Reflections on *Kenya - A Prison Notebook*: Intergenerational Inheritance of Social Struggles in Kenya

Gacheke Gachihi

*Mathare Social Justice Centre (MSJC) and the Social Justice Centres Working Group Steering Committee*

**Abstract:** “June 9th 1982 After refusing to sign a written confession statement, I was given back my clothes, blindfolded, handcuffed and taken to the CID headquarters where I was physically abused, photographed, fingerprinted and charged with possession of a seditious publications entitled Moi’s Divisive Tactics Exposed, a document the Police had planted in one of my research files.” Prof. Maina Wa Kinyatti.

25 Years ago, Professor Maina Wa Kinyatti wrote *Kenya: A Prison Notebook*, borrowing from the narrative of great revolutionary and organic intellectual Antonio Gramsci, a political prisoner during the fascist dictatorship of Benito Mussolini in Italy during a period when Europe was undergoing a capitalist-imperialist crisis of fascism.

Comrade Maina Wa Kinyatti, a revolutionary and freedom fighter, spent 6 years in Prison primarily for writing Kenya’s correct history and for being a member of the Mwakenya –DTM movement that fought for democracy and social justice in Kenya during the Kenyatta–Moi dictatorships. In *blood and tears*, he wrote one of the most beautiful and glorious chapters of the history of our resistance as a people - a history of constant struggle in defense of democracy and our collective memory, dignity and social justice. Published 25 years ago, *Kenya: A Prison Notebook* remains relevant and continues to inspire new generations of freedom fighters, students, peasants and social justice activists. It has sparked a re-imagination of political education and provided the social justice movement with great insights into the true history of resistance in Kenya, including lessons learnt during the struggles of Kenya’s underground Movement, popularly known as Mwakenya.

It was in 2003 when, through Tirop Kitur, I got a copy of *Kenya: A Prison Notebook* from the then Release Political Prisoners (RPP) offices along Nairobi’s historic Cabral Street. RPP was a political organization started by mothers of political prisoners and Kenyan exiled communities in London agitating for democracy and release of all political prisoners in Kenya. Comrade Tirop had been one of the Mwakenya detainees and was a political activist alongside Karimi Nduthu - first RPP coordinator, great revolutionary and urban guerrilla assassinated by the Moi regime in 1996. Karimi Nduthu was at the time of his assassination creating a political path for the mass movement anchored on the struggles and human rights work that RPP was engaged in. Indeed, the seeds for today’s grassroots social movements emerged from the struggles of RPP and the
Mwakenya movement - just as the seeds of RPP and Mwakenya had emerged from the struggles that preceded them.

The book fired up my patriotism and opened my eyes to Kenya’s beautiful history of struggle, especially the resistance by ordinary people against the British imperialist backed Moi dictatorship. It sparked my anger and passion against injustices and human rights violations. It exposed me to the evils of the Moi regime, the blood that was shed and the price paid by many university intellectuals, workers and peasants during the struggle for democratic rights, including the freedom to organize and protest. It is through continuous organizing and protests such as the Saba Saba March in 1990 among other political activities that Moi’s 24-year old dictatorship was removed from power in 2002.

The book became one of my best pieces of history and an authoritative reference on Kenyan struggle and resistance - and has inspired me into buying copies for my comrades as part of political education. True to its nature, the neocolonial state firmly opposed any political organizing and research on the Mau Mau Movement that Maina Wa Kinyatti was bringing to light to educate the Kenya Masses on our true history. Maina, due to fear of change and resistance the regime, embarked on a mission to cleanse radicals and Marxist professors from Kenya Universities, destroying the culture of education and hitherto vibrant battle of ideas in university spaces. In the universities and other public spaces, the state removed progressive books by Karl Marx, Ngugi Wa Thiongo, Steve Biko, Malcom X and any material that challenged the neocolonial state and British imperialism in Kenya. During Moi’s reign, marked by ethnic mobilization and backward politics, university education in Kenya took a nosedive, destroying the foundation of generational values and a culture of patriotism that liberation movements such as the Mau Mau had inspired. Maoism took Kenya down the path of economic destruction and neocolonial poverty; and entrenched divisive ethnic politics that is at the core of Kenya’s political mess today.

Maina wa Kinyatti was arrested and sentenced to six and a half years in prison for ‘possessing seditious material’. The Imprisonment of Maina Wakinyatii, Prof. Edward Oyugi, Kamonji Wachira, Katama Mkangi, Willy Mutunga, Ngugi wa Thiongo, and many others derailed the growth of an ideological political base in Kenya for progressive politics and the social justice movement.

I first met Maina Wa Kinyatti in 2000 and much later, we began organizing night political study sessions at the Polytechnic Institute in Nairobi as part of introducing us to class struggle and history of resistance in Kenya. Subsequent study sessions forged our comradeship and led to an opportunity to launch one of his books, History of Resistance in Kenya in 2008. Maina Wa Kinyatti and his wife Mumbi Maina have since then become my teachers on patriotism, love for our people and the struggle for liberation in Kenya and Africa.
As we mark 25 years of *Kenya: A Prison Notebook* we celebrate comrade Prof. Maina Wa Kinyatti as a great freedom fighter, revolutionary intellectual and a mentor to our generation’s struggle for freedom and social justice. As Milan Kundera once said, “The Struggle of People against Power is the Struggle of Memory against Forgetting”. Prison Notebook is an epoch of memory that we will never forget. An epoch of history that will continue sparking fire against injustice across many generations in Kenya. It’s a permanent spark of our fire of resistance, love of our country and a memory of the sacrifices of comrades of the December Twelve-Mwakenya Movement.