

---

# THE STRENGTH OF MOTHERS: The Life and Work of Wahu Kaara of Kenya

By Alison Morse, Peace Writer

Edited by Kaitlin Barker Davis



---

2011 Women PeaceMakers Program

Made possible by the Fred J. Hansen Foundation

\*This material is copyrighted by the Joan B. Kroc Institute for Peace & Justice. For permission to cite, contact [ipj@san Diego.edu](mailto:ipj@san Diego.edu), with “Women PeaceMakers – Narrative Permissions” in the subject line.

---



Joan B. Kroc Institute for Peace & Justice  
Joan B. Kroc School of Peace Studies  
University of San Diego  
5998 Alcalá Park  
San Diego, CA 92110-2492  
<http://peace.sandiego.edu>

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

|              |  |           |
|--------------|--|-----------|
| <b>I.</b>    | <b>A Note to the Reader .....</b>  | <b>3</b>  |
| <b>II.</b>   | <b>About the Women PeaceMakers Program .....</b>                               | <b>3</b>  |
| <b>III.</b>  | <b>Biography of a Woman PeaceMaker – Wahu Kaara .....</b>                      | <b>4</b>  |
| <b>IV.</b>   | <b>Conflict History – Kenya .....</b>  | <b>5</b>  |
| <b>V.</b>    | <b>Map – Kenya .....</b>   | <b>10</b> |
| <b>VI.</b>   | <b>Integrated Timeline – Political Developments and Personal History .....</b> | <b>11</b> |
| <b>VII.</b>  | <b>Narrative Stories of the Life and Work of Wahu Kaara</b>                    |           |
|              | a. The Path.....   | 18        |
|              | b. Squatters .....   | 20        |
|              | c. The Dignity of the Family .....   | 23        |
|              | d. Namesake .....  | 25        |
|              | e. Political Awakening.....  | 27        |
|              | f. Exile .....   | 32        |
|              | g. The Transfer .....  | 39        |
|              | h. Freedom Corner .....  | 49        |
|              | i. Reaffirmation .....   | 56        |
|              | j. A New Network.....  | 61        |
|              | k. The People, Leading .....   | 68        |
| <b>VIII.</b> | <b>A Conversation with Wahu Kaara .....</b>                                    | <b>74</b> |
| <b>IX.</b>   | <b>Best Practices in Peacebuilding .....</b>                                   | <b>81</b> |
| <b>X.</b>    | <b>Further Reading – Kenya .....</b>   | <b>87</b> |
| <b>XI.</b>   | <b>Biography of a Peace Writer – Alison Morse .....</b>                        | <b>88</b> |
| <b>XII.</b>  | <b>Joan B. Kroc Institute for Peace &amp; Justice .....</b>                    | <b>89</b> |
| <b>XIII.</b> | <b>University of San Diego .....</b>   | <b>90</b> |
| <b>XIV.</b>  | <b>List of Acronyms .....</b>  | <b>91</b> |
| <b>XV.</b>   | <b>Endnotes .....</b>  | <b>92</b> |

## **A NOTE TO THE READER**

In the following pages, you will find narrative stories about a Woman PeaceMaker, along with additional information to provide a deep understanding of a contemporary conflict and one person's journey within it. These complementary components include a brief biography of the peacemaker, a historical summary of the conflict, a timeline integrating political developments in the country with personal history of the peacemaker, a question-and-answer transcript of select interviews, and a table of best practices in peacebuilding as demonstrated and reflected on by the peacemaker during her time at the Joan B. Kroc Institute for Peace & Justice.

The document is not intended necessarily to be read straight through, from beginning to end. Instead, you can use the historical summary or timeline as mere references or guides as you read the narrative stories. You can move straight to the table of best practices if you are interested in peacebuilding methods and techniques, or go to the question-and-answer transcript if you want to read commentary in the peacemakers' own words. The goal of this format is to reach audiences through multiple channels, providing access to the peacemakers' work, vision, lives and impact in their communities.

## **ABOUT THE WOMEN PEACEMAKERS PROGRAM**

Made possible through a generous grant from the Fred J. Hansen Foundation, the Joan B. Kroc Institute for Peace & Justice's (IPJ) Women PeaceMakers Program annually hosts four women from around the world who have been involved in human rights and peacemaking efforts in their countries.

Women on the frontline of efforts to end violence and secure a just peace seldom record their experiences, activities and insights – as generally there is no time or, perhaps, they do not have formal education that would help them record their stories. The Women PeaceMakers Program is a selective program for leaders who want to document, share and build upon their unique peacemaking stories. Selected peacemakers join the IPJ for an eight-week residency.

Women PeaceMakers are paired with a Peace Writer to document in written form their story of living in conflict and building peace in their communities and nations. The peacemakers' stories are also documented on film by the IPJ's partner organization Sun & Moon Vision Productions. While in residence at the institute, Women PeaceMakers give presentations on their work and the situation in their home countries to the university and San Diego communities.

The IPJ believes that women's stories go beyond headlines to capture the nuance of complex situations and expose the realities of gender-based violence, thus providing an understanding of conflict and an avenue to its transformation. The narrative stories of Women PeaceMakers not only provide this understanding, but also show the myriad ways women construct peace in the midst of and after violence and war. For the realization of peace with justice, the voices of women – those severely affected by violent conflict and struggling courageously and creatively to build community from the devastation – must be recorded, disseminated and spotlighted.<sup>1</sup>

## **BIOGRAPHY OF A WOMAN PEACEMAKER – WAHU KAARA**



Photo credit: Michele Zousmer

An ardent advocate and long-standing peace and political activist, Wahu Kaara has lived through many chapters of Kenya's history. She has also helped write some of those chapters, making significant contributions to the progress of human rights, women's rights and democratization in Kenya.

In a country of immense ethnic diversity, Wahu is an adept cross-cultural Kenyan. As part of her desire to keep Kenya unified she has learned to greet people in all of its 42 languages.

As a student at Kenyatta University during the wave of political activism in the 1970s, Wahu's professors detected her readiness to think about and act on Kenya's most critical issues. The influence of her professors led her to become an educator. As a teacher and then headmistress of a girls' school, she tried to create unity and understanding between the diverse ethnic groups represented among the students. The vision she had then of empowering girls to be leaders in families, their communities and eventually the nation continues today.

Her pro-democracy activism turned toward the release of political prisoners in the early '90s, when Wahu and a group of mothers, wives and daughters approached Kenya's attorney general to demand the release of 52 prisoners arrested during the democracy struggles of the 1980s. The women would wait, on hunger strike, in the public park at one of Nairobi's busiest intersections – "Freedom Corner," as it came to be known – until he answered them. Though police brutality forced them to relocate to a nearby church, they continued their 2-year-long protest, and the government began releasing the prisoners one by one.

In 1999 Wahu helped establish Kenya Debt Relief Network (KENDREN), where she is now coordinating director, to coordinate Kenya's activities for the global Jubilee 2000 debt cancellation campaign. Now a well-respected research and policy analysis group, KENDREN frequently advises government ministries on matters of public finance, foreign aid and debt. This led to Wahu's appointment, from 2004 to 2006, as the coordinator of the U.N. Millennium Development Goals campaign at the All Africa Council of Churches.

Wahu's wisdom and expertise spans to other international organizations such as Action Aid and Oxfam, the coordinating committee of the World Social Forum, the African Social Forum Council and the Coalition for Peace in Africa, a network for peace and security in Africa.

She has been recognized for her contributions to Kenya's peace and development as one of the 1,000 women nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize in 2005 and as the 2009 Project Concern Global Humanitarian. Over the decades, she has seen Kenya's cycles of violence and peace, and as elections draw near again in 2012, Wahu hopes to mobilize organizations to prevent the recurrence of the 2007 election violence.

## **CONFLICT HISTORY – KENYA**

The area of East Africa now known as the Republic of Kenya began as a set of boundaries called the British East Africa Protectorate. Those boundaries, created in 1886 by Great Britain and Germany, enclose 42 disparate, thriving, ethnic nations in terrain that spreads from the coastline along the Indian Ocean, through mountains and plateaus, to a section of The Great Rift Valley that contains arid plains, volcanoes, lakes and green, fertile highlands.

The ancestors of Kenya's 42 ethnic nations had settled on this land by the second century A.D. The majority were farmers, growing vegetables and fruit and raising livestock. Other communities concentrated on breeding and herding cattle. A few were also nomadic. The Kenyans along the coast of the Indian Ocean developed cities and traded goods with Omani Arabs for 2,000 years. By 1740, the Arabs of Oman claimed Kenya as part of their Sultanate of Zanzibar.

In the 1800s, Britain developed an economic interest in the area. At the Berlin Conference of 1885, when Europe's most powerful countries decided which parts of Africa they wanted to control, Great Britain and Germany agreed to divide East Africa between them. Kenya fell under the protectorate of Britain, which immediately sought to colonize the region's economy by forming the Imperial British East African Company, a trading company, and then by taking over political control of Kenya in 1895 from the Sultan of Zanzibar.

Soon after, Britain built the Kenya-Uganda railway to connect Kenya's coastline, interior and western border, bringing in laborers from India to construct it. These Indian workers, as well as Indian merchants who moved inland from the coast, were a minority population in British Kenya that had representation in the colonial government when Kenya became an official British colony.

But the African people who made up the vast majority of Kenya's population were treated quite differently. In 1903, Britain invited white European settlers to buy large tracts of land in Central Kenya's fertile highlands, land that belonged to Kikuyu, Luo, Embu, Maasai and other ethnic nations who had lived in the area for millennia. The colonial government, created in 1920 when Kenya became an official British colony, was run by a governor who had unchecked power over all land in Kenya. Settlers created large-scale, single crop farms and most Africans were forced to become squatters, tenant farmers who worked for the settlers in exchange for a small plot of land. The governor brokered land deals with a few African chiefs in exchange for cooperation. The colonial government denied native Africans political representation or rights but collected taxes from them.

After the first full decade of British domination, indigenous Kenyans began to rebel against British imperialism. In 1913, a woman from Kenya's Coast Province, Mekatilili wa Menza, organized her people, the Giriama, in protest against the colonial government. Under her leadership, the Giriama refused to pay taxes or work as virtual slaves on white-owned private plantations or public projects. She was arrested and deported. The movement disbanded.

Soon after, African nationalist Harry Thuku, a Kikuyu, co-founded the Young Kikuyu Association (later called the East African Association), a political party unrecognized by the colonial government that campaigned against increased taxes, forced labor, lack of title deeds for African

lands and the abuse of young African women by European settlers. The colonial government arrested him in 1922. A crowd of thousands, including 150 women, stood outside the police station where Thuku was held and demanded his release. A woman named Mary Nyanjiru was so enraged that she took off her dress and yelled “Take my dress, give me your trousers. You men are cowards!” to the men who tried to disperse the crowd. She and the rest of the women charged at the armed officers guarding the police station. They were shot at and Mary was one of the first to be killed. The association’s demands were ignored.

By the close of the 1920s, the East African Association became the Kenya African Union (KAU) under the leadership of Jomo Kenyatta. The association campaigned for land reform and political rights for Africans. The colonial and British governments ignored their demands as well.

In the 1950s, the Kikuyu of Central Kenya, with the aid of the Embu and Meru, led a violent revolt against British rule and the Africans who supported that rule. The uprising was called Mau Mau. Possibly more than 200,000 Kikuyu and people from other Kenyan ethnic groups were killed during the fighting, and more than 1,000 Mau Mau fighters and sympathizers were hanged in punishment by the British. Others, like Jomo Kenyatta, were imprisoned. Britain declared a state of emergency and sent thousands of Kikuyu to concentration camps called “protected villages.” One hundred fifty British people died.

By the late ‘50s, the colonial government began to make some concessions to Africans. They offered the Kikuyu private land ownership, allowed Africans to grow coffee and gave Africans seats on the colonial legislative council. Meanwhile, African leaders urged independence from Great Britain.

Kenya became an independent dominion in 1963. The terms of independence, negotiated with the British, upheld the sanctity of private property rights, based on land purchases made under the colonial government. Kenya bought out European settler farmers so that white settlers could leave Kenya without losing money. The property would then be divided among landless and unemployed Africans. A new constitution was created that included a bicameral parliament, a central land board to manage all land issues and a governmental structure that took away some power from the president and distributed it to different regions – in an effort to protect European and ethnic minorities from the politically dominant Kikuyu and Luo nations.

Kenya had its first open elections that same year. Jomo Kenyatta, head of the Kenya African National Union (KANU), a new incarnation of the KAU party, became Kenya’s first prime minister. A year later, he declared himself president, and Kenya, a republic. Kenyatta and his mostly KANU government amended the new constitution, eliminating regional governmental offices, the central land board and the second house of parliament. He and his party also folded the major opposition party into KANU, creating an unofficial one-party government where the president had as much unchecked power as the British colonial governor. He gave and confiscated land at will and left people with no legal way to defend their land rights, which promoted corruption and escalated explicit ethnic tensions. He also promoted single-crop farming, tourism and other industries owned by foreign businesses at the expense of Kenya’s economy and ecology. And, during his time in office, some of his political opponents were assassinated. The Kenyatta regime started a trend of mistrust between the president and the people of Kenya.

That mistrust intensified under the 20-year rule of Kenya's next president, Daniel arap Moi, who followed in Kenyatta's footsteps by issuing illegal land titles and promoting economically and ecologically unsound industrial land use. He was also a repressive, autocratic ruler, firing any government minister suspected of disloyalty. After a 1982 coup attempt by members of the Kenyan air force, Moi sent out secret police to spy on and arrest political opponents, intellectuals and activists critical of his policies. He also added an amendment to the constitution making Kenya an official one-party state. Civil society protests against Moi's undemocratic control of government led to more arrests, detentions in prison without trial and torture. Meanwhile the public sang and chanted "KANU is mother and father" during his almost daily public appearances.

In the meantime, Kenya's first women's organization, Maendeleo ya Wanawake, was created in the 1950s as a colonial government sanctioned rehabilitation project for female participants in Mau Mau. In the 1960s it broke off from the government and became one of several women's groups, many of which evolved into sources of alternative economic, political and environmental power for Kenyan women – and men. Unofficial women's groups collected, saved and invested money together. They helped each other with the practical tasks of their daily lives and started many income-generating projects together. An official women's group, The National Council of Women of Kenya, still active today, organized women to run for elections, encouraged women to vote and monitored elections. Professor Wangari Maathai, who was active in the council, developed a grassroots organization in the 1980s called The Green Belt Movement. The movement, still working after Maathai's death in 2011, focuses on poverty reduction and environmental conservation through tree planting. Another official political group, Release Political Prisoners, was organized by the mothers of activists imprisoned by the Moi regime.

By 1991, Moi's flagrant abuse of human rights prompted The Paris Club – an unofficial group of 19 creditor nations with some of the world's biggest economies, who offered financial services like debt relief to nations in need – to demand that Moi amend Kenya's constitution to allow multiparty elections before they would provide any more financial assistance. He complied.

Moi was re-elected president of Kenya twice. But both the 1992 and 1997 elections were marred by violence. In 1992, the attacks centered in the Rift Valley Province and were aimed at the Kikuyu, said to be "foreigners" by the Kalenjin who also lived there. The Kikuyu are Kenya's largest (22 percent of the population), most educated and most prosperous ethnic group. Land vacated by the former settlers during the 1960s and early 1970s was purchased by Kikuyus with assistance from Kenyatta's government instead of being returned to the communities from which it was first taken during colonial rule.

The Rift Valley was also the site of election violence in 1997 with additional violent ethnic clashes occurring in the Coast Province. Moi, a Kalenjin, was accused of igniting the violence during both elections to ensure political victory.

After ruling for 20 years, Moi could no longer legally run for office, so the 2002 election was peaceful. His former vice president, Mwai Kibaki, head of KANU's biggest opposition party, the National Rainbow Coalition, or NARC, won the election. He vowed to create a new, more democratic constitution within his first 100 days in office. This draft of the constitution, called the Bomas Draft, was created in the time allotted, but when it went before Kibaki's administration for review, the section that divided executive power between the president and prime minister was

deleted, keeping the president in a position of unchecked power. The amended constitution was defeated in a 2005 popular referendum. Like his predecessors, Kibaki concentrated the nation's wealth among foreign industries and a few wealthy Kenyans at the expense of the rest of the nation.

Kibaki ran for a second term in 2007, defeating his chief rival Raila Odinga, leader of the Orange Democratic Movement. A new, more intense wave of violence rocked the country before, during and after this election. More than 1,000 people were killed and at least 600,000 lost their homes. Violence occurred along ethnic lines: Odinga, who refused to concede the election, is Luo; Kibaki, whose election commission was accused of fraud, is Kikuyu. The violence threatened to escalate into genocide until a team of prominent African leaders, headed by former U.N. Secretary General Kofi Annan and including the former first lady of South Africa, Graça Machel, and Tanzanian President Jakaya Kikwete, mediated between the opposing parties and the government. An agreement was reached on a number of terms that would bring peace and greater stability to Kenya. Kibaki and Odinga agreed to share executive power: Kibaki as president, Odinga as prime minister. They also agreed to end the violence, help the victims of that violence who were displaced from their homes and property, and work to fix the problems underlying the violence: need for constitutional reform, land management reform, persistent inequalities between classes, genders and ethnicities, unemployment, lack of national unity and the government's lack of accountability to the people of Kenya.

Kenya is now trying to tackle all of these issues. Parliamentary anti-corruption committees have exposed government corruption, leading to the resignation or suspension of several ministers while the six officials most responsible for the election violence have been charged in the International Criminal Court. Civil society organizations are working on inter-ethnic communication and consensus-building. A committee of 11 constitutional experts, with a great deal of input by the Kenyan people, drafted a new constitution that was ratified by the public in 2010. The new document redistributes the president's power by giving a substantial amount of it to 47 counties funded by the central government. Each county will also be represented in the National Assembly, which will be able to check the president's power in multiple ways – including by impeachment. And at least 47 of the 210 members of the National Assembly must be women. The constitution also contains land tenure principles and reforms that are designed to move Kenya toward a more just, fair and ecologically sound process to deal with the country's land issues. But enactment of those principles and reforms has proven difficult, in particular the relocation and resettlement of Kenyans who were displaced from their homes and land after the last election.

Economic reform and improvement has proven slow too, in part because the wealthy countries that provide aid to Kenya are also in an economic crisis, but also due to a lack of political will on the part of Kenya's ruling elite. The Kenyan Treasury is running short of cash and very close to breaching its overdraft limit at the Central Bank of Kenya. It is now seeking increased aid from the International Monetary Fund to stabilize Kenya's shilling, which has lost up to a third of its value since the beginning of 2011. So Kenya, instead of stabilizing its debt and gaining more independence from the West, which might help reduce unemployment, huge class inequities and economic corruption, will increase the amount of money it owes to the world's richest countries.

As 2012 approaches, Kenya is at another crossroads. The government just sent troops into neighboring Somalia to fight the al-Qaida-linked al-Shabaab militia. And Kenya's large, overcrowded Somali refugee camps are another land, funding and human rights issue that needs to be dealt with.



National elections will be held in 2012. Will they be violent? Will they lead Kenya in a new direction or will the country continue along the same lines? The next chapter in Kenya's history is difficult to predict. One thing is certain, though. Women have been working together in the background of Kenyan politics since before colonial times and will continue to do so in the future; perhaps they will move into the foreground, too.



Map No. 4187 Rev. 1 UNITED NATIONS  
January 2004

Department of Peacekeeping Operations  
Cartographic Section

## INTEGRATED TIMELINE

### **Political Developments in Kenya and *Personal History of Wahu Kaara***

|   |  |
|---|--|
| <b>From first humans to around 150 A.D.</b> | The ancestors of Kenya's 42 ethnic nations settle in various parts of Kenya.   |
| <b>1740</b>                                 | Omani Arabs claim Kenya as part of the Sultanate of Zanzibar.  |
| <b>1885</b>                                 | Berlin Conference: Germany, Great Britain, France and Portugal discuss regulating colonization and trade in Africa by dividing up the continent and assigning areas to each European country.  |
| <b>1886</b>                                 | Anglo-German Agreement: The British East Africa Protectorate is formed. European powers assign the area that is now the Republic of Kenya to Great Britain.  |
| <b>1888</b>                                 | Imperial British East Africa Company is formed to administer the territory of East Africa apportioned to Britain in the Anglo-German Agreement.  |
| <b>1895</b>                                 | Britain takes over political control of Kenya from the Sultan of Zanzibar. Different ethnic communities, along with their government, come under one new area of central administration led by a governor who works under the British "crown."   |
| <b>1901</b>                                 | Kisumu railway is built, mostly by laborers from India. Trade and tourism intensifies. Indian settlers from Mombasa move inland.   |
| <b>1903 – 1920</b>                          | The British government in Kenya encourages farmers of European origin to settle in the highlands of Central Kenya. This region becomes known as the "White Highlands." Most of the settlers are from South Africa, and they try to introduce forced African labor.                       |
| <b>1904</b>                                 | The British government in Kenya forces African Kenyans to settle on reservations.  |
| <b>1913</b>                                 | Giriama revolt: Mekatilili wa Menza leads protests against recruiting African porters for World War I. She later leads protests against British attempts to hire African laborers on the cheap and to collect taxes from all Kenyans in order to force them to work for their companies. |
| <b>1920</b>                                 | Kenya becomes an official British colony. Kenyan Africans have no political representation in the government.  |
| <b>1921</b>                                 | The Young Kikuyu Association is formed to assert African rights and recover Kikuyu land.   |

- 1922** Thuku Riot to free Harry Thuku, one of the founders of the Young Kikuyu Association, occurs. Mary Nyanjiru is killed.
- 1928** The Young Kikuyu Association is suppressed by the colonial government but members regroup to form the Kenya African Union under the leadership of Jomo Kenyatta.
- 1939 – 1945** World War II: Britain establishes an allied base in Kenya.
- 1944** The first African member of the Kenyan legislative council is appointed, a token appointment.
- Post-World War II Nationalist movement in Kenya begins as a result of lack of African representation in government and exclusion from economic development under an apartheid system.
- 1952 – 1960** Mau Mau movement: Kikuyu soldiers who fought with the British in World War II, as well as Kikuyu women and younger Kikuyu activists, hold protests and violent uprisings, forcing the British government to concede the need for constitutional reform. They are joined by members of the Embu and Meru ethnic groups.
- 1952** *Wahu is born in Eldoret.*
- Maendeleo ya Wanawake, an NGO dealing with women's rights and gender equality in Kenya, is formed.
- 1954** The Lyttleton Constitution attempts to form a more multi-racial government in response to the Nationalist movement by the African majority.
- 1957** *Wahu's paternal grandmother and the families of her uncles come to Eldoret to stay with Wahu's family after being sent back to central Kenya while her paternal grandfather is in detention and her uncles are imprisoned for being Kikuyu. Every Kikuyu at that time is suspected of being Mau Mau.*
- 1959** *Wahu's grandfather is released from the Manyani detention camp and comes to live with Wahu's family in Eldoret.*
- Wahu goes to St. Patrick's lower primary school in Eldoret.*
- 1960** *Wahu's paternal grandparents move to Turbo.*
- 1960 – 1963** Lancaster House Conferences: Africans are finally given the majority of seats in the legislative council. African political parties and the first constitution are formed.
- 1962** *Wahu's mother becomes a squatter. Her father travels as an entrepreneur.*

