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**Open Letter From Kenya To The Panafricanism Champion  
The Late Professor Micere Githae Mugo (1942–2023)<sup>1</sup>**

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Picture this: an octogenarian mother of two adult daughters who deeply resemble her lies in her deathbed. Her spirit half here half elsewhere stands as a silhouette at the fork of the ethereal path.

One path leads her backwards to the daughter who is alive. The other leads her forward to her daughter who died from cancer and rests in peace at Oakwood Cemetery, 940 Comstock Avenue, Syracuse, New York.

The middle-aged African woman who sits next to the deathbed of the beautiful woman of 80 dying from cancer in the same Syracuse is sad but happy.

She is sad that the spirit of her serene mother, and only surviving nuclear family member, is departing from its body agonized for years by a long illness endured bravely, at this very instance.

She is happy because her only sibling, Njeri, who died 11 years ago, will finally reunite with their mother who raised them both alone against many odds.

This sister left alone now here on Earth is Mumbi, named after the female progenitor of the largest ethnic community in Kenya living at the very centre of the East African nation – the *Agikũyũ*.

It is Mumbi who sits this ill-fated summer next to her famous mother's bedside. They are not far from the famous Syracuse University named after this part of the greater New York. Here her uniquely gifted mother worked for decades as a human rights champion and distinguished public intellectual.

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Forced into exile in 1982, with her former Kenyan workmate at the University of Nairobi and fellow playwright, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, after the failed August coup that set the then government clamping down on all rights champions, Mumbi's mother made America her new base after a fecund academic tenure at the University of Zimbabwe.

Like at home, even outside Kenya in exile, the dying lady of the beautiful letters established herself as a key cognate in the great machinery for the struggle for multiparty democracy of Kenya after independence as well as leading proponent of Panafricanism and the fast-spreading black philosophy of Utu/Ubuntu.

It is Mumbi who, sitting by the deathbed of this magnificent thought-leader of our age, sends tiding through social media to her networks of relatives, friends and colleagues of her shrunk family that the grand lady, known in her school decades as Madeleine Micere Githae, her mother, her armour, is no more.

The rest of us, on both sides of the Atlantic, including the domains where her mother straddled like the colossus she was, of theatre and poetry of the English-speaking world know her over the past five decades, receive the news with great pain. It is confirmed. The late Professor Micere Githae Mugo (1942–2023) of Kenya, an iconic daughter of Africa, is dead. – **30 June 2023.**

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**30 December 2009.**

Micere. When I first approached you in the winter of 2009, you responded with the eloquence of silence. Nights are many that I still count as echoes of the mind, when I tossed and turned next to my writing table, my black laptop, waiting for your precious words. Then come February, come month of love, you said yes. The rest is history.

Professor Micere Mugo, you are gone but you are here. The news from the United States, from New York, reached me on Friday night. It was confirmed by social media networks on Saturday.

Strangely, I am not feeling grief even here at the Holy Family Basilica, where I now write this on my trembling black phone. Your demise is confirmed. Yet you are still here in the inner chambers of my memories and respect.

You accepted to write the foreword to my debut book of poems: *Nest of Stones* (2010). We had never met in person. You in New York, I in Berlin: Kenyans. Kenyan poets of two generations, decades apart, appeared between the same cover. By doing that, you confirmed my kaleidoscopic fears to me: I am a poet.

You said so in your 1311 words sprawled between three pages. You told me you typed them nonstop as you escorted me in my poetic elegies to the 1,133 Kenyans who died in the post-election violence of 2007. We cried for our beloved country from abroad, together, that year.

### *Open Letter From Kenya To The Panafricanism Champion*

It is clear now that this book you endorsed as my first published acts of poetry now attains a higher meaning. It grows into a new signature of our literary friendship; your firm confirmation that art should bend in the direction of justice and the poet should not just chronicle but be the voice of conscience.

Thank you, my mother, my elder and guide, for helping me write the unspeakable.

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**21 July 2023.**

As a long-standing student of literature, I had met you earlier, Mwalimu, through the fecundity of your lessons on life transmitted through your canonical writings and philosophical works.

As if as a premonition, your first play bore a title symbolic of what assailed your last days here on Earth – *The Long Illness of Ex-Chief Kiti*. 1971. With it you diagnosed the postcolonial ailments of Kenya that have root causes in the bloody anticolonial Kenyan struggles against the imperial British Empire.

Micere, is it not you who restored the dignity of Field Marshall Dedan Kimathi, with Ngugi, in the play you penned together: *The Trials of Dedan Kimathi*? You later translated it together into Kiswahili as Shujaa Kimathi to connect it deeply with the 200 million Swahili-speaking Africans of this world!

In fact, in 1977, at the 2nd World Black and African Festival of Arts and Culture (FESTAC) in Lagos, Nigeria, you acted the play out to wide and wild accolades from people of Africa. Before then, Kenneth Watene had released a play of dubious aesthetics that politicised the freedom fighter negatively.

