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THE INTELLECTUAL LIVES OF MAU MAU DETAINEES*

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ABSTRACT: This article illuminates the creative intellectual and social projects in which Mau Mau detainees were engaged. It draws on the private papers of Gakaara wa Wanjau, a Gikuyu writer who during his eight years of detention composed several plays, wrote ethnography and poetry, and carried on an extensive correspondence with his family. Gakaara and other detainees were doing more than defending a Mau Mau ideology. They were opening up new ways of doing Gikuyu culture, holding wives and children accountable, and representing themselves to a British public that could, they hoped, be brought round to their side.

KEY WORDS: Kenya, intellectual, family, prison.

GAKAARA wa Wanjau was born in 1921 in Nyeri district, in northern central Kenya. His mother and father were among the earliest converts at the Presbyterian mission at Tumutumu. After two years spent at the Alliance High School, Gakaara joined the King's African Rifles as a clerk. By 1948, he was sometime Chairman of the Nakuru branch of the Rift Valley Agikuyu Union, which aimed to 'do away with prostitution'.[1] That same year he published a book entitled *Wanawake wa siku hizi* (Women of These Days). He told potential buyers that the book 'abhors the bad reputation brought up by lazy African women who roam about shamefully in town with nothing to do but prostitution … [and] encourages the African girls who lead good ways of life'.[2] While Gakaara lamented women's dissolute behavior, he at the same time had his own reputation to worry over. Gakaara's family lacked secure title to the land they occupied. And Gakaara himself was languishing as a railway clerk, unable to secure a promotion. In a 1949 questionnaire he filled in for the British Institute of Practical Psychology, Gakaara complained that 'I have much propaganda to make be a big man whereas I have no ways'. In reply to the question 'Do you feel your life lacks purpose?', Gakaara wrote

* References to archives are abbreviated as follows: KNA: Kenya National Archives, Nairobi; GW: Gakaara wa Wanjau papers, Yale University Library, New Haven, Connecticut; RH: Rhodes House Library, Oxford; Bristol: Imperial and Commonwealth Museum, Bristol; PRO: Public Records Office, Kew (now the National Archive); PCEA: Presbyterian Church of East Africa archives, Nairobi; ACK: Anglican Church of Kenya archives, Nairobi; EUL: Edinburgh University Library; CBMS: Conference of British Missionary Societies archive, School of Oriental and African Studies, London. Research for this article was conducted with the assistance of the British Academy and the Smuts Fund at the University of Cambridge. Gakaara wa Wanjau's papers were seen at Yale University Library courtesy of Dorothy Woodson and Ann Biersteker. Joseph Kariuki translated much of Gakaara's Gikuyu-language correspondence.

[1] KNA JZ 7/6: S. Fazan, 'Petition no. 632: J. J. Gakaara Wanjau', 12 July 1954.

[2] GW correspondence, 1948–9 file: Gakaara to East Africa Command, n.d. [Jan. 1949].

'Yes, because of poverty'. And when asked 'Are you inclined to turn away your eyes when people look straight at you?', Gakaara wrote: 'Yes. Big people, more educated and very rich'.[3]

Gakaara had his reputation in mind when, in July 1952, he took a Mau Mau oath.[4] Like other partakers of the oath in Nyeri district, Gakaara committed himself to work for the common good, to stay away from prostitutes, to abjure sorcery and to fight for *ithaka na wîathi*, for 'property and self-mastery', the right to social respect.[5] On 20 October, Gakaara was arrested and accused of fomenting Mau Mau ideology. British officers thought he was 'probably a sincere fanatic of unstable mental balance'.[6] He was detained for eight years, first at Kajiado; then at Manda Island and Takwa camps, on the Indian Ocean coast; at Athi River camp; and finally at Hola Open Camp, in Kenya's arid east.[7]

At his death in 2001, Gakaara's personal archive amounted to over 7,000 pages of material, mostly written in the Gikuyu language, accumulated over the course of a long life spent in writing and publishing. Gakaara composed a large proportion of this archive while in detention. By October 1953, less than a year after his arrest, Gakaara had written a book manuscript entitled (in Gikuyu) 'The mysteries of the Kikuyu witchdoctor' and a pamphlet called 'Spit out what you have taken'.[8] In 1955 Gakaara was conducting ethnographic research with other detainees at Manda Island camp. This research was written up, in pencil, in six exercise books, and entitled 'Which clan do you belong to?' In 1956, at Athi River camp, Gakaara confessed before British officers to his involvement with Mau Mau, and was employed as a staff member. Under the direction of the British commandant Gakaara composed at least five plays for detainees to perform. He also edited the detention camp newspaper *Atîrîrî*, a journal which he called the 'most interesting, if not beneficial newsletter to the detainees ... to help us for the building of a New Kenya'.[9] During his eight years in detention Gakaara also composed dozens of songs, carried on an extensive correspondence with his wife, negotiated through the mail over his sister's remarriage, directed litigation over land he had inherited and kept a diary. The diary, heavily edited, was published in 1983 as *Mwandîki wa Mau Mau Ithanîrio-inî*, later published as *Mau Mau Author in Detention*. It won the 1984 Noma Award for publishing in Africa.

In her Pulitzer Prize-winning *Imperial Reckoning* (published in the United Kingdom as *Britain's Gulag*), historian Caroline Elkins has inducted Kenya's detention camps into the world history of state-sponsored

[3] GW correspondence, 1948–9 file: enrolment form, British Institute of Practical Psychology, n.d. [1949].

[4] GW detention file: no title, confession notes, 8 May 1956.

[5] PCEA II/G/4: Mau Mau oath confession forms, 1955–6; see J. Lonsdale, 'The moral economy of Mau Mau', in Lonsdale and B. Berman, *Unhappy Valley* (London, 1992); and D. Peterson, *Creative writing* (Portsmouth NH, 2004), ch. 6.

[6] KNA JZ 7/6: Petition no. 632, Gakaara Wanjau, n.d.

[7] Gakaara's biography is given in C. Pugliese's excellent *Author, Publisher and Gikuyu Nationalist: The Life and Writings of Gakaara wa Wanjau* (Bayreuth, 1995).

[8] These two manuscripts have not survived. GW detention file: Gakaara wa Wanjau to G. Dennis, 18 Dec. 1953.

[9] KNA AB 11/61: Gakaara to Community Development Office, 27 July 1957.

genocide.[10] For Elkins, the Mau Mau war was a straightforward struggle between two sides. Gikuyu were either part of a 'Mau Mau population' or British loyalists, moving in 'lockstep with the British to ensure their common collective interests'.[11] This two-sided political struggle was carried forward in detention camps, as tens of thousands of Gikuyu people were 'screened' and tortured by loyalists and British officers. Invoking Orlando Patterson, Elkins argues that long-term detainees were made 'socially dead' through violence, humiliation and isolation.[12] Some detainees nonetheless forged a will to resist, defending their commitment to Mau Mau by convening secret prayer sessions and by administering new oaths to waverers. Other detainees, who could not withstand the physical and psychological pressure that British officers applied, 'broke'. Elkins argues that those who confessed to their involvement with Mau Mau were motivated by a desire to save themselves from torture, abuse and hard work.[13]

Elkins's book illuminates an awful history. But her simplified analytical categories straitjacket the interpretation of detention camp culture, making it hard to see the range of intellectual and moral projects in which detainees were involved. Detainees like Gakaara were not simply defending their loyalty to a Mau Mau movement. Their intellectual world was not defined by the stereotyped political choices that Elkins sees. Gakaara and the many other Gikuyu men and women who took an oath in the late 1940s and 1950s were involved in a moral project, not in a straightforward political war between two sides. They were worried over women's sexual conduct, over their own reputations and over the future of the Gikuyu commonwealth. Once detained by the British, Gakaara and other entrepreneurs carried these discourses about family life and political self-mastery forward. The 'world behind the wire', as Elkins calls it, was not a world of the socially dead. Detainees did cultural work to ensure their wives' fidelity, to get leverage over brothers and clansmen, and to generate rhetorical and social capital with which to engage with the British. They were engaged in innovative cultural and social projects, generating knowledge and making claims on others.