- 1963** The first free elections are held in Kenya. Jomo Kenyatta, of the KANU party and longtime member and leader of the Young Kikuyu Association, is elected prime minister and his party wins the majority of seats.
- 1963 – 1978** Kenyatta suppresses all political parties other than KANU. Competitive elections disappear. A small segment of the population, mostly Kikuyu and allied with Kenyatta, take over ownership of most of the country's land and wealth.
- 1964** *Wahu moves in with her paternal grandmother and attends upper primary school in Burnt Forest.*
- Kenyatta declares Kenya a republic and himself the president.
- 1968** *Wahu attends secondary boarding school at Kapkenda Girls School.*
- 1969** Grace Onyango becomes the first female member of the Kenyan parliament.
- 1972** *Wahu attends high school boarding school at Matuga Girls School.*
- 1974 – 1977** *Wahu attends Kenyatta University.*
- 1975** *Wahu takes Kaara Wa Macharia to be her husband.*
- 1976** *Wahu's daughter, Wanjiku Kaara, is born.*
- 1977** *Wahu gets her first teaching job teaching history and Kiswahili at Mugoiri Girls High School.*
- 1978** Kenyatta dies and is succeeded by Daniel arap Moi, who is Kalenjin. Most of the country's wealth and land is transferred to Moi's allies.
- Kiama Kaara, Wahu's first son, is born.*
- 1979** *Wahu teaches history and Kiswahili at Kianyaga Boys High School.*
- 1981** *Mwaura Kaara, Wahu's second son, is born.*
- 1982** The Kenyan National Assembly makes the single-party system official in an amendment to the constitution, section 2A.
- After an attempted coup by the Kenyan Air Force, many opponents and critics of the government are arrested, tortured, disappeared or forced into exile.
- Wahu becomes headmistress of Nginda Girls Secondary School.*
- 1982 – 1991** *Wahu works on the repeal of section 2A of the constitution.*

- 1985 *Ngotho Kaara, Wahu's third son, is born.*
- 1986 *Kaara Wa Macharia goes into exile in Tanzania.*
- 1989 *Wahu is given a transfer letter and must leave the school where she has been headmistress for six years. She continues working as a teacher in Nairobi at Ngara Girls High School.*
- 1990s – present *Wahu becomes a world renowned social justice activist for acting globally and thinking locally, as well as thinking globally and acting locally.*
- 1991 Local and foreign pressure forces the government to repeal the one-party section of the constitution.  
*Kaara Wa Macharia returns from exile.*
- 1992 Multiparty national elections are held but the Moi regime promotes ethnic and political clashes to remain in power.  
*Wahu participates in the Release Political Prisoners Pressure Group.*  
*Wahu participates in Freedom Corner.*
- 1992 – 2003 *Wahu participates in the constitutional review, reform and rewrite process, including at the National Constitutional Conference at Bomas.*
- 1994 *Wahu becomes a researcher with Terisa Turner and Leigh Brownhill from the University of Guelph. Her research includes Kenyan women's participation in Mau Mau, microcredit issues, gender relations and sustainable agriculture.*
- 1994 – 1996 *Wahu works as a researcher with Beth Ahlberg and Engla Krantz of the Karolinska Institute on the epidemiology of HIV and AIDS in Kenya.*
- 1994 – 1995 *Wahu starts a master's program in public health at the Karolinska Institute, and takes a two-year leave from teaching before retiring.*
- 1997 *Kaara Wa Macharia dies.*  
*Wahu reclaims her Christian faith.*  
*Wahu participates in the State Department's International Visitors Program where she visits the United States for the first time on a two-week tour.*  
Multiparty national elections are held but the Moi regime promotes ethnic clashes to remain in power.
- 1999 *Wahu joins the Jubilee Campaign for World Debt Cancellation.*

**2000**      *Kenya Debt Relief Network (KENDREN) is formed in the office of EcoNews Africa. Wahu becomes coordinator of KENDREN.*

*Jubilee South is formed to focus on debt cancellation in Africa, Latin America and Asia. KENDREN becomes a member.*

**2001**      *Wahu participates in the G8 Summit in Genoa, Italy.*

**2002**      *Wahu attends a conference with and meets Mary Robinson, president of Ireland, in Dublin.*

*Wahu participates in Rio+10 Earth Summit in Johannesburg, South Africa, where she is the key discussant of debt, trade and aid from a gender perspective.*

*Wahu participates in the United Nations Financing for Development Conference in Monterrey, Mexico, with African Women's Economic Policy Network and is the designated speaker on issues of debt and trade.*

Moi is constitutionally barred from running for president again. Mwai Kibaki, who is Kikuyu, is elected president. Kenya grows economically but corruption continues and wealth remains in the hands of a few wealthy Kenyans. Disparities increase between rich and poor. Ethnic clashes for land and urban violence increase.

**2003**      *Wahu is delegate 521 at the Kenyan National Conference to create a new constitution. She is instrumental in the formation of Bomas Katiba Watch.*

*Wahu participates in the World Conference Against Racism, Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance in Durban, South Africa.*

**2005**      Parliament approves a draft of the constitution that keeps the president's power unchecked. The people of Kenya reject this draft.

*Wahu launches the Global Call to Action Against Poverty (GCAP) with President Lula of Brazil and meets President Hugo Chavez of Venezuela at a luncheon he hosts for World Social Forum members in Porto Alegre, Brazil.*

*Wahu gives the keynote address for the U.N. Department of Public Information-NGO Forum at the United Nations General Assembly in New York City.*

*Wahu is part of a delegation led by South African Archbishop Njongonkulu Ndungane, leader of faith-based representation to the United Nations, in Washington Cathedral. Madeleine Albright and Jeffrey Sachs are also part of this group.*



*Wahu consults with Kofi Annan, the Archbishop of Canterbury and Gordon Brown (when he is chancellor of the exchequer) at St. Paul's Cathedral, London, in response to what Annan will present at the G8 Summit in Gleneagles regarding the Millennium Development Goals Commitment.*

*Wahu attends the G8 Summit in Gleneagles, Scotland, accompanied by Richard Branson, founder of Virgin Records, Bob Geldof, coordinator of Live Aid and Live 8, and Bono. She participates in the Live 8 activities for debt cancellation for Africa.*

*October – Wahu goes on a speaking tour of five U.S. cities (San Diego, Pittsburgh, Chicago, Miami and Boston) with Jubilee USA.*

*Wahu is a speaker with Africa Action in Washington, D.C.*

*Wahu is one of the 1,000 women nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize as part of PeaceWomen Across the Globe.*

**2006** *Wahu addresses the Austrian Parliament on what needs to be done about poverty during a discussion of the Global Marshall Plan.*

*Wahu's first grandchild, Wahu, is born to Wahu's son Mwaura. First granddaughter Wahu dies in 2008. Wahu's second grandchild, Neema, is born to her daughter Wanjiku. Wahu, her third grandchild, is born to her son Kiama. Kaara, Wahu's fourth grandchild, is born to her son Mwaura.*

*Wahu is a participant in the Africa Social Forum processes toward the World Social Forum, hosted by Kenya in Nairobi.*

*Wahu participates in the World Social Forum process in New Delhi in preparation for World Social Forum in Nairobi.*

*Wahu participates in the Polycentric World Social Forum in Dakar and the Asia Polycentric World Social Forum in Karachi.*

**2007** *KENDREN helps host the World Social Forum in Nairobi.*

National elections are held with many parties participating. Kibaki is declared the winner but his main rival, Raila Odinga, claims election fraud. Violence ensues throughout the country.

**2008** Kofi Annan, former U.N. secretary-general, and a team of prominent African leaders broker a power-sharing agreement between Kibaki and Odinga, who become part of a joint government with Kibaki as president and Odinga as prime minister.

*Wahu is the Dame Nita Barrow Distinguished Visitor at University of Toronto.*



- 2009**      *Wahu participates in Klimaforum in Copenhagen, Denmark, within the process of the Convention on Climate Change (COP 16).*
- 2010**      *Wahu, with KENDREN, works on pre- and post-referendum (formation of the new constitution) civic education projects in parts of Kenya.*
- A new constitution, begun in 2003 at the Kenya National Conference, is approved by the nation.
- 2011**      The “Ocampo Six” International Criminal Court trial cites six officials, including three members of the Kenyan government, for crimes against humanity during and after the 2007 elections in Kenya.
- August – Elizabeth Nyambura Makuro, Wahu’s mother, dies on August 13.*
- Wahu works with the organization Pillar of Light to launch the Supreme People’s Restoration Council.*
- September – Wahu participates in the Women PeaceMakers Program at the Joan B. Kroc Institute for Peace & Justice in San Diego, Calif.*
- Professor Wangari Maathai, Nobel Peace Prize laureate and influential Kenyan activist, dies on September 25.
- Kenya invades Somalia.
- 2012**      Kenyan national elections will be held. Women have been working together in the background of Kenyan politics since before colonial times and will continue to do so in the future.

## **NARRATIVE STORIES OF THE LIFE AND WORK OF WAHU KAARA**

### **The Path**

*Slap, slap.* Four-year-old Wahu pressed her bare feet to the sandy path that ran from her family's flat to West Estate's main road, the first part of her journey to the hospital in Eldoret. A cool early morning breeze tickled the dampness still on her skin from the head to toe washing her mother had just given her. The cool seeped through the light pink wool sweater she wore over her blue pinafore. She shivered.

"Why are you not beating me in walking? You are young," her mother's half-teasing lilting voice called out. She was following behind on the path, Wahu's baby brother slung across her back on top of her big, empty, pot-like sisal basket.

Wahu's strong-striding mother, dressed like a meadow today in her short-sleeved yellow flower-print dress and matching headscarf, always prodded first-born daughter Wahu to lead the way. So Wahu walked faster.

She hurried along the packed dirt main road of West Estate past the blocks where their neighbors lived: row after row of connected gray, cement brick one-room flats with tile roofs and common bathrooms that looked just like theirs. Walking warmed Wahu; but she was tired. Yesterday she didn't eat because she couldn't swallow and her whole body burned like a log on fire. Yet they still needed to walk more than an hour to get to Eldoret hospital for Wahu's fever treatment and they hadn't even reached the end of West Estate.

"You know you are making us walk so slowly," her mother reminded, the stomp of her adult footsteps getting louder.

Wahu quickened her pace again. They had to be finished at the hospital by late morning so her mother could take care of all the buying and hawking and gardening and cooking she had to do that day.

At the end of the West Estate road was the path of matted grass that meandered like a snake around the outskirts of Eldoret. This was the way she and her mother always walked to the hospital. Wahu's thin little legs felt heavy as tree trunks.

"Why can't we just go shortcut through the town?" she asked. The route through downtown Eldoret would cut the trip in half. Besides, she'd get to see the big white pillars of the post office, its funny boxes filled with letters, those few cars driven by the no nonsense, laughterless white people in their odd shorts and stockings – and who knew what else – instead of the boringly familiar sights along the long grass path.

"That path is for whites only, don't you know?"

Wahu turned around. Her mother, large dark eyes calm and serious as round black stones, was not kidding.

But Wahu had been downtown last week, watching and standing by with her baby brother strapped to her back while her mother sold potatoes to the stocky man, white as a potato, who drove a big gray car. “Whites only?”

“We have the white’s place, the Indian’s place and us Africans.”

Wahu tried on the idea: everyone in their separate place. But at West Estate she played with Luo and Luhiya children – not just Kikuyu. They were all friends. West Estate was a place for Africans. Wasn’t the downtown for Africans too?

And she had been to the Indian part of town as well, to watch her mother bargain with an Indian shopkeeper inside his dry goods store over the price of a baby towel. He tried to keep up with her mother in his Indian version of Kiswahili. “*Veve Mama Kelele kelele* – You woman you are making lots of noise.” “*Mimi nanunua na bei mzuri sana* – I am buying with a very good price,” her mother replied. Back and forth they argued, Wahu’s mother never backing down. She got the towel for the lowest price possible.

“Don’t Africans want to go downtown?” Wahu asked.

She could hear her mother breathing right behind her. “No, they want to go to town but downtown is not for us; that’s why we are following this route.”

*Why THIS route?* she wondered. Why this roundabout path of grass made by many feet through fields and bushes, past the Somali makeshift homes of tin and thatch and whatever was available, past the airplane camp, past the garden where Wahu’s mother harvested so much maize and beans and thoroko<sup>2</sup> that Wahu could give away extra vegetables to her friends? This route took forever to get to the hospital.

And after the hospital, wouldn’t her mother buy potatoes from the wholesaler, then take Wahu and her brother downtown – to the section they now couldn’t walk through – to watch as she peddled potatoes? “Can you buy my potatoes?” her mother would call out, very politely, in English, when she hawked them to the white people in downtown Eldoret. *How curious*, thought Wahu. “I don’t understand.”

“Well, a time will come in Kenya when we can walk over those streets, don’t you worry. Just now, let’s go to the hospital the way it is.”

Wahu sighed. Tall grass tickled her legs and caught the hem of her dress. How could she lead her mother to the hospital in time when she was swimming in grass?

“Come, I don’t want you to be dirty.” Her mother picked her up and put her on her shoulders. She was so strong she could carry both Wahu and her little brother to the hospital. Her mother, in her British-style yellow dress, could do so much – anything perhaps.

Anything except make Wahu understand why right now they were following this path.

### Squatters

Chickens squawked loudly in the sun-baked sand yard by the entrance to Wahu's uncle's compound, signaling the arrival of yet another one of his neighbors at the drinking party in honor of Wahu's family's visit. This time it was Gituro, elegant and old as an acacia tree, gray blanket draped across his broad bare shoulders. Six-year-old Wahu, her three siblings and four cousins ran to greet him as he entered the compound. His laughing eyes met Wahu's. He gasped. Snap. His fingers clicked together. "*Eyo ngenyoria!*" he declared, in booming Kikuyu. He had just fallen in love upon seeing a beautiful girl. Wahu giggled, happy to be joking with a favorite elder.

Then Gituro joined the adults who disappeared into Wahu's grandmother's big round thatch-roofed hut to start the celebration. And celebrate they did. Wahu and the other children watched by the door. Gituro dipped the bulbous calabash with the skinny neck into the big brown gourd of homemade honey beer, poured it into the ox horn cup and gave it to her father, who took a sip then passed the horn to the other male guests, oldest to youngest, all sitting together on three-legged Kikuyu stools. Then the women drank. Everybody drank. Talked about adult things and drank. Wahu's mother and her aunts left to do their chores. Wahu, too, was anxious to move. She suggested a game of hide-and-seek. The other children agreed.

"Wangui goes first," she said. "Then you and you," she pointed to her little sister, then her cousins, then her younger brothers. She chose to be last. "Now go." The children scattered like her uncle's doves to find a hiding place. Wahu ran behind the sheep pen but her brother was already there. So she chose the maize stall. "Coooo," her sister called from somewhere near her uncle's first wife's hut. Wahu followed the voice back out to the yard by the compound entrance. There she saw a boy, pale as a cloud, in crisp khaki shirt and shorts, socks to his kneecaps and lace-up boots, walk in. Her siblings and her cousins saw him too. They all came out from their hiding places to watch the boy walk right past them without so much as a glance.

"*Bwana Mdogo*," whispered her cousins.

*How curious, thought Wahu. This little white boy, no more than a few years older than me, is my cousins' Young Boss? How can that be?*

Into her grandmother's big round hut walked the boy. Wahu followed. The cousins stared, open-mouthed.

Inside, the beer-drinking celebrators on their three-legged stools – father, uncle, neighbors, grandmother, elder women, elder men, including revered Gituro – stopped talking. Gituro stood up slowly. He lowered his head and shoulders in a bow and said to the little white boy, "Oh, Bwana Mdogo, you have come."

Wahu's uncle, her father, the neighbors, the other elders, all stood up. They bowed, too. And her grandmother, her mother's mother, who was never at a loss for words, did not know what to say. Those seniors who Wahu respected so much were acknowledging a little boy as their young boss. *What is so special about him? Being white? He is just a boy. White.*

The boy responded to no one. He strode over to the calabash, now on the ground, picked it up by its thin handle as if he were grabbing the neck of a chicken, and smacked it against the wooden pole in the middle of the hut. Smash. Pieces of calabash flew like broken ochre glass. Glistening honey-colored beer splashed on the dirt floor, over the ashes in the fireplace, on the bare feet and legs and pants and dresses of the guests, even on the mud walls of the hut. If Wahu had maintained her senses of sight and smell, she would have noticed a sweet and sour scent overwhelming the air. She would have registered the color of the boy's eyes. But when she ran up to the boy and grabbed him by the shirt, she was too disgusted to smell or see anything.

"How dare you do this to adults, you stupid child. What's wrong with you?" she shouted up to the boy in Kiswahili, holding tight to his shirt. Silence. The boy just stared down at her, a stern frown on his face. Silence. She heard nothing, not even his breathing, not even the cluck of the chickens outside. The adults were shaking. Her uncle's eyes, her father's eyes, her grandmother's eyes, Gituro's eyes, everyone's eyes grew very wide as if to plead for her to stop. Silence sent the message that she had done something very wrong. Had she?

Wahu let go of the boy, who ran out the door.

Her uncle did not reprimand her. Instead, he and the rest of the adults sat back down and spoke in low tones about what would happen next. She didn't hear what they were saying. The afternoon sunlight called from outside the door of her grandmother's hut, but Wahu didn't want to play; neither did the other children. Everyone was shaken.

She went to bed early and tried to sleep, but the same question rolled over and over in her mind keeping her awake: What crime had she committed? Would her uncle lose his job and his land because of her? Why?

The next morning, Wahu heard that her uncle had left his compound, as usual, to go milk the cows for the settler, father of Bwana Mdogo: *Bwana Mkubwa*, The Big Boss, the white man who owned the land where her uncle was a squatter. Wahu stayed in her grandmother's hut and listened to the speculations of what might happen to him. Her uncle's friends and neighbors, including Gituro and the other elders, her father and her grandmother, reviewed the situation over tea that Wahu helped her grandmother brew in a big aluminum *sufuria* over the fireplace in the middle of the hut. The adults sat by the door appearing calm but leaning in close to one another, whispering. She knew that calmness was a sign that something serious was being discussed. Wahu distributed mugs of tea and listened.

"No, Shari will not get offended," Gituro said very softly, referring to the settler. "After all, he knows Nyambura." Nyambura was Wahu's mother. "He knows her from when she was a small girl."

Her grandmother recalled Wahu's mother as a child, demanding money for picking pyrethrum<sup>3</sup> on the settler's farm – work that other children did for free. The settler listened to her. In fact, he encouraged her stubbornness. And he called her Tractor because she worked so hard.

"He will see Nyambura in her daughter," said Gituro.

Wahu had never heard her mother spoken of like this before. She was always just a mother. She sat down by the fire with her cup of tea and frothy milk and took a sip: warm and sweet and strong.

“Well, Mwangi isn’t back yet,” said a neighbor. “It’s either the best or the worst.”



Mwangi, Wahu’s uncle, returned that afternoon. He walked into the hut, dressed in his work clothes: long black coat, black felt hat and sandals. He greeted everyone in the room and sat down by the fireplace next to her grandmother, who gave him a cup of tea. He put his hat on his knee. The adults stared silently and solemnly at him.

“Yes,” he said. “I reported to work.” Then he smiled. By the end of the workday, the settler had not said anything and nothing unusual happened.

Just as she thought. She had not wronged anybody. The afternoon sun beckoned Wahu from outside the door. She excused herself from the adult conversation and left the hut to find her cousins. She couldn’t wait to give them the report.

### The Dignity of the Family

When she was 10, Wahu and her family moved into her grandmother's hut on her uncle's compound. Her father wasn't with them. His business in Eldoret had failed. He was now traveling back and forth to Uganda trying to make money. Without him there were no more drinking celebrations, no neighbors and no elders to make her laugh with delight. But the worst part about coming to stay with her mother's family was living with her cousins. When she used to visit, they followed her around, so happy to see her, so willing to let her take charge of their hide-and-seek games and rope skipping. Now they went off and played by themselves, leaving Wahu and her siblings entirely alone. Wahu tried to act as if nothing was wrong, but her heart felt a little tender to the touch, as if someone had singed it with a lit match.



One afternoon, while her mother was away with the baby at the market, selling maize in order to buy dry goods like soap and sugar, Wahu's oldest cousin prepared lunch at the compound. She made the meal then dished out food to everyone except Wahu and her three siblings. Her brothers and sister looked at her. Their wide eyes asked, *What should we do?*

Wahu's face betrayed no emotion. But she did not want to eat if she was not invited. *It's undignified.* The siblings sat silently together away from the fire while the cousins and the aunties ate. Wahu's throat constricted. It was very clear that her family was not really welcome at her uncle's compound. This was foreign ground. *We are alone*, she thought. *Homeless. Are we moving into poverty?* But she smiled, pretending everything was fine. Her siblings did the same.

Her grandmother sat quietly, too, eating nothing. When cousins and aunties offered her food, she declined it. Then she stood up. She stomped slowly and loudly across the room to the maize bin, scooped up an armful of maize and put it in the maize grinder, grabbed the handle of the grinder and turned. She was so weak that she had to throw her whole body into the task.

One of Wahu's aunties shouted, "Leave that alone. Let me do it." Wahu's grandmother said nothing. She simply untied her dress at the shoulder and kept grinding. Her exposed breasts shook, her arms shook, even her earrings shook. She was sweating. Cousins who tried to help were ignored. When Wahu heard her grandmother's loud labored breath, she ran up to her and asked if she could help, too. Her grandma gave her a hard stare, like an angry bull. Wahu backed away.

When her grandma finished grinding, she boiled water on the fire and stirred the ground maize into it. She continued to stir the *ugali* until it was ready. Then she called loudly for Wahu. "Come here with your siblings." She and her brothers and sister did as they were told.

"Can you eat," her grandmother said. Her words were more command than question. She handed each child a bowl of ugali. *Ground and cooked by grandma.* They could not refuse it. They sat in the hut, eating ugali made by their grandmother as their cousins watched.

Wahu's grandmother ate with them. Despite her lack of teeth, she looked regal in her earth-colored cotton Kikuyu dress, tied again at the shoulder, and *han'gi* earrings that hung like the beaded outlines of many-petalled flowers over her ears and were attached to a band around her shaved head.

She kept herself so clean, her pots too, and her hut. She gave what she had as a grandmother: attention to all the grandchildren. Her actions spoke so loud: *If people choose not to extend goodwill to you, you don't demand it, because you create more friction. You receive what you are given, and you give what you have. And as long as you give, you shall also receive.*



Early that evening, Wahu's mother returned from the market with Wahu's baby brother and a *kiondo* full of sugar, salt, tea leaves and soap. She sat down by the fire with the family.

"What did you do today?" she asked everyone.

One of the aunties told her about the grandmother's ugali. "She even ground the maize for your children."

Wahu's mother's face clouded over in anger. "Wahu, why didn't you grind it for her?"

Wahu explained the whole story. Her mother sighed and turned to Wahu's grandma. "This is why I have to find work as a squatter. Hawking doesn't bring in enough money. I must make sure my family can provide for itself. It just isn't fair to rely so much on your good graces."

*Yes*, thought Wahu. *We need a home – a space*. Her grandmother taught her that when she was only 5. Every time Wahu complained that she couldn't do something, her grandmother said, "You are a woman of capacity, equal to your mother and any other woman in the village. You can do anything. Take your space."

It was time for her family to take its space, to make its own identity.



### Namesake

Wahu, her sister Wangui, and all the students and teachers and staff of her upper primary school stood on the grass by the Great North Road, along with all the other residents of Burnt Forest. Everyone in the area had left their homes, their shops, their gardens and whatever else they had to do that day to wait for Jomo Kenyatta, Kenya's first elected head of state, to pass by. There was no school either, just the wait for the president. "We should be very proud," Wahu's teacher said as Wahu and the other students stood quietly in the hot sun trying not to fidget. Kenyatta had been in office for two years – only one as president of an official republic – and this was the first time he was passing through Burnt Forest in Central Kenya. The tarmac of the Great North Road sat empty like an expectant carpet, but the roadside grass was abuzz with a long line of dancing, singing, whispering people and grazing cows.

