Gilmore, Perry (2015). Kisisi (Our Language): The Story of Colin and Sadiki. Wiley Blackwell

Book Review by Dawn Wink

"There was a boy."

So begins the story of two boys in post-colonial Kenya—one American and one Kenyan—who met when both were five-years-old and within two months created their own language that transgressed the political, cultural, and linguistic boundaries between them in *Kisisi (Our Language): The Story of Colin and Sadiki* (Wiley Blackwell, 2015) by Perry Gilmore. To this I add, "There is his mother, now and always." Written with an academic expertise and mother's heart, what makes this story-like book about love, language, and transgressing social, cultural, and linguistic borders knock-you-over powerful and poignant is to learn on the first page that Colin, whom we come to know and love as an impish and courageous five-year-old, is killed by a drunk driver when he is 18-years-old.

"Part historic ethnography, part linguistic case study, and part a bereaved mother's memoir the mixed genre narrative and multi-disciplinary narrative and multidisciplinary discussion offers a brief glimpse into Colin and Sadiki's world—a love story about two five-year-old boys who simultaneously created a special bond and a special language—both inextricably woven together" (p. xvi). Gilmore expertly weaves a journey of mind and heart, intellect and compassion that spans the narrative arc of time. Colin and Sadiki only referred to the language as "our language." When Gilmore was able to approach her transcriptions and notes of this time, too painful to approach before, the publisher felt the language deserved its own name. After much thought, Gilmore decided on Kisisi, a combination of the Kiswahili prefix *ki-*,

which refers to the language itself, and *Sisi,* the Swahli word for *we* or *us*. Sadiki met the word with amusement and approval via Skype, and Gilmore felt Colin would have liked it, too.

Gilmore lifts the created language between two five-year-old boys from the woodland hills of Kekopey Ranch, where she and her husband move to conduct graduate research studying communicative behaviors of a troop of 92 wild olive baboons and sifts the chalky dirt of the landscape to reveal what Kisisi reveals about, "how their invented language helped them construct new identities and resist, transgress, and transform the marked post-colonial borders and harsh inequities of economics, race, culture, and culture that engulfed them and dominated the social power relationships and language ideologies that engaged all aspects of their daily lives" (p. xvi).

As the lone keeper of their language, Gilmore share the story in celebration of "*all* children and their brilliance as innovative language users, keenly observant cultural critics, and strong social activists" (xvii). The first chapter describes the unexpected discovery of the boys' invented language that goes against all Gilmore has learned about children's language acquisition and the widely accepted notion that children could not amend or adjust their speech. Chapter Two explores Kisisi in relationship with historic understandings and experiments designed to identify language origins. Chapter 3 delves into the boys' language experience through play, creativity, performance, and language invention. Chapter 4 portrays the reality of the colonial and postcolonial social structures that infused every aspect of the children's lives and how they used language to transgress these boundaries. The fifth chapter analyzes the interactive discursive processes Colin and Sadiki utilized to create meaning and expand the language.

“’Uweryumachini!!’ Colin and Sadiki kicked up puffs of hot pale dust as they jumped up and down, excitedly yelling and pointing to a small airplane flying high above them in the clear blue Kenya sky. ‘Uweryumachini!’ They gleefully giggled and shouted. With outstretched arms they reached up, jumping high, as if to touch the winged visitor” (p. 1). Gilmore stop to wonder what the boys are shouting as the plane, “buzzed its way across the vast sky that reflected itself perfectly in the flamingo-rimmed glassy blue soda lake below” (p. 2). The family is new to the multilingual Gilgil Baboon Reearch Project, but she didn’t recognize the language as either Swahili, the language used by most tribal people for mutual understand, nor Samburu, Colin’s mother tongue and primary language. When she inquired later about the word, the boys giggled and said slowly, “who-are-you-machini”. The airplane! As time went by, the boys continued to speak their own language and people began to notice that their “Swahili” was different, one that nobody could understand.

As the months passed, both children consistently demonstrated a fluidity of language, moving back and forth between Swahili, English, and Kisisi. They reflected the translanguaging abilities of multilinguals, responding appropriate in Swahili or English, depending upon context, and with one another exclusively in their own language. Gilmore explains how this language invention veered from accepted language theory and into the unknown. As a parent ethnographer, Gilmore recorded “in detail the dynamic, complex, nuanced political, cultural, and social aspects of this tiny speech community of two” (p. 24).

As the boys’ language expanded and grew, so did its fame around the entire hillside community and came to be views as “a blessing from God; something sacred and a symbol of their new friendship (p. 6). Gilmore who already had significant experience in education in the United States mused that in the U.S., this language would have been diagnosed by school

personnel as an indication of a learning disability and followed immediately with intervention, remediation, and concern about the parenting. “Seen as status enhancing and a sign of advanced linguistic complexity and love on the hillside; potentially seen as a stigmatized deficiency, a pathological problem, and a qualification for disability tracking in most mainstream US educational contexts” (p. 26).

With a deft and steady hand, Gilmore seamlessly shares a journey of discovery that is intimately personal and professionally expansive. She explores the political, social, and cultural reality for Kenyans, British descendants, and foreign researchers and the role Kisisi played in the greater context. The entrenched social, political, and cultural roles that framed roles during and after imperialist conquest threaded every aspect of life throughout the country, Kekopey Ranch, and the boys’ lives. The emergent and interdisciplinary field of colonial and postcolonial linguistic was just beginning to be explored in 1975, with the Kenya only a decade into independence. The field explores “how language is affected by colonial and postcolonial conditions and how colonials and postcolonial constellations of facts are reflected, shaped, and negotiated by language” (p. 30). Colin and Sadiki’s creation and use of Kisisi represented a verbal and human crystallization of a “representative place for their friendship and allowed them to mediate and transcend the racialized hegemonic linguistic and cultural borders that enveloped them in postcolonial Kenya” (p. 30).

