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## Decolonizing the Mind with Ngugi Wa Thiong'o and Chinua Achebe: Searching for a Voice in Postcolonial African Literature

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DECOLONIZING THE MIND  
WITH NGUGI WA THIONG'O AND CHINUA ACHEBE:  
SEARCHING FOR A VOICE IN POSTCOLONIAL AFRICAN LITERATURE

by

Steven M. Almquist  
Bachelor of Arts, St. Mary's College of Minnesota, 1992

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty  
of the University of North Dakota  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of  
Master of Arts

Grand Forks, North Dakota  
December  
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This thesis, submitted by Steven M. Almquist in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts from the University of North Dakota, has been read by the Faculty Advisory Committee under whom the work has been done and is hereby approved.

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(Chairperson)

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This thesis meets the standards for appearance, conforms to the style and format requirements of the Graduate School of the University of North Dakota, and is hereby approved.

Harvey Kull  
Dean of the Graduate School 12-2-98

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## ABSTRACT

Any discussion of postcolonial African literature requires consideration of both the inherent diversity of “African” and the complex history of colonialism throughout Africa. Ngugi wa Thiong’o claims there are “broad affinities” among the diverse peoples of sub-Saharan Africa which allow for a broad discussion of the common experiences of colonialism, but it is necessary to complement these broad affinities with specific cultural references and historic contexts. This paper attempts to delineate some of the common struggles facing postcolonial African peoples by focusing on the specific writings of Kenya’s Ngugi wa Thiong’o and Nigeria’s Chinua Achebe. Though they are from disparate regions within Africa, Ngugi and Achebe share the common experiences of being subjects to British colonial rule and, later, of witnessing the births of their respective nations. From their common experiences, several key issues pertaining to postcolonial literature emerge, namely the political and cultural implications of retaining English as the *lingua franca* in an independent African nation. The debates concerning the role of English in postcolonial African nations inspires serious consideration of the relationship between a language and its people, the relevance of a language to cultural identity, and, as the Alice Walker discussion will



demonstrate, the ideological conflict between cultural autonomy and cultural chauvinism.

A close analysis of the primary works of Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Chinua Achebe reveals a political imperative from each author. Exploring this relationship between literature and politics, this paper will attempt to present and then address several of the key political issues portrayed by Ngugi and Achebe. To complement these primary works, the paper employs additional secondary sources to help develop a conceptual framework through which Ngugi and Achebe can be read and interpreted.

This paper will not pretend to be exhaustive in exploring the many serious issues facing postcolonial African peoples, and it will not presume to solve the issues it does address. Rather, this study provides a starting point for understanding the dynamics of two of Africa's leading contemporary writers and thinkers--Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Chinua Achebe--and a forum for addressing the complexity inherent to the postcolonial discussion itself.



## PREFACE

Several key issues attend any discussion of postcolonial African literatures. From the potentially ambiguous categorizations of peoples into *third worlds* and *first worlds*, *Western* and *African*, to concerns over ongoing neo-colonial exploitation, these literatures often reflect a common struggle of indigenous peoples against the suffering caused by colonialism. Ngugi wa Thiong'o has addressed this struggle in a defiant way: He has sworn to forsake English as the vehicle for his creative expression. For Ngugi, language is the central issue in the struggle against imperialism and colonialism.

The following study does not pretend to resolve the issues Ngugi presents; instead, it intends to explore certain elements of Ngugi's belief in the political nature of the writer and how this belief manifests itself in today's global society. To that end, the study presents Chinua Achebe's belief in transforming English to help express the African experience as an alternative to Ngugi's defiance. A final issue to be discussed is the ideological conflict between cultural autonomy and cultural chauvinism as it relates to the specific controversy of female circumcision presented in the works of both Ngugi and Alice Walker. Rather than declaring any definitive conclusions, the study seeks to address the complex nature of the postcolonial discussion itself.

CHAPTER 1  
NGUGI WA THIONG'O:  
THE LANGUAGE OF POLITICS, THE POLITICS OF LANGUAGE

Caliban:                   When thou camest first,  
thou strok'dst me and mad'st much of me, wouldst give me  
    Water with berries in't, and teach me how  
    To name the bigger light, and how the less,  
    That burn by day and night: and then I loved thee  
    And show'd thee all the qualities o' the isle,  
The fresh springs, brine-pits, barren place and fertile:  
    Cursed be I that did so!

Prospero:                I pitied thee,  
Took pains to make thee speak, taught thee each hour  
    One thing or other: when thou didst not, savage,  
    Know thine own meaning, but wouldst gabble like  
    A thing most brutish, I endow'd thy purposes  
    With words that made them known.

Caliban: You taught me language; and my profit on't  
    Is, I know how to curse. The red plague rid you  
    For learning me your language!

*The Tempest*, William Shakespeare (I, ii)

Without romanticizing about an Edenic Africa somewhere in the deep past, Ngugi wa Thiong'o strives to reconcile the present state of post-colonial African nations with the turbulent and often misunderstood historical encounter with the Western world. Indeed, this history stretches into our present day. Shortly after the recent bombings of United States' embassies in Kenya and Tanzania, I spoke to a Kenyan friend studying in Minnesota. I asked what she thought of the bombings, and



she replied, "See what your country is doing to us?" My country? Doing to you? Weren't we Americans, collectively, victimized by these terrible acts? How could Betty, a Kenyan living in America, transfer the sense of victimization from *me* to *her*, from the United States to Kenya? As the media revealed the statistics of fatalities and injuries--12 Americans dead, several Kenyans killed and injured (specific numbers didn't seem to matter concerning Kenyan fatalities)--it became clear that Betty's view and mine differed, in part, because of long-standing cultural beliefs. I assume our right to maintain a presence in Kenya and connect that right with the current tragedy only as an unfortunate matter of coincidence; Betty recognizes the illogical death of Kenyans resulting from some covert war against American foreign policy. Our innocent conversation can be read on a level that moves our friendship, indeed the very nature of cross-cultural relationships, into a confused realm of politics, culture, and power relationships. Ngugi explores this convergence of the personal and political in much of his writing.

Ngugi sees himself, John Henrik Clarke tells us in the introduction to Ngugi's collection of essays under the title Homecoming, as "a unique kind of politician who has not realized his potential" (vii). The potential Ngugi envisions is the ability to create art that speaks to and for a collective spirit and community, thus blurring any distinction between personal and political. Ngugi's essays and fiction are different in genre, yes, but his role as writer in any genre is inherently political because "literature

does not grow or develop in a vacuum; it is given impetus, shape, direction and even [an] area of concern by social, political and economic forces in a particular society” (Homecoming xv). These forces move the writer closer to the political potential Ngugi envisions.

Ngugi believes literature is both private and public, personal and collective, but does this dual nature necessarily make literature, and writers, political? For Ngugi, the answer is unequivocal:

The poet and the politician have certainly many things in common. Both trade in words. Both are created by the same reality of the world around us. Their activity and concern have the same subject and object: human beings and human relationships. Imaginative literature in so far as it deals with human relationships and attempts to influence a people’s consciousness and politics, in so far as it deals with and is about operation of power and relationship of power in society, are [sic] reflected in one another, and can and do act on one another.

(Writers in Politics 71)

Politics is defined in terms of power relationships, and the writer’s concern is the changing relationships that form and continuously re-form the social environment in which he or she is writing. Or, as Ngugi puts it, “Literature and politics are about living men, actual men and women and children, breathing, eating, crying, laughing, creating, dying, growing men in history of which they are its products and makers.”



He goes on to delineate three ways in which the power relationships of a society affect writers and their writings. First, the “writer as a human being is himself a product of history, of time and place”; second, a “writer’s subject matter is history”; third, “the product of a writer’s imaginative involvement becomes a reflection of society: its economic structure, its class formation, its conflicts and contradictions; its class power political and cultural struggles; its structure of values . . .” (Writers in Politics 72).

Again, Ngugi stresses the importance of the writer *being in* the world about which and to which he or she is writing, for that is the world reflected in imaginative literature.

Moreover, that world is not bound by time and place. A writer’s domain includes the historical encounters that have led to the current social environments, and exploring such encounters is necessary to gain an understanding of present social relationships.

Regardless of which side we may take in theoretical disputes over social and political implications of a *text*, my aim is to illustrate both Ngugi’s belief in his own political role as a writer and how that belief derives from his personal experience of writing as a Kenyan and as an African.<sup>1</sup> Chester J. Fontenot, Jr., suggests that literature may have a different role for a “minority culture” than it does for others.

His use of the term “minority culture” can be problematical, for many of these

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<sup>1</sup>The label “African” deserves clarification. I am not intending to simplify the diversity of the entire African continent through a single term; rather, for the purposes of this study, I am following the lead of Ngugi and Chinua Achebe and employing the term in general reference to sub-Saharan, “black” Africa. In a discussion of colonial and postcolonial politics and literature in Africa the label is useful because many of the “national” descriptive labels (Kenyan, Nigerian) are accurate only after independence. Therefore, “African” is used to describe, in a general sense, the indigenous peoples of the territories which were to become nations. The term is employed both in writing and in speech based on what Ngugi

“minorities” may, in fact, outnumber the supposed “majority” if we consider population as the measuring stick. If, however, we think of the “minority cultures” as those cultures who have historically been colonized or oppressed in the name of imperialism, as does Fontenot, we are able to engage with his discussion on the role of art in these cultures:

Minority cultures do not distinguish art from social manifesto and “use.” They reject the idea that the work of art should not mean but be. For them art ought to have a definite purpose, which is explicitly linked to social movements and which is to express oppressed people’s social awareness or to condemn the oppressor and propose ways to alleviate the oppressive situation.

Though the typical minority stance toward literature may seem simplistic, the fact remains that there is an inherent drive in minority movements to give art a social function, probably as the result of minorities having realized the importance of artistic activity in formulating people’s outlook toward the world.

