When she was about five years of age, she accompanied her eldest sister, Mwara, to Mwara’s matrimonial home. In those days, weddings did not happen as we know them today. There were several visits and ceremonies, the most significant one known as *gũtinia kĩande*: an offering was made to the in-laws by the prospective bridegroom to ensure the deal was sealed—effectively meaning that the bride price requirements had since been completed. *Gũtinia kĩande* refers to the piercing of the shoulder of a slaughtered he-goat (*thenge*), and signified that the couple were now joined. The bridegroom—accompanied by his buddies—would then simply waylay the hapless betrothed and escort her to her matrimonial home. Knowing she was now at her parents’ home on borrowed time, the bride-to-be was never alone at any time. Thus, when the ‘unplanned’ day of abduction arrived, she would be accompanied by her age-set friends. In the case of Mwara, her favorite youngest sister, Thara, was in tow. The young women faded into the sunset singing a *Kĩĩro* song—a long

song, each of whose verses signified the breaking of ties with the bride's home, thus transitioning to her matrimonial home.<sup>11</sup>

*Nderirwo ngarĩre mwere wa kagũrani-ĩĩ,  
Hae haiya; Ngĩrwo ngatahe maaĩ  
Mũira wa nyume rūũĩ nduma ĩkĩndumanĩra-ĩĩ,  
Hae haiya; Ngĩĩnama na ngĩĩra  
Ngĩĩrwo ngarĩme no rūhiũ rūkĩhithwo-ĩĩ,  
Hae haiya; Ngĩkinya mũhĩrĩga  
Hau hama ĩkĩambwo na ĩgĩcoka ĩkĩambũrwo-ĩĩ,  
Hae haiya; Ngĩkinya makũmbĩ-inĩ  
Hau hama ĩkĩambwo na ĩgĩcoka ĩkĩambũrwo-ĩĩ, Hae haiya; Ngĩkinya  
gĩthaku-inĩ  
Hau ngĩĩta nyaciara wa rwendo, wa rūnanio-ĩĩ,  
Hae haiya; Na ngĩmwĩra nyaciara  
Nduume woye rūtungu, na waigua rūtungu-ĩĩ,  
Hae haiya; Nĩ rūtungu mũndũ*

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<sup>11</sup> Mami wrote the song (letter dated Jan 21, 1977) and sent it to me when I lived in Geneva, Switzerland. She also wrote a song for children, “*Ndĩrathiire na rūgũrũ, ngĩkora Njeri akĩĩra...*” (I went down South, found Njeri crying...) In the letter, she said it would be great if I remembered the tunes (this was before YouTube), then I’d sing them to myself to ease my loneliness, “*after all, you’re also a child like the ones to whom I tell stories on radio...*” I’m now sure she was trying to pass a message about marriage, and children as a desirable outcome of marriage, but at the time I was too dumb to understand and, therefore, failed to pursue marriage in my relationships.

*Kĩĩro twarĩraga na wangunyanĩire-ĩĩ,  
Hae haiya; Nĩkĩariganĩire!*

(I was told to go chase the birds from some groom's sorghum field;  
told to go fetch water  
Before I could get home from the river, darkness descended; I bent  
down and cried  
I was told to go to the fields but the weeding tool was hidden; I got to  
the gate  
There a tent was mounted; then dismantled; I got to the granaries  
There a tent was mounted; then dismantled; I got to the front porch  
Here I called out teasingly to mom-in-love; and I said, mother dear.  
Come out and pick up this log; which just happens to be a human-log  
Wailing I shared with the one who betrayed me, all is now forgotten)

Thus Mwara (Thĩga) and company “wailed” their way to the  
home of Baranaba Regerũ in Gĩchungo near Thogoto (about  
eight kilometers away) which was to be her matrimonial home.  
As evidenced by his first name, Baranaba (Barnabas) had already  
converted to Christianity and his bride was later baptized  
Elizabeth (*Ithabethi*).

Young Thara helped look after Sophia Nyokabi, the first child  
born to the newly-weds. Ithabethi Thĩga (Mwara) and Baranaba  
were among the higher ranks of second generation converts at

the Church of Scotland Mission, Thogoto, near their home in Gĩchungo. At the time of their marriage, the mission was hardly two decades old, having been inaugurated in December 1900. Listening in on fellowship sessions at home and accompanying the Nyoike family to church, young Thara soon developed an insatiable and irreversible love for the Church of Jesus Christ, and the education that was the key to reading the Bible, wherein lay the awesome mysteries of the faith. So, by the age of about six years, Thara was a very enthusiastic pupil at nearby Rũthĩmĩtũ Primary School.

Unfortunately, and unknown to the young scholar-in-the-making, her father was a firm “*mũregi*” (a “refusenik”) who had no intention of ‘surrendering’ to the ‘new light,’ or worse, sacrificing his children to the ways of the White strangers. As soon as he heard of his young daughter’s antics, he promptly sent for her to come home. However, no sooner had the family started to get used to having their young daughter back, than she again disappeared back to Gĩchungo and school. Thus began a pattern that characterized Thara’s childhood and early adolescence, vis-à-vis education and religion: parental restrictions and orders, defiance and outright disobedience on her part. Her father would sneak into the school, abduct and take her home. At the first opportunity, Thara would run away again, back to school.

However, Thara's father had more to contend with than his truant of a daughter. Patriarch Jommo, who married his first wife towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, was old enough to have witnessed the arrival of the first Europeans in his area – Kĩnoo-Mũthĩga-Kanyarĩĩ. Around the time of Thara's birth in 1913, the turmoil in the land inhabited by a largely sedentary Agikũyũ community had heightened. Tensions rose as the Europeans increasingly took up residence on ridges around Jommo's home. Families were forcibly evicted from their clan lands to facilitate European settler land-grabs<sup>12</sup> and the setting up of institutions and facilities in the area to the west of Nairobi, as the colonial government asserted its authority on the indigenous people.

Meanwhile, over on the side of the Nairobi-Nakuru highway—built by Italian prisoners-of-war—large tracts of land had been grabbed by White settlers for coffee farming; entire ridges were carved out for construction of a wide range of racially demarcated colonial government institutions—educational, tertiary, research, sports and golf clubs, etc. Ndumbo-inĩ was

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<sup>12</sup> Chiromo was grabbed by Lord William Northrop Macmillan and Ewart Grogan; Kirũngĩĩ (Westlands) and Mũthangari (Lavington) were given to the Roman Catholic Church, while the rest was subdivided into exclusive residential plots for Whites.

grabbed by a European settler—Frederick Lugard—for coffee farming and a so-called court of justice named Fort Smith, under the Imperial British East Africa Company. Here, Waiyaki wa Hinga was locked up before being transported to IBEA Company's court in Mombasa to stand trial for the killing of an IBEACo laborer named Maktubu, but he died on the way, and rumor reached his people that he had been buried alive in Kibwezi. Across all the ridges to the west of Nairobi,<sup>13</sup> European settlers had grabbed clan lands for dairy farming, while the Catholic Church and the Church of Scotland Mission had carved out huge portions of forest, ridges and grazing lands that had been sold by the indigenous Aathi to Agĩkũyũ migrants. Indeed, by 1908, the CSM had started to evict inhabitants who refused to sign a squatting agreement presented to them by Rev Dr J.W. Arthur.<sup>14</sup> What became agricultural and forestry research institutions in Mũgũga-Nderi had also been clan lands; while settler estates were also to be found in Ondirĩ-Kikuyu, Mũgũga-Rironi, and Tigoni-Limuru (Red-Hill).

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<sup>13</sup> Kangemi, Kabete, Kanyarĩrĩ, Mũthĩga, Rũngĩrĩ and Thogoto. Agĩkũyũ families often settled on ridges, and the term is still used to refer to family divisions and clan lands.

<sup>14</sup> Frank Furedi, *The Mau Mau War in Perspective: East African Studies* (Heinemann Kenya, 1990)

Actually, the ancestral lands of the Gĩchanga clan were in the Gaturi area of Mũrang'a across the River Chania. According to Mami, clan elders had escaped from the witchcraft ("*ũrogi*") that was devastating families in Gaturi, traveled across the River Chania with their herds and families. They negotiated with the Aathi, and bartered some of the livestock they had brought in exchange for land for pasture and cultivation. Now, hardly three generations later, they were being forced out. Some who were able to negotiate with the settlers were paid prices dictated by the buyer, and for which they were at a total disadvantage. This was because they had not yet assimilated the monetary culture, and compounded by the fact that the miserable compensation paid by the colonial government and the settlers would subsequently be taken away as Hut Tax.

Jommo wa Gĩchanga was well informed about all the events that were happening further afield. He had encountered displaced families, in search of refuge and pastures greener than the remnants here and there that indigenous people could claim after the White strangers had forcibly fed their greed with the choicest picks of land. To compound matters, able-bodied men including Jommo's step brothers and cousins, were taken away

to fight a war (WWI) they knew nothing about. Most of them were never seen again.<sup>15</sup>

In or about 1924, patriarch Jommo threw in the towel, as it were, and joined the exodus going west (to the Great Rift Valley), accompanied by four of his wives—Wambui, Gacherũ, Kĩmotoku and Gathoni. But his stubborn, part-Maasai first wife, Berewa, insisted on staying put in Kĩnoo.

In Njoro, Jommo's herds flourished and he built a home befitting a patriarch: each wife and her children had their own house and granary, in a spacious compound around the '*thingira*.' This was the patriarch's abode, in ethnic style. In 'their' fields, the wives grew enough food for the family's consumption and commerce. Jommo wa Gĩchanga was once again a man in full control—of his family and his growing wealth in sheep and goats (not cows; those could only be kept by the White settlers). "All is well," ("*Gũkũ no wega mũtheri!*") he would gleefully announce to anyone who cared to listen, especially during the *wazee*'s

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<sup>15</sup> A booklet produced by the Presbyterian Church of East Africa (PCEA) to commemorate 100 years of the church in Kenya records that 2000 Christian men 'volunteered' for WWI, coming from the CSM, CMS and AIM, with Dr. Arthur as their Captain. They formed the Kikuyu Missions Volunteers, attached to the Carrier Corps. PCEA - Historical Highlights of Kikuyu Mission, 1898-1998. (PCEA. Sept. 1998.)

(elders') traditional honey wine imbibing ceremonies. In time he was nicknamed *Wega Mũtheri* (All's Well!)

About two years after Thara's last escape, her father traveled by train to Kikuyu, arrived at '*Bibi Watson's school*' and demanded for his daughter. Denied, he pulled out his "*njora*" (traditional sword) and hid in a shrub between her classroom and dormitory. He waylaid and took off with her, saying no daughter of his was going to fall under the influence of people who looked funny, dressed funny, spoke funny, and built funny houses. These funny people were now busy grabbing his clan's lands and imposing hitherto unheard-of demands like Hut Tax. Adding insult to injury was the fact that the taxes were collected by forcibly taking the people's precious livestock and giving them in return funny little coins called rupees which the same weird people proceeded to take away as the Hut tax! By that time, Mzee Jommo wa Gĩchanga had become very demoralized and disillusioned at the realization that White people had penetrated the lands, so much so that the place where he had chosen to settle in Njoro had turned out to be a White settler's farm! He was now taking a desperate step to redeem his self-esteem and reassert his autonomy and parental authority, by whisking his daughter away from the White people. He was convinced the distance would discourage any further escapes.

To seal her fate, he arranged for her inclusion in the next rite-of-passage ceremony where her protests and pleadings (that she was now a Christian) fell on deaf ears. Her 'White people clothes' were burnt and she was made to wear the customary ochre-dyed wrapper fastened on one shoulder. She got circumcised, complete with the laceration of ears, as befitted a respectable teenage girl of quality, according to Agikũyũ custom. The girls taking part in this so-called ceremony were so eager that they happily engaged in the preparations and the ceremony itself, bracing themselves with vulgar song and dance. With the forceful support of the *mũtiiri* (non-compromising agent) they ensured not to show any sign of pain, which would be interpreted as cowardice and earn the candidate a bad reputation. Thara refused to take part in the festivities, but had no choice but to yield to the ordeal of circumcision.

In Njoro, the family's livelihood was secured by each wife sending a child into settler Capt. Graham's service, with no pay. Thara, with her experience of 'Athomi' (educated and socio-culturally assimilated) was accordingly conscripted to the household. Graham was sufficiently impressed with the young girl's passable 'yes' and 'no' English language prowess, rewarding her with a white calico cloth to wrap around herself (as opposed to the ochre-dyed wrappers of her people). However, she was alert enough to observe the near slave-like

conditions under which her mothers and other women toiled. With babies strapped to their backs, many worked the long rows in the maize fields from early morning to evening, with no food or water, while Capt. Graham did the rounds on horseback to make sure no one was idle. Women without children were required to chop wood for the Graham family's fuel requirements. The women still had their 'own' vegetable gardens to tend to, which meant that they never rested. Men broke the virgin land with hoes, and at harvest time carried the heavy bags of maize to the railway station—a distance of at least 8 kilometers. They brought back more loads of farm and household implements for Graham.

Young as she was, Thara compared the settler—aloof except when he was issuing overly harsh orders—with what she had experienced under the missionaries at Thogoto, who preached love and were polite and compassionate towards their workers and general public. One day, after the physical wounds of circumcision and the perforation of ears had healed, Thara and her step-sister, Wanyoro, were in the field with their father's livestock. Thara soon hypnotized her sister with tales of the good White people at the mission school. It wasn't long before the two of them took off, leaving their father's goats in the field and walking roughly 10 kilometers through unfamiliar, wildlife-

infested territory, to the train station. They then stowed away in a bogie (goods) wagon to Kikuyu.

Arriving at Kĩnoo, they found no-one to go with them. Thara and her sister walked through the leopard and hyena infested forest surrounding Itukarua springs and Nyongara, a stream whose hazardous, bridge-less crossing point was just a few meters from a steep waterfall. By the time they arrived at Minnie Watson's school (*'Wathoinĩ kwa Watenga'*), they were both delirious with fever. At the school compound, Thara's leg was badly torn, not by leopards, hyenas or baboons—of which there had been plenty en route—but by a metal spike as she tried to get her way around the unfamiliar barbed wire surrounding the school compound. The infected wound, which became almost gangrenous from rust poison, was to cause a thinning of her left leg and an accompanying slight limp from which she never fully recovered.

She was admitted at the hospital, where Rev. Dr. John William Arthur, the head of the CSM Hospital at Thogoto, took personal charge of her. The young girl's physical condition and emotional devastation from the initiation experience served to intensify his antipathy towards the custom and his determination to eradicate it.

This incredible episode in her life forced her father to relent, taking some comfort in that she was now ethnic-branded and effectively initiated into “adulthood.” Disillusionment caused by the migration from Kĩnoo was undoubtedly playing havoc with the choices Jommo exposed his family to. Mzee Wega Mũtheri was now faced with a generalized rebellion as Thara’s younger brother, Njũgũna, as well as her adolescent step brothers and sisters literally followed her in the quest for education, emptying the Jommo homestead of children and young adults and thus leaving his herds without a shepherd, their mothers without the labor support needed in order to satisfy both the settler’s commands and their own livelihood requirements. This turn of events was particularly depressing for patriarch Jommo, who had started to look forward to bride price payments for his daughters in order to consolidate his wealth. He decided to move his family to an area closer to home. When Captain Graham heard that his free labor force was planning on (re)migration, he confiscated their herds and burnt down their homes. So Jommo had no choice but to leave. With the few goats he was able to salvage, Jommo consoled himself by acquiring a new wife! Henceforth, he used to say that all he “went west for was a wife, since all things considered, life is more precious than wealth, isn’t it?” Nevertheless, Mr. Jommo

disowned his defiant daughter, and reconciliation did not happen until almost twenty years later.

The family settled on the plains of Ndeiya-Lusigetti, where there was plenty of pasture. In a short time, Mzee Jommo acquired new animals; his herds grew when some of the daughters who had followed their stepsister to school found suitors. They had themselves also started to imbibe the strange new ways—Christianity and education—and were thrilled and proud to acquire ‘educated’ wives. In this particular scenario, polygamy paid, as there were many daughters from the many wives. Indeed, some of the wives—such as Wambũi wa Gĩchau—bore him only daughters. Jommo wa Gĩchanga, a.k.a. *Wega Mũtheri*, had plenty of bride price, in the form of goats and sheep, and even cows, complete with traditional honey wine and malt beer. At the core of his skepticism about the new religion was the branding of traditional lifestyle and values, in general, as sin. But now, once again, he was a contented man—head of a large family, and livestock with pasture nearby. With age catching up, the son of Gĩchanga mellowed to the point where he attended his son Njũgũna’s Western-style church wedding in 1937. Here, as if rubbing salt into his father’s injured pride, Njũgũna married a girl who had adopted European clothing, had basic formal education and also carried a Christian name—Mary. Mzee Jommo must have seemed psychic, or just plain fortunate in his

decision to bring his family back to the Central region when he did. No sooner had they left the Rift Valley region than there was a mass expulsion of so-called Kikuyu squatters in the Rift Valley. The settlers had uncovered a secret plan<sup>16</sup> to petition the colonial government to accord squatter families permanent residence in the lands where they had settled. Hundreds of families were bundled off in trucks, destitute, their herds and granaries confiscated, their homes and belongings burnt to

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<sup>16</sup> Until 1919-20 life on European farms was fairly unregulated. Around 1918 a squatter on average worked for the settlers three-to-four months per year, paid Sh4 per month. In turn they could cultivate as much land as they wished—seldom exceeding six-to-seven acres (2.5-2.8 ha)—and most families were allowed to graze their sheep and goats. However, in 1925, the colonial government passed an Ordinance requiring all males over 16 years of age to enter into wage contracts or get out of the farm. The settlers started shooting squatters' animals, followed by mass evictions. (Frank Furedi, *The Mau Mau War in Perspective: East African Studies-Heinemann Kenya*, 1990.) the Njoro area, research highlighted the fact that most of the White settlers were financially challenged and could only afford to hire labor if it was cheap and paid for in kind, e.g., land for cultivation and grazing (Tabitha Kanogo, *Squatters and the Roots of Mau Mau, 1905-63: Eastern African Studies—East African Publishers*, 1987.)

ashes. They were dumped in Central Province, many in places where they had no roots whatsoever.

As for Thara, as soon as she decided on putting the ordeal of circumcision behind her, she grew by leaps and bounds. As soon



Sarai (standing next to groom) the caring sister, who went overboard to ensure a highly colourful, European style wedding for her younger brother, Socrates Njũgũna, in 1937.

as she was discharged from hospital and fully recovered from the effects of the rites and the inflammation of the leg, coupled with the travel fatigue and pneumonia caught during the trip from Njoro, she got busy with her school work. A teacher at the school, Mrs. Moart, had just introduced the Girl Guides

movement and Thara became one of the first recruits. Indeed, Mrs. Moart said at the time that she was amazed at the way the young girl seemed to soak up knowledge. She had also noticed her singing voice, and taught her to sing and play the piano. Soon, Thara was helping her to assemble a choir, with girls having to be persuaded to shed their shyness and stand in front of the congregation to sing. The Mrs. Moart/Sarai choir won acclaim for its performance during a convention—held in a field near Thara’s home at Kĩnoo—that brought together the Presbyterians of Thogoto, the Anglicans of Kabete and the AIC of Kijabe.

Thara was baptized Sarah Sarai in April 1928, aged about 15 years, by Rev. Dr. John W. Arthur, after baptismal classes offered by Dr. Codawd and the Rev. Jackson Njiraine.

It was around this time that the missionaries followed the colonial government’s model and introduced the payment of school fees. According to the number of classes or courses one was attending, the fees could go as high as thirty shillings a year—a lot of money for communities in the throes of transition into a money-based economy. Sarai devoted her free time (mostly at night) to weaving kiondo-baskets for sale in order to cater for her own and her younger brother Njũgũna’s fees. Njũgũna was to be among the first entrants into Alliance High

School, next door to the Church of Scotland Mission Primary School and Hospital. From the money she made, Sarai was also able to buy a few items of clothing and toiletry for herself and her brother. She also bought some brightly shimmering cloth ("*halili*") and sat up all night making a dress, which the matron promptly threw into the pit latrine—such mode of dress was spiritually unacceptable, the type to be seen on the bodies of *malaya*. Undaunted, Sarai would go purchase more cloth, when funds permitted, and stitch a new dress. She'd also purchased a pair of rubber shoes and a colorful headscarf which she tied around her head with a bow to the side.

Thus adorned, she walked into church, wearing a sense of accomplishment. The church elders would have none of it and promptly threw her out. They themselves were still in the process of cultural migration from animal skin and the wrapper draped from shoulder to heels to the mostly ill-fitting European suit. But, as humanity has undoubtedly learnt through the ages, nobody can stop fashion. Sarai and her confrontations with the church elders only served to fuel the rebellion the missionaries had, sometimes unintentionally and unknowingly, planted into her mindset since childhood.

All the girls in Thogoto started to copy her style, and soon enough Sarai was helping her friends make dresses in cotton

material with wide necklines and sleeves, copied from the Whites. This was so opposed to the rough, shapeless, regulation khaki tunics prescribed for “*Watho-inĩ*” (boarding school) girls and nursing trainees that the church elders proscribed her from Holy Communion. She was defiant and called them hypocrites who “cleaned their cups on the outside.”

*“For us children from “washenzi” (non-Christian) homes, we have been taught respect for our traditional values, which you shun, yet you do not fully understand Mzungu culture, which you have embraced with Christianity.”*

She then joined Dr. Arthur in his campaign against female circumcision in Kikuyu Land. They traversed the ridges, on foot, in Kiambu District and went as far as Murang’a town—then known as Fort Hall—and the Church of Scotland Mission at Tumu Tumu, Nyeri District. They walked, entering homesteads where they were inevitably received with hostility, but they remained undaunted. Circumcision was, and remains, the most revered rite-of-passage into adulthood in many—if not most—parts of Africa. Thus, any intrusion into the practice was bound to attract unfettered hostility.

The Kikuyu morans riposted by ritually blacklisting Sarai and her ilk in their *Mũthĩrĩgũ*<sup>17</sup> counter-crusades of 1929. The counter-crusades were bad enough to get her mentor, Rev. Dr. Arthur, into trouble with the colonial authorities, even as they imposed a mandatory thumb-print exercise. These rapidly spreading *Mũthĩrĩgũ* counter-crusades precipitated a big walkout by new Protestant Church converts, to form their own independent churches—the *Karing’a* (African Orthodox Church, AOC) and the Arathi (Agĩkũyũ Spirit churches). These were considered to have assimilated certain local cultural practices. Meanwhile, the Roman Catholic faithful religiously remained surreptitiously loyal to their culture as their leadership dithered on the issue.

However, according to Sarai’s testimony at various Christian gatherings, she and Dr. Arthur also had the satisfaction of seeing the circumcision of little girls become increasingly unpopular among the Kikuyu Protestant converts who remained. Meanwhile, for reasons that may not have been too far removed from the passion and single-mindedness of his crusade against female circumcision, Dr. Arthur soon relinquished his

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<sup>17</sup>The *Mũthĩrĩgũ* is a song genre that was used in expressive protest against White suppression of African traditional values and practices.

position as head of Mission at Thogoto as well as his seat in the Legislative Council where he had represented African affairs.

This aside, Sarai was also capable of getting herself into the most scandalous of situations. She once got into a physical fight with a girl who bit her deep near her right eye, inflicting an infection that had Sarai bed-ridden in hospital for three months, unconscious for weeks on end. At that time, the miracle of antibiotics had not yet been introduced; doctors could only prescribe Brandy and prayers. From then on, Sarai loved her tipple. She'd faithfully record in her tiny diary the number of pegs (tots) of Brandy consumed during her political activism days of the 1960s, and when she traveled abroad, where many fell over themselves to show her love, friendship, sympathy, empathy, hospitality, or solidarity.

Sarai loved her father, but she never got over the ordeal of the circumcision, even in old age. She especially hated that during the ceremony, they had perforated her well-shaped ears. Like their Maasai neighbors, the Agĩkũyũ used to pierce ears as part of the male and female rites of passage. Bits of rounded stick buds would then be inserted along the top of the ear, while metal and beaded triangle sets would be suspended on the pierced lobe. In time, under the weight of the heavy triangle sets, the holes would be elongated to the point they were

dangling on either side of the face and sort-of resting on the chest. As for Mami, henceforth she wore a headscarf, fastened under her chin to cover her ears. Otherwise, she grew her hair long—by African-Bantu standards—braided into a sort of knot at the forehead and a line on either side, all in an effort to cover what was left of her lovely ears after Rev. Dr. Arthur had tried to surgically repair the damage, leaving her ears lobeless.

She was an ardent believer in culture and its expression in artifacts (*“objets d’art”*), in song and dance, and especially the warmth of kinship ties and relationships; yet from then on she was extremely contemptuous of customary rituals such as the circumcision of girls and accompanying festivities, witchcraft, blood oathing and such ceremonies. Her lifestyle henceforth would mirror the contradictions of social assimilation, spiritual conversion to Christianity as propagated by the Scottish missionaries, and an indelible attachment to an African cultural identity.

Her father, for his part, never forgave her the affront of *‘cavorting with the enemies of our people’*, which he termed a betrayal. In contradiction, he somewhat softened this stance towards his other daughters who had acquired educated husbands, in no small part since their families were still happy to perform customary bride price rites. When she was living a

life of relative affluence in the late 1940s, Sarai sought reconciliation. She had her father brought to her in Nairobi,



Sarai with her father in a photography studio in downtown Nairobi.

where she entertained him sumptuously, to say the least. She even took him to a photography studio in downtown Nairobi where they had photographs taken, but he remained non-committal.

On his way home, he stopped in Kĩnoo and tasked his eldest son, Abraham Gĩchanga, to impress upon his sister the importance of

having children, saying that having observed her lifestyle—he had concluded that his daughter had “joined the ranks of the African urban moneyed class, such that she was behaving like a man. Hence, which man was going to marry a fellow man?” (This was at least a century before LGBTQ.) Indeed, it is telling that in the photograph with her father, she is seated sideways on her dad’s seat—holding him at the shoulder, while he sits. Even for a father-daughter relationship in a traditional African context, the dynamics in the photograph tell a story of reversed gender-based authority, if only for/in the photo.

Abraham faithfully delivered the message. So, to honor her father’s wishes, she had Gĩchanga, me and Njũgũna in quick succession—April 1947, September 1949, and August 1951. Still, a proper reconciliation between father and daughter only happened almost at his deathbed in 1962, more than three decades after their falling out.

Whereas women at that time did not—or could not—buy land, in 1949 Sarai bought a piece of land in Kĩnoo from a distant cousin of hers by the name of Njũgũna wa Kimani. The purchase may have been in defiance of gender norms, but it was just as likely meant to secure her children’s future. The deal was brokered by the same brother Abraham. After Sarai’s arrest and detention and the declaration of the State of Emergency two

years later, the colonial government ordered land demarcation. As the eldest male of the Jommo family—and one that the Colonial government considered not to be involved with the Mau Mau—Abraham was allowed to oversee land allocations for his siblings in the mid-1950s. He proceeded to deny his sister Sarai any inheritance from her father's share of the Gĩchanga clan lands although, as a daughter who was not married yet, she was customarily entitled.

Encouraged by the same colonial authorities, he *graciously* offered a dilapidated, grass-thatched, mud-walled rondavel to his sister and her children upon release from prison at the end of 1959. Hardly two years later, when he realized that her engagement with the now heightened political struggle for independence was irreversible, he forcibly evicted us, throwing our furniture and households into the early morning rain in Mami's absence. Thankfully, in a show of unmitigated kindness, our neighbors in the village offered us shelter. A few years later, Mami's nephew (her sister Tabitha's son) Samuel Njoroge, also evicted us from his mother's plot, in protest against his mother allowing her sister to put up a temporary shelter after the earlier eviction by uncle Abraham.

Hereafter, following a failed home construction project on her own plot in the village, there was a canopy created by a guava

tree supporting a thick passion fruit climber in what was left of the piece of land she had bought in 1949. It was under this canopy that Sarai settled in 1972, broke but not broken.

## BREAKING OUT

In 1933, at the relatively young age of 20 years, Sarai graduated from the School of Nursing at the Church of Scotland Mission Thogoto, then known as the Hunter Memorial Hospital Kikuyu (now PCEA Hospital Kikuyu). During this time, Sarai found herself having to teach some of the new expatriate mission workers the Gĩkũyũ language, which they wished to learn for effective communication with the locals.

One of the most gratifying experiences in this connection was with Dr. and Mrs. Brown, who took a great liking to the intelligent and hardworking native Christian girl. They would lend her books on medicine to encourage her, and Sarai took such a keen interest that she soon qualified as a midwife. She was put in charge of the nursing and midwifery personnel. In her memoirs, Sarai has specially tributed good old Dr. Brown's "unreserved encouragement and guidance."

