

ABSTRACT

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Ngugi's Nationalist Shift

(Under the Direction of Professor TIMOTHY CLEAVELAND)

Critics of Kenya's famous author Ngugi wa Thiong'o have long been fascinated with his adoption of Fanonist Marxism in the late 1960s and early 1970s. This shift has typically been described as a radical and abrupt change in Ngugi's epistemological beliefs, resulting in an aesthetic and ideological departure from his three previous novels. This essay attempts to explain this shift by combining biographical information with a close reading of Ngugi's early novels for cultural/nationalist themes. When viewed through a nationalist context, Ngugi's adoption of Marxism represents a discernible and logical evolution in his perception of Kenya's national character. Rather than a break with the past, Ngugi's shift can be best understood as an attempt to solve the troubling problems he observed through his first three novels. While Ngugi certainly jettisoned a great deal of his faith in Western culture and education as vehicles for a modern Kenya, his adoption of Mau Mau as a national symbol reflects not so much a departure with his previous ambivalence towards the movement as an attempt to reposition the nature of Kenyan nationalism away from its traditional ethnic and cultural underpinnings.

INDEX WORDS: Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Mau Mau, Kenya, Nationalism, Gikuyu

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DEDICATION

To my parents, for their worrying and their patience.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

In an essay published in 1962, a young James Ngugi wrote:

In Kenya then, there is really no concept of a nation. One is always a Kikuyu, a Luo, a Nandi, an Asian or a European. I think this diminishes our strength and creative power. To live on the level of race or tribe is to be less than whole...To look from the tribe to a wider concept of human association is to be progressive.

When this begins to happen, a Kenyan nation will be born.¹

Ngugi's misgivings concerning the future in the period immediately preceding Kenya's independence are quite understandable. This soon-to-be nation, which Jomo Kenyatta once described as “a land of conflicts”, contained political tensions along racial and ethnic lines rooted in decades of colonial rule. As James Ogude argued, the daunting task of conjuring new nations out of former European colonies fell to the members of a diverse array of disciplines: “...the new narrative of 'nation formation' constituted a dialogue, not just with the West...but also a dialogue with other adjacent zones of knowledge such as history, anthropology, political science, religion, etc...”.² African writers, Ngugi among them, constituted an important part of this dialogue to discuss the specifications of African nationalism.

It is surprising, then, that Ngugi's early conception of Kenyan nationalism has received comparatively little coverage, despite its presence within his early novels. Critics have been more inclined to focus, first, on Ngugi's Marxist ideology and, second, his controversial discourse on the position of Western languages within African literature. These subjects have

1 Ngugi wa Thiong'o. *Homecoming* (Westport, Connecticut: Lawrence Hill and Company, 1983), pp. 23-24.

2 James Ogude. *Ngugi's Novels and African History* (London, England: Pluto Press, 1999), p. 1.

proven popular, I believe, because of their international scope. Ngugi's Marxist period produced essays concerned with the global state of neocolonialism. Countries such as Kazakhstan, South Korea, and Vietnam entered Ngugi's writing as kindred spirits in the fight against continued Western imperialism. Ngugi's support for African languages likewise resonated across the African continent and beyond (indeed, Ngugi's linguistic argument as been applied to subjects as varied as Peruvian history and American pedagogy³⁴). The subject of Kenyan nationalism, in comparison, has little relevance to those outside of Kenya and its immediate environs.

However, despite the global tone of Ngugi's political arguments, his writing has always revolved around his experiences as a Kenyan. As Simon Gikandi wrote, "...Ngugi's best fictional work was nourished by his dynamic relationship to local sources, his relationship with the East African landscape..."⁵ Ngugi's most compelling political arguments and works of fiction, such as his support for a revised history of Mau Mau and his bold experimentation with African language literature, derive their power from a uniquely Kenyan perspective. Even Ngugi's eventual adoption of Marxism rested on the ability of a class-based view of history to adequately explain the disappointing conditions Ngugi saw in Kenya. Far from a matter of provincial importance, an understanding of Ngugi's perception of Kenyan nationalism and his own self-imagined role in striving to bring about a unified Kenya can be of immense help in explaining the course of his political and aesthetic trajectory.

3 John C. Hawley. "José María Arguedas, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, and the Search for a Language of Justice", *Pacific Coast Philology*, Vol. 27, No. 1 (Pacific Ancient and Modern Language Association, 1992), pp. 69-76.

4 Sonia MacPherson. "Review: Ngugi wa Thiong'o: An African Vision of Linguistic and Cultural Pluralism", *TESOL Quarterly*, Vol. 31, No. 3 (Teacher of English to Speakers of Other Languages, Inc., 1997), pp. 641-645.

5 Simon Gikandi. "Traveling Theory: Ngugi's Return to English", *Research in African Literatures*, Vol. 31, No. 2 (Indiana University Press, 2000), p. 208.

CHAPTER 2

BACKGROUND

In his brilliant exegesis on nationalism, Benedict Anderson defined the nation as “an imagined political community – and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign.”⁶ Kenya, like many other newly independent African nations, faced the difficult prospect of expanding the limited scope of community beyond the traditional ethnic or tribal boundaries of the past to encompass some notion of shared community within the largely artificial territorial boundaries drawn up by the colonial powers. The very nature of colonial rule, which often pitted (intentionally or not) various ethnic groups against each other in competition for better positions within the new colonial order, complicated this process of nationalization by heightening tensions between ethnic groups or creating tensions that had never previously existed. Kenyan political leaders, previously united in opposition to British colonial rule, fractured when faced with the prospect of defining the national nature of Kenya. Members of the Kenya African National Union (KANU), comprised of the large Gikuyu and Luo ethnic groups and led by the popular *mzee* of Kenya, Jomo Kenyatta, advocated a strong central government and the retention of the traditional colonial administrative districts. Fearing the political dominance of the Gikuyu and Luo, a coalition of the smaller ethnic groups formed the Kenya African Democratic Union (KADU) upon the platform of regional autonomy akin to the federal system utilized by the United States (termed *majimboism*) and the recovery of the traditional ethnic territorial

6 Benedict Anderson. *Imagined Communities* (New York: Verso, 2006), p. 6.

boundaries that had existed before the arrival of European settlers. The political fight between the two parties resulted in months of acrimonious deadlock, finally ending with the dissolution of KADU under heavy political pressure as the last members crossed the floor to join KANU on November 10th, 1964.

The debate over Kenya's political organization marked perhaps the first use of nationalism as a political force within the newly independent Kenya's domestic politics. KANU frequently positioned itself as the party concerned with the “nation”, labeling KADU as an organization of tribalists, anti-nationalists, and, quite possibly, violent secessionists. KANU members depicted *majimboism* as a colonial plot designed to weaken the new Kenyan state by fracturing its political power. The early support of KADU by white colonial organizations such as Michael Blundell's New Kenya Group (NKG) certainly did not help KADU's image. The traditional historical narrative of the conflict written by Kenyan historians after the fact portrays KADU and the entire *majimbo* affair as a brief setback in Kenya's march towards national unity.⁷ However, recent scholarship suggests that, far from being a short-lived political whim, *majimboism* has continued to influence the course of Kenyan politics, finding supporters in many different parts of the country as a solution to legitimate issues of ethnicity and sovereignty. As David Anderson concluded, “...*majimboism* may yet turn out to be a more enduring political project than was nationalism.”⁸

I bring up the topic of *majimboism* not to advocate for or against the nationalist project in Kenya, but to demonstrate the complexity of both the decolonization process and the deployment

7 An example of this traditional history: B. A. Ogot and W. R. Ochieng, *Decolonization and Independence in Kenya, 1940-1993* (London, England: James Currey, 1995)

8 David M. Anderson, “‘Yours in Struggle for Majimbo.’ Nationalism and the Party Politics of Decolonization in Kenya, 1955-1964”, *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 40, No. 3 (Sage Publications, Ltd., 2005), pp. 547-564.