This article begins by examining detainees' family lives. Confronted with a world where kinspeople seemed dangerously unaccountable, detainees managed their homes through the postal system. In the voluminous correspondence that they carried on with wives, brothers and friends, detainees exercised leverage over their families and upheld their reputations. Detainees at the same time looked for leverage over British officers. The second section shows how detention camp petitioners generated evidence of their maltreatment, representing their diets, clothing and work routines as offenses against the British conscience. By positioning themselves as maltreated confreres of British people, detainees created trans-continental networks of advocacy that could be brought to bear on colonial officers. The third section concerns the key moral quandary that detainees faced: whether or not to confess to their involvement in Mau Mau. Some detainees, worried that the

[10] C. Elkins, 'Detention, rehabilitation, and the destruction of Kikuyu society', in J. Lonsdale and Atieno Odhiambo (eds.), *Mau Mau and Nationhood* (London, 2003), 191–226; and Elkins, *Imperial Reckoning: The Untold Story of Britain's Gulag in Kenya* (New York, 2005). [11] Elkins, *Imperial Reckoning*, 60. [12] *Ibid*. 156.
[13] *Ibid*. 179, 186–7.

substance of their lives was draining away, thought their primary duty lay with their families. They therefore confessed to British officers, and sought an early release from detention. Other detainees refused to accept the British demand that they sully other people's reputations by naming those whom they knew to be involved in Mau Mau. This 'hard core' kept their mouths closed, and languished for years in detention. The battle behind the wire was not fought over detainees' loyalty to a Mau Mau movement. Detainees' intellectual and moral concerns were always close to home.

I

There were three engines that drove detainees to create new cultural forms. First, detainees needed to build institutions with which to discipline other detainees' conduct. Detention camps were brutal, brutalizing places. Manyani camp was in 1954 home to over 15,000 men, crammed into aluminum-sided barracks housing 60 each.[14] Sewage from the latrines pooled near the kitchens. In mid-October 1954, 97 detainees died of typhoid.[15] But more than physical indignity, detainees at Manyani and elsewhere felt themselves imperiled by other detainees' immorality. In February 1957, two detainees at Embakasi Quarry Farm wrote to the governor to complain about a group of convicts brought in from a Nairobi prison. 'We have many young boys of our own which they like to do them as women', they wrote.[16] They asked to be separated from 'those [who] like to do shameful and wily deeds'. At Aguthi camp in Nyeri, detainees complained about petty criminals who 'steal and quarrel, fight and commit sodomy with each other'.[17] Other detainees were alarmed at the petty infighting of detention camp politics. Writing from Manyani in 1954, the detainee Gitui complained that Special Branch officers were inflaming detainees' prejudices. 'They say that Nyeri people were cheated by Kiambu people and their young men and girls were killed', wrote Gitui.[18] 'They should not teach bad manners to foolish people'. For detainees like these, a Hobbesian state of nature seemed perilously close at hand.

Troubled by the fratricidal conflict within their own ranks, detainees were also confounded by their lack of influence at home. Male detainees were terrified that wives, left to fend for themselves, would forfeit their fidelity. They had good reason to worry. In the mid-1950s, the ratio of women to men in northern central Kenya was seven to one.[19] In husbands' and brothers' absence, women had to do hard work to care for children and elderly relatives. Shifra Wairire, released from detention in April 1957, cared for a half-dozen children while also building a new house and participating in communal labor. 'We were left as people whose kin had all died', she wrote

[14] KNA AH 9/5: Assistant Director of Medical Services to Commandant, Manyani, May 1954.

[15] KNA AH 9/5: Legislative Council minutes, 9 Dec. 1954; Elkins, *Imperial Reckoning*, 138–41.

[16] KNA JZ 7/4: Mbugwa Boro and Kimani Njoroge to Governor, 11 Feb. 1957.

[17] J. M. Kariuki, *Mau Mau detainee* (Nairobi, 1963), 139–40.

[18] KNA AH 9/37: Gitui to Governor, 20 Feb. 1954. See also M. Mathu, *The Urban Guerilla* (Richmond, 1974), 86.

[19] Dr. Shannon, 'The changing face of Kenya', *Kikuyu News*, 210 (Oct. 1955).

to her husband Gakaara wa Wanjau. 'I know that if you were present, we would not be undergoing what we are experiencing now'.[20] Some abandoned wives found it impossible to resist other men's advances. In 1956, detainee Samuel Muiruri at Kerkerra Rehabilitation Camp heard that his wife, Wambui, had married another man.[21] When her brother was offered dowry by a neighbor, the sister found it unprofitable to refuse the man's proposition. Detainees worried that the men with resources at their disposal would take advantage of lonely wives. 'I know that any man cannot play around with you and convince you to offer them your body recklessly', Gakaara wrote in a nervous 1957 letter to his wife. 'Never agree to such a thing as offering your body to anyone who comes with the lies that he will help you. These are all lies'.[22]

Worried over their wives' fidelity, detainees also worried about their male relatives' greed, a third engine of cultural innovation. Many detainees were junior members of their families, with older brothers who stood to inherit the bulk of their father's property.[23] Detainees' property was particularly imperiled after 1954, when, under the Swynnerton Plan, government surveyors consolidated dispersed Gikuyu landholdings.[24] 'Land is being consolidated and it is only the owner of the land who may know everything concerning his land', warned the detention camp newspaper *Atîrîrî* in 1957.[25] Detainees had to rely on wives, brothers or cousins to represent them before government surveyors. Greedy clansmen sometimes took advantage of the situation. In 1957 detainee Anderson Mureithi was refused parole by his village chief. His brother, Mureithi learned, did not want him to receive land from their father, and so had objected to his release.[26] Gakaara wa Wanjau was involved in protracted litigation with members of his own clan over land he had inherited from his father. 'I have heard a lot of complaints here in detention from the detainees because they are shortchanged on land … even from people from the same clan, and others from their own brother', he wrote in 1957.[27] He instructed his wife and mother that 'this is the time when one is called upon to open her eyes wide open and be extremely crafty'.

In 1960 Gakaara wa Wanjau published his pamphlet *Mîhîrîga ya Agîkûyû* (Clans of the Gikuyu).[28] It had been written, with a pencil, during Gakaara's detention on Manda Island.[29] For Gakaara the detention camps had been an invaluable opportunity to conduct ethnographic research. 'I had all of these

[20] GW detention file: Shifra to Gakaara, 4 July 1957.