In time, a Dr. Shaw arrived at Thogoto to relieve Dr. Brown. He welcomed the assistance that Sarai provided to help him settle into his job, and was happy to have her work side-by-side with him. In the process, he taught her more about medical work and maneuvers in the hospital's surgery and out-patient wings. Soon, the largely illiterate church elders began to view her with

some skepticism and were at times outrightly hostile about her sustained efforts, skills and peer influence in copying the 'European style'. Sarai was however popular with her seniors, teachers and colleagues alike, while Mrs. Minnie Watson referred to her as her daughter, considering the young age at which she first came to the mission center. Sarai and her colleague, Charles Gathaca, were also regular evangelists in the wards, and helped convert many patients to Christianity.

She did, however, start getting restless when she learnt that she could earn as much as 30 Shillings in a Government hospital, five times more than her monthly salary as a senior Nurse/Midwife. She obtained excellent references from Mrs. Watson, Miss Moart, and Dr. Codawd. Dr. Arthur helped her secure a position at Fort Hall (now Mũrang'a) District Hospital. When, in 1935, the time came for her to leave Thogoto, all the church elders, as well as hospital personnel, turned up to give her a very warm send-off.

Thus, at a time when Africans in general and women in particular did not venture beyond their home villages, Sarai joined the small coterie of African professionals who broke out and away.

## **Sarai in Mũrang’a**

Sarai found another female nurse at the hospital in Fort Hall. Leah Wanjikũ was the daughter of John Gechaga, an early Christian who had been introduced to Sarai’s brother Socrates Njũgũna by Elikanah Karanja, a friend and colleague of their elder brother Abraham at the Native Industry Training Depot<sup>18</sup> (NITD) Kabete. Leah had arrived at the Fort Hall District Hospital in 1935, in the company of Eliud Mũturi, a male nurse who was appointed Hospital Assistant. According to Leah, the hospital was as unpopular as a morgue. The general perception was that patients went to the hospital to die.

Sarai found disease rampant in Mũrang’a, with a large segment of the population steeped in witchcraft. Many believed that ill health resulted from ‘the evil eye’—non-physical contact poisoning—as well as other evident or hidden manifestations of witchcraft. Sarai joined Dr. Bullen at the hospital which had two wards, one male and the other female, each with 38 beds. With such a shortage of beds, patients would often share a bed, with up to three people at a time. Sarai—in charge of the female ward—was especially depressed about maternity patients being in the same ward with patients manifesting contagious

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<sup>18</sup> Present-day Kabete National Polytechnic.

conditions. She started by separating the patients; surgical and other common cases on one side, pregnant women and mothers with babies on the other.

She was horrified by the attitudes of the local staff. The cleaner did not believe in mop and water, insisting only on the broom, so Sarai took on cleaning as well. By 8.30 am when the doctor made his rounds, she would have the ward clean and the patients ready. The male dressers had no compassion for their patients. They would sneak off during working hours to a native beer den—hidden in the reeds on the banks of River Mathioya—and would emerge intoxicated, totally incapable of carrying out their duties. She directed her Christian energies towards achieving mind-set change, and was in time gratified to see the bad habits change. Even the visits to the brewery by the river stopped, at least during working hours. Generally, Sarai faulted the locals for being content to just earn their meager wages, never concerned about improvement or expansion of the facilities. When repeated requests to the doctor-in-charge for additional space did not yield results, she started firing off memoranda to the oversight authorities—Native Civil Hospital in Nairobi, later named King George, and later still Kenyatta National Hospital—for the construction of an extra ward, even a temporary wattle shed, so they could isolate patients suffering from communicable diseases.

Sarai had introduced the habit, acquired at CSM Hospital at Thogoto, of starting the working day with prayers, telling the doctor-in-charge that even in government hospitals they needed God's guidance and blessings to make their efforts and medicine more effective. The doctor asked her to lead the devotion, which she enthusiastically did. Off-duty on Sundays, she went for service and fellowship at the Anglican Church at Kahuhia, where she was ministered to by Canon Levi Gachanja, father to Muthoni Likimani. The Gachanjas became great friends to her, visiting her at the hospital where they would sit late into the night, reading the Bible, sharing in prayer and testimonies.

Gradually, things started improving at the hospital. A small children's ward was built, and added to Sarai's charge. She used her position to sneak in some of her difficult maternity cases. Then there were the old ladies who came in with swollen legs and feet resulting from jigger infestation. Sarai would soak them in disinfectant and remove the jiggers. After about a week the swelling would go down and the healing would start. Then the patients would go home, confident that the hospital was a good place, after all, because it had removed the poison inflicted upon them by the witches.

To make matters worse, there were poisonous snakes which even found their way into the wards and bit patients. Then there

were mosquitoes. Working under these harsh conditions, it was only a matter of time before Sarai contracted malaria, which was at first misdiagnosed, and she spent many weeks in the hospital ward, her body starting to show signs of jaundice. By this time, Dr. Bullen had been replaced by Dr. Davies, who finally decided to send Sarai back to Kikuyu, climatically cooler and drier. In 1937, Sarai left Murang'a with the satisfaction of having initiated awareness on matters of health and hygiene, having unreservedly applied herself to the alleviation of poverty and disease, and having actively participated in spreading the Gospel of Christ. Additionally, she had trained two girls from the area, to whom she handed over her duties as she left.

### **Sarai in Msambweni**

After a month of recuperation at home in Kĩnoo, Sarai was sent to work at the mission hospital in Msambweni, in the South Coast region of Kenya. Oh how her adventurous spirit rekindled! This being a professional tour, she could travel second class on the overnight '*chuchu*' train to Mombasa. Second class had cushioned seats, as opposed to the bare wooden ones in third class which accommodated the bulk of African passengers. First class was, of course, reserved for Whites. At this time, she had not yet learnt Kiswahili; as such, she could not evangelize on the

train as most Africans were unschooled. She read her Bible and the little literature she was able to marshal in an effort to familiarize herself with her soon-to-be new home. She marveled at the first sight of the Indian Ocean and the drastically-changed climate—from the coolness of Kikuyu, to the steaming heat of Mombasa that almost made her faint. She was met at the train station and taken by rowboat across the Harbour Channel, her most harrowing travel experience to that point.

To Sarai's dismay, Msambweni turned out to be even more deeply steeped in witchcraft than Mũrang'a. Patients would actually throw away medicine obtained at the hospital. Disease was widespread and particularly severe, with malaria, conjunctivitis and STDs having the worst effects. Sarai joined the resident, Dr. Wright, and a hospital orderly by the name of Jackson. Working conditions were better compared to Mũrang'a; here there was a maternity ward, as well as a surgical and a medical ward. The male nurses were as kind and courteous towards the patients as they were towards their colleagues. This accounted for a better working environment than Sarai had experienced in Mũrang'a. In time, one of Sarai's most stimulating activities became community outreach: visiting the few schools in the area, giving the children medical examinations and taking specimens of their stool, urine and blood, for laboratory tests. In this way, a lot of children suffering

from a variety of diseases were then brought to the hospital for treatment.

The women were another matter altogether. They would refuse to stay in the hospital to finish treatment, since tradition did not allow them to sleep away from their homes. In an area with no means of transport whatsoever, Sarai would walk long distances to retrieve these patients—especially those suffering from STIs, because conception before finishing treatment easily resulted in babies born malformed or with diseased eyes. There was a lot of blindness in the area due to this, as Sarai recalled in her handwritten memoirs.

Fortunately, the people were friendly and hospitable. Soon, Sarai found herself being invited to the homes of families in nearby villages. As the designated home visitor,<sup>19</sup> she used these opportunities to address the women on matters of personal, family and collective hygiene and healthcare. They learnt how to prevent communicable diseases, while she counseled against witchcraft and sensitized women against traditional practices that affected their reproductive health and self-esteem. She also used these opportunities to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ, so that people could move away from witchcraft and the harmful

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<sup>19</sup> About the equivalent of a present-day Public Health Officer.

traditional rituals she herself had faced. She'd also exhort the girls to go to school, if only to learn to read and write. She joined the girls and women in their traditional dancing so that they, in turn, would not shy away from accompanying her to the prayer meetings.

After two years in Msambweni, Sarai became exceedingly home-sick and decided it was time to retrace her roots. Before heading home, however, she put in short stints at the Native Civil Hospital Makadara (now Coast General Hospital) in Mombasa, and a tiny rural missionary-operated hospital in Kilifi. At this place, she made the acquaintance of the late Ronald Ngala,<sup>20</sup> then a teacher at the rural mission school. She also visited Tanga in Tanganyika (now Tanzania) for Christian and medical outreach.

Apart from a great deal of invaluable experience, Sarai's sojourn at the East African coastal region equipped her with perfect Kiswahili, which not only placed her a notch above other up-country professionals—and politicians—of her day, but would also later serve her well in social welfare and political work.

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<sup>20</sup>Ronald Ngala was the first post-colonial leader of the Kenyan national political opposition.

## Sarai in Kampala

As earlier mentioned, the journey back home took a rather round-about route, because she ended up in Uganda where she worked at the Mulago Hospital in Kampala. Of residence and work in Kampala, little of her notes and diary entries survive. Many of her documents were destroyed during the latter-periods of turmoil in her life: her incarceration, the eviction from Ziwani, temporary storage at her brother Abram's home in Kĩnoo, and in the instability of the early years of reunion with her children, who were too young to understand the importance of preserving records. However, in Kampala, she learnt some Luganda, and in her old age would burst into the Buganda nation's anthem, whose refrain went something like:

*Twesiimye nnyo, twesiimye nnyo,  
Olwa Buganda yaffe  
Ekitiibwa kya Buganda kyava dda  
Naffe tukikumenga...*

The song largely said nothing to me until my first employment in Arusha, Tanzania, with the East African Community, in the late 1960s, where I overheard the tune was executed in beautiful—tipsy—harmony when my Baganda friends were seized by nostalgia during our all-too-frequent partying sessions. The stint in Uganda, and lingering admiration for the Baganda lifestyle—

of irksome cultural practices such as the circumcision of girls—left an indelible mark on Sarai, who easily made friends with her Ugandan neighbors at Ziwani, where she also met my father.

## MOVE TO NAIROBI

It was inevitable that Sarai would move to Nairobi, the capital city of the Kenya Colony. Thus, she did not alight at Kikuyu from the train that brought her from Kampala, but proceeded to the main Railway Station in Nairobi. Once there, Sarai had to be registered, and became the proud possessor of a red hard-covered booklet (the size of passports of yesteryears) which contained an unmistakable, elaborate identity:

1. Colony and Protectorate of Kenya
2. Domestic Servant's Pocket Register No. 38677
3. Issued under the Authority of the Regulations of Domestic Servants Ordinance, 1928
4. Issued on February 18 1939

In the usual nonchalant manner in which the particulars of Africans were recorded, her name is stated as Sarah, and her father's name as Thara! Her age—which in 1939 would have been 26—is recorded as 22 years. This all-important document was given because she was working in non-African settings. However, at that time, being a young African woman, the only designation that fit her in the colonial authorities' register was as "Domestic Servant." Such documentation was to ensure her

employer and the authorities could trace her in the event she absconded. Her race or tribe was recorded, as were other aspects of identification, such as:

- 5. Religion or Caste;
- 6. Sex;
- 8. Height and Build (*Medium 5' 4"*);
- 9. Complexion (*"Dark brown"*);
- 10. Nose (*"Broad"*);
- 11. Mouth (*"Large"*);
- 13. Hair (*"Curly"*);
- 14. Teeth (*"2 missing, lower"*);
- 15. Scars, Tribal marks or other
- 16. Usual place or residence when unemployed.
- 17. Married or Single.

This elaborate document made clear to Sarai where the colonial government placed her in the social hierarchy. It states:

*"Servant" includes every person employed either wholly or partly in any of the following capacities i.e., cook, house servant (including bedroom and kitchen servants), waiter, butler, nurse, valet, bar boy, footman, chauffeur, washerman..."*

All those jobs were performed by Africans, except nursing which was dominated by Whites and Asians. But it is also made clear

that the ordinance applied to domestic servants, who were all only African. Clearly, White and Asian nurses had a different designation.

Sarai was the first African woman to perform nursing duties at HH Aga Khan Volunteer Dispensary, which has since grown into one of the biggest private hospitals in the region—the Aga Khan University Hospital. At the dispensary, Sarai was to encounter the Asian community, which—placed above the majority of Africans in the colonial pyramid of socio-economic relations—was contemptuous of Africans to the point of verbal abuse. Sarai is recorded to have worked for just over 2 months (April 1 to June 12, 1939) as a Nurse, with a monthly salary of 30 shillings. She is discharged on her own accord, with ‘Character of Servant’ given as ‘*Very Good*’; Ability as ‘*Satisfactory*’ and Remarks: ‘*Hard worker and very godly*’.

With WWII raging even in Kenya, Sarai was recruited as an ‘African Attendant’ at the European Base Hospital<sup>21</sup>—from August 1, 1940 to January 31, 1942—with a monthly salary of 30 shillings. At what she used to call the Europeans’ hospital, Sarai performed the duties of assistant theater nurse, which provided

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<sup>21</sup> Present-day State House Road Girls High School. The hospital was relocated as a European Hospital. After Kenya’s independence, it became the Nairobi Hospital.

both a professional challenge and satisfaction. Although she got the same basic salary as at the Aga Khan clinic, at the European Base Hospital she was housed in the hospital compound—a tiny room<sup>22</sup> which, according to Sarai, fitted only a narrow bed and a stool. Sarai's character of servant is shown as good. She is discharged on her own request. Even though her ability is stated as *'Very good—an excellent worker; intelligent and willing'*, her pay on discharge is still only 30 shillings per month—after almost one and half years of *'excellent service.'* Sarai was the only trained African nurse; other Africans employed in the hospital were subordinate and manual workers or cleaning staff. The majority of them did not even have elementary education.

Having so far been ensconced in the relatively caring missionary community, she was not quite prepared for the openly color-bar-centered colonial administration and working conditions she operated under. For instance, because salaries for Africans were so measly, certain doctors were popular and therefore obtained good performance from the workers because they were known to give a generous tip. As a result, there was eternal

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<sup>22</sup> The rooms were still there in 1964, the first year after independence, when I got sponsorship from an unnamed European donor for admission to what had become the Delamere Girls High School – presently State House Girls High School.

squabbling and quarrels in the camp where the workers were housed. Accusations and counter-accusations of sycophancy flew as Africans ingratiated themselves to colonial masters in an effort to ease the harshness—nay, cruelty—of evolving master-servant relations. The women proved more quarrelsome and even violent, with allegations of trading sexual favors.

Fights would break out as the workers scrambled to serve the popular doctors, such as Sarai's supervisors Dr. Belvridge, Dr. Anderson, and Dr. Colman. The doctors for whom Sarai worked liked and had confidence in her, and she reciprocated by working her hardest. She soon succeeded in transforming the theater into a spotlessly clean and orderly place. Sister Burns—in charge at the theater—soon realized the depth, if not superiority, of Sarai's knowledge and experience and befriended her, both on the clock and outside the hospital. During their time off, she would take her to the cinema theater, to see films, plays and other recreational activities.

This was at the inception of World War II, which was a busy time at the hospital. Often, Sarai would be recalled from her time off to be scrub nurse, as the doctors scrambled to save the limbs and lives of British soldiers flown into Eastleigh Air Base. They arrived regularly from Kenya's neighboring countries, where the war was being fought with the respective armies of Hitler in

Tanganyika to the South, and Mussolini in Somalia to the East. During this period, the country was also in the throes of the Great Cassava Famine. To cap it all, a romantic betrayal and heartbreak of monumental proportions shattered all her dreams of ever attaining either marital status or any bliss thereof. “The love of my life,” she would later say to me, “got himself caught up with my niece. This was an ugly betrayal which could never in a lifetime be corrected through polygamy—that would have been an abomination of the highest order, especially as we had all converted to Christianity.”

Given the stigma attached to pre-marital sex and the single parenthood that would now follow, she knew that she could not expect to be granted maternity leave when the time came. Compounded by her own sense of guilt as a Christian, she felt—at the time—that she had no option but to resign. Her supervisors and colleagues at the hospital organized a farewell tea party and gifted her a book on domestic science. Sarai left the European Base Hospital having become increasingly disillusioned by the preferential treatment accorded to White nurses—her juniors. They received higher salaries, better accommodation and other fringe benefits, while she got the

subordinate status of untrained labor, despite her education, intensive training and extensive nursing experience.<sup>23</sup>

Between the years 1942 and 1945, Sarai struggled—jobless—through an unplanned first pregnancy and the shame (to a lesser degree still) attached to the reality of a Christian single mother. To make it worse, she was homeless in a strange environment that was the African residential estate of Landhi Mawe in Nairobi. Her ‘cousin’—a stepbrother to two sets of her cousins—Police Inspector Tirus Waiyaki wa Munyua, had taken her and her baby to his place after rescuing them from a death wish situation at Jevanjee Garden. Starving and drained, she couldn’t let her baby die in her arms, so she placed him at a corner of Jevanjee and went to another to wait for death. This was happening in a country hardly recovered from a famine of historical proportions and devastated by the effects of an ongoing world war.

After rescue and recovery from her ordeal, she went back to her mother’s home in Kĩnoo, to rejuvenate her spirit. Sarai records that during this time, she decided to change her career and go into either teaching or social welfare work—areas for which she

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<sup>23</sup> In the 1980s, more than 20 years after independence, I encountered similar racial discrimination tendencies in an international NGO based in Nairobi, headed – ironically – by an African woman.

had already received basic training from the Scottish missionaries.

### **Municipal Council of Nairobi (later Nairobi City Council)**

When conditions permitted, Sarai successfully applied to the then Municipal Council of Nairobi. She was employed in the department of Social Welfare, headed by the Municipal African Affairs Officer—Mr. Thomas Garrett Askwith—who later became the Vice President of the Federation of Social Services in Kenya. She was immediately sent to an induction course at the Jeanes School Kabete—which in the lead up to the country's independence became the Kenya Institute of Administration, now the Kenya School of Government. She underwent formal training in pre-school—or pre-primary school—supervision, and the teaching of 'domestic crafts' of machine tailoring, spinning and weaving. She was awarded a First Class Certificate in Social Welfare.

## Social Welfare Assistant

In June 1945, Sarai started work at the County Council of Nairobi, and was allocated House No. 140 in Ziwani, a cosmopolitan residential estate for middle-class African bureaucrats. She was designated a Social Welfare Assistant, under the supervision of Ms. Devrill from South Africa, for whom she also served as an interpreter for Kiswahili and Kikuyu-speaking audiences.



The department had three programmes targeting African women, including the spinning and weaving program—under Edith, a Seychelloise, and Tailoring and Sewing—under Sarai’s friend, Helina Chania. Sarai was in charge of Early Childhood Education, then simply known as nursery schools. Sarai’s life-long love affair with children—which germinated during her time with Christian missionaries—was honed here. These activities were conceived for the mostly illiterate African women to be trained in skills which would enable them to be gainfully self-employed and encourage them to educate their children from an early age. The Social Welfare office was in a newly-built Pumwani Social Hall, which still stands. Sarai’s training in social work, together with her medical background, combined to give a lingering positive impact to her work and legacy.

Miss Devrill rode a bicycle to work, and Sarai soon acquired one for her own mobility. Together they rode, scouring homes, clinics, and social halls in the council estates of Pumwani, Bondeni-Gorofani, Kariokor, Kaloleni, Shauri Moyo, Starehe and Ziwani. They searched for children who had refused—or had been denied the opportunity—to attend nursery school. With the help of Police Inspector Mchuzi, they would organize for the children to undergo medical tests for worm infestation, Kwashiorkor and the like. Additionally, Sarai’s medical background would come to the fore as she persuaded—and in

some cases coerced—expectant mothers to attend antenatal clinics and post-natal clinics after delivery. In the process, the Social Welfare team also encouraged women to avail themselves for the spinning-weaving and tailoring-sewing classes, assuring them that their children would be well looked after at the kindergarten. According to Sarai's hand-written memoirs:

*"...a very large group of women attended these classes, setting an example for other women, demonstrating to them that they could make money from creating with their hands."*

But still there were those who cared little for the children. These were commercial sex traders, who she persuaded to visit the STD Clinic for tests and medical support. At the time, sexually transmitted illnesses among African workers in Nairobi had come to assume almost epidemic proportions. Such was the extent of affairs that post-World War II, the municipal council established an STD Clinic to service the denizens of Pangani and Kariokor.

Sarai also taught the women personal and child care, including mending, sewing and fabricating children's clothes from

discarded adult clothes.<sup>24</sup> Often, the women came to her little office for handouts; bits and pieces of calico material which those attending sewing classes made into clothes for their children. Sarai showed them how to make floral designs engraved from potatoes cut in half and dipped in dye. Other times she would buy maize flour and other ingredients to show them how to make scones.<sup>25</sup> Amidst an atmosphere bursting with racist attitudes from her superiors, Sarai had to search away from the office, using mostly personal sources, for resources to facilitate her work with children and their mothers in line with her training. Sometimes she approached the matrons at King George or Aga Khan hospitals for blankets sourced from donations, used to cover children during their afternoon naps in the nursery schools.

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<sup>24</sup> This was years before the advent of *mtumba*—the pervasive second-hand clothing market that brought clothing fashion and dignity to poor families. In the 1940s and 50s, small children from poor families in the African residential estates simply walked around naked, or wore only tattered underwear. Bigger children, even adults, were defined by how tattered and patched up their clothing was.

<sup>25</sup> A mark of the racially-segregated lifestyle of the day: The White South African who was her supervisor could not be persuaded to ‘waste’ wheat flour on Africans.

One of the achievements she recorded in her diary was getting the Council to deploy a medical doctor to the nursery schools. The female doctor recruited for this purpose—Dr. Henry—turned out to be an old mentor from Sarai’s Matron Watson days at Mambere School in Thogoto. Children were treated for what appeared to be endemic conjunctivitis, worm infestations and conditions related to STIs suffered by their mothers before and during pregnancy. From her mobile pharmacy, Dr. Henry also discharged tonics, Cod Liver Oil and cough syrups to the children as she did her rounds of the nursery schools, Sarai in tow.

In response to the challenges they encountered, Sarai persuaded Dr. Henry to requisition the Council to roll out a milk distribution and feeding programme, and to construct better, concrete, facilities. The feeding programme was still active when I attended Pumwani Nursery after her arrest. We got milk for our 10 am snack. I would drink it with the casing of the half-loaf of bread that remained after my unaccompanied, distraction-loaded 2 to 3 hour walk from Mami Mūnene’s place—Makadara, at least 6 km away. For lunch, we were treated to a tasty and fairly nourishing concoction which, according to Mami’s memoirs, was made from boiling chicken heads and necks with a smattering of green leaves. Later, they would lay down mats for us to take a nap before we were set

free to go home, singing some of the songs Sarai had taught, such as:

*Nasikia sauti ya mama...*

*Sasa ni saa tisa,*

*Mwalimu kwaheri*

(I hear mom's voice...

It's now 3pm,

'Bye teacher!)

### **Nairobi African Advisory Council**

In 1949—the year of my birth—Sarai was appointed as the first female African member of the Nairobi African Advisory Council, a position she held for two years. Her duties at the Council's Social Welfare Department were taken over by Marion Wanjira (who later became Mrs. Annan), and the two developed a life-long friendship.

Naturally, the issue of health was especially close to Sarai's heart and, most probably also, her interventions especially raised issues of maternal health. She was appointed Chairperson of the Committee for Pumwani Maternity Hospital. At Council meetings, she was especially passionate about the need to expose African workers and cleaners to some basic training on

proactive health management and curative measures. She pointed out the potential risks of untrained hospital staff giving a patient improper medication, since they handled medicine as part of their cleaning duties and may be tempted to take some for a patient at home. A transcript of her recorded memoirs says that this call was heeded and the Council started taking in nurse trainees at the Pumwani Maternity Hospital. Some were dispatched to King George Hospital, and she noted how the hospitals gradually started becoming cleaner. A health center at Pangani was moved to Ziwani area, headed by a Mrs. Dugmore who had taken care of Sarai at the European Base Hospital. She and Sarai worked together, tremendously improving Council health services. Mrs. Dugmore would even offer metal pots and pans to be used in free provision of home-science lessons that Sarai conducted on the side.

Doing the Nursery School's rounds with Dr. Henry and observing the two departments, Sarai's eyes opened to the situation of African women in Nairobi. She thought of ways to create employment opportunities for women in the African Estates. Until then, they would spend endless hours braiding each other's hair after cleaning their tiny houses and completing related chores. In conversations with political colleagues, Sarai had come to understand that the local government in England employed both men and women, and could not understand why

the same should not apply in the colony. However, the main employer in Nairobi—then the Municipal Council—only employed men.



The Mayor of Nairobi, senior staff, Councillors and members of the Nairobi African Advisory Council, 1949-1951. Sarai appears to be one of the two African women.

Sarai initiated social and child welfare programmes in Pumwani, Starehe, Ziwani, Kaloleni, and Shauri Moyo. These were the first Municipal Council residential estates for Africans. Council housing for workers in such places as Kariokor and Shauri Moyo consisted of tiny single rooms, with very basic communal kitchen and sanitation facilities. Such insensitive planning was

meant to discourage African families from migrating to the capital—there were no informal settlements then, or they were few and confined to the city's outskirts. Sarai agitated for women's employment within the Council, arguing that wives left in rural areas should join their husbands in Nairobi to counter the spread of STIs—transmitted through prostitution—that male workers were wont to transmit to rural-based wives when they returned home for annual leave.

The peculiar Kenyan practice of urban 'house' and rural 'home' was incubated by colonial negligence of African family rights. It has since persisted, even as urban areas grew exponentially. The family is left behind to farm while children attend school, and the man seeks employment in the capital and other urban areas. As a medical professional, Sarai clearly understood the dire and painful consequences of sexually-transmitted infections, epitomized in the late 20<sup>th</sup> Century by HIV-AIDS. The house-home conceptualization underlies the peculiar African tendency to neglect rented—or employer-provided—residential premises in urban areas, providing care and attention to rural homes, where owners will often only go home in a coffin, or with health-related dependency.

Sarai worked tirelessly for the labor and family rights of Africans, focusing especially on women. Her struggles led to the granting

of maternity leave for female African workers in the Council. During this time, she became a management committee member for Pumwani Primary School. She persuaded Andrew Gĩthieya and Isaiah Kinyanjui to join her crusade to get girls into the school, monitoring their progress. If one girl missed school for a week, Sarai would comb the estates, especially Majengo, until she located the girl's home and persuaded the parent(s) to let her go back.

In the process, she observed that many older women in Majengo and Shauri Moyo areas were going hungry. This triggered her push for the Council to issue hawkers' licenses to these women, so that they could cater for their families. Shauri Moyo was inhabited by the poorest-paid Council workers, while Majengo was built by a predominantly Muslim community, left largely to its own devices by the colonial government. Kaloleni and Starehe were occupied mostly by African clerical staff in the Colony's central and local government. A survey of informal vendors showed that men mostly sold shoes and boots from WWII, while women sold the vegetables they grew in small gardens around their homes. Sarai advocated for a retail market to cater for all these locations. She proposed that this would decongest the railway station of vendors who found the Municipal market too far away—located as they were in today's Koinange-Muindi Mbingu streets. It was also inhibitive for both

African vendors and customers, with the meat section dominated by Asian vendors and European shoppers.

The Burma Market on Jogoo Road was finally opened. At the time of Mami's release from detention, I was attending Dr. Krapf Primary School in Ofafa Maringo—more than 20 km and two bus-rides from Kĩnoo. I recall saving my bus fare for the lesser journey—Ofafa to Country Bus Station—and stopping at Burma market to buy the biggest mandazi in town. Someone informed one of the vendors that I was Sarah Sarai's daughter, and he said they were so happy for what she had done for them that they had expected the market to be named after her. From then on, I enjoyed a free mandazi each time I stopped at the stall, which was—shamelessly—almost daily for the rest of the school term.

Sarai tried very hard to fight against racial segregation, a struggle she had carried forward from her days at the CSM School and hospital in Thogoto. In the process, she made the daunting and demoralizing discovery that the same patriarchal forces that drove her father to force circumcision upon her were present in the missionaries' efforts to educate her but limit the extent to which she could emulate them. Now in professional circles, she was fighting a racial and gender-differentiated color-bar system that had not even prepared for the possibility that African women could be educated and become professionally

competent! Printed identity pocket books, forms and certificates of service and other documentation were all done for men. On most occasions, the officials filling them in for her did not even bother to correct the gender indicators. A certificate awarded her, for instance, reads “*in recognition of **his** services...*”

In Thogoto, she had defied the odds set against her and won respect through dedication and hard work. She had stood up to the clientelist church elders who saw no contradiction in their dealings. They would embrace and expose their children to the missionaries’ education and religious teachings while drawing lines of privilege between theirs and the children of *washenzi* such as her traditionalist father. On the other hand, they themselves were steeped in aspects of socio-cultural and economic patriarchy—say, in marriage negotiations, dowry-taking and in property ownership. While they and their wives transitioned into a European mode of dress, the growing and braiding of women’s hair—a culture that had traveled up the railway line from the Coastal Swahili people—was considered a mark of prostitution. So was the wearing of simple canvas shoes at a time when Africans could not afford fancy shoes or access racially-segregated shops.