(Fontenot 2)

Fontenot suggests that this notion of minority literature is “simplistic,” and his very appraisal points to a judgmental attitude in looking at the literature of different cultures

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refers to as recognizable “broad affinities” that validate a discussion of African values. He develops this concept with the help of Melville Herskovits in Homecoming (page 5).



that has often led to a dismissal of "minority" art as inferior or adolescent when compared to the supposed mature art of the Western world.<sup>2</sup>

Similar to this concept of minority art is Frederic Jameson's definition of third-world literature. Although Jameson anticipates critics who might decry his use of the term *third world* for "the way in which it obliterates profound differences between a whole range of non-western countries and situations," he believes the expression effectively describes the range of "countries which [have] suffered the experience of colonialism and imperialism" (67).<sup>3</sup> Although critics such as Aijaz Ahmad struggle with Jameson's definition because of its "suppression of the multiplicity of significant difference among and within both the advanced capitalist countries and the imperialised formations" (3), Jameson is important because his language gives us a starting point for considering the historical, social, and even literary developments of formerly colonized peoples. Jameson may reduce the diverse cultures that have survived colonialism and imperialism into one neat category, making it necessary to stress that within his definition we must allow latitude to explore diversity, but his reduction allows us to consider the common experiences precipitated by colonial movements.

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<sup>2</sup>The imperial presence in Africa has a complicated history that must be recognized in order to contextualize my terminology. Those countries that have historically maintained a political, economic, or cultural presence throughout Africa are particular to each situation, but in general they are described in terms of being *Western* or *first world*, including both the European powers and the United States.

<sup>3</sup>Jameson's essay "Third World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism," written in 1986, distinguishes these third world countries from the "socialist bloc of the second world" and the "capitalist first world" (67). Although his language reflects the *cold war* political climate of the 1980s, it is still useful in providing a framework for considering the literature that has been produced by formerly colonized peoples.



We see a similar reduction in the definition of *postcolonial literature* by Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin: “what each of these [postcolonial countries’] literatures has in common . . . is that they emerged in their present form out of the experience of colonization and asserted themselves by foregrounding the tension with the imperial power, and by emphasizing their differences from the assumptions of the imperial culture” (2). Steven Tobias argues that even though the term “postcolonial literature” is inherently problematical, Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin have provided a “useful and generally acceptable definition of this nebulous and diffuse genre” (163). In looking at Fontenot, Jameson, and Ashcroft, et al., it is apparent that however problematical assigning a term to this genre may be, the common denominator in each definition is the historical relationship between imperial forces and colonized peoples. Each of the three definitions I have mentioned refers in some way to colonialism and imperialism, and the resulting literary genre is that which has evolved out of those experiences. The problem with each definition is its limited scope, for each colonial situation has its own particular history, and grouping these particular histories together, therefore, implies a contiguity that does not necessarily exist; moreover, the categories present an arguably inaccurate depiction of a dualism between the first world and third world, or, in Jameson’s delineation, a simplified relationship among the first, second, and third worlds. However, as problematical as assigning a distinct and agreeable definition to this genre may be, I want to clarify that I, too, will consider the common point on



which each definition relies; that is, I will examine Ngugi in the context of a former colonial subject who writes from his knowledge and experience of the tension between the British Imperial forces and the resistance of the native Africans.<sup>4</sup>

Nigerian Chinua Achebe is another example of an African writer who is concerned with both the broad tension between imperialism and resistance and the particular history of his own people, specifically the Igbo of eastern Nigeria. Achebe also believes there is a clear distinction between the role of third-world African writers and their Western counterparts. Although Achebe firmly believes in the socio-political relevance of the African writer, he points out not all writers need be concerned with the same issues and admits “the fact is that some of the great issues of Africa have never been issues at all or else have ceased to be important for, say, Europeans” (Morning 78). Because third-world writers such as Achebe, for example, write from their specific experiences and focus on the pertinent social issues of the third world, Jameson, a self-identified Westerner, argues that when Westerners read a novel like Things Fall Apart “we sense, between ourselves and this alien text, the presence of another reader, of the Other reader, for whom a narrative, which strikes us as

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<sup>4</sup>It is necessary to recognize the limits of this statement. The African continent has historically been colonized by various European powers, and I want to stress that Ngugi writes from the particular history of the British presence in what is today the nation of Kenya. Within this nation there are nearly thirty ethnic groups with distinct languages and traditional practices. Any discussion of African, or even Kenyan, literature must therefore be qualified with the recognition of the profuse diversity which is necessarily simplified in order to speak of the common experiences that have produced the genre I have been discussing. Ngugi views his own heritage in the broad sense as an African, in the national sense as a Kenyan, and in the ethnic sense as a Gikuyu. Each of these distinctions still fits the categories I have mentioned above--*minority*, *third world*, and *postcolonial*--and although Ngugi's complex heritage is simplified, the terminology allows me to consider Ngugi in the broad context of African literature.

conventional or naive, has a freshness of information and a social interest that we cannot share" (66). Things Fall Apart begins with a thriving traditional village before the coming of the European, but through the course of the novel the white man appears in his colonial guise, and traditional life is forever changed. The implications of this change prevail today, as African countries continue to struggle for political, economic, and cultural freedoms, and thus the colonial relationship remains a pertinent issue for African writers, even if Western critics and readers feel the narratives are "conventional" or "naive."

Fontenot calls the minority stance toward literature "simplistic" and Jameson proposes that Westerners are struck by the conventions and naiveté of the third-world novel, but each qualifies his judgment with an admission that the third-world reader may have an immediate perspective to understand the art in its socio-political context. Jameson goes so far to introduce an "Other" into the discussion, a reader who is between Western readers and the text. What this leads to, for Jameson, is distinguishing between the Western text and the third-world text in a manner that brings us back to Ngugi and his beliefs concerning the dual role of writer and potential politician. Jameson argues that "one of the determinants of capitalist culture, that is the culture of the western realist and modernist novel, is a radical split between the private and the public, between the poetic and the political . . . in other words, Freud versus



Marx" (69). In this analysis, the Western novelist is not primarily concerned with depicting the collective political issues of the day. Third-world texts, however,

. . . even those which are seemingly private and invested with a properly libidinal dynamic--necessarily project a political dimension in the form of national allegory: *the story of the private individual destiny is always an allegory of the embattled situation of the public third-world culture and society.*

Need I add that it is precisely this very different ratio of the political to the personal which makes such texts alien to us at first approach, and consequently, resistant to our conventional western habits of reading? (Original italics; Jameson 69)

The shift to naming third-world literature *allegory* raises many objections. Aijaz Ahmad responds directly to Jameson by arguing "that there is no such thing as a 'third-world literature' which can be constructed as an internally coherent object of theoretical knowledge"; for Ahmad, there are too many "fundamental issues--of periodisation, social and linguistic formations, political and ideological struggles within the field of literary production, and so on--which simply cannot be resolved at this level of generality without an altogether positivist reductionism" (4). Such a reductionism leads to several key questions about Jameson's argument and the concept of "third-world literature" in general. Can the absolute categorization Jameson employs possibly offer a fair critique of *all* third-world literature? Does the sense of allegory exist in Western

literature as well? Is third-world literature intentionally allegorical, or allegorical in its existence as third-world literature? Do “conventional Western habits of reading” prevent Westerners from apprehending the same meanings third-world habits might produce?

These questions, and many others that arise from reading Jameson, Fontenot, and Ashcroft, et al., move the discussion back into a debate about the theoretical implications of the *text* and the problems of defining *third-world* or *minority* or *postcolonial* literature. As I have shown, any definition of this genre possesses inherent limitations and unavoidable debates concerning appropriate terminology. Ahmad, for instance, questions Jameson’s entire categorization: “The point is that the binary opposition which Jameson constructs between a capitalist first world and a presumably pre- or non-capitalist world is empirically ungrounded” (7). Ahmad proposes that instead of relying on a binary opposition, “one could start with a radically different premise, namely the proposition that we live not in three worlds but in one; that this world includes the experience of colonialism and imperialism on both sides of Jameson’s global divide” (9). In general, Ahmad criticizes Jameson’s categories for their reduced representation of the complexity of global relationships and he argues “there are increasingly those texts which cannot be easily placed within this or that world” (25). Although it is important to note Ahmad’s objections to Jameson’s categorization, it is equally important to recognize the usefulness in addressing the



genre I have been discussing as a product of the struggle between indigenous resistance and imperial forces. The scope for both Jameson and Ahmad includes a theoretical discussion concerning the global implications of considering the construction Jameson calls the *third world*; my purpose in this chapter is to focus on the specific relationship Ngugi wa Thiong'o envisions between himself, as a writer in a postcolonial African state, and his community, which I have shown to be a complicated hybrid of continental, national, and ethnic loyalties. To that end, it is helpful to first examine the social and political implications of the writer in a third-world country.

Because of the tight relationship among culture, politics, and the writer, the African artist has maintained a special role in post-independence African nations. Africa and Africans are not new subjects for literature; Haggard, Conrad, Dinesen, and many other Europeans were writing about Africa long before many nations achieved independence. The essential difference between the Africa being written *about* and the Africa being written *from* is the political characterization and subsequent representation of Africans resulting from the shift in viewpoint. Whereas the "failure in imaginative comprehension of the African character in European fiction lies in the fact that the African is not seen in active causal-effect relationship with a significant past," the "African novelist has attempted [to] restore the African character with his history"; the African character who appears in European literature "has no vital relationship with his environment, with his past. He does not create; he is created" (Homecoming 43). A

useful example of this reduction is Isak Dinesen's observational characterization of the Africans she employs and professes to love in her classic frontier memoir, Out of Africa: "When you have caught the rhythm of Africa, you find that it is the same in all her music. What I learned from the game of the country, was useful to me with my dealings with the Native People" (16). A seemingly sentimental and supportive observation, this description speaks volumes to an underlying attitude toward the African: The African is closer to flora and fauna of the natural landscape than to the European writer so describing it. Ngugi views Dinesen's book as "one of the most dangerous books ever written about Africa, precisely because this Danish writer was obviously gifted with words and dreams. The racism in the book is catching, because it is persuasively put forward as love" (Moving 133). Dinesen's apparent sympathy makes her voice all the more dangerous because it purports to be gentle and friendly: she is not an overtly racist voice, but rather a seemingly friendly one who easily compares her loyal cook, Kamante, to a "civilised dog who has lived for a long time with people" (134). The subtlety of Dinesen's dehumanization of her native African servant lends it an equally subtle power that potentially catches the reader unaware because of her apparent sympathy.

