



President's New Year's Reception 2024

Laudatory speech for Voltaire Prize winner Gerawork Teferra Gizaw by Marcia C. Schenck

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As we gather here in Griebnitzsee to celebrate the New Year it is more urgent than ever to remind ourselves of the importance of the spirit of tolerance and understanding. This is the legacy of Voltaire, whose advocacy for freedom of thought and expression laid the foundations for the modern pursuit of tolerance. Today, in the spirit of Voltaire, I am honored to introduce a man who embodies these same principles in a contemporary context, Gerawork Teferra Gizaw.

Much like Voltaire, who navigated the complexities of his time with intellect and courage, Mr. Gizaw confronts the challenges of our era with comparable resilience and determination. Living in the Kakuma Refugee Camp in Kenya where he has sought safety from persecution in Ethiopia, he has transcended his circumstances to contribute profoundly to our understanding of human displacement through his writing, teaching, and heritage activities. Though Voltaire is not known for his writings on displacement, the way that Mr. Gizaw is, I have no doubt that if Voltaire had ever had the opportunity to discuss human mobility with Mr. Gizaw, the two of them would have been up all night.

I first met Mr. Gizaw in the Kakuma Refugee Camp in 2016, while teaching a global history class. He was an incredibly fast learner and acquired the skills of an oral historian, which he subsequently put to good use exploring different facets of camp life from education, to hope and resilience, and the paradox of living for decades under what are meant to be impermanent conditions. Our encounters in makeshift classrooms across the camp marked the beginning of an enriching collaboration that spanned various projects, including co-authored publications, joint teaching initiatives, and enlightening discussions.

In the camp, Mr. Gizaw is currently working for Jesuit Worldwide Learning and Xavier University as Academic Adviser and Learning Facilitator. Moreover, he is also facilitating community-based research for students who use oral history and storytelling to explore different facets of camp life. In addition, he received a grant through the AHRC funded project "Imagining Futures through Un/Archived Pasts" aimed at establishing a community archive within the camp, a testament to the past 30 years of camp history drawing on interviews, video and household items to give testimony to the legacy of permanence amidst temporariness.

Mr. Gizaw's exceptional engagement transcends geographical boundaries, extending his influence to international platforms. His participation in workshops from Accra, Ghana to Ankara, Turkey, highlight

his commitment to global dialogue and knowledge exchange. His presentations, though often virtual due to travel restrictions, resonate with profound insights into displacement and post-conflict scenarios, bringing together scholars and practitioners into meaningful discourse.

His scholarly contributions are as impressive as his community work. Mr. Gizaw has diligently conducted research within the Kakuma camp, offering deep insights into the refugee experience. His publications in top-notch journals like *Africa Today* and in paradigm-shifting anthologies such as “The Right to Research” (2023), showcase his exceptional analytical skills and care in addressing themes like mobility, hope, and transience, as well as education within the camp. These works, often penned under challenging conditions of limited resources and connectivity, speak volumes of his scholarly rigor and resilience.

Moreover, Mr. Gizaw is a devoted educator and mentor, whose pedagogical approach extends beyond the conventional classroom. His dedication to nurturing understanding and knowledge among the youth is evident in his teaching endeavors both within and outside the camp. His involvement in a semester-long email dialogue with Potsdam students studying refugee history exemplifies his commitment to fostering global dialogues. This dedication not only enriches the academic experience of his students but also bridges cultural and experiential divides, fostering a deeper understanding of displacement.

In Gerawork Gizaw, we witness the epitome of a scholar and humanist. A development practitioner, environmentalist and teacher, he describes himself as “enthusiastic wonderer with a strong interest in understanding the human condition” and a “rational and critical thinker, analyzing experiential realities beyond the boundaries of time and place.” I have met few people for whom this could be truer. His unwavering commitment to using scholarship as a tool for dialogue, understanding, and transformation is inspiring. His work, undertaken in a challenging environment, is a testament to his determination to contribute to a more understanding, tolerant, and just world.

In reflecting upon the remarkable journey of Mr. Gizaw, we find echoes of the Enlightenment spirit championed by Voltaire. Both men, separated by centuries and circumstances, share a profound commitment to the ideals of human dignity and intellectual freedom. From Voltaire, we learn the importance of challenging established norms and advocating for tolerance amidst societal constraints. In Mr. Gizaw, we see these principles brought to life in a modern context, amidst the stark realities of a refugee camp. Both Voltaire's philosophy and the advocacy for a right to research for which Mr. Gizaw also stands embody a commitment to intellectual freedom, the critique of traditional authority, and a move towards greater inclusivity in intellectual endeavors. This parallel suggests a shared vision of a world where the pursuit of knowledge is unrestricted by arbitrary boundaries and where diverse perspectives are valued and encouraged. Recognizing Mr. Gizaw's work with this award not only honors his remarkable achievements but also amplifies his voice, extending his impact to a broader audience and enabling him to continue his invaluable work in and beyond the Kakuma Refugee Camp. In conclusion, it is my profound belief that Mr. Gerawork Teferra Gizaw represents the very essence of what the Voltaire Prize stands for. His life and work are a living testament to the power of perseverance, intellectual rigor, and a deep-seated commitment to fostering peace, tolerance, and understanding under the most challenging circumstances. Awarding him this prize also serves as a beacon of hope and inspiration to many who, like him, are community leaders and scholars who push

this world to be a little better every single day.