In Nairobi, Sarai found the place of African women in the color-bar scheme more hazardous and abhorrent. The most prevalent trade for women in the city was of the flesh, with commercial sex workers in places like Majengo neighboring the Church Missionary Society branch she attended, presently ACK St. John's Community Church Pumwani. At public service level, racial segregation was even more entrenched, owing to Nairobi being the seat of government. It was going to be almost impossible to make an impression on this front. Undaunted, she started by waging small-scale battles at a personal level that made her stand out among Africans in general and African women in particular.

This was a big reason why, encouraged by her supervisor Ms Devrill, she had bought herself a bicycle. Not only was it convenient for her work, but she could also avoid riding in segregated commuter buses, where Europeans sat up front on upholstered seats while Africans rode on wooden seats at the back, or upstairs in double-decker buses.

Sarah Sarai's newly-found joy and freedom were unfathomable—serving social as well as spiritual needs. When time permitted, she would ride from Ziway to the forest on Ngong Road—a distance of at least 10 kilometers—for spiritual retreat and picnic. It was there that, one day, she encountered

*“jangiri”* (robbers). They were about to pounce on her—having already grabbed her bicycle—when out of nowhere a *mzungu* (White) man appeared. He threatened them with a gun, and after they had disappeared back into the bush, proceeded to load Sarai and her bicycle onto his vehicle and drop her into the safety of downtown Nairobi. This experience, and the pressures of work, subsequently kept Sarai away from the Ngai Ndeithia (God, Help Me) forest.<sup>26</sup>

When she was breastfeeding, she would strap the baby’s wicker basket onto the bike’s passenger seat and ride to her office at Pumwani Social Hall, against all regulations. In truth, wage, labor and movement restrictions did not allow for the small group of African professionals to employ the services of nannies; that was the preserve of Europeans and Asians. She would breastfeed and put the baby to sleep, then carry on working until the next feed. There was no maternity leave for African women, and according to Sarai, she was keen to make a statement about maternity and early childhood rights. Necessity, as in many arenas of her life, had once again mothered the beginnings of progress both personal and communal.

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<sup>26</sup> The forest is still known as such.

In her spare time, Sarai did wonders with needle and thread. Before she was able to purchase a Singer sewing machine, she would sit up all night. With some material and scissors—as well, perhaps, as a commercial pattern, but mostly a design she had espied somewhere and copied indelibly into her brain—she worked on apparel in the latest European fashion. She was the epitome of Western-style elegance in her day, as she continued to sharpen her defiance of the double standards she had seen in the missionaries and church elders at Thogoto. Now, she was setting fashion standards for her fellow upwardly-mobile African women. At Jeanes School she had learnt to spin and weave. She bought herself a loom with which she wove colorful rugs, carpets, blankets and scarves, some of which she sold to supplement her salary and enable her voluntary service. She crocheted and embroidered beautiful tablecloths and handkerchiefs, and later, in prison, she would collect scraps of discarded sacking materials and wool to make purses, handbags and knapsacks. Long before the introduction of artisanal training for prisoners, she would pass on her needle arts to her fellow detainees, a spirit not entirely daunted by her situation.

Ziwani was at that time a new housing estate, maintained to high standards of cleanliness and sanitation, with trappings of elitist aesthetics such as flower beds. There, Sarai furnished her house with antique furniture, some of which has survived to

date. Years later I visited the estate and marveled at how she had fitted a small double bed, a single bed, a cot and a chest of drawers into the tiny bedroom. How the sewing machine, loom, furniture, and a children's bath tub set—a metal tub fitted onto a wooden counter—fit into the equally tiny sitting room remain a mystery still. The home was a model of tidiness and cleanliness. Families and school parties would visit to view a demonstration of 'modern' urban home management for the well educated, mostly young, upwardly-mobile, native professionals, *marking the Nairobi Municipal Council's concern and care for the natives.*

She did not waver in using her official position as a native woman member of the Nairobi African Advisory Council (NAAC) to advocate for change, supporting the efforts of predominantly uneducated African women to break the color-bar. For instance, there were no accredited African midwives. African women giving birth at home had to endure humiliation and hefty fees from Asian midwives. Accompanying their services with insults, they demanded a 100-shilling fee, way beyond the monthly earnings of the patients' husbands, leaving families indebted. Sarai's own salary at this time was all of 56 shillings per month.

Once appointed Chair of the Pumwani Maternity Committee in the NAAC, Sarai brought together traditional birth attendants

who had moved to Nairobi—mainly living in Majengo. Incorporating them under the umbrella of the nascent Nairobi African Women’s League (NAWL), Sarai successfully petitioned for them to undergo training at the Pumwani Maternity Hospital. This entailed personal grooming and hygiene, as well as sanitary ways of carrying out home-based deliveries. As members of NAWL, it was thereafter easy to encourage them to treat their patients with due care and compassion. The traditional midwives, charging less than half the Asian fee, thus assuaged the state of affairs.

Sarai also pushed for the expansion of the Pumwani Maternity Hospital to a full-fledged training facility. She advocated for salaries to be paid to African birth attendants, as well as their deployment—as and when the occasion demanded—to other hospitals, like King George Hospital, where they could perform midwifery duties. I can attest to her reasoning on this one. I remember being admitted at King George Hospital one evening in 1961; coincidentally, my cousin Wanjikũ was also wheeled in the same night from the Pumwani Maternity, where she had earlier been admitted. The morning that followed, I overheard the night-duty staff recounting the previous night’s dramatic events. That a pregnant woman had been wheeled in from Pumwani, gone into labor and delivered a baby who was wrapped in cotton wool and taken to Pumwani—on the other

side of town—all so as to be placed in an incubator, which King George Hospital did not have. The baby survived, but the mother succumbed to excessive bleeding as a result of a rupture, as I overheard.

Alongside the Council's Welfare Committee, Sarai was also a member of the General Purposes Committee.

Regarding her coming to live and work in the Ziواني-Pumwani area, Sarai sought and found a spiritual home at St. John's Church in Pumwani, which was Anglican. In the estates, she encountered women—and men—from the Presbyterian strongholds of Thogoto (Kiambu), Tumutumu (Nyeri) and Chogoria (Meru) who had moved to the Pumwani-Majengo area. The women had not yet mastered the Swahili language, which was the medium of communication at the CMS church. Sarai approached Canon Elijah Gachanja and requested him to seek ways of accommodating the Kikuyu Presbyterian congregation. The CMS leadership allowed for a Kikuyu service to be held at their church on Sunday afternoons—that congregation grew impressively, with many Majengo women converting back to Christianity from Islam. Sarai approached the council to offer space for the children's Sunday school class, and was granted access to the Pumwani Social Hall. To help teach the class, she roped in Mrs. Jemimah T. Gecaga, who in April

1958 would go on to be nominated the first African woman to serve at the LegCo. In 1969, she was again, and expectedly, nominated as a member of the post-independence parliament.

Owing to her dedication to the cause of women, and her ability to hold forth in Kiswahili, Sarai was constantly invited to speak at the CMS, to women drawn from various backgrounds and ethnicities. She would urge them to go replace their husbands in dishwashing jobs in the hotels and to seek cleaning jobs at the municipal council. She encouraged them to learn to read and write, with the aim of building a knowledge base that would enable them to take over such jobs as petrol attendants. In general, she urged them to have a work attitude like that of European women, instead of confining themselves to the subservient status in which the colonial authorities had placed them.

In spite of the spats with the church elders at Thogoto and the welcome she received from the CMS in Pumwani, Sarai's allegiance lay with the Presbyterian Church. She started persuading the Council to allocate a plot for a Presbyterian church in the estates. A compound granted near Gikomba, in the vicinity of Pumwani, was later taken away from them when rumors of an African uprising started spreading. Kikuyus (alongside Merus and Embus) were henceforth increasingly

pushed to the margins of Eastlands, in the Bahati-Makadara area. The Presbyterians were finally granted a plot in Bahati, where the main church service is still conducted in the Kikuyu language.

Soon enough, Sarai's activism attracted official attention, and she was invited to the Governor's secretariat. She went, armed with a plethora of memoranda on issues which included: African development; education, particularly the need for secondary schools in Nairobi—this was prepared with the help of her friend and brother-in-Christ, Isaiah Kinyanjui; the need for 'home nurses' to start outreach programmes in the estates where disease was quietly ebbing away the energies of Africans; the need for homes for orphaned and abandoned children, as well as old people. One *cheeky* memorandum even had to do with allowing African men to be accompanied by their wives to the cinema! Hitherto, only European and Asian men were allowed female company to the cinema; no matter how educated an African was, a female companion was branded a commercial sex prospector. Being a single mother, Sarai was all-too-keenly aware of the commercial sex worker tag that had become the hallmark of African women's presence in Nairobi and other urban areas. Indeed, such perception endures in the largely patriarchal rural Kenya. It's not clear when the restriction was lifted, but by the time John Njoroge was courting my cousin

Elizabeth Mwara in 1958-9, they could go to the cinema in downtown Nairobi, sometimes with me in tow.

Sarai was also involved with others, outside of the Nairobi Municipal Council framework, in carrying out social welfare activities. For instance, she joined Amos Wagacha, Njoroge Kamau, Muchohi Gikonyo and others to form the Gĩkũyũ General Union, GGU. For a time, they focused on repatriating children who were working in Asian homes under deplorable conditions, to their rural homes. They would approach the Locational Superintendent, a Mr. Colomon, who would issue the necessary orders for police action in taking the children into custody to facilitate repatriation. GGU was part of the Kenya African Union, KAU.

## SARAI AND ANTI-COLONIAL POLITICS

In 1944, Governor Moore nominated Eliud Mathu as the first African member of the Legislative Council (LegCo). Later in the year, the government agreed to register the Kenya African Study Union, KASU,<sup>27</sup> ostensibly as a support mechanism for Mathu, its co-founder. The general perception, however, was that KASU was a counterpoint to the Electors Union, a political outfit earlier launched to especially articulate the settler community's interests. By the time Mathu was settling in at the LegCo and engaging with KASU, Sarai had started to raise concerns regarding African women in Nairobi. Mathu, a friend from her Thogoto days, encouraged her to recruit women into KASU in order that their issues could be raised at the Council. However, Sarai felt that women needed to first organize themselves into strong political and welfare organizations. This would give them leverage with the male-dominated African political organizations, both in terms of positions and in raising issues of concern to women.

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<sup>27</sup> The colonial government, having banned political parties at the start of WWII, pressured Mathu and his co-founders into changing the Kenya African Union, KAU, into KASU.

In February 1946, KASU went back to being the Kenya African Union (KAU). A section of Kikuyu leaders saw KAU as a reincarnation of the proscribed Kikuyu Central Association (KCA), which had existed since the Harry Thuku-led riots of the 1920s, through to the beginning of WWII. However, Sarai sided with the KAU-Kenya group, rallying behind its president, James Gichuru, organizing secretary Francis Khamisi and his wife Mary, and other notables like Chief Koinange, James Beuttah, and Jomo Kenyatta—recently back in the country after an absence of twenty years abroad, especially in the UK. They were actively working towards an organization that reflected the multi-ethnic make-up of the Kenyan nation.

KAU provided a political platform to which social welfare organizations such as the African Women's League could aspire to be fully represented. Among others, James Beuttah, Jesse Kariuki, and James Njoroge tutored Sarai in 'politicizing' her memoranda, even though she remained in the background due to her government job. As cross-ethnic mobilization gathered momentum; KAU became more politically assertive. Kenyatta addressed meetings at Kaloleni and Pumwani social halls and openly called for return of land and self-rule. Some of the memoranda and speeches were discussed and prepared overnight at her home in Ziواني, as were plans for rallies and protests. Meetings would be held at Pumwani and Kaloleni

social halls, but Sarai would stay in the background—she would have already handed over memoranda concerning issues relevant to women, So she avoided direct confrontation with her bosses at the Municipal Council of Nairobi.

In her efforts to satisfy her own interpretation of her job description at the Council, Sarai resorted to writing memorandum after another: to the African Home Affairs Officer, Mr. Askwith; to the District Commissioner, Nairobi; to the Governor; to Arthur Creech Jones, Under-Secretary of State for the Colonies—on a fact-finding mission to Kenya in July 1944; and finally to the King of England! Obviously, she was no political scientist. Like most Africans, she did not understand why the British national anthem should exhort God to save the King, to rule over his subjects—including, obviously, in the colonies—if the King did not really rule. Creech Jones himself did not help matters when he addressed the crowds and said that the King had sent him to see for himself and report back the needs of the people in Kenya.

When, in June 1952, then Princess Elizabeth arrived at Eastleigh Airport, Sarai was allowed to present a lovely bouquet of flowers that she had arranged herself. Sarai used the bouquet presentation to surreptitiously hand over a raft of complaints addressed to the young royal's father, King George VI! Among

other issues, the “memoranda” condemned the excesses of racial discrimination—the despised *color-bar*—and drew attention to the degrading conditions in which Africans were living and working in Nairobi. Nairobi was to acquire city status, but Sarai and Muchohi Gikonyo—a fellow member of the African Advisory Council—disagreed with the decision. They argued that there was no ground to believe that city council authorities could institute the changes sought by Africans, which the municipal council had been unable or unwilling to embark on.

After the announcement of her father’s death on June 6, Princess Elizabeth flew back to England as Queen. Convinced that as a woman she was more likely to bring about the changes Sarai and other Africans sought, Sarai kept the memoranda going. As a result, she was summoned for questioning by the Commissioner of Police and other colonial officials. Unapologetic and defiant—if naïve—she declared that the memoranda were a consequence of the harsh restrictions of segregation. She also stipulated that the dispatched contents were within her mandate as a member of the Nairobi Municipal African Advisory Council.

## **The Women's Anti-Colonial Movement**

Sarai's political activism evolved from her work at the Municipal Council of Nairobi and her membership of the African Advisory Council thereof. At the Municipal Council, Sarai had interacted with Mrs. Jean Anderson, Vice President of the East African Women's League (EAWL) since 1932, and the first Alderwoman<sup>28</sup> in the Municipal Council of Nairobi. Formed in 1917, the EAWL was—and still is—the oldest women's organization in Kenya. An extension of the suffragette's movement in England, the League's early achievements had come in the form of the right to vote for women, granted in 1918. Of course, this right was not extended to African women in colonial Kenya; at the time, neither did African men have the vote.

Needless to say, EAWL was, until the mid-1950s, an exclusively White affair. As one of the very few educated African women in the employ of the Municipal Council of Nairobi, Sarai got busy mobilizing African women and organizing them into the Nairobi African Women's League (NAWL). The 'African' in the name was race-derived, contrasting the 'East African' in the other Women's League, which defined geographical coverage but

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<sup>28</sup> A female Councillor.

excluded the natives. What Sarai did not know was that the 'East African' was related to the time when Kenya was known as British East Africa.



Sarai was indefatigable in presenting petitions on behalf of African women.

On the other hand, it may well be that as she grappled with the issue of African women's political representation, Sarai was influenced—if not encouraged—by Mrs. Jean Anderson, MBE, with whom she rubbed shoulders in the Council halls, meeting rooms, offices and/or corridors. Sarai's objective was to navigate the internecine racial political divides and progressively overwhelm the European organization with the sheer numbers of the African 'league,' in the process defeating the forces of

exclusion and racial prejudice. She maintained the 'League' in the name optimistically, hoping that in time the Leagues would jell into one strong multiracial and multicultural women's organization, and, in the process, marshaling formidable political clout. For this reason, even though the NAWL was both a grassroots movement and a progressive urban-based forum with a clear political mission, Sarai, as Secretary General, tried to steer it in such a way as not to overly antagonize the colonial government. Thus, for instance, the agenda for a meeting held at Pumwani Social Hall on January 30 1949, includes an invitation to Mr. Askwith, the African Home Affairs Officer for Nairobi Municipal Council.

NAWL was working to extract more political space for African women, and to support African women leaders to become more responsive to the needs and interests of African women.

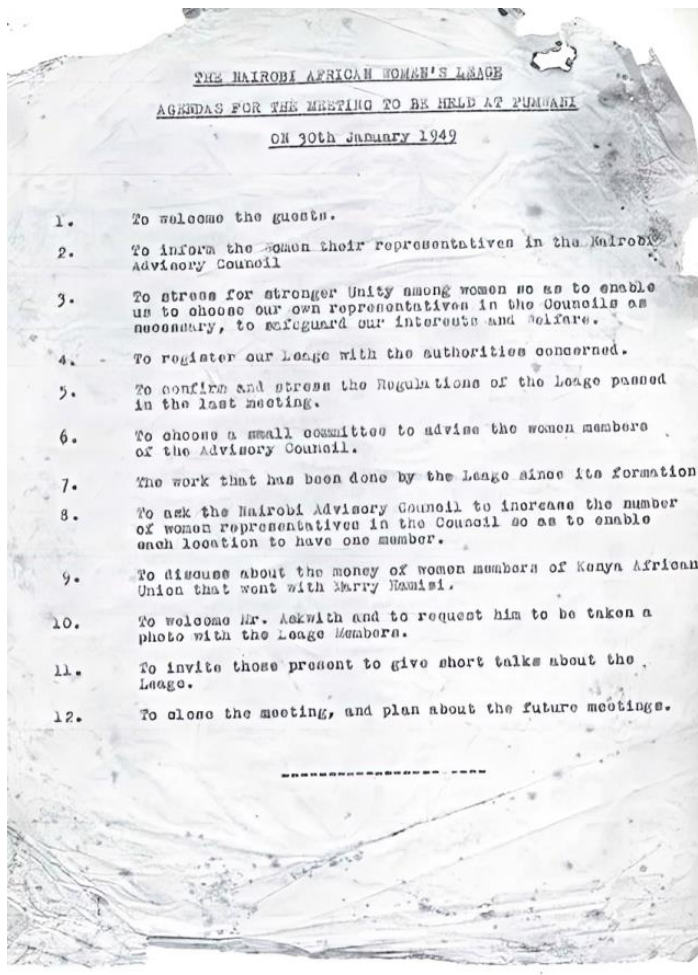
In her memoirs, Sarai states that for nine months, Mr Askwith beseeched her to accept nomination to the Municipal Council, as AWL representative. She would not accept, nonetheless, "unless elected by African women."



Founding members of the Nairobi African Women's League after a meeting held in Pumwani Social Hall, January 30, 1949.

Sarai's political activism was always anchored in non-violence; she was incredibly progressive, mobilizing and organizing non-violent struggles within a framework of transparency and

accountability way before NGOs popularized such concepts.



## Networking

NAWL membership and leadership straddled the burgeoning African class identities and the rural-urban divide. According to Sarai, the President was Gatũndũ-based Rebeka Njeri Kairi, who was barely literate. Sarai was founder and Secretary General of NAWL. According to her notes, it was NAWL which gave birth to AWL. Mr. Mbiyũ Koinange gave the name AWL to a group of women led by Ms. Rebeka Njeri Kairi. They had mobilized funds and labor—mainly consisting of women – for the construction of a ladies’ dormitory at the AOC (Karing’a) Teachers’ Training College in Gĩthũngũri. The college was built by the independent churches that broke away from mainstream Protestant churches during Dr. Arthur’s crusades against female circumcision in the late 1930s. The women’s rallying call was that no establishment could be without a *kĩrĩĩĩ*, referring to the girls’ chamber in the traditional Kikuyu home.

As colonial intransigence got more entrenched, Sarai joined other nationalists within KAU in more actively organizing political pressure to end colonial rule. Overtly, she intensified petitions and memoranda, and led peaceful demonstrations for improvement of living and working conditions for Africans, especially women. The character of NAWL was decidedly moderate and non-violent. However, three facts point towards

potential for radicalization, which—in a matter of time and in the face of colonial obduracy—would have configured into demands for reforms:

- 1) NAWL leadership had started to forge links with the Asian Women's Association. This would for sure not have gone down well with the authorities, since the colonial state was founded on domination in a pyramidal political and economic exclusivity. The European minority sat at the top, the buffering Asian community in the middle, and the native African majority at the bottom. The Asians enjoyed certain privileges and property rights within the colonial socio-political and economic pyramid. All the same, being used as a safeguard between minority White supremacy and majority Black dispossession was a position that could not stand the test of time. The specter of a women-led solidarity movement between Asians and Africans must therefore have at best been disquieting to the colonial masters!
- 2) Sarai said that NAWL had been planning a major rally at Kamukunji on the day that followed her arrest. This, coupled with support and advisory structures built around women representatives on the African Advisory Council, and links with the Asian women, could indicate

movement in the direction of expansion and consolidation of women power. From the perspective of any self-respecting colonial authority, any such notion had to be nipped in the bud.

- 3) Sarai was a member of the Kenya African Union, KAU. If KAU features in the agenda of a NAWL meeting in 1949, it is a safe bet that by the year 1952, political consolidation—if not a clearly outright affiliation—with the women’s movement had undoubtedly taken place. The fact that she was targeted under the Governor’s Orders for that very first wave of arrests of top-brass nationalist leaders who included Jomo Kenyatta,<sup>29</sup> and became the longest serving woman political prisoner, indicates a formidable capacity for organization that the colonial powers must have sought to quash at all cost.

The League was fast becoming the fulcrum of conscientization for African women in Nairobi. Most of them were semi-literate or illiterate. But they were soon making demands on the government and the municipal council for change—for instance, they called for more African women to represent them. The women were also beginning to take advantage of economic

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<sup>29</sup> This would come to be known as Operation Jock Scott.

opportunities opening up for Africans, such as in home and rental property ownership in the Pumwani-Eastleigh area and other African residential estates in Eastlands. In the process, African women in Nairobi were becoming increasingly financially independent, though in the early 1950s—before the declaration of the State of Emergency on October 20 1952, the number of such women was almost insignificant.

Africans had started to despair about the effectiveness—or lack thereof, of bringing about the improvements they sought, particularly in their pay and working conditions. In 1950, Nairobi Municipal Council workers converged at Kamukunji grounds, cutting down trees and lighting fires and singing praise songs to trade unionist Chege Kĩbachia, who took responsibility for organizing the strike. He was arrested and jailed. Even as other leaders were interrogated, Sarai was spared by a stroke of luck. Though she had taken part in the planning, it had been decided she should stay with the children at the Pumwani and Shauri Moyo kindergartens so they would not be affected by any outbreak of violence or police action.

Her luck, one might say, would soon run out.

## THE NIGHT THEY CAME

Arrest, Detention and Kamĩĩ Women

Sarai started writing her own story during her incarceration at Kamĩĩ Women's Prison, titled *"The Night They Came."* How her notes and diaries survived the sharp eyes of prison guards is a sure indicator of the wiliness of Sarai and her fellow inmates; it could also point to negligence on matters of the written word, owing to over-arching illiteracy on the part of the official hierarchy. Indeed, a lot of the prison memorabilia was lost/destroyed after her release from prison, owing to the insecurity, ignorance and instability that encased her family life post-detention.

Laban Muchoki Gikonyo escorted Sarai home on the evening of October 20 1952, after a KAU meeting in Nairobi. This was chaired by Jomo Kenyatta and attended by officials who would soon feature in the 'Kapenguria Six' trials. After thanking her colleague and bidding him goodbye, Sarai went inside. She quickly changed into a nightdress and a loose bathrobe, took baby Njũgũna in her arms and sat on the edge of her bed to breastfeed him. Then came a commotion outside, a big bang on her door. Before she could recover from the shock and fear, the police force—two Whites, and a plethora of Black home-guards—invaded. Grabbing the baby by the foot, they brutally

tore him away from her breast and threw him against the wall and onto the bed. In a flash, Sarai was bundled away in handcuffs, her children and their cousin-minder screaming in fear. She was to later learn that this was *Operation Jock Scott*, targeting the top leadership of KAU for arrest. Sarah Sarai and Rebeka Njeri Kairi were the only two women arrested on the same night as the crème-de-la-crème of the leadership of the nationalist movement on October 20 1952.

Although I have never come across ‘AWL’ in any of Sarai’s documents—not in her diaries, notebooks, meeting agendas or records—I had always assumed that there was one AWL, with Rebeka Njeri Kairi as President and Sarai as Secretary General, serving as president of a Nairobi Caucus of AWL, in the shape of NAWL. I presumed that to be why the two were targeted that night. Rebeka Njeri, having always been a resident of Gatundu—I reasoned—could, therefore, not have been president, or even member, of a Nairobi-centered AWL. This would have been a neat political arrangement, which would also have placed the women on an even higher pedestal than the male-led political organizations, such as KAU. However, in one of Sarai’s small diarized notebooks, I came across the following:

*“2<sup>nd</sup> April, 1961: Mr. Peter Mbiyu, son of Koinange, took my Women’s League name to Gĩthũngũri Teachers College...”*

Mbiu Koinange, recently returned from America as the first Kenyan to have achieved a Masters' degree, was impressed with Rebeka's capacity and efficiency in mobilizing women. *"They came each day in hundreds, sometimes stayed for 3 days after walking 30-50 miles to Gĩthũngũri Teachers Training College run by the Kikuyu Independent Schools Association, KISA. They contributed a farthing (quarter cent) to raise KShs. 85,000, which was accounted for to the last farthing. They also contributed labor—fetching stones from the quarry—to build and equip a girls' dormitory to accommodate 60, as well as a dining hall, a reception hall and separate kitchen facilities."*

NAWL had raised KShs. 9,000 towards Kenyatta's return airfare. Why would Sarai object to "her League" being shared by an initiative where women had been so effectively mobilized? The explanation is fairly simple. KISA and the Gĩthũngũri Teachers College were projects of the African Orthodox Church that broke away from mainstream Protestant churches in the early 1930s. Having remained a staunch Presbyterian, Sarai was therefore not likely to have a formal relationship with women associated with the independent churches. She would, however, be attracted to the fact of women mobilizing and working for the education of girls, as well as the training of women teachers. Rebeka Njeri and Priscilla Wambaki, both from Gatũndũ, successfully mobilized other women to contribute financial

resources and labor in order to build a dormitory, dining hall and an office.

But there was another angle deepening the rift between Sarai and women in the independent churches. The growing KISA institutions and memberships provided centers for the wave of oaths sweeping through the Agĩkũyũ community, especially in Central Kenya and Rift Valley. While totally committed to the cause of African self-determination, Sarai was vehemently opposed to the oathing,<sup>30</sup> and the violent uprising to which the oath bound its adherents. For these reasons, it is poignantly ironic that Sarai would be one of the first women targeted for arrest as part of the Mau Mau, and the last to be released from political detention in Colonial Kenya seven years later.

Sarai was taken on a ping pong detention tour, from Nairobi Industrial Area holding camp, to Lang'ata, to Isinya, to Kajiado, before ending up at Kamĩtĩ Women's Detention Camp. She was in Gĩthũngũri block, in a room she shared with (Mama) Ngĩna wa Kenyatta, Wambui wa Mbiu, and Mukami wa Kĩmathi. She said that while she and Wambui took turns preaching the Gospel of Jesus Christ to the prisoners, Ngĩna—then a shy, young bride—

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<sup>30</sup> She once told me that she found it repugnant – if the content described to her by fellow inmates at Kamiti Women's Prison was real.

was easily overwhelmed by the excesses of prison life. Sarai would help her write letters to her husband<sup>31</sup> and read for her the responses, if/when they happened. In the process, she also taught her the basics of reading and writing, as she did with fellow detainees.

An ex-detainee by the name of Irene Nyagũthie wa Mũmĩra from Kĩnoo (Detainee No. 82 - 1953) once told me, “I owe my life to Sarai, who adopted me as a daughter, protected me from *karaĩ*,<sup>32</sup> gave me hope, livened up my life at Kamĩĩ with song, taught me to read and write and knit and sew; and brought me to Jesus Christ...” According to Nyagũthie, many prisoners in the ‘Karai brigade’ suffered severe headaches, which remained unattended to. They were subjected to beatings by the guards in order to hasten the pace of delivery of concrete mix to building sites, until many literally dropped dead. Death was never far away at Kamĩĩ. The women digging in the quarries for ballast with very heavy *thururu*<sup>33</sup> or mounted on unfamiliar

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<sup>31</sup> Jomo Kenyatta, then a prisoner in remote Kapenguria, then Lokitaung, Lodwar and Maralal.

<sup>32</sup> Karai is the Swahili for a metal basin, its Kikuyu translation used here in reference to their use in forced labor that entailed carrying ballast on the head.

