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Beez, Jigal

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GILBERT CLEMENT KAMANA GWASSA 1939-1982

A TRIBUTE TO THE FOUNDER OF TANZANIAN MAJI MAJI RESEARCH¹

By Jigal Beez

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These days there is no research on the Maji Maji war which is not quoting the Tanzanian historian Gilbert Gwassa. Gwassa's work became the foundation and quarry for all researchers who are working on the worst atrocity under German colonial rule. Gwassa's work is widely known in the academic world. However, outside of Tanzania and even within, only a few people know much about the Tanzanian scholar. His research papers (Gwassa 1969a, 1969b, 1970, 1972a, 1972b, Gwassa/Iliffe 1967), which he published in various journals or volumes, are available through major university libraries. However, his masterpiece and Ph.D. thesis "The Outbreak and Development of the Maji Maji War 1905-1907", the jewel of his academic heritage, has not been read much. It has become somewhat of a mystery in Maji Maji research: often quoted but rarely read. The reason is that it was not available through international library exchange system, which limited its exposure. There are a few copies of the thesis such as the one in the East Africana Collection of the University Library in Dar es Salaam, another in the Dar es Salaam History Department, and a few lucky persons received a private copy. This poor exposure ended in 2005 when the German publishing house Ruediger Koeppe Verlag published Gwassa's thesis with financial assistance from the Vereinigte Evangelische Mission, a German mission society and with the consent of Gilbert's widow Florence Gwassa, commemorating 100 years of Maji Maji. However, this reprint is regrettably not available in Tanzania.

Gwassa was born in Kibondo District of the Kigoma Region, in Western Tanzania close to the shores of Lake Tanganyika. He received his secondary education at the famous Tabora Boys' Secondary School, where Nyerere had studied. At Tabora Boys' he met his

¹ The basis of the information is an interview with Florence Gwassa, who kindly agreed to meet me in February 2008 to talk about her late husband Gilbert. I deeply appreciate the efforts she undertook by traveling from Morogoro to Dar es Salaam to share with me such an emotional and sensitive topic.

wife Florence, who was schooled at Tabora Girls'. After excelling in Tabora, Gilbert was sent to Makerere University in Uganda to gain a Bachelor of Arts degree in History. After graduating at Makerere, the young historian joined the newly established University of Dar es Salaam as a tutorial assistant at the Department of History under the Professors Osbourne, Iliffe, Kimambo and Temu. As a member of the history department he was attached to the Maji Maji Research Project, which was lead by John Iliffe. He successfully recorded Tanzanian voices on a war whose historiography up to then was dominated by reports produced by colonial officers and the interpretation of non-Tanzanian scholars. Consequently Gilbert Gwassa started his own Ph. D. research project on the Maji Maji war in Umatumbi. This study led him into the area of the Matumbi Hills, Kilwa and Liwale, where he conducted interviews with survivors of the war and descendants of war participants. By doing so, Gwassa was able to discover many aspects of the war, especially on the Maji-message. The message which made people believe that bullets can be turned into water and exposed the organization of the Maji-movement, were until then unknown to the academic world. Of course over time, with the change of research paradigms, scholars are challenging aspects of Gwassa's results, like the role of Prophet Kinjikitile or the degree of unity among the Maji-soldiers. Nevertheless, the work of the Maji Maji Research Project and Gilbert Gwassa still remain the most valuable work on Maji Maji for they are the basis of all discussions on the topic.

For his studies, Gilbert Gwassa also learnt fluent German, which enabled him to travel to Leipzig and Potsdam in what was then East Germany in 1968, where he studied German documents on the war in various archives. In order to read these documents he also learnt to read the old German blackletter handwriting known as "Suetterlin", which is today, only known by a few Germans. His wife Florence remembers from the letters Gilbert sent home that he spent most of the time reading and writing till late at night with his new skills. In addition, Gilbert and Florence also attended many functions of the East German community, Dar es Salaam. When I met Florence to talk about Gilbert, she remembered the current guesthouse of German Development Service (DED), our meeting place, as one of the places Gilbert and she visited together. In fact, DED inherited this former East German property after the German unification and turned it into a guesthouse for German development workers.

After returning from East Germany, Gilbert and Florence married in 1969 in a Lutheran ceremony. Though Gilbert was an Anglican, they decided to follow his wife's religious background for the wedding. Professionally, Florence helped Gilbert translate his English results into a popular Swahili pamphlet (1969b), which was distributed by the Tanzanian Historical Association and is widely circulated and the basis for history lessons in Tanzanian schools.