A more overtly offensive portrayal of the native African can be found in Joseph Conrad's Heart of Darkness.<sup>5</sup> Conrad's language and imagery are much less

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<sup>5</sup>A close textual analysis of Heart of Darkness reveals a framed narrative which has a "narrator behind a narrator." My purpose in alluding to the text is to consider the attitudes exuded in the written literature by Europeans about Africa; therefore, I am making reference to Conrad's narrative and not Conrad



sympathetic than Dinesen's, but the racist reduction of the native in each text is strikingly similar. The native in Conrad's novel represents the native--the primitive--in all of us: "It was unearthly, and the men were--No, they were not inhuman . . . they howled over and leaped, and spun, and made horrid faces; but what thrilled you was just the thought of their humanity--like yours--the thought of your remote kinship with this wild and passionate uproar" (96). So although Conrad's text, like Dinesen's, recognizes a trace of humanity in the native, it is seen as a primal and wild humanity that the European has somehow outgrown. At one point in the narrative, we are given a description of one of Marlow's native workers that illustrates this representation:

And between whiles I had to look after the savage who was fireman. He was an improved specimen; he could fire up a vertical boiler. He was there below me, and, upon my word, to look at him was as edifying as seeing a dog in a parody of breeches and a feather hat, walking on his hind-legs. A few months of training had done for that really fine chap. (97)

Like Dinesen's memoir, Conrad's narrative reduces the native African to the image of a dog that aspires to please its master.

The common attitude present in both Dinesen and Conrad is not unique to the European presence in Africa. Tzvetan Todorov tells us that as Columbus journeyed among the islands of the new world, he too noticed the natives in terms of the natural

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himself. In the first essay in Hopes and Impediments, Achebe argues that Conrad seems "to approve of Marlow" and that the text itself exemplifies Conrad's personal views on the racial issues present in the novel. That point is debatable, but I do not believe the debate is pertinent to my present discussion.

environment: "Columbus speaks about the men he sees only because they too, after all, constitute a part of the landscape" (34). In one journal entry, Columbus recorded the following observation of some of his men: "Here, they observed that the married women wore clout of cotton, but the wenches nothing, save for a few who were already eighteen years old. There were also dogs, mastiffs and terriers. They found as well a man who had in his nose a gold stud the size of half a *castellano*" (Todorov 34).

Columbus resists a direct comparison of the natives to the dogs, but Todorov notes "this allusion to the dogs among the remarks on the women and the men indicates nicely the scale on which the latter will be assessed" (34). Columbus, like Dinesen, appears to be sympathetic towards the natives he encounters in the new world but, as Todorov points out, even with this sympathetic view there is an underlying attitude which reduces or dehumanizes the native in the mind of the European. Obviously the texts of Dinesen, Conrad, and Columbus have been written from distinct historical frames of reference, but the common dehumanizing attitude in all three leads to a similarly common reduction of native cultures and being to a level commensurate not with the particular person observing and recording, but rather with a dog. All three appear excited by their adventures and "discoveries," but Jean-Paul Sartre argues there is more at work here than naive exuberance at discovering new worlds and peoples.

In his preface to Fanon's Wretched of the Earth, Sartre argues that an "order is given to reduce the inhabitants of the annexed country to the level of superior monkeys



in order to justify the settler's treatment of them as beasts of burden" (15). This "order" that Sartre mentions can be an explicit command that aids the physical subjugation of a people, but a more dangerous order is the implicit one that assumes the Imperial culture is superior and therefore justified in overtaking the native inhabitants. Ngugi writes against such racist stereotyping by telling the story of Africans from an African perspective. In short, he writes about a people struggling to maintain their culture, struggling to maintain a relationship with their environment, struggling against an imperial force, but struggling nonetheless. Within that struggle lies an active, creative culture. As long as the struggle continues, Africans are not history-less and ineffectual objects for description; they are subjects very active in creating and constantly re-creating their relationship to their environment. Ngugi argues that in Kenya history has been rewritten by the colonial and neo-colonial powers in an attempt to "bury the living soul of Kenya's history of struggle and resistance" (Moving 98), but this very history of resistance includes struggling against a revised history. Achebe concurs with Ngugi on this point, and he has written that he would be happy if his novels did nothing more than teach his readers that their past "was not one long night of savagery from which the first Europeans acting on God's behalf delivered them" (Hopes 45).

This creative impulse, manifested in the community's artists, keeps the culture alive and maintains a communal connection between the artist and the community.

Ngugi knows that traditional African art “used to be oriented to the community” (Homecoming 7) and, unlike Joyce’s young artist living and creating within himself, Ngugi’s artist is always working in relationship to a changing society. Of literature in particular he argues,

Literature results from conscious acts of men in society. At the level of the individual artist, the very act of writing implies a social relationship: one is writing about somebody for somebody. At the collective level, literature, as a product of men’s intellectual and imaginative activity embodies, in words and images, the tensions, conflicts, contradictions at the heart of a community’s being and process of becoming. It is a reflection on the aesthetic and imaginative planes, of a community’s wrestling with its total environment to produce the basic means of life, food, clothing, shelter, and in the process creating and recreating itself in history. (Writers in Politics 5-6)

Essential to these beliefs is Ngugi’s own upbringing in a peasant family during the transformation of Kenya from colony to independent nation. Perhaps it was the tumultuous Mau Mau period, during which “the basic objectives of Mau Mau revolutionaries were to drive out the Europeans, seize the government, and give back to the Kenya peasants their stolen lands and property” (Homecoming 28), that triggered Ngugi’s cultural awareness of what was being lost in the colonial struggle. The struggle was, and continues to be, an effort to regain and maintain self-determination in



economic, political, and cultural affairs. Clarke tells us that Ngugi repeatedly “calls attention to the need to look at African culture before the impact of the Europeans began to destroy its social structure. It was based on communal societies, pluralistic in structure, where nobody was rich and nobody was poor at all” (Homecoming ix).

Within these communal societies, the Africans, obviously, regulated themselves in their political, economic, and cultural affairs. Ngugi never tries to portray a Utopian society in pre-European Africa; quite the opposite, he confronts any notion of pre-European African culture as being undisturbed:

Contrary to the myth and fiction of our conquerors, Africa was always in a turmoil of change, with empires rising and falling. African traditional structures and cultures then were neither static nor uniform. There were as many cultures as there were peoples, although we can recognize broad affinities which would make us talk meaningfully of African values or civilizations.

(Homecoming 5)

Achebe also holds this view, and one of the motives behind Things Fall Apart was the desire to portray traditional village life as an imperfect--but complete--society.

Portrayal of traditional life, therefore, included the depiction of ongoing turmoil, but it also included this range of affinities Ngugi refers to that gives meaning to a broadly-defined set of African values or civilizations.

For Achebe, Umuofian culture represents a pre-colonial way of life fashioned by the native Africans. I will look more closely at Achebe in chapter three, but it is helpful to point out Ngugi's and Achebe's shared emphasis on the value of recognizing a broad traditional culture that is both imperfect and mutable. Culture, for Ngugi, "in its broadest sense, is a way of life fashioned by a people in their collective endeavour to live and come to terms with their total environment" (*Homecoming* 4). Ngugi's admittedly broad definition implies that as the environment changes so too does the peoples' relationship to it, and therefore the culture is constantly in the process of modifying itself.

The most severe change to Ngugi's environment was the movement to *de-colonize* Kenya and return political, economic, and cultural control to the black African. Numerous factors involved in the de-colonizing process present themselves in Ngugi's writing, from critiques of both the old and new regimes, to the choice of language, to a patriotic hope for the future. At times the critiques deem de-colonization as little more than a re-colonization or a neo-colonization, whereby the faces of those in power change, but the uneven relationships of power remain. Ngugi writes, ". . . the age of independence had produced a new class and a new leadership that often was not very different from the old one. Black skins, white masks? White skins, black masks? Black skins concealing colonial settlers' hearts?" (*Moving* 65). This irony, a neo-colonial phase during which the fight for independence produces a class of native élites



who essentially maintain the interests of the former settler class while the peasants and workers experience little change from colonial times, was described by Fanon:

The national middle class which takes over power at the end of the colonial regime is an underdeveloped middle class. . . the national middle class is easily convinced that it can advantageously replace the middle class of the mother country. But that same independence which literally drives it into a corner will give rise within its ranks to catastrophic reactions, and will oblige it to send out frenzied appeals for help to the former mother country. (149)

The obligation to send out appeals creates the neo-colonial phase that Ngugi so adamantly writes against. It is not the direct colonialism where opposites are easily identified, but a new, subtle manifestation of the same power struggle.

Jameson views the problem of identification in the neo-colonial phase as a problem of representation:

. . . this is also very much an aesthetic dilemma, a crisis of representation: it was not difficult to identify an adversary who spoke another language and wore the visible trappings of colonial occupation. When those are replaced by your own people, the connections to external forces are much more difficult to represent. (81)

What confuses the representation is the nature or role of the new, empowered class of natives. Fanon argues that "the national middle class discovers its historic mission:



that of intermediary” (152). So, instead of a newly independent nation building itself, literally and figuratively, from the ground up, the new nation remains under control of the former colonizer through the mediation of its new leaders. These new leaders do not emerge accidentally. Sartre sees them, collectively, as a product of the colonial process and as mouthpieces to their European counterparts. He writes:

The European elite undertook to manufacture a native elite. They picked out promising adolescents; they branded them, as with a red-hot iron, with the principles of Western culture; they stuffed their mouths full with high-sounding phrases, grand glutinous words that stuck to the teeth. After a short stay in the mother country they were sent home, whitewashed. (7)

Sartre’s image of stuffing the mouths of the new elite with impressive-sounding phrases is of particular importance to the writing and thinking of Ngugi wa Thiong’o, for Ngugi contends the manipulation and displacement of language is essential to the manipulation and eventual displacement of culture.

