


'Radical discipleship': The public theology of archbishop David Mukuva Gitari towards democratisation of Kenya



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This article examines the remarkable prophetic witness of Archbishop David Mukuva Gitari, who played a pivotal role in Kenya's struggle for democratic governance during the 1980s and 1990s. Gitari emerged as a guardian of democratic values, advocating for social justice both in words and actions. This article analyses Gitari's public theology and its impact on his activism in the ongoing fight for democratisation in Kenya. It seeks to recover Gitari's life story as one of the most distinguished Christian leaders of the 20th and 21st centuries. His leadership journey illustrates Africa's wealth of talent and its ability to produce church leaders on par with figures such as Martin Luther, Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Sammy Kaffity, the former Bishop of Jerusalem and the Middle East. The article closely examines his contributions to Kenya's social and political transformation, particularly within the Anglican Church. It is based on both primary and secondary sources, including ten in-depth oral interviews with knowledgeable individuals.

Contribution: This article explores Gitari's public theology and its relevance to the church's prophetic mission in addressing the global challenges of the 21st century.

Keywords: advocacy; autocracy; David Mukuva Gitari; democratisation; Kenya; prophetic; radical discipleship.

Introduction

Archbishop David Mukuva Gitari was one of the most outspoken, bold and courageous church leaders that Kenya has ever produced. While describing Gitari in his enthronement speech as the fourth Kenyan Archbishop, Benjamin Nzimbi (2002–2009) paid tribute to his predecessor, David Gitari, as a courageous and bold church leader and vowed to follow in his footsteps. He also quoted a Kiswahili poem praising Gitari: '*Gitari ni hodari. Gitari ni daktari. Gitari ni jemedari. Gitari ni hatari*', which can be translated in English as: 'Gitari is bold. Gitari is a doctor. Gitari is an army commander'. Gitari is tough (Gathogo 2011:98). Conversely, Salim Lone describes Gitari as a selfless leader who championed democratic reforms, alongside other clerical activists, Alexander Kipsang Muge, Timothy Njoya and Henry Okullu (Lone 2013:3). Public testimonies on Gitari's prophetic ministry enriched studies on church history in Africa, and his immense contribution cannot be limited to the travails of his clerical vocation. Rather, his social ministry provides a wealth of experience to the current church leadership, which is accused of being complicit in injustice across Africa (Gathogo 2011:108). Arguably, Gitari's prophetic witness is at least comparable to that of South African clerics, Desmond Tutu, Beyers Naude and Allan Boesak during the Apartheid regime. Gitari fashioned his pulpit as a space for civil society, and his transformative sermons were disruptive to those in authority. It is worth tracing the roots of such a leader not only for his theological contribution but for the preservation of Anglican ecclesiastical history.

Literature on Gitari is a reproduction of his biographies and social ministry without a clear development of his theological footprints. The works of Gathogo on the Mutira mission dedicate a chapter to Gitari, tracing his ethnic roots and migration from Kitui in Ukambani to Kirinyaga, Central Kenya (Gathogo 2011:93). Gathogo maps well the political activities of Gitari but does not account for his theological vision. Other works on Gitari include essays that address his church ministry and ecclesial activities within the Anglican Communion (Benson 2009). Ben Knighton's *festschrift* on Gitari is dedicated to his prophetic ministry but undertheorises his theological corpus (Knighton 2009). This article fills this lacuna by tracing Gitari's public theology that informed his ecumenical prophetic ministry in the 1980s and 1990s. Before analysing Gitari's formative life that shaped his transformative discipleship, we turn to the research method and approach for this

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study. Finally, this article analyses Gitari's public theology and the democratisation agenda, a significant theme today because of the growing democratic regression and authoritarianism globally.

Research methods and design

This was a qualitative research employing both archival research and oral study. The archival research entailed analysing documents, including Gitari's homilies, autobiography and biographies, pastoral letters, meeting minutes, correspondence, institutional memoranda and reports. These documents contextually grounded Gitari's public theology in Kenya's democratisation project. The archival research was undertaken at the Kenya National Archive (KNA) in Nairobi, Gitari's Family Archive (GFA) at Philadelphia Retreat Centre in Kirinyaga and the Cambridge Centre for Christianity Worldwide (CCCW) in England. The KNA contained newspaper materials with commentaries on the church's prophetic witness during the tumultuous democratisation struggle. In addition to KNA, this article benefited from GFA and the CCCW archives. In 2018, I spent 4 weeks examining the CCCW collections of Gitari's sermons, both print and digital recordings. These materials were deposited by G. Patrick Benson, who worked with Gitari between 1978 and 1995. Benson served as the director of studies at St Andrew's Institute for Theology and Education, Kenya and later as the director of communications for Mount Kenya East Diocese (G.P. Benson pers. comm., 29 July 2018). The GFA at Philadelphia contained dozens of materials such as sermons, newspapers and personal correspondences between Gitari and other leaders locally and abroad. Broadly, this was an 'informal archive' as it contained uncategorised materials. I came across three boxes containing over 200 sermons preached by Gitari between 1975 and 2002. Going through the archive reveals a complex engagement that demonstrates existing power relations between individuals and groups within the institution (Higgs 2024:3). Perhaps this discursive narrative is worth studying; however, I was interested in sermons that trace contemporary public discourses. More importantly, I was drawn to 10 sermons preached between August 1986 and July 1997 (see Table 1). I listened repeatedly to digital sound copies of these sermons at the CCCW in Cambridge, England. The choice of the sermons was directed by their discourses on