Then a car appeared on the highway. Behind it was another and another and another. Slowly, a caravan of more than 20 cars approached, like a herd of steel cattle. The car in the middle of the caravan was a jeep with an open top that had a box-like railing around it. Holding onto the railing was a man in a dark striped suit with a pink carnation in the jacket buttonhole.

"Don't look at his eyes," whispered one of Wahu's classmates. "You could die." But Wahu looked. She could only see the president from the waist up. He surveyed the residents of Burnt Forest with a stern, smileless expression and waved his silky cow's tail fly whisk.

The crowd applauded loudly. Jomo Kenyatta, president of the Republic of Kenya, did not acknowledge the applause. Almost as soon as he and his entourage appeared, they receded into a tiny speck on the horizon. Then they were gone.

School was dismissed for the rest of the day. Wahu and her sister searched the crowd for their father's mother, the relative they were living with while attending upper primary school. She was nowhere to be found. So they followed villagers heading in the direction of their grandmother's homestead and walked more than five kilometers on the Great North Road to her home.

As soon as they arrived at their grandmother's lush, green property, a commanding voice from her garden called out: "Who is that unannounced guest?"

Wahu announced herself.

Her grandmother walked out from behind a plot of dried maize stalks that trellised a green tangle of prolific white bean vines. She wore her cotton Kikuyu one-shouldered tunic over a pleated skirt and her kiondo on her back. Over her ears, framing her shaved head, the beaded circles of her han'gi earrings dangled. She pointed at Wahu with her *panga* cultivating knife. "You've come so early today."

Wahu told her about the president.

Her grandmother shook her head. "So your school told you to go see that agetate of mine? Wonders never cease to happen in this world." She laughed, an open-mouthed laugh that reminded

Wahu of all the times her grandmother boasted about the beautiful gap-toothed grin she used to have – before she lost her teeth.

“You didn’t see him?” asked Wahu.

“You know, the village chief came here, today. Let me tell you. He had the audacity to tell me even you were going. Everybody was going. And I told him: ‘Me? Wahu? Hey. Find somebody else. As much as this Kenyatta is the president, he’s also my agemate and there is nothing that can make me go wait for him. I’m not a woman who wastes time or gets frightened or intimidated. You know my history,’ I told him. ‘Are you forgetting my history?’” She took her panga and kiondo to the garden and dared the chief to remove her from her own property. The chief left her there. While everyone else waited for Kenyatta, she was cultivating her garden.

“Alright then, tell me your story: How you watched this agemate of mine. What was there that fascinated you, even though you are named after me? Were you looking at him?”

“He is your agemate, not mine,” said Wahu, unafraid to tease her namesake grandmother. “Everybody at school was happy to see him.”

“You were all happy to see him? Just a man who is my agemate? Don’t you like seeing me?”

“We see you every day.”

“What can you see in him that you cannot see in me? Is it because he was in a car? Oh, but I walk. Don’t I walk?”

For the rest of the day, all through dinner and around the nighttime fire with Wahu and Wangui, their grandmother talked about how the president, her agemate, who was circumcised at the same time, at the same river, as she, was not worth all this fuss. The whole village had faulty logic. “Didn’t he have enough people watching when he was being circumcised? What is so special about watching him in clothes? Heh? And everybody else is in clothes, too?”

Her agemate group was called *Kibiu Mviri* in Kikuyu: big knife on the body. It signified courage and endurance and she, Wahu’s grandmother, was courageous and tough. She was the best dancer, the most beautiful one, her husband paid her dowry before she was born, she was born with beautiful teeth. She went on and on.

Wahu loved her grandmother’s stories. She also didn’t mind the boasts. She knew that both were meant to teach her something: to have confidence and pride in her past and in herself because, according to her grandmother, she and her namesake granddaughter were one in the same.

### **Political Awakening**

Entering her freshman year of college in 1974, Wahu was filled with confidence. She had been a good student and top debater throughout secondary and high school, a member of the Young Christian Society, and a popular girl who was known as a good dancer. In the meantime, her father, now back in Eldoret with her mother, had become a successful businessman. He bought her everything she needed for school and drove her to college in his new Buick. At Kenyatta University, in Nairobi, she was going to get her bachelor's degree in education and become a teacher, her dream since secondary school.



During a tutorial in Wahu's freshman history class, one of her classmates, a boy named Kaara, raised his hand and said he'd like to define imperialism.

*What's the big deal?* An excellent history student in high school, Wahu knew the definition of imperialism from her textbooks. But this boy was not speaking like her textbooks – about the West conquering countries in Africa on such and such dates or Kenya once being a colony of Britain. He said that *he* was the example of the peasantry, the child of peasants from the Murang'a district. Even though he was now at the university, he was not going to enjoy the good things in life because his people were *still* peasants. Other students were examples of the petit bourgeois. They could go out to eat full course dinners instead of taking all their meals at home. He was sure those students also aspired to remain the petit bourgeois after they graduated.

"Then there are the bourgeoisie, like Wahu," he said in a dramatic, slightly mocking tone. "I see her calling home in the evening. They have a telephone at home. And she's driven from Eldoret to school by her father, while I have to struggle to look for bus fare. Yet we are in the same class." Haut bourgeois gatekeepers, like Wahu's father and others, opened Kenya's resources to Western imperialists. The haut bourgeois and Kenya's ruling elite were one in the same. They had no interest in the peasants.

The boy's words resonated with Wahu like the tones of a large bell. He took what had been an abstract concept and made it real. His ideas seemed to flow from the lectures of her history teacher, Maina wa Kinyatti – but they were all his own, too. Yes, he'd embarrassed her in class, yet instead of being angry or hurt, she wanted to know more. So Wahu officially introduced herself to Kaara wa Macharia, who was her age and had a handsome, serious face. He liked to smoke cigarettes, drink beer and talk. Wahu, not a drinker herself, bought the beer – she could afford it. Soon she found herself spending most of her free time with Kaara and other smart, politically aware students, arguing and listening to him connect concepts from class to their own lives, concepts like class struggle and dialectical materialism, developed by authors and politicians like Karl Marx and Vladimir Lenin, concepts that Kaara had learned about from his older brother, Ngotho, who was a young lecturer at the university.

Wahu re-examined her own life in terms of class. Her mother, once a squatter-peasant, retained her peasant values of hard work and simple living while her father, now a successful businessman, had become bourgeois. Wahu felt much more at home with her mother's life and values.



Wahu and Kaara's history professor, Maina wa Kinyatti, was an authority on the Mau Mau<sup>4</sup> resistance. In fact, every discussion in his class started and ended with this violent, controversial, Kikuyu-led struggle against British rule in the 1950s. Wahu knew her professor's aim was to encourage students to care about their country. He also tried to instill the value of sacrificing oneself for the common good. He taught history as a sequence of liberations. To Kinyatti, Mau Mau was key to Kenya's liberation.

Outside of class, students asked each other: Was your family for or against Mau Mau? For Kaara, the answer was a resounding *for*. He came from Central Kenya's Murang'a district, home of well-known Mau Mau freedom fighters – and Professor Kinyatti. The British had detained Kaara's father in a concentration camp for seven years because of suspected Mau Mau involvement. He was detained when Kaara was a young boy and by the time he returned, Kaara was nearly done with boyhood.

Wahu listened with rapt attention as Kaara told the story of how the women of Kaara's village were forced into labor camps. When the new mothers at the camps stopped working to breastfeed their babies, the royalist in charge announced, "These are not children. They are maize cobs. Put those maize cobs in water." The babies were thrown into a pool of stagnant rainwater. They all drowned except for one child, Kaara.

Kaara's vivid descriptions and passionate logic helped Wahu internalize her professor's teachings. She could now see how the people she had grown up around in Eldoret and in squatter compounds were living in the pain of poverty and oppression. Even her own family's fear of white people made more sense in light of the repression that surrounded them. *I didn't understand.*



Wahu went back to Eldoret and asked her mother what role her family had played during Mau Mau. For or against?

"Do you remember your grandmother coming with all those other cousins of yours?" Years before Wahu and her sister went to live with her father's mother in Burnt Forest, Grandma Wahu and some of her grandchildren had stayed with Wahu's family in Eldoret. Her grandmother had been removed from her Burnt Forest home because of Mau Mau fighting in that area. The British had also sent her grandmother's sons, Wahu's uncles, to prison. The children of those uncles were in her grandmother's care. It was only after Kenya's independence in 1963 that Grandma Wahu was allowed to return to Burnt Forest to cultivate her beloved garden.

Wahu also had a vivid memory of her father's father, who came to live with her family in Eldoret a few years after her grandmother, when she was 7. He was thin and stooped and could barely breathe without his asthma inhaler. She walked with him around their apartment complex every day and threatened to beat the living daylight out of the other children who made fun of him because he wore a traditional Kikuyu tunic, cape and earrings.

Her mother reminded her that he came to Eldoret from Manyani, a British concentration camp for Mau Mau suspects. Life there had made him very sick. He died soon after he returned to Burnt Forest to reunite with his wife, Wahu's namesake grandmother.

"I had an experience, too," said her mother. Wahu sat up straighter in her chair. "Maybe I have been afraid to speak about it, but I shouldn't be. You were just a baby then."

In the early 1950s, when Mau Mau protests and counterattacks by colonists and African royalists grew more and more violent, the British declared a state of emergency. The British army screened Wahu's mother and other Rift Valley Kikuyu people to see if they were participating in Mau Mau. She remembered standing in line at the screening station. Everybody ahead of her was being interrogated, then sent away to a detention camp or repatriated to another part of the country. Nobody escaped. When her turn came, an interpreter who spoke Kikuyu asked her name, whether or not she was married, her means of employment and where she lived. Wahu's mother answered truthfully. She gave her name, the name of her husband, said she was a squatter and pinpointed where in the Rift Valley she lived and worked. Then the British officer asked the interpreter to ask her in Kikuyu, "Have you taken the Mau Mau oath?" She replied, "Yes."

"What is that oath?" the officer asked in English. The translator asked the question in Kikuyu.

"To cut off the white man's head."

"Would you cut off my head now?"

"Yes!"

The white man put his pen down and looked at her. She was released.

She preferred to speak the truth and go to a concentration camp rather than deny her involvement, but she did not understand why she was let go.

Wahu leaned in closer to her mother. "This is what we are studying in class." The screenings were designed to find out the mind of the Kikuyus involved in the freedom struggle. "The white man saw that you were very committed and clear about what you were doing. You were telling the truth and of course he knew you were not going to cut off his head in the screening room so you weren't a threat. But you gave him the information he was looking for. There was nothing that was going to stop the Mau Mau from freedom fighting." After that screening period the British sent Kikuyu people from Central Kenya straight to detention or repatriation.

A new fire lit Wahu's mother's eyes as she talked about the Kikuyu squatters in the Rift Valley who were the first to hold meetings about taking back land and freedom from the British. Her whole body swayed as she sang a Mau Mau freedom song: "Our old defense walls are collapsing, though we have put up a hard fight. You must now fully prepare yourselves. This is a continuous war."

Wahu was relieved. She could return to college and confidently engage in Mau Mau discussions. Her family was certainly not royalist.



After classes, Wahu, Kaara and their friends sat on the hard ground of the concrete plaza on campus engaging in heated debates about the politics of the day, everything from Mao, the Cold War, the American civil rights movement, unrest on college campuses all over the world and the Palestinian question to the struggles of apartheid and independence in other African countries. They talked about Kenya, how through armed struggle their country achieved its independence only to be betrayed by the Kenyan elite, who disinherited Kenyans by not addressing questions about who owned what land now that the British were supposedly gone. More and more Kenyans were being dispossessed by the government. Conflicts between tribes escalated.

Many times, Wahu found that she was the only female in the group – which never stopped her from speaking up. She also found herself attracted to Kaara, not just as a friend and comrade, but romantically, too. She confessed her feelings to him. “But we have always been in love,” said Kaara. By their third year in school they had moved in together and declared themselves married – without the aid of a judge or priest.

The couple and their friends became well known at Kenyatta University for their leftist sympathies and activism. They were outspoken in class and student groups and marched with students who went on strike against what they saw as unfair, discriminatory university policies. Right-wing students spat on them as they walked by on campus and screamed at Wahu in the hallways of the university: “That’s the wife of the Marxist!”



After college graduation, Wahu and Kaara got married in a church ceremony – much to the relief of their far more conventional families. They became history teachers and parents of young children, but they continued to take Professor Kinyatti’s teachings to heart and poured much of their energy into working for the common good, in this case, the liberation of Kenya from the repressive government of the country’s second president, Daniel arap Moi.

In 1982, Moi’s fourth year as president, members of Kenya’s military staged an unsuccessful coup. The president became so fearful of his position that he added an amendment to the Kenyan constitution officially making the country a one-party system. And that one party was Moi’s party, the Kenya African National Union, or KANU. Moi himself now had near-dictatorial power.

Almost every time Wahu turned on the radio to listen to the 1 o’clock news, she heard an announcement that minister so-and-so had been sacked and so-and-so had taken his place. Moi demanded absolute loyalty. If he didn’t get it, or perceived that he wasn’t getting it, that person would be fired.

Universities were targets, too. Many of Wahu’s favorite professors, including Maina wa Kinyatti and Edward Oyugi, were arrested and sent to prison for questioning Moi’s actions and policies.

Wahu, Kaara, their friends from the university and sympathizers all over the country met in groups to analyze Kenya's political situation and try to do something to change it. They all agreed: Since Kenyans had resisted British colonialists, how could Kenyans not resist repression by its own people?

These groups came together to form a movement called Mwakenya. They wrote educational leaflets that they passed out to people on the streets in neighborhoods all over Kenya, wake-up calls to Kenyans about the way their country was being mismanaged.

Wahu and Kaara's house became a central meeting point for Mwakenya in the Murang'a district. If anybody from anywhere in the country wanted to discuss politics, they would be welcome. The couple would provide an instant quorum. More often than not, at least one more person from somewhere else would be visiting at the same time. Kaara and Wahu also kept a library of reference books on Marxism, Leninism and Kenyan and African history and literature so people could borrow books or read them at the couple's house if the books were too dangerous to be carried around in public.

Moi responded by increasing his public appearances. One of his ministers made the public statement, "KANU is father and mother." Moi's party was to be every Kenyan's parents. The phrase became a song performed at public rallies that local chiefs and government officials were forced to attend for fear of being accused of disloyalty. Whenever Moi visited a neighborhood or village, choruses of children, women's choirs, citizens and politicians lined up to sing "KANU is father and mother" as he paraded by in his car.

### Exile

On April 21, 1986, National Tree-Planting Day, a holiday designated by Moi, Wahu turned on the radio to listen to the president's latest speech.

Moi shouted at the crowd: "From today you should keep quiet! I don't want to hear anything again about *Mwakenya*."

"Keep quiet," Moi repeated. "The government will deal with them one by one. We will collect them, so don't mention *Mwakenya* again. Let's keep quiet and go on collecting them. I am happy that we have uncovered them and they are naming their fellow collaborators. This is very encouraging. If you were involved in this thing you should be worried. I think you can hardly sleep because you are scared. When you hear a knock on the door, you think those friends have come."

Wahu quickly flipped off the radio. If she didn't know how deadly serious Moi was, she would have laughed at his ridiculous public threats. What would Moi do next? Wahu's entire body tensed.



Out the window of the van that Wahu secured from Nginda Girls School where she was headmistress, she watched the June panorama transform from Murang'a's tree and shrub studded hills to flat green fields of young maize stalks, bean and sweet potato vines and groves of banana palms. This Saturday trip to visit her daughter Wanjiku at boarding school in the lowlands of the Kirinyaga district would be a good family diversion in these times. Next to her in the van, Kaara sat in his own anxious world, full of worry that only she could see – and share. Anyone else might think that he was simply a quiet man, difficult to read behind his beard. Their youngest boy, 9-month-old Ngotho, stayed obliviously asleep on her lap. Four of her sisters were behind them and 5-year-old Mwaura, their second son, sat in the back with the young house help and all the pots and thermoses full of food and kitchenware needed for their picnic with Wanjiku.

Wahu told the van's young driver to stop in Sagana so they could pick up a few extra items for their picnic. Kaara declined to join them at the market. When they returned to the van with their groceries, Kaara was sitting in his seat reading the *Daily Nation* newspaper. Wahu watched her husband carefully. For an instant, his head jerked back as if startled by what he was reading. She said nothing.

Back on the highway to Wanjiku's school in Kerugoya, Mount Kenya in the distance like a huge ghost, Wahu picked up the newspaper that her husband had left on the dashboard and, with Ngotho in her arms, opened it to an article about two men who had been arrested for association with Mwakenya. The names sounded familiar but she couldn't place them. *Did Kaara mention them in passing?* A fear, like the buzz of stinging insects inside an enclosed room, filled Wahu's entire body. It was the same dread she'd felt since April, when Moi publically announced his crackdown on Mwakenya.





In the grassy field behind the classrooms that the boarding school had designated for student visiting day celebrations, Wahu, her children and her relatives picnicked near the other families. They had set out the big green tablecloth, a kitchen of dining utensils, and pots and thermoses of roasted and stewed meat, *irijo*, *mandazi* dumplings and assorted breads and fruits.

Wahu sat on a sisal mat eating a second helping of roast chicken and goat and a tender piece of flat chapati bread. Nine-year-old Wanjiku, in her green and yellow school uniform, darted from one relative to the other, her smiling face and easy laugh evidence of her well-being, despite the fact that Kaara had disappeared as soon as they'd arrived – to go to the shopping center, no less. He was not one to enjoy what he called “family obligations,” but he would usually sit and eat with Wahu before going off. Then she remembered the article about the arrests. The government targeted people by association, by history and by relationship. Kaara's brother Ngotho Kariuki was already in detention for opposing Moi's one-party system. Their good friend Kibachia Gatu had left the country. Both were part of Mwakenya. Now these new arrests. Could Kaara possibly be next? She lifted her face to the warm mid-afternoon sun and breathed deeply to keep calm.

“Hallo Mrs. Kaara,” a familiar voice called out. Mr. Njeru, an old friend who had once taught at the same school as Wahu and Kaara, was running to where her family sat eating. He too had a daughter at the boarding school.

“Where is Kaara?” he asked, panting from exertion. “You know they're arresting each and every other person of his thinking, so I'm wondering: Is he arrested or not?” His tone was light, joking.

She tried joking back. “Why haven't they arrested you?”

“They know I was never a Marxist,” replied Njeru. “Kaara and the like are the ones who were known to be dire leftist revolutionaries. I'm surprised that he is not arrested.” Nobody was laughing. Even the children listened quietly to the conversation.

“You know where you'd find him,” said Wahu, keeping her tone as lighthearted as possible.

Njeru nodded. “Yes, I know. He's at the shopping center having his beer.” He said his goodbyes and walked away from the picnicking families in the direction of the shopping center. Wahu brushed the crumbs off the lap of her flower-print dress and tried not to think about anything other than her daughter's happy face.



At 5 o'clock the edges of the afternoon began to cool. Thermoses and pots lay empty on the grass. Ngotho was sleeping and Wanjiku was entertaining the others with stories of her school life. Wahu had eaten plenty; the ample lunch sat heavy in her stomach. She was anxious to bring the van back to school, but Kaara had not returned. What was this recklessness, this don't care attitude? This was a visit to his own daughter. Who was he trying to injure? Wahu? Wanjiku? Everyone?

She said goodbye to her daughter, summoned everyone back into the van and told the driver to go to the Kerugoya shopping center.

As soon as they arrived in town she spotted Kaara in the entryway of a bar, as if he were watching for her. Then he slipped back inside the building.

The van parked across the street and Wahu went to retrieve her husband.

Inside, Kaara was drinking beer with Mr. Njeru and a group of men, some familiar, some not. Wahu walked up to their table. They were discussing the arrests. She told her husband it was time to go home.

“I’m not going home.” His bearded face remained calm.

“Why?”

“I just want to finish my beer.”

“No, it’s late. You are going.”

They argued back and forth until Wahu finally hooked her arm under his armpit and pulled him out of his chair. “Wake up. It’s time to go.” She told Njeru to pay his tab and walked her husband out the door.

The whole ride home they didn’t speak. She, the headmistress of Nginda Girls, and her husband had made a scene in public, but what else could she have done? She needed to bring her children home and return the van by 6 p.m. according to the school rule. Only in emergencies was she allowed to use the van at night. Those were the rules and she, headmistress of the school, was the custodian of those rules. He knew that.

For the rest of the weekend, Kaara stayed very quiet. He slept in Sunday morning, then left for the shopping center in the afternoon. Wahu stayed busy with school business, which was constant. They lived in the headmistress’s home on the school campus, so people were always calling or stopping by with problems to solve.

At 2 a.m., a knock on the window woke her from her sleep. It was Kaara, his inscrutable bearded face a specter in the dark. She had no time to be angry – or to worry. He had stayed out late before.

She went to work tired on Monday morning. After school assembly at 8 a.m., she went to her office. Before she could sit down the phone rang.

“It’s your husband on the line,” said her secretary, who connected them.

“Can you come now?” said Kaara in a deep authoritative voice – so different from the casual tone he usually took with her. “If you don’t want to come you can stay.”

She reminded him that this was Monday morning. She was working.

“I know. But I’m telling you, you can come now if you want. If you don’t want to, don’t.”  
*Bang.* The sound of his receiver hitting the phone reverberated in Wahu’s ear. She left her office and whispered to her secretary that she would be at home for a while.

By the time she reached the house she was sweating. Kaara was sitting on their bed smoking. A small pile of cigarette butts littered the floor, the bedspread, his lap. He was sweating, too. She sat down next to him and breathed in. He threw down his cigarette and lit another one. They stared at one another. She had never seen her husband like this before.

“So here I am,” she said.

“Yes,” he finally replied, in between drags on his latest cigarette. “I just want to tell you; you remember the newspaper on Saturday? Those two people who were arrested? They were in my Mwakenya cell.” He said there was a chance that they would name him when they were interrogated. Then the Special Branch, dressed casually and even known to him, would come for him at any time. That was why he did not want to stay at Wanjiku’s school picnic. He did not want to give them the benefit of arresting him in the presence of his family. He had seen members of the Special Branch at the bars that weekend. He knew who they were – he even talked to them. But they didn’t come for him on Saturday and they didn’t come for him on Sunday when he stayed out late. They were just planning the opportune moment to come for him. It was a particular kind of hide-and-seek game. He could not waste any time.

She understood. Her husband, so forthright in his opinions and his activism, a quality that made her fall in love with him at Kenyatta University, was now a target, like their left-leaning friends, their former favorite professors and the many people who thought as they did that Kenya should be a democratic country, not Moi’s personal domain.

The sense of panic that had traveled with her all weekend disappeared. She needed to focus on what to do next.

“It’s so important to prepare yourself for anything,” she said. “So go your routine way preparing for the worst. But be in charge.”



That evening, Wahu sat under the bright light and hard shadows cast by the lamp in the living room of the headmistress’s quarters – their home at Nginda Girls School – with Ngotho nodding off in her lap and Mwaura in his pajamas on the couch, curled up between her house help Beth Waheto and her sister. Wahu, her sister, her sister-in-law, Beth Waheto and the deputy headmistress sipped tea and told stories in an effort to keep everyone together and awake while waiting for word from Kaara.

“You know Mwaura,” said Wahu teasingly, “you really like eating a lot.”

“No, no, no. I don’t,” he insisted, his voice a little whiny with tiredness.

“Oh, I remember how you ate that day,” said Beth. She spun a story so exaggerated that she made Mwaura giggle through his protests.

Then the phone rang. Beth left the room to answer it. Wahu’s sister threw out a new thread of conversation for all the women to catch.

“Oh, Miss Magundu, we like it when you come to visit us for these evening chats with our cups and cups of tea. We should make a women’s tea group, perhaps.”

Beth returned to the living room. “The father of Wacera is on the phone.”

It was Kaara’s friend Philip Mwangi Kanyi. Wahu gave Ngotho to her sister-in-law and went to the children’s room where the phone was kept. She expected to hear the worst about her husband. Arrest or death. Her whole body tensed with apprehension.