In Decolonizing the Mind, Ngugi addresses the issues of oppression and colonialism in terms of language and literature. The essential ingredient of any form of colonialism is power: who has the power and who struggles for empowerment. Power can be physical or mental; the colonizer uses superior force to gain physical control of a people, but how does the colonizer gain mental control? For Ngugi, the only possible answer is language: “In my view language was the most important vehicle through



which that power fascinated and held the soul prisoner. The bullet was the means of physical subjugation. Language was the means of the spiritual subjugation” (9). How does the imposition of the colonizer’s language subjugate the spirit of a people?

Specifically, “The choice of language and the use to which language is put is central to a people’s definition of themselves in relation to their natural and social environment, indeed in relation to the entire universe” (*Decolonizing* 4). By positioning language as a central element to self-definition, Ngugi asserts an immediacy between a people and its language that will necessarily result in confusion and alienation if disrupted. In short, the imposition of English in Anglophone African societies causes a crisis of self-definition.<sup>6</sup> This crisis materializes due to the nature of *how* language helps to define a people. I mentioned earlier that Ngugi’s own upbringing has influenced much of his writing on cultural and political topics, and nowhere is that more evident than in his understanding of the relationship between culture and language. Ngugi recalls the contradiction between his *formal* education in a colonial school and the more *traditional* education he received at home. At home, Ngugi and generations of other young Gikuyu<sup>7</sup> children learned the history and mores of

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<sup>6</sup>In my current project I am examining Ngugi and Achebe, both of whom happen to come from English-speaking former colonies, and their experiences in Kenya and Nigeria, respectively. It should be noted that English is not the only European colonial presence and language affecting the African continent. For instance, many former French colonies within Africa maintain French as the official language. However, my conceptual framework will focus on the former British colonies that are now Kenya and Nigeria.

<sup>7</sup>There is some inconsistency in the tribal name for the A-Gikuyu. I borrow from Jomo Kenyatta’s treatise on the tribal life of the Gikuyu, *Facing Mt. Kenya*: “the usual European way of spelling this word is Kikuyu, which is incorrect; it should be Gikuyu, or in strict phonetic spelling Gekoyo. This form refers only to the country itself. A Gikuyu person is Mu-Gikuyu, plural, A-Gikuyu. But so not to



the community through stories. The oral stories, of course told in the Gikuyu mother-tongue, taught the young audience that words had value and that “language was not a mere string of words.” The language was a part of the society as a whole. Ngugi remembers, “the language of our evening teach-ins, and the language of our immediate and wider community, and the language of our work in the fields were one”

(Decolonizing 11). As soon as Ngugi went to school, a colonial school, the “language of [his] education was no longer the language of [his] culture” (11). At this point, the relationship between culture and language is disrupted, and we witness the potentially destructive power of educating the African in a European language and the potentially tragic consequences of that education. It is, therefore, the point at which we must consider what Ngugi has come to call the “language debate” (Personal Letter 18 March 1998).

Essentially, the language debate concerns the importance of retaining indigenous languages and, by extension, cultures. Although my focus is Ngugi wa Thiong’o and his experience with Gikuyu, this debate affects numerous people and cultures throughout the world. The similarities in the debate point to a commonality within the colonial process; that is, throughout the world formerly colonized peoples are struggling to regain a sense of their collective identities. There are examples throughout Africa, Asia, Central America, North America, and Europe of cultures undergoing a similar struggle to Ngugi’s, and although it might be instructive to

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confuse our readers we have used the one form Gikuyu for all purposes” (xv). I, too, will use Gikuyu for



compile a database of indigenous languages and cultures and the prospects for their survival, for my current project it is not practical. It is practical, however, to briefly mention one other example to confirm a commonality, or at least a parallel dilemma, within the struggle.

Although the historic colonial processes of the former Soviet Union and Kenya are quite distinct, Chinghiz Aitmatov shares some of Ngugi's concerns about the need to preserve indigenous languages. Aitmatov's motherland, Kirghizistan, is a small republic of nearly two million inhabitants who speak more than thirty languages. For both Ngugi and Aitmatov the struggle is for more than *just* the preservation of language, it's a struggle to maintain indigenous cultures. Aitmatov argues: "The issue here is the fate of the national culture of the small peoples of our time. This involves first and foremost the fate of their languages, for without them, there can be no development of national identity" (62). Just as Ngugi places language at the center of self-definition, Aitmatov points to the role of language in national identity. The concept of nationhood in this context can be somewhat ambiguous because Ngugi and Aitmatov do not always use the term in a strict geographical and political sense. Rather than a national identity bound by borders, they speak of a national identity that represents the cultural heritage of their peoples. Ngugi often complicates it further by affiliating himself not only with the Gikuyu people and the Kenyan nation, but also with the peoples throughout sub-Saharan Africa. He justifies his affiliation, as I have



already shown, by claiming broad affinities among the cultures of sub-Saharan Africa that allow for a meaningful discussion of African values and an African identity.

Aitmatov's Soviet experience varies in the particulars from Ngugi's African experience, but what each espouses is the importance of indigenous languages to peoples throughout the world. Aitmatov goes on to argue, "while language is the most essential element of a national culture, it is also a means of its development. The language of any people is a unique phenomenon created by the genius of that people, and its loss leads to grievous consequences" (62). If writers such as Ngugi and Aitmatov place such an importance on language and its impact on shaping culture, then why are indigenous languages in any danger at all? And, why do Ngugi and Aitmatov publish their essays in English rather than the languages they so fervently defend? The answers to these questions bring us back to the common dilemma within the process of colonization.

Ngugi recalls the disruptive force in his own experience with language and culture as being his education in the colonial school. Generally, Ngugi reflects, ". . . education was not aimed at a knowledge of self and the reality of the black man's place in the world. What we did not know was that we were being groomed to become a buffer state between the propertied white rulers and the harsh realities under which the African peasants and workers lived" (Homecoming 49). Education, then, was the means by which the colonizer developed the native elite I referred to earlier. Ngugi's personal perspective reflects the history of British colonization in Kenya. Fanon tells



us that colonialism “hardly ever exploits the whole of a country”; that it “contents itself with bringing to light the natural resources, which it extracts, and exports to meet the needs of the mother country’s industries” (159). Among these natural resources the colonizer brought to light, and perhaps the most important, is the native. The labor and local knowledge of the native population is an important element in meeting the needs of the colonizing country’s industries. As with other natural resources, colonialism is, in effect, selective concerning the use and appropriation of the native resource. The needs and desires of the colonizer are seen as superior, while the native is viewed as a part of the landscape, to be dealt with in a manner prescribed by the colonizing power.

The colonial school should be viewed as representative of the larger colonial project. Throughout Africa the school, the *idea* of a formal school, was a European import and served to instill European ideas and values. These ideas and values were not weighed in relation to the native cultures; rather they were seen as superior from the start, thus the *teaching* of such ideas and values was assumed to be beneficial to the African. In the specific example of Kenya, coming from the *high culture* of England, the colonizers “had come to Kenya not merely as farmers, traders or administrators, but as the proud guardians of a superior civilization possessing certain standards of conduct that they intended gradually to transmit to the Africans, who might be expected, in the fullness of time, to absorb most of them” (Rosberg and Nottingham 38). This superior attitude came to fruition in the British colonial school, where



English was both the language and culture to be learned and imitated. From the start, the colonial imperative was partly to create an African territory, later to become an independent nation, seemingly trying to *become* the European model. A 1919 report from an Economic Commission led by Sir Henry Belfield concludes, in part: "It is our firm conviction that the justification of our occupation of this [territory] lies in our ability to adapt the native to our own civilization" (Rosberg and Nottingham 390). Such a report illustrates the superior attitude that could only justify England's colonial objectives: that the natives were somehow in need of English culture to overcome their own lack of any sophisticated culture.

One of the most influential aspects of culture transmitted to the African through education, and for many the most destructive, was Christianity. Ngugi describes the relationship between colonialism and Christianity in Kenya as a contradiction, for "Christianity, whose basic doctrine was love and equality between men, was an integral part of that social force--colonialism--which in Kenya was built on the inequality and hatred between men and the consequent subjugation of the black race by the white race" (Homecoming 31). Jomo Kenyatta argues that just as the Europeans in general believed their cultures were filling voids where the Africans otherwise had no cultures, the missionaries felt "the African was regarded as a clean slate on which anything could be written" (269). The emerging Christianity "set in motion a process of social change, involving rapid disintegration of the tribal set-up and the frame-work of social



norms and values by which people had formerly ordered their lives and their relationship to others” (Ngugi, Homecoming 31). This process of change, during which the Africans’ “clean slate” would be purportedly filled with the superior culture and faith of the missionary, was maintained by the educational system, a system in which education, “especially reading and writing, was regarded as the white man’s magic, and thus the young men were very eager to acquire the new magical power” (Kenyatta 272). Interestingly, Ngugi employs the same image as Kenyatta in describing the impact English had on the Kenyan student: “English was the official vehicle and the magic formula to colonial elitedom” (Decolonizing 12). Again, the white man’s magic is considered in terms of literacy; from the start language, especially the reading and writing of English, held a magical role in the life of the newly colonized African.