democracy, social justice, peacebuilding and reconciliation. Moreover, the sermons selected were intertwined with diverse content and effectively underscored Gitari's dynamic biblical, theological and practical ministry. The archival materials were complemented by discourse analysis of three manuscripts, which systematically documented Gitari's prophetic homilies: *Let the Bishop Speak* (1988), *In Season and Out of Season* (1996) and *Eight Great Years* (2002). The latter contained Gitari's achievements as the Archbishop of the Anglican Church of Kenya (ACK). While the other two books documented his 'radical discipleship' and political intrigues in Kenya. 'In Season and Out of Season' contained 25 prophetic sermons preached between 1975 and 1994, while 'Let the Bishop Speak' had four controversial sermons preached in June 1987. Furthermore, biographical essays were instrumental in tracing Gitari's prophetic ecclesiology and ecumenical engagement. The oral study was undertaken between 2014 and 2018, which entailed in-depth semi-structured interviews. Using a purposive sampling technique, 10 resourceful persons who witnessed Gitari's transformative ministry between 1975 and 2002 were interviewed. The majority of them were priests, laity and missionaries who worked with Gitari in Mount Kenya East Diocese and later in Nairobi when he served as the Archbishop of the ACK. One of the respondents, Paddy Benson, noted that working with Gitari was a privilege, as he learned how church leaders can navigate complex politics through advocacy for justice and accountability (G.P. Benson pers. comm., 29 July 2018). Lastly, the archival sources were triangulated alongside qualitative interviews to draw empirical conclusions.

Gitari's formative life: Education and evangelical heritage

David Mukuva Gitari, an Anglican clergy, led the democratic movement of the 1980s through his pulpit activism. He was born on 6th September 1937 at Ngirambu village in a devout Christian family. His parents, Samuel Mukuva (d.1970) and Jesse Njuku (d. 2000), were the pioneer African missionaries in Ngirambu (Gitari 2014:4). For over five decades, they both served as catechists and evangelists converting souls to Christianity (Gathogo 2011:91). Gitari attended Ngirambu primary school, founded by his father Mukuva in the 1920s.

TABLE 1: Typology of sermons preached by Gitari between 1986 and 2002.

Dated	Place	Theme	Scripture
12-22 August 1986	Kenyatta University NCKK Conference, Nairobi	The Church and Leadership	Acts 2:42-47
21 September 1986	Good Shepherd Gatunguru	On Unity of Religious & Political Leaders	1 Corinthians 1-10 John 13:35
07 June 1987	Emmanuel Church Mutira, Kirinyaga	Harassed and Helpless	Matthew 9:35-38
17 December 1987	Funeral service Getuya, Kirinyaga	Cain Strikes Again	Genesis 4:1-16
10 April 1988	St. Thomas Church, Kerugoya	Shattered Dreams, Realised Hopes, (vote rigging and intimidation)	Genesis 37: 12-36
09 October 1988	Annual Mothers Union Rally of Mt. Kenya East Diocese, St. Paul's Cathedral Embu	Render to Caesar (addressing the lack of debates in KANU's delegate conference)	Mark 12:17
02 April 1989	St. Mary's Church, Mugumo, Kirinyaga	God of Order, Not of Confusion, (addressing electoral conflicts, corruption and violence)	1 Corinthians 14:33
30 April 1989	St. Thomas Church, Kerugoya	Duties of the state and Obligations of Citizen	1 Peter 2:13-17
19 May 1991	Trinity Church Mutuma, Kirinyaga	Was There No Naboth to Say No? (addressing corruption and land grabbing)	1 Kings 21:1-29
13 July 1997	All Saints Cathedral, Nairobi	<i>Mene Mene Tekel Parsin</i> , (preached during the cleansing of All Saints Cathedral after its defilement by a security officer on 'Saba Saba' Solidarity day, Nairobi, Kenya)	Daniel 5:27

He later joined Kabare Intermediate School, where Gitari sat for his Kenya African Primary Examination (KAPE) certificate in 1953 (J.S. Mathenge pers. comm., 29 January 2015). He was then admitted to Kangaru High School for a High school Diploma (Gitari 2014:11). It was at Kabare that Gitari developed an interest in Christianity because of the influence of Mr. Peterson Muchangi, a staunch member of the East African Revival movement.¹ Like his father, Gitari was a liberal Christian who disavowed the revivalist's legalistic attitude. Revivalists had a pious projection of life and condemned women and girls who wore necklaces or earrings. Also, men and boys who parted their hair were not spared from the revival's rebuke. Gitari in particular did not escape their condemnation for having parted his hair (Gitari 2014:12). Despite their moralistic attitude, the revival movement played a significant role in Gitari's spiritual life. For John Karanja, 'the revival movement nurtured Gitari to become a prophetic figure and a critique of bad governance' (Karanja 2006:580–603). He was the founding chairperson Christian Union at Kangaru High School (Gathogo 2008:333–346). At Kangaru, Gitari was nicknamed 'Man of the Bible' for his critical biblical exposition (Gitari 2014:13). The Bible became the primary resource during the struggle for liberation from an authoritarian state in the 1980s and 1990s.

Gitari attended the University of Nairobi for his higher education where he studied Bachelor of Arts in Geography and History (Gathogo 2011:95). At the university, Gitari interacted with African liberation heroes among them Jomo Kenyatta, Joseph Tom Mboya, Paul Ngei, Pinto Pi Gama, Mwalimu Julius Nyerere (Tanganyika), Kenneth Kaunda (Zambia) and Joshua Nkomo of Zimbabwe (Gitari 2014:17). He was also inspired by historical figures such as William Wilberforce, a social activist, politician and committed Christian. Gitari also got inspiration from Abraham Lincoln, then the US president who championed the freedom of African slaves in 1865 (Gathogo 2007a:235, 257). Later on, Gitari was inspired by the Civil Rights Movement leaders such as Martin Luther King Jr, for their unwavering quest for justice and equality (Gathogo 2007a:235). Broadly, these global leaders influenced Gitari's view of social justice and sharpened his political theology.