<sup>33</sup> A one-sided pickaxe.

construction scaffolding would fall to their deaths or disability. Others would die from depression, worry about family, or food poisoning. Having recognized her surname as one of the Kĩnoo families, Sarai intervened. Nyagũthie was taken out of Karai into the 'Interment Brigade', which was considered light duty. On that particular day, two trucks arrived at around 3.00 pm, one from Nairobi, with 20 bodies and the second one from Gĩthũngũri, with 16 bodies. The women prisoners were lined up—a group at the bottom of the trench and others on the ground, while others were made to climb into the trucks. It was culturally considered taboo for women to touch dead male bodies, but the prisoners were beaten into submission. Two by two, the ones in the truck threw the bodies to the ones on the ground, who in turn threw them on to the ones in the trenches. When they were done, they shoveled in the soil and covered the bodies. Nyagũthie recognized a certain son of Tharũba from her village.

Another woman from Kĩnoo who was in the interment brigade is Nduta wa Kĩnyanjui wa Wamwĩrĩ. She had been arrested in 1954 under orders from Chief Kĩambũthĩ, through Sub-Chief Wambaa wa Mũchũgia, and sent to Kamĩĩ for three years. When Nyaguthie was brought to Kamĩĩ, she found Sarai in the sick bay, suffering from food poisoning. She had already heard of “the famous daughter of the Gĩchanga clan” in Kĩnoo, but had

never met her. At Kamĩĩ, she soon joined Sarai's class for personal and communal hygiene, literacy, Bible lessons and political education. Small and slender in build, rendered skinny by circumstances, she declared the deepest love and respect for Sarai, who folded her in a sheet and used her as a pillow, to prevent marauding warders from sexually assaulting her! The logistics of some of the actions of Sarai and her colleagues at Kamĩĩ are—to say the least—mind-boggling.

The late Serah Wathĩtu wa Mbũgua was arrested and detained in February 1955, and gave birth to a baby boy at Kamĩĩ in October of the same year. She told me that according to prison classification, she and Sarai had three wristbands.<sup>34</sup> She said that if they had been men, they would not have survived; men with three wristbands were almost automatically hanged. After interrogation, male prisoners were categorized into:

- a) Hardcore Mau Mau adherents, the oath administrators;
- b) Executioners, the gun-runners;
- c) Governor's prisoners, who wore two bracelets, identifying them as planners and strategists; and

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<sup>34</sup> Irene Nyaguthie insisted Sarai actually had 4 wristbands (the Governor's prisoner; a hardcore criminal)

d) Kenyatta's colleagues, the master-minds and coordinators—who wore three bracelets.

Sarai was in the last category. For the Kamĩĩ women, one wristband signified a 'suspect'; two wristbands occasioned that a prisoner had been found guilty<sup>35</sup> or highly suspect; three wristbands were for 'hardcore' prisoners; those who had refused to cave in, despite the harshest interrogation methods and/or were imprisoned at the Governor's pleasure.

Sarai had to be hospitalized at the King George Hospital after contracting pneumonia from the 'Cold Room' experience. This involved being thrown into a tiny concrete room with a tiny window, otherwise known as *nyumba ndogo*; here, they had only a thin mat to sleep on. Two equally thin blankets were left for cover, and if one did not confess as directed and beg forgiveness, they were abandoned there for seven days. The food, passed through a narrow opening of the door, was half-cooked ugali. Cold water was frequently thrown in. By the time a prisoner was taken out, their skin would have become almost white, *like a mzungu!* They would then be put outside and a doctor called to attend to them. Many died, according to

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<sup>35</sup> Not necessarily in a court of law, but in the 'screening' process engaged as prisoners were brought in.

witnesses who were in Kamĩĩ with Sarai. Yet the torture methods represented by the cold room, the quarry and the burial brigades were still preferable to being made to carry bucketfuls of fresh human faeces on the head. The women so ordered would empty all the toilet buckets into rusty metal basins. Once full, they would be ordered to balance them on their heads while running—with the feces and urine dripping onto their faces—to empty the basins into a designated pit. All the while, guards ran behind them, not hesitating to use their batons on the backs of the hapless prisoners who for one reason or another could not catch up with the fastest of them.

Serah Wathĩtu remembered Sarai as a Christian, a nurse, a counselor on personal well-being, and a teacher/trainer. Wathĩtu, who at over 90 years old had an amazingly fresh memory, recounted how after the detainees were locked up at night, they'd quickly eat and then gather around Sarai's mat. Before the lantern was extinguished, using any scraps of material salvaged from sources within the camp, she taught them to sew, to knit and embroider, while imparting knowledge and counsel about personal hygiene, maternal health and childcare. They made lovely multi-coloured bags with wool pulled from blankets and sisal sacking filched from the kitchen. I am the proud possessor of such a bag which, for its

preservation, has won decades of contests with rodents and termites alike.



As prison life lingered on, White female social workers started visiting, bringing wool and knitting needles, among other permitted hand-outs. Thus, Sarai's 'home science' class thrived. Nyagũthie told me that she was in traditional attire—a wrapper

strung round the chest and tied on one shoulder—at the time of her arrest. She was so proud of a European fashion dress Sarai stitched for her, that after release from prison, she wore it until it literally fell off her back! Other women prisoners who had been given sewing machines were Ngĩna wa Kenyatta and Wambũĩ wa Koinange, according to Serah Wathĩtu.

Another detainee was Priscilla Wambakĩ from Gatũndũ, said to be a relative of Jomo Kenyatta's. She had been a long-term member of the Kikuyu Central Association (KCA), from 1925 to 1940 when it was proscribed. She later joined KAU, the Kenya African Union, where she also represented the Women's League. She was arrested in 1953 and detained at Kamĩĩ until 1957.

Secretly involved in counseling and offering advice on personal and family issues, Sarai succeeded in reconciling women caught up in inevitable quarrels and disputes. In the process, she became the detainees' 'advocate' who, being trilingual—fluent in English, Gĩkũyũ and Kiswahili—was able to communicate detainees' grievances to the highest authorities in Kamĩĩ. Serah Wathĩtu said Sarai was especially successful in pleading for the healthcare and welfare of babies and young children held with their mothers. They had been dying at a very high rate, until prison authorities ordered the shy young lady known as Ngĩna

wa Kenyatta to cook a special gruel for them. Thereafter, according to Mama Wathĩtu, infant deaths reduced considerably.

On Sundays, Sarai and Damaris Wambũĩ wa Mbiũ would preach to fellow prisoners in the presence of the guards, but later assure the women that nothing had changed with regard to the struggle for self-determination. Indeed, in Kamĩĩĩ, Sarai distinguished herself as a prisoner-of-conscience, refusing to remain docile and passive as further injustices were meted out towards her and her fellow detainees. One of the few educated detainees—another being Damaris Wambũĩ wa Mbiũ—Sarai used her (then) relatively superior understanding of the workings of the colonial government to fire off petitions to the Camp Commandant, the Governor, the Legislative Council (LegCo) member for African Affairs, and even the Queen of England.

Undoubtedly, most of the petitions and memoranda never reached their destinations, especially when destined for outside the camp. Nonetheless, living conditions at Kamĩĩĩ Women's Prison gradually became a little more bearable. The most famous detainees were separated from the others and put in a block—Gĩthũngũri—that was considered by camp authorities to be almost luxurious. These were tiny cubicles meant to

accommodate four prisoners on either side of a toilet bucket; a mat, or thin single mattresses with sisal fiber filling to accommodate two, and two very rough, single-bed blankets. The candidates for this preferential treatment, according to Serah Wathĩtu, included herself, because she had given birth to a live baby—many died at birth; a young, naturally shy and very withdrawn (Mama) Ngĩna wa Kenyatta, who had been moved from Hyena Block; Rebeka Njeri and Sarah Sarai; and three wives of Paramount Chief Mbiũ wa Koinange who had been brought to Kamĩĩ from Kisumu. One died and was buried at Kamĩĩ in spite of efforts by her son, Chief Karũga Koinange, to obtain the body for burial at his home.

Circumstances came together to fundamentally modify Sarai's political thinking. The arrest, the loss of her job and separation from her children, the incessant interrogation to confess an oath she had never taken, the inhuman treatment accorded her and other detainees at Kamĩĩ... Before they came for her, she had strongly believed in a gradual process towards African self-determination that would include aspects of 'assimilation'. The color-bar could be lifted, so that together, Africans, Europeans and Asians would cultivate a new way of moving the country forward. She believed that such a process would enable more and more women to gain the tools that would liberate them from what she termed 'cultural and social slavery.' She was

certain that it would equip them with the necessary tools, starting with literacy, that would enable them to fight for equal participation in both the struggle for, and the fruits of, independence. In her thinking, violence could only further alienate the races and disadvantage the women. Fearless as she was, she did not see women as active front-line combatants.

However, incarceration made her realize that the colonial government was too deeply invested in maintaining the *status quo*. She heard harrowing stories of the torture women had undergone in the hands of British and Home Guard interrogators at the time of their arrest and detention in the Chief's posts within their home areas. At the clinic, Sarai assisted the prison doctor to treat and nurse victims of gang rapes that had resulted in fistula—a post-traumatic condition that abnormally connects genitalia with the bladder and/or rectum. This often manifested most obviously with the victims emitting a stench of feces and urine. Some women detainees also had their uteruses damaged when, after gang rapes, beer bottles were inserted into their birth canals. Sarai wrote that it was a miracle that they lived through their gruesome ordeals and survived the infections that had remained unattended for days before they were brought to Kamĩĩ and on to medical treatment. She would surreptitiously offer counseling and aftercare services when they were locked up for the night.

Serah Wathĩtu said her sister-in-law was subjected to this horrendous ordeal, but was not detained. The women narrated the woeful humiliation of their fathers, husbands and brothers in front of their families; being mercilessly beaten, sometimes castrated with the use of crude tools, or outright murdered. Some women recounted the indescribable sorrow of their babies having been mercilessly butchered as they watched. Screams tore through the night as all these women relieved their ordeals in nightmares, but a neighbor was always at hand to calm down the survivor or otherwise help stem the screams.

Sarai also encountered women who spoke with passion about their allegiance to the Mau Mau oath. They were totally unapologetic about their participation in helping the forest fighters, because they did not see how else the White settlers could be made to return the land stolen from their fathers and clans. It was at Kamĩĩ that Sarai cultivated solidarity with, and a deep respect for, the forest fighters and the women who supported them with deliveries of food, medicine and even guns and ammunition. She enthusiastically learned their freedom struggle songs, helped in composing new ones, or improvising and adding verses. Nonetheless, Sarai remained unshakeable in her commitment to non-violence in all struggles for freedom, rights and equality.

Some of the enduring ethnic animosities, however, were born at Kamĩĩ; prison guards were almost invariably from the Wakamba or Wanandi (Kalenjin) communities, while almost all the prisoners were—or originated—from Central Kenya. Sarai was *released* at the end of 1959, not back to Nairobi where she had been living before arrest, but into another twelve months of restriction in what the colonial authorities had put down as her family's home village of Kĩnoo. She had no house of her own. Her father had migrated to the Rift Valley years earlier, and her mother—who had remained in Kĩnoo—had died in 1952, not long before Sarai's arrest. Her elder brother, Abraham Gĩchanga, gave her a terribly rundown thatch-roofed, dirt floor, mud-walled rondavel that often flooded from leaks during the rainy season. During the period of 'restriction', she was required to report to the local chief's office every week.

When the one-year restriction was finally lifted, Sarai dived right back into the thick of nationalist politics—then sizzled with calls for the release of Jomo Kenyatta to lead Kenyan Africans towards self-determination. She also engaged in efforts to revive the Nairobi African Women's League, incessantly mobilizing former colleagues around Nairobi. Her efforts also drew in the new crop of female socio-political activists that had sprouted out of the inestimable suffering wrought by the State of Emergency. Her diary records that on August 24 1962, she

went to the Registrar of Societies to apply for approval to change the group's name to Kenya African Women's League, KAWL.

At home, things were far from ideal. One early morning, we had just lit a fire using *mabebe* (dried maize stork) to make porridge so Jommo and I could hitchhike or walk tens of kilometers to school in Nairobi. Uncle Abram limped into the house, destroyed the fire with his crutch, and with his son Makumi in tow, proceeded to throw out all our belongings. They fastened a padlock on the door and left us out in the morning drizzle. Female neighbors, headed to the river with round water cans fastened with leather on their backs—suspended on sisal straps from their heads—came to commiserate with us. They then moved our belongings to our Auntie Peris's empty house in the village. When she turned up two days later, Mami explained that she had traveled to Kisumu for political activities.

Jommo took to walking around with a *kĩbindo*, a hunter's knife, swearing to kill our uncle at first sight. Mami would on the other hand caution him to do as the Bible said, and to "always remember he is your uncle." Meanwhile, we stayed in Tata Peris's spacious timber house while a two-room structure was put up on Mami Mũnene's plot in the village. As we were to learn a few years later, this arrangement was irksome to our

cousin Njoroge. Being Mami Mũnene's only son, he considered himself the rightful custodian and heir of his mother's property.

### **Gaitho's Treachery**

"Your cousin Wanjikũ was always a bit dumb in her gentleness. How else could she get entangled with a fraudster, whom she let into our Ziwani home after I was taken away, who then proceeded to ransack the house, steal my post office savings book and get a woman accomplice to impersonate me and withdraw all nine hundred shillings of my savings!" In 1952, with 992 shillings in a Post Office account,<sup>36</sup> Mami was a proud member of a miniscule African elite, and one of a handful of women so well-equipped. I believe Gaitho's treachery robbed her not only of her savings, but worse also of her mobility towards the modern economy, with attendant banking transactions. She records that on May 10 1962, she received all of four hundred shillings from the Court as compensation for the money lost in her Post Office Savings account. Without a constant income, the so-called compensation—which,

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<sup>36</sup> Bank accounts were for Europeans only.

obviously, did not take into account the actual amount stolen or interest the savings would have earned—soon dissipated.

At some point thereafter, I came across my school gym pants while rummaging in a basket of old clothes discarded for being torn. The pants felt heavy, and as I picked them up, out came tumbling bundles of United States Dollar notes. Dumbfounded, I hid my find until Mami came home. She explained that the money was a gift from Emperor Haile Selassie of Ethiopia.

At age twelve, I obviously did not have the necessary and timely handle on intelligence and mathematics to be her financial adviser. For math, I still don't. She had had trenches dug for a concrete foundation to erect a twelve-room residence, including guest quarters, palatial by the standards of the day, and even today! She purchased stones, cement and sand, ready to start construction on her own plot by the main road in Kĩnoo village. However, the precarious dynamics and vicissitudes of pre-independence politics kept her on the road or in the air, traveling within the country and abroad. In time, the bags of cement turned into stone, the construction stones were pilfered, and the sand became a weed-covered hillock.

A few years later, when cousin Njoroge evicted Mami from his mother's plot, she planned to move to a small plot of land she had purchased back in 1949—her very own property, neither

inherited, nor borrowed. But there was no house. She lived under a custard apple tree overgrown by a passion fruit climber whose canopy provided perfect shelter; only later was I able to buy timber and corrugated iron sheets, then a small, three-room house with an earthen floor was put up for Mami. At last, 21 years after we lost our City Council home in Ziwani upon her arrest, and 14 years following her release from colonial jail, Mami had her very own, very modest, home on her own piece of land, now standing as **SARAI'S**.



Sarai with a step-brother-in-law, Getau wa Mĩĩyo, after a technical session for the upgrade of her mother's traditional hut in Kĩnoo. Unfortunately, her mother died (1952) and Sarai was arrested before the construction could get underway

### **A Sensational Experience**

In the middle of all the effervescent pre-independence politics and my family's social instability, the Brazil Circus came to town, providing one of those precious moments when Sarah Sarai instantaneously morphed into Mami! October 1 1960, she bundled us off for a night of indescribable fun and enjoyment. For the first time in our lives, we were seeing elephants and lions. Their antics left us dumbstruck! Mouths agape we watched and screamed ourselves hoarse as the trapeze acrobats swung like monkeys high up in the marquee's apex. The clown—resplendent in his rainbow costume, red nose-and-mouth and funny cap—kept waving to the crowd: “Bye, bye. I'm going to Mombasa...” This from atop a ramshackle 18<sup>th</sup> Century contraption that he kept yanking to extremely noisy effect, only for the steam to fizzle into a loud hiss, and the engine to clank...clank...clank into silence.



Brothers Jommo and Jones, with our nephew and nieces: Jommo's Gichanga, Gathoni (Kakam), Wanja—all on call for the navigation of the contours of Mami's life in Kĩnoo, anchored in her upbringing.



Mami's life in Kĩnoo, after 7 years in jail (detention)

More than sixty years down the line, we still talk about the clown and his car. The show started at 9 pm. We paid five shillings and had a meal at Rahab Nduta's kiosk for one shilling and fifty cents, then got a ride to our home in Kĩnoo from Damaris Kimenyi, her husband and children—all this recorded in Mami's otherwise sketchy tiny diary! The circus audience was overwhelmingly White and Asian, and here was Mami defying her restriction orders. Indeed, she had been defiant almost from the word go. It may well be that her brother decided to step in and help the authorities by throwing us out of his house.

The early 1960s were the halcyon days of nationalist politics in Kenya, with Nairobi as the hub. Mami completely immersed herself in it. There was the Tom Mboya-led Nairobi People's Party, NPP—a vibrant, throbbing affair based at Alvi House, Duke (now Tom Mboya) Street. The Kenya African National Union, KANU, as well as its Women's Wing, also met at Alvi House. Here is where I would retire to after school and await Mami, most times due to lack of bus fare. More often than not, Mami and I would miss the last bus home and spend the rest of the night with one of her political party colleagues. There was Wambũi wa Mũnyua—later Mrs. Wambũi Otieno; Rahab Nduta, Keziah and Gladys in Kariokor, Salome Nicodemus in Shauri Moyo, or relatives such as Uncle Eslom Kamande in Starehe. I'd spend hours listening to the young men of the "Youth Wing"

rehearsing some great liberation songs, songs with a capacity to inject immense doses of euphoria in singer and listener alike:

*Wazungu watarudi kwao Ulaya;*

*Wahindi watarudi kwao India;*

*Waafrika tutabaki hapa, Kenya...*

Whites will go back to Europe;

Asians will return to India;

Africans, we shall remain in Kenya...

Sometimes, a party member would treat me to a tea snack at the Nachu Cafe downstairs. When the young men had finished their singing, I'd go to the building's entrance at the corner. Here, the watchman flattened cartons, thus set up a makeshift mattress for me to sleep on, and placed his coat over me as a blanket.

I wasn't allowed in the music room because of my rather tender age, but my ears caught everything, and on June 1 1963, the first Madaraka—Internal Self-Rule—Day, I led a huge crowd of villagers in Kĩnoo as we went door-to-door singing in celebration. They mostly sang in Gĩkũyũ:

*Wĩyathi, wĩyathi, Wĩyathi bũrũri wa Kĩrĩnyaga*

*Būrūri wa gĩkeno, wĩ ituamba na mĩtitũ;  
Kenya nĩ būrūri wa Andũ airũ.*

Freedom, freedom... for the land of Kĩrĩnyaga  
A land of happiness, with valleys and forests;  
Kenya belongs to Black people

But I had also mobilized a youth choir with the more assertive lyrics in Kiswahili, like “*Wazungu watarudi kwao Ulaya,*” and so we sang at the tops of our voices and beyond! By morning, the cold had penetrated both my throat and my knees; my voice was gone, and my knees buckled under me. Mami carried me on her back; first to the Kĩnoo bus stop, and then from the bus station to King George Hospital.

## THE CHILDREN

Sarai had her children baptized John Edward, Creek Jones Abraham, Rosemary, and David Solomon. Our names not only affirmed her Christian identity, but also her acceptance—if not admiration—of the British royalty, governors and a conflicted search for socio-cultural assimilation. It is ironic that a woman who as late as 1951 had baptized her son David Solomon would the following year be considered enough of a threat to the colonial state to warrant arrest and detention under the Governor's orders.

A picture of Sarai's children, taken with their cousin-minders, two and half months after her arrest, shows children who are well groomed and even chubby; the youngest two—according to preserved records, were regularly immunized and treated at Kariokor City Council Clinic. Behavioral psychologists will draw their conclusions. However, I am convinced that our individual and collective personalities are closely intertwined with our experiences over almost eight years of separation from Mami. The environment ushered in by the declaration of the State of Emergency was so hostile, and we were so young, ten years of age and younger. We are still haunted by memories of the separation and eviction from our home in what was then a

middle-class residential estate of Ziwani. Individual coping mechanisms we adopted in our vulnerability and the dynamics of transitioning to new social environments, still haunt us.

In the early years of her detention, it would appear that, in official government circles, there was genuine concern about the welfare of her children. Some officials went as far as to suggest that plans be made for the children to join her in prison. Others downplayed the children's welfare concerns and went as far as distorting facts about her family's financial status. Having been arrested and detained 'under Governor's Orders,' Sarai's case was of special interest to the colonial authorities. Thus, effort went into making it look like her welfare and that of the children she'd had to leave behind had been secured. Yet the truth was that the children had been separated and scattered to different institutions, relatives and friends after eviction from the Council house in Ziwani.

Below are samples of correspondence passed on by archivists:

To Col S.H. La Fontaine, 16<sup>th</sup> December 1953

*I ... would like to know what provision can be made for Sarah Sarai's children joining her at Athi River. I do think that it is important, as much in the children's interest as anyone else...*

Rev. Howard J. Church

Commissioner for Community  
Development & Rehabilitation

To the Principal Probation Officer, 11<sup>th</sup> January 1954  
*... If Sarah Sarai's children cannot go to Athi River, I feel strongly that funds should be made available for their support. Would you be kind enough to go into this matter and, if money cannot be obtained from the Destitute Persons Vote, I will have to apply for a Special Emergency vote.*

T.G. Askwith  
Commissioner for Community  
Development & Rehabilitation

*... Sarah's children were being looked after by her nephew Njoroge, the son of Tabitha, with whom they live. Rev. Joseph Kang'ethe contributed towards their education, and should be relieved of this duty, because Sarah's family connections are quite well off*

Col S.H. La Fontaine

11th January 1954

The Principal Probation Officer  
P.O. #80 N.Y.

SARAH SARAI

With reference to the attached copies of  
correspondence.

If Sarah Sarai's children, carried for the  
Alley Run, I feel strongly that funds should  
be made available for their support. Would  
you be kind enough to go into this matter  
and if money cannot be obtained  
obtained from the District Council  
Vote, you will have to apply for a special  
Emergency vote.

T.B. ASKINITH  
Commissioner for Community Development  
and Rehabilitation.

Sarah's children were being looked after by  
her nephew Njoroge K. Tabiti a man who  
was very drunk.  
Rev. Joseph Kany'ele, Controller  
towards their education and should  
be reminded of their duty. Because  
Sarah's family connections are quite  
strong.

16th Dec 1953

Col. S.H. La Fontaine  
Box 420  
N.Y.

Mrs SARAH SARAI

I am sending you a copy of a letter from  
the City Council Affairs Officer. I have  
mentioned this matter to you and would  
like to know what provision can be  
made for rest of Sarah Sarai's children  
living near the Alley Run. I do think  
that this is important, as much in the  
children's interest as anyone else.

Commissioner for Community Development  
and Rehabilitation.

Reverend Howard J. Church

These were, of course, unbridled lies. By end-January 1953 we—the children—had already been evicted from the City Council house in Ziواني and scattered among Mami's colleagues, friends and relatives. Our elder cousin Njoroge did look after Jommo very briefly in 1956, after Jommo was rescued from the streets in Eastleigh where for more than three years he had imbibed in the fullness of street culture (petrol fumes before the onset of cannabis, etc.). Cousin Njoroge was unable to cope with the wayward teenager, and took him to his mother, Mami Mũnene,

in Makadara. However, Jommo proved unmanageable and Njoroge finally took him to his sister Rachel Njeri's upcountry—Kagaa, Gĩthũngũri, Kiambu County—home. As for family connections being “*quite well off*,” even if this had been the case, pass and curfew restrictions had completely cut off the children from almost all of our relatives who might have been in a position to help. Meanwhile, our uncle Socrates Njũgũna, who was a manager at Juja Farm, had also been arrested and detained in the notorious Manyani Camp.

*4<sup>th</sup> February 1954*

*... The detainee informs me that she has 5 children, all of whom are attending school: 2 at Government School, Nairobi; 1 at CMS School Kikuyu and 2 at the Nursery School, Pumwani.*

*It is understood that a friend is looking after these children, although the mother seems uncertain as to who this friend is. It would, therefore, seem necessary for enquiries to be made... The mother has no finances with which to help.*

Henry D. Montgomery  
Probation Officer,  
Athi River Detention Camp

## Elizabeth Mwara

My brothers and I all knew she was Mami Mūnene's last born daughter, but she was also our big sister. She and Jommo were brought up together by Mami, ending up in Ziwani. She threaded in and out of my life—spicing my otherwise tumultuous existence under her mother's care with unforgettable crescendos. She once turned up at her mother's place in Makadara with a gramophone and I became an instant star and source of envy from my peers in the neighbourhood. I learnt the songs on the "His Master's Voice" vinyl records literally overnight, and proceeded to teach my friends: "*When the Moon Takes the Place of the Sun in the Sky...*"; "*Kamwambie ni Saa Saba, Mwalimu Sheikhi Nuhu...*"; "*Waniuaua, Kipenzi, Waniuaua...*"; "*Nilikuwa ku-soko, mama, Naona bibi mmoja, Anauza kuku wake...*"

*Wairimũ tene nĩndakwendete,  
no rĩu nĩndakũnyararire,  
Wathĩĩ mũgũnda woimbĩka rūhiũ wathie bushere kũgũra nyama!  
Wairimũ rehe ithaga rĩakwa,  
Rĩa gĩcuhĩ ndĩragwĩkĩre na thigũkũũ.*

Wairimũ responds:

*Kĩhuha nĩgakũĩire rĩrĩa ndekĩire mindo,  
Ngacoka gwaku rĩngĩ wagũra Kojo-o!*

The lyrics are worth translating because they demonstrate the kind of transition Kenyan society underwent in under 50 years of colonization:

*Wairimũ, I used to love you,  
but now I despise you  
You went to the shamba (garden),  
buried the tilling tool  
Headed to the butchery to grill meat  
Give me back the ring I gave you at Christmas*

She responds:

*Kĩhuha, your goose was cooked  
When I put on ear-rings  
I'll come back to you  
When you buy a Consul (a Ford car make long since out of  
production)*

The song's composer came from Kiambu District (now Kiambu County), neighboring Nairobi, which at the time, was a rural population anchored in traditional culture. As such, women wearing modern-type earrings and grilling meat at the butchery in the shopping center were considered to be going astray, and Africans in general did not own cars.

Children would crowd at our window to listen to the music and stare at me being taught to dance! Elizabeth taught me the Rhumba and the Rock 'n' Roll, and I lapped up the song and dance into my dreams. My pals and I spent endless time debating how 'Frank na dada zake' ever got to sing "*Mama we... Wataka nini wewe...?*" into a flat black disc with a hole in the middle. The record had a label with a picture of "His Master's Voice," which was a pussy cat looking curiously into the open end of a trumpet-like funnel. Some swore they had heard the same Frank and his sisters sing the same song in another house!

Those days, a transistor radio was installed in the local chief's office and a wired outlet fed into a strategic place, like the social hall. People gathered at specific times during the day—not evenings because of 'curfew' laws—to listen to the news by the African Broadcasting Corporation. The radio was centrally switched on and off by the chief. The only electronic entertainment, in the way of music, came from "His Master's Voice" vinyl disks. The TV had not yet made an appearance; at least, not in the African locations, especially not Makadara and Bahati where Kikuyus had been forcibly relocated after the declaration of the State of Emergency. Once a month, I think, the children would be thrilled to bits in the early evening when a huge screen was mounted on top of a mobile film company's truck in a nearby football pitch or open ground. We were then

allowed to go watch mostly cowboy movies. The interim moments imitate them in action, miming at shooting guns, and voice: *“Sholly, sholly, sholly!”*

As for me, I reveled in the sweet voices and dance from our gramophone, and developed a life-long addiction to music and dance, especially of the Rhumba and the Rock ‘n’ Roll brands! We even composed our own Rock ‘n’ Roll song as we danced the ‘knock knee’ brand:

*Jana nilicheza Rock juu kwa juu  
Mguu wangu mmoja ukavunjika  
Sasa ninaitwa mama kiguruu  
O mambo, mambo Ra (Rock) !!*

(Yesterday I danced the Rock’ up and up,  
Broke a leg  
Now I’m known as Mama Leg-O...)