In some parts of Africa, Christianity introduced new systems of belief and new ways of seeing the world. If we look specifically at the Gikuyu, we realize the pre-European community had a religion replete with deities, rituals, and spirituality, but this system of belief was often dismissed by the missionaries as superstition or even witchcraft. Through education, through language, the missionaries led the early converts further and further away from their traditional beliefs, thus setting in motion the alienation so important to colonization. Separating the missionary activity and education--and by extension the imposition of English--is difficult, for “the first education given was merely to enable converts to read the Bible, so that they could



carry out simple duties as assistants to the missionaries” (Homecoming 32). The missionary and the teacher, often either hand in hand or one and the same, worked concomitantly to *de-Africanize* the Gikuyu in the name of religion. The missionaries’ success was measured in the number and piety of their converts, but measuring the effects on the Gikuyu was more difficult.<sup>8</sup> Ngugi contends that “education was not an adequate answer to the hungry soul of the African masses because it emphasized the same Christian values that had refused to condemn (in fact helped) the exploitation of the African body and mind by the European colonizer” (Homecoming 32). Perhaps the delicate relationship between English, education, and Christianity is best summarized by Ali Mazrui’s syllogism:

The partial equation of education with Christianity, coupled with the partial equation of education with the English language, produced a partial equation of Christianity with the English language. In other words, given that education was Christian and the English language was the very basis of education, was it not to be inferred that the English language was itself Christian too? (55)

Paradoxically, Mazrui describes the sometimes ambiguous attitude of the English concerning the spread of her language in the colonies. Some officials were concerned about the ability of the natives to truly appreciate and apprehend the language; others feared the power of language in developing intellectuals who could meet the colonizer on a rational, intellectual level; others were more concerned with developing

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<sup>8</sup>Kenyatta devotes an entire chapter to “Gikuyu Religion, Ancestor Worship, and Sacrificial Practices” in



“orthographies and systems of writing for local languages” (57). Despite the ambivalence, in England’s colonial territories English assumed a powerful status and became a prominent factor in the colonial legacy.

As we move through the many spheres of colonial influence, we continually return to one major subject: language. Politics, education, religion--they all flourish through the medium of language, and in colonial Kenya that language was English. English did not merely mix with the many tribal languages of the territory; it “became more than a language: it was *the* language, and all the others had to bow before it in deference” (Decolonizing 11). So, what happens to a language deferred? As a new language replaces it, does a *new* culture follow? Ngugi tells us that, yes, the language is both part producer and part product of the culture. Reflecting on how his formal education in English--during which he studied Chaucer, Dickens, T.S. Eliot, and others--affected his relationship to his traditional culture and to his experience of traditional oral literature, Ngugi recalls, English “language and literature were taking us further and further from ourselves to other selves, from our world to other worlds” (Decolonizing 12). Writing in 1979, Oyekan Owomoyela argued that the increase in European-language usage in African communities resulted “from intense educational efforts, which if directed at developing feasible African alternatives would inevitably yield results not as ominous culturally for the continent” (Preface). Owomoyela speaks of the ominous trend of replacing African languages, thereby depleting an important



element of cultural expression, with European languages that have assumed prominent roles mainly through the colonial legacies. Owomoyela adds that it is “wrong to argue that [Africans] must simply continue to live with the situation forced upon them in colonial days.” Ngugi would agree, and he brings us back to the idea that language somehow contributes to a sense of a *self* within a community that also, collectively, is largely defined through and by language. The question then arises, exactly *how* does a language--or a literature--achieve the power to carry one between worlds?

Ngugi, borrowing from Marx, believes that language is both a communicative process and a cultural vehicle. Language as communication has three elements:

there is first what Karl Marx once called the language of real life . . . the relations people enter into with one another in the labour process, the links they necessarily establish among themselves in the act of a people, a community of human beings, producing wealth or means of life like food, clothing, houses.

(Decolonizing 13)

By rooting language in the basic, everyday activity of existing as a community, Ngugi sets a foundation for understanding the importance and power of the relationship between a people and its language. The next aspect of language as communication is the speech that imitates this “language of real life, that is communication in production” (13). Like tools mediating between humans and nature, “spoken words mediate between human beings and form the language of speech” (14). Finally,

imitating the verbal aspect of language is the third element: written signs. Writing evolves as a representation of sounds with visual symbols that culminates in the harmonic relationship between everyday life and the language of a community. Thus, a Gikuyu child learning the language of his or her home community is learning much more than the Gikuyu language; that child is learning something of the *being* of the community as a community. Conversely, the imposition of English upon that child causes a rupture to the harmony of his or her sense of community and language. Moreover, English can only provide partial knowledge, for the “real life” on which the language is based rests somewhere far off.

The confusion resulting from this uneven mixing of languages, in which the “language of the colonizer has a great prestige value” (Hansen 94) leads to an alienation wherein the native comes to equate speaking the colonizers’ tongue with attaining a superior status. Emmanuel Hansen continues:

In the colony the colonialists are the “real people,” hence their language is the “real language.” There is a feeling both on the part of the colonizer and on the part of the colonized that the black man or the colonized person comes closer to being a real human being in proportion to his ability to speak the white man’s language. (94)

Language maintains such a command over the colonizeds’ sense of *self* because the colonizers’ language represents their culture, which is in the process of overpowering



the native culture, thus appearing superior in every respect. Those who apprehend the colonizers' language gain a new power in a changing society, but their power places them tenuously between two worlds. Language is supposed to be a part of the acculturation process, thereby inculcating the native to the colonizers' world, but for the native "the new civilization he is supposed to acquire neither prepares him for the proper functions of a European mode of life nor for African life; he is left floundering between two social forces" (Kenyatta 125). These two forces remain at odds as long as the colonizer assumes a position of power over the native, a position, again, that is enforced by and through language.

The relationship between language and power in the colonial context exists because of the relationship between language and culture. Once the colonizers have introduced and begun to impose their language, a cultural displacement soon follows. Using Columbus's imperial trek to the new world as his model, Todorov records such a displacement from the colonized's point of view: "The testimony of the Indian accounts . . . asserts that everything happened because the Mayas and the Aztecs lost control of communication. The language of the gods has become unintelligible, or else the gods fell silent" (61). *Everything* that had happened was the conquest and subsequent displacement of the native cultures; from the Indians' point of view the loss of language--communication--made everything else possible. Todorov makes a significant point of relating the loss of language with a native faith crisis, for language

is inseparable from culture. Once the Indians lost their language, they questioned the very essence of their cultural spirituality. For Ngugi, this loss causes such crises because “language as culture is the collective memory bank of a people’s experience in history,” and this collective memory bank is stocked with a particular language in a particular relationship to its users:

The capacity to speak, the capacity to order sounds in a manner that makes for mutual comprehension between human beings is universal. This is the universality of language . . . but the particularity of the sounds, the words, the word order into phrases and sentences, and the specific manner, or laws, of their ordering is what distinguishes one language from another. Thus a specific culture is not transmitted through language in its universality but in its particularity as the language of a specific community with a specific history.

Written literature and orature are the main means by which a particular language transmits the images of the world contained in the culture it carries.

(Decolonizing 15)

The *particular* relationship between culture and language produces the harmony I referred to earlier and should serve to emphasize the disruptive potential of imposing *any* language on a culture. In colonial Kenya, as in other colonized territories, the disruption was so complete that English not only replaced the tribal languages, but also ascended to a superior position of *the* “vehicle to colonial elitedom.” This ascension



illustrates that it is the “final triumph of a system of domination when the dominated start singing its virtues” (Decolonizing 20). The very force that disrupted traditional culture became that which the African was to emulate and imitate.

A major problem with imitation in the colonial context is the inherent asymmetrical relations of power between the *imitator* and the *original*. The colonial African in Ngugi's experience found himself or herself between two worlds: not quite English, but forever distanced from traditional culture. This intermediary position leaves the native alienated, an alienation that has two forms: “an active (or passive) distancing of oneself from the reality around; and an active (or passive) identification with that which is most external to one's environment” (Decolonizing 28). The use of English language and emphasis on English literature leads Africans to identify with external forces, subsequently taking them away from their own culture. Literature is “one of the most subtle and most effective ways by which a given ideology is passed on and received as the norm in the daily practices of our being” (Moving 127), thus the colonizer is able to enact its ideology--in other words, its culture--by setting its own literature as a norm. Such action continues in the neo-colonial state.

During the 1994 and 1995 school years, while teaching English at a secondary school in Nyeri, Kenya, I was obliged to teach Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet. The Ministry of Education had selected the play to be read by all secondary school students



trying to pass their certificate exam.<sup>9</sup> Not only were the students forced to grapple with an archaic version of English--for many, their third language--but they were also confronted with a story based, in part, on European concepts of romantic love and aristocratic conventions--concepts that did not exist in traditional Gikuyu culture. Because Shakespeare is seen as a representative of the superior, dominating force, students reading him are led to believe that Romeo and Juliet also represents a superior culture. They are removed from the history of the play, and the culture that has produced it and continues to re-invent it is as foreign as the language. The message, however, is clear to the student: if you wish to advance your education, thereby seizing the opportunity an education affords, you must study this play, this language, this culture. Advancement in the system is proportional to the students' apprehension of these foreign cultural standards. Here we can see the active--or passive--alienation Ngugi defines. Students are carried between worlds and left in a confused state somewhere between cultures. One could argue, of course, that Shakespeare's themes transcend cultural difference and explore the *human condition*; that great literature is not bound by cultural constraints and should be accessible to all. If this is true, then perhaps it is not the general use of Shakespeare that is potentially so harmful, but the presentation of Shakespeare as a playwright portraying a *superior* culture.

To combat this tendency of European-based literature assuming a superiority, the African writer must take an active role in reversing the alienating power of

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<sup>9</sup>The certificate exam is a comprehensive exam administered following the completion of secondary



literature. If focusing on European literatures and languages led the African away from traditional beliefs and values, then strengthening the validity of African languages and literatures may lead back to those beliefs and values; in short, one way to overcome the forces of cultural oppression is to reclaim traditional language and literature. Ngugi has taken an active role in this struggle, and it is a role that he has been considering for much of his career. Though his early novels were written in English, Ngugi never felt comfortable as an *African writer* publishing works in English. As early as 1967 he was quoted as saying, "I have reached a crisis. I don't know whether it is worth any longer writing in English," and by 1977 he was "becoming increasingly uneasy about the English language" (Decolonizing 72). As the title of his book infers, the continued use of English perpetuates the colonization by holding the African mind captive in English images and cultural associations. In a defiant statement preceding Decolonizing the Mind, Ngugi takes his discomfort with English to the extreme: "This book is my farewell to English as a vehicle for any of my writings. From now on it is Gikuyu and KiSwahili all the way" (xiv). Ngugi continues to publish essays and criticism in English, but since this declaration his novels and plays have been written in Gikuyu or KiSwahili and available in English through translation.