For his theological education, Gitari joined Tyndale Hall theological college, Bristol in 1965 under the guidance of Dr Oliver Barclay, the then General Secretary of the Pan African Fellowship of Evangelical Students (PAFES) (Gitari 2014:18). The training at Bristol equipped Gitari with some advanced bible knowledge for his evangelical ministry across Africa. He benefited from critical theological enquiry and the international network at Tyndale Hall College. Back in Nairobi, Gitari became the General Secretary of PAFES, currently, the Fellowship of Christian Union Students (FOCUS) for 2 years while patiently waiting for his service licence from Archbishop Habakkuk Festo Olang (Gitari 2014:19). While working as the General Secretary of PAFES, Gitari met and bonded mentally and spiritually with Rene and Catherine Padilla whose theological works on integral

mission influenced his prophetic ministry (Knighton 2009:47). Gitari studied Bachelor of Divinity (BD) as an external student at the University of London (Gathogo 2011:95). Gitari was the fourth Anglican Kenyan cleric to obtain a theological degree after, Rev. Henry Okullu, Rev. Thomas Kalume and the famous African theologian, Dr John S. Mbiti (Gitari 2014:31). In 1983, Gitari was awarded an honorary Doctorate of Divinity (DD) by the Asbury Theological Seminary Ohio, United States (US), and another in 1998 by the University of Kent following the commendation of Archbishop of Canterbury his Lordship George Carey (Gitari et al. 2002:165). The awards were a result of his transformative Christian ministry in Africa.

The emergence of a radical disciple?

The term 'radical discipleship' is used here to describe the prophetic ministry of Gitari, which emerged in 1974 after the Lausanne Congress in Switzerland. Etymologically, the term 'radical' is derived from the Latin word 'radix', meaning root. On the other hand, the word 'disciple' is derived from the term 'discere', which means to learn. In Christianity, a disciple is a follower of Christ or one who adheres to the biblical teachings of Jesus Christ. Thus discipleship is both a gift and a calling to be active collaborators with God for the transforming of the world (Th 1 3:2). Discipleship inspires us to share and embody God's love in Jesus Christ by pursuing justice and peace in ways that differ from the world's approach (Jn 14:27). By radical discipleship, we refer to the theologically grounded orientation inherent in the essential teachings of Jesus to Christian ministry. Thus, we are responding to Jesus' call to follow him from the margins of our world (Lk 4:16–19). Gitari's episcopal pilgrimage began with his ordination in 1972 into the priesthood of the ACK by Bishop Obadiah Kariuki of Mount Kenya Diocese (Gitari 2014:31, 32).

Gitari emerged as a radical disciple after attending the Global Evangelical Convention at Lausanne, Switzerland, in 1974. At this convention, Rene Padilla, David Gitari and Samuel Escobar and about 600 participants from the Global South launched an alternative declaration entitled: 'Theological Implications of Radical Discipleship' (Kirkpatrick 2016). This declaration was a critique of the evangelical position adopted by the Billy Graham group of North America evangelicals that sought to distinguish between evangelism and social action (Wiher 2022:26). Based on the critical position adopted by this group of theologians and the title of their proposal, they were branded as 'radical evangelicals' (Wiher 2022:27). Reflecting on the Lausanne Congress, Gitari affirms that holistic theology, rooted in radical discipleship, views human beings as psychosomatic (Gitari 2014:199). He emphasises that salvation encompasses personal, social, political and global dimensions of life and notes that the Lausanne movement 'opened my eyes to understanding the holistic mission of the church' (Gitari 2014:104).

From Lausanne, Gitari's ecclesiology took a holistic approach, preaching the good news of liberation, healing, restoration and transformation. He began by criticising

1. East African Revival Movement began in 1930 at Gahini Rwanda before spreading its tentacles to the entire East Africa (Murray 1975).

the political assassination of Josiah Mathenge Kariuki (JM) in 1975 (J. Gathaka pers. comm., 30 January 2015). Josiah Mathenge Kariuki was a charismatic political leader who was admired for his outspokenness on social justice issues. Josiah Mathenge was one of the critics of President Jomo Kenyatta's regime over corruption and ethnicity. He was signalled out for challenging Kikuyu's political hegemony and that JM's death was linked to Kenyatta's political associates from Kiambu (Throup & Hornsby 1998:19). Before JM's murder, government critics such as Pinto Pi Gama (d.1965)² and Tom Joseph Odhiambo Mboya (d.1969), a Luo by ethnicity and one of the possible Kenyatta successors, had been assassinated by 1960s (Ochieng1995:101). JM's murder, however, surprised many, as no one could imagine that Kenyatta's regime would assassinate his tribe man (Gitari 2014:33).

For Gitari 'JM was a hero of the revolutionary movement against the colonial government' (Gitari 1996:13). In the post-colonial era, JM as observed by Throup and Hornsby had emerged as a senior figure in the informal opposition attempting to mobilise the poor against the conspicuous wealth of the Kikuyu bourgeois, especially Kenyatta's relatives and business associates (Throup & Hornsby 1998:19). As a crusader for social justice, equality and equity in the distribution of national resources, particularly, land, JM was aware that justice was not limited to ethnic loyalty (Gathogo 2007:238). Both in Parliament and on public platforms, JM Kariuki championed people's rights to free medical services, education and land. In the struggle that ensued for social justice, he is popularly remembered for his famous statement (Ochieng 1995):

A small but powerful group of greedy, self-seeking elite in the form of politicians, civil servants, and businessmen have steadily but very surely monopolized the fruits of independence to the exclusion of the majority of the people. We do not want a Kenya of ten millionaires and ten million beggars. (p. 103)