Then, one day a gang of three young men calling themselves John’s brothers descended on us and forcibly took away the gramophone, swearing that their brother would not marry a Kabete ‘b...ch’, no way! We were petrified. John was Elizabeth’s boyfriend. I thought the world of him for encouraging me to tug along when he took Liz to watch a movie at Cameo Cinema in downtown Nairobi. I had walked between them, each holding my hand to cross the streets, especially Delamere—now

Kenyatta—Avenue which was very wide, with cars appearing to come from all directions! In defiance of his brothers' threats, John did go on to marry Elizabeth, and it was the greatest day of my existence at the time. In the company of John's sister Grace, I walked down the long aisle of Our Lady of Visitation Catholic Church Makadara. I held flowers in front of Elizabeth, and was dressed in a brand new yellow dress with matching frills and the first white sandals to grace my ten-year old feet!

It was Elizabeth who had all the character traits of Mami. She was pleasant and fun-loving, never scolded, and was always smart in dress—*fashionista* in her heyday. Indeed, Mami loved her so much more because she took after Mami exactly, except for the politics. She trained as a nurse at the same CMS Mission Hospital in Thogoto where Mami had been a pioneer trainee. At one point she also ended up at the Pumwani Maternity Hospital for midwifery training, which made Mami love her all the more for "*walking in her professional footsteps.*" The only time a cloud passed over my self-assuredness and security in Mami's love for me was when Elizabeth was around and Mami would blurt out to me something like "*nyakĩhangara*". This was an admonition of my aversion for work and preference for play as compared with Elizabeth's tenacious pursuit of hard work, and a trait Mami insisted on naming only in English: '*neat and tidy.*' I've never quite understood the distinction.

Elizabeth had her fair share of brushes with the raw-end of State of Emergency restrictions, as embedded in the local chief's authority. On one such occasion, accompanied by a home guard, Chief Mukhwana came to arrest her for not having registered her presence in Makadara at the chief's office. She had spent the morning washing clothes—hers and the rest of the family's—and had nicely hung them on the line to dry. Escorted by a huge dog, Mukhwana and his brace of guards first cut the lines, throwing all the clothes on the muddy surface below. We all locked ourselves in our room. Mukhwana then went for the wooden window and shattered it with one bang. We all screamed our throats dry, whereupon the chief and his askaris gave up and took off, leaving us all in tears of fear and relief.

Another time, she went to visit Mami, recently discharged from rehabilitation, first to Gĩtamaĩyũ, then to Kĩrigiti near Kĩambu town before being sent to Kĩnoo for a year's restriction. On the day of Mwara's visit, the whole village was expected to engage in unpaid communal labor—digging trenches and terraces on the hillsides shouldering Dagoretti and Kanyarĩĩ rivers. Poor Mwara didn't know this; it was her day off from nursing duties at PCEA Kikuyu Hospital, so she hurried to Kĩnoo to hug the auntie whom she had not had contact with since October 20 1952, i.e., 7+ years. Chief Kiambũthĩ and his home guards descended upon her with whips, manacles at the ready.

Elizabeth was saved by Mami declaring that she had been a special Governor's prisoner, which the chief somehow verified, but still insisted that Mwara had to get out of the village at once! Such uncalled for, unwarranted, unmitigated, suffering of populations under occupation is the glue that binds history.

### **John Edward Jommo**

Our eldest brother was born in April 1942 at the height of World War II and the 'Cassava Famine'. Mami used to tell me the story of how one day, she swallowed her pride and went to the Europeans' Hospital to seek terminal dues, carrying her baby. Returning empty-handed and having despaired of finding something to eat for her baby—her breasts completely dried up by hunger—she arrived at the Jevanjee Gardens in downtown Nairobi. Having decided not to watch her baby die, she wrapped him and placed him at one corner of the gardens, near the entrance, then went to another corner and lay down to die. As she sank into unconsciousness, she was shaken awake by an authoritative male voice.

Through her dimming eyelids, she recognized Inspector Tirus Waiyaki. Her father's sister Wanjikũ and her mother's sister, Nũngari were married to the Police Inspector's father, Mũnyua

wa Waiyaki. He took her and Jommo, whose feeble crying had first attracted his attention, to his house in Landi Mawe Railways Quarters and fed them back to life and health. Mami had the greatest respect for uncle Tirus and his children: Dr. Mũnyua Waiyaki—her political comrade who became independent Kenya's first Minister for Agriculture, then Foreign Affairs, and a Member of Parliament; his brother Kĩmani who became the first African to be Nairobi City Town Clerk; and their sister Wambũĩ wa Otieno who, like Mami, was a fearless champion of women's rights and freedom. She and Mami shared a special bond, in spite of their age difference. Several times they shared a bed at Wambũĩ's tiny room in Kariokor while I slept under the bed, after they came from political party meetings too late for us to catch the last OTC bus home.

After Mami's arrest, my brothers Jommo and Gĩchanga were taken to Kĩnoo and left under the care of our cousin John Njoroge and his wife, Rachel Wairimũ. However, when Rev Josiah Kang'ethe learnt of this, he brought them back to Ziwani together with Wairimũ so she could look after all the children. He went on to petition the authorities to release Sarai as her children were on their own. Meanwhile, Wairimũ, under pressure from her family in Kĩnoo and living under the generalized fear wrought by the State of Emergency, left her

sister-in-law Mary Wanjikũ to look after the children in Ziwani and went back to Kĩnoo.

I only got to know Jommo when I was about 7 years old. I overheard whispered conversation as to how our cousin Wanjikũ was unable to cope with looking after 4 children as well as her own child and a husband. Jommo had fallen into delinquency after following *mtaa* boys to Eastleigh, where he had recently been rescued from street life. When he was brought to Makadara, he was in his mid-teens and all I saw and experienced was a wild, terribly cruel, big boy. I'd tell on him for having taken the 10 cents coin left on top of the cupboard and buying a cigarette. He'd throw me a "*you just wait till we're alone*" look. And, sure enough, left alone, he'd give me the whacking of my life! He'd grab my feet, turn me upside down and bang my head on the concrete floor (this may ostensibly explain why I morphed into hard-headedness). Mercifully, a neighbor quickly intervened—thank God for the urban congestion that was Makadara. Then, of course, I couldn't report for fear of more beatings. To my utter relief, Jommo was soon bussed off to Mwalimu Rachel Njeri, our cousin and Mami Mũnene's eldest daughter. She was a primary school teacher in a far out-of-town place known as Kagaa, in the Uplands Forest. Our baby brother Njũgũna was already under Mwalimu's care and all seemed fine. But after Jommo relocated to Kagaa,

trouble erupted. Jommo would be caught in some mischief, such as being in the company of a girl in the forest during class time. They'd bring him to the school, strip him down and Mwalimu would administer thorough corporal punishment during the morning parade, in front of the entire school. Jommo would then go home (Mwalimu Rachel's) and take out his humiliation on his little brother, aged 5-6 years. I fear to speculate on what he may have done to him, because to date Njũgũna has never been known to be in a relationship, and he can never describe the beatings without almost breaking down and stopping.

Cousin Njeri eventually succeeded in disciplining Jommo, to the extent that he completed Primary 8 (KAPE) and proceeded to Thogoto Teacher Training College.

### **Jones Abraham Gĩchanga**

*(who later changed his middle name to Ibrahim)*

My elder by two and half years, he was brought to Makadara from a children's center when he was about 8-9 years old and we bonded beautifully. We'd sit at the back of the house, observing birds and aeroplanes flying overhead. He'd take a keen interest in a big aeroplane and solemnly announce, "It's headed to South Africa." I thought he was so-o-o clever! I'd try to impress him with how much knowledge I had retained from

his 'teaching'; the next time a plane flew past I'd excitedly pipe: "There's the plane flying to Mayakafri!" He would ever so calmly make me repeat the words I found so difficult to pronounce, sounding it out: 'South Africa.' Then he'd teach me a song, like:

*Kwa mabawa ya Imani, Nami nipae huko  
Kwa waliyoitwa hewani Kwenye nuru kuu*

*Wataniimbia wimbo, Wanikaribishe huko  
Malaika nao nikiwafikilia Watanikaribisha!"*

*(On wings of faith, That I should worthy be  
To fly amongst those called - To great light in glory*

*They'll sing a song - To welcome me in their midst  
And when to the angels I get - Welcome, I shall be...)*

After I'd mastered the melody, he harmonized. We sang a perfect duet, and I was in seventh heaven!

However, my brother was soon taken back to the Salvation Army children's center, where he'd been since we were evicted from our Ziواني home. I later learnt that he ended up at Dagoretti Children's Centre. Meanwhile, I never stopped looking forward to his next visit. I loved him with all my young heart, and

continued to do so into adulthood. He, however, remained indifferent at best. Later, when Mami gathered her children to her, she'd tell us the story of how my father gave Gĩchanga six shillings for the purchase of a baby and he dutifully handed the money to Mami before she left for Pumwani Maternity Hospital. In those days, childbirth was a secret between mother, midwife and newborn. It was a near taboo subject for men. After Mami brought me home, Gĩchanga was over the moon. He now had a baby of his own! Several months down the line, he surprised us as I was being bathed and made the big discovery that I was different from him and Jommo, *"This baby you bought for me is circumcised! It's not like Jommo and !! I want my money back!"*

Perhaps he should have been given 'his money', because unknown to Mami, he began plotting to get rid of me. One day he offered to push me in the pram, but when Mami went indoors to clean the house, leaving us outside, he pushed the pram into the nearest drainage trench. Then he headed back to the house, triumphantly announcing that he had gotten rid of the circumcised baby! Women drawing water and washing clothes at the communal water-point nearby ran and got me and the pram out. I guess Jommo, who was 5 years older, must have educated him about circumcision as they bathed. Unfortunately, Kikuyu families (still) do not discuss matters sex (endowment, practice, etc.)

Once, after drinking honey wine at our Grandpa Jommo's home in Lusigetti, we came back to Kĩnoo thoroughly smashed. We then became inseparable. Gĩchanga and Njũgũna went and stood outside to pee. I joined them and inserted myself between them, but then I had to squat and tried to get them to squat as well. We all fell in a heap. That was in 1962, when Mami had taken us for the reconciliation ceremony with her father. We had sat around the three-stone fireplace, where grandpa insisted that we also partake of the honey wine, specially brewed for the reconciliation ceremony, *njohi ya kĩrathimo*. The horn-tumbler was ritually passed from one pair of hands to the next, taking a small sip then passing it on until it got back to Guka. He then poured some for libation and took a generous swig, from which he spat into his chest, muttering words of blessings that were more poetry than prose. After we found out it tasted sweet, we almost gulped it down at the next round, even as Mami tried to at least slow us down—surreptitiously and politely, since Guka had decreed we could drink. Well, we soon paid the price upon returning to Kĩnoo, for we threw up all over the place!

Mami was always concerned about Gĩchanga and the effect of the separation. On August 2 1961, she recorded a prayer for him in her daily meditation notebook: *"Improve Gĩchanga's health, cover his bad condition, give him a clean mind, take away his*

*bitterness and hatred, give him a clean heart and shine thy blessing like a torch in his way all his life long..."*

## **Me**

*"Your dad was suave, sophisticated, fascinating—a tobacco pipe perennially balanced at the side of his mouth... It was inevitable that we came together, in love. Not Kenyan, therefore not involved in the hustles of the politics of the day. My other lovers we met in the course of my political work, though none of the relationships endured as I was not ready to enter into polygamous homes. My personality doesn't fit a second/third wife status."*

Mami opened up to me about everything, including her love life. A studio photograph of my father—pipe held to the side of his mouth—had survived her 7-year absence in detention and as she showed it to me, she called him by two European names—David Stone. I asked why and she replied that his father had originated from Chicago in the USA and was in a ship that docked at the port of Mombasa during World War I. He jumped ship and went looking for his roots in Africa—traveling up the railway line to Jinja in Uganda, where the railway had reached at the time. He settled, married a local woman and they had my

father. I shudder every time I think of this brave soul, perhaps moving from former American slave colonies in the South to Chicago in search of livelihood and dignity. Only to encounter the same forces of White supremacy and the discrimination and dehumanization of Black people that he'd ran away from in the South of the USA. So, he jumps at the opportunity to retrieve his roots and stows away in a ship headed for Africa. Traveling up the railway line from Mombasa to Jinja must have considerably dampened his spirit as he encountered a wild continent under the yoke of colonialism.

I have always wondered how old Mr. Stone fared in Uganda, having run away from a 'free' America that was not free for Black people, only to find even less freedom under colonial rule. Whether he experienced the euphoria of independence celebrations in the early 1960s; whether he was around to witness the overthrow of the Kabaka, king of Buganda, and other monarchs; whether he experienced the shock and disappointment that hit my mother at the overthrow of Emperor Haile Selasie—the only African ruler to have succeeded in defending his subjects and country against European invasion and colonialism. Whether, indeed, he lived long enough to experience the turmoil that followed the coup against President Milton Obote's government by the murderous Idi Amin Dada in January 1971.

Mami did not say what my father was doing in Nairobi. Could it be that his own father's spirit of resistance to the forces of oppression had driven him from Uganda? Was he trying to find his way back to America where his father had come from? Ziwani—and Starehe nearby—was a cosmopolitan, multicultural neighborhood. Our neighbors were colorful people with colorful names or titles: Mjomba, Mama Muganda, Mawerere, and Mzee wa Mombasa, to name but a few. Mama Muganda and Mawerere were from Uganda, and David Stone had arrived as their guest, settling soon after in Nairobi. As a toddler, I remember being very intrigued by the Ugandans, whose women wore colorful, bulbous outfits called *Gomesi*. The men wore long white 'kanzus' (robed tunics) with black blazers on top, a stick toothbrush perennially stuck to the side of the mouth, and wooden crafted slippers I've not seen anywhere else since. As for my father and his pipe, they disappeared after Mami was taken away, never to be seen again.

As I grew older and started to internalize what Mami had endured for the sake of her country, I added respect to the love, and even with teenage rebellion, we bonded beautifully because all I could ever show her was respect and love. I took her rebellious, unpredictable persona in my stride. I think she and my dad must have found common ground in the wanderlust and love of adventure. When I lived in Arusha, Tanzania (1969-

72), on two occasions I heard a strong knock on the door in the dead of the night, ran downstairs in my nightie, to find a taxi driver asking to be paid for having brought a visitor from the bus station. Typically, mami had not alerted me that she was coming! The second time she visited, after a few days I came home from work and she was missing—for the next seven days! I went to the police station to report the disappearance; meanwhile, she had a great time in Moshi, where she had found spontaneous hosts who had even slaughtered a goat in celebration of a new-found friendship!





Mami and I in the UK. She was a well-travelled woman and mother who would cross oceans to be with me

When I lived in Geneva, Switzerland, she visited; this time my friends and I welcomed her at the airport, since I had sent for her. Her three months with me were punctuated by drama. This one time, I arrived home on a Sunday from an overnight office retreat to find her washing the car—against Swiss social rules—all bedecked in Maasai traditional regalia, her vocal cords stuck in an African song!



In the 1970s, I lived in Switzerland, invited mom over for a well-earned holiday. We visited Caux-sur-Montreux, and were welcomed by one of her old colleagues-in-faith.

The awe-struck landlady and neighbors could only discreetly watch from behind window curtains. Luckily, I got home before anyone called the Swiss Police! Noise pollution was offensive in Swiss Law, and neighborhood relations.

When I was a toddler, we had a pet monkey named Shiba. She was always stealing bananas from Mr. Comoria, an itinerant fruit hawker originally from the Comoros, who faithfully delivered to Ziwani House no. 140, because Mami was such a good customer. All the while, he sang this stupid song that went *“Comoria... Alexander is the great...”* For some reason, Mami took a fancy to the song and sang it into her old age, even through Alzheimer’s. It’s the one song Mami sang that I just hated, though my daughter was amused by it, and still sings it when she’s trying to annoy me.

Comoria, as everyone called him, habitually got into a fight with Shiba over his bananas. Invariably, he would lose, with Shiba disappearing into the tree next to our house, carrying Comoria’s bananas. Apparently, Shiba was only caged at night. He had been brought to us by our uncle Peter Kinyanjui, fondly called Mjomba by the family. Mjomba was a hunter, and used to escort European hunters to the forests of the then Belgian Congo. I still have a photograph of him, resplendent in his hunter’s hat, and the khaki shirt and shorts that have endured as the ‘safari’ outfit. In it, he’s holding and pointing a hunter’s rifle, and has a pistol tucked into his belt. On his return, everybody would sit around him, enthralled by the goodies and regaled by the life stories of the *“little people of Belgian Congo forests.”*

Just beyond three years of age, after we were evicted from the Council house at Ziwani, our Tata Njoki took me into her house in nearby Bondeni Estate. There were just the two of us, and she spoiled me silly. She'd take me with her to her workplace at Pumwani Maternity Hospital. I'd spend hours rolling on the lovely lawn and making flower bouquets or plucking petals and arranging carpets of the bougainvillea, hibiscus, false lily and daisy blooms. When I was done, I'd obediently sit and watch (and doze) as she stitched away at her sewing machine, making and mending uniforms for the hospital staff. Then we'd come back home and she'd make savory food, like rice *pilau*.

All too often came “*pirigisheni*” (inspection) police raids, and all hell broke loose. The johnnies<sup>37</sup> with their African escorts—some wearing *gakũnias*<sup>38</sup>—would descend on the neighborhood and go swiftly around the Estate, banging doors with the butts of their guns, and dragging out so-called Mau Mau suspects. But my wonderful Tata Njoki had heard them from a distance, or would have heard the fracas at the neighbors. Swift as an arrow, despite her bulky frame, she'd grab me quietly—a finger to her

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<sup>37</sup> British Colonial soldiers were locally referred to as johnnies. The term is still used to refer to British soldiers in Nanyuki's training unit.

<sup>38</sup> Gakũnia refers to masks of simple sacks with holes for eyes. The term came to refer to collaborators, who often wore them to hide their identity.

mouth—and stuff me into a charcoal gunny bag. This she would shove under a concrete slab on the veranda used for placing the cooking stove on, and bid me keep as quiet as the dead. Eventually the *johnnies* and home guards would leave, none the wiser about a hidden child of a so-called Mau Mau detainee!

For reasons which remain a mystery to me, but which probably have to do with the fact that auntie Tabitha Waikonyo (Wangare) was Mami's elder sister while Tata Njoki was a step sister or cousin, I was soon shipped off to her place in far away Makadara. I had entered Pumwani Nursery School and, at age 4-5 years, now had to walk from Makadara to Pumwani and back, a distance of more than 6 kms one way. Each morning as we parted company, Mami Mūnene to walk to work at BAT in the Industrial Area and me to Pumwani, I was admonished not to talk to strangers and not to dilly-dally on the way, not to do this or dare the other! I was given a half a loaf of Elliot's bread to accompany the soup we were served at Nursery school—a legacy from Mami's advocacy during her tenure as City Council Assistant Social Welfare Officer.

Customarily, as I approached the Nairobi River, I'd become exceedingly hungry and scoop out the soft fleshy insides of the bread, leaving the shell. This I would then take partly with the milk during the 10 o'clock break-time, and the rest with the soup

at lunchtime. I was often late for school, but my teacher had been a member of Mami's party and was ever so kind to me. I recall her as Teacher Chamuge—from *chamgei*, which is a greeting in the Kalenjin language—though she was not a teacher but a cleaning assistant. She indulged my littlest whims, carrying me and giving me all manner of tidbits like sweets and bananas. I remember her to this day, seven decades later.

By 1956, I progressed to Morrison Primary School in Bahati, less than half the trek to Pumwani. Four years later, I went to Dr Krapf Primary School in Ofafa Maringo. This was where I was when Mami was set free from colonial jail—officially called 'detention,' serving only to aggravate the injustice through the use of 'softer' language. I probably wouldn't have been privy to this great piece of news (about Mami's release) if it wasn't for Evangelist Billy Graham, who came to Nairobi and preached to Africans at the City Stadium. With the repeated interpretation into Kiswahili, the preaching went on and on as he addressed a hugely adult congregation. As for me, I was waiting to see a miracle. The school was abuzz with rumors of the preacher's healing powers, and we ran all the way to the stadium, over five kilometers away, to witness the miracles.

Then, my own miracle happened! As I watched the crowd, now surging forward in response to what I only learnt as an adult was

the altar call, I saw an apparition, headscarf tied under the chin. “*Maaaamiiiiiii!*” I screamed and dashed, or rather flew, towards her. Before I could hug her, she grabbed my hand and gave me that look and gesture I’d learnt to interpret at Kamĩĩ Women’s Prison as, “*please be very quiet; we’re in the presence of Almighty God and some other earthly forces that don’t entertain noisy children...*” She held me by the hand and, together, we joined the procession headed up front. We bowed our heads and were prayed for. Mami said we were now saved, which made sense to me only in as far as she had brought heaven to my miserable world. But in-no-time we were separated as she headed back to Kĩnoo, while I somehow found and joined the Makadara crowd I’d come with. My excitement—at the thought that I’d soon be with my mother, out of prison for keeps—knew no bounds!

The icing on the rotten cake of colonial administration was the failure to notify her family that Mami was to be released, or had been released after more than seven years of incarceration. Was it heartlessness, negligence, or thoughtlessness? Was colonial record-keeping and communication so deficient that no one could locate her children with their family members where they could be reached? She was simply dumped in her ancestral village of Kĩnoo where—mercifully, for the moment—her elder brother Abram Gĩchanga, lent her the use of a grass-thatched

mud hut. “Lent” here is the operative word because, before the year was out, he hopped over and physically threw us out, during Mami’s absence.

Anyway, life and school had to go on, and it was decided that I should stay put in between school breaks. Then, a year or so later, another Christian crusade happened at the same Nairobi City Stadium venue. The self-appointed broadcasters at school assured us that this time the miracles were happening, so we trooped off to the stadium after school. The preacher preached passionately, on and on. The only ‘miracle’ happened when, suddenly, the street lights came on. In total panic, I ran all the way to Makadara. Of course, I was too late. Mami Mũnene was already home from work, fuming! She didn’t even shout at me. She imperiously made me pack my belongings in a bag and took me to her younger brother, my uncle Socrates Njũgũna. He too had been imprisoned, but for a shorter period than his sister’s seven years. After release, being an ex-Alliance High Schooler, he had secured a sales job with Kenya Breweries Limited, with a one-room accommodation provided in Makadara. We found my new auntie Wambũi at home. When Uncle Njũgũna found me in his house, he rained blows on my head until I peed on myself and auntie was shedding tears, quietly begging him to stop.

Two days later, after showing me how to cook for and serve my uncle, she left for the village to look after my cousins. They had recently lost their mother, her half-sister, who had died at the end of her eighth or ninth pregnancy. Uncle arrived after dark and I quickly served his supper as auntie had instructed. Then he ordered me to lie down next to him on the single bed. I obeyed, and he tongue-kissed me and tried to push his humongous manhood into me. Mercifully, after unsuccessfully trying to disentangle or straighten out my skinny, 10-year-old thighs, he gave up and fell into a drunken stupor. I slid off the bed and regained my mat on the tiny kitchen floor. Decades later, when I opened up to my auntie about the episode, she confided to me that she had stumbled upon worse scenarios, closer home! And society continues to write RIP on the graves of violently abusive, paedophilic, incestuous men! Aagh!!

Has anyone researched on the monsters churned out by the torture chambers of colonial jails? Someone once suggested to me that young Agíkũyũ men and women were at best getting into heavy drinking to forget, or committing suicide, rather than live with the memory of what they had seen or experienced during the State of Emergency. On the other hand, perhaps the calypso song *“Shame and Scandal in the Family”* is testimony to even deeper, more widespread roots; the centuries of slavery with all the accompanying dehumanization. Hence, *“Your dad*



Hon. J. D. Kali, who was the first African Member of Parliament for Eastlands, Nairobi, after independence. He lived next door to Dr. Krapf Primary school in Ofafa Maringo, and agreed for me to live with his family; this was made up of Tabitha, his then-new wife straight out of Alliance Girls' High School, her brother Paul and a nephew. I stayed with the family for the rest of my Primary School life, and treasure the memories by giving back to the community, collectively or individually, when I can.

### **David Solomon Njũgũna**

He was at his mother's breast when they yanked him off, by the leg, and threw him on the bed against the wall. His earliest clinic card shows that by my second birthday on September 19, 1951, he weighed 9 lbs 7 ozs.

On one of her visits to see us in Ziواني, Njeri, a member of NAWL, literally a 'disciple' of Sarai's, found we had been evicted, together with everything in the house. She took Njũgũna home with her to Pumwani-Majengo, and raised him as her only child. His only recollection of his life with Njeri is from around the time when Njeri had joined the women's singing group—the *nyakĩnyua*—in Nairobi, agitating for Kenyatta's release. She never left Njũgũna behind. In all that hullabaloo, he was spotted

by our cousin Njoroge, who arranged to bring his young cousin to our aunt in Makadara. Now, I had a kid brother! He must have been about 5 years old, and I was seven. We were inseparable!

One day, we were sent to Mami mūnene's vegetable patch in the then open space between Makadara and Ofafa Jericho, to keep us away from mischief while our auntie went to work at BAT in the Industrial Area. Njūgūna's foot was torn up by the remnants of the barbed wire segregating Makadara for Kikuyus. The barbed wire had recently been pulled down, and danger from the pieces lurked all round. So here we were—in a bloody fix! I tried covering the wound with soil but we ended up with blood all over our clothes. I carried him on my back, both of us crying, leaving a trail of blood patches behind. A wonderful man took us to the clinic. In the evening, Mami Mūnene arrived from work and found Njūgūna's foot bandaged. So, I received a thorough spanking with a cane! The next time our cousin Rachel Njeri came to visit her mother, she took Njūgūna back with her to Kagaa, where he started school.

Our uncle Kahĩa had a Ford station wagon. He came from Kagaa in Gíthūngūri District, and was married to Auntie Moi, Mami's youngest step sister from her second mother Wambūi. It was he who once took us to Gatamaiyũ Detention Centre to visit Mami in the process of her 'rehabilitation.' Plans for the visit were

arrived at weeks in advance. Jommo and Njũgũna walked the five kilometers through the forest from Kagaa to Uplands Train Station, catching the evening train from Kisumu to arrive at Kikuyu Station. They then took a bus to Nairobi, and on to Makadara, where we all trooped to Uncle Kahia's place for the ride to visit our Mami.

She shed tears at seeing her last born, and jokingly declared that her breasts never dried up. She gave each of us a multi-colored sleeveless top knitted with leftover wool collected over time in prison. The wool, clothes and materials for sewing classes in jail were usually donations from prison visitors, members of EAWL. Njũgũna treasured his sweater so much he insisted on wearing it regardless of weather condition or occasion. He even wore it to sleep! Yet it was he who declared to the magistrate at the Children's Court that Mami was an imposter, since his mother was Njeri who lived in Pumwani. He was constantly running away and had been found as far away as Thika, wandering in the streets. It was at this juncture that he was taken to the Children's Court, and afterward put away at the Kabete Approved School for a few years. Thus, Mami was once again separated from her last-born son.



Mami posing for a photo with her last-born son Njuguna after she bumped into him in downtown Nairobi. He disappeared again two weeks later.

In August 1961, she would enter a prayer for him in her little MRA notebook: *“God Almighty, touch David with hope that he may be able to see and learn much in school. Let him no longer run away from school and home.”* After discharge from Approved School, where he received training as a watch repairer, he ran away, permanently, into the streets of Nairobi city. It was thus likely that he had become not a watch repairer, but snatcher, in the streets of Nairobi city, or wherever. But he

also veered towards cart-pushing—*mkokoteni*—for the traders at the city's Wakulima Market. Some time in the early 90s, he returned home with a suitcase and a transistor radio which lasted 20 years in working condition. Njũgũna's own outlook in life, living and being, however, remains a mystery. I promised Mami I'd always look out for him, God enabling me.



Sarai's children with their  
cousin-minders: Liz  
Mwara, Mary Wanjiku  
(holding Berewa (L), David  
Njuguna and Jones  
Gichanga, with John



7 years after separation,  
Sarai was reunited with her  
children. Thanks be to  
God.

## SAFARI ABROAD

**M**oral Re-Armament was founded in Oxford, UK, in 1938 by American scholar Dr. Frank N.D. Buchman. The drumbeats of WWII were already in the air. MRA brought all religions together in an effort to thwart the trajectory of the war machine. MRA grew exponentially, world-wide, through the 1940s, but Russia and its allies in the Soviet Bloc stayed away. Post-WWII, MRA evolved into a powerful anti-Communism ideological machine, to the extent that those inside perceived it as a revolution.