You taught the world thus, that literature is not simply an act of art. It is a hallowed space for enunciation of order and balance.

Equations of the world that symbolised disorder and imbalances bothered you. This is why you called out the settler white writers of colonial Africa and their misrepresentations of our continent and cultures in your debut philosophical book, *Visions of Africa*, published by Kenya Literature Bureau in 1978.

Inequalities and inequities based on gender and the constraints of patriarchy bothered you as well. You composed numerous poems to celebrate the grandmothers, mothers and daughters of Africa. *Daughter of My People, Sing* (1976) and *My Mother's Poem and Other Songs* (1994) stand as monuments of this gender agenda within your academic work of decades.

In a bid to demonstrate that roots of human rights lie within our natal cultures and native heritages, you chose Orature and Folklore as sites of knowledge. You restored their dignity from the earlier view that held them as barbaric barriers to colonial and missionary agendas before Independence here. You showed how our ethical and moral parameters reside in our folk wisdom and ways in *African Orature and Human Rights* (1994).

However, it is in this century that your matters reached a head. Having taught on both sides of the Atlantic for six decades, the vision of your work on earth attained its finest clarity when you released *Writing and Speaking from the Heart of My Mind* (2012).

The speeches and essays congregated in this book left the world with confirmation that you were not just a poet but a philosophical teacher of mankind. In them is the common thread that calls conscience to loftier levels for the benefit of humanity.

Your committed campaigns against neoliberalism, neocolonialism; your intellectual acts of decolonisation climaxed your revolutionary credentials when you released in 2021 *The Imperative of Utu/Ubuntu in Africana Scholarship* under Daraja Press.

You embody prices of knowledge and freedom, value of justice through nationalism and exile, reminding us to guard African Studies as a liberated academic zone; to continue its legacies in our own workstations and nations.

It is you, Mama, who thus empowered me with a solid philosophy of art to use as a scribe. I signed to Ubuntu as a philosophy, not through Nyerereism or even Thabo Mbeki of African Renaissance discourses. Rather, I did so through your writing; retracing the evolution of your thoughts, life and deeds. Contemporary Kenyan playwright of note John Sibi-Okumu, whose class was your first in 1973, knows I am not the only one. Your academic disciples are ubiquitous across Kenya, Africa, her diasporas and beyond.

From that pioneer class you taught in '73, listen now, the sole professor of theatre at Kenyatta University, where I mourn you now, was your student in those revolutionary seventies at the University of Nairobi, where you taught him theatre is for the people, by the people and of the people.

I utter his name for your sake alone now: Professor Oluoch Obura, a direct scion of your aesthetics, a direct mentee of our theatre gurus, your colleagues in Performing Arts, Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Ngugi wa Mirii. He too is in the throes of sorrows.

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Micere, you are Kenya and more. Kenya rejected you at one point. *Persona non grata*, you went into exile in the unforgettable 1982.

You are Africa. A young, revolutionary Zimbabwe gave you a home, work and dignity. With identity papers, you crossed the Atlantic and initiated a stellar career in New York at Syracuse University, where you taught Black Studies for long. You are America.

In New York, you taught people of the world this: It is important to know who you are and to find your roots. However, it is more urgent and permanent to find

*Open Letter From Kenya To The Panafricanism Champion*

the meaning of existence now by securing the world, making it a better place for you and others. You are Earth.

You earned moral awards from Africa and beyond. They highlight to our young eyes the right paths to light even as you leave. We thank your family now for releasing you to the rest of us forever.

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**21 July 2023. Nairobi.**

It is my birth anniversary today – the 44<sup>th</sup>. As I mourn the loss of your body, Mwalimu Micere, I celebrate the tenancy of your spirit in mine as wisdom. As we look forward to the interment of your graceful body, in Oakwood Cemetery, 940 Comstock Avenue, Syracuse, New York on Monday, July 31<sup>st</sup>, 2023 at 10.30 am, may your spirit and the world across Africa and beyond, hear my homage to you my sage:

**ODE TO MWALIMU MICERE**

She does not need to reach heaven now - she had heaven inside

She was a neat woman, who enjoyed the blue of the sky,

She loved to hear birds tweet, teacher of songs

She collected grass gently, shoots of them

She made a crest off them, garlanded students

And avoided stepping on ants, helped some flee

Also she stopped and sniffed flowers here and there.

Sometime she sat near a rain-pool with her thoughts

And threw tiny stones in there, created motions

Or took a twig and traced so very tenderly

the delicate mirage of her gentlest of ideas

Inside the water, made of raindrops from heaven

She smiled with peace inside, for heaven is not

Far and remote,

it is near,

yes,

it is inside her heart and Art!

*Kwaheri ya kuonana!*

*Mwalimu makiwa!*