Gitari asserts that JM was an inspiration for his gospel of social justice, which resonated well with his prophetic ministry. Following JM's brutal murder, there was public outrage, with university students protesting and accusing the state of his assassination (J.S. Mathenge pers. comm., 29 January 2015). Gitari, then serving as the General Secretary of the Bible Society of Kenya (BSK) and Bishop-designate for Mt. Kenya East diocese. He was called upon by the National Council of Churches of Kenya (NCCCK) to preach on human rights and social justice on the state-owned Broadcasting station, Voice of Kenya (Gathogo 2007:235–257). Gitari gave six live talks on the radio programme, 'Lift up your Hearts', each of a 5-min duration before the morning news bulletin at 7.00 am (Gitari 2014:33). He structured the six talks on the first stanza of the National Anthem:

O God of all creation
Bless this our land and nation
Justice be our shield and defender

²Pinto Pi Gama was an Asian ally to the late veteran opposition leader Jaramogi Oginga Odinga. He was murdered on February 1965. See also Oginga Odinga's (1967) *Not Yet Uhuru*, pp. 284–229.

May we dwell in unity, peace and liberty

Plenty be found within our borders. (p. 33)

In these talks, 'Gitari stressed the sanctity of human life, reminding the nation of the United Nations General Assembly's proclamation of 10th December 1948 on human rights'. He stressed the right to life, liberty and security, education, equality before the law, freedom of movement and religion, freedom of association and freedom to marry and have a family (Gitari 1996:18). Gitari paralleled JM's killers to Cain, who murdered his brother Abel. He said: 'Today God is asking Kenyans, "Where is your brother JM Kariuki?" And those who assassinated him or planned his assassination are saying, "Am I my brother's keeper?"' (Gathogo 2007:243). Commenting on these talks, Ben Knighton argues that 'though the churches had in 1969 challenged Kenyatta's oath of the Agikuyu, no church cleric had ever challenged the nation and those in authority in the mass media' like Gitari (Knighton 2009:20). Apparently, Gitari's prophetic proclamation did not auger well with government officials who felt that their ills have been exposed badly (Gitari 2014:33). Gitari recollected that after giving the fourth talk on 'Lift up the nation', he received a telephone call from the state corporation (Voice of Kenya) officials inviting him for a 'dialogue' (Gitari 1996:13–21). The chairperson of the media station, Mr. James Kangwana accused Gitari of public incitement. He charged that, 'Your reference to Cain killing his brother Abel (Gn 4) may make listeners assume that you were referring to the assassination of J.M. Kariuki' (Gitari 2014:33). In his rebuttal, Gitari claimed that 'the gospel is very disturbing to sinners' (Gathogo 2007:235–257). Gitari continued challenging the government on many issues, including corruption, political assassination and ethnicity.

Reconfiguration of Gitari's public theology

Earlier, we mentioned that the Lausanne Congress of 1974 partly influenced Gitari's holistic ecclesiology. Beyond this convention, his public theology was primarily shaped by his understanding of prophetic ministry in the Old Testament (OT) and New Testament (NT). In Gitari's pulpit advocacy, he explores the creation metaphors, biblical prophetic ministries, NT concepts of the Kingdom of God and the incarnation model to underscore the church's engagement in public life (Gitari 1991:7). For Benson, Gitari's biblical Christianity shaped his public theology and prophetic ministry (Benson 2009:113). Prophetic leadership emerges from social, economic and political crises. According to Peter Knox, OT prophets surfaced during crises when society faced impediments or obstructions in their relationship with God (Knox 2008:208). Based on their pointed utterances, the beneficiaries of unjust systems accused them of prophesying for a living and trespassing into politics. In particular, Amos was charged with interference in Israel's internal affairs through his prophetic utterances. However, 'he became adamant and maintained that God had sanctioned his prophetic witness to

disrupt the status quo and call the nation to repentance' (Knox 2008:208). Arguably, a prophetic message is not tied to the future but to the present realities of the time. Thus, according to Knox, like Gitari, prophecy is not limited to future prediction but rather relates to present realities (Gitari 1991:7; Knox 2008:209). In Gitari's view, prophetic ministry entails bringing God's word to bear on [our] contemporary world (Gitari 1988a:ix). Thus, Gitari adopted an incarnational theology that addressed contemporary challenges.

Gitari, like other Anglican clerics, Henry Okullu (d.1997) and Alexander Muge (d.1990) were radical clerics who advocated for biblical activism against state autocracy. The OT served as their biblical archives where Gitari searched for prophetic utterances of truth to power (Lonsdale 2009:60). He placed a higher premium on God's authority over political authority, insisting on loyalty to Christ rather than government (Gitari 2014). The 'radical posture' adopted by Gitari against political authoritarianism and his pointed sermons on justice led his critics to brand him as a 'meddlesome priest' (Knighton 2009:18). His pulpit witnessed to Christian values on human dignity, calling for protection of human rights and demanding accountability from the government (Gitari 1991). At one time, KANU politicians proscribed Gitari's sermons on the pretext of sedition, only for President Moi to declare, 'Let the Bishop Speak!' (Gitari 1988a:56). Employing critical pulpit preaching, 'Gitari sensitized citizens on their social, economic and political rights' (J.S. Mathenge pers. comm., 29 January 2015). He once stated: 'I have always confined myself to the word of God, expounding it faithfully, systematically and applying the same to the prevailing socio-political context' (Gitari 1991:13). Gitari's sermons were mind-provoking, opening spaces for dialogue against state censorship. Gathogo credited Gitari's pulpit advocacy to the 'OT biblical prophets such as Amos, Jeremiah, Isaiah, Ezekiel and Hosea and was convinced that the end of life is not to avoid risks or pains but to do the will of God' (Gathogo 2007:236–237). By so doing, Gitari risks his life for the sake of the nation; he dared to face 'the autocratic Kenya African National Union (KANU) government' for the liberation of the oppressed.

