

Re-traditioning: Letter from Kenya

by [Edward Miller](#) in the [May 3, 2000](#) issue

Standing on a dusty Nairobi roundabout amid exhaust fumes and blaring horns, several hundred young men raise their hands north to the unseen shrine of Kerinyaga, or Mount Kenya—the second-highest mountain in Africa and mythological birthplace of the Kikuyu, Kenya’s largest tribe.

These Kikuyu faithful are members of the Tent of the Living God, one of a growing number of non-Christian traditional religions in Kenya. The Tent’s founder, Ngonya wa Gakonya, bedecked in white robe, graying dreadlocks and assorted traditional decorations, leads the congregation with the incantation “*Thaai thathaya ngai thaai* —God, bring peace to our people.”

Gakonya calls himself a crusader. “What I am doing is salvaging Kikuyu culture through reviving, revamping and reinvigorating the laws and values of our forefathers,” he says in his tin-shack office, dipping into a bottle of traditional snuff and offering visitors mugs of sweetened sorghum porridge. “But it is not just a Kikuyu thing,” says Gakonya. “I can go throughout Africa with the same authority, because other Africans also pray facing the mountains. There is only one African traditional religion.”

Schooled in one of Kenya’s modern high schools, Gakonya became disillusioned with Western Christianity and, after finishing school, educated himself about Kikuyu tradition. He talked with rural elders and participated in rituals and sacrifices. It was all experiential learning, he says, since “this knowledge is not in books.”

Gakonya’s compound on the outskirts of Nairobi boasts unique traditional structures, including a large wooden *thingira*, a hut for men. The *thingira* represents a special physical place for the activities of traditional age groups, called *riika*, says Gakonya. “We want a revival of these age-set rituals, which mark time and contribute to the solidarity of the community,” he says. “The *riika* is our most important grouping, sometimes even before family,” adds Tent member Mwendia wa Kaniaru. Kaniaru emphasizes deep respect for an elder system that enforces traditional law and oversees the community’s complex network of cleansing, initiation and marriage

rituals.

Gakonya blames “confusion by Christian missionaries” for the present state of the Kikuyu, where such traditions are not always adhered to, and where members now use “unnecessary” Western medicine, eat junk food and “behave like beasts” in modern urban centers. “Early people lived a communal life. No one was excluded from the community,” he says. It is different now. “My brother has 12 children, but I know only three of them.” Gakonya is certain that lost traditions can restore a disjointed Africa, still reeling from a missionary and colonial legacy that led to deep self-hatred. With the age-sets and other traditions, Gakonya seeks “to salvage self-dignity, kinship, community and culture.”

Gakonya created the Tent in 1987. By '90, adherents numbered in the thousands, and a distrustful government began to clamp down, leveling accusations of tribalism against the movement and then banishing it. Gakonya has spent time in jail for his beliefs. Recently police tear-gassed and arrested 80 members of a sister traditionalist group, Mungiki.

“The government fears us because we demand respect for the poor and lowly,” says Gakonya. He adds that Tent members also identify with the Kikuyu Mau Mau freedom fighters of the 1960s independence era, who claim that the government of President Daniel arap Moi, Kenya’s second president, sidelines them. Kenyan scholars identify the complex historical dynamics. “The present ruling class hails from the first generation of educated Kenyans,” says one. They are seen as sell-outs and opportunists by traditionalists of the same generation. Politicians perceive the growing movement as a major threat. They are afraid that the traditionalist groups will make a foray into politics and will have an authority with the rural and traditional constituency that the present ruling class lacks.

Gakonya tried to start a political party in '91 and still harbors political ambitions. But his current involvement is limited to commenting on contemporary issues, preaching freedom of worship and transparency in government, and decrying the exclusion of traditional religion. In January, uninvited, hundreds of followers of the Tent and Mungiki joined in a Christian rally on constitutional reform. National television broadcast their colorful group prayers and a sermon by Gakonya, in which he berated the churches. Days later, Mungiki national coordinator Ndura Wairunge told students at a rally to instigate a revolution “by making the country ungovernable.” Professor Grace Wamue of Kenyatta University’s Religious Studies Department says

that while both the Tent and Mungiki are political, Mungiki “openly criticizes dictatorship, and no dictator will allow that.”

Gakonya points out that groups like Mungiki are generally “more radical” than his, in addition to being more political. “The Tent has no difficulty in embracing aspects of modernity,” he says. He insists that traditional beliefs can and do flourish in a modern setting, and that back-to-nature intentional Kikuyu communities are impractical. “Some radicals live as if in a monastery, which is too much like the church, so I can’t advocate it—but I also can’t dictate my way,” says Gakonya.

Gakonya’s philosophy appeals to many who are seeking a strong cultural identity while struggling to survive in the modern world. But to some young Kenyans, glorifying tradition is a step backwards. “I consider this stuff unprogressive tribal chauvinism,” says Hilary Kamau, a Kikuyu and recent university graduate, distancing himself from what he calls “uneducated, lower class” adherents. While conceding that some aspects of tradition are valuable, Kamau says that politicizing the issues only isolates people.

Mainstream Christians are wary of groups like the Tent even if they sympathize with their social goals. Professor Wamue insists that traditionalists have a lot to offer Kenya and the world. “We Africans cannot run away from our Africanness, which defines our social way of life, our morals, and our relationship with God,” she says. Traditionalists’ “ideas on morality, hard work and group food production teach that everyone has to be involved in the general welfare of the community.” Kenyan society will not improve, she says, unless we relearn our traditional motto: “Include everyone.”