[21] KNA AB 18/2: Community Development Officer, Kerkerra Camp, to Probation Officer, Kiambu, 19 Dec. 1956.

[22] GW detention file: Gakaara to Shifra, n.d. [mid-1957].

[23] See KNA AB 18/10: Community Development Officer to District Commissioner (DC) Nakuru, 15 Dec. 1956.

[24] For the Swynnerton Plan, see C. Leo, *Land and Class in Kenya* (Toronto, 1984); and G. Kitching, *Class and Economic Change in Kenya* (New Haven, 1980).

[25] KNA AB 11/61: *Atîrîrî*, 1 51, 21 Sept. 1957.

[26] KNA AB 1/94: Anderson Mureithi at Hola Camp to Community Development Officer, Saiyusi, 29 May 1957.

[27] GW detention file: Gakaara to Raheli Warigia, 8 July 1957.

[28] Gakaara wa Wanjau, *Mîhîrîga ya Agîkûyû* (Karatina, 1960).

[29] GW detention file: Gakaara to Shifra, 12 July 1958.

ten clans [in detention]', he said in an interview. 'Their characteristics are quite different ... One person whose clan is Anjiru may come from Nyeri, another from Kiambu or Murang'a, and they happen to meet in detention camp'.[30] The book that Gakaara wrote is a window into the constructive cultural work that detainees were doing. It lists ten different clans, identifying each clan's 'behavior', its 'manners', 'statesmanship and courage', 'wealth', 'witchcraft' and 'attraction to women'. Detainees must have spent long hours in argument before agreeing, for example, that the Mbui clan 'love fighting' and that they 'speak openly and hate interruption'. In making these judgments detention camp ethnographers offered proverbs and stories to support their line of interpretation. Concerning the Ceera clan, for example, the book describes how a Ceera man, traveling with a friend to look at a new piece of property, crossed a river on a log, then turned and removed the log before his companion could cross. The Ceera then raced ahead and claimed the land as his own. The story allowed detention camp ethnographers to make judgments on Ceera men's character. The book says that Ceera 'are not good friends of the poor', and that they are 'impatient before they understand a matter'. But, as a salve to Ceera men's dignity, the book assures the reader that these men are 'liked by women because of the way they decorate themselves'.

This ethnographic typecasting was a novelty. Never before had the Gikuyu clans been sorted out with such precision. The earliest ethnographers in central Kenya thought that the Gikuyu people were divided into 13 clans, not 10.[31] In 1911, the District Commissioner in Nyeri counted 9 Gikuyu clans, while in 1921, the District Commissioner in Fort Hall thought there to be 12 clans in all.[32] Not until 1933, with the publication of Stanley Kiama Gathigira's *Mîikarîrie ya Agîkûyû*, did Gikuyu ethnographers begin to sort out their clans in print.[33] Gathigira, a Presbyterian schoolmaster, told his readers that there were 10 Gikuyu clans. He said nothing about each clan's personality, or about its members' character.[34] Gikuyu thinkers were always wary of saying too much about their clans. Jomo Kenyatta's *Facing Mount Kenya*, published in English in 1938, dealt with Gikuyu clans in a few scant sentences.[35] His political imagination was focused on the vertical relationship between the singular Gikuyu ancestor and an omnipotent God. God had once taken the man Gikuyu to the top of Mt. Kenya, wrote Kenyatta, and there he was given the land stretched out before his eyes. Kenyatta and other ethnographers were drawing Gikuyu together around a common ancestry. In this family history, clans were problematic: they divided the unitary people that Kenyatta sought to conjure up.

In documenting the personalities of each clan, Gakaara and other detention camp ethnographers of the 1950s were doing something quite new in Gikuyu intellectual history. Their ethnographic work was part of a wider

[30] Cited in J. Lonsdale and C. Elkins, 'Memories of Mau Mau in Kenya' (unpublished paper for 'Memory and Violence' colloquium, Cortona, Italy, 2002).

[31] W. S. Routledge and K. Routledge, *With a Prehistoric People* (London, 1968 [1910]), 20.

[32] KNA DC/Nyeri/1/6/1: McClure, Jan. 1911; KNA PC/CP/6/4/3: DC Fort Hall, 19 May 1921.

[33] S. K. Gathigira, *Mîikarîre ya Agîkûyû* (Nairobi, n.d. [1933]).

[34] M. Kabetu, *Kîrîra kia Ûgîkûyû* (Nairobi, 1991 [1947]) elaborates slightly on Gathigira's account.

[35] J. Kenyatta, *Facing Mount Kenya* (London, 1953 [1938]), 2.

effort to create cross-cutting institutions that would unify disparate, divided people. John Mungai, detained at Manda Island together with Gakaara, reported that detainees had created bureaucracies to foster clan allegiances. Each clan had a chairman and a membership roll, so that 'each member of the clan should know each other'. These clan organizations cut across the parochial loyalties that confounded detention camp organizers. Detainees' ethnographic work also gave them intellectual and rhetorical leverage over their wives. Gakaara's *Mîhîrîga ya Agîkûyû* was an advice manual for husbands, offering insight on how to tame wives' eccentricities. The book listed the tendencies of each clan's women: a Munjiru woman, for example, was said to 'love her husband and protect his property'; while the notional Munjiru wife was 'not known for politeness. When angry can resort to violence'. Ceera women had their husbands' best interests in mind: they were said to 'love their homes and work hard to help husbands get rich'. Moreover, the Ceera wife 'does not fail to report to her husband any time the boundaries are distorted by neighbors'. Detainees needed to know whether their wives would guard their interests. Many of them were depending on their wives to protect their land at a time when government surveyors were adjudicating boundaries. *Mîhîrîga ya Agîkûyû* is a window into the anxious conversations that detainees at Manda Island and elsewhere were having about women's loyalties.

Guided by their ethnographic research on women's behavior, detainees kept up a running correspondence with their families. Detainees used the postal service to project their interests into a domestic arena where they otherwise had little leverage. 'Inquire and know those who support me and those who say I do not have a right to a piece of land', Gakaara told his wife in a November 1957 letter. 'This way, I will secretly write to those who support me to thank them'.[36] Gakaara was using the postal system to gather information, identify supporters and make claims on others. He wrote dozens of letters to his wife Shifra, in Gikuyu and in Swahili, while urging her to 'get an educated woman to teach you English … I want you to improve your handwriting'.[37] In July 1957, Gakaara sent his wife a copy of the government newspaper *Tazama*, calling her attention to a feature story about how to welcome visitors to one's home. 'I would very much like you to read the story keenly', wrote Gakaara. 'I have marked with pen all the area I think are important'.[38] In the same package he sent his wife a set of teacups. 'Keep them from children and maybe you should be using them only when you have visitors', he advised his wife. Gakaara was managing appearances from afar.