of nationalism within the decolonizing context. The traditional narrative of decolonization in Africa speaks in general terms of a wave of nationalism washing across the continent, resulting in a rapid erosion of European control (17 countries achieved independence in 1960 alone). In Kenya, the path towards independence presents a much more complex and confusing story. Even if we assume the presence of a genuine, widely accepted attitude of Kenyan nationalism on the eve of independence, from whence did this nationalist sentiment spring? The Mau Mau movement comes to mind as one of the chief causes for Kenya's eventual independence. As an organization, Mau Mau managed to unite thousands of Kenyan men (and some women) in an armed struggle against British colonialism. Women and children were also active during the uprising, supporting the rebels in the jungle with supplies from the villages. Mau Mau, as an organization, certainly fostered the kind of deep horizontal comradeship found in the imagined communities of the nation, a fraternity powerful enough to compel its members to sacrifice themselves for the cause. However, scholars have disputed the national character of the organizations. As Bruce J. Berman put it:

While Mau Mau was clearly not a tribal atavism seeking a return to the past, the answer to the question of “was it nationalism?” must be yes and no. What the British called Mau Mau, and by constant repetition imposed on the consciousness of both Kenya and the outside world, was no single thing, but rather a diverse and exceedingly fragmented collection of individuals, organizations and ideas, out of which no dominant concept of a Kikuyu imagined national community had emerged.⁹

Far from serving as a source of *Kenyan* nationalism, Mau Mau's credentials as a consolidated expression of *Gikuyu* nationalism rests on shaky ground. The subsequent marginalization of the Mau Mau freedom fighters during the decolonization process further erodes Mau Mau or a

9 Bruce J. Berman, “Nationalism, Ethnicity, and Modernity: The Paradox of Mau Mau”, *Canadian Journal of African Studies*, Vol. 25, No. 2 (Canadian Association of African Studies, 1991), pp. 199-200.

centralized Gikuyu bloc as a source of nationalist inspiration.¹⁰ It was largely the new educated political elites of KANU and KADU that decided the course of the new nation, not the illiterate peasants who had fought for land reform.

The fragmented nature of nation-building is certainly not unique to Kenya. One can imagine that the Whiskey Rebellion insurrectionists in America felt that the excise tax on whiskey betrayed the very ideals of the American Revolution, just as the members of the Kenya Land Freedom Army (KFLA) felt that having to purchase land betrayed the very ideals of the Mau Mau uprising. The internal difficulties and divisiveness that accompany the shift towards nationhood have always provided a challenge to would-be national leaders. As Benedict Anderson argued, a certain degree of historical amnesia has always proven essential in this shift towards a national self-consciousness. Just as the adult human finds it difficult to “remember” the consciousness of childhood, nations outgrow the intimate connection to their point of birth, leaving a chronological gap easily filled with legend and myth.¹¹ It was with this comforting sense of amnesia in mind that Jomo Kenyatta declared that, “we all fought for *Uhuru*”, seeking to carry the nation out of the troubling circumstances of its birth. Mau Mau and all of its attendant baggage was to be left behind, a relic of Kenya's national childhood.

For a young James Ngugi, the events of the past had gone by too quickly to even have been consciously processed, let alone forgotten. While modern scholarship has had the benefit of time to research the nature of Mau Mau as a political/nationalist organization, for Ngugi, as with many of his contemporaries, the Mau Mau uprising had had a profound yet inscrutable impact on his development as an author. It is perhaps unsurprising, then, that Ngugi's early

10 The neutralization of KLFA, the successor, in many ways, to Mau Mau is covered in Tabitha Kanogo's *Squatters and the Roots of Mau Mau* (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1987), pp. 162-175.

11 Benedict Anderson. *Imagined Communities* (New York: Verso, 2006), pp. 204-206.

novels orient themselves towards the past in an attempt to discern the personal and national implications of the struggle for independence. As Ngugi himself put it, “The novelist is haunted by a sense of the past. His work is often an attempt to come to terms with 'the thing that has been', a struggle, as it were, to sensitively register his encounter with history, his people's history.”¹² Ngugi's struggle to register the significance of the past proved problematic for the author because of his conflicting roots as not only the son of peasant farmers, but also a student of the colonial education system, a convert to Western liberalism. This internal conflict would first establish Ngugi's thoughts on Gikuyu cultural nationalism; the resolution of this conflict with the adoption of Marxism would determine the trajectory of Ngugi's future political positions.

12 Ngugi wa Thiong'o. *Homecoming* (Westport, Connecticut: Lawrence Hill and Company, 1983), p. 39.

CHAPTER 3

MAKING OF A WRITER

Ngugi certainly experienced a life atypical for most Kenyans under British colonial rule. Ngugi attended school largely through the Church of Scotland Mission, with a brief period of instruction at the Maanguuu Karinga independent school. A gifted student with a talent for English, Ngugi advanced to the prestigious Alliance High School, one of the few accepted from his hometown in Limuru. Ngugi continued to excel, entering Makerere University College in Uganda in 1959. In late 1964, Ngugi entered Leeds University on scholarship to pursue a postgraduate degree in English, a degree that he would later abandon in the midst of his internal political shift towards Marxism.

The education Ngugi received through the colonial education system should have prepared him to become one of the African elites he would later come to despise. As Ngugi himself recalled, “The emphasis in the education offered to us at Alliance [High School] was on production of Africans who would later become efficient machines for running a colonial system.”¹³ It was within the context of the colonial education experience that Ngugi would first come into contact with the “great tradition” of English liberalism, reading works by Dickens, Shakespeare, Wordsworth, Longfellow, Tennyson, and Kipling. While at Alliance, Ngugi developed into “rather too serious a Christian”, doubtless spurred on by an education that routinely included Christian hymns as a central part of the curriculum. Ngugi's colonial education was not concerned merely with imparting knowledge. Rather, knowledge (and, by

13 Carol Sicherman. *Ngugi wa Thiong'o: Making of a Rebel* (New York: Hans Zell Publishers, 1990), p. 20.

extension, the fruits of modernity) were to be had only through the acceptance of European cultural values and all the attendant finery, including modes of dress, recreational diversions, and religious observations.

However, despite the nature of his education, Ngugi proved early on to be a rebellious figure. In a school debate in 1955, Ngugi argued forcefully that Western education had done more harm to Kenya than good. While books such as *Treasure Island* had greatly influenced a young Ngugi towards English literature, it was the works of African and West Indian writers that truly excited Ngugi as a budding author at Makerere University. While Ngugi's time spent at school spared him from directly experiencing the events of the Mau Mau rebellion, the emergency period nonetheless powerfully impacted his life. His older brother Wallace Mwangi wa Thiong'o joined Mau Mau, retreating into the forests. This resulted in Ngugi's mother experiencing three months of torture at a homeguard post. The homeguard were also responsible for razing Ngugi's home and village as part of an anti-Mau Mau campaign.¹⁴

This contrast between Ngugi's colonial education and the realities of a Kenya in the throes of armed conflict resulted in a great deal of internal conflict for Ngugi. As the son of a poor tenant farmer, Ngugi would certainly have identified with the notions of land and freedom underpinning the Mau Mau movement. Members of his own family had participated in the movement or had been harmed by the colonial response, which had hardly exhibited any degree of civilized restraint.¹⁵ On the other hand, the violent and, as the British would characterize, barbaric tactics used by Mau Mau threatened the stability and authority of the church and school which he had come to greatly admire. As an organization capitalizing on the use of terror, Mau

14 Carol Sicherman. *Ngugi wa Thiong'o: Making of a Rebel* (New York: Hans Zell Publishers, 1990), p. 4.

15 Caroline Elkins. *Imperial Reckoning: The Untold Story of Britain's Gulag in Kenya* (New York: Henry Holt, 2005) provides an interesting, if controversial, account of British atrocities during the Mau Mau revolt.

Mau was difficult to define within the colonial context, its connections to legitimate grievances lost in seeming atavism and barbarity.