MRA came to Kenya during the 1950s, in the interstices of the Cold War and the inevitability of self-rule, for which Kenyans were frighteningly coalescing around an armed struggle using home-made guns. In Kenya, MRA was openly crafted under a *“not right, nor left”* ideology—it was a tool purely to fight the spread of communism. As Sarai gained freedom from the colonial jail, she found herself interacting with a remarkable coterie of White settlers, administrators, business people and professionals. They were led by Colonel Alan Knight, a former prison superintendent reformed from merciless bully to MRA disciple, professing a ‘religion of change.’ White adherents were humbly seeking forgiveness on behalf of their government, and pleading with ex-detainees against bitterness for the horrific

excesses and atrocities meted out under the State of Emergency—including years of incarceration.

The families of former detainees were warmly welcomed to the homes of the now-changed Whites without reservation. Doors were open, from the formerly exclusive Whites-only tree-canopied suburbs of Westlands and Lavington in Nairobi, to the cool Redhill-Tigoni near Limuru; from the beautiful mansions surrounded by tea plantations overlooking far away Kitale, to the dairy and wheat farms in Nakuru, Naivasha, and Eldoret. A convention center was built at the Narosura Farm near Rongai, about 30 kms from Nakuru town. Here, people of all races, creed and circumstance would spend days and nights in personal and collective meditation. They shared personal reflection as, with pen and notebook, their minds and their conversations navigated the four ‘moral standards’—of Absolute Honesty, Absolute Purity, Absolute Unselfishness and Absolute Love—around which MRA adherents would “*Remake the World.*”

Sarai was introduced to Lt-Col. Alan Knight by her colleague Stanley Kinga on December 9, 1960. The Kenyans who were invited to Moral Re-Armament were carefully selected, mainly being those who had spent years in political incarceration. In the minds of the colonial authorities and settlers, these were the people poised to take over the reins of power in a Kenya under self-rule.

One fine morning, Mami announced that we were all going on a trip. We bathed and put on our Sunday bests and walked with Mami to the bus stop. It was not the one for traffic headed towards the city, which is what we were used to, but for that headed west. Then Mami started flagging down passing vehicles. I'm not sure what had happened to transport arrangements, as I am sure the hosts must have taken care of logistics. It took a while for a vehicle which could accommodate a family of four big children and a mother to stop. What stopped was a truck with an open body—sides boarded but the tail end open—for ferrying timber from the forest. It was being driven by a *Kalasingha* (Sikh) and he had two African loaders next to him. One jumped out to make room for Mami, and we joined him at the back.

The truck was literally flying! We were all thrilled to bits, until we got to the Limuru Escarpment. My brothers were simply overwhelmed by the breathtaking view of the Great Rift Valley down below, and invited me—who had so far been seated on the truck's floor—to join them standing up behind the cab. Well, I did, and all hell broke loose! The road winds down the steep sides of the escarpment like a snake precariously caught in a maze. Convinced that we were going to tip over any minute, I screamed my lungs dry. The truck stopped. Trembling, I was brought to the cab between the driver and Mami, who did her best to calm me down. To this day, every time I drive down that escarpment, I marvel at how that *Kalasingha* man could have

been driving at such speed. Even more mind-boggling was that he drove with one hand on the driving wheel; the other drummed away some tune he was whistling and mouthing the lyrics in his mother tongue. This was some years before radio, cassettes, CD, DVD and other assorted digital gadgetry came to be fitted into modern motor vehicles.

Our entertaining *speedy Gonzales-à-la-Sikh* driver dropped us at the Gilgil turn off. We hailed another ride, this time a Peugeot station wagon, arriving in Nakuru after dark. It took no less than two precious additional hours to find Mami's comrade-at-arms—Mr. Stanley Kinga's— house in a residential estate situated on the outskirts of town. By the time we were knocking at the front door, it was well after ten o'clock, and the family had retired for the night. Such was Mr. Kinga's joy at beholding us that the whole household was woken up and everybody assigned a task for our hospitality. By midnight, we were sitting at a table, eating chicken that had been slaughtered and cooked after our arrival. I only remember the chicken; how delicious it tasted! Mr. Kinga and Mami sat up for the rest of the night, reminiscing. In the morning, we were picked up by a car with European occupants, one of whom was introduced as Jean Hopcraft. We thus headed to Narosura Farm in Rongai, past the home of Daniel Arap Moi, who was at the time one of the handful of African members of the colonial parliament, the LegCo.

We were received with tremendous warmth. Narosura Farm turned out to be a Moral Re-armament Conference Centre, donated by our host family. All sorts and types of people were there—lots of Whites, a few Asians and a few Africans. We were given a room in the main house, and experienced the comfort of European settler life. The children were introduced to European table etiquette; on contact with knife and fork, my steak invariably went flying out of my plate, to my utter frustration and embarrassment! After a lavish English breakfast where, for the first time, we sampled delicacies such as bacon, sausage, fried eggs, and oat porridge with milk, we were left to play with the settlers' children present. They took us on an expedition of the wonders of the farm—enormous cows being milked; hay neatly stacked in the silos where we played hide-and-seek; the dam with its resident ducks, the geese and turkeys.



Served by White settlers; serving White settlers; serving with White settlers.

Every morning we woke up early to attend “*quiet time*” at 6 am in the conference hall. We were given notebooks where we were to note our “thoughts” and “guidance” for the day, and what “we wished to change” in our lives. Because they mentioned God and they were mostly White, I figured it was a sort of extension of the Billy Graham crusade where I had spotted Mami among the throngs responding to the altar call—so we walked together to the altar and I got saved. When I arrived back home to Makadara, I informed Mami Mūnene I’d been saved. “From what?” She asked. I said, “From licking sugar and playing marbles with boys on my way to fetch water, and being lazy.” She was very happy and for a few days didn’t scream at me as I made every effort to do “saved” things like cleaning out the cupboard, washing dishes without waiting to be ordered to do so, and keeping away from the sugar bowl.

So, at the MRA morning quiet time, I wrote down that I wished to change my sugar licking habit, which I had inadvertently fallen back into a short while after the Billy Graham crusade. (I still lick sugar!) As for guidance, I wrote down my wish that my friend Muthoni could join us in Narosura; if not for this trip, then the next one? What wouldn’t I do for my closest friend to sample the food and luxury of sleeping in beds with soft pillows, bedsheets and blankets?

I had met Muthoni when I transferred to Dr. Krapf Primary School in Ofafa Jericho from Morrison Primary in Bahati, after passing the Common Entrance Exam. Muthoni and I were the

youngest in Class 5 and we bonded immediately—for life! I so wanted her to share in the goodies we were eating in Narosura and, maybe, even get a cute dress like the one I got from Moira Hopcraft.

Later on, as a teenager, I was to join MRA's Sing Out Africa—later Harambee Africa—group. Together with young people drawn from as far afield as Uganda and Tanganyika, we sang our hearts out. This, for me, was MRA's nirvana—a humongous choir of teenagers like me, practicing all day at a camp in the quiet environs of Hardy's in up-market Karen, near Nairobi. I loved listening to some of the most awesome soprano soloists from Uganda, belting out "*Water for a thirsty land...*" We sang, "*Not left, nor right, but straight ahead,*" the ideological message not quite sinking in. "*If more people were for people, there'd be a lot less people to worry about, and a lot more people who care.*" These were some of the messages in the songs we sang. The lyrics in

*What color is God's skin?  
It's black, brown, it's yellow;  
It is white, it is red;  
Everyone's the same in the Good Lord's sight.*

held a special appeal for me. I was then a student at Delamere, a former Whites only school where I was one of the first beneficiaries of scholarships offered to African students in the

period of the implementation of the post-colonial desegregation policy. From my experience of extremes which ranged from a ping pong progression (sometimes regression) through the A, B, C, D Parallel grade streams to a year's salt-free diet to check my rapidly expanding bustline, I had reason to wonder about the color of God's skin.

But there was also an inescapable political message in the lyrics which held a special attraction for many of us. We belted out Pan-African songs, our young minds buying into the vision of Africa as one country (the united states of Africa?) with Kiswahili as its lingua franca, growing into a gift to the world.

*O Afrika, nchi yetu  
Sisi tu watoto wako  
Twajitoa kukulinda  
Hilo ndilo lengo letu*

(O Africa, our motherland ...  
We, your children  
Commit and aim  
To defend you...)

We performed at the city hall in Nairobi, where the capacity audience gave a standing ovation. The choir and band even went on a US tour. For reasons that I can only imagine had to do with age, I couldn't make the trip. To date, however, I remain an ardent believer in the Pan-African dream.

At Narosura, the mood and narrative were set especially by two films: one titled *“Freedom for Ghana,”* was based on the independence celebrations of the first country in sub-Saharan Africa to achieve independence in 1957. The other movie, *“The Crowning Experience,”* was a musical starring an African-American actress by the name Muriel Smith, singing *“Sweet Potato Pie...”* and

*The world walked into my heart today*  
*Black and White and Brown and Yellow*

Sarai was attending her Moral Re-Armament (MRA) introductory conference at Narosura Farm in the Rift Valley—the heartland of white settler land grabs, large-scale farming and brutal squatter evictions. Here, the footsoldiers and gatekeepers of all that was inhuman and unjust about colonial rule and the excesses of the recently lifted State-of-Emergency (white farmers and colonial government officials, including Police and Prison commandants) stood on the platform or sat down with victims like Sarai, and sought forgiveness. Such was the power of this new ideology. Each morning the day started with a *“quiet time”* devoted to reflection on personal experiences and relationship with God. People wrote down their innermost thoughts in a notebook provided for the purpose. If individuals wished, they then shared with other congregants. The intensity of Sarai’s soul searching is penned just before the

decision to forgive various people, including Mr. Mbiyu wa Koinange:

*“In my life, I have never agreed to accept my mistake; to seek to be forgiven. I have been full of hate; I led my children and my people into hatred. This ideology has cured the hatred and bitterness in my life.”*

Sarai was a ‘born-again’ Christian, who did not hesitate to renew her salvation—anchored in the concept of cleansing from all sin, for instance during evangelical crusades—hence our unforgettable encounter at the Nairobi City Stadium. Forgiveness is inscribed in “The Lord’s Prayer”, a constant for Christians; one confesses sin and seeks forgiveness—from God and man. *“Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us.”* One, therefore, has difficulty reconciling, on the one hand, Sarai the sinner, who seeks forgiveness from God time after time and, in turn, Sarai the MRA adherent who forgives and seeks forgiveness from those who have wronged her!

Perhaps this was the irredeemable flaw in a spiritually-inspired reconciliation process, as opposed to a process driven by justice—not necessarily retributive justice. What is implied in Sarai’s MRA notes is that responsibility for the moral and material monstrosity colonial rule had turned out to be was to be shared between perpetrator and victim alike. No wonder Sarai’s notes from the entire MRA experience are so incoherent. Receiving kindness, as opposed to the eight years of hostility

and cruelty from which she had just emerged, and witnessing humility from highly prominent and influential personalities— inclusive of politicians, former guards, bureaucrats, and so on— naturally elicited a response from her in a like manner. Thus, as recorded in her small notebook, aside from Mr. Mbiyu Koinange, she would also seek forgiveness from her brother; a fiancé of longstanding who had betrayed her; and lovers who'd left her morally bruised and shamefacedly nursing the products of shared sin, among others.

Sarai embraced MRA plainly with such zeal, declaring that it resonated perfectly with the Christianity she had so fervently latched onto since childhood. Some very profound conversations were taking place between hitherto sworn enemies, couched in apparent remorse, forgiveness, sincerity and warmth. Mami lapped it up truly and sincerely, ready to forgive her former tormentors and hold hands to move forward together. In her notebook, she exclaims:

*"Marvel of God! He is calling for me to change... to be pure in heart and to forget the past, so as to receive fresh life, which will enable me to forgive those who've wronged me!"*

March 31, 1961

*"God is telling me to reach out to various people – Col. Allan Knight, Douglas Hughes, my sister, my brother Abraham who*

*threw my children and my things out of his house, Eliud ..., who betrayed me ...”*

A letter from one Iris Guthridge of Nakuru demonstrates the openness and sincerity of the MRA encounters:

May 13, 1961

*My dear Sarah,*

*...I have had you in my thoughts very much since Easter... I heard that you were able to... show the women the right plan. I... pray that God will guide you to the right home and employment...*

*As you say, the moral fences are down and bitterness and hatred are in many hearts. I am seeing that unless my heart is pure ... I can have no part in bringing an answer to this country, and so my decision is to be willing to change every day and every time I am tempted to feel angry or resentful, so that my heart is not closed and I am free to help the person next to me.*

*In my “quiet time” this morning, I was reading about the ‘widow’s mite’ and saw how when she simply gave it to God in faith, then she was no longer a poor widow but someone Jesus used to teach us all.*

*With all good wishes and hoping we shall be meeting again soon.*

*Yours very sincerely*

*Iris Guthridge*

On May 29 1961, Sarai went to Lusigetti to bid her father farewell. She spent the night, and on May 31 1961 traveled to Switzerland in the company of her friends and colleagues Ms. Margaret Wambui Kenyatta, Nahashon and Mary Ngare, Stanley and Dorothy Kinga, the Lows and the Kĩbuthus. After two days of transit, they arrived at Caux-sur-Montreux, overlooking Lake Geneva. Here, they joined hundreds of people of faith from all corners of the globe for the MRA continuous World Assembly, where they were greatly inspired by encounters with and speeches by the MRA founder, Dr. Frank N.D. Buchman.

At the time of her departure for the MRA World Assembly, my cousin Wanjikũ (our caregiver back in 1952) and I were in hospital. I had ruptured my appendix thanks to the ministrations of Mami Mũnene's neighbor—a traditional masseuse by the self-evident name of Wangare *Mũruithia*, the circumciser. This after I was sent home from school because I was vomiting and complaining of pain in the stomach. I had spent a miserable night, but come morning I was sent back to school—having been declared cured by my torturer. By the time the school called an ambulance, my nails had started to darken. I underwent multiple surgeries over three months at the King George Hospital. Wanjikũ was in another ward, with pregnancy complications. By the time Mami came back, Wanjikũ had passed away during the premature delivery of a baby girl, who survived. Wanjiku and I were both named after our

grandmother. Mami Mũnene never forgave her sister for going off 'gallivanting' in Europe and leaving us in hospital, under her social care.

The engagement with MRA injected unmitigated turbulence in Sarai's mind. On July 2 1961 she wrote (in the 2<sup>nd</sup> person as the spiritual directive was dictating: *"Sarah, you must think about the nation, not your children. The work is waiting for you to spread the MRA ideology as the key to change... Ask Abram to take the children to the Salvation Army or Mang'u Catholic center... As for your daughter, take her to Narosura for the holiday. God will find a good place to keep her healthy and comfortable..."*

22 July 1961:

*"God gave, and God has taken away. I pray for Mary Wanjiku, my sister's daughter, may our God forgive her sins and keep her in a comfortable place in Heaven until I meet her again there. Lord, have mercy upon Rosemary, cure her illness completely so that she may work thy duties again in this world. Help my sister, protect her heart from weakness so that she may keep the children in good condition."*

The MRA ideology was spread through assembly from various corners of the country and region. There were speeches and testimony in plenary, and individual, pair or group sessions. Personal or group reflection or insights were duly recorded in personal notebooks and the highlights or details thereof

packaged for subsequent sharing in plenary. More entries in the small notebook, on August 2 1961:

*Blessed be the Lord God Almighty. My heavenly Father, you heard my cry and answered my prayer for my family; you took care of my daughter and now she's out of hospital. Protect her, give her good health wherever she walks, show her your way, give her a good brain to study hard; increase knowledge for her, let her mind feel the power of your Holy Spirit. Please Father do not let Satan lead her in the wrong direction. May thy love shine on and guide her all her life..."*

*Then: ...For years I fought for freedom for my country... and as a women's leader many people trusted me... At the Swiss National Day celebration, I was full of bitterness, wondering when we Africans will have a day for our own national celebration. Many people agreed strongly about fighting the British government for freedom to form our own government. I hope and pray that when we Africans have our freedom, we shall choose a day of remembrance for those who fought..."*

On August 11 1961 she joined other MRA converts to Germany to collect the body of Dr. Frank Buchman, the MRA founder who had died there four days earlier. He was buried in the church at Caux-sur-Montreux, with over 340 people in attendance.

Sarai stayed on at Caux, helping out in the kitchen, where she penned into her notebook all manner of menus and recipes. Soon, however, she fell ill with severe food poisoning. She was

attended to by a doctor she called Margaret, and on September 16 1961 entered the following into her tiny journal: *"You are well guarded by your host—the Almighty God. He will give back your health. He has given you a long life, to do His work. So, He knows how you will get resources to feed the family..."*

During Mami's absence, MRA adherents looked after us with compelling warmth. A letter written to Jommo just after Mami's arrival back from Switzerland tells it all:

Nairobi, September 24 1961

*Dear John,*

*I was up at Kĩnoo this afternoon to see you and your mother. I am very sorry there was no one to meet your mother. John, please forgive me.*

*Good luck in your studies, John. My thought for you this morning was that you have been called by God to lead your people and show them a completely new way.*

*Yours sincerely*

*Phil Abrams*

From far away Switzerland, his mother had also been thinking of and praying for the same Jommo, as evidenced by this entry on August 2 1961: *Dear God, help John Edward to find a good school and scholarship. Open the way and guide him to happiness. Protect him and let his heart learn to be honest."* Mami records

the numerous times she tried to secure a scholarship for Jommo to study abroad, or even to join a local institution of higher learning, all in vain! Jommo never forgave her; everyone else came to her for help, and she had succeeded in helping many, but she was unable to secure a scholarship for her own first-born son!

Many people, mostly women, wrote their names and addresses in her little notebook.<sup>39</sup> In time, however, I was to conclude that Mami had embraced that aspect of MRA that was spiritual and put aside the Cold War ideology and its attendant anti-communism propaganda. Her tiny notebook in Caux-sur-Montreux contains passages such as:

*“Try to learn the meaning of Moral Re-Armament, not what people want you to do, but what God wants you to do.”*

*“...the British used people of God in a hypocritical way, not straight, while pushing the propaganda that Africans are not to be trusted...”*

*“Kenya will have its own government and Kikuyus will prove corruptible, which they have copied from the British...”*

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<sup>39</sup> See list (Appendix 1)

Indeed, it is obvious that the whole MRA experience was spiritually uplifting and liberating, if momentary in certain aspects. She has a photograph taken in the company of a European friend, bare of the headscarf that had served to cover her lacerated ears since early teenage when she was forced into the detestable FGM ritual. Mami arrived back home on September 21 1961, full of stories of wonderful encounters with people from every corner of the globe: Western Europe, Burma, Hindu priests, Islamic leaders, representatives of indigenous nations from USA, New Zealand, Pacific islands, and a few African countries. She was especially impressed at how most non-Europeans were all decked out in colorful national costumes and cultural regalia.

Back home in Kĩnoo, MRA adherents such as the Abrams and the Hopcrafts were constant visitors. We were even taken to the lovely Lovering family home in Tigoni, where we were generously fed as we all watched the film "Freedom." On December 24 1961, we were fetched from Kĩnoo to go spend Christmas at Narosura Farm, where we, the children, feasted to our hearts' content!

The campaign for the release of Jomo Kenyatta was gaining momentum among the nationalists. Fear among the White settlers of what such eventuality would portend was growing exponentially. Whether it was subtle or open, Sarai and no doubt the other Kenyan African members of the delegation at Caux-sur-Montreux were expected to rope in other nationalists.



1962 Sarai's children celebrating youngest David Njuguna's 10<sup>th</sup> Birthday at Narosurra Farm, near Sabatia/ Rongai in Nakuru County

This was especially true for those likely to be nursing bitterness from years of incarceration, torture, elimination of loved ones and destruction of livelihoods. The Colonial masters must have despaired when, after returning from Switzerland, and even as she remained passionate about the MRA values, she started dilly-dallying, first with the Emperor of Ethiopia—only African ruler to have successfully militarily repulsed colonial forces. Secondly, she was soon trooping off to the then Eastern Bloc (USSR), where the mainstay ideology was Communism, the

antithesis and clear target of the then raging Cold War that had split Europe into East and West—the West led by North America and East by the USSR.

## **ETHIOPIA**

From the remnants of her notebooks and diaries, it is clear that the sponsors for her trips, mainly the governments of countries she visited, were nursing the expectation that she would form part of the ruling contingent in a soon-to-be independent Kenya. For her first visit to Ethiopia, she was on her own. She arrived in Addis Ababa—which, she learnt, means Fresh Flowers—on Saturday August 10 1963, and stayed at the home of Col. Tegene for three days before moving to St. George Hotel.

Her tiny diary states that on August 16 James Njogu informed her that Eliud Mathu was resident in Addis, and that they met four days later.

Another diary entry states that on Saturday, September 7 1963 she was received by Her Imperial Highness, Princess Tenagne and her daughter. She presented to the Princess nine books, including the KANU Manifesto. At this time, Sarai had started writing a book titled *“The Night They Came”* which, as she disclosed to Princess Tenagne, would be based on her arrest by the colonial government and subsequent incarceration in high security prisons.

She met Mr. Njũgũna Njaũ, a Kenyan resident in Addis who entertained her and another Kenyan, Mr. Gathingira, for lunch and dinner at his place. On Tuesday, September 10, she was received by the Ethiopian Foreign Minister, Mr. Getacheo, who arranged for her accommodation at St. George Hotel. On Thursday, September 12 1963—during celebrations of the Ethiopian New Year, 1956—Sarai wrote that she was presented to His Imperial Majesty, Haile Selassie, followed by dinner at the home of Col. Tegene.

In Addis Ababa, she met young Kenyan men who had left home in search of higher education abroad. For reasons largely related to financial paucity and ignorance of the challenges of traveling abroad, they had ended up stranded in Addis Ababa. Some had hitchhiked from Kenya, through Sudan. Sarai got busy sourcing scholarships from various countries with embassies in Addis Ababa. She wrote in her diary that on Tuesday and Wednesday, September 24-25 1963, she was received by the Bulgarian and Polish ambassadors, respectively, in her efforts to procure scholarships for Njũgũna Njũru and Njũgũna Njaũ.

Almost a year later, on Saturday July 14 1964, Sarai returned to Addis Ababa. The following day, having mentioned her loom and sewing machine among the casualties of her arrest and long years of incarceration, she was escorted by her Ethiopian hosts to visit a cotton mill and clothing factory. Given the cultural expression shaping the factory's product, Sarai was so

impressed that she declared in her tiny notebook that she hoped *“to send our girls to be taught to spin and weave.”*

Since her nursing days in mission hospitals, Sarai had sought avenues—including opportunity and audiences—to express her spiritual convictions. Thus, she had been an ardent evangelist, following her patients to their villages and homes to preach against witchcraft, female genital mutilation (FGM), wife-battery and child molestation. In the 1960s, now additionally equipped with MRA ideology, Sarai got deeply involved in efforts to prevent the Shifta War, notably by persuading Somalia to back down from its territorial expansionist Greater Somalia ideology.

On her first visit to Ethiopia, when she was received at the palace of His Majesty Emperor Haile Selassie, she had sought and obtained permission to organize a peaceful demonstration in Addis Ababa against Somalia’s claim to swathes of North Eastern Kenya and the Ogaden region of Ethiopia. Now that she was more familiar with the socio-political landscape, she went ahead to organize the event with the assistance of three

Kenyans resident in Addis Ababa—Njũgũna Njaũ, James Njogu and Henry Gathingira.



Sarai leads a massive demonstration in Addis Ababa, with permission from H. H. Emperor Haile Selassie, against forces of expansionism that sought to consolidate Somali nationalism across post-colonial borders.

She was later given at least a dozen photographs, very clearly featuring the iconic stamp, “Imperial Ethiopian Government, Ministry of Information.” They show a lone woman dressed in her own African style and carrying a humongous white fly whisk, in the company of the Kenyan gentlemen, leading a procession of hundreds (perhaps thousands) of predominantly male Ethiopians, some carrying hand-scripted placards that read:

*“Britain & Somalia, stop dividing Kenya. We don’t want bloodshed,”*

and

*“Somalia, Hands off Kenya. NFD<sup>40</sup> is an integral part of Kenya.”*

A few placards were written in Amharic, but many lectured in English to the culprit governments (Britain and Somalia) with admonitions, reproaches, warnings, and assertions on the outcome of the labors of Sarai and her team: *“It is a dangerous illusion to believe that there will be secession of NFD to Somalia...”*



Received on Thursday, September 19 1963 by His Imperial Highness Haile Selassie of Ethiopia. He gave Sarai permission to mobilize for a demonstration against Somali expansionist politics, as well as an autographed photo of himself on the occasion of celebration of the Ethiopian Calendar's New Year 1956.

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<sup>40</sup> The North Frontier District (NFD) was one of the regions of British Kenya. It covered Marsabit, Isiolo, Wajir, Mandera and Garissa.

## CAIRO, EGYPT

In July 1964, Sarai and Ms. Margaret Wambũi Kenyatta had a stopover in Cairo on their way to the Peoples' Republic of China. Upon arrival in Cairo, they were confronted by the sorry sight of stranded Kenyan students who had traveled from Nairobi as part of either Tom Mboya's or Jaramogi Oginga Odinga's student airlift programmes to various destinations abroad. Some, such as Leonard Mũngai, Joseph Mbũrũ, Samuel Gĩthuka and Stephen Njũgũna, wrote their names into her tiny diary, saying:

*Thĩna witũ no gĩthomo, o kũrĩa guothe kĩngĩoneka. Passports cĩa arutwo o na cio nĩ irehete thĩna*

("Our foremost concern is education, wherever it may be found. Also, student passports have become a problem. Please help us!")

On arrival at the Ismailia Hotel in Cairo on July 4, she had met students Moses and Tom who, as inked in her diary, she had immediately taken to the American Embassy and helped obtain student visas to the USA.

Stephen Njũgũna and another student had, apparently, been awarded scholarships to the Soviet Union, but did not wish to go there. They wanted to travel to Cyprus, from where they hoped to find their way to Israel. Of course, they dared not reveal their plans to the USSR embassy officials charged with

helping to make flight connections to final destinations, for fear of being denied their preference, or even arrested. Now, they were penniless and stranded. Sarai failed to cultivate the willpower to leave the students and proceed with her journey. Her traveling companion proceeded to their intended destination—China. Sarai caught up with her in Peking (present-day Beijing) almost a week later, having helped the students in Cairo meet their destination expectations.



Sarai in Cairo, pictured with Kenyan students, some having hitchhiked this far, whose plight for further studies abroad she took up, while her travel companion, Ms. Margaret Wambui Kenyatta, proceeded to the designated destination, China. Sarai caught up with her in Beijing after almost a daunting fortnight of knocking on European Embassy/Consulate doors and securing travel and study sponsorship for most.

## PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF CHINA



Sarah Sarai and Ms. Margaret Wambui Kenyatta, guests of the National Women's Federation of the People's Republic.



With children in the Workers' Village Kindergaten in her hotel, and Leaders of the National Women's Fed of the People's Republic of China in 1962

## EASTERN EUROPE

Sarai's diary records that on July 27, 1964 she arrived in Berlin, then East Germany. Three days later she went right back to Prague, Czechoslovakia—now the Czech Republic. On July 31, she had a meeting with the Women's Wing of the Communist Party in Prague. A letter sent to her by Eva Maríková, Editor-in-Chief of the journal "Czechoslovak Woman" in 1964 encourages Sarai by evoking the inspiration woven by her pronouncements at the International Women's Convention that she had attended in Prague:

*"I wish all the women in Kenya to soon reach the summit of the mountain at the foot of which they are now standing"—as you expressed it so poetically, beautifully and very correctly in the discussion.*

On August 1 1964, she left for Kenya.

Sarai came back from this trip and tried to alert the government that considerable numbers of student beneficiaries of the scholarships for study abroad were getting stranded mid-way to their destinations. When she was not satisfied that the respective organizers had heard, she went to the media.

Though briefly and based on what the hosts chose to show and inform her, Sarai observed the socialist model at work—especially those aspects related to socio-economic and gender concerns. She went on to enthusiastically use discourse from both sides of the ideological divide to pursue struggles for social justice and the rights of women in Africa generally, and Kenya in particular.



A floral bouquet offered by pupils of School No. 103 in Tashkent—in the then USSR—in 1964.

Everywhere she went, she was received with honor.



Sarah Sarai, the 7-8 year colonial jail survivor, story-teller, women's rights activist par excellence, very easily accommodates one-on-one dialogues with foreign women leaders.

## CLAMOR FOR UHURU!!

Anybody who thought that *jela* had cooled Sarai's passion for 'the politics of freedom' was proven to have been so wrong. This was the case especially for Mami Mũnene, who could never understand why her sister could not just stay put in Kĩnoo, gather her children around her, work on her small shamba and educate her children from proceeds thereof and market-based hassles *"like other women!"*

She would be attending the interminable meetings and rallies of the Nairobi People's Convention Party, NPCP—associated with Tom Mboya—and later, KANU. Having missed the last bus to Kĩnoo, she'd come knocking on the timber window at Makadara—sometimes as late as midnight—seeking accommodation. Her sister, who went to bed early so as to leave for work at BAT just after dawn the following morning, invariably scolded Mami on these occasions. I cringed at the harshness in her voice, in fear and discomfort as an adult confrontation interfered with my excitement at seeing my Mami. But Mami never responded in kind, not even when she had taken beer or a little too much of her preferred shots of Brandy. Speaking of which, Mami faithfully recorded in her diary the number of beers—or shots of Brandy—bought for her by different friends,

colleagues, potential lovers and even suitors; after all, she was only about 46 years old when she was released from prison!