His defiance raises numerous questions about language and imperialism, questions that lead us back into the complex relationships among culture, language, education, power, Christianity, literature, and politics. Ngugi calls for a return to

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school. The results of the exam determine which students get places in the national universities.



African languages rather than advocating a transformation of European languages into some workable medium for Africans: for Ngugi, a people and its language are inseparable. Refusing to write in English, then, is as much an affirmation of his own culture as it is a denunciation of European-based culture, and Ngugi writes: "I believe that my writing in Gikuyu language, a Kenyan language, an African language, is part and parcel of the anti-imperialist struggles of Kenyan and African peoples"

(Decolonizing 28). Through *true* African literature, written in the languages of the African peoples, Ngugi believes the harmony of African culture can be reclaimed and the African peoples can again control their cultural expression.

Not all African writers take as defiant a stand as Ngugi. Many believe in the power of English as a language that crosses tribal differences and a language that can be appropriated for use in the post-colonial world. The role of European languages in independent African countries leads to a complex discussion of traditional African orature, colonial legacies, and neo-colonial realities. Ngugi's stand is clear, but others disagree. Chinua Achebe, for example, dispels Ngugi's adamance and claims that the reality of present day Africa dictates that European languages can be appropriated to carry the African experience. I will examine the relationship between Achebe's politics and writing more specifically in chapter three, but first I want to explore the political and literary implications in the English translation of Ngugi's most recent novel, Matigari.



## CHAPTER 2

### MATIGARI: NGUGI'S AFRICAN NOVEL

Great love I saw there,  
Among the women and the children.  
We shared even the single bean  
That fell upon the ground.

(Matigari 6)

By the mid-1960s, Ngugi wa Thiong'o was gaining acclaim as one of East Africa's burgeoning young novelists. In a four year span he published three English-language novels--Weep Not, Child (1964), The River Between (1965), and A Grain of Wheat (1967)--dealing with Kenya's struggle for independence and the emerging conflicts in post-independence Kenya. The novels depicted the struggles facing the young nation and, perhaps in retrospect only, warned of future variations of the colonial struggle. By the mid-1970s, Ngugi found himself detained in a maximum security prison without being charged and without being given a trial. By 1982, without ever being formally charged by the Kenyan government, Ngugi had gone from a promising intellectual, to a detainee, and, finally, to an exile. To this day, his "relationship to the Kenya regime is one of mutual opposition," and he is "still in

exile" (Personal letter). I have established that, for Ngugi, to be a writer is to be a politician, and as he faced possible exile Ngugi tried to convince himself that he "was not going to be one of James Joyce's heroes, obeying only the laws of [his] imagination on the banks of the Thames or Seine, or in a new Bloomsbury around Bedford Square" (Moving 103). He remained adamant in his conviction that he had a role to play in postcolonial Kenya; that as a writer he could rally people against the economic, political, and cultural forces of neo-colonialism. Shortly before his planned return to Kenya in 1982, however, Ngugi received a message at his London hotel that transformed the possibility of exile into stark reality. The message--which read "A red carpet awaits you at Jomo Kenyatta airport on your return"--was a warning that Ngugi "was due for arrest and another detention without trial, or worse . . ." (Moving 103) upon returning to his homeland. Ngugi took the warning seriously, for two of his former colleagues had already left Kenya to avoid detention, and he began his unofficial exile.

How did Ngugi wa Thiong'o, over the course of 18 years, go from a promising intellectual to a detainee and, eventually, to an exile? Though the full answer may never be known, three significant events begin to explain Ngugi's evolution. First, as a lecturer in the English Department at the University of Nairobi in 1968, Ngugi became a key figure in what he calls the "great Nairobi literature debate" (Decolonizing 89). The then head of the department, Dr. James Stewart, submitted a proposal concerning



the future development of the English Department that contained two “crucial sentences” that Ngugi and two of his colleagues could neither accept nor ignore. Dr. Stewart proposed:

The English department has had a long history at this college and has built up a strong syllabus which *by its study of the historic continuity of a single culture throughout the period of emergence of the modern west* makes it an important companion to History and to Philosophy and Religious Studies. However, it is bound to become less *British*, more open to other writing in English (American, Caribbean, African, Commonwealth) and also to continental writing, for comparative purposes. (Ngugi’s italics; Decolonizing 89)

These sentences were crucial because they expressed an attitude that continued to marginalize African culture by implying the “modern west” was somehow central to the mission of the University. Ngugi and his colleagues--Owuor Anyumba and Taban Lo Liyong--developed an understandably controversial rebuttal to Stewart’s proposal.

In part, they argued:

We reject the primacy of English literature and cultures. The aim, in short, should be to orientate ourselves towards placing Kenya, East Africa and then Africa in the centre. All other things are to be considered in their relevance to our situation and their contribution towards understanding ourselves. . . . We want to establish the centrality of Africa in the department. . . . With Africa at



the centre of things, not existing as an appendix or a satellite of other countries and literatures, things must be seen from the African perspective.

(Decolonizing 94)<sup>1</sup>

In order to place Africa at the center, the three lecturers called for an emphasis on traditional orature, the rich store of pre-European oral literature that helped to define the many native cultures. The syllabus was eventually reworked to accommodate many of the lecturers' demands; in addition, and perhaps more importantly for Ngugi's personal development, the debate catapulted him into the politics of language and literature in Kenya's postcolonial society.

Another important event in Ngugi's political evolution, and one that attracted the attention of the Kenyan government, was the publication of Petals of Blood in 1977. Unlike Ngugi's previous novels, Petals of Blood was a veiled criticism of the new regime. An ambitious novel, it portrays the disillusionment in newly independent Kenya by exposing the reality that a Kenyan government could be just as corrupt and harsh as the colonial governments of the past. Opposing this corruption is the power of the common Kenyan, the peasantry. Adeleke Adeeko argues that in the novel, "Ngugi wants to plot, in theoretically feasible terms, a sympathetic and realistic portrayal of the revolutionary potential of the peasantry" (182). The critique of governmental corruption and vision of an empowered peasantry are present throughout the novel, as Ngugi "presents a world which calls for historical and cultural repositioning" (Kessler

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<sup>1</sup> The full paper is published in the Appendix of Ngugi's book, Homecoming.



75). Ngugi clearly reflects a dissatisfaction with the post independence Kenyan regime, and his novel presents a challenge to the independent African nation.

Perhaps the final factor leading to Ngugi's arrest was his involvement in the Kamiriithu Community Education and Cultural Centre. The center served the local villagers with, among other activities, adult literacy programs and dramatic productions. In 1977, Ngugi and Ngugi wa Mirii co-wrote *Ngaahika Ndeenda*--a Gikuyu-language play they translated as I Will Marry When I Want--and began working to produce the play for the outdoor theater at Kamiriithu. The play "reflected the contemporary social conditions of the working people as well as their history of resistance" (Moving 93), and for Ngugi the experience "amounted to an 'epistemological break'" with his past (Decolonizing 44). Ngugi broke from his past because this Gikuyu-language project was truly an artistic expression derived from an African perspective--a perspective he seemed distanced from through his years of reading English in colonial and European institutions--and produced in an African language. The play opened on October 2, 1977; Kenya's government banned any further productions on November 16, 1977; Ngugi was imprisoned on December 31, 1977; he was released on December 12, 1978; the government outlawed Kamiriithu Community Education and Cultural Centre on March 11, 1982; the government razed the theater to the ground on March 12, 1982. In Ngugi's mind, by destroying the theater the government showed "its anti-people neo-colonial colours" (Decolonizing



61), as well as its determination to maintain control over the cultural expression of the “peasantry.”

These three events--the Nairobi literature debate, Petals of Blood, and I Will Marry When I Want--show the dimensions of Ngugi's growing awareness of the importance of maintaining and developing traditional art forms and his growing involvement in the politics of language and literature. At Kamiriithu, Ngugi's experience working with Gikuyu led him to consider the implications of language in his writing. Foremost among these implications was the question of audience. Who was Ngugi writing for? Working in his mother tongue answered that question: “the question of audience settled the problem of language choice; and the language choice settled the question of audience” (Decolonizing 44). This logic led to Ngugi's next step as a novelist: to write a novel in Gikuyu. Ngugi's challenge was complicated by his detention in 1977, but imprisonment only hindered his writing, it did not stop it. Ngugi wrote his first Gikuyu novel while in prison; because he didn't have access to paper, he had to write the first draft of Caitani Mutharaba-ini (Devil on the Cross) on toilet paper. Ngugi saw the irony in this drafting process, and he recognized that paper was only a part of the challenge he had undertaken:

Free thoughts on toilet-paper! I had deliberately given myself a difficult task. I had resolved to use a language which did not have a modern novel, a challenge to myself, and a way of affirming my faith in the possibilities of the languages



of all the different Kenyan nationalities, languages whose development as vehicles for the Kenyan people's anti-imperialist struggles had been actively suppressed by the British colonial regime (1895-1963) and by the neo-colonial regime. . . . (Detained 8)

In essence, Ngugi was experimenting with a new genre: the African novel. Unlike his previous novels, which relied heavily on the European tradition he had studied, this new novel would reclaim the author's relationship to Gikuyu culture and language.