Ngugi's attempt, then, to register with Kenya's past involved not only digesting the legacy of Mau Mau and the events that had led up to Kenya's independence, but also determining his own position within the new Kenyan society. While Ngugi realized that his education had not secured him a place in colonial society equal to that of Kenya's white teachers, administrators, and officials, he was unwilling to abandon completely the Western liberalism that he had inherited from Makerere in favor of Gikuyu traditionalism. Ngugi believed that Gikuyu culture had become defined in opposition to colonial authority. Writing on culture in 1969, Ngugi opined that:

...we talk of African culture as if it were a static commodity which can and should be rescued from the ruins and shrines of yesterday, and projected on to a modern stage to be viewed by Africa's children, who, long lost in the labyrinth of foreign paths in an unknown forest, are now thirsty and hungry for the wholesome food of their forefathers. No living culture is ever static.¹⁶

As one of those Africans “lost in the labyrinth” of colonial modernity, Ngugi was not willing to abandon wholesale the fruits of colonial education in a return to Gikuyu nativism. Rather, Ngugi's early novels represented an attempt to make sense the complicated cultural and national urges that managed, with no small amount of confusion, violence, and internecine conflict, to propel Kenya onto the world stage as an independent country.

16 Ngugi wa Thiong'o. *Homecoming* (Westport, Connecticut: Lawrence Hill and Company, 1983), p. 4.

CHAPTER 4

EARLY WORKS

The River Between, Ngugi's first written novel (*Weep Not, Child* managed to get published first), takes place before the Mau Mau uprising, providing Ngugi with the space to explain the origins of the movement. *The River Between*, like many of his early novels, contains a great deal of symbolism and sweeping allegorical images. At the very beginning of the novel, for example, the reader is presented with the division between the Kamenno and Makuyu ridges, symbolic of the division within Gikuyu society. Some critics, including James Ogude, have found Ngugi's depiction of Gikuyu society in the novel to be artificial, relying on allegory while omitting some of the more complex facets of Gikuyu society. The profound insularity of the society presented in *The River Between*, where no white figures of authority are ever present within the community, does not correlate with the general state of Kenya in the 1920s, where a community of this size would surely have engaged in trade with the colonial apparatus. The absence of independent Gikuyu schools in the novel, despite their prominent (if inconsistent) existence within Gikuyu society, also appears problematic, as Waiyaki's knowledge could very well have been attained from sources other than white colonial missionaries, robbing him of his symbolic power as the product of colonial and traditional culture. In Ngugi's defense, however, *The River Between* should be more properly read as an allegory of the colonial impact on traditional Gikuyu society, an impact that reaches a great deal farther back into history than the existence of the independent school movement or the solidification of the colonial structure.

What *The River Between* does manage to do through its omissions is prominently foreground the Gikuyu community and its divergent internal reactions to the stresses of colonialism. Ngugi's purpose in writing the novel can be interpreted as trying to answer one fundamental question: How could Gikuyu society at the beginning of the Mau Mau uprising have become so sharply divided between traditionalists and loyalists despite a closely shared background?

In trying to tease out the nature of Gikuyu cultural divisiveness, Ngugi focuses chiefly on the motivations underlying traditionalist activity within the novel. These motivations are best displayed in the community's reaction to Waiyaki. To the community, Waiyaki represents a foretold figure from the past, come to liberate Gikuyu society from the ills of colonialism as the son of Chege and heir to a great legacy of seers and prophets. Though Waiyaki derives his power from Western education and advocates education as the tool for Gikuyu renewal, his relationship with the community is always defined within traditional forms. Waiyaki touches the people because his voice is “like the voice of the great Gikuyus of old.”¹⁷ Waiyaki's speeches, and those of the elders, is laden with references to past Gikuyu heroes and failures, sources of inspiration and instruction. Even Waiyaki, distinctly not in the traditionalist camp, seeks solace in the sacred grove of his ancestors before his downfall. The *kiama* ultimately rejects Waiyaki because he proves incompatible with their goals of recapturing the tribal “purity” of the old times, diluted by Christianity and colonial behavior. This fixation of the community on the past suggests that traditional Gikuyu culture has become defined by the narrative of the triumph of the idyllic past over the tyranny of colonialism.

This is not, to say, that some notion of Gikuyu culture never before existed. Rather, as Gikandi explained, “the constant clamor for a return to the old ways that dominates the second

17 Ngugi wa Thiong'o. *The River Between* (Berkshire, Great Britain: Heinemann, 1965), p. 96.

half of the novel arises from an awareness of loss and displacement.”¹⁸ In retreating to the past for solace, the cultural practices of the Gikuyu take on new symbolism as acts of resistance against colonial change and become the ultimate means for salvation. Waiyaki, filled with the best of intentions, fails because he cannot live up to the community's imposed image of a *traditional* savior. As Waiyaki realizes, too late, “...the truth had to be reconciled to the traditions of the people. A people's traditions could not be swept away overnight.”¹⁹ The momentum of tradition drives the people to condemn Waiyaki, even though many are uncomfortable with it: “They went away quickly, glad that he was hidden by the darkness. For they did not want to look at the Teacher and they did not want to read their guilt in one another's faces.”²⁰

On the other hand, the Christian Gikuyu within the novel represent the opposite extreme. Joshua, the representative Christian, completely rejects the old ways, defining himself in opposition to Gikuyu traditionalism. Joshua's own strongly held view of himself and his place within the community compels absolute faith in Western religion and culture. Where the members of the *kiama* have adopted a puritanical return to the past in order to deal with colonial rupture, Joshua blindly puts his faith in Western culture, convinced that the old ways are dark and evil. Waiyaki straddles the gulf between these two factions, though not always comfortably. Waiyaki is constantly assailed with doubt concerning his role in the community, the circumcision ritual, and his ability to fulfill the prophecy ordained by his father. This doubt is symptomatic of a crisis of identity within Waiyaki. Unwilling to completely embrace the traditions of his tribe or the zealous Christianity of Joshua, Waiyaki attempts to create an identity combining the two. Even Ngugi's aesthetic development of Waiyaki reinforces this, as Waiyaki fulfills an almost

18 Simon Gikandi. *Ngugi wa Thiong'o* (Cambridge, Great Britain: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 54.

19 Ngugi wa Thiong'o. *The River Between* (Berkshire, Great Britain: Heinemann, 1965), p. 141.

20 Ngugi wa Thiong'o. *The River Between* (Berkshire, Great Britain: Heinemann, 1965), p. 152.

Christ-like figure in the novel; the only son, sacrificed for the community. Waiyaki, a figure of salvation for the Gikuyu, assumes a role rich in Christian symbolism within a Western form of literature, the novel. Simon Gikandi best describes the difficult position that Waiyaki inhabits within the community:

Ngugi's narrative language in the early stories is structured by a simple trajectory: rejected by their families and communities because they cannot – or are unable – to fulfill their assigned cultural functions, the main characters decide to embrace their loss and displacement as the enabling conditions for a new identity; but at the end of the story these subjects come to realize that there is no identity outside the locus of community.²¹

In describing the divide within the Gikuyu community, Ngugi also foreshadows the rise of Mau Mau. As Glenn and Maughan-Brown have argued^{22 23}, Ngugi's depiction of the *kiama* in the novel conjures images of Mau Mau, burning Christian huts and engaging in violence. The leaders of the *kiama* exist as shadowy figures, “lurking in the edges of darkness”.²⁴ The elders practically push Waiyaki into the *kiama*, appointing him clerk with little discussion. As the apparent savior of the community, Waiyaki's position nearly mirrors that of Kenyatta, who tried to distance himself from the Mau Mau movement even as his fiery rhetoric provided it with momentum. As Kinuthia says to Waiyaki, “The Kiama has power. Power. And your name is in it, giving it even greater power.”²⁵

Many of the themes in *The River Between* carry over to Ngugi's next novel, *Weep Not, Child*. The character of Njoroge maintains a great deal of similarity to Waiyaki in many respects,

21 Simon Gikandi. *Ngugi wa Thiong'o* (Cambridge, Great Britain: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 45.