This correspondence was, in one way, surveillance. It helped reassure him of his family's single-minded fidelity. After waiting for two weeks in July 1957 for a letter from his wife, Gakaara exploded with frustration. 'Why have you shamed me that way, Wairire?', he asked. 'Surely, you can never fail to have nothing to tell me … Is it stamps you don't have, or is it fatigue from communal work, or have you been taken ill?'[39] Gakaara similarly

[36] GW detention file: Gakaara to Shifra, 4 Nov. 1957.
[37] GW detention file: Gakaara to Shifra, 26 Jan. 1956.
[38] GW detention file: Gakaara to Shifra, 2 July 1957.
[39] GW detention file: Gakaara to Shifra, 28 July 1957.

complained over Shifra's silence in June 1958. 'Why have you done this to me?', he asked. 'Why have you shamed me this way and the way I love you dear? Don't you know how much I love you and you are just hurting my heart?'[40] Shifra occasionally found Gakaara's injured pride too much to bear. As she wrote in August 1958, 'When will you stop the noise over letters? The younger aunt to my mother died … Also, the elder called Mbarithi has succumbed to disease. Wanjau Githaiga stabbed Mucoki Kagera to death. Wanjau has been arrested … For that reason, if you find an incomplete letter do not ask why'.[41]

Letter writing, like ethnography, was a means by which detainees sought to get traction in the social world. To Gakaara as to other detainees, wives and kinsmen seemed dangerously unaccountable. In his constant stream of exhortation, and in his outrage over his wife's late-arriving letters, Gakaara was working to sway his relatives' behavior. His correspondence was at the same time a way of creating a respectable persona in his own, immediate world. In July 1957, Gakaara told Shifra to organize a family photograph, giving her specific advice on where his grandmother, mother and children were to position themselves.[42] When the photos reached him later in the month, Gakaara displayed them to his detention camp fellows. They caused a stir, as he told his wife:

> When people see Wanjau sitting alone, they say 'See how he has portrayed himself as brave', and another is saying, 'He is intelligent as his father, just look at those eyes' … They are saying that Muturi has closed his eyes in shrewdness, that he is furious and that he is more clever than Wanjau. I have heard all these things as I sit in silence as people here scramble to see the photos.[43]

By giving him an identifiable progeny, Gakaara's photo album earned him a home life to call his own. His virtual family took on flesh and blood in mid-1958, when his wife and children joined him on a four-acre homestead in Hola Open Camp. Gakaara wrote lengthy screeds instructing Shifra on how, exactly, to prepare for life in camp. 'Were it not for my inabilities, I would like you to be neat and clean thus becoming a true wife of Gakaara's', he wrote in June.[44] He sent Shifra money to buy cloth for two dresses, and gave her specific instructions on the pattern she was to use. 'I would like that once you are through, people will see that you have good clothes', he wrote. Gakaara the fashion designer was crafting a presentable wife. He also instructed Shifra on the art of good conversation. 'You should update yourself on public issues so that you will be able to narrate to them well, for instance what is happening in Karatina', he wrote.[45] In his letters home, Gakaara was stage-managing Shifra's appearance, and giving her lines of conversation. He hoped by this means to impress his detention camp colleagues with his social attainments.

By comparison with other detainees, Gakaara was uniquely able to put a good face on his family life. After becoming a rehabilitation assistant at Athi

[40] GW detention file: Gakaara to Shifra, 18 June 1958.
[41] GW detention file: Shifra to Gakaara, 13 Aug. 1958.
[42] GW detention file: Gakaara to Shifra, 8 July 1957.
[43] GW detention file: Gakaara to Shifra, 29 July 1957.
[44] GW detention file: Gakaara to Shifra, 21 June 1958.
[45] GW detention file: Gakaara to Shifra, 8 Aug. 1958.

River camp early in 1957, he could use his modest salary to provision his home. He contributed 10 shillings each month to pay the wages of the house girl.[46] But less well-positioned detainees were also using the postal system to take hold over their domestic affairs. In 1957, 25 per cent of detainees in camps were said to be literate.[47] J. M. Kariuki and two colleagues used their time in detention to write up an ethnography which they published in 1961 as 'Kikuyu customs and teaching before marriage'.[48] Gakaara was not alone in his efforts to uphold his marriage. Thousands of detainees kept up a running correspondence with their spouses. In March 1956, 5,786 letters passed through the censors' hands at the women's detention camp in Kamiti.[49] Detainees at Kamiti had the British social worker read out letters from home, and pressed her to compose replies on their behalf.[50] Literate detainees often took up their pens on behalf of their fellows. In 1954 an acquaintance wrote to Gakaara at Manda Island camp, naming some 149 people to whom he asked Gakaara to transmit messages.[51] Illiterate men were using their literate colleagues as a conduit through which to transmit news and instructions. Detainees also got news through word of mouth. In 1958, Gakaara described how three women newly arrived at Hola Camp from Kiambu had 'talked until their voices became hoarse' about land consolidation, rain and other home affairs.[52]

Gakaara's correspondence with Shifra Wairire was part of detainees' larger work of social engineering. In a situation where wives and relatives could not physically be held accountable, detainees used the postal system to ventriloquize their voices and extend their influence. But their correspondence was not merely a pragmatic means of domestic management. Gakaara and Shifra loved each other, and there are touching moments in the correspondence where that relationship comes to the fore. 'God is great that one day we might see ourselves together, kissing in the same way we did', he wrote in 1957. 'Let us pray to Him very much'.[53]

II

Detainees also used the postal system to project their interests onto a wider, imperial stage. Detention camp entrepreneurs worked hard to make themselves recognizable as British citizens. At Mageta camp, Gikuyu teachers purposefully ran their own classes in 1957, refusing to accept assistance from the British officer.[54] At Manda Island the camp school, staffed by detainees,

[46] GW detention file: Gakaara to Raheli Warigia, 8 July 1957.
[47] KNA AB 11/60: Staff Officer for Education, 'Distribution of periodicals in camps', 25 Oct. 1957.
[48] Kariuki, *Mau Mau Detainee*, 177. Thanks to B. Shadle for this reference.
[49] KNA AB 1/92: Rehabilitation Officer Kamiti to Commissioner for Community Development, 25 Mar. 1956.
[50] CBMS A/T 2/6 Box 279, 'Miss Martin' file: Martin, circular letter, 1 Aug. 1955.
[51] GW detention file: Unknown to Gakaara, 24 Feb. 1954.
[52] GW detention file: Gakaara to Shifra, 9 Aug. 1958.
[53] GW detention file: Gakaara to Shifra, n.d. [but Nov. 1957].
[54] KNA AB 1/88: Community Development Officer to Secretary for Community Development, 8 July 1957.

offered Standards I through IV.[55] By early 1956, detainees had collected some 670 shillings to purchase the Kenya government's official syllabus. Gakaara wa Wanjau, the Education Committee Secretary, took pleasure in his students' progress. 'Good progress!', he wrote in a diary entry describing the term's work.[56] In 1955 he enrolled in a short-story writing course with the London-based Regent Institution. On the question 'Is success due to luck?', Gakaara's answer was emphatically 'No. We must work hard to obtain success', he wrote. 'Luck will never find someone in bed'.[57] At other detention camps educational work was less formal, but no less serious. At Manyani, detainees used sharpened sticks to write on slates of smoothed-over sand.[58] At Athi River, detainees in 1954 borrowed 700 books per month from the camp library.[59] The 1,891 women detained at Kamiti read 1,750 newspapers in January 1955.[60]

Hard at work in their lessons, detainees used their mastery over the English language to position themselves as confreres of Englishmen. In petitions and other exhortatory correspondence, detainees framed their experience of physical privation as an offense against the British conscience. In April 1957, petitioners from Embakasi camp gave the Commissioner of Prisons a primer in British jurisprudence. Entitling their letter 'Structures of British laws in prisons', they described how the Commandant was torturing them by shoving sticks into their rectums. 'The time is now ripe for HM Government to think how the Africans should be governed, and we are not fed up with British Laws at all', they wrote. 'But we really pray for well instructed Government officials who understand the Queen's Government Laws [better] than such impervious to reason people as [the Commandant]'.[61] The 'Black Africans in Manyani Detention Camp' likewise sought to hold local camp officers to high standards. 'The actions and the treatments which are going on in Detention Camps mostly in Manyani are completely out of orders and laws of Queen Elizabeth the II', they wrote in a petition to the Governor.[62] In another letter, they asked whether the Commandant was 'really a British man in birth or is he another man of another nation blood?'[63] Detainees were contrasting universal British ideals with the injustices perpetrated by untutored camp officials.