On the phone, Philip greeted her then said in a flat, emotionless voice, “Mama Wacera seriously needs your blood.”

“What?”

“Mama Wacera is in the labor ward and she seriously needs your blood.”

Wahu racked her brain trying to make sense of the code. Philip’s wife, Mama Wacera, was not pregnant now, nor had she ever been pregnant. But she did work in the labor ward of Murang’a hospital. Wahu needed to go and see her. It was urgent. *They*, the Special Branch, knew that Philip Mwangi Kanyi and his wife were good friends of Wahu and Kaara. She hung up the phone and told her guests and children that Philip, Baba Wacera, called to tell her that his wife was very sick in the hospital and she needed to visit her. But how was she going to get there? The only way she could use the school van at night was for an emergency. That was the rule. She called the watchman at the school gate and asked him to get the driver; her baby son was very sick and needed to go to the Murang’a hospital. The driver asked no questions; Wahu had requested the van for emergency night trips to the hospital at least half a dozen times when students became ill.

The white Nginda School van drove up to the hospital parking lot where the driver waited while Wahu walked quickly into the hospital, her 9-month-old son in her arms. About halfway to the labor ward, Mama Wacera, in her white, nurse-like midwife’s uniform, met Wahu and whispered in her ear: “They tried to come for your husband this morning. He’s now in our house. I have instructions to take you there but I’m on duty now and I don’t want anyone to suspect anything. So walk with me into the labor ward so that my colleagues will see it’s you who have come and I am attending to you.”

The two women entered the labor ward, talked and joked with the staff there and went through the motions of examining Ngotho. Then they left the hospital and took the school van to the Kanyi house.

On the couch in the Kanyi living room, talking with Philip, Kaara sat, hunched over, his shoulders at his ears. He was sweating profusely and shakily lighting a new cigarette with a half-finished butt. He looked up at Wahu with wide eyes that asked *take control, please*.

She had never seen him so fearful before. Her own apprehension vanished. She had no time to waste.

“If you go to prison they will kill you because I know of your stubbornness. So I think the best option is for you to get out of this country.”

Kaara’s eyes stayed fixed on her. “Whatever you decide,” he said quietly.

Wahu and baby Ngotho, Kaara, Mama Wacera and Philip went back to the school van. Out of thin air, Wahu pulled out the beginnings of a plan. She told the driver that Ngotho had to be admitted to the hospital in Nairobi because he was a headmistress’s son. He could not be admitted into a hospital in Murang’a; he needed better treatment at Gertrude Hospital in Nairobi. But first they had to return Mama Wacera to her job in the labor ward and Philip, a clinician, needed to write a letter to Gertrude Hospital recommending Ngotho’s admittance there. Mr. Kaara was just accompanying them. The driver complied without question.



On the hour and a half long drive to Nairobi, Wahu and Kaara stayed silent. Her husband, who was never one for public displays of affection, now looked at her with soft, loving eyes. She was piecing together the rest of the plan to get him out of the country. From the bus station in Nairobi, Kaara could get to Mombasa where Wahu’s sister Wangui lived. She and her husband could help him cross the border into Tanzania. *Finally, a plan.*

They reached the bus station after 9 p.m. The last bus to Mombasa had just left. *Now what?* She milled in and out of the crowd inside the station with her helpless husband and sleepy child. Suddenly, she was stopped by a policeman. He grabbed her arm.

“Don’t you see?” shouted Wahu in her sternest headmistress voice. “I have a sick child. I’m trying to reach the hospital.”

The policeman let go of her arm and walked away. She and her family hurried back to the van. She imagined police hiding all over the station, ready to stop them at any moment.

*Where to next?* Maybe her younger brother, Mike, who lived in another section of Nairobi, could drive Kaara to the border. The van headed east to his apartment. But he was not home.

Wahu had a friend who was the principal of Machakos Teacher’s College, a school on the way to Mombasa. The van could drop Kaara off with her friend. So Wahu told the driver to go to Machakos.

At 2 a.m. they were not yet near Machakos. She needed to get the van, her son and herself back to school. She quietly suggested to Kaara that the driver could drop him off at a nearby dancing and drinking club on the side of the highway called Small World, a place he knew.

“But there are so many of *them* there,” he whispered, his eyes full of fear. So Wahu said nothing to the driver, who continued on Mombasa highway toward the teacher’s college in Machakos. When they had almost reached their destination, Kaara said, “Don’t take me to her. Just leave me anywhere on this road. I’ll know what to do with myself.” Wahu realized that he was more afraid of being left in the hands of anyone who might not help him reach his destination than he was of being left by himself in an unfamiliar place. She also knew that it was almost dawn. *Where to go?*

She scanned the darkness for an answer and found it in the clusters of lights from new, unfamiliar little towns that had sprouted along the sides of the highway. She told the driver to stop at the next town. The van slowed down at the next cluster of lights, a town called Salaama. Once there, she spotted a small building with a light on that looked like a hostel of some sort. They stopped there and asked if there was a room for rent. There was. She looked at her shaken up, frightened husband and gave him the money in her purse. Then they hugged each other. She tried to memorize the feel of his arms around her, his handsome face. Then she left him to find his own way to Mombasa.

At sunrise, the van reached Nginda Girls School. She told the driver to accompany her to her office. Once there, she said, “If anybody asks about Mr. Kaara, my husband, whether you have seen him or when you saw him last or whether you know where he is, if you dare to talk it is your problem because there are real implications.” She spoke very slowly in Kikuyu. He nodded his head. Then she granted him a two-week vacation from school.

### The Transfer

Is it better to be a teacher than a doctor? At 16 years old, Wahu won her first debate in secondary school by arguing: You could be an engineer, a doctor or professor, but you must go through the hand of a teacher.

And hadn't she been a teacher since she was little, instructing her 11 brothers and sisters at home and tutoring the older, bigger students at the lower primary school in Eldoret? The other students sought her out, always asking, "What was the teacher trying to say in the lesson today?"

In form two she wrote about her desire to make a contribution to her country, Kenya, by becoming a teacher. The essay received an A.



On a crisp Monday morning in July, Wahu, headmistress of Nginda Girls School, stood outside the administrative offices flanked by the deputy headmistress, the teacher on duty and the rest of her fellow teachers. She watched the 15 rows of students sing the hymn for their weekly assembly. The lines of girls stood on the grass like sapling fig trees in their emerald green skirts and jerseys. Their untrained soprano and contralto voices animated the morning air.

"On Christ the solid rock I stand, all other ground is sinking sand."

Wahu hummed along quietly. It was a hymn she used to sing during her own teenage years in boarding school.

Then the teacher on duty, tall, athletic Mr. Wambugu the games master, addressed the girls, followed by the elegant deputy headmistress, Miss Magundu.

Finally, Wahu came forward, official and neat in her lavender flower-print dress, cream-colored cardigan, plaited hair and Dr. Scholl's sandals, always appropriate yet never too imposingly formal. She was not a tall woman, but she tried to feel tall.

"When you are disciplined," Wahu began, her deep voice swooping and soaring with the force of an eagle-hawk, "you'll have no problem with punctuality; and when you are punctual you have no problem with the school timetable; and when you have no problem with the school timetable you are ready to learn."

She could see the girls' faces walk with her, their eyes attentive – even the stubborn ones who a few months ago used to fidget during assembly.

"When you are a hard worker you have results," she continued. "And when you have results, when you make your grades, you'll be happy with yourself and society will be happy with you because you have refused to go to the social dustbin. When you refuse to go to the social dustbin, you have space within society."

Wahu loved these assemblies; she loved shaping these young girls' minds, guiding and counseling and cautioning as she had been counseled. "Wahu, you can answer. Try, try; I know you have the answer. Don't keep quiet. I know you have the answer," the teachers would tell her. And from nowhere an answer would come.



Back at her office desk, while checking through her logbook to see what needed to be attended to that morning, she noted the unmistakable herd-of-mechanical-cattle rumble of a Land Rover enter the school parking lot. Her phone rang.

"The district education officer is here," announced Mrs. Muchoki, Wahu's secretary, in her motherly, gentle voice. *Ah yes*, thought Wahu, *a Land Rover*. Someone was visiting the school.

Into her office walked a middle-aged man in a typical district education officer black suit and nondescript tie followed by two women. The older woman had anxious eyes, close-cropped hair and walked with a slight limp. She introduced herself as Mrs. Ngure. The other woman, Mrs. Gitu, the deputy headmistress of a neighboring school who had been to college at the same time as Wahu, smiled broadly and said with great enthusiasm, "It's good to see you Mrs. Kaara. We are here."

The women sat down in front of Wahu's desk. The man did not. He handed Wahu a brown envelope addressed to the headmistress of Nginda Girls High School. All three guests just watched, silently, as Wahu opened the letter.

On stationery with the Provincial Education Office insignia at the top, the letter read: "Dear Mrs. Kaara, you are transferred from Nginda Girls High School with immediate effect. You are advised to hand over and report to the Teacher Service Commission with immediate effect." The letter was signed by the deputy provincial education officer, Mr. Kariuki, a local official.

Wahu was filled with a strange calm. She expected this.

The three years since her husband escaped to Tanzania had been filled with warning signs. After the first interrogations at the police station came the house visits from gangs of five, six or eight dark suited Special Branch police. They rifled through the shelves of her home for incriminating books by authors like Marx, Lenin or exiled Kenyan novelist Ngugi wa Thiong'o and demanded to know time and again about her husband's whereabouts and political activity, only to become frustrated and angry when her house help served them tea.

Then they tried to bait her with her own son. A teacher from Mwaura's lower primary school came to Nginda Girls to tell Wahu that a white car with Special Branch police inside picked up her son at school that day. She responded without panic, acutely aware that the teacher was probably an informer, come to rile up Wahu into saying or doing something that would lead to her arrest. Another night, the police arrived at the gate of Nginda Girls with guns, only to be hounded by a flock of students screaming and yelling, "No no no, you can't arrest her!" Luckily, men posing as police had recently been caught stealing in the neighborhood, so the night watchman did not let the men inside the school grounds.



By the time the student strike at school occurred, where all 800 Nginda girls – except Wahu’s younger sister – escaped in the night through a small hole cut into the fence behind the kitchen, Wahu was not surprised by anything. She was fairly certain that neighborhood parents helped plot the strike to discredit her and place her in the news beside her husband, whose name appeared almost daily in the local papers as a leader of Kenyan political dissidents in Tanzania. During a meeting about the strike between the PTA and a district education officer, those local parents and their children stood in the playing field outside the classroom where the meeting was held and yelled about how she was trying to steal school funds to subsidize Mwakenya. Wahu was able to quiet the students and parents with a speech. “I know my greatest crime is that I love working for my country when I work in this school. I don’t work because of my employer; I work because I love being a teacher and I know I am instrumental in the lives of these girls.” She then called in the accounts officer to read the names of all the parents who had paid tuition. Out of 800 sets of parents, only 50 had paid in full.



Wahu looked up from the letter to Mrs. Gitu, who still smiled her nervous, too wide smile. *She’s probably anxious for a promotion, thought Wahu. Isn’t she also a relative of one of the local prefect girls who helped instigate the strike? And the deputy provincial education officer – who is not the official usually designated to sign these kinds of letters – doesn’t he also live in the neighborhood?* Wahu knew they were using her husband’s exile and her brother-in-law’s detention to try to show how loyal they were to the Moi government. Hence the vague transfer letter that was not even signed by the right officer.

She felt nauseated. She was being baited yet again and was sure that the district education officer, who still said nothing, knew she had a reputation for fighting for her rights. He was waiting for Wahu to engage with Mrs. Ngure, the new education officer, who also happened to be disabled, or with Mrs. Gitu, Wahu’s successor. Wahu gave the district education officer her sternest stare.

“You know, Mrs. Kaara, we are just messengers,” he said, his eyes darting around the room. “You never kill a messenger.”

“Indeed, yes,” she uttered in a whisper.

Then she broke down. She gripped her desk and cried and cried. Between big, choking sobs she said, “I am not crying because of the transfer, because I can teach anywhere in this country; I’m crying because of the injustices and the unfairness. I’m crying because I am a woman and I’m crying because you as a man have agreed to come and watch women tear one another apart.” She acknowledged her successor but reminded Mrs. Gitu that she, Wahu, was the one who set the standards for her school. Then she agreed to accept her transfer and hand over her power as headmistress of Nginda Girls School with immediate effect. She called her secretary and told her to draft a letter acknowledging and accepting her immediate transfer. Mrs. Muchoki came into the office with the letter. Wahu signed it and handed both the letter and her school keys to the district education officer.

“No, not that way, Mrs. Kaara,” he said.

She reminded him that the letter instructed her to hand over her power with immediate effect.

The district education officer instructed Mrs. Muchoki to summon Nginda Girls School's deputy headmistress into the office at once.

"I'm from the District Education Office," said the man to elegant Miss Magondu as soon as she walked into Wahu's office. He informed her of Wahu's immediate transfer and instructed her to take over the school and help the incoming headmistress settle into her new position.

Miss Magondu, arms akimbo, replied, "Sir, I hear you but, according to my job description, that is a bit too much to ask. Mrs. Kaara has been my headmistress and she's still the headmistress of this school as far as I know. And when the new headmistress comes I'll work with her as the deputy headmistress. But I cannot supervise the transition because that's not part of my job description."

The district education officer flung his hands up in the air. "Mrs. Ngure, you take over," he said, then left the school.

Mrs. Ngure tried to tell Wahu to comply with the district orders. "Just relax. Let's go out quietly," she said.

Wahu sighed. "I have no problem with you. I have a problem with my employers and my employers have told me to report to them with immediate effect. So here are the keys. Here is the office." She gathered her few personal files, her purse and her sweater, and left Mrs. Muchoki, Mrs. Gitu, Mrs. Ngure and the headmistress's office of Nginda Girls School.



The next day, Wahu, dressed in a cotton print skirt and matching blouse with a peter pan collar, turtleneck underneath to protect her from the cold, put on her Dr. Scholl's sandals and took the bus from Murang'a to the Teacher Service Commission office on the 16th floor of a glass and steel skyscraper on Haile Selassie Avenue in Nairobi.

The receptionist for the Teacher Service Commission secretary sat at her shiny Formica-topped desk. Her pink manicured nails matched her lipstick and her hair was straightened into a smooth flip. She informed Wahu that she did not have an appointment so she could not see the secretary, Mr. Kangari.

In her sternest voice, Wahu replied, "I do not need an appointment."

The receptionist flinched. "I beg your pardon; I'm only advising you." Her tone was much less official. "You can't see him because you don't have an appointment."

"I don't need an appointment to see Mr. Kangari. He's an employee of the Teacher Service Commission just like I am. I don't disagree that I need to make an appointment but you should be asking yourself, why am I demanding to see him if I haven't made an appointment?"

The receptionist stared at Wahu for a moment, got up and disappeared into Mr. Kangari's office, then returned to her desk. Wahu sat, trying to be as patient as possible, yet alert for anything. Thirty minutes later the receptionist's phone rang. "You can see him now." She gestured to the clean, modern, wooden door behind her. Wahu got up and opened the door, walked in and sat down in front of Mr. Kangari's enormous wooden desk.

Mr. Kangari sat behind his desk fiddling with a small pile of paper. He was an older man with gray-edged hair, a pock-marked face and a scar above his right eye. After a few minutes, he finally looked at Wahu. "You're feeling very cold."

"I'm not feeling cold," she said, her jaw tightening.

"You are not well-dressed."

Wahu clenched her teeth and glared at him. *How dare he*, she thought.

Mr. Kangari returned to his papers. He picked up one phone call then another but did not so much as glance at Wahu. Five minutes later two men in suits, education staffing officers, walked into the office. Wahu recognized the tall one with the shiny shaved head as the senior staffing officer. The other, shorter man had been a classmate of hers at Kenyatta University. The two officers seated themselves opposite Wahu.

"Here is this teacher," said Mr. Kangari. "Yes, you are transferred from Nginda Girls High School, but." He cleared his throat. "You can be posted to any other part of the country but not the Rift Valley or Central Kenya because," he paused for breath and looked at the papers on his desk, "you are a state security risk."

"This is because of my husband," said Wahu, knowing that Mr. Kangari, like all the people who had been trying to discuss her case, were afraid to mention Mwakenya.

"Did I mention your husband's name?" Mr. Kangari did not look up from his papers.

"But you are saying I'm a state security risk. How would I be a state security risk if..."

"No, no, no." He glanced at the two staff officers. "Can you stop her? Can you inform her we are only telling her to decide where she wants to be posted, as long as it's not the Rift Valley or Central Kenya?"

"How could I not wish to be transferred to Rift Valley, which is my home, or to Central Kenya, which is my second home?"

"You have to make a decision. Take her." Mr. Kangari returned to his papers. Wahu knew he was done with her.

Wahu accompanied the two officers to the Staffing Office. The older, senior officer with the bald head gave her a pad of paper and a pen. She stared at the blank page. Now that she could not teach anywhere in the Rift Valley, the province where she was born and raised, or Central Kenya,

where she had moved with her husband to be near his family, where was she to go? She wrote down Eastern Province. *Just watch*, she thought. *They will never place me in Eastern Province or anywhere near Central Kenya. This transfer is a completely political move.*



When Wahu showed the headmistress of Chuka Commercial Girls School in Eastern Province the letter from the Teacher Service Commission, the headmistress looked puzzled. The letter stated that Wahu was to report to the Chuka School as their new headmistress but the present headmistress had not received notification of a transfer. *I was right*, thought Wahu. She explained the politics behind the letter and told the woman not to worry. Wahu would ask to be placed somewhere else.

Months passed. The new headmistress of Nginda Girls insisted that Wahu, a state security risk, leave school grounds, where she still lived with her two youngest children. So Wahu distributed her furniture among her friends and family and moved with her two young sons into the house of Reverend John Gatu whose own son lived with Kaara in Tanzania in exile. She finally received a letter from the Teacher Service Commission posting her at the Mutuiini School in Nairobi but, again, the school was not informed of her arrival and was not ready for her.

She was advised to report back to the provincial education officer who happened to be her husband's sister's husband. She went to his office on one of the upper floors of Nyayo House, the building known to contain the basement torture chamber used to interrogate many of Wahu's mentors, colleagues and friends, including her husband's brother.

The Nairobi provincial education officer didn't even invite her to sit down. He paced back and forth and told her, "I don't know how to deal with your case." They were all related, he, she, Kaara and Kaara's brother Ngotho, so he didn't know whether he was being watched, too. "I don't want to fall into that predicament," he said, of being part of a political situation because of his relationships. Wahu just looked at him with pity. He was obviously afraid for his position and would never be able to stand up for anyone or anything. *But to be abandoned by a member of my own family.* Wahu felt miserable.



Reverend Gatu visited Mr. Kangari to see if Wahu could be helped. The secretary assured him that the commission was trying its best to find her a position, despite the fact that she was a state security risk. The reverend advised Wahu to wait and see.

So she waited. In the meantime Wahu moved with her sons to a rental house in Nairobi. Her mother came from her home in Eldoret to visit with a bag of groceries and a kiondo filled with avocados, potatoes and green maize that she'd grown herself.

"What is this house?" her mother asked. "It has no water, no electricity. How are you going to live here? Your children are not used to this kind of life." And Wahu's salary, though more than enough at Nginda Girls because she had lived for free in the headmistress's house with no food or transportation expenses, barely covered the cost of living in Nairobi. "Why," her mother asked, "if

other people like Reverend Gatu are helping you, couldn't your own parents help out, too?" Wahu could come live with them in Eldoret. Wahu's mother could even go talk to Moi herself. "I have some powerful Kalenjin friends."

"This is a political conflict," said Wahu. "It's about power, not family or friendship." She reminded her mother that the coup attempt against Moi in 1982 made him very suspicious. Members of his own air force tried to overthrow him. His life had been at risk. He was not going to take any chances. Anyone suspected of threatening his power needed to be controlled. Wahu brought up her mother's experience with Mau Mau. If a mother or a child defied Mau Mau, it was the members of the family who would kill them. She did not want her parents entangled so closely in her life. It was not safe for any of them. But her mother could support her life choice, which was to stay loyal to her husband by not going home to live with her parents. If she moved back to Eldoret, it would look like her husband was guilty of something and Wahu was denouncing him. Socially, it would look like she was divorcing Kaara. But Wahu could not stop supporting her husband; she was his wife.



Weeks went by. Wahu could no longer sit idle and wait to be posted. It had been four months since she'd gotten the transfer letter, four months with no position. They wouldn't dare not pay her, but it was not merely money she wanted; she wanted work. So Wahu went back to the Teacher Service Commission and walked straight into Mr. Kangari's office on the 16th floor without saying a word to the receptionist with the matching lipstick and nail polish. She closed the door and sat down in front of his massive desk.

"Good morning, sir," she said, her gaze never leaving his face. "I am here to get a dismissal letter or a transfer to a location."

At first, Mr. Kangari looked shocked. Then he simply stared at her.

She stared back. "I am not leaving this office without a dismissal letter or a transfer letter to a location." She told him she would be happy with either solution. "The easiest one I think for you would be a dismissal letter. You have tried to transfer me; it has not happened. So give me the dismissal letter. I'm ready to think differently."

Mr. Kangari did nothing but stare.

"Can you give me the dismissal letter? I want a dismissal letter. Why should you pay me if I'm not working? What is making you not dismiss me if I am a state security risk? Why is it that you don't want to dismiss me?" Wahu repeated her argument over and over.

Mr. Kangari called back the staffing officers, the bald senior officer and his compatriot.

When they arrived in the secretary's office, Wahu stopped talking. Mr. Kangari finally spoke. "Can we have this teacher posted?"

The two officers nodded and headed for the door.

“Mr. Kangari,” Wahu almost shouted, her hands firmly on her knees. “I am not leaving your office without a dismissal letter or a transfer to a location. You can write the dismissal letter from your desk. Give me the dismissal letter,” she repeated again and again.

Mr. Kangari finally told the bald senior staffing officer to take the Teacher Service Commission car and transfer Wahu to Ngara Girls High School in Nairobi.

The officer drove her in the Teacher Service Commission Peugeot station wagon to the office of Ngara Girls School. Wahu waited in the reception area while he met with the school headmistress. When they were through, the officer said goodbye; then he left. The headmistress did not even acknowledge Wahu’s presence.

Wahu walked around the school trying to find people that she knew, to introduce herself, to strike up a conversation, with little success. The next day she returned to Ngara Girls School at 8 a.m. to wait for her posting. The following afternoon, she was finally called into the headmistress’s office. The headmistress of Ngara Girls, a tall, imposing woman in a straight-haired wig that ended in a flip, who sported gold jewelry, makeup and shiny manicured nails, looked at her notice from the Teacher Service Commission and said, in a loud, arrogant voice, “It seems you have been posted as deputy headmistress. But I already have a deputy headmistress. She was appointed three weeks ago.” She looked at Wahu with an expression of indifference. “I can only allocate you duty to teach in the classroom.”

Wahu told her she was happy to teach, that was her training after all. She was very comfortable teaching.

The headmistress pursed her lips. “You are dismissed.”

Wahu’s mother called to find out how she was faring. When Wahu told her about the posting at Ngara Girls, her voice grew loud and anxious. “But your children, they are like orphans. You go away to school and nobody is at home.” She suggested that Wahu retire. “What is there in teaching?” she asked. “How much money does the Teacher Service Commission give you? We can pay you every month.”

“It’s not about money.” Yes, her children were insecure. Yes, she was economically strapped and living in a neighborhood where she knew nobody. “But I want to work. And leaving is against my political thinking and my political life.” Her problem was political. It needed a political solution, which was to engage with the situation, not run away from it.

Her mother volunteered to come live with her to take care of the children. Wahu accepted her offer.