Gitari's radical discipleship, as expounded by Jeffrey Greenman called the Christian community to a threefold practice (Greenman 2012:200). The first is being a 'distinctive separation', thus living on a standard different from the rest of the society marked by 'unselfishness and supernatural love informing their activities' (Greenman 2012:200). In Gitari's view, radical discipleship begins with personal morality. As Greenman observes, 'only by illustrating in our lives the kind of life which is God's will for society as a whole are we in a position to practice prophetic ministry' (Gitari 1988:88). Essentially, church leaders and Christians alike should be a 'mirror of reflection' in society by being role models. Unlike today, the political society compromises the Church through partisan politics and the ethnification of public life. Secondly, Gitari emphasised the concept of 'judgement'. Based on his ecclesiological and theological convictions, churches need to 'exercise the prophetic ministry of judgement by calling people to righteousness and justice' (Gitari 1991:7). Gitari

posited that the church's support for the state is tied to social justice and vice versa. He called upon Christians to challenge ethnocentrism and corruption. Thus, Christians must be conscious of the nation, reminding the state that it exists only as the servant of God and humankind (Greenman 2012:200). Furthermore, Christians, like the prophets of the OT, must speak out and pronounce the will and judgement of God.

Finally, Gitari discusses 'creative participation' in public life. Radical discipleship calls for the incarnation of the Gospel. This is a divine mandate, as Christians have been granted dominion over all creation (Gitari 1991:17). This form of public theology calls for Christians' engagement in societal affairs, including business, politics and education, rather than being 'cut off from the rest of society' (Gitari 1991:17). This grounded theology demands creative participation in public affairs. For Gitari, humankind is a psychomatic being, consisting of material and immaterial elements. Thus, sacred and temporal affairs are intertwined and cannot be ignored by the church (Gitari 2014:199). This affirms the integral mission that Third World evangelicals adopted at the 1974 Lausanne convention. The Lausanne covenant on 'radical discipleship' implored Christians worldwide to focus on evangelism and social service, thus propagating a practical theology that demanded both proclamation and demonstration (Tizon 2010:67; Wiher 2022:27). As a proponent of radical discipleship, Gitari saw 'no biblical dichotomy between the Word spoken and the Word made visible in people's lives' (Gitari 1988:46). He called upon clerics and Christians to stand in solidarity with the poor, the oppressed, the powerless, the destitute and the downtrodden members of society (Gitari 1996:10–11).

Gitari's (1988) public sermons call for the incarnation of the Kingdom values in public life. In his exegesis of Mathew 9:35–36, he says:

And Jesus went about all cities and villages, teaching in the synagogues and preaching the gospel of the Kingdom and healing every disease and every infirmity. When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without shepherd. (pp. 13–14)

Parallel to this reading, Gitari suggests that by Jesus 'emptying himself' to humanity (Jn 1:14), the church cannot afford to be indifferent to social affairs but rather engage with society (Gitari 1988:11). The Gospel demands a commitment to the plight of the poor and the oppressed (Gitari 1991:9). This pastoral dimension of discipleship plays out in Gitari's doctrine of the Kingdom of God or Kingship politics. According to Paddy Benson, this form of contemporary discipleship draws its nexus from the lordship of Christ over temporal authorities. In his Kingdom sermons, Gitari implored Christians to prioritise the insignificant ones and those excluded from history (Benson 2009:113). In his eschatology of the oppressed, Padilla, like Gitari, takes a similar view:

When the church is committed to an integral mission and to communicating the gospel through everything it is, does, and says, it understands that its goal is not to become numerically large, nor to be materially rich, nor politically powerful. Its purpose is to incarnate the values of the Kingdom of God and

to witness to the love and justice revealed in Jesus Christ, by the power of the Spirit, for the transformation of human life in all its dimensions, both individually and communally. (Padilla 1989:189 as cited in Kirkpatrick 2016:87)

Gitari, while in consensus with Padilla, innovatively recites the LORDs' prayer in Mathew 6:10–11: 'May your Kingdom Come, Your Will be done on earth as it is in heaven' (Gitari 1991:12). By doing so, Gitari presents the eschatological reality of the Kingdom in the present tense that entreats public engagement. The political ethics of the Kingdom of God are opposed to dictatorial leadership, corruption and oppression of the poor. Thus, radical discipleship leaves no room for theological dualism between sacred and profane. According to Swiss missiologist Hannes Wiher, Kingdom politics is a commitment to holistic liberation of humankind and involves full-fledged shalom (Wiher 2022:27). Further, the Kingdom politics demands an eschatological Kairos built on the transformative power of the lordship of Christ. Throughout his public ministry, Gitari, like Padilla, saw no dichotomy between worship and public life, evangelism and social action, personal faith and Kingdom services (Gitari 1988:15). He demonstrated the lordship of Christ over temporal order. Thus, Gitari worked towards the transformation of the authoritarian state under President Daniel Moi (1978–2002). Both Moi and Gitari retired in 2002, following a democratic transition from KANU misrule to the National Rainbow Coalition (NaRC) under President Mwai Kibaki (2002–2013).