Sarai became deeply involved in the groundswell of multi-party politics of the early 1960s. More often than not, she was a lone woman among the political giants of the day—Tom Mboya, Lubembe, Dr. Munyua Waiyaki, James Gichuru, Dr. Julius Gikonyo Kiano, Mr. Seroney, Cyrus Maina, Jackson Angaine, W.W.W. Awori, Ochwada, Jeremiah Nyaga, Joseph Murumbi. Other women mentioned in her diaries are Margaret Wambui Kenyatta and Jemimah Gechaga.

Between 1960 and 1962, the sole demand of the day was “Release Jomo Kenyatta!” The networker she was, Sarai even reached out to Asian women to join the campaign. Mrs. Saraswatiben Manubhai Patel, together with Urmilaben Patel, collected signatures of 1,500 Asian women in Nairobi. They would form part of the 1,018,525 signatures petitioning for the release of Jomo Kenyatta, presented to the Governor by NPCP officials Alfred Aketch, G.W. Mahinda and S.M. Maina on April 15 1960. The day was observed by Africans as Kenyatta Day—the day in 1953 when Kenyatta was sentenced at the end of the Kapenguria Trial. Ms. Saraswatiben Patel stated at the time: “Asian women have full trust in Kenyatta’s leadership. We believe that Kenyatta’s long years in Europe will make him

understand women's role in the nation's affairs and expect of him that he will afford full protection to all women as is done in all the civilized countries of the world." How wrong they were!

Sarai's diary records that they used to spend nights in Tom Mboya's office before his departure for the Lancaster House negotiations, helping him articulate the position of the African leadership. On September 25 1960, after the election of Kanu Nairobi Branch officials, they escorted Tom Mboya to the airport for the night flight to London. The following day, she attended a Kanu Women's Wing leadership meeting—two each representing Nairobi, Kisumu, Mombasa, Kiambu, etc. However, the Kanu Women's Wing was not without its fair share of intrigues and power wrangles, because, according to Sarai's diary, on Thursday, September 29, another election was held at the Alvi House Kanu office, with a decidedly ethnic balancing agenda. Akamba, Abaluhya, Kikuyu, and Kipsigis women's representatives were left out, much to Sarai's chagrin!

On October 3 1960, Sarai approached Mr. James Gichuru to mediate in the women's political leadership wrangles. She had found herself in an uncomfortable situation, as an educated professional woman with broad multi-cultural exposure and experience, among women leaders whose grasp of the

challenges was at best superfluous. The jostling for personal limelight was something Sarai found distasteful.

*"I was there!"* Celebrating Independence in the Pan-African Spirit.

On December 8 1961, according to her diary, Sarai got into an OTC bus headed to Dar es Salaam, to witness the momentous occasion of the lowering of the colonial flag and raising of Tanganyika's flag under the leadership of Mwalimu Julius Nyerere. She had been left out of the KANU leadership travel arrangements. She records the names of those who had hired an OTC-KANU bus: Kenyatta, Kung'u Karumba, Dr. Mungai Njoroge, Dr. Munyua Waiyaki, Oginga Odinga, Gichaga, Matu, Dennis Akumu, Ochwada, J.D. Kali, Mugo Muratha, Dr. Julius Gikonyo Kiano, and Ronald Ngala— who stayed in a separate hotel. Only Tom Mboya flew. No women went with them, apart from Ms. Margaret Wambui Kenyatta, who—as mentioned in Sarai's notes—was not very amused by Sarai showing up in Dar es Salaam.

Sarai had set off for Dar es Salaam with all of Shs. 56/- to her name. That amount only served for the OTC bus to put her down in Moshi. There, she sought and obtained a police escort to connect the bus to Dar es Salaam. She rode on the freedom euphoria and goodwill to Dar es Salaam. Her diary records that

she was lodged by the Salvation Army, thanks to the efforts of Joseph Kinyanjui and KANU Youth Wingers. Naturally, the KANU leaders stayed in a hotel.

The following day, Mrs. Damaris Wambui—wife of Peter Mbiyu Koinange, Secretary to the Pan-African Freedom Movement in East & Central Africa, who was at the time resident in Dar-es-Salaam—fetched and brought her to their house. The mission of witnessing the formal raising of the independent Tanganyika flag accomplished, Sarai joined the WaTanganyika in the ensuing celebrations—singing and dancing all night long. The following day, she and Damaris set off on a three-day odyssey that had them spend a night near Korogwe, then get a lift from ‘an American’ to Namanga, the border post. They found all buses to Nairobi full. A police Inspector accommodated them. They arrived during the night at Athi River, to find the bridge submerged by flood waters. They spent the night clubbing in Athi River town. At 5am, the flood waters having considerably subsided, they crossed over and boarded a train to Nairobi. On arrival at the Railway Station, Mrs. Mbiyu paid Shs. 2/- for a taxi to take Sarai to her sister’s place in Makadara, where she slept for three days from sheer exhaustion! Her bewildered sister let her be.

That was vintage Sarai. As long as the information was in the public domain, she never stayed away from a nationalist occasion. She was always almost penniless, but she traveled far. She believed God would get her there, and He did not disappoint.

### **Kirinyaga Welfare Association**

Sarai joined other nationalists to form the Kirinyaga Welfare Association—sort-of people-centered and people-driven ‘truth, justice and reconciliation outfit, based on Agĩkũyũ traditional values and approaches to dispensation of justice. Her diary records an inaugural meeting on December 17 1960 at Kaloleni Hall in Eastlands, Nairobi. This was a time of effervescent political activity, centered on calls for release of Jomo Kenyatta, the people’s leader.

During 1961, Sarai was mostly absent on MRA outings, the longest in Caux-sur-Montreux, Switzerland.

She records that the first election of KWA officials was held on January 13 1962, with over 48 members present. The first Chairman—Dedan Mugo—had been Chairman of the tribunal at Cura, near Kikuyu Township, which had for many years mediated in family and community disputes. Sarai was elected

Vice Chair, a lone woman among at least six men in the Association's leadership. The Treasurer, Vice-Treasurer and Secretary were William Mbaya, Nahashon Ndung'u and John Kiongo respectively.

By June 1962, the association had grown to the point that women were starting to agitate for their separate wing within, even as some advanced divisive opinions between married and unmarried women. Sarai reported that Kirinyaga Welfare Association convened a meeting on June 20, in order to mediate the rift between married and unmarried women in KANU.

Apart from the chairman, the KWA leadership consisted of freedom fighters recently released from political detention, only to find families that had been torn apart by seven years of the State of Emergency. KWA sought to rehabilitate families, applying indigenous means and methods of dispensation of justice, reparation and reconciliation, helping victims to regain dignity and participate in reestablishing social cohesion. A quasi-judicial mechanism, KWA officials would formally sit to hear disputes, say, between neighbors. Land disputes were also arbitrated between members of the same family; some had been released from detention or returned from fighting in the forests to find that their siblings had disinherited them when land demarcations were carried out in the mid-1950s. Some of

the issues brought to KWA's dispute intervention agency were politically sensitive, rooted in the armed struggle for independence. Most common were cases where someone had turned traitor and caused the arrest, torture, detention and/or killing of a Mau Mau warrior or warriors.

Other matters KWA dealt with were of a humanitarian nature. As an example, they mobilized funds to bring back for burial the body of a Kikuyu man who died in Arusha, Tanzania. But the self-appointed mediators did not shy away from labor disputes, as meticulously recorded in Sarai's tiny notebook. Complaints were brought mainly by the employee, usually citing exploitation, non-payment of agreed salary, or denial of vacation time. Reconciliation was a key component of the work of the Welfare Association. In some instances, the parties to the dispute respected the 'ruling' delivered and the matter was settled using Agíkũyũ traditional approaches, usually non-retributive. Others would denounce the proceedings and seek help from politicians or the formal judicial system.

There were many cases of men released from long years in detention camps to find their wives had had children with other men. The most heart-rending of such scenarios was when the fathers of those children were home guards or colonial chiefs and other 'collaborators.' In some instances, the culprits would

be White settlers or *johnnies*. It then transpired that in most cases, such conception was a result of rape, including gang rape. In cases where Whites were involved, the women in question often committed suicide, which might explain the small number of mulatto children at the time.

That said, there also seemed to be some confusion between KWA and KANU; some actors, like Sarai, were engaged in the two entities with the same visibility. Sarai is careful to record in her diary the whirlwind trip she made in March 1964 to popularize KWA: 14<sup>th</sup> - Meru; 16<sup>th</sup> - Meru to Nyeri; 17<sup>th</sup> - Nyeri to Mũranga'a. In each place she identified people who would carry out the necessary organizational groundwork for KWA structures.

For reasons that were unfathomable to that brave band of hapless but dedicated freedom fighters, the Association was quickly frustrated out of existence. Clearly, after the granting of independence, vested interests quickly started coalescing around issues of truth and justice perpetrated during colonial rule, and especially during the State of Emergency. The state could have chosen to build upon initiatives such as KWA, to deepen the potential for healing, and to broaden the agenda in order to achieve more broad-based reconciliation as well as authentic national cohesion. From the perspective of Sarai and

her colleagues, the post-colonial state narrowed down the agenda to formal justice, devoid of any colonial historical perspective. In her notebook, Sarai opined that KWA was disbanded in order to give way to the setting up and proper functioning of Makadara Court. Sixty-plus years down the road, the country is still grappling with socio-political differences, concomitant injustices and consequential violence.

### **KANU Women's Wing**

According to Sarai's diary, the period between 1960 and 1963 was full of activity as women sought a platform within the rapidly expanding and increasingly assertive national politics in the country. She was in constant movement: Kiambu, Murang'a, Meru, Nyeri, Kisumu, Nakuru and so forth. Her diary also records national and regional conferences and seminars with—for instance—highly placed women educationists, all interspersed with international travel.

During the students' airlifts period, she got busy sourcing students for Tom Mboya's projects, as evidenced by a letter dated September 22 1960 to her brother-in-law, Socrates Gitau wa Míríyo: "We arrived late last night from Fort Hall (today's Mũrang'a) extremely tired—I couldn't bring our son's form.

Here it is. Please try to get it signed ASAP.” The letter is handwritten on Hon. Tom Mboya’s letterhead, which puts her across as an insider.

On May 17 1962, Sarai organized a young KANU women’s protest in response to a slur uttered by Tom Mboya, “*malaya wataona cha mtema kuni!*”—‘prostitutes’ will be cut down to size! Young women had been arrested at KANU Nairobi Branch offices, setting off a stand-off between Mboya and the KANU Women’s Wing. In her notes, Sarai wondered “*Why weren’t young men who hang around all day at the offices branded idlers and targeted for arrest? Why must young women’s political activism attract negative, sexual innuendos? Even if they are prostitutes, can they not play a role in the politics of change for Africans? If Mboya was condemning prostitutes, what about their clients?*” If she penned these sentiments in her little notebook, she must have fearlessly voiced them to Tom Mboya and other KANU leaders.

Finally, on May 23 1962, Mboya and the KANU Women’s Wing met to mend fences and harmony was restored. The following day, Sarai wrote to Jomo Kenyatta seeking the admission of four women into the KANU Governing Council, as agreed with Tom Mboya. On May 27 1962, KANU Women’s Wing Nairobi branch elected Sarai to represent women in the LegCo. Had this

happened, Sarai would have been in the line-up for a ministerial appointment in the first post-colonial government, which was ushered in as Internal Self-Rule—granted on June 1 1963, with full independence on December 12 1963. In retrospect, one can only conclude that the KANU Women Wing’s audacious election of Sarai to represent women in the LegCo elicited at best a collective frown from a highly patriarchal political class both within the Colonial and the colonized leadership.

Her diary records that she was elected to the Governing Council of KANU Women’s Wing on June 19 1962. Sarai’s election to the Governing Council had attracted controversy, stoked by a contemptuous male chauvinist leadership. All the same, not one to do things in half measure, Sarai was so enthusiastic about KANU that she took out a life membership for herself. In the early 1970s she bought membership for KANU Kiambu Branch for all her four children, arguing that those not yet of age would find a *fait accompli foothold* in which to grow their nationalism.

Then came Uhuru, on December 12, 1963. I remember dancing with a *mzungu* man at the United Kenya Club next to Jevanjee Gardens in downtown Nairobi. The *mzungu*, who was as excited about independence as the whole crowd of Black Kenyans there, turned out to be Sir Derek G. Erskine, founder of United Kenya Club. Aged 14 years, in my primary school uniform of a blue

pinafore sleeveless dress over a white shirt, I was totally immersed in the unprecedented excitement of independence.



Two days after independence Sarai has mobilised women to demonstrate their joy and to also claim their right to be included in past colonial governance

## **The Great Disappointment**

A lack of consistent journal entries—coupled with scribbblings which lead in a suspicious trend towards what can only be described as being tipsy—demonstrates the period 1966 to

1968 as the time Sarai descended to her lowest emotional pitch. The earliest entry is in June 1966, and it is largely incoherent. In fact, the 1966 diary is mostly empty. The few entries are profound, such as one in which she tries to compare African socialism and the socialism of Eastern Europe. “African Socialism is not like Eastern socialism,” she notes, concluding that African socialism must be propagated on the basis of an ideology derived from internal models.

Three years after independence, Sarai had to face up to the fact that her name did not feature anywhere in what she refers to as the “book of rewards.” Not even informal recognition was accorded her by the post-colonial political leadership—people she was on first-name terms with, whom she had so far considered as colleagues in the struggle. She started to come to terms with the fact that, as a woman from a humble, unknown, family background, and a single mother, she could not amass the political muscle to jostle for positions in the national government. Meanwhile, her friend and sometime traveling companion Margaret Wambũi Kenyatta was appointed Mayor of Nairobi (1970 to 1976), and Kenya’s Permanent Representative to the UN (1976 to 1986).

As weeks turned into months, and months into years, her plans for construction of a house befitting of her and her family’s

status unraveled; there was no further injection of funds after Emperor Haile Selassie's gift of 1963. She was an extremely busy woman, but all the positions she held in the political, welfare, community and women's movements of the day were voluntary. "Sitting allowances" and "stipends" were unheard of in the socio-political environment in which the freedom fighters operated.



The National Council of Women Kenya (NCWK) awarded a certificate of Merit to Sarah Sarai alongside 4 others in recognition for their contribution to their spending work in champion for

## Community Service

Sarah Sarai was a consummate voluntary community worker and pro bono representative of community interests to all levels of government. She would walk into a school, uninvited and unannounced, to give pupils talk on personal hygiene or recite *marimũ* (ogre) stories all containing morals on the merits of education, obedience and good behavior. With gratitude in her heart, she'd visit the Salvation Army Centre or Dagoretti children's homes where our brother Gĩchanga was looked after, and for a moment of play with the children, even though she had no material items to donate. She also offered free medical and maternity services in the village when called upon to do so by neighbors. Her diary records one such instance, an emergency to dislodge a blocked placenta on September 28 1966. Many were the babies she delivered in the village, and thus earned respect from many families who would bring gift baskets of food to our home, especially at harvest time.

### A SAMPLE OF ENTRIES IN SARAI'S DIARY (EARLY 1960s)

9/24/60: Stayed up all night in Tom Mboya's office, with Oguda, preparing, encouraging, going over the issues so that he (Mboya) 'should not compromise' in Lancaster House talks.

9/25/60: Escorted Mboya to the airport. KANU Nairobi Branch elections. Dr. Waiyaki elected chairman; Lubembe Vice

9/26/60: Gathering of women from all over Kenya (Nairobi, Kisumu, Mombasa, North Nyanza, Kiambu.... (2 each) for KANU Women's Wing meeting

10/11/60: Revival of Kenya National Women's League, whose leadership was elected into KANU Women's Wing leadership.

1/03/61: Dr. Kiano's invitation to lunch at Legco. Joined by Mbiyu Koinange, Kenyatta, Charles Njonjo and Jesse Kariuki.

12/1/61: A meeting of the KANU Kiambu Branch in which I was elected "in the Chura Division."

12/24/61: Fetched by Eva from Kĩnoo to go to Narosura Farm, near Rongai, for a MRA Christmas retreat.

1/13/62: Elections for Kirinyaga Welfare Association (over 48 members present):

Chairman – Dedan Mugo; Vice Chair – Sarah Sarai; Treasurer – William Mbayi; Vice Treasurer – Nahashon Ndungu; Secretary – John Kiongo; Vice Secretary – Michah...

1/22/62: KANU Women's Wing meeting at Alvi House

1/23/62: Met John Keen at KANU HQs and he promised to help the women. He suggested the Women's Wing be given a vehicle; funds be mobilized through dances, sports, etc.

4/08/62: Kenyatta and his comrades return from Lancaster House

8/24/62: Went to Registrar of Societies to apply for approval for name change to Kenya African Women's League.

5/17/62: Organized young KANU Women's protest at Tom Mboya's insult: "*Malaya wataona cha mtema kuni!*" Young women arrested at KANU Branch office, Nairobi. Mboya's stand off with KANU Women's Wing.

5/23/62: KANU Women's Wing meeting to mend fences.

5/24/62: Letter to KANU president, Jomo Kenyatta, seeking representation (by 4 women) of KANU Women's Wing in the Governing Council.

5/27/62: KANU Women's Wing, Nairobi Branch meeting elected Sarai to represent them in Legco. (This, evidently, never materialized.)

6/20/62: Kirinyaga Welfare Association: Trying to bridge the divide between married and single women. Same applies to the KANU Women's Wing.

9/04/63: Received by Princess Tenagne and her daughter (in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia). Gave them the KANU Manifesto.

9/12/63: Received by H.I.H. Emperor Haile Salassie on Ethiopian New Year Day 1956. Invited to the Emperor's party for the New Year religious celebrations centered around huge bonfires.

Sept 1963: Visit to a cotton-spinning factory in Addis Ababa and discussed with Princess Tenagne the possibility of Kenyan girls being sponsored to learn spinning and weaving.

9/24 & 25/63: Visited Bulgarian and Polish Embassies in Addis Ababa, seeking scholarships for Kenyan students, especially for Njũgũna Njau who I met in Addis. Handed the KANU Manifesto to the Ambassadors.

KANU rallies:

14/03/63: Meru; 16/03/64: Nyeri; 17/03/64: Murang'a

## TATA WA CIANA (THE CHILDREN'S AUNTIE)

In the early 1970s, Sarai secured a radio programme as the children's aunt. She conceived of her role not only in entertaining children but also in advising their parents—especially mothers—on value addition to parenthood through various strategies. For instance, notes for the programme on April 17 1974 acknowledge a contribution from one of the listeners, Janet Wangui of Lari, Uplands, in which the latter wishes Sarai to elaborate on the Agĩkũyũ proverb “*Wega uumaga na mucĩĩ*” (Goodness springs from the home). Sarai dutifully elaborates the proverb, using the opportunity to expound on gender equity and fairness: “*home means father and mother, each playing their rightful roles in such a way as to bring out the best that God has given each gender; this would in turn bring out the best in their children.*”

Sarai also used her radio programme to improve women's culinary skills, drawing from a deep love and appreciation of traditional dishes at home and those encountered in her sojourns at the Coast, Uganda, and Nairobi. She also applied her extensive interaction with Western cuisine—attributed to the three months in Caux-Sur-Montreux, Switzerland, where she joined the team catering for hundreds of people attending the

MRA conference. For instance, on December 17 1975 she offered a recipe for scones made from ground sweet potatoes mixed with corn flour, egg and butter; on February 17 1976, she offered a recipe for scones or pancakes with flour ground from the rather unusual mixture of banana and potato peels. Other recipes considered unusual for a largely Kikuyu audience include mushrooms, peanuts, cassava; and even bakery with flour ground from yam and arrow roots. She also recommended fruit salad—cutting up and mixing pawpaw, pineapple, mangoes, sweet bananas, sprinkled with fresh orange juice. From her days as social welfare assistant with the Nairobi City Council she included nutritional, cookery and hygiene content.

Her radio programme served to raise awareness about positive traditional lifestyles, beliefs and systems, as well as the underlying conflicts as Christianity and Euro-centric modernity clashed within and between individuals, families and communities. She emphasized the need to embrace positive parenting, according to and endowing both parents—regardless of gender—equal status from the child’s perspective and interest. She used the programme to promote gender sensitivity and to advance the rights of women. For instance, in July 1975, she challenged her listeners to organize a forum where they would invite the women who had attended the momentous Beijing Women’s Conference to address them on what they had

“brought back.” It was important, she felt, that they understand how decisions reached in Beijing would impact upon the lives of women in Kenya, and how they in turn could best organize in order to take advantage of opportunities likely derived from implementation of the Beijing Plan of Action. Her notes ask the question succinctly: *“What should the women of Kenya expect of women leaders from around the world; what can the women of Kenya give/share with the women of the world?”*



Sarai welcoming granddaughter Selaine who, a while later becomes dance partner.



Sarah Sarai the beloved grandman to Jomo (our firstborn brother's son and Selaine Thara, my daughter)

Some of the stories Sarai recounted on air include the following:

## **I. Sarai's Compositions**

### **The Origins of Agĩkũyũ Clans**

*(Most Agĩkũyũ children knew their clan's name; they also knew that in the beginning there was a man named Gĩkũyũ and his wife Mũmbi whose nine daughters were married off to nine men and hence founded the different clans, named after each of the*

*daughters. Here's Sarai's version as told to children in her radio programme "Tata wa Ciana")*

A young man lived alone in the forests to the South of Mt. Kĩĩnyaga (Kenya), roaming in the forest and eating wild fruits and berries—"Birũ," "ngambura," "ngawa," "ndare," "ndicũ," etc.—as well as raw meat from wild animals, such as thia (fox), thwariga (waterbuck), thwara (antelope), etc. He was a good-looking, very strong man—no wild animal could escape from him, either for meat for his food, or an animal out to attack him; he would seize them all and kill them with his bare hands.

The young man had a clean heart, and he was covered with hair, which made his body warm so he wore no clothes—come rain or shine.

One day a storm broke out—lightning and thunder accompanying an extraordinarily thick hailstorm. He found shelter under a huge Mũkũyũ tree—a tree whose wide, thick leaves hang so heavily on the branches that they formed a canopy around the tree that no rain could penetrate. The storm raged, buffeting the huge forest trees which shook as if about to be uprooted. The young man was calm in his shelter. Then he felt uneasy, sensing that he was being watched. He turned and, lo and behold, there stood a young woman of unequalled beauty. From the thick snows on top of the mountain, he heard

a loud but loving, pious, voice calling to him: “My son, my son, you are my beloved son. I have seen that it is unsatisfactory for you to stay on your own. I have sent a girl to keep you company and to assist you with all the work that I have in store for you. Since you sleep under the Mũkũyũ tree, and you take shelter from the rain under the Mũkũyũ tree, your name henceforth shall be Gĩkũyũ. I shall bless you to become the father of clans and a nation to be known by your name. The young woman’s name is Mũmbi, for through her belly she shall found nine clans who shall be known by the names of your daughters.

And this land, surrounded by six hills and covered by ridges, forests and flowing rivers, is yours, together with all animals which you will name, and even the arid lands in it, they are all for you and your children to meet your daily needs. My name is ‘Ngai, ‘Mũrungu mwene Nyaga!!!’ and I am your father and you shall therefore address me as “Ngai Baba” (Father God.)<sup>41</sup>

Gikũyũ thanked his father god, and slaughtered an animal in sacrifice whereby he poured the blood at the foot of the Mũgumo tree near his Mũkũyũ canopy home. He raised his voice to the mountain top calling, “Ngai baba, Ngai baba, Ngai

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<sup>41</sup>Like ‘O my God!’ By English speakers, Kikuyus commonly call out ‘Ngai Baba’ at the slightest provocation...

baba, thank you for your gracious gifts of wealth around me; and for giving me a partner to ease my loneliness. You alone I shall worship and call you “Mũgai” (the provider), “Mũrungu wi tha na mwege” (the holy one full of mercy and grace).

And then another storm happened—lightning and great thunder and growling, howling winds that scared poor young Mũmbi and left her shivering with the mountain cold. So she ran to the young man Gĩkũyũ for protection, hugged him and lay on his chest. She then proceeded to feel his whole body and when she touched him between his legs, he became aroused and the two found warmth and love in each other. Mũmbi’s menses (called mũiru in Kikuyu) ceased and she realized there was a life growing inside of her.

On an especially dark night, she gave birth to a baby girl. She said to Gĩkũyũ, “you made my muiro disappear, and now I’ve born for you a Nyakairũ...” So Gĩkũyũ called the child “Wanjirũ” who became the mother of the Anjirũ clan. Mũmbi had a second child at a time when their large herds were grazing on sandy pastures, and she was named “Wanjikũ.” A third baby was born at a time when a herd of zebra was grazing near the homestead, and she was named “Wambũi.” A fourth baby girl was born while her father Gĩkũyũ had gone on a walk-about (iceera) and she was named ‘Njeri wa Waceera’. A fifth baby was born at a

time when a leopard had invaded the home and eaten the goats, so she was named ‘Wangarĩ wa Mũithiegeni’. The 6<sup>th</sup> daughter was named Waithĩra, or Wangeci; the 7<sup>th</sup> Wairimũ; the 8<sup>th</sup> Nyambura, or Mwĩthaga who was born during a rain-storm (a curse based on her is visited on all wrong doers). The last born was Gathigia, matriarch of a clan known to be inward-looking and not very intelligent; whose males adore women....”

One day when Njeri was out on her own, she was waylaid by a man who raped her. Nine months later she gave birth to a baby boy. Her father Gĩkũyũ was extremely happy to have a member of the family who looked like him. He named him Kamuyu.

When the daughters were all grown, Mr. Gĩkũyũ made a sacrifice of thanksgiving to Ngai Mũrungu for giving him a family, and asked him what he should do about it. Ngai Mũgai told him to chase the girls away from the homestead. It so happened that Gĩkũyũ had built each girl her own hut, so they retired to bed, only to be woken up by fire burning their huts down. Nine gentlemen appeared literally from nowhere. Each rescued a girl and took off with her to wherever he felt was sufficiently safe. And so it was that whenever each of the sisters had a baby, they named after her own name. This is the origin of the nine Agĩkũyũ clans: Anjirũ; Agacikũ; Anjeri or Achera; Ambũi; Aangarĩ; Aithĩra

or Angechi; Airimu; Ambura or Ethaga; Agathigia. The tenth is Aicha Kamũyũ, which is an Ithũmba (lone boy) clan.

Now, people within the clans were multiplying. Gĩkũyũ and Mũmbi moved from the Mũkũyũ area and arrived at a sandy (mũthanga-ini) area where there was a very large Mũkũrwe tree, surrounded by smaller ones, forming a thick forest. Gĩkũyũ built a home there, at Mũkũrwe-ini wa Gathanga in the Mũrang'a region. His sons-in-law followed suit and also built homes in the same place, thus forming a mutually dependent community. Alongside livestock grazing, they cleared the place and cultivated mwere, mũkombi, mũhia (millet), mũgimbi (sorghum), shuu, thoroko, njahi, bananas, yams, sugar cane, ndũma, as well as sweet potatoes (known as Gĩkũyũ potatoes).

After a while, population pressure forced some people to move back towards Kĩrĩnyaga Mountain (Mt. Kenya), while others moved further South and South West. In the process of expansion, the people were no longer known by their clan names but became the Agĩkũyũ tribe, spread over the Central part of Kenya, comprising three major groups: The Wa-Embu; the Kĩrĩnyaga and the Kikuyu to the South of the mountain.

## **A Story for Children to Tell All**

(A Sarah Sarai—"Tata-wa-Ciana" vintage)

March 10, 1976.

Once upon a time, at a ridge in far away India, lived a people who held no secrets from each other—revealing to each other their deepest thoughts and desires. It so happened that the King's young consort fell in love with a young man—an only child living with his extremely poor mother—outcasts, untouchables in the Hindu social hierarchy.

Now, under the tree where the innocent young lovers met, a donkey, quietly grazing, heard all the plans. He started baying—hee hawwww, heeee haaaaawwww!! The tree heard and trembled, branches and leaves shaking. A bird perched on the tree heard and flew off, chirping tchwiiliiii, tchwiiliiii, and perched on the poor widow's hovel, telling her the day and time the king's soldiers would waylay and kill the couple.