22 Ian Glenn. “Ngugi wa Thiong'o and the Dilemma of the Intellectual Elite in Africa: A Sociological Perspective”, *English in Africa*, Vol. 8, No. 2 (Institute for the Study of English in Africa, Rhodes University, 1981) p. 55.

23 David Maughan-Brown. *Land, Freedom, and Fiction* (London, Great Britain: Zed Books Ltd., 1985), p. 232.

24 *Ngugi wa Thiong'o. The River Between* (Berkshire, Great Britain: Heinemann, 1965), p. 124.

25 *Ngugi wa Thiong'o. The River Between* (Berkshire, Great Britain: Heinemann, 1965), p. 112.

though not as self-aware of his situation as Waiyaki. Njoroge's similarity to Ngugi's own life lends an almost autobiographical tone to the novel; at the very least, Ngugi's use of similar protagonists signals a degree of sympathy with their crises of identity. In Njoroge's case, the crisis stems from his disconnection to the society of his birth. Under the influence of colonial schooling, Njoroge becomes increasingly disconnected from the old Gikuyu stories, finding solace instead in the Bible and even combining the two in his imagination:

His belief in a future for his family and the village rested then not only on a hope for sound education but also on a belief in a God of love and mercy, who long ago walked on this earth with Gikuyu and Mumbi, or Adam and Eve. It did not make much difference that he had come to identify Gikuyu with Adam and Mumbi with Eve.²⁶

Njoroge retreats to education as situations at home deteriorate, "...sustained by his love for and belief in education and his own role when the time came....Only education could make something out of this wreckage."²⁷ Njoroge comes to identify himself more with his adopted religion and education, ignorant of the community he wishes to someday rebuild. The death of Njoroge's father, his expulsion from school, and his torture at the hands of the homeguard shatter Njoroge's naïve image of himself as one of the future architects of the Kenyan state. Njoroge realizes, just as Waiyaki did, that the complex social inequalities of colonial Kenya are too great for education alone to overcome. None of these things necessarily happen as a direct result of Njoroge's or Waiyaki's failings, per se; Ngugi fully intends for the reader to sympathize with his protagonists. Rather, the central conflict between the ideal formulation of Gikuyu society, represented by Waiyaki and Njoroge, and the impossibility of what they are expected to achieve reflects the serious doubts Ngugi had concerning the usefulness of his education and his own

26 Ngugi wa Thiong'o. *Weep Not, Child* (Nairobi, Kenya: Heinemann, 1964), p. 49.

27 Ngugi wa Thiong'o. *Weep Not, Child* (Nairobi, Kenya: Heinemann, 1964), p. 82.

sense of identity. Like Njoroge, Ngugi's eagerness to absorb the teachings and trappings of Western culture ultimately fails to protect him and his family from colonial violence during the rebellion, leaving both adrift and out of touch with the society they left behind for white education.

Weep Not, Child is also significant for providing us with a depiction of Mau Mau, one that is drastically different from Ngugi's later accounts of the movement. As in *The River Between*, Ngugi's depiction of the traditional basis for Mau Mau is less than flattering. Boro, the most prominent Mau Mau member in the book, is described as a sullen and unlikeable character that inverts the natural order of things. Boro represents a group of young men that usurp the position of the elders: "The young men of the village usually allowed the elders to lead talks while they listened. But these others who came with Kori and Boro from the big city seemed to know a lot of things. They usually dominated the talks."²⁸ Boro even tries to administer the Mau Mau oath to his father, something not done in traditional Gikuyu society: "And then Boro thought that he could make the old man submit to his will. But Ngotho made a determined resistance. He would not take the Mau Mau oath at his son's hands or instruction."²⁹ This mobilization of a traditional practice (oathing) becomes juxtaposed with the very untraditional act of having the youth oath older members and women. Ngotho's traditional authority as the master of the household, weakened by colonial land appropriation, becomes usurped by a supposedly traditional movement that scoffs at his weakness and unwillingness to fight back.

That Mau Mau becomes so closely associated with one particular character in the novel demonstrates a weakness in Ngugi's depiction of the movement. According to Maughan-Brown,

28 Ngugi wa Thiong'o. *Weep Not, Child* (Nairobi, Kenya: Heinemann, 1964), p. 50.

29 Ngugi wa Thiong'o. *Weep Not, Child* (Nairobi, Kenya: Heinemann, 1964), p. 71.

Ngugi posits Mau Mau as the destroyer of the delicate peace that existed under colonial rule.³⁰ Indeed, the underlying social and economic reasons for the revolt are never discussed in great detail. Ngugi does not attempt to characterize the movement as rooted in a particular class or provide any clue as to why some of the Gikuyu choose to join the group. Mau Mau in *Weep Not, Child* is a bewildering, confusing, sudden occurrence, shattering the harmony of the past when Ngotho was “...firm, commanding – the centre of his household.”³¹ While Ngugi certainly does describe incidences of colonial brutality in the novel, such violence is never explicitly mentioned as targeting Gikuyu with legitimate grievances against the government; indeed, as Maughan-Brown points out, some of the Gikuyu arrested by the homeguard in the novel are among the wealthiest in the community, their reasons for joining the movement unexplained.³²

It would be easy to read Ngugi's first two novels as decidedly anti-nationalist, given Ngugi's persistently pessimistic tone and ambivalence towards Gikuyu cultural nationalism. However, Ngugi's choice of protagonists provides an insight into his earliest conceptions of how the Kenyan nation could be shaped. Both Waiyaki and Njoroge are students and the theme of education is ever-present within both novels. Waiyaki and Njoroge view themselves as servants of the tribe, using their education to help strengthen the community. Such strength inevitably involves a process of synthesis; when Chege delivers the prophecy to Waiyaki, he instructs him to, “Learn all the wisdom and all the secrets of the white man. But do not follow his vices. Be true to your people and the ancient rites.”³³ Similarly, Njoroge views himself as a future leader of the Gikuyu, using his education to help his people: “The country needs me. It needs you. We

30 David Maughan-Brown. *Land, Freedom, and Fiction* (London, Great Britain: Zed Books Ltd., 1985), p. 237.

31 Ngugi wa Thiong'o. *Weep Not, Child* (Nairobi, Kenya: Heinemann, 1964), p. 124.

32 David Maughan-Brown. *Land, Freedom, and Fiction* (London, Great Britain: Zed Books Ltd., 1985), p. 234.

33 Ngugi wa Thiong'o. *The River Between* (Berkshire, Great Britain: Heinemann, 1965), p. 141.

must get together and rebuild the country....The sun will rise tomorrow.”³⁴

If education constitutes the panacea for Kenya's ailments, it is within the space of the school that the reader is given a glimpse into what a new Kenya may look like. Njoroge refers to school as the place where, “ [the white men] never talked of colour; they never talked down to Africans; and they could work closely, joke, and laugh with their black colleagues who came from different tribes. Njoroge at times wished the whole country was like this.”³⁵ Similarly, Waiyaki's new school draws teachers from across Kenya, united in their desire to help the community. The school provides the neutral space between the zealous adoption of Western practices exemplified by Joshua and the worship of the idyllic past embodied in Kabonyi and the *kiama*.