Radical discipleship and reconstruction of the autocratic state (1986–2002)

Gitari's prophetic ministry began with his consecration to the episcopate in 1975. By mid-1986, he had become one of the leading prophetic voices in Kenya's public space (Gathogo 2009:149). Alongside other mainline church clerics such as Henry Okullu (1929–1999), Alexander Kipsang Muge (1946–1990) and Rev. Timothy Njoya of the Presbyterian Church of East Africa (PCEA), they challenged Moi's autocratic leadership (Sabar 2009:128). President Moi ascended to power in August 1978, following the abrupt demise of President Kenyatta. As an Evangelical Christian, many viewed him as a less corrupt leader who could address social and economic inequalities through wealth redistribution (Sabar 2009:127). He had packaged himself as a loving Christian and created a political ideology of *Nyayo* patterned on Christian symbols of peace, love and unity (NCCCK 1983:6). As the chairperson of the NCCCK, Gitari edited a book, 'A Christian View of Politics in Kenya: Love, Peace and Unity' in 1983, which critiqued Nyayo's philosophy as opaque (NCCCK 1983). The radical clerics, Gitari, Okullu and Njoya provided a theological critique of the *Nyayo* philosophy. Previously, they had protested Moi's political extremism that emerged following the botched *coup de tat* of 1st August 1982. In the 'Christian view of Politics', the clerics challenged Moi's oppressive course by calling for peace and justice. The president was preaching peace, but his political

actions betrayed the central tenets of Nyayo: peace, love and unity. Gitari urged the citizens to strive for 'peacemaking' rather than 'peace-loving' (Gitari 1996:46).

In retrospect, Moi's political intolerance over divergent opinion led to critics being branded anti-Nyayo. According to John Lonsdale, Moi's regime had banished members of academia who were perceived as Marxists (J. Lonsdale pers. comm., 17 July 2018). The Nyayo crackdown targeted the civil society through either co-optation or incarceration. From student organisations such as the Student Organisation of Nairobi University (SONU), oppositional leaders, artists, lawyers and members of academia, among others. With coercive politics, the Church emerged as 'the conscience of the nation', rebuking the KANU government by calling for transparency and accountability (Sabar 2009:127–128). As the space for civil society activism shrank, Gitari innovatively and creatively turned to pulpit advocacy to drive his prophetic agenda.

Sermoning the nation: Gitari's pulpit activism

Gitari adopted an all-embracing approach in his prophetic ministry, which was marked by biblical exposition that called for justice and good governance (Gathogo 2009:149). The cleric also relied on African sources such as storytelling, African metaphors, songs and drama (Gathogo 2011). In Jenkins observation, 'cultures that readily identify with biblical worldviews, especially in Africa find it easier to read the Bible not just as historical fact, but as relevant instruction for daily conduct' (Jenkins 2006:6). Clerical activists in Africa including Rev. Desmond Tutu and Albert Nolan of South Africa made good use of the Bible in their challenge to the Apartheid regime. Likewise, the Anglican clerics such as Okullu, Muge and Gitari relied on the scriptures in their pulpit advocacy for the democratisation of the nation.

Reportedly, Gitari preached critical sermons between 1986 and 2002. In August 1986, for instance, he led NCCCK in opposing KANU's electoral amendments that undermined democracy. Thus, the period preceding 1990 was marked by intense pulpit activism on social affairs, politics and media (Gathogo 2009:149). This period was characterised by political agitations for social justice and democracy. Gitari's pointed sermons shaped political discourses by vitally empowering the laity. He preached politics, thus attracting media publicity, often to the dismay of KANU politicians (G. Ireri pers. comm., 10 April and 14 April 2015). After transitioning from a one-party state to multi-party politics in 1991, the discourse shifted to constitutional reforms and democratic consolidation (Kapinde 2018:217). The Anglican Church was at the forefront of pushing for these reforms before the 1992 General Elections and pushed for transitional justice until 2002. Gitari and Okullu were the leading voices, collaborating with other religious leaders and civil society in demanding constitutional changes. Although by the end of 2002, the struggle for constitutional reforms had stalled, the cleric's efforts paid off when the ruling party, KANU, was

defeated by a broad-based alliance of oppositional parties, the NaRC.

Historians have documented the bulwark role played by the Anglican clergy in supporting multi-party democracy (see Githiga 2001; Lonsdale 2009; Sabar 2002). In this study, I focused on Gitari's radical pulpit, particularly his political sermons preached between 1986 and 2002. Suffice it to say, Gitari's sermons during this tumultuous period were not only controversial to those in power but also political. By terming the sermons 'political', I mean they profoundly spoke to the existential affairs of the nation. In 'The Divine Tag on Democracy', Timothy Njoya argues that the sermons called for the restoration of God's divinity and humanity to the oppressed and underprivileged masses (Njoya 2003). Thus, he asserts that political sermons strived for accountability and good governance. For Njoya, 'God's words get engaged with the reality of dominance to transform it into governance' (Njoya 2003:18). Essentially, the task of the preacher is to reaffirm that God is concerned with the plights of the poor and that all systems of government are accountable to HIM (Karanja 2008:71). Granted, therefore, Gitari's political sermons aimed at nurturing coherent, orderly, responsible and accountable governance through imaginative interpretation of the scripture (Kapinde 2025:4).

To this end, the study analysed pulpit sermons preached by Gitari between 1986 and 2002. While the cleric addressed many social issues, a discourse analysis of the sermons revealed that they touched on a confluence of human rights, political assassinations, vote rigging, democracy and constitutionalism (Gitari 1996). Gitari also preached peace and love as essential for reconciliation and national development (Gitari 1988, 1996). Although Gitari's sermons have been read by many, their interpretations vary widely. The political rhetoric in the sermons demonstrates how the pulpit was used to play politics from below (eds. Bompani & Frahm-Arp 2010). Listening to Gitari's sermons helped the church to create a 'culture of citizenship', whereby the congregations could engage in everyday politics. In terms of theology and politics, Gitari's sermons provide important lessons for contemporary church leaders whose pulpit sermons are detached from public life.