The next morning, Wahu waited at the bus stop at 6 a.m. to catch the bus that would bring her to Ngara Girls by 8. When the bus arrived it was so overloaded that she had to press up against the crowd to find a space to stand. She and the other passengers, all squeezed into the bus, lurched slowly forward. About halfway up a hill the bus screeched to a halt; it had run out of diesel. Everyone was ordered to get out and wait for another bus from the same company. The five shillings Wahu had spent on bus fare was half of her daily allowance, so she moved with the sea of

100 passengers along the narrow street from the stalled bus to the next bus stop. Cars and trucks and vans sped by to the left and right of them.

For the first time, Wahu felt her life shatter. Anger, fear and desperation overcame her. For months she'd focused her energy on engaging with the Teacher Service Commission. Now she had a school to go to but she did not have the energy to move. She stood frozen in place at the bus stop. She had lost her husband and her headmistress position. Life in Nairobi was almost six times as expensive as life at Nginda Girls. How would she and her family live? She was so tired. The commute took so long. *I am helpless.*

When the bus came it was too full to board. She paid five extra shillings for a *matatu*<sup>5</sup> and eventually arrived at school.

Once there, she had no place she had to be. She had no class, no subject to teach. She sat in the staff room of Ngara Girls School completely ignored by the other teachers.

Then she remembered a letter she had recently received from Kaara. *They will reduce you to a pauper*, he had written. *When you reach that end you'll either sink or it will be victory for you, if you can handle it. Remember, you are our energy and our strength so when they reduce you to a pauper, for the children, for me and for this struggle, Wahu, you have to keep strong.*

Wahu was that dispossessed pauper.

Invisible to the people around her, Wahu sat with her own thoughts. Over and over, she repeated to herself, *for my children for my husband and most importantly for my mother*. If she became too desperate, if she really broke, the immediate casualty would be her mother, whose own life had become focused on Wahu's well-being and success. So she renewed her determination to survive. She would continue to wait to be assigned a class at Ngara Girls High School. *I am a good teacher.*



"So now you are a pauper," said Kaara as he walked with Wahu along the beachfront of the Oceanic Hotel in Dar es Salaam in Tanzania, during a too short visit to her husband in exile. Their youngest sons, Mwaura and Ngotho, walked ahead of them, barefoot, along the water's edge.

Kaara was living in a small house with a group of Kenyan activists. The only way for the couple to talk seriously, in private, was to spend the afternoon at the hotel.

"So why not bring the children here so we can be together?" Kaara asked.

"It's better to be a pauper at home than to be a pauper in a foreign country," said Wahu. She knew the children would have a difficult time living in exile.

Kaara admitted he was being sentimental. He was in no position to offer Wahu and the children a secure life in Tanzania. But at least they could all be together.

Wahu stood her ground the same way she did with her mother. As much as she missed her husband and as much as her children needed a father, it did not make sense for them to go into exile when she had an opportunity, however meager, to remain in Kenya. So many Kenyans struggled; why should she not be a struggling Kenyan, too?



### Freedom Corner

“I think Moi is serious about this,” Reverend John Gatu told Wahu and his own daughter-in-law in the living room of his home. “I think people should come home.” Moi had announced that he would extend amnesty to everyone who had left the country for political reasons; they could all come back to Kenya. He even repealed section 2A of the constitution and promised multiparty elections.

*Moi is following the winds of change*, thought Wahu. Winds that blew in the collapse of one-party powers like the Soviet Union and brought fax machines to Africa so that Wahu, Kaara and their activist friends in Kenya and abroad could spread fax after fax about Moi’s corrupt, repressive practices to the rest of the world. Suddenly, Moi was being reprimanded on Kenyan TV by the U.S. ambassador. Then the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank cut off all aid and loans to the country. Moi had no choice but to change.

Reverend Gatu offered to travel to Tanzania to talk with Kaara and his own son, Kibachia, about coming back home – as long as their wives approved. *If the reverend believes that Moi is serious about amnesty*, thought Wahu, *if their lives are no longer threatened, then yes, they should come home*. So in early 1992, both exiled men came back to Kenya. Their safe return gave confidence to other political exiles anxious to do the same.



*Yes, Moi has repealed section 2A and promised multiparty elections, but is Kenya now a truly democratic nation?* Innocent people like Wahu’s brother-in-law were still in detention without trial for supposedly seditious acts, and others, like journalist and politician Koigi wa Wamwere, sat in prison on trumped up treason charges. In all, 52 political prisoners languished in Kenya’s jails after being interrogated and tortured in the basement of a government office building in Nairobi, Nyayo House. *And this is happening in a multiparty democracy?*

Koigi’s mother, Monica Wangu, and other mothers and supporters of the prisoners started a group called Release Political Prisoners Pressure Group (RPP) in Nakuru, capital of the Rift Valley Province. Wahu, Kaara and their activist friends worked for the mothers’ cause in Nairobi. They met every evening for several weeks at the house of Professor Wangari Maathai to discuss the matter. The political atmosphere was still unpredictable so they organized quietly and clandestinely. Twice people noticed Special Branch officers hanging around the professor’s house, so meetings abruptly ended.

One evening at Wangari Maathai’s house, as Wahu sat next to chain-smoking Kaara, Professor Maathai announced that she was about to become involved in a big women’s conference put together by the National Council of Women of Kenya at the Kenyatta International Conference Center (KICC) in downtown Nairobi. Next to Kenya’s parliament and other national government offices, the KICC was a huge, fancy facility that only hosted government and international meetings. Kaara, Wahu, their good friend Njeri Kabeberi and the others all agreed that the conference would be a great place to bring up the subject of the political prisoners. Professor Maathai had recently led a successful protest against construction of a Moi-sponsored building complex in the middle of Nairobi’s largest public green space, Uhuru Park. *No doubt Wangari will be called to speak about her victory*

*sometime during the conference*, thought Wahu, who was not alone in her thoughts. Someone else very politely suggested that since Professor Maathai would probably be speaking, perhaps she could call attention to Release Political Prisoners. Professor Maathai agreed.

The group quickly made a plan. Njeri volunteered to locate the mothers and bring them to the conference. When Professor Maathai spoke about releasing the political prisoners, then the mothers would get up and say a few words. Release Political Prisoners Pressure Group would also have a table at the conference with T-shirts and written material about the political prisoners, manned by a fellow activist named Biruri. Wahu and Njeri volunteered to come to the conference wearing the RPP T-shirts. They would help out at the table and mingle with the participants as much as they could.



The day of the women's conference, Njeri drove Wahu to the KICC for her first event at the skyscraping tower. In front of the center, the giant bronze statue of Jomo Kenyatta sat, staring down at her like a king on a throne in his suit, robe and ubiquitous beaded crown-like hat, holding his Kikuyu walking stick and fly whisk like twin scepters. *I work for a different image of Kenyan democracy*, she thought, *one based on the will of Kenyans themselves, not the royal rule of one man*.

Tall, elegant Njeri, 10 years younger than Wahu, knew quite a few women at the conference and had a quick mind that Wahu trusted completely. She followed Njeri through the large crowd of Kenyan women. Some, members of the National Council of Women of Kenya, stood out very prominently in their Western designer suits, high heels and makeup or their multi-colored, elaborately folded African outfits, but most of the women looked much less conspicuous in their plain dresses and headscarves. Both Wahu and Njeri, wearing white T-shirts that boldly stated "Release All Political Prisoners" in black capital letters, stood out like human billboards. They sat in the middle row of the assembly so that everybody could see them.

When Wangari Maathai got up to the podium, she said nothing about the political prisoners. Instead, she talked about her victory over Moi, and proposed marching to the exact area in Uhuru Park where the building complex was not going to be erected. She wanted to christen that space "Freedom Corner." Wahu and Njeri joined the march, their T-shirts eliciting stares and questions from dozens of women along the way.



By the time the women returned to the KICC, the conference was nearly over.

Njeri whispered to Wahu that she had a new plan. Obviously, Professor Maathai had forgotten to mention the political prisoners. But Njeri knew the conference's mistress of ceremonies. "Come with me," she whispered.

Together, they walked to the podium to talk with Kavetsa Adagala, a progressive professor at Nairobi University.

“You know, the mothers of political prisoners are here,” said Njeri in her quiet yet persuasive voice. “Please, please just let them mention their children in prison.”

“Oh, quickly, quickly,” Kavetsa replied.

Njeri grabbed Monica Wangu, Koigi’s mother, an older woman with many missing front teeth. She was very nervous. She wanted to know what she should do at the podium and when Njeri told her to talk about her son, she made an impassioned, emotional, worried speech about him. She brought the audience to tears but did not talk about releasing any political prisoners. So Njeri pleaded with Kavetsa to let another mother speak.

Then Ruth Wangari, another older woman in a headscarf and modest cotton dress, whose son was imprisoned on the same treason charge as Koigi, walked up to the podium. Wahu had never met her or any of the other mothers until that day. Ruth was very calm. She spoke in Kikuyu and Wahu translated her words into English.

“For me,” said Ruth, “I will die with my son. I am going on hunger strike outside the Kamiti Maximum Prison to have my son back – or to die.”

*Yes, it has come to this*, thought Wahu, impressed by Ruth Wangari’s candor and resolve.

Wahu, Njeri, Professor Maathai, other RPP members and the mothers all agreed to hold a hunger strike with Ruth – but not outside Kamiti Maximum Security prison, where they would probably be sealed off and unable to interact with the public. Instead, they would go to the attorney general’s office in Sheria House, a building facing the Parliament, with a memorandum to the attorney general demanding the release of their sons. *Release Political Prisoners is ready to act.*



Midmorning, Wahu stood with Wangari Maathai, Njeri Kabeberi and four of the mothers, including Ruth Wangari and Monica Wangu, in the plaza in front of Sheria House, Kenya’s house of law. *What now?* she thought. The doors of the building were open but the attorney general, who worked inside Sheria House, was not. They had taken the mother’s petition demanding release of their sons to his office. He told them to wait. They could even wait outside Sheria House.

*For months these mothers have been told to wait, by politicians opposed to Moi.* Reputable leaders like Jaramogi Odinga and Mwai Kibaki said, “After we get into power, then we will help you.” But the mothers had already been waiting too long. *What more can we do?* Wahu wondered.

“We cannot trust these men,” said Ruth Wangari, in the matter-of-fact manner Wahu had come to admire. “They talk about going to power; meanwhile, it is not acceptable for anybody to be imprisoned even one second when they are not guilty. How can we celebrate multiparty democracy while our sons continue to suffer in prison?” She was ready to start the hunger strike. But the small plaza outside Sheria House was crowded with people hurrying to and from government offices. There was no comfortable place for their group to set up.

So the women decided to go to Wangari Maathai's Freedom Corner, the grassy spot in Uhuru Park that she had saved from development. Wahu volunteered to get there first to wait for the mothers to arrive, one by one.



The next morning, a Friday, Wahu walked from the roundabout that connected the cacophony of commuters in both directions along two of Nairobi's main streets, Kenyatta Avenue and Mombasa-Malaba Road. Then she headed to the grassy area in Uhuru Park, where manicured hedges of pink and purple bougainvillea separated the park from the highways. Just beyond the flowers, off Mombasa Road, Nyayo House jutted out from a grove of trees and blocked a bit of cloudless blue sky. Its nondescript glass and concrete office building façade gave no clue that a torture chamber for political prisoners was housed in its basement.

Within minutes, Wahu noticed an older woman wearing a long dress and tennis shoes, flanked on either side by two young children, heading toward her from the roundabout. The woman's shoulders were slightly stooped and she leaned on a walking stick, but she moved purposefully in the direction of Freedom Corner.

"*Ni Mwakinya Kuuria Muugukaga mugokoga* – I think you have reached your destination," said Wahu in Kikuyu.

"Oh! *Niguo*," said the old woman, straightening her back. She and her grandchildren sat down on the grass with Wahu and began introducing themselves. The woman was Mama Mirugi, mother of Mirugi Kariuki, who was imprisoned on the same treason charge as Koigi wa Wamwere. The children with her were Mirugi's son and daughter. Mama Mirugi called Wahu Mama Ngotho, mother of Ngotho, whose namesake uncle was in prison too.

By the time the sun was high in the sky, other mothers had arrived: Ruth Wangari (Mama Thungu), Monica Wangu (Mama Koigi), Mama Kangethe, Mama Karimi, Mama Mureithi, Mama Rumba, Rumba's sister and Njeri Kabeberi. Wangari Maathai joined the group at 6 p.m. that evening. Curious pedestrians on their way home from work began to gather around the women to find out why they were sitting together in the park.

At about 6:30, a group of more than 20 young men, all dressed in traditional Kikuyu style, joined the women. With their cloth-belted, one-shouldered, cotton tunics, multi-colored knitted skull-caps, long, beaded necklaces and fly whisks, they were a spectacular sight, thought Wahu. They introduced themselves to her as members of an organization called *Thai* – peace in Kikuyu – who believed in returning to Kikuyu traditions for spiritual sustenance. The young men offered to give security to the mothers. Later, Wahu learned that they were acting in solidarity with Ruth Wangari and had been actively following the court cases of political prisoners. They not only came to Freedom Corner to give the mothers security, but also to join them in the hunger strike to free the mothers' sons.

The young men stationed themselves at various posts on the lawn, acting as guards and watchmen and attracting the attention of passersby on foot and in cars with their striking appearance. Wahu, sitting with the mothers inside the boundaries made by the men, felt protected.

At dusk, the young men came to Wahu and the other mothers with an idea. Nighttime could bring danger. Police could easily force a blackout that would make the mothers and the other protesters vulnerable to attack. But Freedom Corner could stay illuminated with candles, 52 candles – one for each political prisoner. *What a brilliant plan*, thought Wahu. So a few of the young men bought supplies and, together with the mothers and their supporters, placed 52 plain white candles in brown paper bags filled with sand in a circle on the lawn around the mothers. The soft, amber ring of light they made glowed so peacefully in the darkness that more and more people were drawn to Freedom Corner. The park filled with people. Roads became clogged with curious, sympathetic crowds. Media crews from the Kenya Broadcasting Corporation and foreign and international news services ran up and down the sea of people conducting interviews.

By 9 p.m., the hunger strike at Freedom Corner had turned into a celebration. People danced and sang Kikuyu songs from the Mau Mau era reworded for the occasion. “*Tuthiaga Tukenete, ona Moi angetuoba, ethie tutumakaga* – When we are going, we go in happiness, and when we are coming back, we are in happiness, we would not be intimidated by Moi.” The spirited tune and its historic lyrics energized Wahu and the rest of the crowd.

They also sang a traditional Kikuyu lullaby to the political prisoners. “*Uruuru, Koigi, tiga kurira* – OK, Koigi, do not cry. We are there for you – Uruuru, Thunga, tiga kurira. Uruuru Mureithi, tiga kurira.” They sang the same words for each of the 52 prisoners. *A perfect way to engage and educate this enormous, disparate crowd*. All night long the park was alive with more than a thousand Kenyans raising their voices together in clear solidarity with the mothers.

The next morning brought dew to the grass and an even larger crowd to Freedom Corner. A progressive Kenyan-Asian man brought an open-bottomed tent that sat like a large umbrella over the heads of Wahu and the other women. The day and night became an open rally with speeches. Politicians opposed to Moi, like Mwai Kibaki and Jaramogi Odinga, finally pledged their solidarity with the mothers and their cause. They were all for relieving Moi of his power. But Ruth Wangari also spoke. She urged the mothers themselves and their long-time supporters to work toward decision-making positions in Kenya. Only Kenyans who truly understood and empathized with the country’s struggles could make Kenya a more democratic nation.

Others made speeches too. Anyone who had something to say was given a platform to speak – in between choruses and solos of freedom songs from all over the world and spontaneous bursts of dancing. Wahu participated with great joy into the night and all through Sunday when the crowd number reached 10,000. She barely felt the effects of no food and water that weekend; there was too much to think about. She and Ruth talked a lot about taking political activism to the next step: positioning oneself in a decision-making role that would help Kenya’s government grow out of its cycle of political corruption and foreign dependence.

*This mother’s hunger strike at Freedom Corner speaks louder than any politician: Not only should political prisoners be released, but dictatorship in Kenya has to go.*

By Monday morning, Wahu needed to get back to her job teaching at Ngara Girls. As the family breadwinner, she had no choice. So every day that week, she went to work, then returned to Freedom Corner in the afternoon. When friends asked her why she looked a little pale and sickly, she told them about the hunger strike. Many of those closest to her joined her.



Late afternoon on Thursday, Wahu made the long walk from Ngara Girls School to a street corner near Uhuru Park to meet a liaison from the RPP who was to brief her on the day's events at Freedom Corner. She had done this every day since she went back to work. But on this day, the closer she got to the park, the more her eyes began to itch. *Tear gas? What happened?* At Koinangi Street, she saw Kaara, who happened to be the day's RPP liaison. He gave her his report.

"The police are here," said Kaara gravely. Earlier that afternoon, police had sealed off Freedom Corner and threatened the crowd with arrest if they didn't leave. But many supporters remained. That was when the police threw tear gas and started charging at people.

At one point, they cocked their guns and aimed them at Kanene, a young member of the RPP who was trying to defend the mothers. Ruth Wangari shouted at them, "How dare you shoot any of the sons. I want to know whether or not you are sons of women." Then she removed her clothes, revealing the naked body of a mother who had given birth. Ruth's display of her genitals, a Kikuyu women's curse, caused the police to put down their guns and flee. But the violence continued. A canister of tear gas hit Wangari Maathai and knocked her unconscious. Wangari, and the other mothers who were beaten or trampled, had to be taken to the hospital. The remaining mothers were now trapped in isolation behind a police cordon.

Wahu and Kaara, hyper-alert and focused on what to do next, circled an area parallel but not too close to Freedom Corner trying to assess the situation without running into the police, who were randomly arresting people. They ended up at All Saints Cathedral, a large Anglican cathedral west of Freedom Corner, where other Release Political Prisoner activists had gathered to monitor what was happening and to figure out what to do next.

The group decided to bring water to the mothers but had no luck getting through the police cordon. Even Wahu tried to persuade the police to let her through, to no avail. So the group approached a young priest who worked at the cathedral and asked him to try to bring water to the women. The priest agreed to help. He pleaded with the police and got permission to enter the cordoned off area to bring the women two 5-liter jerry cans of water. He also spoke to Njeri Kabeberi, and told her that members of the RPP were congregating at the cathedral.



At about 8:30 that night, a police lorry came to transport the remaining mothers from Freedom Corner back to their homes. The activists at the cathedral saw them leave and told the priest that Wahu was one of the mothers on hunger strike. Could the cathedral provide sanctuary for her and the rest of the activists – a group of more than 20 people – so they could all sit in vigil over night and converge with other sympathizers the following day? The priest was more than happy to allow the visitors to stay and told the provost of the plan.



The next afternoon, a service at All Saints Cathedral led by the provost, Reverend Peter Njenga, focused on Freedom Corner. He preached about the long list of injustices that had occurred

under the Moi regime. The treatment of the mothers at Freedom Corner was only Moi's most recent unjust act. The reverend preached encouragement to the mothers on hunger strike, who sat in the congregation, and to their supporters, who packed the pews. Then he invited the mothers to continue their vigil at the cathedral.

The women moved to the cathedral's basement, in a room they dubbed "the bunker." Wahu, who was very weak and tired after eight days of eating and drinking nothing, five of which involved going to work by day and sitting with the other mothers at Freedom Corner by night, could not join them. But she visited the mothers periodically. She was still one of them even though she had to eat in order to feed her family and not collapse in the street.

The mothers of Freedom Corner stayed in the bunker for more than a year, eating and drinking only the most minimal amount to stay alive. Their demand, to free the sons of Kenya, was heard around the world. One by one, over a period of two years, all 52 prisoners were released.



For Wahu, Freedom Corner was an awakening. The mothers, seemingly powerless, created a force of great positive power and energy when they banded together around something they believed in. She saw that force as a limitless, bright white space, a deep breath that calmed her own fear, anxiety and panic about her life and her country.

During the week of the hunger strike, to keep her mind off hunger and thirst, Wahu meditated on political activism. As an activist, she could refuse to compromise but she could do so peacefully – like the mothers – not by engaging in violent protests out of anger and a desire for vengeance. She felt the presence of a higher power, a faith in God that she maintained despite her belief in Marxist political theory. She even saw President Moi as a human being who had come to power unwelcomed by the Kikuyu elite, allies of Kenya's former president, Jomo Kenyatta. They called Moi "a cloud passing by" and would not let him ride in the presidential car without the accompaniment of two other powerful ministers. Moi's government had survived an attempted coup by the Kenyan air force in 1982, which had led directly to his repressive reaction against anyone who seemed to oppose him. That was why he demanded such loyalty. And didn't his misuse of public resources simply echo the behavior of Kenya's ruling elite since British rule?

At Freedom Corner, Wahu felt restored and composed. The energy she gathered there opened her mind to a new way of seeing the world, of viewing herself. *Believe in yourself, Wahu. Just be the humble woman you are. Be in confidence with your faith and beliefs and determination. Just do what you can at your level.*

### Reaffirmation

Two years after Freedom Corner, Wahu, still the sole breadwinner in her family, felt trapped at Ngara Girls High School – the only school in Kenya where the Teacher Service Commission would place her. Her salary barely put food on the table and the already overstaffed school only gave her two Kiswahili classes to teach. Then, with no raise in pay, the headmistress asked her to be a guidance counselor, too. But she took her new responsibility as a challenge.

The school had discipline problems. Many of the girls paid no attention in their classes – if they came to school at all. Wahu was determined to figure out what was going on.



During her morning Kiswahili class, Wahu decided to add *sheng* – teenage slang – to the lesson to try to bring the students closer to their subject.

“Language can tell you a lot,” she said, “about the economics and social dynamics of a culture.” Sheng turned the words mother and father into *mathee* and *fathee*. Father could also be *buda*, a stranger or bully, or *mdosi*, the big one who gave out big money. But mathee was always mathee. Sheng had only one word for mother.

The girls’ faces lit up. “I get it,” said one girl. “Like *sare’e*.” She put her hand over her mouth as soon as she said the word. Other girls emitted gasps and *oohs*.

“Yeah, sare’e,” said another girl. She giggled.

Now Wahu was very curious. “You see, language is so dynamic. Teach me what sare’e means.”

They told her it meant a free ride. Some of the girls who came to school in matatu taxis never got off the matatus because they were sare’e.

Wahu understood instantly. She took matatus to and from school. Ngara girls, in their bright red cardigans and blue skirts, stood out from the other passengers in the vehicle. She had seen the young, male matatu touts, who rode the matatus aggressively looking for passengers, flirting with the girls. *What else are they doing?*

As a guidance counselor, she called in girls to find out more about sare’e. It turned out to be a subculture that involved not just absenteeism from school, but drugs, drinking and sex for money – or free rides. *No wonder these girls have discipline problems.* Wahu did not report them. Instead, she counseled them individually as many hours a week as she could and met with their parents and teachers, until they started showing up to school and participating in class. Nurturing attention proved so much more effective than shaming.





Late one Friday afternoon, after a long day at Ngara Girls, Wahu took a matutu northeast of Nairobi to Thika for a weekend workshop on HIV and AIDS. Beth Ahlberg had invited her. Beth, a Kenyan married to a Swede, had been a wonderful messenger between Kenyan exiles and their families in the 1980s and had once delivered a message to Wahu from Kaara in Tanzania. She was also a medical researcher at the Karolinska Institute and was collaborating with the University of Nairobi Community Health Department on a study of the spread of HIV and AIDS in Kenya's Central Province. They were doing a workshop with high school guidance counselors in the Murang'a district and Beth knew Wahu's long history in that area as headmistress of Nginda Girls. So she invited her to the weekend workshop at a hotel in Thika, halfway between Nairobi and Murang'a.