They had British rulebooks close at hand. J. M. Kariuki, while held at Manyani in the mid-1950s, purchased a copy of the government's detention camp regulations for 20 shillings.[64] He sewed the book into the lapels of

[55] Gakaara wa Wanjau, *Mau Mau Author in Detention* (Nairobi, 1988), 117.
[56] GW Detention diary manuscript: May to June 1953.
[57] GW Writing course correspondence: Gakaara to Regent Institute, 7 Feb. 1955.
[58] Kariuki, *Mau Mau Detainee*, 87.
[59] KNA AB 25/200: H. Church to Commissioner for Community Development, 13 Dec. 1954.
[60] KNA AB 1/112: Kamiti Rehabilitation Officer to Commissioner for Community Development, 3 Feb. 1955.
[61] KNA JZ 7/4: Embakasi convicts to Commissioner of Prisons, 6 Apr. 1957.
[62] KNA JZ 7/4: 'Black Africans in Manyani detention camp' to Governor, 9 Mar. 1957.
[63] KNA JZ 7/4: 'The black people of Kenya in Manyani detention camps', n.d. [Jan. 1957].
[64] Kariuki, *Mau Mau Detainee*, 101–2.

his coat for safekeeping. Detainees also kept a close eye on the news. The government's rules placed strict limits on detainees' reading habits: the free press was distributed exclusively to detention camp staff.[65] Distribution rules notwithstanding, it is plain that unauthorized newspapers made their way into detainees' hands. In 1956, Kamau Gachuke and four other detainees at Saiyusi Island wrote to a parliamentary delegation saying that they 'strongly support the truth inquiry of Miss Barbara Castle MP which appeared in the *Daily Mirror* of 9th and 10th December 1955'.[66] In their newspaper reading, detainees were collecting intelligence, and identifying allies. In Manda Island camp, detainees established a sub-committee to determine to whom they should direct their petitions.[67] The Secretary of Defence must have been the first name in their address book: in 1956 he complained that his clerks were 'inundated' with petitions from various detention camps.[68] But detainees knew also how to address themselves to unofficial British opinion. At Manda Island camp, John Mungai and other detainees filled in cyclostyled forms reporting on the rations they were given, on their bedding and on their physical treatment.[69] This bundle of paper was forwarded to the British liberal Fenner Brockway in order to bolster his case against the detention camps.

In addressing liberal British opinion, detainees did intellectual and rhetorical work to represent themselves. Detainees actively characterized their diets, workload and attire so as to catch British liberals' attention. Their intellectual and rhetorical agency is most obviously seen in their descriptions of the work they did. For British officers, hard work was medicine for the sickness of Mau Mau. It cultivated habits of obedience, and taught detainees to cooperate. 'A man whose body is disciplined and subject to control, will be more open to subjecting his mind to control', one rehabilitation camp officer explained.[70] For Gikuyu petitioners, the labor they were forced to do was useful evidence. Some detainees eagerly agreed to perform onerous physical tasks, so better to illuminate the abject servitude in which they lived. At Lodwar, Yatta, Kamiti and other camps, detainees determinedly refused to accept wages for the manual work that they did.[71] 'A good Mau Mau may work, but he may not accept pay', wrote a British officer; 'So the delightful situation arises of Kikuyu coming to the Camp authorities and saying: ''We don't want to be paid for our work, Bwana. We don't mind how hard we work … only please, please don't pay us!'''.[72] By refusing to accept money from British officers, detainees positioned themselves as slaves, not as biddable wageworkers. They thereby generated rhetorical capital with which to arouse the British conscience. From Saiyusi camp, detainees described in a

[65] KNA AB 11/59: J. Dames, 'Distribution of periodicals', 1 July to 30 Sept. 1957.
[66] KNA JZ 7/4: Kamau Gachuke *et al*. to Thomas Dugdale, 18 Nov. 1956.
[67] Bristol Breckenridge papers: J. M. Mungai, confession, 21–28 Sept. 1956.
[68] KNA AH 9/37: Secretary for Defence to Commissioner of Prisons, 11 Dec. 1956.
[69] Bristol Breckenridge papers: J. M. Mungai, confession, 21–28 Sept. 1956.
[70] RH Mss. Afr. s. 2257: Howard Church, 'The Athi experiment', n.d.
[71] For Lodwar, see Kariuki, *Mau Mau Detainee*, 116, and KNA JZ 7/4: R. Mwangi to Defence Secretary, 16 Apr. 1957; for South Yatta Works Camp, see KNA JZ 7/4: P. Bennett to Commissioner of Prisons, 14 Sept. 1954; for Kamiti, KNA AB 1/112: Warren-Gash, 31 Oct. 1957.
[72] RH Mss. Afr. s. 2257: Church, 'The Athi experiment', n.d.

1957 petition how they were kept at work cutting trees, sawing lumber and burning charcoal. 'Now we have learnt that instead of being detained, the government has turned us into slaves', they wrote, 'for we are employed in the same work as African slaves were employed in America'.[73] In a September 1954 petition, detainee John Gitiri addressed himself to the Secretary of State for the Colonies, with copies to Prime Minister Clement Atlee, parliamentarians Fenner Brockway and James Griffiths, and Jawaharlal Nehru. 'We don't want to be paid any cent but we will work as slaves', he wrote. 'Would you please enquire this to the British Government of our Queen Elizabeth II to help all people ... not to be made Kenya slaves'.[74] By refusing payment for their work, detainees were characterizing themselves as chattel, bound to serve at the whim of British masters.

Food was a second platform on which detainees could represent themselves. British officials set detainees' diet with a bureaucratic precision. Detainees were to be given one pound 4 ounces of maize meal a day; 8 ounces of beans, 8 ounces of potatoes and 8 ounces of meat twice a week; and one tablet of ascorbic acid daily.[75] Petitioners cited these statistics, comparing deviations against the legal standard. At Manyani, detainees complained in 1957 that 'the food which we eat there is not according to British law and order'.[76] Writing from Saiyusi Island camp, Maina Macharia and two companions entitled their 1956 petition to the Secretary of State to the Colonies: 'Indirect killing: food reallocation in Saiyusi Island Detention Camp'. They complained that they were receiving millet flour instead of maize, palm oil instead of vegetable oil, and that there were no potatoes in their rations.[77] 'The days of our lives are limited unnaturally by penal diet and inhumanity treatment', they wrote. Detainees' diet was, in fact, very often inadequate. A British Rehabilitation Officer found in 1954 that detainees from Manyani were in 'shocking health', many of them suffering from malnutrition.[78] Some hungry petitioners contrasted the detention camp menu with the Queen's table. Writing from Kamiti in 1956, a group of female detainees complained that they were dying of hunger. 'We think that we are just the same as other women and if it was Queen Elizabeth we think it would have been nutterness [*sic*])', they wrote; 'It is better you send us some of your police armed with rifles so that they should come and kill us instead of being in a horrible condition'.[79] Detainees were measuring their situation against imperial standards. They thereby generated rhetorical capital with which to prevail on a British audience.

