

## Teachers as transformative agents: an interview of retired teacher mwalimu gatheca from njumbi village, murang'a county. Kenya

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**Abstract:** The World Teachers day is celebrated globally on 5<sup>th</sup> October to highlight the rights, responsibilities and standards of teachers in their quest to impact the communities they live in. The first celebration of the World Teachers day was in 1994 to commemorate the anniversary of the adoption of the 1966 ILO/UNESCO Recommendation concerning the status of teachers around the globe (UNESCO<sup>i</sup>). According to UNESCO<sup>ii</sup> the theme for this year was, “The transformation of education begins with the teachers”. In Kenya celebrations were held in various education institutions right from basic to tertiary education. This is the one day, that a teacher is trending and several congratulatory messages are given to teachers by their learners. In this article, we celebrate a retired teacher Mwalimu Gatheca, who hails from a small rural community in Njumbi, which is located in the central part of Kenya. He is a respected elder in his community and though retired, he is not expired. He is still actively engaged in a transformative agenda in his community which has entailed harnessing energies of his community members who cut across gender, age and geographical divide.

**Keywords:** Transformation, Teacher, Change

**Resumo:** O Dia Mundial dos Professores é comemorado no dia 5 de outubro para destacar os direitos, as responsabilidades e a qualidade dos professores em sua busca para impactar as comunidades em que vivem. A primeira celebração do Dia Mundial dos Professores ocorreu em 1994 para comemorar o aniversário de adoção da Recomendação da OIT/UNESCO de 1966 sobre o *status* dos professores em todo o mundo (UNESCO). Segundo a UNESCO, o tema deste ano foi “A transformação da educação começa com os professores”. No Quênia, as celebrações foram realizadas em várias instituições de ensino, desde o ensino básico até o ensino superior. Este é o único dia em que um professor está na moda, recebendo várias mensagens por parte de seus alunos. Neste artigo, homenageamos um professor aposentado Mwalimu Gatheca, de uma pequena comunidade rural em Njumbi, localizada na parte central do Quênia. Ele é um ancião respeitado em sua comunidade e, embora aposentado, continua em plena vitalidade. Ele está ativamente engajado em uma agenda transformadora em sua comunidade, que envolve o aproveitamento das energias dos membros de sua comunidade que incluem temáticas como gênero, idade e divisão geográfica.

**Palavras-chave:** Transformação, Professor, Mudança.

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## Retiring is not expiring

Mwalimu Gatheca hails from a small rural upcoming community of Njumbi, which is located in Murang'a county. This village is inhabited by one of the largest communities in Kenya called the Agikuyu, who live around the highest Mountain in Kenya called Mt. Kenya. Njumbi is an agricultural community, with frequent rains and quite hilly as is evident from this picture from Mwalimu Gaatheca's farm. Most of the farms here are divided in thin stripes of about an acre all ending into the lower side of the farms where there's a tributary streaming into the main rivers that cross this region as they channel their way to flow into the Indian Ocean which is several miles from this hillside village.

Our interview of Mwalimu Gatheca prompts us to reflect on this year's world Teacher's theme from a different prism because, here is a teacher who has been retired for fifteen years, and is still actively engaged with his community and transforming the members in his own little way. In a sense, we may as well say that, **“The transformation of a community, begins when that community has a teacher”**.

Mwalimu, is the Kiswahili word for 'teacher', it is a word that is used for respect to teachers at all levels, whether it is one who teaches in kindergarten or at the university. The use of this word does not stop when one retires, and even in death one is celebrated as a teacher. The families of teachers are also held high in the rural communities, and the children are expected to uphold high values and be of good standing since their parents are role models for the community.

Mwalimu Gatheca's philosophy of life as a retired teacher is that, retirement is not expiry. He encourages those who have retired to keep active by engaging in things that they are passionate about so that they can keep off idleness and stress. He appreciates the fact that retirement has given him the freedom to make his own schedules and he is happy to have the time to engage in activities that he is passionate about and which keep challenging him not only cognitively but also socially.

Soon after his retirement, Mwalimu Gatheca started a small bookshop at the local shopping center which later birthed a shop to sell glass products. He informs us that starting this shop was the best decision he made because he has had opportunities to actively engage with his local community. Mwalimu Gatheca, like all good teachers, who are lifelong learners, is adept in using social media and he has been able to connect with members of his community who live in the diaspora. Through, his wisdom he has been

Nyambura Salome, Teachers as transformative agents: an interview of retired teacher mwalimu.. able to appeal to some of them to pool resources and support him in some of the initiatives he has started in the community.

Mwalimu Gatheca has had a passion of preserving the histories of his community and teaching it to the youths. Besides, running his business, which is now evolving into a community library, he has for years been collecting different items that were used by the Agikuyu community before the colonialists arrived in his village. These artifacts are no longer in use by the families that have given them to him, but they are memorabilia that is a treasure to the history of this community. He observes that, “Any community that loses the value of their cultural practices is lost.

Generations to come should know how their forefathers lived, their traditions, values and the material culture. Any young person should know how and why their communities are as they are, since no community is primitive”. The artifacts in the following Table are over a hundred years old as Mwalimu contends, that the use of the Meru Oak as a **Kiriri**<sup>iii</sup> (1), a traditional bed was used many years before the onset of colonialism. The **Njung’wa** (3) is a traditional three legged stool which was used by elders.