The most important shift for Ngugi in developing Devil on the Cross was his appropriation of traditional orature. Early in his career, Ngugi had been praised for his "pure and direct" language and the fact that his "characters [used] no pidgin and [spoke] no proverbs" (Tibble 83), but he admits that in Devil on the Cross he "borrowed heavily from forms of oral narrative, particularly the conversational tone, the fable, proverbs, songs and the whole tradition of poetic self-praise or praise of others" (Decolonizing 78). His use of Gikuyu as the vehicle for the novel contributed to this stylistic shift, and although his subject matter was to be the "historical reality of a neo-colony," his use of the oral tradition challenged critics who had already categorized him as a realist. Traditional orature was full of "animal characters, of half-man-half-beast and of human beings all intermingling and interacting" (Decolonizing 65), thus any borrowing from such a fantastic heritage would necessarily defy traditional concepts of realism. Critical categorization can be problematic, as it tends



to limit the breadth of understanding and interpreting an artist, and it was clear Ngugi had employed a new style--a "new realism" F. Odun Balogun describes as "a judicious merging of elements of formal realism with the techniques of oral narrative at all levels of the novel's composition: subject matter, setting, point of view, characterization, plot, and narrative language" (358). Ngugi clearly did more than just write a novel in Gikuyu; he wrote a Gikuyu novel. Perhaps the greatest indicator of this accomplishment extends beyond Balogun's analysis of the novel's composition and into an analysis of its reception.

Ngugi undertook to write a Gikuyu-language novel after his experience at Kamiriithu stirred his devotion to the peasantry's desire for cultural expression, and the reception of Devil on the Cross confirmed the potential of this desire. His novel was "received into the age old tradition of storytelling around the fireside; and the tradition of group reception of art that enhances the aesthetic pleasure and provokes interpretation, comments and discussions" (Decolonizing 83). Instead of private readings in school libraries, the novel "was read in buses, bars, and other public settings" (Wise 134), and it became a living narrative, its presentation dependent on the voice and character of its narrator. For those who could not read, the impromptu oral performances offered access to the tale and the subsequent discussions. Similar to traditional folk literature, which was "accessible in a certain measure to the whole African community: men, women, children, young people, adults, and the elderly"



(Makouta and Mboukou 15), the emerging orality of Ngugi's narrative connected the novel to its community, for orature suggests a community of readers and listeners. Ngugi had, in part, achieved what he had set out to do: write a Gikuyu-language novel accessible to those for and about whom it was written. The form of Devil on the Cross became as important as--if not more important than--the story, for the "most essential element of the oral tale . . . may be the orality of the tale itself, the fact that the oral tale is never affixed on paper like the written tale, but is experienced as an event in the world of sound" (Wise 138). That world of sound was the world of traditional orature; while writing Devil on the Cross in prison, Ngugi had wanted to "reconnect [himself] to the community from which [he] had been so brutally cut by the neo-colonial regime in Kenya" (Moving 106), and what better way to reconnect than by redefining the limits of the community's cultural expression?

Already having rejected English as the vehicle for his writings, and already having experimented with Devil on the Cross, Ngugi published another Gikuyu novel in 1986. Like Devil on the Cross, Matigari represents both a significant shift from Ngugi's early novels and a departure from Western categorization through its merging of different genres. Balogun goes so far to say that the "new realism" Ngugi had experimented with in Devil on the Cross was "perfected in Matigari" (358). Perfect or not, Matigari is the most sophisticated of Ngugi's Gikuyu-language works available in translation, and his experimentation with the new genre has created a "hybridized" art,



enabling a dialogical relationship between European and local culture” (Lovesey 158). Because Matigari, as an example of the new hybrid, is rooted in Gikuyu culture, this new dialogical relationship necessitates a conversation based on the premise of equality; that is, African novels, unlike the “Afro-European novels” written by Africans in European languages and modeled after European forms, will not respond to the same critical analysis as Western novels because they are, in essence, a non-Western genre.

Ngugi did not set out to satisfy Western critics, and despite his “use of Western stories and ideas, his decision to write Matigari in Gikuyu defines his primary audience as an African one” (Tobias 174). This decision to define his primary audience through his choice of language has numerous implications, including the inevitable discussions generated by the reception of his secondary audience. The African novels are meant primarily for African audiences, and thus “non-African readers . . . may well be unable to identify [them] for what they are, a new African literature designed primarily for a Kenyan audience of exploited peasants and workers” (Lovesey 155). Ngugi had been considering this shift to write for an African audience, even at the peril of distancing his non-African readers, for some time. In Moving the Centre he recalls, “I had just published A Grain of Wheat, a novel that dealt with the Kenya people’s struggle for independence. But the very people about whom I was writing were never going to read the novel or have it read for them. I had carefully sealed their lives in a linguistic case” (107). His experimental novels certainly resist sealing the lives of



Kenyans in any case, and the readers he is primarily concerned with are able to enliven the narratives by using them in the traditional sense of oral stories: the stories are meant to be performed and heard and not just read.

By reconnecting with his primary audience Ngugi limits immediate access to his novels to those who speak Gikuyu, but he is no way an isolationist. Ngugi doesn't intend for his works to be sealed in a new case, this one bound by the Gikuyu language and culture. Instead, he aims to emphasize the centrality of Gikuyu culture to his art by writing in his mother tongue and making his stories available to a wider audience through translation. The order of translation lends validity to the Gikuyu language and culture; the act of translation allows for the trans-cultural dialogical relationship I've already mentioned. Translation from Gikuyu to Western languages opens the novels to the world literary scene, but more important for Ngugi is the translation among African languages.

Through translation, Ngugi sees a "kind of communication between African languages" that forms "the real foundation of a genuinely African novel" (Decolonizing 84). Once this foundation for the African novel is firmly set, the dialogue among all Africans through literature--without having to work through a European conduit--awakens a potential for a new, invigorated African literature that would be the "foundation of a truly African sensibility in the written arts," as well as helping form the foundation for a national culture and "sensibility" (Decolonizing 85).



Ngugi believes it is essential to communicate directly between various African languages, but not all African writers share his view. For instance, Chinua Achebe believes that on the collective level the English language can serve as a common vehicle for inter-tribal communication, and that on the personal level it can “carry the weight of [his] African experience” as long as the language is transformed and altered to “its new African surroundings” (*Morning* 62). I will explore Achebe’s alternative view more thoroughly in the next chapter, but for now I want to consider, specifically, how *Matigari* fulfills the potential Ngugi envisions for the African novel.

Although Ngugi’s choice of language for *Matigari* is essential to his political beliefs in reclaiming cultural agency, the act of using Gikuyu alone does not necessarily empower the novel as a postcolonial statement. Steven Tobias argues that *Matigari* “can be considered a definitive postcolonial novel as it sets a traditional Gikuyu folktale in the context of an unnamed contemporary African country” (163); in other words, the marriage between form and content define Ngugi’s narrative as a postcolonial, African novel. Ngugi also recognizes the importance of both content and form, for he believes, “content is ultimately the arbiter of form” (*Decolonizing* 78). In *Matigari* this relationship begins with the title itself. The title character’s full name--*Matigari ma Njiruungi*--translates as “the patriots who survived the bullets” (20); that is, those warriors who had survived the fight for liberation from the colonial power. Ngugi uses the plural name to emphasize what *Matigari* represents--the patriots’ collective struggle



for freedom, even after independence. Matigari embodies the strength and will of a people who refuse to surrender to the forces of neo-colonialism. Matigari himself, a fictional character, became the target of these very real forces after the novel was published in 1986. Matigari was received much like Devil on the Cross, and the novel was read aloud and discussed throughout Kenya. The government heard of these discussions of a man named Matigari roaming the country talking about truth and justice, and “there were orders for his immediate arrest” (Matigari viii). When it was revealed Matigari was a character in a book, and not an actual dissident, the government decided to arrest the fictional Matigari nonetheless. The book was removed from all shops in February 1987, and Matigari was effectively detained. Matigari’s arrest exemplifies Ngugi’s belief in the political implications and power of literature, while Matigari’s narrative typifies the potential of the African novel.

To understand how intricately Matigari relates to traditional orature, it is helpful to realize that the novel is based on an oral story of a man searching for a cure to an illness. The traditional story, like Matigari, “dispenses with fixed time and place . . . [and] it depends on the rhythmic restatement of the motif of search” (Matigari vii). Ngugi retells the story, which would have been known to much of his primary audience, replacing the search for a cure with a search for truth and justice. Such alteration was not uncommon in traditional storytelling. Chinua Achebe points out that from his perspective, “one of the most critical consequences of the transition from oral



traditions to written forms of literature is the emergence of individual authorship” (Hopes 47). In traditional orature, the stories belong to the community and “the story told by the fireside does not belong to the storyteller once he has let it out of his mouth” (47). Although the story may be communal, the storyteller imprints his or her creativity through the delivery. Ngugi recalls that “. . . there were good and bad storytellers. A good one could tell the same story over and over again, and it would always be fresh to us, the listeners. He or she could tell a story told by someone else and make it more alive and dramatic” (Decolonizing 10). Ngugi invites the people to receive this novel as they would an oral story by prefacing the narrative with a note to the “reader/listener” (ix); the note implies that Matigari will be received aurally by some, and it places the narrator and audience in direct contact, thereby fostering a relationship akin to the relationship between the traditional storyteller and audience. The message of the narrator’s note emphasizes that “this story is imaginary . . . The story has no fixed time . . . And it has no fixed space . . .” (ix).

Ngugi returns to this message in his narrative by granting Matigari a timeless existence. At one point, Matigari says, “I have seen many things over the years. Just consider, I was there at the time of the Portuguese, and at the time of the Arabs, and at the time of the British--” (45). Although Matigari “can be placed within the context of Kenya history,” Ngugi believes “Time and Place are elastic. It is really the central theme of struggle against injustice which makes Matigari a universal figure of human



history” (Personal letter 19 May 1998). Matigari’s universality doesn’t undercut the particular history from which Ngugi writes, rather it broadens the scope of the struggle to include common forms of oppression. In this way, Matigari is both universal and particular; his search for justice is as relevant to postcolonial Kenyans as it is to oppressed peoples throughout history:

For most of the time, Matigari is presented as a hero of Kenyan history and as a returnee Mau Mau on a mission to restore true democracy to Kenya; however, on occasions, Matigari is shown as a universal proletarian hero, fighting for the restoration of the rights of peasants and workers who are being exploited by a joint force of internal and multinational capitalists. (Balogun 363)

Matigari lays down his arms and girds himself with a “belt of peace” before commencing his search that takes him from the marketplaces to the shopping centers to the eating places and to the rural areas where he might find common people.