When the young man came home, his mother confronted him and he told her all. So they ran away to Persia where the King could not find him. When she failed to see her new young lover, the poor queen went crazy with loneliness and was confined in her chamber where doctors administered the best cures in India, all in vain as the queen finally died of a broken heart.

*Moral: Children, don't keep secrets—good or bad. Tell your parents everything, so that they can protect you.*

**Thuraku na Ndaa  
(Termite & Flea)**

March 17, 1971

A long time ago, termite and flea embarked on preparations for a dance festival. They started at sunrise in order to complete all the adornments in time for the dance. They got plumes, beaded chokers, collars and neck-laces (ndaritũ na mĩgathĩ), earplugs and other jewellery and ornaments for armbands and anklebells (cĩgamba); flywhisks and ornamental sticks, etc.

Termite sheathed his sword and tightened the belt on which the sheath was hooked around his waist. Anxious not for the belt to loosen and cause him embarrassment at the dance, he tightened it all the more. For flea, seeing his friend's waistline wasting away was hilarious. He started to laugh and laughed until his nose split from his face. In the event, neither termite nor flea made it to the dance festival for which they had so painstakingly prepared.

*Moral: Children, do things in moderation, even laughter!*

## **II. Sampling of Audience Contributions To The “Tata wa Ciana” (Children’s Auntie) Radio Programme**

Apart from scribblings and notes for her own compositions, Sarai’s file for The programme also contained stories that were sent to her by her enthusiastic audience—children and adults, in the hope theirs’ would be the next story to be broadcast in the Radio Programme of the 1970s. A few of the stories are appended (translated by me), as a gesture of appreciation to those who proactively penned them and sent them to “Tata wa Ciana,” assuring them that even if she did not get to read them on radio, they were carefully preserved, to the extent the handwritten originals, however shoddy, are still in Tata wa Ciana’s file.

### **A Never-Ending Story**

By Peter Mururi Njoroge  
P O Box 37, South Kinangop  
June 23, 1975

Once upon a time there lived a king who hated boredom. He employed 10 storytellers who each day took turns to amuse him

with stories. After many years, the king got bored. He called his storytellers and said: "I am fed up with your miserable, uninteresting, little stories! Now I want a never-ending story. You give it, I give you half my kingdom; you fail you choose how you die—spear, arrow, sword, thrown from a cliff top, or poison!"

The first one started on Monday and ended on Wednesday. He was pierced through the heart with a spear. The second one started on Wednesday and ended on Sunday. He was thrown over the nearest cliff. And so on until only one was left.

He started. "Once upon a time there lived an extremely wealthy king - caring and very wise. The king forecast a great famine would befall his kingdom and therefore had enormous granaries built and filled with millet, sorghum (mwere, muhia, mukombi.) The famine came. It was so bad, to the point where birds of the air had nothing to eat.

Then the birds discovered tiny holes in one granary through which they could insert a beak and pick a grain of sorghum. The first bird picked a grain and flew off. Then two birds came and left with a grain each. Then another two came and left with a grain each. Then one came and left with a grain. The king asked, "Is the story over?" "Not yet, Your Majesty," replied the storyteller and continued, "Then another two birds pushed their

beaks through the holes and left with a grain of sorghum each. Then another two birds came and left with a grain each..." The king asked impatiently, "Isn't it over yet?" "No, your majesty," replied the storyteller patiently. "Then another two birds pushed their beaks through the tiny holes and flew off with a grain of millet each. Then a lone bird came and did the same..." Exasperated, the king said to himself, "If I ask tomorrow, he'll tell me the same thing, and it'll be years before the grains get finished." "OK, stop!! You can have half my kingdom. Go!!"

*Moral: "Ũũgĩ wĩ mbere ya hinya" ("Brain power beats muscle power.")*

## **How Ostrich Developed a Long Neck**

By Titus Christopher Gathigi

C.S. Nderi School, Kikuyu

July 21, 1974

In olden days, Ostrich had a short neck. He made friends with Crocodile, in complete disregard to advice from all in the animal kingdom, who knew Crocodile as a dangerous animal. For

behold, Ostrich, in spite of his big body, his small head holds only a small brain.

Now, a famine descended on the land. Crocodile had not eaten for several days. He approached his friend, saying, "Friend, please check to see my hurting tooth," Whereupon Ostrich thrust his head into his friend's open mouth to look for the tooth in pain. Crocodile promptly clamped his friend's head in his mouth. Ostrich pulled with all his might, lengthening his poor neck in the process. Crocodile could not resist Ostrich's strength for long and finally let go. Whereupon Ostrich ran as fast as his long legs could carry him. Since then, Ostrich lives in dry lands, far away from the rivers where Crocodile lives.

*Moral: Beware your friends!*

## **The Stupid Donkey**

By Ndambuki Onesmus

A.C. Chura Pr School, Lower Kabete

In a land far away, Donkey went for a walk and found a dead lion. He carefully skinned him and donned his mane and coat, then went round scaring all and sundry, who thought he was Lion. When he got home, he tried to scare his master, but his

master spotted his hooves and called his bluff. Master took a whip and lashed Donkey thoroughly.

*Moral: Lies will get you into trouble...*

### **How Tortoise Broke His Back into Pieces**

By Ruth Gakure

EA Bags & Cordage Sch, Ruiru

June 2, 1971

Once upon a time all the birds were invited to a feast in heaven. Meanwhile, Tortoise cried as he scavenged for food, as there was a big famine in the land. When he learnt about the feast in heaven, he pleaded with the birds to take him along. Out of pity they agreed. Each bird contributed a feather, and Tortoise stuck all the feathers on his back, ready to fly. Before departure, Tortoise said to the birds, "protocol demands that each one adopts a new name at the feast, so each one should state their feast name. The birds obliged. Finally, it was Tortoise's turn. He said his name was "All of you."

The big flight took off—higher and higher until they arrived. They found a feast fit for kings. When they were invited to table, Tortoise said: “Wait a minute...” and asked the head waiter: “who was this food prepared for?” He answered: “for all of you,” and left the guests to get on with the feast. Tortoise then turned to the birds and warned: “You’ve heard... the food was prepared for me so I must eat first!” The birds had no choice but to let Tortoise go first. When he was through, they were left to pick scraps from under the table and lick the plates. In retaliation, they demanded their feathers back, there and then. Tortoise had no choice but to oblige.

As they prepared to take off, he tried to send them to his wife, but no one wanted anything to do with him. Except Parrot, who was the angriest, but didn’t show it. Tortoise said to him: “Please tell my wife to prepare a soft landing for me—plenty of leaves, etc., so I can jump.” Parrot delivered the following message to Tortoise’s wife: “Your husband says to spread out nails, hoes, machetes, broken bottles, and other sharp tools.” Mrs. Tortoise did as her husband had ordered. Mr. Tortoise jumped and landed on his back, which broke into smithereens! Fortunately, a famous medicine man nearby was able to save his life and put the pieces back together again, but he was unable to remove the seams where he had joined the pieces. Thus, Tortoise still carries a back pack of pieces sewn together.

## **The Drunkard Who Mistook Lion for His Wife**

By Joseph Thuo Gikonyo wa Gathirimu  
Nginduri F.P. Sch, Ruiru

Baba Wangu would get his salary at month-end, stop at a masandukuni (informal drinking joint) and drink heavily, before heading home through the forest, carrying a kilo or two of meat for his children, Wangu, Wangui, Wangungu and Wanguru. One day, after a salary raise, he drank more heavily than usual, then headed home with two kilos of meat.

In the forest there lived a lioness with her cubs. When Baba Wangu got to Lioness' thicket, he thought he had arrived home, entered through the doorway, dropped on the floor and slept soundly. The cubs got curious about the stranger but Lioness growled them away. Whereupon Baba Wangu woke up, apologized for his earlier negligence and shared out the meat to his children saying, "here's your portion Wangu; Wangui—here's yours; here's yours, Wangungu. Wanguru, here's your share," and promptly went back to sleep. Early in the morning Lioness took her satisfied cubs for a walk.

Deep in his sleep, Baba Wangu rolled onto a nearby footpath where the villagers found him and carried him home, still in deep sleep. Since he came to, he has been arguing with Mama

Wangu, reminding her how he shared out the meat to the children, even though he has no recollection of how he got home.

*Moral: Beware the dangers of excessive alcohol consumption. You may end up building a relationship with a man-eating "lioness and her cubs," under the mistaken belief that they are your family.*

### **How Porcupine's Body Developed Pines**

By Titus Christopher Gathĩĩ  
TCS Nderi Sch, Kikuyu

July 9 1970

Porcky had an extremely beautiful, warm coat, knew it, loved to be praised and loved to show off in it. One day he waylaid bear and started showing off, as usual, saying, "Ah, if only all animals looked like me, the forest would be a lovelier place.

Bear was fed up with Porcky's bragging, but cunningly said, "Over the ridge, there lives a man with a magic formula to make you an even more beautiful coat. You must go over there at once, before he moves camp, but leave me your coat since you

won't need it any more. Whereupon Porcky took off his nice warm coat and handed it to Bear. The path Bear had indicated was full of long thorns that embedded themselves into Porcky's now bare skin, until they covered his entire body. When Bear saw this, he laughed until he was blue in the face. "You can't wear your nice coat with pines sticking out from all over your body, so I might as well keep it." Thus, Bear ended up with the nice, warm jacket, while poor Porcky got the pines.

*Moral: Children, beware of the dangers of bragging!*

### **Importance of Washing Hands**

By Ayub Kinũthia

Chomo, Gatanga, Mũrang'a Dist

October 3 1974

Tata, I pray God continues to equip you to impart knowledge to our nation. Please consider the following contribution. Please advise parents, children, workers in eateries and food kiosks, etc., on the importance of washing hands thoroughly, preferably with warm water and soap, before and after eating, and after short or long calls (using the lavatory).

Also advise them on the importance of eating fruit and vegetables, which provide the body with the vitamins it needs to fight illness.

### **A Cock & Bull Story**

By Mary Wangari Muoria

A.C. Nyathuna Full Pri. Sch., Ngecha

Cow, Goat, Frog and Cock went to school, to learn mathematics—the only subject taught in that school at that time.

After 3 months, their hard-working teacher gave an assessment test, which she marked and returned. Now, each pupil had to say their grades aloud, for acclamation by the rest of the class. Cow of small brain started: “Moooooore, mooore-aaaall-right! [Mooore; moooothel!]. Goat followed “Meeeeeh; Meeerĩ! (Two); Then it was Frog’s turn, “Nooo-ti!” (“Nooought!”). When it was Cock’s turn, he took to his wings, saying “I shall be cuckolded no more!!! No more korokoro<sup>42</sup> for me!!

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<sup>42</sup>‘Korokoro’ is Kikuyu for prison cell.

*Moral: Children, if you listen carefully, you'll hear those animals continue to broadcast their marks. Indeed, naughty children are said to be like chicken, which flew away and failed to acquire an education.*

## **Two Friends**

By Owen Ndung'u Nyanjui  
County School, Rironi, Limuru

May 22, 1970

Once upon a time there were two young men who were great friends and went everywhere together. One day, as they were walking through a thick forest, one of them spotted a huge lion. He quickly, quietly, climbed a tree and hid—saying nothing to his friend. Then the friend spotted the lion. In a flash he dropped to the ground in a dead fit, knowing—nay—hoping that the lion may not wish to immediately eat a dead body. Mercifully, the lion arrived at the spot, sniffed around and went away.

The friend climbed down from the tree and asked, “What did the lion say to you?” “He advised we part company immediately

because you are a coward!” Whereupon the friends went their separate ways, for good.

Moral: Friendship should be about looking out for each other!

### **Hare and Cat**

By Joe Johnny Miruru

Kenya Continuation School, Nairobi

Long ago, when hyenas had horns, clever Hare was hopping down the road when he spotted nice, ripe bananas at the top of a tree way beyond his reach. As he turned away in disappointment, he encountered Kitty and asked, “Hi, friend! Where are you headed?” “I’m in search of mice,” said Kitty. “Hey, friend, follow me, I’ll show you their den!” Kitty followed. Then Hare said, “I just spotted one getting into that bunch of bananas.” So Kitty climbed towards the banana and as he searched and scratched, the ripe bananas fell one by one. Hare had a feast! Kitty came down, disappointed. Hare said, “Thank you, pal. I needed for you to render me that service.” Kitty left, disappointed, angry, to continue his search for the elusive mouse...

[PS: A Tom & Jerry episode, Kikuyu version]

## **The Gathering of the Horned**

Dorcas Nduta and Esther Njeri

Githunguri Kamucege

One day all horned animals agreed to come together in order to iron out all issues pertaining their status. Upon learning of the plans, Hare decided to craft a disguise in order to gatecrash the gathering. He made a wonderful pair of horns from soft mud and fixed them so no one was any the wiser. However, as the deliberations went on and on, the sun got higher and hotter and Mr. Hare's horns got drier and begun to crack. Before they could fall off, Mr. Hare stood up and implored the horned colleagues to end the meeting, saying

"Athuri a cira-cirai narua, niamu cia wamariru ikirie kuriruka!"  
(Elders, kindly conclude before Mr Décor's decorum decodes...)

Whereupon he took off at top speed, before anyone recovered from the shock of an intruder who had heard all their secrets.

*Moral: There's more value in wisdom than in strength.*

## EPILOGUE

**A**lzhheimers took over Mami's mind for almost ten years until she passed into glory in 2003. Yet, at a time when she didn't even remember her name, she'd suddenly burst into song and sing all the verses of either a nationalist song, or a hymn. On February 8, 2000 at 9.30 pm, I quickly picked up pen and paper to write as she sang, almost like in her sleep:

*No inyuĩ acukani aya mũthũire ciana cianyu  
Na mũkenda o nda cianyu, Ni inyuĩ thũ cia rūĩĩĩ*

*Na nĩkĩo ithuĩ twathamirio, Nĩ kũĩĩĩĩra ciana  
Tũgĩtwarwo mawerũ-inĩ, Bũrũri wa kũraya*

*Tũtigatiga orĩ orĩ, Tũtarĩ gwa kũĩĩma  
Na wĩyathi witũ kũĩĩmbe Bũrũri ũyũ wa Kenya*

*Ona tũngĩthĩnio mũno, tũtigatiga kwaria  
Tũtuĩke ta njamba itũ, Kenyatta mũtongoria*

(You, traitors, detest your own children  
And care only for your stomachs  
You are the curse of the nation!

For the love of our children we were incarcerated,  
Taken into the wilderness, in far away lands  
We shall never, ever, surrender, without land to till  
And our very own freedom, in this our land of Kenya  
Torture and suffering we shall endure  
Yet we shall never be silenced  
As we emulate supreme warrior Kenyatta, our leader)

Such was the charisma of her leader, and the loyalty he was accorded, especially among the freedom fighters, that at the time of the composition of the song—probably during the early years of independence—the looters/traitors were perceived to be lodged only around him.

*...He comforted me by saying that I would be in his office with him always.*

Almost 40 years after independence, the promise in her dream on the eve of independence had miserably failed to materialize. The jostling for proximity to power and wealth did not necessarily involve Sarai's colleagues in the struggle for independence but mainly family, former loyalists and traitors of the course. Those who had stood on the sidelines or even worked against the freedom fighters now capitalized on their suffering, leveraging their connections to occupy influential positions.

Meanwhile, Sarai and her compatriots were left in the shadows, their sacrifices overlooked as the political elite reshaped the nation's destiny for their own gain.

One Sunday after service in the mid-1960s—I was still in primary school—as she left church, a group of “born again” Christians had assembled in a circle in front of the church, singing “*Tukutendereza*” and giving testimonies of their walk with Christ during the past week. Mami had joined this congregation during her one year of restriction in Kĩnoo village after detention. Now, a couple of years down the line, she had seen up close the result of the machinations of the State of Emergency; the betrayals, deprivations, harshness and brutality experienced by Kĩnoo villagers, and other dynamics underlying social and spiritual life in the village. I stood watching, trying to figure out an exit strategy for myself if Mami was going to spend the rest of the afternoon in this fellowship. She emerged abruptly from inside the church, grabbed my hand and whisked me off with the admonition—loud enough for everyone to hear—“*Come, daughter, leave these hypocrites alone!*” Her frustration was not just with the congregation but with the broader society that had allowed such duplicity to flourish. The very people who had once turned a blind eye to the suffering of freedom fighters now sang songs of salvation, conveniently forgetting the role they had played in supporting the oppressive regime. I have since had an on-off

relationship with that and other Christian congregants, especially of the “born again” brand.

Does “hypocrisy” aptly describe the cruelty, betrayals, harshness, heartlessness, deception and outright lies which invaded, took root and colored—indeed, defined—local relationships during the State of Emergency? Indeed, these betrayals were not only personal; they were systemic. Sarah Sarai, along with other freedom fighters, found themselves abandoned by the very nation they had sacrificed everything for. The promises of land, honor, and recognition vanished, replaced by the self-serving ambitions of the new political elite. Those who had betrayed their own during the struggle now occupied positions of privilege, while the true heroes like Sarai faced marginalization, denied the recognition and compensation they so richly deserved. When all is said and done, it may perhaps be more apt to look closer home for the failure of her dream to materialize.

When all is said and done, it may perhaps be more apt to look closer home for the failure of her dream to materialize. The first post-independence comptroller of state house was Eliud Wambu Mathu. Could it be that Mathu had a similar dream and, therefore, there was some form of competition between him and his erstwhile sweetheart for the regard of Jomo Kenyatta? His credentials for the position of comptroller of state house included his nomination as the first African member of the

Legislative Council (LegCo) in the Kenya colony, where he served from October 1944 to 1957. While Sarai may not have aspired to such an elevated position as state house comptroller, there were dozens of ways for the post-colonial state to honor her and other freedom fighters. The state did make gestures through the Africanization of public offices, land and commercial enterprise allocation programmes of the 1960s; this, however, was experienced by the family and friends of those in or closest to power. However, this was also the 1960s, well before the Beijing Conference, characterized by almost total gender insensitivity and the marginalization of women, especially in matters political. In a patriarchal society, Sarah Sarai's contributions, like those of many women who fought for freedom, were sidelined. Her exclusion from power was not just a clear reflection of post-independence political machinations but also a stark testament to how women, the backbone of the struggle, were conveniently forgotten in the building of the new nation

On March 30, 2002 at 10.30 am, after many silent months, I quickly recorded as she sang

*Shaitani angĩginginya hakuhĩ, akĩendaga o tũmenane  
Nĩ ngamũingata na ndeto ici, Jesu na nĩ twĩna ndũgũ nene  
Nĩngũkena na ngoro yakwa, Jesu na nĩ, nĩtwendaine  
Tene ndatũire ndĩmũthũire, Rĩu no kwendana...*

She did not sing another note, nor speak another word, for a year and quarter, when she went to meet Jesus, her friend, on June 3 2003. In the search of this friendship, she had read The Holy Bible (in Gĩkũyũ) and devotional Daily Light (in English) until they were in tatters.

This was the friendship that she had formed in her childhood at the home of her elder sister Elizabeth Mwara (Thĩga); the friendship with bonds that had inspired her constant truancy from her father's homestead in order to pursue an education and Christianity. A friendship that had helped her overcome heart-rending cultural transitions, and the heartbreak of losing her sweetheart to her niece. One that had inspired her professional and political pursuits, and endowed on her the convoluted onus (without honor) of single parenthood. It had kept her hope alive through seven years of colonial incarceration followed by a year's restriction, and accompanied her travels at home and abroad. It had equipped her with the courage to continue struggles for African and women's freedom and dignity, and enveloped her in a "ne'er-say-die" spirit. Her belief injected endurance to overcome yet another painful rejection, this time political, and stand to endear herself to the children of the Kikuyu nation, through the radio. Christ, her friend, did after all say, *"Let them come to me... for the Kingdom*

*of God belongs to such as these... Whoever does not receive the Kingdom of God like a child will never enter it.” [Mark 10:14-15; Luke 18:16-17]*

Alzheimer’s had incapacitated her to the status of a child, nay, a baby. For at least three years, she was fed, bathed and clothed as her minders wished for her. So, I am convinced, she was totally ready to receive the Kingdom of God like a child.



Grandchildren feed an ailing granny

*R.I.P, My Darling Mami! You are in God’s courtyard forever!*

## 10TH ANNIVERSARY MEMORIAL

Shujaa Sarah Sarai T. Jommo

(1913 – 2003)

### **Nyina wa Ruriri /Tata wa Ciana!!**

It is (already!) a decade since God called you home to eternal rest. From love and dedication to your family, to rest. From struggles against the excesses of colonial rule, to rest. From justice-seeking against post-colonial betrayals, to rest. From organizing against women's oppression by the cruel tenets of culture and tradition, to rest. From cheering children oppressed by an oppressed people, to rest

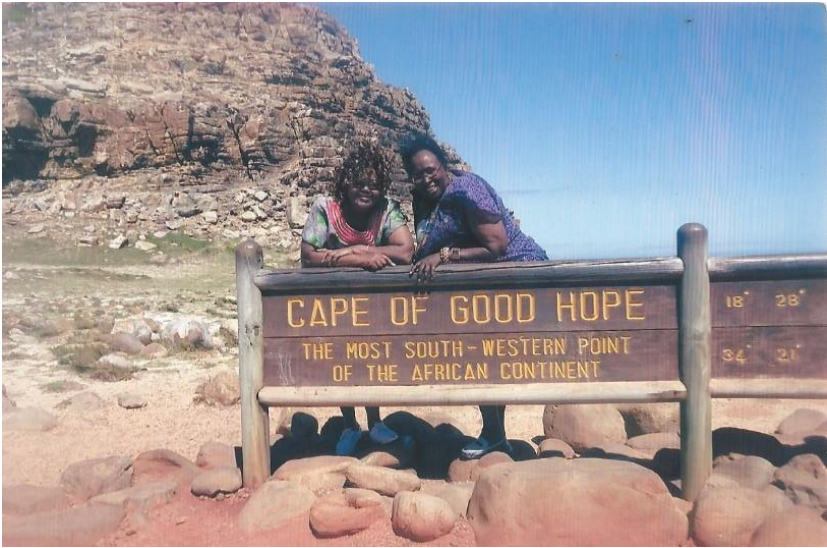
Though we miss your warmth and love for all and your larger-than-life personality, these ten years have shown us that no-one can ever fit into your shoes.

*So then, Death, where is your victory?*

*Where, Death, is your power to hurt?*

(1 Cor. 15:55)

Dearly missed by the nation, the women's movement, your brothers and sisters-in-Christ, your children Jommo, Gĩchanga, Berewa and Njũgũna, your grandchildren and great-grandchildren, the larger Gĩchanga clan, and your friends and admirers at home and abroad.



After laying Mami to rest, my dear friend, Dr. Jane Nyagitha Miano 's daughter, Nyawira, sent her mom and I on a sympathy tour of Zimbabwe and South Africa. May God's mercies always shine upon our daughter Nyawira.

## **APPENDIX 1: THE MRA EXPERIENCE**

80+ 'AUTOGRAPHS'

Eighty-two participants at the MRA conference in July, 1961 at Caux-sur-Montreux, Switzerland, wrote their names in Sarai's notebook:

Reke & Remi Ademola, London, UK & Abeokuta, Nigeria

Mrs. Herbert Allen "Dot," Caux

Henrine Ward Banks, Florida, USA

Betty Bethune, Florida, USA

Margit Borg-Sundman, M. P, Oksanank, Helsinki, Finland

Meinir Burden, Milford Naven, S. Wales, UK

Liu Borchgreiviuk, Norway

Odette Carvalho, Rio de Janeiro

Nancy Chapin, Richmond, WA, USA

Gyckman Chaumall

Marion Clarkson, Yorkshire, England

Paul and True Colwell, San Marino, CA, USA

Maria Olga das Dores Costa, Brazil

Agnes Craig, Glasgow, Scotland

Peggy Cummock, Glasgow Scotland

Ellen Dee, Los Angeles, CA, USA

M. G. Haje-Gashegu, Kampala, Uganda

Mrs. H. H. Goatian, London, UK

Ceridwen Jones, Liverpool, UK

D. Gauchild, Calgary, Alberta, Canada

Mrs. Harindranath, Kerala, India

Miotti-Teresita, Bologna, Italy

Monika Flutsch, Bern, Switzerland

Vreni Gautschi, Reinach, Switzerland

Nancy Greenfield, London,

Elisabeth Hardon, Wabern-Bern, Switzerland

Elsie Hayter, Newbury, England

Father Henri Hendrikz, Zeeland, Holland

Florence Hoar, Northwood,

Lisa Jaeger-Hahnloser, Winterthur, Switzerland

Madi James

Marjorie Jardine, West Indies

Bettie Lewis, Northwood, Middlesex, England

Kathi Luthei, Caux, Switzerland

Alison Maitland, N. Bristol, England

Christian Mallet

Nelson Marcellino, Rio

Rose Mayser, Germany

Mrs. John McGovern, Glasgow, Scotland

Hilda McKay, Berks., England

Edna Mills, Sussex, England (who knew Emily Gutteridge)

Hector Menncho, Lima, Peru  
ora Moerane, Durban, S. Africa

Feretzhedwig Monte Rosa

Jaime & Clotilde Morier, Lausanne, CH

Marthe Mottu, Mountain House, Caux

Marti Neuhaus

Thora Margrethe Norem, Stavanger, Norway

Ajela Norih

Louisa Ongaya, London, UK

Margareta Othman, Helsingfors, Finland

Marie-Liette Pahud, Caux, Switzerland

Robert & Lydie Porsche & their children Jean Daniel, Francoise  
& Marie-Claire, Maracon, Vaud, CH

Genegy de Pastio

Mollie Procter, Barnetz, Brasil

Jacqueline Pelet, Suffolk, England

Pedro Ramalhrhu

Delia Raumis, Chile-Peru

Mary Reynolds, Mackinac Island, MI, USA

Muriel Roberts, Mackinac Island, USA

Joanna Rodd, England

Sally Rogers, Freetown, Sierra Leona

Margaret Russell, Haverfordwest  
Frances de Rusett, Johannesburg, South Africa  
General Calimere Santoz, Brasil  
Barbara Schenker, Luzern, Switzerland  
Ursula Schenker, Luzern, Switzerland  
Carlos Lopes da Silvo, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil  
Gunda Sjögren, Stockholm, Sweden  
Magdalene Sonu, Cape, South Africa  
Elise Stephens, Newbury, England  
Signe Tegström, Sweden  
Kitty Thornhill, Sussex, England  
D. R. Umagiliya, Colombo, Ceylon (Sri Lanka)  
Dieuwke van der Veen, Den Haag, Holland  
Catherine Weers (British), Geneva, CH  
Otto Wigardt, Eskilstuna, Sweden  
Priscilla Wilson, Los Angeles, CA, USA  
Liesel Witrig, Koln, Germany

Joyce Wolfe, MI, USA

Gen. Ho Ying-chin, Zhangsou, China

J. B. Zabasajja, Entebbe, Uganda



After an interview at her home in Kinoo with Phoebe Kamene ' Daily  
Nation columnist, auntie Peris in the door ' Jan 11th 1974

# Hon. Kimani wa Nyoike

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December 10, 2009

Hillary Ng'weno

Editor,

Makers of the Nation

Nairobi

*Rudolf's Assurance Bldg.  
5th Fl. Right → Stellacew Ltd.*

Dear

*Hillary*

I wish to record my sincere appreciation for the immense trouble you took to help me record my life work. Some of those pictures were not easy to obtain. My family is very happy and excited because your efforts have reduced a part of my life work into a documented record. Thank you very much.

It so happens that in my family, I am not the only one worth recording. You know about my brother-in-law, Hon. Eliud W. Mathu, the first African in the LEGICO, predecessor of our present Parliament. I am sure you have also looked into my cousin, Hon. Dr. Munyua Waiyaki and my first cousins namely Hon. Dr. Njoroge Mungai and his younger brother Ambassador Ng'ethe Njoroge.

However, I am absolutely certain that the most accomplished and colourful nationalist in my family is, without doubt, my Late Auntie famously known as SARAH SARAI daughter of Njomo wa Gichanga. She was a younger sister of my Late Mother.

Sarah Sarai was arrested on the same night, October 1952, with Jomo Kenyatta and the Kapenguria six. She was detained in Kenya prisons until the early sixties. She suffered at the hands of colonialists but, by God's grace, she survived. She later became a star in KBC (it's predecessor) when, for many years, she was Tata wa Ciara (children's auntie). Her biography is powerful and inspiring. Please examine and record her contribution. You can contact her daughter, my first cousin, (quite a girl!), by the name Belewa Jomo who will supply you with proper details and photographs of Auntie Sarah Sarai.

Belewa's number is 0722 344 731. I shall beg her not to go to Dafur or Cairo or such other places before documenting her mother's colourful life. I have also given her your telephone number. When you get time, please enjoy the coming Christmas.

Sincerely,

*[Signature]*  
Kimani

*Hillary*

*Ng'weno*

*0722-785684*