Detainees further characterized themselves through their attire. New arrivals at detention camps were usually deprived of their clothing on entry, and issued standard garments. British officials represented this as a

[73] KNA JZ 7/4: Detainees at Sanjusi Island detention camp to Tom Mboya, 7 May 1957.
[74] KNA JZ 7/4: John Gitiri to Secretary of State for the Colonies, 5 Sept. 1954.
[75] KNA JZ 7/4: P. Bennett to Commissioner of Prisons, 14 Sept. 1954.
[76] KNA JZ 7/4: 'The black people of Kenya in Manyani detention camps', n.d. [but Jan. 1957].
[77] KNA AH 9/37: Maina Macharia *et al.* to Secretary of State for the Colonies, 1 Nov. 1956.
[78] J. Breckenridge, *Forty Years in Kenya* (Dorset, Great Britain, n.d.), 212.
[79] KNA AH 9/37: Kamiti prisoners to Governor, 6 Nov. 1956.

straightforward bureaucratic routine. Receipts were issued for any money, explained the Manyani Commandant, and detainees' clothing was returned to them on their release.[80] For Gikuyu petitioners, the loss of their clothing was a means to illuminate the incivility of detention camp life. Writing to the Colonial Secretary in 1957, the 'Black African detainees in Manyani camp' reminded him that during a recent tour of the camp, 'you saw a good number of detainees were without clothes like wild animals'. 'We are not rich at all, we are detainees', they wrote. 'We are not animals to remain naked'.[81] Other detainees dramatized the moment when they were stripped of their clothing. 'All our belongings bags and baggages were taken away from our possession and we were left naked, empty handed', wrote a group of Saiyusi Island detainees in 1956.[82] Stripped at British officials' command, detainees were left without the bare essentials of human dignity. Detainee John Gitiri described in 1954 how, on arrival at camp he was robbed of his money and clothing. 'We were left naked as we were born', he wrote. 'We know we were under British Government but the Kenya Government are treating us like animals'.[83] By their policy on clothing, argued detainees, camp officials had stripped them of their rights as citizens, and as human beings.

British officers thought detainees' lurid petitions were exaggerated. James Breckenridge, Commandant at Athi River during the mid-1950s, complained that detainees seldom bothered about the truth. 'Suppose a detainee had been forcibly restrained from attacking a warder, and placed in cell', he wrote in his memoirs. 'They would be capable of writing that he was hung up by his thumbs all night'.[84] Breckenridge insisted that the regulations were rigorously followed. Detention camp letter writers, by contrast, were characterizing their workload, their diet and their attire as violations of their civil liberties. Searching for leverage over the official mind, detention camp letter writers used their practiced command of the English language to represent themselves to a British metropolitan audience that could, they hoped, be spurred into action with evidence of maltreatment.

British liberals read their mail, and used Gikuyu detainees' evidence to fuel their criticisms of the Conservative government's Kenya policy. There were 31 questions asked about Mau Mau in the British parliament from 1952 to late 1955. Of these, 18 questions concerned the plight of specific detainees, while seven questions were asked about conditions in Kenya's detention camps.[85] Detainees' descriptions of their short rations, inadequate clothing and physical maltreatment shaped British arguments about the obligations that government bore to its African subjects. Published in 1955, the Church Missionary Society's pamphlet *Kenya: Call for Action* labeled the detention camps' screening process 'completely contrary to British justice'.[86] In 1956

[80] KNA JZ 7/4: Knowlden to Commissioner of Prisons, 21 Aug. 1954.
[81] KNA JZ 7/4: 'Black African detainees in Manyani camp' to Colonial Secretary, 11 Mar. 1957.
[82] KNA JZ 7/4: Kamau Gachui *et al*. to Secretary of State for the Colonies, n.d. [but 1956].
[83] KNA JZ 7/4: John Gitiri to Secretary of State for the Colonies, 5 Sept. 1954.
[84] Breckenridge, *Forty Years in Kenya*, 235.
[85] Churchill College Dingle Foot papers 5/7: 'List of Parliamentary questions', n.d. [late 1955].
[86] Church Missionary Society, *Kenya: Call for Action* (London, n.d. [1955]).

Eileen Fletcher, formerly employed as a rehabilitation officer, published a pamphlet entitled *Truth about Kenya*.[87] She described how one detainee had asked her if it was 'British justice that when a person has finished his prison sentence he can be … kept [in a detention camp] indefinitely'. Learning from detainees' own rhetorical strategy, Fletcher described the detention camps as a 'slur on the name of Britain'.[88] Many missionaries derided Fletcher's pamphlet for its vehemence. But even so eminent a figure as Max Warren, the General Secretary of the Church Missionary Society, had to tell the government's Colonial Secretary about his 'concern for Britain's prestige in Africa'.[89]

Gikuyu detainees and metropolitan liberals were bound up in a shared discourse about citizenship. Detainees represented their diet, their clothing and their workload as violations of their rights. Their rhetoric resonated in Britain, where liberal advocates used detainees' letters and other evidence to prick the electorate's conscience. Kenya's detention camps were by no means an 'untold story'. Gikuyu detainees were framing their situation, generating evidence and positioning themselves in a legal and rhetorical world they shared with their rulers.

III

The chief moral problem that detainees faced concerned the British demand that they confess to their involvement with Mau Mau. Central Kenya was, in the late 1940s and early 1950s, gripped by a crisis of gender relations, as land-poor young men found it increasingly difficult to found a family. Rural class formation fueled vocal arguments between husbands and wives over their mutual responsibilities. Courts were clogged with marital litigation.[90] The men who took Mau Mau oaths in the early 1950s were terrified at this gender trouble. Learning from their nineteenth-century history of forest clearing, Gikuyu householders knew that 'home affairs must not go into the open'.[91] Soft words proverbially made homes cool and prosperous.[92] Public argument between husbands and wives, in contrast, destroyed families. 'Too much talk breaks marriage', warned one proverb.[93] In their oaths, Mau Mau partisans had promised to keep careful hold over their tongues. Partakers vowed that if they ever violated the oath, 'may my brethren seize me and thrust my tongue through with a red hot iron'.[94] Peter Munene, then a teacher at a school in Nyeri, remembered that Mau Mau printed notices saying 'everyone should listen [and] curb your tongue seven times before you say

[87] Eileen Fletcher, *Truth about Kenya* (London, 1956).

[88] CBMS A/T 2/5 Box 278 'Eileen Fletcher's accusations': Fletcher to L. Greaves, 28 June 1956.

[89] CBMS A/T 2/6 Box 279 'CMS and Colonial Secretary' file: Max Warren, notes, 28 Mar. 1955.