Ironically, the neutral space within which a coherent Kenyan state can be conceived is a colonial institution. Chege, the seer, foretells Gikuyu salvation through *colonial* education. Even Boro, the Mau Mau rebel willing to visit violence on the white colonists, supports Njoroge's continued colonial education: “In spite of the troubled time, people still retained a genuine interest in education. Whatever their differences, interest in knowledge and book-learning was the one meeting point between people such as Boro, Jacobo and Ngotho. Somehow the Gikuyu people always saw their deliverance as embodied in education.”³⁶ This mirrors Ngugi's own experience, as his brother Wallace Mwangi encouraged him to continue his schooling even as he fought in the jungle.³⁷ This perceived belief in education as a necessity for the transformation of Gikuyu society demonstrates the totality with which colonialism has

34 Ngugi wa Thiong'o. *Weep Not, Child* (Nairobi, Kenya: Heinemann, 1964), p. 106.

35 Ngugi wa Thiong'o. *Weep Not, Child* (Nairobi, Kenya: Heinemann, 1964), p. 115.

36 Ngugi wa Thiong'o. *Weep Not, Child* (Nairobi, Kenya: Heinemann, 1964), pp. 104-105.

37 Ngugi wa Thiong'o. *Moving the Centre: The Struggle for Cultural Freedom* (Nairobi, Kenya: Heinemann, 1993), pp. 138-139.

defined notions of Gikuyu culture and nationhood. As Gikandi notes, this overdetermination of Gikuyu society by colonialism makes it difficult to create a coherent state:

...Njoroge, like many Africans of Ngugi's generation, is asked to carry out an almost impossible cultural mission: to perpetuate what has become a meaningless historical narrative (one associated with paternity, genealogy, and prophecy) and to construct a new vision of the future, the vision presented by the mother who sends him to school at the beginning of the novel. In both cases, of course, colonialism comes to play a decisive role: it is the imposition of colonial rule that renders the older narratives irrelevant; it is the unquestioned belief that the vision of the future can only be realized through colonial institutions that makes the process of education perilous and suicidal.³⁸

Ultimately, Ngugi's notions of Kenyan and Gikuyu nationalism at this point in his career revolved around the primacy of the colonial experience on society. Homeguards and devout Christian converts were obviously influenced by colonial culture, but even the so-called traditional movements, as Mau Mau purported to be, retreated into the idyllic past as a reaction to colonial disruption of old patterns of behavior. Ngugi's own position as an educated Kenyan rested on unsteady cultural ground. Kenyan nationalism, the entire notion of "nationalism", relied on a perspective imported from Western colonialism that could not be excised.

A Grain of Wheat, Ngugi's third novel, provides very little additional insight into Ngugi's ideal formulation of Kenyan nationalism; indeed, many of the themes within the book are the same as those in *The River Between* and *Weep Not, Child*. However, unlike the previous novels, *A Grain of Wheat* takes place in the period immediately after Kenya achieved independence. Within the traditional nationalist narrative, the moment of Kenyan independence should have proven a transforming experience, fundamentally changing the nature of the nation and justifying the years of suffering under colonial rule. *A Grain of Wheat* allowed Ngugi to explore the

38 Simon Gikandi. *Ngugi wa Thiong'o* (Cambridge, Great Britain: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 86.

consequences of independence on a Gikuyu culture that had for so long been defined in opposition to colonialism.

Like his previous novels, *A Grain of Wheat* (published in 1967) centers around the use of the past to find definition in the present. In this case, the independence struggle, the struggle of Mau Mau, is utilized by the community to fashion some sort of coherent narrative through which the post-independence period can be explained. However, like his previous novels, Ngugi's opinion of Mau Mau as expressed in the novel remains ambivalent. Maughan-Brown has shown that while Ngugi gives Mau Mau more “moral purpose” in *A Grain of Wheat*, he continues to attach a degree of guilt to the acts of violence perpetrated by the movement³⁹, at odds with Fanon's opinion of colonial violence as the “mortar” of nation building and a “cleansing” force.⁴⁰ Kihika's presence as a messianic figure lends Mau Mau a degree of purpose previously seen only in students such as Waiyaki and Njoroge. According to Maughan-Brown, this elevation of a more militant figure to the messianic role creates a “certain linkage between individual and collective destiny” with respect to Mau Mau.⁴¹ The freedom fighters provide a determinative role in the future of Kenya as much as the educated teachers such as Waiyaki and Njoroge. On the other hand, a pervasive sense of guilt continues to accompany Ngugi's description of Mau Mau violence. One of the central Mau Mau leaders in the novel, General R., is wracked with guilt over the murder of Jackson, seeking to share the guilt by having all of his followers dip their pangas in his blood. This guilt, which he carries throughout the novel, suggests that Mau Mau violence constituted acts of murder rather than righteous resistance. Additionally, Ngugi's

39 David Maughan-Brown. *Land, Freedom, and Fiction* (London, Great Britain: Zed Books Ltd., 1985), pp. 238-241.

40 Frantz Fanon. *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove Press, 1963), p. 51.

41 David Maughan-Brown. *Land, Freedom, and Fiction* (London, Great Britain: Zed Books Ltd., 1985), p. 238.

depiction of Mau Mau as an organization disrespectful of their elders and the traditional Gikuyu hierarchy continues in *A Grain of Wheat*. Kihika, in defending the use of violence, says:

We must kill. Put to sleep the enemies of black man's freedom. They say we are weak. They say we cannot win against the bomb. If we are weak, we cannot win. I despise the weak. Let them be trampled to death. I spit on the weakness of our fathers. Their memory gives me no pride. And even today, tomorrow, the weak and those with feeble hearts shall be wiped from the earth. The strong shall rule. Our fathers had no reason to be weak.⁴²

As Maughan-Brown noted, this passage is certainly not intended to appeal to the reader. Much like Boro, Ngugi presents a representative member of Mau Mau filled with contempt for his elders and Gikuyu tradition. Kihika's glorification of strength through violence has less to do with any real sense of Gikuyu culture and tradition and more in kind with colonial descriptions of Mau Mau as an irrational and brutal organization.

While Ngugi's depiction of Mau Mau remains ambivalent in *A Grain of Wheat*, his opinion of the decolonizing process is undoubtedly pessimistic. This pessimism can certainly be attributed to poor leadership within the Kenyan state and Ngugi does criticize Kenya's MPs as constantly delivering "broken appointments and broken promises".⁴³ Far more important to the subject of nationalism, however, Ngugi's discourse speaks powerfully about the dangers of trying to build a nation on the foundation of the idyllic past. The central narrative of the story, that of the community slowly learning about Mugo's role as a traitor, provides a perfect example of this. For the Gikuyu community, independence was presented as the deciding moment in Kenyan history, the aforementioned triumph of Gikuyu traditions over colonialism. Mugo, as a hero of the war, is thrust into the role of champion for the community. Even Mugo's name, shared with a

42 Ngugi wa Thiong'o. *A Grain of Wheat* (London: Heinemann, 1967), p. 217.

43 Ngugi wa Thiong'o. *A Grain of Wheat*. (London: Heinemann, 1967), p. 72.

famous Gikuyu shaman of the past, evokes images of the glorious past. Mugo, like Waiyaki, becomes imbued with the community's hopes while becoming alienated from his community; in this case, the knowledge of his betrayal weighing heavily on his mind. But while Waiyaki represented an answer, a figure designed to deliver the Gikuyu from colonial societal rupture, Mugo instead serves as a coherent figure of the past, a concrete linkage between the struggles of the past and the uncertainty of a suddenly independent Kenya. While Waiyaki's downfall served to demonstrate the destructive nature of retreating into the idyllic past to confront problems brought by modern colonialism, Mugo's flawed nature demonstrates the confusing history of the fight for independence, one without a clear narrative with which to grant the nation building process momentum and purpose.

The disconnect between what the people expect Mugo to be and what he really is reflects the actual nature of independent Kenya. The moment of independence, the “day of deliverance”,⁴⁴ proves to be less fulfilling in reality than in promise. Mugo, General R., Gikonyo, and others struggle with their memories of the past, either to forget or to remember. Speaking of nationalism, Benedict Anderson wrote, “Awareness of being embedded in secular, serial time, with all its implications of continuity, yet of 'forgetting' the experience of this continuity...engenders the need for a narrative of 'identity'.”⁴⁵ This process of 'forgetting' the experience of continuity lies at the heart of *A Grain of Wheat*. As the figures within the book struggle to create the usable past out of the traumatic experiences of the independence movement, the Kenyan government moved towards forgetting. This rupture in the decolonizing narrative provided a precarious foundation for the creation of a new nation.

