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**INTRODUCTION TO THE GIKUYU LANGUAGE**

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Gikuyu belongs to the Bantu language family of the Niger-Congo phylum (Guthrie code: E51; ISO 639-3: [kik]). Although in English the language is known as ‘Gikuyu’ or even ‘Kikuyu’, in Gikuyu this would be written as *Gĩgĩkũyũ* and pronounced as [ɣ̥ɛ̃ɣ̥k̥ɔ̃jɔ̃], as noted according to the International Phonetic Alphabet. Gikuyu has 7 vowels and 18 consonants, which combine in open syllables most often having a consonant-vowel structure. Like many other Bantu languages, Gikuyu is a tone language. It distinguishes between three types of tones: high, low, and down-step. The language is, like many other Bantu languages, marked by a rich variety of noun classes (17 of them) with nouns triggering noun class agreement on determiners such as adjectives and on verbs through concordance prefixes, and it has a wealth of verb tenses.

The situation of the language is viewed as stable; with some 7 million native speakers it is one of the largest languages in Kenya. Although mostly spoken in the Gikuyu heartland between Nairobi and Mount Kenya, one may encounter speakers all over the globe. Different variations exist, spoken by people from Nyeri, Kiambu, Mũrang’a, and the Kĩndia and Gĩgĩcũgũ variations of the Kĩrĩnyaga area. The Embu and Meru languages are closely related to Gikuyu.

The language is used in many contexts: there exist radio- and television-stations in Gikuyu, in churches gospels and hymns are sung in Gikuyu, lively debates are held in Facebook-groups and on Twitter, there exist films in Gikuyu, etc. Gikuyu is also the language for some of Kenya’s most famous singers; Joseph Kamaru – with over 5 decades of career –, Daniel Kamau (DK), John De’Mathew, Queen Jane, and others have made their fame with Gikuyu songs as their medium, at times integrating Gikuyu folksongs in their music.

Gikuyu has disappeared from many school curricula, and especially in urban areas, younger people do not know how to read or write in Gikuyu. As there are some differences with writing in English (eg. the vowels ĩ and ũ), reading and writing in Gikuyu is experienced as difficult by many young native speakers. Also, books in Gikuyu are not readily available, and in a context of rapidly changing language use, texts are quickly felt to be ‘antique’. So at first sight the language is not threatened, but the reading-writing situation is facing challenges. Our project certainly aims at offering young people an opportunity to practice their Gikuyu reading skills.

Gikuyu is relatively richly described, with published dictionaries (e.g. Benson 1964), various grammars (e.g. Gecaga e.a. 1953), and a 3-volume language course (Bennett 1985). Central Kenya – the Gikuyu heartland – was deeply affected by colonial history and missionary influence, with literacy and language education being one of the themes for discussion in colonial, missionary discourse and in anti-colonial, nationalist circles. In the 1920s Gikuyu

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speakers started their own schooling system, independent of the Christian missionaries and the colonial state (Peterson 2004).

Gikuyu is an important language in literature. It has a longstanding literary history of various oral genres. In oral narratives (*ng'ano*, sing. *rũgano*) a wide range of characters and themes played a role, and expert storytellers vividly mimicked the various animals, people and ogres in the plot, interweaving their narrative with songs for the audience to participate in. The nature of the stories could vary greatly; some were fictional ogre tales, others had mythological status or formed a cycle of legends around an important historical figure. Oral storytelling has been on the decline in colonial and postcolonial Kenya, but folktales and other narratives have found their way into children's literature and schoolbooks. In this project, we propose to pay ample attention to oral folktales as they are a strong and interesting means to reflect on society and its problems.

The mastery of proverbs (*thimo*, sing. *thimo*) is still today regarded as an asset: those able to lace their speech with proverbs are regarded as great speakers. Many oral narratives also end with a proverb to summarize the story's message.

Great fun is often found in riddling. Nowadays riddles (*ndaĩ*, sing. *ndaĩ*) may also be told in the classroom, but in the past riddling sessions were often held amongst children or between grandparents and grandchildren. Through this metaphorical and metonymical wordplay children learned about their living environment.

Songs not only play a role in narratives; they also form the core of various song-dances (*nyĩmbo*, sing. *rwĩmbo*). The poetry of the songs perfectly matches the dances, and each song-dance knew its own group of participants. Thus many song-dances were suitable for adolescents who could meet each other during such social occasions. Other song-dances were performed by married couples, or by women or by men alone. The song-dances were subject to fashion, and the ones in vogue could change rapidly. In the course of the colonial era, rather some of these song-dances were prohibited, as they were deemed indecent or politically subversive.

Various poetic forms are rather specific to the Gikuyu language. One such genre is called *kĩrĩro*, a lament of young women about to get married. Another expert genre is called *gĩcaandĩ*, that takes the form of an in-depth riddling competition. Usually it is held between men, but there have been female *gĩcaandĩ* singers as well. The rattle that accompanies the poetry is inscribed with a pictorial script, describing the journey the singer has undertaken. Nowadays *gĩcaandĩ* performers are few and far between (for more on the subject of Gikuyu oral literature, see Kabĩra & Mũtahi 1988).

Writing in the Latin alphabet was introduced during the colonial era, and especially Christianity played a major role in its dissemination. The first attempts to translate the English- and Italian-language Bible into Gikuyu were undertaken around 1900, although only in the 1960s a full Gikuyu Bible was published. Newly converted soon took to sending letters, stories and other items to missionary magazines. Gikuyu literacy also took other directions apart from religious publications. As often in colonial contexts, writings in political activism, journalism, cultural and literary expression intermingled. Thus the monthly of the Kikuyu Central Association 'Muigwithania' ('The reconciler', since 1928) contained reports of gatherings and speeches, stories, advice, announcements, etc. Its first editor was Jomo Kenyatta who later became Kenya's president and also wrote *Facing Mount Kenya* (1938), one of the first monographs in Social Anthropology produced by an African writer. Although in English, it became a highly influential text in Gikuyu writing. Writing about Gikuyu culture became an important theme and various works can be situated in this realm (eg. Gathĩgĩra 1934).

The work of Gakaara wa Wanjaũ deserves special mention. Not only did he write on Gikuyu culture (eg. 1960), he also started his own printing press in Karatina and produced popular short stories, political songbooks, an autobiography, etc. (for example 1983). Gakaara's writing formed a source of inspiration for Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, Kenya's most well-known author internationally. In 1986 Ngũgĩ published the essay *Decolonising the mind*, in which he bade farewell to English as the language of his writing. His writing in Gikuyu became very famous and in 2007 he completed the most voluminous work ever written in Gikuyu, *Mũrogi wa kagogo* (some 766 pages, translated by Ngũgĩ himself with the title: *Wizard of the crow*).

Of course much more can be said about the Gikuyu language and its literatures, but hopefully this offers a first start for you to continue your search with!

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