Maji Maji was Gwassa's main academic interest. He became the Tanzanian expert on Maji Maji and developed into an outspoken Africanist scholar who took an active part in writing the history of his country from a Tanzanian point of view. Gwassa contributed to the successful process of Tanzanian nation building, by giving a historic example of African unity, a unity that was achieved over various ethnic boundaries fighting colonialism. His research was also important to the political leadership and Gilbert was called many times to personally inform President Nyerere on his studies. Gwassa also did some small research on the history of his Kigoma home, which, never received as much attention as his major work on Maji Maji (Gwassa/Mbwiliza 1975). In the course of his academic duties, Gilbert Gwassa was also a member of the Tanzanian Historical Association and became its chairman for some time.

In the mid 1970s he left the History Department as he was given the task of establishing the new Institute for Development Studies. Gilbert headed this department until 1981, when Haroub Othman took over. During his time as a director of the Institute for Development Studies, he had many official responsibilities and traveled extensively. Moreover, there were a lot of teaching obligations to be met at the University of Dar es Salaam as well as at Sokoine University in Morogoro. All these activities left him little time to do further research or follow up on the publication of his Ph.D. thesis or even to work on other publications. Only a few research papers during this time can be found at the University Library of Dar es Salaam (Gwassa 1975a, 1975b, 1977a, 1977b, 1978).

During his career, Gilbert Gwassa was part of the interesting and challenging academic developments at the University of Dar es Salaam which led to the establishment of the famous nationalistic Dar es Salaam School of Historiography in the 1960s and hot political discussions about how a socialist Tanzania should develop in the 1970s. Here Gwassa was

cooperating with pan-African greats like Walter Rodney, who was the supervisor of his Ph.D. dissertation.

However, life on the hill, how the university in known in Dar es Salaam, was not always easy. His wife Florence had to travel 20 kilometers to Temeke every day, where she worked as a teacher at the secondary school. In the course of the Kagera war against Uganda's dictator Idi Amin, times became also difficult for the academic elite of the country. Florence had to queue for hours until late night to try to get sugar for the family and many students had to leave the University to become soldiers and fight in the war. Over the years, Gilbert developed a serious illness, which forced him to spend periods at home in bed. In 1982, during an official trip to Moshi, he developed high blood pressure and was hospitalized at KCMC, the Kilimanjaro Christian Medical Centre, which serves as reference hospital for Northern Tanzania. The last time he talked to his wife was on the phone. He was optimistic to be released soon. However, a day later he passed away. His family buried him at his Kigoma home. He left behind his wife Florence, his daughter Pesa Victoria, born in 1971 and his son Bob, born in 1974.

After Professor Gwassa's death, Florence had to leave the University housing and moved to Mbezi on the outskirts of Dar es Salaam, where Gilbert and her had started a small farm, including cows, pigs, and goats. However, the security situation there had become bad. Burglary was common and even Gilbert's books and many research documents were stolen. Finally Florence left Mbezi as she became Head Mistress for Songea Girls Secondary School in the southwestern Ruvuma region.

Until her retirement, Florence Gwassa worked as headmistress and for the Ministry of Education. Sometimes her history teachers asked her, if she was related to Gilbert the author of the popular pamphlets on Maji Maji and the people were surprised to hear that she is his widow.

Gilbert and Florence's children followed their parents in academic studies. Currently Pesa studies at Mzumbe University Information Technology in Morogoro Region, and Bob studied Theology in Texas, USA. He continues living there, and married Rachel, an American. The young couple named their first born after his famous grandfather: Gilbert to keep the memory of the famous Tanzanian historian alive.

While in the year 2007 scholars remembered the 100th anniversary of the end of the Maji Maji war with conferences in Dar es Salaam and in other parts of the world, the Gwassa family met in Kigoma at the grave of Gilbert to honor him on the 25th anniversary of his burial. Somehow Gilbert Gwassa and the Maji Maji war remain linked even decades after his passing away. It is not only that Gilbert Gwassa's academic work lives on and continues to inspire generations of historians but that fate wanted it that also them linked forever by the Maji Maji war anniversaries.

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The author Dr. Jigal Beez wrote his Masters Thesis on socio-religious aspects of the Maji Maji war which was published in 2003. Together with Felicitas Becker he edited a book on

the Maji Maji war in 2005. He did his Ph.D. at Bayreuth University, Germany, on paddy farmers in Kilimanjaro Region. Furthermore he published various articles on Swahili popular culture. Currently Beez is working for German Development Service in Moshi, Tanzania.