[90] See J. Lonsdale, 'Authority, gender and violence', in Lonsdale and Odhiambo (eds.), *Mau Mau and Nationhood*; D. Peterson, 'Wordy women', *Journal of African History*, 42 (2001), 469–89; and L. Thomas, *The Politics of the Womb* (Berkeley, 2003), ch. 3.

[91] G. Barra, *1000 Kikuyu Proverbs* (Nairobi, 1960), 4.

[92] EUL Gen. 1786/6: Barlow, 'Kikuyu linguistics', n.d. [1950s].

[93] Barra, *1000 Kikuyu Proverbs*, 6.

[94] ACK Mau Mau file: Pittway, 23 Jan. 1954.

a word'. The notices, said Munene, 'taught us not to be a loud-mouthed person'.[95] Curbing their tongues was for Mau Mau partisans an act of civic responsibility.

British officers thought that, by confessing their misdeeds, detainees could be purged of their allegiance to Mau Mau.[96] At detention camps in Fort Hall, the District Commissioner required those who wished to confess to stand on a soapbox in front of an assembled crowd. 'If that truth embarrassed the hearers they too knew we were on their trail', he remembered.[97] Confessions had to be framed in the accusative. Mau Mau supporters had, that is, to name the names of those who had given them the oath, and identify also those friends and neighbors who had once supported the forest fighters. At Athi River and at other camps, British officers took penitent detainees to their home villages, there to point out those men and women who had not yet confessed.[98] Other detainees confessed over the loudspeaker. 'You Kamau were a judge in a Mau Mau court', announced one detainee. 'You sentenced six men to death … Their blood is on your hands'.[99] In 1956 Gakaara wa Wanjau attended, for the first time, a public confession meeting.[100] One man named the people from whose hands he had taken three oaths. Another detainee confessed to killing his neighbors. In his diary, Gakaara noted that he and his colleagues *twagegire* (were 'amazed, astounded, astonished') at the sight.[101]

What made these public confessions astonishing? In many detainees' view, men who confessed were slanderers. British officials' insistence that they should publicly confess their crimes was, in this partisan assessment, a smear campaign. In 1956, Reuben Emesi and three other detainees at Saiyusi Island camp accused Aram Ndirangu of slander.[102] They had been sitting quietly in their barracks when, over the tannoy, they heard Ndirangu say 'I hate Mau Mau, Jomo Kenyatta and in particular these bastards', naming Emesi and his colleagues. 'You are Mau Mau leaders', said Ndirangu, 'your souls will rot in hell'. Emesi urged British officials to stop loud-mouthed detainees like Ndirangu from sullying other people's character. In other camps, they wrote, detainees were only allowed to use the loudspeaker 'to confess his own personal misdeeds, but it is never his business to go on the air and defame or scandalize other detainees' characters'. Straight-backed men like Emesi thought men should be responsible for their own actions. At Athi River, detainees smothered the camp's loudspeakers with blankets, reducing the sound to an inoffensive gurgle.[103] In 1954, Gakaara wa Wanjau wrote out a short statement revealing some of his work on behalf of Mau Mau.[104] The following day, he heard that his confession was to be published in the *East African Standard*. In a panic, Gakaara remonstrated with the screening

[95] Interview: Peter Munene, Iruri, Nyeri district, 12 May and 9 Aug. 1998.
[96] Elkins, *Imperial Reckoning*, 152–3.
[97] Bristol 1996/86/B: W. Thompson, 'Only the foothills', n.d.
[98] Breckenridge, *Forty Years in Kenya*, 228.
[99] RH Mss. Afr. s. 2257: Church, 'The Athi experiment', n.d.
[100] Gakaara wa Wanjau, *Mau Mau Author*, 184–7.
[101] Gakaara wa Wanjau, *Mwandîki wa Mau Mau Ithamîrio-inî* (Nairobi, 1983), 147.
[102] KNA AH 9/37: Secretary for Legal Affairs to Secretary for Community Development, 30 Oct. 1956.
[103] Kariuki, *Mau Mau Detainee*, 131–2.
[104] GW detention diary manuscript, 20 and 22 Mar. 1954.

team. He was horrified at the thought that his private dealings with other people would be opened up for public discussion.

Many detainees refused to confess because they would not agree to slander other people. Their chief criticism of the Kenya government's rehabilitation program was that it deprived detainees of their moral agency by loosening their tongues with physical abuse. In 1957, detainees at Aguthi camp advised the Commissioner of Prisons not to dishonor other men by forcing them to confess. 'An ethical man should know how it is not worth to force man since God moves darkly in men's brains using their passionate hearts as his tools', they wrote.[105] Detainees at Athi River similarly criticized the British for forcing detainees to incriminate others. 'We are always forced to say what one doesn't know … so as to commit himself into some mistakes or crimes which to the fact he knows nothing', they wrote in a 1957 petition. 'Pliers are applied to work as the apparatus of castrating the testicles, and also the ears … All this is done so as to … oblige them to agree to what has been alleged against some one whether it is true or not true'.[106] Forced confessions were objectionable because, against their will, detainees were being made into loud-mouths. For similar reasons, detainees complained when Catholic priests turned the confessional against them. 'The priest would come with a tape recorder and would deceive you and later take you to court', ex-detainee Elijah Kiruthi told me in an interview; 'He could cheat you and [you could] tell him the people you had killed or those people who had killed people'.[107]

Confronted with the inhumane powers of rehabilitation camp screeners, detainees very often refused to talk. On first arriving at Manyani camp early in 1957, the British officer Wild found that 'every time I got near a detainee I said Jambo, the reply I received [was] merely a stare, or downcast eyes'.[108] Some detainees played word games with British officers. At Manyani camp in 1954, J. M. Kariuki and other detainees were forced to repeat phrases, in Gikuyu, like 'Jomo Kenyatta is a dog', or 'Dedan Kimathi and Stanley Mathenge are dung'. But instead of calling Kenyatta a dog, *mbwa*, they used the Gikuyu word *mba*, meaning 'creator'. Kimathi and Mathenge they named as *maji* (water), instead of *manfi* (dung).[109] With this linguistic subterfuge they avoided slandering their leaders. Other detainees crafted prescripted replies for screeners' intrusive questions. 'What made you become a patriot?', went a song that Gakaara composed in Manda Island camp. 'It's land hunger that made me so'. 'And why do you like to remain free?', went another question. 'I need not remain a slave in my motherland', went the heroic reply.[110] Detainees were writing liturgies, playing word games and holding their tongues. Their control over their words fortified their moral agency.

When detainees did confess, they meticulously avoided slandering other people. At Manyani camp, detainees habitually incriminated fictitious

[105] KNA JZ 7/4: Aguthi detainees to Commissioner of Prisons, Mar. 1957.

[106] KNA JZ 7/4: detainees at Athi River to Commissioner of Prisons, 10 Jan. 1957. Elkins (*Imperial Reckoning*, 207) reads this petition as a complaint against physical abuse, and ignores the writer's wider point.

[107] Interview: Elijah Kiruthi, Mahiga location, Nyeri district, 15 June 1998.

[108] KNA AB 1/108: Wild to Minister of Community Development, 9 May 1957.

[109] Kariuki, *Mau Mau Detainee*, 67–8.