44 Ngugi wa Thiong'o. *A Grain of Wheat*. p. 104.

45 Benedict Anderson. *Imagined Communities* (New York: Verso, 2006), p. 205.

Ngugi wa Thiong'o's view of Kenyan nationalism through the close of the 1960s appears to have been very dim indeed. Ngugi perceived Gikuyu culture as heavily dependent on the colonial context that had come to define it for more than sixty years. The inability of the Gikuyu community to come together during the independence conflict provided proof of the serious divisions within the Gikuyu community brought on as a result of colonialism. Ngugi's perception of Kenyan nationalism as being overly driven by an idyllic image of the past despite the irrecoverable nature of pre-colonial Kenya conflicted with his own dedication to Western liberalism and education. This reliance on the idyllic past, coupled with an unwillingness to properly register the events of the past within a coherent narrative, left the new Kenyan nation on rocky ground. Ngugi's attempt to navigate the difficult terrain of Kenyan nationalism, however, would require a fundamental shift in his political perceptions.

CHAPTER 5

MARXIST SHIFT

While Ngugi's first three novels revolved around the same basic nationalist themes, his later work after 1968 marked an abrupt departure in Ngugi's nationalist discourse. Ngugi's shift from ambivalence towards the colonial experience and the travails of independence to ardent defender of Mau Mau and opponent of neocolonialism across the globe was the product of a period of political development sparked by Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*, which he read either shortly before or during the writing of *A Grain of Wheat*. Fanon's treatise on neocolonialism exerted a great deal of influence on Ngugi's work and would prompt him to increasingly divorce himself from the Western tradition of thought inherited at Makerere. Fanon's description of the post colonial process, which he contended would quickly become dominated by a bourgeoisie more attuned with Western culture than their own and more susceptible to Western economic pressure than domestic calls for self-sufficiency and transformation, explained why the nationalist sentiment of the 1950's had failed to create a dynamic, independent Kenya. Following Fanon's logic, the solidification of colonial governmental structure in independent Kenya and the exchange of white overseers for black overseers fulfilling the exact same jobs were symptoms of a deep class division created during the colonial period. The African elites remained too closely tied to the old colonial system to affect change:

This bourgeoisie, which has unreservedly and enthusiastically adopted the intellectual reflexes characteristic of the metropolis, which has alienated to perfection its own thought and grounded its

consciousness in typically foreign notions, has difficulty swallowing the fact that it is lacking in the one thing that makes a bourgeoisie – money. The bourgeoisie of the underdeveloped countries is a bourgeoisie in spirit only. It has neither the economic power, nor the managerial dynamism, nor the scope of ideas to qualify it as a bourgeoisie.⁴⁶

The bourgeoisie's pursuit of Western wealth led to an abandonment of rural Kenya in favor of the capital of Nairobi:

And the dream of every citizen is to reach the capital, to have his piece of the pie. The towns and villages are deserted, the unaided, uneducated, and untrained rural masses turn their backs on an unrewarding soil and set off for the urban periphery, swelling the lumpenproletariat out of all proportion.⁴⁷

As a result of Fanon's writing, Ngugi came to believe that the continued poverty in the country outside of Nairobi was a result of a political elite too busy amassing wealth to properly run and administer the nation. The nascent nationalism that had united Kenyans in opposition to colonialism had given way to mass rallies designed not to invest the populace in the politics of their nation, but to act as a show of political strength by individual leaders. As Fanon argued:

If nationalism is not explained, enriched, and deepened, if it does not very quickly turn into a social and political consciousness, into humanism, then it leads to a dead end. A bourgeoisie leadership of the underdeveloped countries confines the national consciousness to a sterile formalism.⁴⁸

Fanon's writings ultimately prompted Ngugi to reevaluate his view of the Kenyan colonial experience. This reevaluation would ultimately resolve the internal conflict that had resulted in such ambivalence towards Mau Mau in his previous work.

The first clear sign that Ngugi had resolved his internal struggles came in October of 1968. Ngugi, who had been given the position of Special Lecturer in English at University

46 Frantz Fanon. *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove Press, 1963), p. 122.

47 Frantz Fanon. *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove Press, 1963), p. 129.

48 Frantz Fanon. *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove Press, 1963), p. 144.

College in Nairobi late in 1967, joined fellow professors Henry Owuor-Anyumba and Taban Lo Liyong in proposing the abolition of the Department of English. In their written proposal, the three professors contended that the college operated under the assumption that “the English tradition and the emergence of the modern west is the central root of our consciousness and cultural heritage.”⁴⁹ In rejecting the primacy of English literature and culture, the professors argued for a focus on African literature and languages. This reorientation of the curriculum did not necessarily require ignoring Western literature; indeed, the proposal called for a compulsory English and French component to literature education. However, the proposal did assert that the primacy of place traditionally afforded to English should give way in the absence of the British colonial system.

This paper, which ultimately led to a heated debate within University College and the subsequent renaming of the Department of English to the Department of Literature along with creation of a Department of Linguistics and African Languages, presaged a number of breaks Ngugi would make with his Western background. That Ngugi, an English professor, should come so strongly on the side of African literature signaled an end to the internal conflict concerning the value of a uniquely Western education. Ngugi's willingness to publicly defend a position sure to be controversial within Kenyan society demonstrated the political outspokenness that would characterize his time in Kenya (and result in his incarceration). Ngugi's resignation in March of 1969 over issues of academic freedom further exemplified a developing rebellious streak.⁵⁰

Ngugi's conception of religion and its role in Kenya's history would be the next source of

49 Ngugi wa Thiong'o. *Homecoming* (Westport, Connecticut: Lawrence Hill and Company, 1983), p. 146.

50 Carol Sicherman. *Ngugi wa Thiong'o: Making of a Rebel* (New York: Hans Zell Publishers, 1990), p. 8.

an epistemological break with Western traditions. In 1970, in a speech delivered to the Fifth General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church of East Africa, Ngugi declared that he was no longer a Christian. In outlining his decision to leave the Church, Ngugi described Christianity in Kenya as being intrinsically linked to the colonial period. Ngugi portrayed the Church, ostensibly operating under a doctrine of love and equality among all men, as a wing of the colonial powers that had attempted to exert their dominance over Africans. Being Christian in colonial Kenya had become synonymous with affecting European customs at the exclusion of traditional African practices. In more forceful words, “while the European settler robbed people of their land and the products of their sweat, the missionary robbed people of their soul.”⁵¹ Ngugi also criticized the Church's monopoly over education during the colonial period, which he claimed had ensured that the only educated Africans were also Christian. He also expressed disappointment with the Church's hesitancy in protesting the brutality of the colonial powers before and during the Mau Mau rebellion:

Christ himself had always championed the cause of the Jewish masses against both the Pharisees (equivalent to our privileged bourgeoisie) and the Roman colonialists: he was in any case crucified on the orders of the Roman conquerors. One could say that if Christ had lived in Kenya...he would have been crucified as a Mau Mau terrorist, or a Communist...In face of a colour bar and discrimination against the black race the Church only preached about heaven and the life to come.⁵²

Ngugi's rejection of Christianity marked a significant break with his previous writing. His early works deployed the Christian idiom with great frequency and depicted Christian Kenyans with a great deal of ambivalence, no worse than their traditionalist opposition. Shortly after this speech, Ngugi made the decision to write under the name Ngugi wa Thiong'o, rather than James Ngugi,

51 Ngugi wa Thiong'o. *Homecoming* (Westport, Connecticut: Lawrence Hill and Company, 1983), p. 32.

52 Ngugi wa Thiong'o. *Homecoming* (Westport, Connecticut: Lawrence Hill and Company, 1983), p. 34.

his Christian name.