The **Itimu** (8), which is a spear and **Njora** (5) a sword were used in times of conflict with the neighbouring communities such as the Masai community. The **Kiondo** (4) basket made out of the ‘mugiyo’ was used to store food and also to carry foods that were harvested. **Ndiri** (2) mortar, used with a wooden pestle to grind cereals such as millet and sorghum which were the staple foods. The **Nyungu** (6) clay pot used for cooking and storing drinking water and finally, the **Ruhia** (7) horn, was used for drinking Muratina the traditional brew made from honey.

**Photo 1:** Collected Agikuyu traditional materials



Mwalimu has given the task to some youths in the community to inform others of his search for these artifacts, and he says the communities elders have been very helpful in sharing to the youth how these items were put in use. One impressive observation from viewing these artifacts is the professional and artistic workmanship in the design. The quality of the products speaks volume, even after their use and ‘retirement’ from service, a simple juxtaposition of these artifacts and the elderly teacher who has made it his life mission to find them is an indication of the quality and how sustainable traditional livelihoods were. Just like the artifacts whose utility has ceased but they can still be reused, so is the teacher who though retired is still an asset in this community and always seeking for more meanings as he soldiers on in his sunset years.

The second project that Mwalimu has engaged in with the support of his friends is initiating a basket weaving project. Traditionally, women used to weave baskets from a locally growing shrub called, ‘Mugiyo’. This shrub grows in regions with a cool climate thus it is a common around Njumbi. “Mugiyo” is also a favourite fodder for sheep and goats. With the advent of colonialism, just like in the use of the artifacts, the use of Mugiyo in basketry was replaced by Sisal which was a newly introduced cash crop. The use of Sisal

Nyambura Salome, Teachers as transformative agents: an interview of retired teacher mwalimu.. in basketry spread quickly in use because it was easier to weave due to its texture. However, its introduction also created a new era of commercialization and capitalistic tendencies, which majority would not be able to sustain due to lack of purchasing power since majority were rural folk eking their livelihoods from subsistence farming.

The introduction of plastic bags for shopping later became very prevalent until it was evident of their disastrous effect on the environment and they were therefore banned and no longer in use in Kenya. Having witnessed the gap that has been created in the market because of lack of sustainable shopping bags, Mwalimu Gatheca and his friends initiated a women group project where the old women who knew how to weave using the “mugiyo” would train younger women and thus have a system that would retain this knowledge for posterity.

The group of women meet near Mwalimu’s business premise and he co-ordinates for them by ensuring there is enough “mugiyo” that has been collected for their weaving every week when they meet. The weekly meeting by this women has created a buzz of interest in the village and even to those who live in the diaspora booking to buy the baskets once ready. Mwalimu Gatheca hopes that besides the transfer of knowledge, this basket making project will besides bonding these women of various ages, that it will also be an added source of income for them since majority depend on subsistence farming which has gradually been affected by climate Change.

**Photo 2:** Elderly women teaching younger women on basket weaving using the indigenous plant, “mugiyo”



Mwalimu Gatheca observes that these two projects are close to his heart and life purpose, since from earlier on, he was a very good student of History and was always keen on finding ways to preserve the memories of his community for posterity. At 71 years, the ever cheerful Mwalimu who also listens quietly and responds in natural wisdom is living his dream and his great enthusiasm and energy is contagious to all those who encounter him. One of the close associates that has crossed his path in his retirement is his villagemate, Chef.

Njathi wa Kabui ([www.chefkabui.com](http://www.chefkabui.com)) who lives in the US but frequently gives social commentary on a local Agikuyu FM radio station called Inooro radio. It is no surprise that Mwalimu Gatheca went looking for this son of his village on FaceBook, since though they are from one village they did not know each other since Chef. Kabui left for the US in his youth. The connection between these two men whose age gap is almost twenty years

Nyambura Salome, Teachers as transformative agents: an interview of retired teacher mwalimu.. has taken an enviable trajectory that is serendipitous. Chef. Kabui has been on a path to return home and thus has been seeking connection with people in his motherland. He is also a good student of history and his values and those of Mwalimu Gatheca align greatly.

The two men are now working on a community library, that will transform Mwalimu's shop into a space that the youths can come and travel to the World through their reading of books that have been shipped by Chef. Kabui. The courage and confidence of Mwalimu Gatheca to seek out the sons and daughters of the small hilly village to come and support him in his quest to transform the local community is laudible. The respect and credibility in the voice and deeds of good teachers is in no doubt as witnessed from those we asked about Mwalimu.

We conclude this article, with the words of one of Mwalimu's ardent followers:

*"Mwalimu Gatheca is more of an elder to me in addition to being an exemplary teacher. I have often said that there are few things that are more valuable than having a great teacher in any community. I spent my early days in the village during a time when there were many elders. It was akin to living inside a museum or indigenous university as wisdom was flowing like a river at every turn. Mwalimu Gatheca is a rare elder who is both versed in traditional wisdom as well as educated in modern education. This makes him quite versatile in serving the community. I value him tremendously and I consider it a great honor to be able to learn from him and to have the opportunity to work together. May his service to the community continue to prosper and his wisdom and teaching fall on fertile grounds so that it may reach thousands of generations to come. Thaaai." (Chef. Njathi wa Kabui)*

## References

<https://en.unesco.org/events/world-teachers-day-0>

<https://www.unesco.org/en/days/teachers>

<sup>1</sup> Kiriri is a Agikuyu word meaning bed. We have used the Agikuyu words to refer to these artifacts since it is the mother tongue language of the teacher and the major language in this community.

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