While Gitari had been preaching on structural injustices, his pulpit advocacy became more defined in the mid-1980s following KANU's introduction of the controversial voting method of queuing behind candidates (Gathogo 2007). During the NCK delegates' conference at Kenyatta University, he challenged the government to rescind this undemocratic method. Basing his sermon on Acts 2:42-47, Gitari observes that the church is called into fellowship with the oppressed and the underprivileged Voiceless majority (Gitari 1996). At Good Shepherd Gatunguru, Gitari emphasised the unity of the church, calling upon 'religious and political leaders' to work together for national development (Gitari 1996). Stressing the need for peace and reconciliation, Gitari appealed for KANU politicians to shun

violence and other human rights abuses (Gitari 1996). Much-quoted sermon preached at Mutira on 07 June 1987, where Gitari criticised KANU politicians for harassing helpless citizens, brings to the surface the structural injustices of the time (Gitari 1988:9). Preaching on Matthew 9:35-38, Gitari urged church leaders to advocate for justice and incarnate the love of Christ for humanity (Gitari 1988:14). His criticism of KANU politicians aimed to provoke their political consciousness regarding the ills of the state. Gitari decried the ruthlessness of KANU youth wingers deployed to heckle him at many church events. At one time, while preaching at Getuya, he warned against political violence and assassinations. Commenting on political murders, Gitari drew parallels with 'Cain's killing his brother Abel' (Gn 4:1-16), using this analogy, he condemned political assassinations (Gitari 2014). Gitari continually reminded the state of its duties to protect human dignity, including the right to life (Gitari 1996). Objections to his sermons came from KANU politicians, who accused the prelate of meddling in politics (Gitari 1988:31). The anti-Gitari sentiments continued as KANU politicians threatened to proscribe seditious sermons (J. Mararo pers. comm., 30 January 2015 and 14 April 2015). Gitari responded with another sermon on 28 June 1987 based on 2 Timothy 3:14-4:7 and asserted the supremacy of the Bible, arguing that 'All Scripture is inspired by God' (Gitari 1988a:43; Kings 1996:497). On the other hand, he acknowledged KANU's legitimacy in 'Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's and unto God the things that are God's (Mk 12:17)' but cautioned against retrogressive politics (Gitari 1988b:16). He stressed on the civic duties of citizens and the state's obligation to uphold law and order. Gitari emphasised on stewardship in public service, cautioning that having 'dominion over all creation is not a preserve of politicians but of all humanity' (Gitari 1991:8).

Gitari abhorred the corrupt leadership of Moi, which had 'shattered many dreams' and hindered sustainable peace and development (Gitari 1996). The KANU government had perfected corruption, ethnicity and extra-judicial persecution of citizens (Press 2004). Gitari authoritatively addressed land and economic injustices, demanding transparency and accountability from state officers. At one point, he criticised local government authority for aiding land grabbing and abdicating their stewardship mandate (Gitari & Knighton 2001). In a sermon, 'was there no Naboth to say No' (1Ki 21:1-29), Gitari wondered lack of ethical leadership that could have objected to such corruption. Here, Gitari pointedly affirmed his theology of dominion and stewardship by calling out irresponsible and corrupt leadership. Although similar criticism on structural injustices came from the Catholic Church, addresses from Gitari and his contemporaries, Alexander Muge, Timothy Njoya and Henry Okullu, inspired civil disobedience to unjust rule and oppression (Kapinde 2025:4). Thus, leading to the politicisation of the pulpit as critics, mainly those from Moi's friendlier denominations, the African Inland Church (AIC) and Pentecostal churches, accused Gitari of misusing the pulpit (Gitari 2014:229). Like the AICs, many Pentecostal

churches at the time supported this 'introverted gospel' because of their less-engaged political theology and primarily for pragmatic reasons, including material benefits from political elites (Gifford 2009:204). By then, many Pentecostal churches were still developing with weak organisational and leadership structures compared to mainline churches such as the Anglican Church and the PCEA (Ngunyi 1995). On the other hand, Gitari's critical pulpit theology (CPT) received support from civil society groups and lay Christians who shared the sermons with the media (G. Ileri pers. comm., 10 April 2015 and 14 April 2015), thus, contributing to the development of the Anglican Church's prophetic ecclesiology.

Gitari's prophetic practices were based on liberative hermeneutics employed throughout his pulpit activism. While this holistic theology remained the mainstay of Gitari's prophetic ecclesiology, its application was a counterforce to KANU's hegemony. Through faith and love for humanity, Gitari remained vigilant, fighting structural inequalities and preaching hope to the hopeless majority (Gitari 2014). At one time, Gitari was attacked by hired thugs but managed to escape to safety (J.S. Mathenge pers. comm., 29 January 2015). This was not an isolated incident, as Okullu and Muge faced similar threats on their lives. Unfortunately, Muge perished in a suspicious automobile accident while on his pastoral duties. Even with threats on his life, Gitari continued with his radical discipleship. In the early months of 1990, Gitari rallied NCK-affiliated denominations to take a radical position against the KANU regime (G. Ileri pers. Comm., 10 April and 14 April). His arduous struggles paid off when NCK declared a *Kairos* moment in 1990, demanding constitutional reforms and the reintroduction of multi-party politics (NCK 1990). The pulpit revolt was augmented by individual Catholic prelates: Ndingi Mwana Nzeki, Zachaeus Okoth and John Njenga, who accused the state of sponsoring violence and abusing fundamental human rights (G. Ileri pers. comm., 10 April 2015 and 14 April 2015). Indeed, clerical activism shaped the calls for the 'Kenya we Want' where the bill of rights is respected and a culture of participatory politics entrenched (J.S. Mathenge pers. comm., 29 January 2015). While there is no consensus on the propensity of pulpit advocacy in civil society, the salience of religious knowledges, beliefs and values in African body politics cannot be understated (Gifford 2009). The present article, although it did not intend to draw a link between pulpit activism and the waves of democratic protests in the 1990s, multiple interviews credited 'pulpit sermons' as having played a conscientisation role by inspiring the citizens to rise against Moi's autocracy (G. Ileri pers. comm., 10 April 2015 and 14 April 2015). By contrast, however, social movement scholars attributed democratic protests of the early 1990s to grievance theory and competing elite interests (Rhodes 2014). Although public grievance with the Moi regime cannot be underestimated, individual clergy such as Gitari set the protest agenda by providing meanings and constructing processes for 'grievance interpretation' in civil society advocacy (McVeigh & Sikkink 2001). Broadly, the clandestine political activities of civil society organisations