Ngugi's ideological shift exerted a profound effect on his writing and world view. While the Ngugi of the 1960s focused intently on the internal divisions within the Gikuyu community, the Ngugi of the 1970s wrote harshly on the continued influence of the West within the African continent and the stubborn reluctance on the part of the new African elite to reform. His writing, previously focused on Kenyan and Gikuyu issues (though he wrote often on the subject of West Indian literature), now took on a more international bent. Ngugi applied Fanon's neocolonial model to nations outside of Africa, such as Kazakhstan and South Korea, viewing them as Kenya's kindred spirits in the fight against Western oppression. Patrick Williams noted that Ngugi's treatment of intellectuals also shifted drastically during this period.⁵³ While educated figures such as Njoroge, Waiyaki, and even Kenyatta are depicted in a positive light in *Weep Not, Child* and *The River Between*, *Petals of Blood* presents us with the Munira, a figure flawed precisely *because* of his Western education.

Fanon's post-colonial model ultimately prompted a change in Ngugi's nationalist outlook. Ngugi's previous ambivalence towards Mau Mau had been rooted in his continued faith in Western education as a potential starting point for the transformation of the nation. Kenyan nationalism could not draw from a common wellspring of culture because of the divisiveness brought about through the colonial process. Gikuyu culture, in particular, would have to find some way to absorb the positive influences of colonialism (education, liberalism, moderate Christianity) within the framework of a new Gikuyu culture independent of the colonial experience. Waiyaki and Njoroge represented symbolic agents through which this

53 Patrick Williams "‘Like wounded birds’: Ngugi and the Intellectuals", *The Yearbook of English Studies*, Vol. 27 (Modern Humanities Research Association, 1997), pp. 201-218.

transformation could take place. As a result of his ideological shift in the 1970s, however, Ngugi viewed the inability of the ruling class to effectively provide for the needs of the nation as a direct result of the influence of Western excess. Though Ngugi could never be considered a traditionalist⁵⁴, the faith that he had placed in Western education and religion dissipated under the influence of Fanon's work. Ngugi's newfound doubt in the redemptive or transforming nature of Western education required a new nationalist discourse, one defined in opposition to the Western colonial practices that continued to hinder Kenya. Where Ngugi had previously decried the constant focus of Gikuyu traditionalists on the past, now he would attempt to leverage Kenya's history of resistance to create a usable, unifying historical narrative.

Ngugi's new nationalist discourse featured two prominent characteristics. First, it was directed predominantly towards Kenya's lower class. Under Fanon's influence, Ngugi had come to believe that the Kenyan elite had become too preoccupied with Western capitalism and the process of amassing wealth to respond to his narrative of national improvement. Faced with what Simon Gikandi called the “cultural penury”⁵⁵ of Kenya's middle and upper classes, Ngugi devoted his efforts to mobilizing the Kenyan peasantry as the group that had benefited the least from Kenya's independence. Even the format of Ngugi's writing changed to fit his new target audience, the peasantry. Simon Gikandi has explained Ngugi's abandonment of the novel format (a full ten years would pass between *A Grain of Wheat* and *Petals of Blood*) as an attempt to “represent subjects and cultural situations that were at odds with the language and aesthetic

54 Some of Ngugi's books have been read as critiques of modernity, especially *Petals of Blood*. Simon Gikandi provides a particularly insightful explanation for why this is not the case. Simon Gikandi. *Ngugi wa Thiong'o* (Cambridge, Great Britain: Cambridge University Press, 2009), pp. 142-143.

55 Simon Gikandi. *Ngugi wa Thiong'o* (Cambridge, Great Britain: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 134.

ideology of his inherited novelist tradition.”⁵⁶ Ngugi felt that the novel, as a Western construct deeply connected to a middle and upper class readership, could not convey properly his message to the everyday Kenya. This mentality resulted in a host of political essays and community plays conducted at the Kamiriithu Community Educational and Cultural Centre (KCECC). As Ngugi would later recall, “After I had written *A Grain of Wheat* I underwent a crisis. I knew whom I was writing about but whom was I writing for? The peasants whose struggles fed the novel would never read it.”⁵⁷

Far more than a mere format change, Ngugi's use of the theater allowed him to engage in genuine cultural production. While the process of novel writing largely depended on the author's point of view and artistic direction, the process of producing a play, by necessity, involved a large group of people working together towards a collective end. By working at the KCECC, Ngugi was directly engaged with his target audience in fashioning a national narrative. As he would recall, “Although the overall direction of the play was under Kimani Gecau, the whole project became a collective community effort with peasants and workers seizing more and more initiative in revising and adding to the script, in directing dance movements on the stage, and in the general organization.”⁵⁸ The intimate relationship between the theater and the audience also lent force to Ngugi's nationalist discourse not present in his previous novels. *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi*, for example, vividly portrayed the Mau Mau leader as the cunning, defiant, and legendary figure that he had been imagined as during the revolt. By actually performing songs and chants on stage, Ngugi's play managed to channel the atmosphere of resistance far more effectively than a novel ever could. Ngugi would come to find that, “Dance, mime, song were

56 Simon Gikandi. *Ngugi wa Thiong'o* (Cambridge, Great Britain: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 160.

57 Ngugi wa Thiong'o. *Decolonising the Mind* (Oxford, England: James Currey, 1981), p. 72.

58 Ngugi wa Thiong'o. *Barrel of a Pen* (Trenton, New Jersey: Africa World Press, 1983), p. 42.

more dominant than words in telling this story of repression and resistance.”⁵⁹

If the Kenyan theater and peasantry provided Ngugi with the means and focus for his narrative, then Mau Mau provided the content. Mau Mau, as an organization, allowed Ngugi to sidestep the troubling issues of ethnic and cultural divisions that had characterized his previous works. By emphasizing historical, united opposition to Western colonialism, Ngugi hoped to spur Kenyans to oppose the corrupt practices of the ruling African elite. This re-imagining of Mau Mau as the high water mark of anti-colonial sentiment is most prominently displayed in *Petals of Blood*, published in 1977. Unlike his previous novels, *Petals of Blood* provides a detailed explanation of the economic goals underpinning the Mau Mau movement, thus transforming it from the confusing, guilty apparition of violence present in *Weep Not, Child* and *A Grain of Wheat* to an organization with legitimate goals necessitating the use of violence. Mau Mau was, “Kenya's national liberation movement that opted for the armed struggle as the highest form of political and economic struggle.”⁶⁰ Instead of being presented with characters such as Boro or Kihika as representative of the movement, Ngugi puts forth Abdulla as the heroic image of Mau Mau. Mau Mau is no longer an isolated outburst, but the last in a long tradition of African opposition to Western imperialism:

For the last five months they would occasionally touch on names which were sweet to the ear ... Chaka ... Toussaint ... Samoei ... Nat Turner ... Arap Manyei ... Laibon Turugat ... Dessalines ... Mondhlane ... Owalo ... Siotune and Kiamba ... Nkrumah ... Cabral ... and despite the sun and the drought and his anxiety over the fate of his donkey he would feel that Mau Mau was only a link in the chain in the long struggle of African people through different times at different places...”⁶¹

For Ngugi, Mau Mau no longer represented an attempt to retreat into the mythic past of Gikuyu

59 Ngugi wa Thiong'o. *Barrel of a Pen* (Trenton, New Jersey: Africa World Press, 1983), p. 58.

60 Ngugi wa Thiong'o. *Writers in Politics* (London: Heinemann, 1981), p. 27.

61 Ngugi wa Thiong'o. *Petals of Blood* (New York: Penguin Books, 1977), pp. 164-165.

history in an effort to find meaning within the new colonial order. Ngugi's comments about Black Power can just as easily be substituted for Mau Mau: "Black Power here does not mean a glorification of an ossified past. Rather it means the true creative power of African people through a people's control of their forces of production and equitable distribution of the products of their sweat to enhance the quality of all their lives."⁶²