Before the start of the workshop, Wahu introduced herself. The young Murang'a district guidance counselors were mouse quiet. The researchers from the University of Nairobi barely said hello. But Beth, modestly dressed in a dark blue skirt and blouse, greeted her with hugs and great warmth. She introduced Wahu to her Swedish colleague from the Karolinska Institute, Engla Krantz, a big woman with glasses and very short hair. Then the workshop began.

One of the researchers from the University of Nairobi presented their project. HIV and AIDS had reached epidemic proportions in areas of Kenya like Murang'a. The researchers wanted to know how the disease traveled so they could figure out how best to arrest its spread. Their goal was to track the sexual activities of young men and women in the Murang'a district by collecting data from high schools, clinics and local hospitals. They had spent a year gathering statistics showing the number of young pregnant women and the percentage of young men with STDs in the area. It was easy enough to find out who was pregnant, but finding data on local young men with STDs proved difficult. And the researchers still knew little about the sexual behavior of their subjects.

*Of course not*, thought Wahu. She stood up. "I see what's missing. You are discussing very private delicate issues. You just don't go up to a teacher or a hospital worker and ask 'how many STDs do you have, how many pregnant girls?' The issue is not just about records. You have to talk to the people involved and build a consensus that the problem belongs to those people you are researching."

During the tea break, Engla approached Wahu and asked her to say more about her consensus-building ideas. Wahu explained that teachers and clinicians should be approached as parents of at-risk children and citizens of a town, not just as workers with records. She spoke about the discipline problems at Ngara Girls, too, and how she solved them by first talking to the students themselves, then by involving their parents and the school community. Engla took notes. Their conversation continued long past the tea break.

By the time the workshop was over, Engla and Beth were impressed enough with Wahu's ideas that they asked her to join their research team. If she could work around her schedule at Ngara Girls and her duties at home, they would love to have her collect data for them. And they could compensate her for travel expenses and room and board.

Wahu was more than happy to counter her less than satisfying job at Ngara Girls with active, challenging responsibilities that had a real outcome – and to subsidize her meager teacher's salary.



Within two weeks, Wahu had the data they needed. Now the research team wanted to validate their findings. So they set up focus groups to affirm that yes, the youth of Murang'a were sexually active and were not practicing safe sex. Their risk of HIV was very high. Wahu was to lead a focus group of mostly matatu touts and other people, young, old, male and female, from the area – more than 30 participants in all.

When Wahu and the researchers arrived at the Murang'a hotel where the focus group was to take place, they found the touts very agitated. With a lot of noise and swagger, the young matatu touts demanded to know how much money they were going to get for their participation.

“*Kuri hindi ya itheru na kabindi meruka* – time for the bone in the throat to go down, otherwise you will choke to death,” said Wahu in a thunderous voice. The Kikuyu proverb challenged the young men to engage in a serious life or death discussion. They grumbled a bit, but stopped demanding money and sat down in the semi-circle of chairs in the hotel conference room along with the rest of the group. “What is this issue of life or death?” many of them asked.

“*Kirira ni ura thoni* – you must speak as it is without gloves,” she replied in her best eagle-hawk voice. “We are here because of the serious risk to the dynamic strength that the young people have. We who sit here, we who are in this town and city know that strength is threatened. You know what is flagging danger to you? Tell me.”

The young touts began to murmur: “HIV,” “AIDS” and the Kikuyu word for a person emaciated by AIDS, “*Mkingo* – a long thin neck.” *They know.*

“Oh yes,” Wahu said, walking among the audience. “That’s why we are here. Something needs to be done.”

One of the young matatu touts stood up and gestured grandly. “You know, the women these days, they are he-goats.”

Wahu nodded. “I agree. The women are changing roles with you. You are the ones who are supposed to be he-goats.”

One after the other, the young men complained about how sexually aggressive modern women were. “We’re actually afraid of them,” said another tout.

“Then whose role is it to tame these he-goats?” Wahu countered.

The men nodded their heads. They wanted to be he-goat tamers. The matatu touts volunteered to tell Wahu all about their sexual problems – and practices. The researchers got the validation that they needed. Even the researchers from the University of Nairobi were impressed.



Wahu worked as a research assistant on the HIV and AIDS project for a year. When it was finished, Beth and Engla chose her to present the project report in Zambia as part of a presentation of Karolinska Institute research on HIV and AIDS in Zambia, Kenya and Uganda. For the presentation, she read Beth and Engla's writings about using preventive strategies to conquer diseases and put these ideas into a political context. Her speech, entirely improvised, talked about how important social medicine was because it brought together all the actors in a community to take ownership of medical issues. She used sexual health education as her example. Effective sex education could not happen unless all people in a community, from the young men and women to their parents and teachers and hospital workers – and the political decision makers – took responsibility for educating the community about safe sex and ensuring its practice.

Beth had called the HIV and AIDS project *Mmoboko*, a kind of Kikuyu dance, based on two steps and a turn. Wahu used the dance metaphor to describe what the researchers did in the Murang'a district. They took two steps back to the community to learn to walk with them in order to gather the information they needed. Their findings revealed that the sexually active youth in Central Kenya Province were very interested in practicing safe sex and reproductive health. There were real opportunities in central Kenya to avert the AIDS crisis. Now the turn would involve researchers, clinicians, schools and the community working together to figure out how to make this happen.

After her presentation, the professor in charge of the Karolinska Institute, a tall man with gray hair and small wire-rimmed glasses, grabbed Wahu by the shoulders and asked, "Do you write?"

She told him all her speeches were extemporaneous.

"You should write down your ideas."

He then asked if she wanted to go back to school at the Institute and get a master's of public health. He understood that she had a family in Kenya. She could travel to Sweden when she could and work at her own pace. And the Institute would give her a scholarship.

*This is what I need*, thought Wahu. To leave her dead-end position at Ngara Girls for a chance to grow intellectually – and to learn about social medicine. *Yes*.

She took a study leave from Ngara Girls. Then early retirement.



Wahu's experience at the Karolinska Institute changed her life. Her teachers encouraged her to overcome her modesty about her talents as a thinker and a leader. She was an intelligent, creative woman who could make a difference in social medicine. Academia accepted her.

But one afternoon she received a call from the headmistress of her daughter Wanjiku's school, telling her that Wanjiku urgently needed Wahu's help to deal with the challenges of teenagehood. The headmistress was a friend from college who told her quite frankly that she would have to choose between her family and her master's degree. Wahu chose her family.

Wahu was not sorry about her decision. Family came first. But her experience as a research assistant and master's student at the Karolinska Institute gave her the confidence she needed to think about doing something different with her life. The words Ruth Wangari spoke at Freedom Corner came back to her, urging her to position herself as a decision maker. And wasn't she a leader – as a mother, teacher and dynamic woman?

*Wahu, go, go.*



Now in early retirement from teaching, Wahu had a small government pension. She and Kaara continued their volunteer political activism, he, through the social movement FORD-Asili, and she, through work in various civil society organizations. Wahu applied for jobs in the civil society sector. The future looked uncertain – but bright.

Then Kaara got sick. He thought it was simply post-traumatic stress disorder, a reaction to the stress of exile. But illness had taken hold of his body. By the time he went for treatment it was too late. Kaara died in 1997. At his funeral, Wahu gave a eulogy. She vowed to keep her husband alive by continuing their work for a democratic, liberated Kenya.

During the week that Wahu and her family were preparing for the funeral – a week like a tornado of sharp, painful feelings that Wahu somehow had to contain to take care of her grieving children – the entire congregation of her neighborhood Presbyterian Church of Eastern Africa visited her home. Wahu had grown up Catholic and had not been a churchgoer since high school, but she was friendly with a few of the church's elders. The congregants wept with Wahu and her children and offered love and support. Every day that week they came to the house, then accompanied the family to Kaara's home village for the burial.

At the burial, Wahu thanked the congregants by leading everyone at the funeral in a chorus of "Blessed Assurance," a hymn she had learned as a girl.

*This is my story, this is my song,  
Praising my Savior all the day long.*

When she returned to Nairobi, she began frequenting the Presbyterian church, where she soon became a member. There she found a space to mourn the loss of her husband and to begin to heal from the last 10 years of repression, exile, humiliation and dispossession. She learned to forgive those who had hurt her. She also learned to forgive herself.

Her renewed faith helped crystallize her lessons from Freedom Corner, that her work as a social justice activist was about forgiveness, too, not just righting wrongs. Instead of punishing those who perpetrated injustices, she wanted to see justice restored to her country – and the world.

### A New Network

In the concrete plaza of Nairobi's Kencom bus station, surrounded by office buildings, palms trees, a constant flow of buses and people, across the street from the monumental steel tower of the city's Hilton, stood a plain white tent. Wahu sat inside, cloistered from the urban bustle by the tent's fabric walls. She was pondering the question of debt. Not her own debt, which she was constantly struggling to control as a retired teacher and widow with four children, but the debt of poor countries all over the world – including Kenya.

It was 1999. Wangari Maathai and an NGO called EcoNews Africa had organized the tent as a way to spread the word to the people of Nairobi about the Jubilee movement, a worldwide campaign to cancel 90 billion dollars in debt owed by the world's poorest countries. Debt cancellation would occur in the year 2000. The idea came from an interpretation of Leviticus chapter 25 in the Bible, which called for liberty and a new start for all in the Jubilee year. Professor Maathai was part of an international cadre of supporters that included church leaders, high-level politicians like Tony Blair and celebrities like Bono.

Anyone who walked inside the Jubilee tent in downtown Nairobi was asked to sit at a table with a logbook on it, sign their name and answer the question: What is your concern in matters of dropping the debt and cancellation of the debt? Wahu wrote: *There is nothing that can happen to the cancellation or dropping of debts unless we engage with the World Bank and the IMF. They are the culprits, the cause of the world's economic inequality.*

Wahu was convinced that the root cause of Kenya's problems was access to resources. Despite its independence, Kenya still operated from the colonial British model, where 74 percent of the country's gross national product went to foreigners, 25 percent went to the country's elite and 1 percent was given to the Kenyan people. At that time she was volunteering with a number of NGOs, including the Social Development Network, which supported the Jubilee movement. But most NGOs in Kenya focused on matters of civil and human rights.



The year 2000 came and went. Poor countries still owed billions of dollars to rich ones. No debts were erased – or eased. So the Jubilee movement split. Jubilee movements in cities and regions around the world sprang up. Jubilee South became the umbrella organization for debt issues in Latin America, Asia and Africa. They worked with the African Forum and Network for Debt and Development, AFRODAD. AFRODAD set up national chapters, one of which was the Kenya Debt Relief Network, or KENDREN.



Edward Oyugi, a director of the Social Development Network and one of Wahu's former professors, called her on the phone. "There is this KENDREN that we are trying to build. Can you come to the consultations?"

So she did. And when the job for coordinator of KENDREN was advertised among Kenya's civil society networks, she applied, with a recommendation from the Social Development

Network. She loved the idea of coordinating the birth of a new organization and she believed in KENDREN's mission to politicize the issue of debt. Wahu got the job.

KENDREN began in the office of EcoNews Africa, an NGO whose director was on KENDREN's advisory board. EcoNews Africa gave Wahu a desk, an old computer and one of its interns, Vitalis Meja, who had worked on the 1999 Jubilee campaign. Vitalis was very young, but smart, confident and ambitious. When Wahu asked him, "What vision should we have for KENDREN? How can we politicize the issue of debt?" he pinpointed his interest right away: to make KENDREN a platform to engage with issues of economic governance in Kenya and Africa. He wanted to work for a future where Africa made its own decisions on matters of security and controlled access to its own resources.

"You and I agree," said Wahu. "Now, what do we do with this desk?" She laid out a strategy. Vitalis would work at the office tracking debates, discourses, national and international conferences and networks on the computer. Wahu would come to the office to consult with him every day. In the meantime, she would consolidate her diverse roles as public speaker, civic educator and political activist under KENDREN, go to conferences as the voice and face of KENDREN, and make connections with possible partner organizations in Kenya, Africa and around the world.



One year later, Wahu flew to Genoa, Italy. The world's eight richest nations were about to meet there to discuss economic and environmental issues at the G8 Summit. In response, an international network of debt relief NGOs organized The Genoa Social Forum for global debt cancellation, and Wahu went to the forum as a representative of KENDREN.

One of the forum workshops she chose to attend, a panel discussing debt and the third world, had speakers brought in by Jubilee South. All the panelists were white. Some members of Jubilee South came to Wahu and asked her to join the panel.

"Two wrongs don't make a right," she said. The panelists had already introduced themselves. She was not going to go up to the table at the last minute looking like an obvious afterthought. "I don't want to support the idea that Africans can only follow. But I'll speak as the African voice from the audience."

So the meeting continued. A white man on the panel, from a Lutheran church organization, spoke about Wahu's country.

"In Kenya, debt is not the problem; it's the constitution and dictatorship of Moi. Africa's leaders are corrupt." He went on and on in the same vein. At the end of his speech the audience applauded.

Then Wahu raised her hand and stood up. "I am from Kenya and I disagree. I want everybody to understand. Here in Genoa we are not speaking about secondary issues. We are discussing debt, the root cause of the problem."

Then she addressed the Lutheran panelist directly. “Stop misleading this part of the world. Yes, we have a problem with our governance. Our leaders have misled us by signing agreements that are against our best interests, agreements that create unpayable debts. Yes, our leaders steal what is already given, I don’t refute that, and they are repressive. But the question is the bilateral and multilateral economic agreements, which were not made by President Moi; they were made by the G8. The G8 already know about Moi. As a member of Jubilee South, we don’t owe and we won’t pay. These debts are odious. Moi and others are stealing that money and not bringing forth development.”

Dozens of people came up to her after the meeting with questions and comments that she had to answer. The Argentinean leader of Jubilee South was ecstatic. He told Wahu that her strategy worked well to prove her point: Africans must speak for themselves.

After the forum was finished, Wahu joined hundreds of thousands of activists from all over the world in a march to protest the economic status quo symbolized by the G8. A contingent of young people dressed in black wanted to engage with the police but the majority of protesters preferred to march peacefully. They negotiated with the black clad youth to have their peaceful march first.

In the sea of peaceful marchers, Wahu walked between people in their 20s from the London Drop The Debt campaign and members of the Jubilee movement, including an Argentinean woman named Nora, whose child was one of the many people disappeared by government police during Argentina’s Dirty War in the 1970s. Every day for years, she had walked with other mothers in front of the president’s office in Buenos Aires demanding to know what had happened to her child. Nora, whose Spanish was translated by a young activist into English for Wahu, was a Latin American version of a Freedom Corner mother.

Into the enormous crowd of nonviolent protesters police threw tear gas. The young people from London quickly came to Wahu’s and Nora’s aid with vinegar and orange juice for their itchy eyes. They took charge of the older women, walking with them and feeding them water. Wahu was overwhelmed. The march gave her a new picture of reality. Brutal police and gentle loving people inhabited the entire world – not just Kenya.

Afterwards, she spoke to Vitalis, who called to report on his workday back in Kenya. As a representative of KENDREN, he had stood at the Kencom bus station in Nairobi with a microphone explaining debt cancellation to the crowds of commuters walking by. He also talked about the G8 Summit in Genoa, which was happening as he spoke. A middle-aged woman walked up to him and said, “Oh, you want to pay your debts. It’s very important to pay your debts.” *She is translating our country’s debt into something she can understand*, thought Wahu. Maybe this was the first step that most people had to take before they could even begin to contemplate a bigger economic picture. Very slowly, KENDREN was moving in the right direction.



To get her organization noticed, Wahu partnered with any NGO that spoke for constructive resolutions to Africa’s economic questions and respected KENDREN as Kenya’s platform for issues of economic justice. One of those organizations, The African Women’s Economic Policy

Network, brought her to New York to attend a United Nations Preparatory Committee Meeting (U.N. PrepCom) on financing for development. But after attending several U.N. PrepCom meetings, she turned to Vitalis with the Kenyan shilling equivalent of about 30 U.S. dollars that she had earned as the leader of a civic education workshop.

“I have no food in my home,” she said. “But take this money, apply for your passport and go to New York. The next U.N. meeting is for you to attend. I can continue to stand up and say ‘There are economic injustices in Kenya and Africa. People are poor. They are dying.’ I can make a political statement about how the IMF and World Bank’s structural adjustment programs have negative implications for Kenyans and Africans, but the policies themselves need to be interrogated.”

She invited Vitalis to analyze the economic policies that kept Kenya and Africa poor and in debt and present the facts and figures at the next U.N. PrepCom. She encouraged him to make KENDREN shine through his participation. He did so well that he was invited back. After his third trip to the United Nations he was given a scholarship to do graduate work in Germany. But before he left, Vitalis found another smart, ambitious young man to volunteer to work at KENDREN’s small desk.



For 10 years, Wahu worked without pay to make KENDREN a flexible, thin but strong spider web of an organization, connected to a network of organizations and individuals all over the world interested in economic justice for Kenya. She did not pay herself and she encouraged volunteerism in others. Vitalis continued to work with KENDREN long after he had officially left the office. Other young volunteers came and went, but those who stayed, like Wahu’s son Kiama, were relentlessly devoted to critiquing Kenya’s – and Africa’s – economic relationship with the rest of the world, as well as researching more sustainable models of economic development for their country and continent. Wahu told the young people at KENDREN that she could yell “debt is death,” but they needed to translate that idea into facts and figures and argument. She urged them to professionalize without compromise and partner with trusted organizations to guide policy and local community groups who worked for social transformation. They would be helped at every step by KENDREN’s board of directors, many of whom had been political prisoners and continued, like Wahu, to devote their lives to important political work.

In 2008, KENDREN became a registered NGO and by 2010 it had its own office, paid staff and working website. The staff works with the Kenyan government and civil society organizations discussing matters of aid. KENDREN guides Oxfam, Action Aid, World Vision, CARE and other organizations that have been speaking on behalf of civil society for Africa but are international Western organizations. KENDREN also partners with AFRODAD on programs dealing with international and domestic debt issues in Kenya, on meetings in Africa and abroad and on research. And KENDREN works with social movements throughout Kenya on civic education projects. Wahu’s dreams for KENDREN have come true.





In 2010, just a few months before a public vote to accept or deny Kenya's new constitution, KENDREN partnered with Uraia, Kenya's national civic education program, on a series of intensive educational workshops about the new constitution, specifically the chapter on finance, Chapter 12. Wahu chose to lead the workshop in Pokot, in the Rift Valley, not too far from where she grew up. She knew there would be difficulties. The Pokot people, who felt abandoned by the rest of Kenya, had a history of taking the law into their own hands, using cattle rustling and killing to solve economic and social problems. It was going to be difficult enough to get this group to listen to anything that Wahu, a Kikuyu, had to say, let alone to get them to care enough about a new Kenyan constitution to vote for it. But Wahu liked these kinds of challenges. She was, after all, a teacher. So she and a young colleague from the office drove an entire day northwest from Nairobi to the arid plains. They spent the night in Makutano, near Pokot.

In the morning, they arrived at a clean, bright classroom in the World Vision building, a 20-year-old, multi-purpose cement building chosen for the workshop by Amani Theater, KENDREN's partner organization in Pokot. Amani Theater worked with all ages, genders and denominations within the Pokot community on theater projects that promoted civic education. A wide swath of Pokot people, including leaders of youth, women and Christian church groups, as well as chief administrators, showed up for Wahu's workshop. All were casually yet conservatively dressed. There were more than 60 people.

An officer from Amani Theater introduced Wahu and her colleague from KENDREN and the workshop focus: Chapter 12 of the new constitution. Then he gave the floor to Wahu.

She asked the workshop participants to first introduce themselves. Each person said their name and identified him or herself as Pokot, a marginalized people. *Marginalized*. The word came up again and again. Wahu would have to address it if she was going to earn their trust. Without their trust, she would not be able to teach them anything.

"I am Kikuyu," she said, banishing any signs of nervousness. "And very proud to be a Kikuyu. And I know you are Pokot and very marginalized. That one, I know."

People's eyes grew wide.

"Before we begin, we have to make an agreement about the objectives of this workshop. I understand that you really want a new constitution and you are here because there is something you think you can learn. OK, so I will start a discussion by asking why I must be, as a Kikuyu, a privileged person, and why you are Pokots, a marginalized people. Can we start from there?"

The group remained silent. Wahu could feel anger rising in the air like steam.

"I am privileged and I know I am privileged. Isn't this so?"

"Yes it is," people grumbled.

"And you are marginalized; isn't it so?"

They agreed. Wahu felt the air grow thick with anger. People averted their eyes.

“OK, I am privileged and you are marginalized. Now, we all know which people in our country are suffering from jiggers.” She knew that everyone in Central Kenya was aware that jiggers, a type of flea, afflicted poor Kikuyu people.<sup>6</sup> She told the people at the workshop that the fleas were imported from Malaysia by the British in colonial times to disempower the Kikuyu during Mau Mau.

“The people who have jiggers in this country, aren’t they Kikuyus? How would you have jiggers if you are a privileged people? Do you know jiggers?”

The group said yes.

“You’ve seen how they totally distort the health of people? They are helpless. They can’t walk. They are dying a slow death and they can’t be treated. Would you say those people are privileged or marginalized?”

From the dichotomy of privilege and marginalization, Wahu wove an argument about the workshop participants’ own experience with the Pokot leadership in government. They felt dispossessed in Kenya because their leaders were part of a system of ruling elite that defrauded its constituents. “*We* are all dispossessed. *We* are all exploited, divided and ruled. And *we* are all disinformed. *We* are suffering from victimization and taking responsibility for it,” Wahu declared. “That’s why *we* need this civic education, to overcome responsibility for victimization, to understand it and to do something about it. *We* need to restore our national attributes, ideas and values that connect us as a cohesive nation – not as a divided nation at war with itself.”

A murmur of recognition and agreement spread through the group. One middle-aged man raised his hand. His name was Musa. “Why didn’t you come here 10 years ago?” he asked. “You are coming when we have already damaged ourselves.”

“No,” said Wahu. “I had to come now.” She assured him that by the time they finished this workshop they would build an informed, united position. His face lit up with excitement and he continued to ask questions. Very quickly, he understood that Pokot was part of Kenya and as guilty as any other group of not understanding how Kenya’s own government conspired against its people.

She explained the new constitution in terms of its preamble, which acknowledged the supremacy of God, and its first article, which affirmed the supremacy of the people of Kenya – not the supremacy of any one ruler or elite group. She talked about economics in the plainest most direct language she could find, writing on the blackboard the Kiswahili words *Walalaboi*, the poor, and *Walalabai*, the rich. Then she went on to discuss the intense dispossession felt by all Kenyans, regardless of tribal affiliations.

Wahu drew a chart on the blackboard showing the way the country’s resources were divided: 74 percent to foreigners, 25 percent to the ruling elite, 1 percent to the Kenyan people. In addition, the major industries of Kenya made little money for its people and damaged the country’s natural resources.

“We definitely don’t see that wealth here,” said the leader of a women’s group. “Especially during the dry season.”

Then Wahu spoke about how the finance chapter of the new constitution would put checks and balances on government use of public money and would ensure that a certain percentage would go to public works. The new constitution was written to protect the people of Kenya.

“Tell us more,” said Musa. “In detail.”

By the end of the workshop, which lasted a day and a half, the entire group was ready to back the new constitution as informed, responsible citizens of Kenya.

And they did. A year later, people from the workshop called Wahu on the phone to tell her that she had opened their eyes to the corruption around them and gave them the confidence to do something about it. The area had been struck, like it was always struck, with drought and famine. When aid came in the form of food, they followed the district commissioner of their area who was leading two trucks of food relief, meant for the Pokot people, away from the Civilian Board Office, possibly to another location to sell the food. They went on foot, or by any other means they could, without being noticed, and passed messages from one village to another. When they intercepted the trucks, the district commissioner claimed that he was only leading the trucks where they needed to go, to the National Maize and Produce building in Kitale, which coordinates the buying and distribution of food relief. So the Pokots released the trucks and sent people to Kitale to meet them.