(CSOs) had less impact than the clerics' pulpit protests. This was partly because the civil society agenda was driven by elite actors with weaker grassroots networks and primarily motivated by narrow political and economic interests (G. Ileri pers. comm., 10 April 2015 and 14 April 2015). The constricted political space under Moi's authoritarianism limited public defiance; thus, many civil society activists went into exile, while others joined underground movements such as *Mwakenya*. In contrast, mainline churches such as the Anglican, the Presbyterian and the Catholic had gained credibility because of their local networks (Sabar-Friedman 1997:25–52) and stronger social links with international organisations (G. Ileri pers. comm., 10 April 2015 and 14 April 2015). Based on these churches' trans-cultural nature, they served as a 'cultural toolkit' for the protest movements. The Anglican All Saints Cathedral Church in Nairobi became a spiritual and political shrine, shaping public discourses. In the struggle for democracy, the Cathedral gained notoriety for providing refuge to political activists, fostering civility and creating a space for national discourses (Wandera 2017). Together with other clerics, Henry Okullu and Peter Njenga, Gitari opened the Church for dialogue and national consultation (G. Ileri pers. comm., 10 April 2015 and 14 April 2015). As a political shrine, the All Saints Cathedral served as a sanctuary shielding activists from state-sponsored harassment (Wandera 2017). In July 1997, police stormed the church to flush out activists advocating for constitutional reforms, abusing worshippers and desecrating the church (Gitari et al. 2002). The aftermath of this clash saw the destruction of property and injuries, with blood spilled over the sanctuary. This inspired one of the final widely remembered sermons entitled *Mene Mene Tekel Urpasin*, Gitari preached against political extremism and warned Moi of his impending defeat (Gitari et al. 2002). He cautioned KANU against extra-judicial persecution of protesters and preached peace, reconciliation and justice (Gitari et al. 2002). This incident emboldened the church by launching a people-driven constitutional reform movement called the Ufungamano Initiative to counter the unfolding undemocratic practices (Kapinde 2018:229). Just before the crucial 2002 elections, the movement had brought together interreligious leaders and civil society actors in negotiating for peaceful constitutional change. It mobilised religious groups, Muslims and Christians, Hindus, Buddhists and traditionalists among other faith traditions in drafting a new constitution (Chesworth 2009; Mati 2012). While the Ufungamano constitutional project lacked legal legitimacy, it forced the government to negotiate for piecemeal reforms. The compromise was the formation of the Constitution of Kenya Review Commission (CKRC), which did little to produce a new constitution because of political meddling (Mati 2012). Towards the end of 2002, Gitari had concluded that for meaningful democratic transformation, KANU had to be removed from power (G. Ileri pers. comm., 10 April 2015 and 14 April 2015). Gitari and other religious and civil society actors helped form a coalition of oppositional parties under NaRC that ousted KANU from power.

Conclusion

This article has mapped Gitari's significant role in Kenya's democratisation process since the 1980s into the early 2000s. From empirical analysis, Gitari, through its prophetic witness, exerted a critical influence on the church and the public. To understand the formative factors that shaped his prophetic ministry, this article retrieved Gitari's history by surveying his early encounters. The troubled journey of his prophetic ecclesiology and political disappointments with the post-colonial government's failed mission to transform the country after decades of colonial authoritarianism. However, as argued, the principal formative influence on Gitari's radical discipleship was the Lausanne conference of 1974, which exposed him to integral mission. Gitari adopted this holistic theology that allowed his pulpit to address social, ethical and public affairs. As a contemporary prophet, Gitari condemned structural injustices, denouncing repressive policies and calling for respect for civil liberties and a more democratic order. His pointed pulpit sermons challenged the KANU regime and provided social and moral support to the opposition movement, thus, building communal resilience against authoritarianism.

Gitari developed a hermeneutic of hope, preaching love and stewardship. Gitari was theologically grounded in the evangelical tradition and had strong expository skills that enabled him to conduct people-centred liturgies, often articulating public interest to the dismay of his critics. The nature of Gitari's contribution represented what can be termed a 'prophetic *diakonia*'. He believed that inaugurated eschatology demands Christians' social witness. While Gitari was convinced that pulpit activism could serve as a platform for civil society advocacy, he argued that Christians had a divine mandate to contribute to the liberation and democratic transformation through dialogue and non-violence. At the same time, Gitari's radical discipleship was grounded in obedience to Christ, walking and imitating his liberating ways to draw meaning for human existence. Thus, the theological significance of his social ministry was rooted in the prophetic proclamation of the Kingdom of God. Overall, Gitari had an all-encompassing faith, a faith that listens before speaking, a faith that tolerates diversity and fosters fraternity and a faith that loves humanity.

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The author declares that they have no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

Author's contribution

S.A.K. is the sole author of this research article.

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The data that support the findings of this study are available, upon written request, from the corresponding author, S.A.K.

Disclaimer

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