



Sakagwa Ng'iti: A Kisii Prophet

By Peter O. Nyambasora

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Review by Enock Matundura

Chuka University, P.O. Box 109 – 60400, Chuka, Kenya.

Email: mwagechure@gmail.com

For the last decade, scholars and cultural enthusiasts have been doing meticulous research to document the history of the Gusii people. To date, there is little documented history of this culture save for the late historian, Prof. William Robert Ochieng's book, *A Pre-colonial History of the Gusii of Western Kenya from AD 1500–1914*. This work is based on his doctoral dissertation submitted to the University of Nairobi in 1971, which remains the most authoritative reference source about the history of the Gusii culture. However, with the publication of Enock Matundura's *Kivuli cha Sakawa* (2010), John S. Akama's two books: *The Gusii of Kenya: Social, Economic, Political & Judicial Perspectives* (2012) and *The Untold Story: Gusii Survival Techniques and Resistance to the Establishment of British Colonial Rule* (2018), and Peter O. Nyambasora's *Sakagwa Ng'iti: A Kisii Prophet* (2021), translated into English by Kefa Otiso as *Sakagwa's Ghost*, there has been a resurgence of interest in documenting the history and culture of the Gusii people. A common thread amongst these latest works is the writers' effort to persistently dig into the life of Sakagwa Ng'iti, the Gusii cultural hero born at the turn of the 19th Century from western Kenya. They concur with Ochieng's assertion that Sakagwa Ng'iti exerted substantial influence on Gusii society and beyond in the latter part of 1800s. Sakagwa epitomized many things: a medicine man, a rainmaker, a seer or prophet, and a strategist who helped his community to counter and neutralize external aggression from the Maasai, Kipsigis, and other neighboring communities.

*Sakagwa Ng'iti: A Kisii Prophet*¹, by Peter Nyambasora, chronicles the life history of Sakagwa, a cultural hero of the Gusii people. The book is divided into seven intertwined chapters. In Chapter 1, the writer gives an in-depth analysis of the environment, sociopolitical, and economic setting in which Sakagwa was born. The 1830s–1880s was a turbulent period for the Abagusii community because it was facing triple threats: death from disease and famine, death from war, and looming assimilation from the Kipsigis and Luo communities. In Chapter 2, Nyambasora provides a candid explanation of Sakagwa's family genealogy, dating back to the progenitor of

¹ A review of this book first appeared in the *Saturday Nation*, September 17, 2021 under the title 'Book sheds new light on Abagusii Hero Sakagwa.'

Omogusii, whose brothers were likely the ancestors of Abasuba, Abakuria, Avaloogoli, and among others. He further suggests that Sakagwa was the only son of his father, Ng'iti and his heir apparent. He was born at a place called Getwanyansi, in Manga area, present day Kisii County.

Chapter 3 is the major cog in Nyambasora's book, capturing the life of Sakagwa and the multifaceted roles he played as a cultural hero in his community: a medicine man, rainmaker, diviner, community sage, and prophet. Noteworthy in this section is how Nyambasora discusses Sakagwa's major prophesies, which eventually came to pass when he was alive and long after he had died. For example, Sakagwa is said to have called a group of Kisii elders to Getembe (Kisii town) where he prophesied by action, "It is reported that, one day he collected a lot of rats and carried them in baskets to the central place in Getembe, the site where the District Commissioner's offices were later built. Here, he opened the baskets containing the rodents. All the rats scampered to different directions (*sic*). He told the elders that '*Amandegere naame Gusii. Ore n'abamura n'ayae*' (edible mushrooms shall sprout in Gusii and only those with sons shall eat them)." In this apparent 'prophesy,' Nyambasora suggests that Sakagwa's emphasis was on the value of educating children so as to secure employment.

This work, being a biographical treatise, Chapters 4–7 are about Sakagwa's life trajectory from birth to 'death' and the mystery surrounding the disappearance of his body after burial. However, Chapters 6 and 7, particularly, make Nyambasora's work stand out against any other documented literature on this cultural hero's life. The writer gives a candid exploration of the theories surrounding the controversial 'death' of this hero before solving the so called 'Sakagwa conundrum,' which has surrounded the prophet's death for decades. For example, Ochieng's 1971 doctoral research at the University of Nairobi (*A Traditional History of the Gusii of Western Kenya from AD 1500–1914*) does not account for the 'mysterious' disappearance of Sakagwa's body after his burial. Similarly, neither do any other books nor literature written about Sakagwa contain this groundbreaking insight. For the first time, Sakagwa's enthusiasts, historians, anthropologists, and those interested in this cultural hero's life, will find this tantalizing detail in Nyambasora's grounding breaking book on *Sakagwa Ng'iti: A Kisii Prophet*.