When the trucks arrived at National Maize and Produce, people demanded to see how the food would be released. But there was no food in the trucks. The people protested and would not allow the district commissioner to leave.

A senior police officer tried to disperse the protesters, who told him they were not violent – they only wanted justice. They had the criminal, the district commissioner, the evidence, no food relief, and the judgment, that he was guilty of defrauding the Pokot people of their maize. More and more people joined the protest until the district commissioner grew so distraught that he collapsed and had to be sent to the hospital. At the hospital he was placed under arrest. The Pokot used the law, under a new constitution that gave sovereignty to the people, to empower themselves – without violence.

*Bravo*, thought Wahu. They had learned their lessons well. *And bravo to KENDREN*. KENDREN’s work with Kenyans affirmed her political work from the time she was a university student through her suffering under Moi, her experience at Freedom Corner and her work with other civil society organizations. The Kenya Debt Relief Network gave Kenyans a tool to think and act on their economic and social rights, which were inextricably tied to human rights, gender rights and the writing of the new constitution. Wahu was so pleased.

### The People, Leading

In 1992, after Moi was forced to reinstate multiparty elections, Wahu, Kaara, Kaara's brother Ngotho and their colleagues from Mwakenya worked tirelessly to create a viable opposition movement to Moi's party, the Kenya African National Union, KANU, in time for the election of '92. They called the opposition party the Forum for the Restoration of Democracy, or FORD. But FORD split along tribal and political lines, weakening its strength. Wahu was certain that Moi and KANU were involved in creating that rift. KANU also instigated violent ethnic conflict at election time between Moi's people, the Kalenjin, and the Kikuyu in the Rift Valley Province. Moi and KANU won the '92 election. Wahu watched Moi get elected again in 1997 while ethnic violence and a plethora of new parties weakened the opposition even further.

But the 2002 elections promised to be different. The international community had forced Moi to retire, creating a wide-open field for new presidential candidates to emerge. Mwai Kibaki, leader of a new opposition party, the National Rainbow Coalition, NARC, defeated KANU and Moi's designated successor, Uhuru Kenyatta.

*But what difference does it make for Kenya to replace one Moi with another?*



One afternoon in early 2003, as Wahu was walking through the arrival gate at Nairobi airport, she received a phone call. She was at the height of her international networking efforts for KENDREN and had just returned home from a conference in Zimbabwe. The call was from a prominent church leader and dear friend who wanted to recommend her as a delegate to Kenya's new constitutional convention. She needed to send her CV right away to the Constitution of Kenya Review Commission. Wahu was surprised.

Mwai Kibaki, who had just won the presidency, ran on a platform that included a promise to create a new constitution for the country in his first 100 days in office. The Constitution of Kenya Review Commission was set up to draft the document. Kibaki would be the commission's first delegate and the rest would be chosen from the government and the country's different regions and interest groups. Everyone in Wahu's civil society fraternity jockeyed for position as a delegate. Competition had been fierce and Wahu had already been turned down. But now she had another chance to be a delegate – as a representative of her friend's faith group. She sent in her CV and interviewed with the commission. She became delegate 521.

The constitutional commission met in the large wooden amphitheater that was part of Nairobi's "Bomas of Kenya," a tourist village modeled after the homesteads of different Kenyan tribes, and a convention center with halls for dance, theater and sports events. More than 1,000 delegates from women's groups, labor unions, faith groups, farmer's groups, youth groups, civil society and parliament sat in the rising tiers above the amphitheater's shiny, polished, red-brown wood floor. Wahu sat with them. She had been sworn in a week late (she had a meeting in New York that she could not back out of) and was still flush with excitement over the fact that she was part of such a historic event, the culmination of years of effort that she, her husband and their friends had put into democratizing Kenya.

From the floor, the chairman answered questions about the commission's procedures and presented reports from Kenya's citizens about what they wanted to see in a new constitution. He also reminded all the delegates that they had 100 days to finish their work. Wahu listened closely to the reports every day for the first couple of months. Then the chairman directed each delegate to a particular committee to review one section of the constitution and make recommendations. Wahu was placed on the executive committee.

In a tent on the grassy grounds of Bomas, Wahu worked with more than 30 delegates on the executive committee. They were only one of several committees inside tents, each hammering out a different aspect of the constitution. But the executive committee was one of the more controversial groups.

In her committee, Wahu argued passionately for the need to check the president's executive power. She wanted to put an end to the "big man syndrome" that plagued Kenya's first two presidents. Kenyatta and Moi had abused their position by bending and changing laws to keep Kenya's political and economic power in their hands – and the hands of their friends. Someone on the committee suggested that Kenya create a parliamentary democracy with a prime minister to keep the president from acting in his own interest at the expense of the Kenya. Wahu liked the idea. She mentioned that Tanzania's parliamentary democracy worked well. But other committee members, delegates from the president's political party, demanded adherence to the status quo: a powerful president who did not have to answer to anyone else.

They also argued over details of presidential privilege, like whether or not a president should receive retirement benefits. One woman on the committee was so vocal that she intimidated the men, who said nothing when she shouted, "Moi should never get retirement!" Wahu very calmly replied, "Yes, we can wish Moi away but Moi is a piece of our history. And he would not get retirement as a person but as a president." *Enough of this illogical anger.* Wahu's idea made sense to most of the committee. Her motion won. But the committee could not agree on the design of the executive branch. They argued incessantly and bitterly.

The only committee as controversial as Wahu's was the devolution committee. The delegates there disagreed on the best way for Kenyans to be represented in government. When the country first became independent, there was a parliament and a senate. But the senators, who represented different regions, had been divided along tribal lines and tribal interests. Was there another way for the government to serve Kenya's communities?

*We must find a new design, thought Wahu. We have to bring power back to the people of Kenya.*



One morning, Wahu arrived at the conference to find delegates whispering together with knitted brows and downturned mouths. The conference proceedings were delayed. In one of the snack tents, where Wahu was getting tea, a delegate who was not Kikuyu approached her and said, "You know, you people have killed him." Three thugs had broken into the house of Dr. Odhiambo Mbai, chairman of the devolution committee, and shot him. Then they left, taking none of his possessions. The committee chairman was a Luo. The news shocked Wahu. She said nothing in response to the accusation but looked for people who could tell her more about what had happened.

The circumstances of the doctor's death were mysterious. Rumors flew. *Is this murder a Kibaki-backed political move to stir up ethnic tensions between Luo and Kikuyu?*

The murder stopped the conference for a week. When proceedings began again, it became obvious to Wahu that the infighting between Kibaki's supporters and members of other political parties threatened to derail the conference. There was so much disagreement that committees could not make decisions. If the delegates did not come up with a constitution in 100 days, their work would be suspended. So she and a group of delegates who were not affiliated with any political party met and took a solemn oath to stand firm to the process of creating a new constitution in 100 days, no matter what.

Political tensions mounted. Wahu believed very strongly that the government was not ready for a new, people-centered constitution. Two prominent members of parliament who were also government ministers and delegates, Kiraitu Murungi and Professor Kivutha Kibwana, proved her right. They mobilized a delegation that lobbied for a motion of no confidence in the conference chairman. If the rest of the delegates voted against the chairman, the conference would have to be adjourned.

Over the weekend, Wahu and a cross-section of about 30 non-government affiliated delegates met at a hotel in Kilifi, on Kenya's coast, to come up with a plan to keep the conference moving. They called themselves Delegates Participating in Making a People Driven Constitution. Wahu was one of three people chosen to lead the group's efforts. As a Kikuyu in opposition to Kikuyu government officials, she could not be accused of tribalism. The other two people chosen to represent the group were Luo and Muslim.

Wahu was put in charge of pinning as many conference delegates as possible with a green ribbon to identify them as Delegates Participating in Making a People Driven Constitution. She organized a group of supportive delegates from different committees to pin green ribbons on any willing delegate as soon as they came to the convention. By 8:30 a.m. the next morning, a critical mass of delegates stood together on the grounds of Bomas wearing green ribbons.

"So what's next?" asked several delegates.

She didn't know. She looked around the room at the delegates wearing their pastoral collars, short, rounded Muslim caps, crosses and other clothing that denoted their religion. Then she remembered: *I am a delegate representing a faith group.*

"Let us pray about this constitution."

"We can't hear you," people yelled from the back of the crowd. She was placed on a chair and shouted in her best eagle-hawk voice, "We are here for a political reason so important for our country. Let this conference reach its logical conclusion just like we vowed. We can only do that if we go to prayer. So let us pray that God helps us complete this constitutional discussion."

She invited all the religious leaders in the group to lead the delegates in prayer. Then she guided the crowd to each committee tent, where everyone continued to pray. Along the way, she and her two colleagues from the Kilifi meeting strategized about what to do next. They decided to

invite the chairman and commissioners to join them in a march from the Bomas entrance gate to the amphitheater. TV cameras and reporters, who were already at Bomas covering the conference, recorded the crowd of delegates as they met the commissioners and chairman at the Bomas gate, then followed the crowd to the amphitheater where together everyone prayed to defend a people's constitution.

After the march, Wahu could sense the green ribbon of solidarity threading through the delegation. A large majority gave the chairman a vote of confidence and allowed the conference to continue.

But the opposition was relentless. After the draft – a constitution that limited presidential powers through the appointment of a prime minister – was finished and approved, delegates from the government balked. Professor Kibwana stood in front of the entire delegation and said, “I cannot accept this draft of the constitution. The voting process was rigged.”

The secretary to the Constitution of Kenya Review Commission countered him. “Professor Kibwana,” he said, “Yes, you were my teacher. Yes, I respect you. But now you are lying. We will repeat the voting.” So the delegates staged an open vote. They stood in lines according to their last names and voted when their names were called. Anyone could see who was voting when. The vote was unanimously in favor of the draft.

The delegates from parliament walked out in protest but the rest of the delegation got up from their chairs, moved to the shiny polished floors of the amphitheater and danced in celebration of their new constitution. Wahu was ecstatic. She swayed her hips and nodded her head to the rhythm of promise. *We have a shape for a new, democratic Kenya. At last.*



Eleven years after Freedom Corner, Wahu watched Kibaki's attorney general wiggle away from justice the way Moi's attorney general had when confronted by the mothers. This time the attorney general, who was supposed to present the draft of the constitution created at Bomas to the parliament for a vote of endorsement or rejection, declared that he did not receive the document as the attorney general, but as a delegate of the conference. So the conference was forced to adjourn – their 100 days were up. But the delegates did so *sine die* (without assigning a day for further meeting, so the conference could be called again). Wahu, other delegates and supporters of the draft formed a group called Bomas Katiba Watch, which staged a big demonstration to call Kenya's attention to the fact that the Bomas Draft of their constitution was written by and for the Kenyan people. The draft's preamble and first article affirmed the supremacy of God and the people's sovereignty – their right to make decisions for the country.

In the meantime, Kibaki's parliament drafted a modified version of the Bomas constitution that took out the checks and balances created by Wahu's executive committee – including the position of prime minister. The attorney general accepted this version, which went before the Kenyan people in a 2005 referendum. A majority of Kenyans knew what was missing and voted no.

But after the bloodshed surrounding the 2007 election for Kibaki's second term, the idea of a new constitution resurfaced and many of the ideas for Kenya's 2009 constitution were taken from the Bomas Draft. In a 2010 referendum on that new constitution, the country voted yes.

Wahu was so proud to be able to use Kenya's new constitution as the basis of her civic education classes, to teach that its preamble now asserted that any ungodly action taking place in Kenya was also unconstitutional and every Kenyan, not just the ruling elite, had the right to be a respected part of the country's decision-making process. She called this idea "horizontal participatory democracy," a term she coined after being nominated as one of the 1,000 women for the 2005 Nobel Peace Prize. She had been nominated for the prize for linking peace with politics and governance, but she had to think about what kind of governance she espoused. *The kind of governance I talk about – and practice – as a civic educator is an inclusive, capacity-building system.*

It was an idea that first stirred without words in her maternal grandmother's house when she watched her grind and cook maize-meal for Wahu and her siblings by herself. Inklings stirred too as she watched the way her mother worked cooperatively with her women friends – without a boss – when they bought food together to sell or exchanged fruits and vegetables from their gardens. She saw the idea in action at Freedom Corner, where the supposedly powerless mothers stood up together to force the government to free their sons. It was an idea she practiced as a teacher and guidance counselor – and as a mother. It was not the false democracy that she'd witnessed in Kenya since its independence, a hierarchical system dominated by a ruling elite that kowtowed to rich Western countries. And it was not the bickering and infighting that dominated party politics. It was a horizontal system where everyone participated – a horizontal participatory democracy.



At Freedom Corner, Ruth Wangari had dared Wahu to think about positioning herself in a decision-making role that would help Kenya's government grow out of its cycle of political corruption and foreign dependence. In 2002, Wahu ran for a seat in parliament with one of the splinters of FORD, the FORD-Asili party. In 2007, under a different party, she ran for the seat again. Both times she lost, but it didn't matter. She got to campaign for a different way to lead.

Now, in 2011, a year away from the next nationwide elections in Kenya, Wahu is thinking about running again – this time, for president. She has helped form a new civil movement called Pillar of Light, with a mission to create a peaceful revolution in Kenya under a governing body called The Supreme People's Restoration Council. The council's goals include better living standards for ordinary Kenyans, better use and ownership of land and property, economic growth for indigenous Kenyans and discipline and order in the public and private sectors. She plans to run for president of Kenya as a Pillar of Light candidate. She feels the time for real change in Kenya, the time for a horizontal participatory democracy under her leadership, is now. And even if Wahu doesn't win, she will have a chance to educate an even larger number of people about the ideal way her beloved country should be run.

She has also recently spoken to Ruth Wangari, her friend since the days of Freedom Corner. From her home in a Nairobi settlement, Ruth Wangari, now diabetic and unable to walk, but still sought after by powerful political leaders, told Wahu, "I am convinced that Kenya will one day determine its own better future." Her life has been devoted to that future. She participated in Mau



Mau and at the Freedom Corner. She's determined to make sure that others will follow in her footsteps. "Others who know to be good stewards and good custodians of life – at any cost. Like you, Wahu. Keep marching. I pass the baton to you."

### **A CONVERSATION WITH WAHU KAARA**

*The following is an edited interview by IPJ Deputy Director Dee Aker on Oct. 4, 2011, with additions and clarifications based on interviews conducted by Alison Morse between Sept. 16 and Nov. 4, 2011.*

**Q: When you were a child, Kenya had not yet achieved independence. You went to live with grandparents who were squatters on large farms owned by white settlers. Tell me what it means to you to have come from those roots.**

A: I was born in the town of Eldoret in the Rift Valley, where people lived segregated into Africans only, Asians only and whites only communities. I went to visit my grandparents, who were squatters, and their relationship with the settler was that of fear. Everybody was fearful. Everybody talked about what it meant to be a squatter, how to behave well so you could remain squatting. People were not getting salaries; they were only getting gardens to cultivate. Seeing the segregation and imbalance of power provoked me to wonder: *Who am I in relation to all this?*

**Q: When you were in college at Kenyatta University, you and your husband-to-be were political activists. In the early '80s he was deported and you were left alone with four children for six years. How did that part of your life impact who you are now?**

A: It gave me the opportunity to understand that I was the decision maker in my family. One very important decision I made was to not follow my husband to exile because I could see that exile would affect the life of my children. At that time they were 9, 7, 5 and 9 months. I was a history student and I understood what it meant to seek asylum and be a refugee. I couldn't bring myself to see my children become refugees, so for the first time I had a big disagreement with my husband and I made a decision. The children's lives were primary and paramount. I was not going to exile. That is one of the things that gave me confidence to make decisions not only about my life, my children and my family, but also decisions about other people.

**Q: How did you support yourself during those days? How did you manage?**

A: That is another decision I had to make. We live in a world where you can't survive without money. Life is determined by money. I did not have money but I quickly realized that I had talents and skills and a big heart and big spirit. That was what I put on the table for people to see. I participated in voluntary civic education because I was a teacher, a good teacher for that matter, but I had lost my teaching career. So I taught civic education, which included democratic processes for good governance and review of the constitution. People identified my skills and slowly I began to get small stipends for doing civic education. But I never had money; I only had myself.

**Q: In the early '90s there was a lot going on in Kenya, and you were involved with Freedom Corner. Tell me about those days.**

A: In 1992, the Cold War had ended and dictatorship in Africa was no longer fashionable. Moi, our president, was forced to repeal section 2A of our constitution, which had made our country a one-party dictatorship. Those who had been working for a multiparty democracy up until then turned their energies to running against Moi for positions of power. But there was other work to be done. There were still political prisoners like Koigi wa Wamwere and others who had been charged with

treason, and political prisoners like my own brother-in-law Professor Ngotho wa Kariuki, who had been detained without trial on sedition charges along with people like my former university professors George Anyona and Edward Oyugi. People were singing “we can be multiparty” but the treason and sedition cases had not been dropped. So the mothers and relatives of these political prisoners started a pressure group called Release Political Prisoners (RPP).

At that time, the late Professor Wangari Maathai had also won a case against Moi, who wanted to take part of Nairobi’s Uhuru Park to build a monument for himself. Wangari went to court. She pushed and she suffered for it but finally she won legally and stopped Moi from building the monument. That victory coincided with the first public meeting of the National Council of Women of Kenya. We, the RPP, took advantage of it and told Wangari: “We know you will be given a position to speak at the meeting because you are a member of the National Council of Women of Kenya. Please speak about Release Political Prisoners.”

I remember in this meeting I translated for Ruth Wangari, mother of Harun Thungu, who said she was going to go on strike outside Kamiti maximum prison. She would die with her son or go home with him. And we took that spirit, went to Freedom Corner to celebrate Wangari’s victory and we stayed for over five days on hunger strike until the police came and disrupted us. But the struggle went on. Women were housed at the All Saints Cathedral, where we remained for over two years when all 52 political prisoners were released.

---

*“So you don’t need might. You only need a heart, a human heart, to take the moment to do what needs to be done for yourself and for others.”*

---

**Q: So that hunger strike got some attention.**

A: It did get some attention, I tell you. At one moment the women of Kenya took over Kenya because when the police came to disrupt the meeting, when the policemen cocked their guns to shoot the young men who were taking care of the women, one woman, the same woman who started this hunger strike, removed her clothes and the police put down their guns. The instruments of power were put down by just a single act of a woman being a woman. So you don’t need might. You only need a heart, a human heart, to take the moment to do what needs to be done for yourself and for others.

**Q: It was after this time, after this great realization of the power of Freedom Corner, that you went back to university and did some more studies.**

A: Yes, because I could not put bread on the table and because of my decision to put my talents and skills to whoever wanted them, I interacted with some researchers from the Karolinska Institute in Sweden. They had come to Kenya to do research on the spread of HIV and AIDS in my country, focusing on the province that I was very familiar with, Central Kenya. For over a year they had not been able to collect data, so in one of their workshops I listened to their problems. I told them, “I know you can’t get that information by just going to a school and asking, ‘How many girls get

pregnant how many young boys get STDs?’ You need to engage with people to seek solutions.” So I ended up becoming a research assistant. They had tried one year. They couldn’t get data. In two weeks I had all the data and that got me into a master’s program for public health at the Karolinska Institute with an arrangement where I did not need to learn Swedish. I could go to classes when they were taught in English, every three to six months. I also became a research assistant with some earnings to put food on my table.

**Q: I know that civic education is where a lot of your heart is at this time. With the election in 2007 and the violence that came out, what kind of civic education is going to be needed to get people on board with the potential for the new constitution?**

A: We Kenyans are very fortunate because we have a new constitution in place, which I participated in creating, from working to push Moi to repeal section 2A to helping to write an early version of the constitution, the Bomas Draft. I was a delegate to the National Constitutional Conference at Bomas of Kenya, delegate 521.

It is so important to tell people: “Do you notice that the constitution says God created us all equal but politics has made us very unequal, such that some are dispossessed and others are privileged? What do we do, we who are the dispossessed?” I reason with people to deflate the anger and desire for vengeance that some tribes feel because they think they have been marginalized. I try to deconstruct their mentality and remove them from their tribal cocoons. Then I affirm their responsibility, as Kenyan citizens, to be accountable and responsible for making their own decisions. They must breathe life into the constitution by taking a position.

So that is civic education. I have done it pre-referendum when we had to vote whether or not to accept the constitution, and post-referendum. I went to the areas where the issue of marginalization was very critical, like Pokot. I am very proud because the Pokot have refused to let a government officer steal relief food from them. There is a very telling story where they were able to arrest the district commissioner who was stealing, put him in front of a *baraza* – a public meeting – and accuse him. They said: “Instead of serving us as our district commissioner, you have stolen relief food from us. But we are saying it is wrong for Kenyans to steal from each other. Now you are judged by this people’s court. You are a thief. You are corrupt and we don’t want a corrupt government.”

**Q: But part of the reality for Kenya is that it lives in a bigger world too. You’ve worked a lot on the Jubilee campaign and the Kenya Debt Relief Network. Can you put that in perspective in the bigger setting?**

A: The Jubilee campaign started in 1999 with a big movement to cancel the debts of poor countries. The idea was informed by Leviticus 25, which talks about starting anew. Because there was so much talk about poverty, death and murder in the third world, everybody was beginning to see that something needed to be done. What kind of economics would we have in the 21st century? So the debt campaign was launched in London at a big conference of Anglicans at Lambeth Palace. In 1999 supporters were out in the streets saying: “Drop the debt, cancel the debt.” But the debts of poor countries were not cancelled by the end of the year 2000. We in the movement had to energize ourselves by forming regional and national debt relief networks. Organizations like Kenya Debt Relief Network and Jubilee South (the debt relief campaign of Latin America, Asia and Africa) connected with other debt campaigns like Jubilee USA and German Jubilee. We all followed the G8

Summits every year, wherever they went, and we told them to prioritize discussions about cancelling the debts of poor countries.

As a representative of Kenya Debt Relief Network I have participated in conferences all over the world since 2001. I went to the World Summit for Sustainable Development in 2002, in Johannesburg, where I spoke about the issue of ecological debt. In Monterrey, Mexico, that same year, I spoke at the United Nations Financing for Development Conference about debt and trade. In 2005, I spoke at the United Nations about whether world leaders had really respected their commitment to the U.N. Millennium Development Goals. That year, I also spoke about debt in various states throughout the United States with Jubilee USA. In 2009, I represented Africa at Klimaforum. This year I am going to Durban for the Conference on Climate Change. Kenya Debt Relief Network tracks on economic issues, economic justice, ecological justice and climate justice because I track on all those issues.

I am a global citizen and that's why I'm comfortable in the United States of America making a wake-up call to Americans. Start thinking. Remember, when you see another person having their head shaven, also put your water there because you might be shaven too. That is a proverb from Kenya. Don't imagine you have it all. Watch what's happening in the White House, in Congress – I've even read some stories where people in New York are taking over Wall Street. I think we are very connected, and the issue here as a peace woman is that we want to build societies of peace. We want to affirm restorative justice and not retributive justice that creates vengeance and anger.

---

*“... we must tell the truth to ourselves and say: Why are we complacent and just waiting for others to fix things that we can fix at our levels?”*

---

**Q: You often speak of a pillar of light that has to come about to change corruption and tribalism, and we're somewhat aware here that you're considering taking up that pillar of light and running for office. Is that true?**

A: The Pillar of Light is a Kenyan movement that we're trying to build, for Kenya and Africa and for the world, based on very strong ideals and principles of love, truth and purity. We need men and women who can love. We need men and women across the world and everywhere who can tell the truth, because it's only truth that shall set us free. And because I have been speaking about truth to power, now we must tell the truth to ourselves and say: Why are we complacent and just waiting for others to fix things that we can fix at our levels?