The re-imagining of Mau Mau that was so central to Ngugi's new formulation of Kenyan nationalism required a great deal of historical revisionism. The traditional history of Mau Mau, written by Kenyan historians such as Bethwell Ogot and William Ochieng, depicted a movement that was far less important to Kenya's independence efforts. Ngugi made no attempt to veil his disgust with Kenya's historians, as he felt their status as Western-educated intellectuals naturally inclined them to try and discredit Mau Mau. *Petals of Blood*, for example, contains a blatant criticism of Kenya's intellectuals in the beginning of a chapter:

Results of the researches on the recent archaeological finds in Ilmorog may well add to the theories of Ogot, Muriuki, Were and Ochieng about the origins and the movement of Kenyan peoples: they may also tell us whether the river is one of those referred to in ancient Hindu and Egyptian sacred literatures or whether the walls that form the ridges are any part of Ptolemy's Lunae Montes or the Chandravata referred in the Vedas...Our present-day historians, following on similar theories yarned out by defenders of imperialism, insist we only arrived here yesterday.⁶³

More straightforwardly:

Who are Professor Ogot's *we*? Intellectuals, of course. On whose side are they? In other words, whose viewpoint, outlook, position, interests, does their interpretation of the past serve, strengthen, give historical legitimacy or scholarly expression? Clearly and unequivocally, that of the "nationalist forces" whose unexamined, unquestioned – by Ogot's intellectuals – rejection of the Mau Mau ideology in the sixties,

62 Ngugi wa Thiong'o. *Writers in Politics* (London: Heinemann, 1981), p. 31.

63 Ngugi wa Thiong'o. *Petals of Blood* (New York: Penguin Books, 1977), p. 80.

forms the basis of these academics' logical conclusions that Mau Mau was not the pivot of Kenya nationalism.⁶⁴

The “nationalist forces” Ngugi mentions can be replaced with “KANU”, an organization that Ngugi had come to lose all faith in by the 1970s. KADU fared little better under Ngugi's historical microscope, described as, “...a black front for continued settler colonial interests. They can all be called loyalists. They concealed their sellout under nationalist slogans.”⁶⁵ Ngugi found kindred spirits in revisionist historians such as Maina wa Kinyatti, whose collection of Mau Mau songs entitled *Thunder from the Mountains* sparked a firestorm over the interpretation of Mau Mau and resulted in Kinyatti's incarceration for possessing “seditious” materials.

Ignoring the specter of state-sponsored censorship, many historians had legitimate reasons to be upset with Ngugi's recent depictions of Mau Mau. As works of fiction, Ngugi's most popular works never underwent the same degree of peer review and criticism as that of most works of historical merit despite the overt use of actual historical events and figures. The degree to which Ngugi entwined history with his fiction prompted historian James Ogude to argue for the inclusion of Ngugi's work within Kenya's historiography. Ogude argued,

Critics have been content to take their image of Africa from the literature itself and then praise the literature for its 'truth' or lack of it without trying to understand the nuances underpinning the alternative histories embedded in these texts. If Ngugi sets out to offer an alternative picture – 'the true image of Africa' – then we need to enquire into the 'truth' of his picture in order to avoid the temptation to erase the problematics and contradictory meanings of his texts.⁶⁶

Ogude further cites Carol Sicherman, who observed that, “Ngugi blurs the lines between history and literature and that, perhaps as a consequence of this blurring of the two genres, the

64 Ngugi wa Thiong'o. *Barrel of a Pen* (Trenton, New Jersey: Africa World Press, 1983), p. 11.

65 Ngugi wa Thiong'o. *Barrel of a Pen* (Trenton, New Jersey: Africa World Press, 1983), p. 13.

66 James Ogude. *Ngugi's Novels and African History* (London, England: Pluto Press, 1999), pp. 2-3

distinction between Ngugi and his narrators and certain characters also becomes blurred.”⁶⁷

Historians felt that if Ngugi saw fit to rewrite the history of Mau Mau, he should be expected to be able to defend his assertions with credible evidence. Ogude felt that Ngugi's depiction of Mau Mau as a “monolithic nationalist movement devoid of contradictions,”⁶⁸ was too simplistic.

This criticism underscores perhaps the fundamental weakness of Ngugi's nationalist project. Ngugi's restructuring of nationalism into a legacy of African resistance to oppression leaned heavily on Mau Mau as a usable symbol of the past. Never concerned with writing an objective history of Mau Mau (a task he left to Kinyatti and other revisionists), Ngugi instead imbued the organization with legend. Though Sicherman noted Ngugi's prominent use of history within his work, she also noted that Ngugi included “legends as well as 'facts' because writers seek to discover 'not only what has happened' – the historians' task – 'but the ways in which things are *felt* to happen in history' And the ways in which things are *felt* to happen may actually affect the way things *do* happen.”⁶⁹ The inability of Ngugi's Mau Mau to truly create a sense of Kenyan national unity could possibly be explained by a number of factors. Ngugi's strong support of socialism may have taken his vision of Mau Mau with it when socialism died as a popularly viable developmental model in the late 1980s. Ngugi's exile from Kenya in 1982 may have dealt his cultural project a mortal blow by depriving him of access to the theater and the Kenyan peasants eager to participate as performers and audiences. Perhaps Mau Mau as an organization simply wasn't up to the task of containing the symbolic force and legend that Ngugi tried to imbue it with, unable to escape its identification as a primarily Gikuyu organization.

67 Carol Sicherman. “Ngugi wa Thiong'o and the Writing of Kenyan History”, *Research in African Literatures*, Vol. 20, No. 3 (Indiana University Press, 1989) p. 348.

68 James Ogude. *Ngugi's Novels and African History* (London, England: Pluto Press, 1999), p. 33.

69 Carol Sicherman. “Ngugi wa Thiong'o and the Writing of Kenyan History”, *Research in African Literatures*, Vol. 20, No. 3 (Indiana University Press, 1989) p. 359.

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

By attempting to redefine the nature of Mau Mau, Ngugi was, in a very real sense, engaged in the process of filling in the gaps left behind in Kenya by the historical amnesia described by Benedict Anderson. Where Jomo Kenyatta attempted to remove the difficult aspects of Mau Mau and the struggle for independence from the collective conscious, Ngugi attempted to fill that void with a legendary organization, a usable past rather than a empty one. From a more pragmatic point of view, the debate over Mau Mau spurred, in part, by Ngugi's writings encouraged a revisiting of the traditional history of Mau Mau written by historians such as Ogot, a history that even Ogot acknowledged as a, "one-sided and perhaps entirely biased historical version of the Mau Mau war."⁷⁰

Looking forward, Ngugi's political development during the 1970s anticipated the later development of his linguistic argument for the cultural primacy of African languages, an argument for which he is, perhaps, most known for internationally. Ngugi's cultural project of the 1970s relied heavily on his intimate relationship with Kenya's populace and politics. Deprived of this source of inspiration in exile and unable to use socialism as a convincing theory, Ngugi would be forced to turn to other means by which to combat the harmful Western cultural influences in Africa. Language became the chief carrier of culture, with Kenya's over-reliance on English necessarily encouraging the development of Western culture.

Ngugi's linguistic argument, though oriented around the same cultural imperatives that

70 James Ogot. *Ngugi's Novels and African History* (London, England: Pluto Press, 1999), p. 33.

drove Ngugi to abandon the middle and upper classes in favor of Kenya's peasantry, is not a nationalist one. Indeed, Ngugi's defense of Mau Mau can perhaps be best remembered as the high watermark of Ngugi's nationalist discourse, his most radical engagement with Kenyan politics. Ngugi's nationalist shift in the 1970s produced literature that tried to explain the problems surrounding independent Kenya and its history in a way that his subsequent work, written from the ivory towers of academia in lands far from the nation of his birth, never could. Though modern readers may find much of his discourse on Mau Mau disagreeable as a work of history, Ngugi fulfilled an important role as one unwilling and unable to forget the struggles of the past, even as the rest of the nation rushed headlong into forgetful oblivion.

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