[110] Gakaara wa Wanjau, *Mau Mau Author*, 26.

people, telling British officers that they were given the oath by, for example, Muthariti wa Riigi (Door Handle son of Door).[111] Ngugi wa Kabiro, worried about his starving family and needing a job, went to confess at a screening center in Kiambu. But first he plotted out his confession with his neighbors, and they together agreed to name as culprits several dozen people who they knew already to be dead.[112] Gakaara similarly coordinated his confession with his wife. He wrote to her several weeks in advance of his confession, telling her that 'I will say that I myself took you … into the oath together with others … but the names you don't know them, because you don't know their matters'.[113] In their confessions, detainees were guarding other people's reputations.

British officials thought that those who confessed had 'broken' their allegiance to Mau Mau. But what moved detainees to confess was not their broken loyalty to Mau Mau, but their devotion to their families. In an editorial published in *Atîrîrî* newspaper in 1957, one J. Kibuku explained his decision to confess by saying 'I realized that a person in a detention camp is just like a sick person in hospital, for he cannot help his wife, children or parents'.[114] There is no doubt that this line of discourse was in part British propaganda. Camp officials worked to make detainees feel themselves responsible for their families, in order to hasten the day of their confession.[115] An observer at Thiba Works Camp in Embu described how the Commandant had brought in a truckload of wives to visit husbands who had refused to confess. 'It was a ridiculous thing that when one man saw his wife, he ran away and hid himself in the huts', the observer wrote. 'The brave wife followed him and pulled him out of the hut. She told him, "I have come to see you, why are you hiding?" He said, "I do not know you"'.[116] British officers brought detainees face to face with their responsibilities at home. They hoped thereby to awaken detainees' sense of domestic duty, and to spur them to seek release through confession.

But notwithstanding British propaganda, it is plain that detainees' worries over their families were generated by a real, deeply felt sense of responsibility. In a letter urging his wife and mother to confess in 1956, Gakaara wa Wanjau wrote about his worries over their home:

> There is no doubt that the war is over and it is a rotten person who will refuse to confess his Mau Mau oath so that we can return to our homes … We have got a great trouble, and other people even now are going ahead, they have planted coffee and are cultivating the garden very well. If you think you will remember that our children are eating troubles because of your refusal to confess the oath which has brought us all this trouble.[117]

Shifra Wairire, Gakaara's wife, was similarly worried about their children. She was detained until 1957 in Kamiti Prison, suspected of having fed and aided Mau Mau guerillas. 'Do not think that it is the home people I have

[111] *Ibid*. 183.
[112] Ngugi wa Kabiro, *Man in the Middle* (Richmond, British Columbia, 1973), 73–4.
[113] GW detention file: Gakaara to wife and mother, 3 May 1956.
[114] KNA AB 11/61: editorial, in *Atîrîrî*, 2 (23 Nov. 1957).
[115] As argued in Elkins, *Imperial Reckoning*, 203–4.
[116] Bristol 2002/218/002–074: G. Mviti to John and Caroline Breckenridge, 11 Apr. 1957.
[117] GW detention file: Gakaara to Shifra, 3 July 1956.

forgotten', she wrote in reply to one of Gakaara's exhortatory letters. 'Every time I am remembering the home. Even if mother [has gone home] I cannot think that they are without trouble'.[118] After her release from Kamiti, Shifra dedicated herself to her children's welfare, building a six-roomed, grass-thatched house for them to live in.

Gakaara's play *Reke Acirithio na Mehia Make* (Let Him be Judged by his Sins) sheds light on the moral dilemmas that detainees faced.[119] The play was composed and staged in Athi River camp in August 1956, shortly after Gakaara had confessed to having supported Mau Mau. British officials hoped that this and other theatrical performances would spur detention camp audiences to confess. In his autobiography James Breckenridge, the Commandant at Athi River, described the psychodramas that he organized as comedic experiences.[120] Actors would put on skins and filthy rags, he remembered, and scratch and spit in a realistic way. Play-acting terrorists were always converted: burdened by their sense of sin, they went to the screener to confess. And in the last scene they returned, well-dressed and smoking cigarettes, for a final song. For Breckenridge, theatre was a way to encourage detainees to make critical judgements on their ridiculous past. But Gakaara's script was more than a straightforward morality play, and more also than a slapstick comedy. The play stars a rich old man, Mariko, who is in a business partnership with another man, Laban. As the play opens, Mariko administers the Mau Mau oath to his two wives. Laban, the villain of the play, informs on him, and Mariko is sent to a detention camp. In Mariko's absence, Laban joins the Home Guard and usurps their joint business, registering the property in his name. He also seduces Mariko's beautiful younger wife, Lily. At the detention camp, Mariko is warned by a visiting preacher that his livelihood is in danger. Worried, Mariko goes to the camp officer to confess to his involvement with Mau Mau. The script does not actually show Mariko confessing: instead, the screening officer and Mariko decorously do their business offstage, between scenes. In the last scene Mariko is released, reinstalled in his business and reunited with his wives; two-faced Lily returns to the marital fold; and Laban, Mariko's persecutor, falls down in a faint. The play ends with the entire cast reciting the Tenth Commandment: 'Thou shalt not covet'.

The playwright Gakaara was exceptionally proud of his work. He sent photographs of the performance home to his family.[121] For their part, British officers found Gakaara's theatrical work to be uncomfortably off-topic. A British rehabilitation officer who saw the play during its first performance thought it to be 'definitely immoral'. 'It shows an unbelievable depth of moral degradation', he wrote in a report; 'All the characters have taken the oath, they are all twisters, liars and scoundrels'.[122] This critic complained that none of Gakaara's characters ever denounced Mau Mau as a bad thing: rather, the play encouraged detainees to confess in order to return home and

[118] GW detention file: Shifra to Gakaara, 18 Oct. 1956.
[119] GW plays file: Gakaara wa Wanjau, 'Let his wickedness judge him', 1956.
[120] Breckenridge, *Forty Years in Kenya*, 226–7.
[121] GW detention file: Gakaara to Shifra, 15 Nov. 1956.
[122] KNA AB 1/85: Staff Officer Education to Secretary of Community Development, 18 Sept. 1956.

look after their property. The British officer wanted the play to be entirely restructured, with at least one straight character brought in to orient the play's message. After the play's first run, the Special Branch interrogated Gakaara, accusing him of fostering hatred towards British loyalists.[123]

For our purposes, the play illuminates the ethical and practical quandaries that detainees faced. Like Mariko, Gakaara and other detainees worried that the substance of their lives was draining away, as neighbors, relatives, business partners and strangers helped themselves to their property. Like Mariko, they made choices to protect themselves and their families against dissolution. The battle behind the wire was not fought between patriotic hard-core Mau Mau and weak-kneed, wavering, broken men who confessed. Detainees disagreed about confession because they could not reconcile the British demand that they slander others with their deep loyalties to kith and kin. Some detainees, determined to stave off the verbal diarrhea against which they had once fought, kept their mouths closed. The British called them 'hard-core'. Other detainees, committed to caring for their wives and children, confessed and sought an early release. Both hard core and soft core had their families in mind. Detainees did creative intellectual labor to bond wives to them, and to create cultural institutions that integrated disparate people and promoted harmony in camps. Detention camps did not destroy Gikuyu society. Rather, desperate men and women opened up new ways of representing Gikuyu culture.

[123] Gakaara wa Wanjau, *Mau Mau Author*, 192.