The Pillar of Light is a movement to usher in new visions and ideals and principles of what good leadership is, who a good leader is and what good governance is. I believe in horizontal, participatory democracy and an inclusive new mindset for economics that is going to work: distributive subsistence economics. The world has everything for everyone, but not everything for the greedy.

**Q: What is your experience with the economic empowerment of women, specifically microcredit programs? Do you think they're working or are we not seeing the whole picture?**

A: Nobody can empower anybody else. It is wrong for anybody to imagine that they're empowering women. When you hear people say they want to empower, it is because they have noticed you have some power and they want to harness that power for their own interest. Economic empowerment and microcredit in Africa found that African women already had a strategy to overcome their lack of economic power.

African women could not get bank loans or credit because they didn't own anything. They were totally excluded from the economic mainstream. But there was another economics that happened outside of formal economics: the informal economy. That informal economy was based on solidarity and the practice of giving and receiving gifts. African women started mobilizing resources in their own way – not with money. For example, they would build a group, then go and sell their labor together, be paid, then solve the problem of one of their members, be it taking a child to school or paying a hospital bill. Then they would go and sell their labor again and, after settling their usual problems, including buying cups, pots, seats, beds and clothing for their households, they started mobilizing to save among themselves.

---

*“The world has everything for everyone, but not everything for the greedy.”*

---

The World Bank created the microcredit formula, which is very much like your credit cards, where you remain in debt. They started teaching women how to save and how to take loans and how to use the group as collateral. Then one woman would emerge powerful economically but detached from the others. That's where the problem is. African women begin as strong groups but collapse, and only one woman emerges who is now empowered, who now can belong to the formal economic paradigm and join the patriarchal market economy where she can move her capital here and there.

Yes, there is the success story of Grameen Bank, I don't dispute that. There is the story of microcredit. But I'm saying this about particular women who have been manipulated to fit the status quo.

**Q: We see photos of starving Somali people in the news, and now Western ad agencies and international organizations use pictures of starving children and adults to gain attention or for fundraising. How comfortable are you with these popular images of Africa?**

A: Very uncomfortable, certainly, because that is not the story of Africa. Poverty is a created scarcity. Human suffering and misery is the best commodity that you can sell. You only need to know how to package it. The whole question of philanthropy has to be revisited because when you see an African child and give your five dollars, you mean it and you are concerned as a human being. You don't want that suffering, but you don't connect with that child. There is a medium here to determine how you think and how you give and also to determine the other side, how you receive and how you use. So we never get to meet each other to know one another.

You can package poverty in Africa; you can also package poverty here in the United States. There are many homeless people here. There are many people losing their houses. Young people don't know what to do with their credit facilities. There is no future. How is it that they finish college with

such a heavy debt? What do they do with that debt? That is the big question. Let us see the superstructure, the big image, and don't narrow that question.

Yes, there are those starving children, but there are also very healthy children, and those healthy children have been nurtured by someone. We must also look for that someone who nurtures healthy children.

**Q: Do you think there is a direct connection between foreign aid that international organizations in Western countries are supplying to Africa and corruption in Africa?**

A: Corruption is spoken about all the time in reference to Africa. But I say this again and again: There is nothing genetic about Africans being corrupt; it's not a gene that makes Africans corrupt. Corruption is the greasing of unequal economic relations. Aid becomes a good instrument for control because it is given with conditions and falls to corrupt leadership in Africa. But both the lender and the debtor have issues with us people of justice because you cannot lend to irresponsible people and get away with it. The World Bank and the IMF agree that all the development models they have designed, from the '60s up until now, are wrong development models. They have acknowledged that the majority of structural adjustment programs that they created for African countries in the '80s were disastrous. Those programs broke down the health services, education systems and infrastructures of African countries. They put a big burden on society in the name of saving governors and governments.

---

*“Corruption is the greasing of unequal economic relations.  
Aid becomes a good instrument for control because it is given with  
conditions and falls to corrupt leadership in Africa.”*

---

For the last 10 years the World Bank and IMF have been trying to figure out what to do with aid. Today they're speaking about aid that can work, aid and development, aid effectiveness. These are the organizations that gave money to corrupt dictators like Mobutu of Congo and President Moi of Kenya, and much of that aid went to contractors from the countries that gave the aid because countries like Kenya did not have their own contractors. Much of this stolen wealth ended up located in Swiss banks. I wonder, is Switzerland in Kenya or in Africa? It's not; it's in Europe.

That's why debt is a big question now. How do you make people who never participated in those aid negotiations pay their debts? Even when the aid was given, it was never put where it was needed. Countries like Kenya have obvious debts, and we have debts that we cannot repay even if we are given another 100 years to pay them because people are just paying the interest and not the capital. So aid and corruption go hand in hand because the international unequal economic framework does not work and we need to do something about it.

**Q: What's the most effective weapon you can use to fight dictatorship?**

A: Consciousness is the best weapon. You must be conscious of the self. You must believe in yourself. You must see yourself as an entity that has energy, intellectual capacity, courage and spirit to be oneself. And anything or anybody distorting or interfering with that needs to be addressed by you. That's why, growing up, I spoke up about my concern over the fact that my grandparents were afraid of the settlers whose land they lived on. Why were some people better than others? I asked this question because I did not want to feel disadvantaged. Consciousness gives you confidence. And when you are confident, you can think without fear and worry. When you can think, you identify problems. When you identify problems, you seek solutions. And when you seek solutions, you are at peace.

**Q: What role does religion play in your life as a peacemaker?**

A: Even when I speak about justice in my country – where we have had very bad historical injustices based on blaming and pointing fingers at each other and talking about retributive justice, which results in bad ethnic clashes every time we have an election – I talk about restorative justice. Restorative justice cannot be there without forgiveness because retributive justice encourages vengeance, and vengeance will lead to more and more injustices, which creates a vicious circle. That's why when you take people to prison they come out more hardened, more antisocial. I learned forgiveness from Christianity and my faith has helped me understand my work as a global social justice activist better. I went back to church after many years to affirm my faith.

---

*“Consciousness gives you confidence. And when you are confident, you can think without fear and worry. When you can think, you identify problems. When you identify problems, you seek solutions. And when you seek solutions, you are at peace.”*

---

**Q: Is there any other country that can help Kenya?**

A: No other country can help Kenya. When the U.S. says that they're interested in democracy in Kenya, I know very well it's because they need their bases to be safe at our cost for their own interest. So it's a question of where you locate this interest and know how you relate: bilaterally or multilaterally. And that's what many of our leaders never learned. They've been dumb because of money. China is also there for its own interests. China is emerging as a big market and a big economy, so it's a big question of power relations.

The Cold War is over but we are having another war, very subtle, which we have not defined. As people of the world, we must help those in leadership understand the kind of policies that need to be in place – policies that will be guided by us as citizens, not policies for the expediency of a few privileged people, like we know now.



### **BEST PRACTICES IN CIVIC EDUCATION**

Wahu is a civic educator who uses her interpersonal skills and a network of resources to teach groups to think for themselves about how to solve their conflicts.

No matter the conflict, Wahu finds ways to build people's confidence in the process of working together with her. She brings the group to the point where they can state the conflict in their own words and can take ownership of the conflict. Once this is done, she facilitates logical analysis of the conflict according to the group's own understanding. Then together they seek solutions to the conflict.

The goal of this strategy is to organize, mobilize and inspire people to take peaceful action for their own self-determination. The result is that groups do take responsibility for the conflicts they have and seek peaceful, logical solutions.

Wahu has four recommendations for becoming a successful civic educator:

1. Become very conversant in the history of the people you are working with – their values, their fears, their ideals, their recreation and their deep-rooted, unspoken, bitter memories or wounds that need to be nursed and healed. You must also be very objective about the people you are working with and be open to learning new things about them during the teaching process.
2. Weave the group's problem into your own introduction. Locate yourself within people's experience and history. Build common ground.
3. Make people accept the issue as it is. Build their confidence in themselves to see the issue as their own. This may take time; take the time needed.
4. Once you have people's confidence and they have confidence in themselves and are able to state the problem as theirs, in their own words, then solution seeking will take very little time.

At present, Wahu does much of her work as a civic educator through the Kenya Debt Relief Network, KENDREN, where she is the coordinating director. Although KENDREN engages in a variety of activities, Wahu believes that they all fulfill KENDREN's mission to "empower the public on issues of economic justice and sustainable development." In other words, KENDREN is an organization dedicated to civic education.

**TABLE OF BEST PRACTICES IN PEACEBUILDING**

| <b>PEACEMAKING STRATEGY</b>      | <b>ACTIVITY</b>  | <b>DESCRIPTION</b>   | <b>PURPOSE</b>  | <b>OUTCOME</b>  |
|----------------------------------|--|--|---|---|
| <b>Civic Education Workshops</b> | 1. KENDREN workshops, in partnership with The Pokot People's Theater, to educate the Pokot people on Chapter 12 of Kenya's new constitution (on public finance) before and after the constitutional referendum | <p>One and a half day workshop to introduce the public finance chapter of Kenya's 2010 constitution as it relates to the constitution's preamble (arguing the supremacy of God) and Article 1 (affirming the sovereignty of the people of Kenya).</p> <p>Wahu first introduced herself as Kikuyu, stated her own privilege as Kikuyu, acknowledged that Pokots were marginalized and allowed them to express their anger and frustration, and brought up the subject of "jiggers" (fleas that carry diseases), thought to have been imported by the British to disempower the Kikuyus during Mau Mau – which gave the Pokots a new understanding and empathy for the Kikuyus and Wahu.</p> <p>Then she related the preamble and Article 1 to Kenya's financial history since the 1700s and discussed the importance of economic justice in terms relevant to the Pokots. Chapter 12 of the new constitution was then presented in the context of economic justice.</p> | To promote understanding and ownership of the public finance chapter of Kenya's new constitution by a dispossessed constituency that tends to engage in violent behavior. | Resulted in greater awareness and political consciousness of the public finance aspects of the new constitution, and increased the Pokot people's interest in voting on the public referendum for the new constitution. In turn, this led the group to feel less marginalized and more apt to use legal means rather than violence to solve problems of economic justice. |

| PEACEMAKING STRATEGY | ACTIVITY   | DESCRIPTION   | PURPOSE  | OUTCOME  |
|----------------------|--|---|--|--|
|                      | 2. Zindukia Social Movement Civic Education Workshop: a KENDREN workshop in partnership with the Nubian Rights Forum | <p>The Nubian people in Kibera, an over-crowded “slum” of makeshift shacks in the Nairobi area, particularly the youth, felt defrauded by the government because of government endorsed “slum upgrading” (the building of high-rise apartment complexes in Kibera). Living in the new apartments would be much more expensive and many people would lose their homes.</p> <p>Wahu conducted a one-day peacebuilding and civic education workshop with the Nubian elders and young people in Kibera, where she let each party express their anger and concerns. Then she reviewed the Nubian’s land situation from a historical perspective, acknowledged that they were defrauded of land and that the young and old must work together to make decisions for their community.</p> <p>* For both workshops, see also the general description of Wahu’s approach to civic education.</p> | To avert violence between the Nubian elders and young people, destruction of government property and violence against government officials and their partners. | Young and old Nubians in Kibera listened to each other and worked together to peacefully protest the “slum upgrading” housing project in Kibera. The Nubians then worked together to develop a more economically, culturally and environmentally sustainable alternative to the “slum upgrading,” which the government accepted. |

| PEACEMAKING STRATEGY | ACTIVITY   | DESCRIPTION   | PURPOSE  | OUTCOME  |
|----------------------|--|---|--|--|
| <b>Networking</b>    | KENDREN partners with multiple organizations on various civic education projects that center around economic justice issues. Other organizations come and go as they please. | KENDREN maps out other organizations that focus on human rights, gender rights, environmental rights, religious rights and food sovereignty rights and works with them to connect issues of economic governance to what they are doing. | By working in partnership with other organizations, KENDREN can reach more people and create an effective, sustainable agency for social transformation in Kenya and other parts of the world. | KENDREN is a respected member of a national NGO network that includes Jukwaa La Katiba, a constitutional civil society organization platform, Jubilee South, AFRODAD and Reality of Aid. Together these organizations make recommendations and critiques to African governments and their international partners, giving non-government Africans a voice and face in policy design and implementation. |

| PEACEMAKING STRATEGY                           | ACTIVITY   | DESCRIPTION   | PURPOSE   | OUTCOME   |
|--|--|---|---|---|
| <b>Information Gathering and Dissemination</b> | KENDREN research, publications and online presence   | KENDREN does research on issues of economic justice and governance, publishes the results on their website and creates teaching materials based on this research, including leaflets. They also publish reports on their civic education workshops and have a blog on their website that discusses issues of economic justice. Wahu and other KENDREN members use these materials in KENDREN's civic education workshops. | To make information about economic justice, economic governance and methods of civic education on these subjects available to the greatest number of people possible. | KENDREN's publications are used by institutions of higher learning, Kenya's Parliament Finance Committee and activists for economic governance discourse and action. Issues of economic justice and economic governance have come to the forefront of Kenyan progressive political discourse. |
| <b>Lobbying and Advocacy</b>                   | KENDREN participates in international civil society forums and events. Lobbying at international events helps intensify and multiply civic education to international organizations. | KENDREN participates in campaigns of the U.N. Millennium Development Goals and Global Call to Action Against Poverty. KENDREN also hosted the World Social Forum in Nairobi in 2007.  | To create a critical mass of appreciation for economic justice as an agency of social transformation, and to call attention to Africa, specifically.                  | KENDREN and Africa gain international recognition and concern in areas of economic governance and economic justice.<br><br>Africa hosted the World Social Forum in 2006 and 2007.<br><br>KENDREN's civic education work helped usher in Kenya's new constitution in 2010.                     |

| PEACEMAKING STRATEGY                     | ACTIVITY   | DESCRIPTION   | PURPOSE  | OUTCOME  |
|--|--|---|--|--|
| <b>Community Mobilization and Action</b> | Making speeches and distributing leaflets  | During the G8 Summit in Genoa, a representative from KENDREN stood at the KenCom bus station with a microphone and made speeches about debt relief and debt cancellation for Kenya and other African countries, relating the issue of debt to the G8 Summit, where the world's richest countries were discussing global economic issues. He also handed out leaflets about debt cancellation and debt relief.   | To call the attention of passersby at the busy bus station to the issue of debt relief and debt cancellation as it related to the G8 Summit in Genoa.  | People approached the KENDREN representative to talk with him and ask questions about debt relief.   |
|  | Community marches: KENDREN, the Huruma Social Forum and a number of other organizations created a March for Food Sovereignty in Huruma, a slum in Nairobi. | More than 300 individuals from local communities and international organizations joined the March for Food Sovereignty, which was part of a larger three-day event on food sovereignty during the 2007 World Social Forum in Nairobi. Food sovereignty is the right of people to define what foods they grow and how they grow them. The participants, including those from other countries who showed their solidarity, carried banners, placards and flags that stated their demands. | To call attention to the idea of food sovereignty in Kenya to passersby who might become curious enough to ask questions of the marchers and find out more about the issue on their own – and to create solidarity among the people at the food sovereignty event. | The direct outcome of this event is hard to quantify, but a national movement for food sovereignty called <i>Unga Thatibo</i> has emerged since the march. The march also created a feeling of solidarity among the participants, which helped give them the energy to continue working for their cause. |

**FUTHER READING –**  
**KENYA**

Barkan, Joel and Mutua Makau. "Turning the Corner in Kenya." *Foreign Affairs*. Aug. 10, 2010.

Brownhill, Leigh. "A Climate for Change: Humanitarian Disaster and the Movement for the Commons in Kenya." Enarson, Elaine and P.G. Dhar Chakrabarti (eds.). *Women, Gender and Disaster: Global Issues and Initiatives*. Delhi: Sage International, 2009. pp. 224-232.

Brownhill, Leigh S. and Terisa E. Turner. "Feminism in the Mau Mau Resurgence." *Journal of Asian and African Studies*, Special Issue on Africa and Globalization. Vol. 39, Issues 2/3. March 2004. pp. 95-117.

Brownhill, Leigh S., Wahu M. Kaara and Terisa E. Turner. "Gender Relations and Sustainable Agriculture: Rural Women's Resistance to Structural Adjustment in Kenya." *Canadian Woman Studies/Les Cahiers de la Femme*. Vol. 17, No. 2. Spring 1997. pp. 40-44.

Citizens for Justice. *We Lived to Tell*. Nairobi: Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, 2003.

Kinyatti, Maina wa. *Thunder from the Mountains: Mau Mau Patriotic Songs*. London: Zed Press, 1980.

Mwakikagile, Godfrey. *Kenya: Identity of a Nation*. Pretoria: New Africa Press, 2007.

Shaw, Carolyn Martin. *Colonial Inscriptions: Race, Sex and Class in Kenya*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995.

Turner, Terisa E., Wahu M. Kaara and Leigh S. Brownhill. "Social Reconstruction in Rural Africa: A Gendered Class Analysis of Women's Resistance to Cash Crop Production in Kenya." *Canadian Journal of Development Studies*. Vol. XVIII, No. 2. 1997. pp. 213-238.

**BIOGRAPHY OF A PEACE WRITER –**  
**ALISON MORSE**



Photo credit: Michele Zousmer

Alison Morse is a freelance writer and educator. She received her M.F.A. from Hamline University in St. Paul, Minn., where her thesis, a novel-in-progress about the war in the former Yugoslavia, won the Outstanding Thesis Award. Her articles, short stories and poetry have been published widely in print and online. She also teaches ELL to adult immigrants from all over the world and is a passionate advocate for immigrant rights. Writing is Morse's second career. For 20 years prior, she was an animator for documentary, artistic and commercial projects and a teacher of animation. Wanting to express the content most meaningful to her with the least amount of technical interference, she turned from moving images to words. Now she uses character, setting, plot and narrative time – tools familiar to her as an animator – to tell stories that promote peacebuilding and human empowerment.



Photo credit: Bijoyeta Das



## **JOAN B. KROC INSTITUTE FOR PEACE & JUSTICE**

The mission of the Joan B. Kroc Institute for Peace & Justice (IPJ) is to foster peace, cultivate justice and create a safer world. Through education, research and peacemaking activities, the IPJ offers programs that advance scholarship and practice in conflict resolution and human rights. The institute, a unit of the University of San Diego's Joan B. Kroc School of Peace Studies, draws on Catholic social teaching that sees peace as inseparable from justice and acts to prevent and resolve conflicts that threaten local, national and international peace.

The IPJ was established in 2000 through a generous gift from the late Joan B. Kroc to the University of San Diego to create an institute for the study and practice of peace and justice. Programming began in early 2001 and the building was dedicated in December 2001 with a conference, "Peacemaking with Justice: Policy for the 21st Century."

The institute strives, in Joan B. Kroc's words, to not only talk about peace, but also make peace. In its peacebuilding initiatives, the IPJ works with local partners to help strengthen their efforts to consolidate peace with justice in the communities in which they live. In Nepal, for example, for more than a decade the IPJ has been working with Nepali groups to support inclusiveness and dialogue in the transition from armed conflict and monarchy to peace and multiparty democracy. In its West African Human Rights Training Initiative, the institute partners with local human rights groups to strengthen their ability to pressure government for reform and accountability. And the Guatemala Justice Project is currently implementing a legal empowerment program in the indigenous region of Quiché.

In addition to the Women PeaceMakers Program, the institute has several ongoing programs. The Joan B. Kroc Distinguished Lecture Series is a forum for high-level national and international leaders and policymakers to share their knowledge and perspective on issues related to peace and justice.

WorldLink, a year-round educational program for middle school and high school students from San Diego and Baja California, connects youth to global affairs.

Community outreach includes speakers, films, art and opportunities for discussion between community members, academics and practitioners on issues of peace and social justice, as well as dialogue with national and international leaders in government, nongovernmental organizations and the military.

In addition to the Joan B. Kroc Institute for Peace & Justice, the Joan B. Kroc School of Peace Studies includes the Trans-Border Institute, which promotes border-related scholarship and an active role for the university in the cross-border community, and a master's program in Peace and Justice Studies to train future leaders in the field.

## **UNIVERSITY OF SAN DIEGO**

Chartered in 1949, the University of San Diego (USD) is a Roman Catholic institution of higher learning located on 180 acres overlooking San Diego's Mission Bay. The University of San Diego is committed to promoting academic excellence, expanding liberal and professional knowledge, creating a diverse community and preparing leaders dedicated to ethical and compassionate service.

The university is steadfast in its dedication to the examination of the Catholic tradition as the basis of a continuing search for meaning in contemporary life. Global peace and development and the application of ethics and values are examined through campus centers and institutes such as the Joan B. Kroc Institute for Peace & Justice, the Values Institute, the Trans-Border Institute, the Center for Public Interest Law, the Institute for Law and Philosophy and the International Center for Character Education. Furthermore, through special campus events such as the Social Issues Conference, the James Bond Stockdale Leadership and Ethics Symposium and the Joan B. Kroc Distinguished Lecture Series, we invite the community to join us in further exploration of these values.

The USD campus, considered one of the most architecturally unique in the nation, is known as Alcalá Park. Like the city of San Diego, the campus takes its name from San Diego de Alcalá, a Franciscan brother who served as the infirmarian at Alcalá de Henares, a monastery near Madrid, Spain. The Spanish Renaissance architecture that characterizes the five-century-old University of Alcalá serves as the inspiration for the buildings on the USD campus. The architecture was intended by the founders, Bishop Charles Francis Buddy and Mother Rosalie Hill, to enhance the search for truth through beauty and harmony. Recent additions, such as the state-of-the-art Donald P. Shiley Center for Science and Technology and the new School of Leadership and Education Sciences building carry on that tradition.

A member of the prestigious Phi Beta Kappa, USD is ranked among the nation's top 100 universities. The university offers its 7,500 undergraduate, graduate and law students rigorous academic programs in more than 60 fields of study through six academic divisions, including the College of Arts and Sciences and the schools of Business Administration, Leadership and Education Sciences, Law, and Nursing and Health Science. The Joan B. Kroc School of Peace Studies opened in Fall 2007.

## **LIST OF ACRONYMS**

|                |  |
|----------------|--|
| <b>AFRODAD</b> | African Forum and Network for Debt and Development |
| <b>FORD</b>    | Forum for the Restoration of Democracy             |
| <b>IMF</b>     | International Monetary Fund                        |
| <b>IPJ</b>     | Joan B. Kroc Institute for Peace & Justice         |
| <b>KANU</b>    | Kenya African National Union                       |
| <b>KAU</b>     | Kenya African Union                                |
| <b>KENDREN</b> | Kenya Debt Relief Network                          |
| <b>KICC</b>    | Kenyatta International Conference Center           |
| <b>NARC</b>    | National Rainbow Coalition                         |
| <b>NGO</b>     | Nongovernmental Organization                       |
| <b>RPP</b>     | Release Political Prisoners Pressure Group         |
| <b>USD</b>     | University of San Diego                            |

## **ENDNOTES**

---

<sup>1</sup> A version of this paragraph first appeared in the article “‘Women Cannot Cry Anymore’: Global Voices Transforming Violent Conflict,” by Emiko Noma in *Critical Half*, Vol. 5, No. 2 (2007). Copyright 2007 Women for Women International.

<sup>2</sup> *Thoroko* is a kind of pea grown in Kenya.

<sup>3</sup> *Pyrethrum* is a kind of chrysanthemum, harvested as a natural insecticide.

<sup>4</sup> See page 6 in the Conflict History for more information on *Mau Mau*.

<sup>5</sup> A *matatu* is a vehicle, usually a van or minibus, used as a taxi in East Africa.

<sup>6</sup> *Jiggers* were carried by white Europeans settlers into Kenya during colonial times. When Kenya was a British colony, most white Europeans lived in the central highlands of Kenya and interacted with Kikuyu people. The idea that jiggers were connected to Mau Mau disempowerment is a theory.