True to their age, the boys delighted in scatological language inventions that brought back my own two sons’ giggles and shrieks of delight when reading the *Captain Underpants* series, including such distinguished titles as *Captain Underpants and the Perilous Plot of Professor Poppypants* and *Captain Underpants and the Attack of the Talking Toilets*. Gilmore’s inclusion of this aspect of Colin and Sadiki’s linguistic delight brought the story ever-more home

to me. I found myself chuckling as I read of Colin and Sadiki's plethora of scatological vocabulary, many words of which included the appropriate sounds expelled with great gusto and in appropriate bursts. When Gilmore inquired more in depth about the spelling of words, Colin replied that it wasn't possible, "because our language has sound that aren't in the alphabet" (p. 39).

Colin and Sadiki's playful and inventive use of language is highlighted through Gilmore's own creative and evocative narrative. She harkens Federico Garcia Lorca's theory of the *duende* and creativity and highlights its similarities with Colin and Sadiki's creative use of language. Garcia Lorca describes the *duende* as the "power and struggle of spontaneous creation" and the "burst of inspiration, the blush of all that is truly alive, all that the performer is creating at a certain moment…The *duende's* arrival always means a radical change in forms. It brings to old planes unknown feelings of freshness with the quality of something newly created, like a *miracle*, and it produces an almost religious enthusiasm" (p. 55). I read this passage several times. With each reading the multiple layers of meaning, when applied to the power of language, sank deeper and deeper.

Gilmore performs the delicate dance of conveying the playful and innocent nature of childhood, while also highlighting the razor-sharp stratified political, cultural, and social world in which they lived. The roles were clear and known – with whites at the top of the hierarchy, owners of land, controllers of all and Kenyans working as land laborers and servants. Kekopey Ranch life reflected the history steeped in imperialistic brutality and power relations. "Aristocratic colonial landowners, privileged western scientists, and disenfranchised African laborers all shared a complicated and strictly ordered life on Kekopey. The Red House, and all who lived and worked there, sat firmly in the middle of the two overlapping colonial worlds of

settle colonialism and colonial western science. They were inextricably tied together. We were all guilty. We were all complicit." (p. 70). Gilmore describes her discomfort in this new role, "We were all thrust into a world that was sheer anathema to our own long-held social justice values" (p. 71).

Language reflected these realities, as exemplified in Le Breton's translation book *Up-Country Swahili.* A recent edition, published in 1968, listed as its first word to learn how to conjugate into Swahili: to beat – kupinga. Children of white land owners and foreign researchers attended their own private schools and educational policies shifted through the years to meet political needs and serve those in power. Colin and Sadiki transgressed yet another of set-in-stone boundary when Gilmore approached the teacher of the school of their wish to support Sadiki in his education and his enrollment in the school along with Colin. Throughout the 15 months that Colin and Sadiki remained inseparable, the sacredness of their shared language transgressed boundary after boundary; throughout the community, the schools, and the otherwise rigid roles of life on Kekopey and how "language provides a detailed look at the boys' sociolinguistic communicative competencies as they navigated the complex multilingual hegemonic borderlands in the challenging sociopolitical context of Kenya's early years of independence" (p. 31).

Gilmore entwines *parrhesia,* the Greek word to express to speak freely or boldly with an implication of the obligation to speak the truth even at personal risk, into Colin and Sadiki's shared journey. "Sadiki and Colin's border-crossing loyal friendship and their invention and use of Kisisi were, in my view, and by these definitions a public act of parrhesia, a truth telling about equality and justice accomplished through their speech acts, their 'voice without fear'" (p. 91). While these events took place 40 years ago, their implications are as relevant and powerful today

as they were as events unfolded. “Colin and Sadiki’s fluid movement within and across sharply contested linguistic and cultural borders should remind us that the unmet challenges in developing successful programs for bilingual education, English language learners, and minority language speakers are not about the children and their lacking abilities, but about our own language ideologies and the deep underlying doubt in children’s language competencies that are instantiated in the foundations of our educational institutions and policies” (p. 134). The findings this empirical research reveals “confronts and debunks the negative deficit perspectives that are so pervasive in education, especially in low-income, underserved, and marginalized communities. All children have much to teach us about language, learning, and culture. We need only to pay closer attention to them” (p. 134).

Kisisi (Our Language): The Story of Colin and Sadiki relates an exquisite tale of the power of language as conveyed through two skinny five-year-old boys who fell into a friendship of love that only their own invented language could express. Their dedication to one another and linguistic creation transgressed boundary-after-boundary previously set in stone and blood. By writing their tale, Gilmore lifts the magic of love and language of that long-ago summer to the world and offers its poignant and powerful message of wisdom. Gilmore’s expertise in language creation, construction, identity, and cultural context provides the solid academic foundation that provides a solid foundation under the reader. Her love for Colin lifts this story far beyond its stellar academic expertise and into the ethereal to illuminate each memory, every revelation of political, social, cultural, and linguistic wisdom to be gleaned from two small boys, their invented language and unabashed devotion to one another, and a mother’s eternal love.