Ngugi repeats the “belt of peace” image throughout Matigari’s journey, but he never fully explains the immediate significance because it, in part, alludes to traditional folklore and his Gikuyu audience would understand the allusion. After coming out of the forest, Matigari buries his weapons next to a huge *mugumo* tree. Ngugi supplies the translation of *mugumo* as a fig tree, but he doesn’t develop the importance of the fig



tree in Gikuyu culture. We can, however, find an explanation of the relationship between the Gikuyu and the *mogumo*<sup>2</sup> in Facing Mt. Kenya:

Gikuyu attachments to such a tree are very intense. It is one of the key institutions of their culture. It marks at once their unity as a people, their family integrity (for their fathers sacrificed around it), their close contact with the soil, the rain and the rest of Nature, and, to crown all, their most vital communion with the High God of the tribe. (250)

Because his primary audience would already attach an importance to the image of the *mogumo*, Ngugi doesn't need to delineate the cultural significance of the tree. Instead, he uses the image to emphasize Matigari's collective journey. After he buries his weapons near the "huge" tree in the center of the cluster, Matigari tears a strip of bark from a nearby tree and girds himself with it. He hopes the belt will protect him and allow him to return without additional violence: "Instead, I have now girded myself with a belt of peace. I shall go back to my house and rebuild my home" (5). And with that, Matigari begins his search for truth and justice.

At each place he visits, Matigari asks the people, "Where can one find truth and justice in this country?" The people, however, are too busy talking about *Matigari ma Njiruungi* and the stories circulating about this returned hero to recognize the seeker as

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<sup>2</sup> Kenyatta describes a specific tree in his home village that the villagers had protected and saved from colonial planters who had been clearing the land. He uses the specific tree to illustrate the general reverence the Gikuyu hold for the *mogumo*. Kenyatta and Ngugi employ different spellings for *mogumo* and I am remaining faithful to each author's spelling.



Matigari himself. The legend spreads and becomes more important than the actual man, who is seeking answers from the common people.

Matigari eventually extends his search for truth and justice to specific people he believes should know where to find them. First, he visits the student with whom he had been imprisoned. Matigari implores him: "Open those books that you are studying, and tell me: Where can a person girded with a belt of peace find truth and justice in this country?" (89). Matigari is disappointed to learn that the student has abandoned his previous desire for the truth and given in to the neo-colonial regime.

The student tells Matigari:

I have stopped asking too many questions. Democracy here means, first, fending for oneself. So I'll finish my studies first, get myself a job at the bank and acquire a few things of my own. Or else I shall get myself a scholarship, go to the USA and come back and start a private research institute. I'll become a consultant for Western companies and governments. (90)

Matigari concludes that there are two types of students in the modern world, "those who love the truth, and those who sell the truth" (90). The student's acquiescence illustrates Ngugi's contention that in general colonial education carries African students further and further from their worlds and closer to the world of Western ideas and values. Another illustration of this dynamic can be found in Tayeb Salih's Season of Migration to the North.



Dealing with the colonial situation in the Sudan, Salih portrays the contradiction colonial education can inspire. The nameless narrator, who was educated in Western universities and has returned to help his village "develop," is contrasted with Mahjoub, the narrator's intelligent age-mate who has stayed in the village and retained traditional values. The two engage in a discussion concerning a fellow-villager's right to marry and possess a young woman in the village. Mahjoub argues that "women belong to men, and a man's a man even if he's decrepit." The narrator argues to the contrary: "But the world's changed . . . these are things that no longer fit in with our life in this age." Mahjoub's response is direct: "The world hasn't changed as much as you think" (99-100). Their conflict pits traditional values against Western ideals. Mahjoub, like Matigari, represents the traditional mores, while the narrator symbolizes the Western-influenced African student who stops asking questions and embraces the new values. Neither Ngugi nor Salih argue that traditional values were perfect, but each author illustrates the dangers in "selling the truth" by blindly accepting the foreign culture. The student is a key figure in this contradiction, for education is one of the means to subjugation in the colonial process. But if a student cannot help Matigari, then who can?

Matigari thinks the answer must be the modern teachers. He goes to the teacher and again asks the question of where he can find truth and justice; again he is disappointed by the response. The teacher tells Matigari: "This country has changed



from what it was yesterday, or what it was when we fought for it. We have no part to play in it any more" (91). He goes on to admit, "I have since been ordained into the order of cowardice and have joined the ranks of those whose lips are sealed" (92). Matigari concludes that teachers, like students, are of two kinds: "those who love the truth, and those who sell the truth" (92).

The Egyptian Nobel Prize winner, Naguib Mahfouz, offers a conceptual counterpart to the educator's disillusionment in his novel The Thief and the Dogs. Although the historical context of the 1952 Egyptian revolution differs from the struggle for freedom in Kenya, there is a similar shift in the teacher-student relationship as the broader societal power relationships change. In short, the theory the teacher preaches doesn't necessarily match what he practices. Said Mahran and Rauf Ilwan had an unofficial teacher-pupil relationship: Rauf taught Said how to fight the economic oppression by thievery and undercutting the system. Rauf, who formerly had fought the system, is now a part of the system. Said can't accept the change and views Rauf's new wealth as a hypocritical embrace of the same forces they used to fight. Rauf defends his new position by telling Said, "things are no longer what they used to be" (44). Said has difficulty comprehending Rauf's transformation, and in his mind he thinks, "*you make me and now you reject me: your ideas create their embodiment in my person and then you simply change them, leaving me lost . . .*" (Original italics, 47). Said's disillusionment is similar to Matigari's because in each case it appears that



the former teacher sells out to protect himself. Instead of selling out and joining the system that has oppressed them, Matigari and Said both hold to the ideals that inspire and maintain the struggle against what each considers an oppressive system.

Matigari is disappointed by both the student and the teacher because each has surrendered his beliefs to the neo-colonial forces. Ngugi draws on his own experience to portray the reality of how detention could have altered the intellectuals' views, and how detention generally functions in the neo-colonial society. In his prison diary, Detained, Ngugi argues that in a

. . . neo-colonial country, the act of detaining patriotic democrats, progressive intellectuals and militant workers speaks of many things. It is first an admission by the detaining authorities that their official lies labeled as a new philosophy . . . are a calculated sugar-coating of an immoral sale and mortgage of a whole country and its people to Euro-American and Japanese capital for a few million dollars in Swiss banks and a few token shares in foreign countries. (13)

Detention is not an act of truth or justice, but an "admission by the neo-colonial ruling minority that people have started to organize to oppose them" (Detained 13).

Unfortunately, even if those who are detained realize this admission, the threatening manner of arbitrary detention can lead to the capitulation portrayed in the novel.

The student and the teacher both abandon their causes after their stay in prison. Consequently, they--however unintentionally--join with the forces of the neo-colonial



regime through their silence. Their acts of omission become as powerful as any act of commission might have been. Ngugi has developed these characterizations out of his own experience, and he believes the results come from the tactical imperative of detention:

Detention and conditions in detention, including the constant reminder of one's isolation, can drive, in fact are meant to drive, a former patriot into a position where he feels that he has been completely forgotten, that all his former words and actions linked to people's struggles, were futile gestures and senseless acts of a meaningless individual martyrdom; yes, reduce him to a position where he can finally say: *The masses have betrayed me, why should I sacrifice myself for them?* (Original italics; Detained 27)

Matigari discovers that these tactics are quite effective, as the two progressive intellectuals both withdraw into their own worlds and fend for themselves.

Still searching for an answer to his question, Matigari goes to the priest. His visit is very much like his previous visits to the student and the teacher. Matigari tells of his search for truth and justice, but the priest tells Matigari to ask the rulers of the country for the answer to his quest. Matigari's visit to the priest can be read as an implicit critique of neo-colonialism. Perhaps the most concrete element of the critique is the priest's reliance on the distinction between earthly law and God's law. The priest tells Matigari to "Render unto Caesar what is Caesar's, and unto God what is God's"



(99). Several times, Ngugi has written about how the implications of this distinction serve those in power in both the colonial and neo-colonial state. In Homecoming he maintains that “the saying ‘render unto Caesar things that are Caesar’s’ was held up to the African church-goers and schoolchildren. No matter how morally corrupt Caesar was, the African Christian was told to obey him” (33); in Detained, Ngugi recalls a visit from the prison chaplain during which the chaplain encouraged Ngugi to pray for forgiveness. Ngugi asked the priest: “Why do you always preach humility and acceptance of sins to the victims of oppression? Why is it that you never preach to the oppressor?” (24). As the discussion continued and Ngugi grew more agitated, the priest became defensive. Ngugi writes: “Avoiding the more earthly issues of oppression, exploitation and foreign control, he said that as a man of God he never indulged in politics. To justify that stand, he quoted the Biblical exhortation to believers to render unto Caesar things that were Caesar’s and to God things of God” (25). Like the prison chaplain, the priest speaking with Matigari dismisses the political question and clears himself of any responsibility for political oppression by relying on the same Biblical passage.

Ultimately, Matigari is told, the politicians are the ones to ask for truth and justice, and his search ends in a confrontation with the Minister of Truth and Justice. Ngugi uses this confrontation to express his disillusionment, as it illustrates the continuity between the colonial and neo-colonial regimes. One of the means of control



in the neo-colonial state is the illusory progress of the native peoples. The colonizers create the intermediary class to serve as a buffer between themselves and the natives, thereby maintaining control over the former colony indirectly. In Matigari Ngugi depicts this relationship through the generational characterization of the settlers and servants. Matigari returns home thinking he has defeated Settler Williams and his servant John Boy, only to find the new regime is led by the sons of his former adversaries. The sons represent the new order, the neo-colonial order in which little has changed for those who fought for independence. Matigari asks himself at the beginning of his journey, "Had anything really changed between then and now?" (9). The answer soon becomes apparent, for while Matigari is searching for his lost family he sees some corrupt policemen stealing from a group of children, and he reflects, "So a handful of people still profited from the suffering of the majority, the sorrow of the many being the joy of the few" (12). As rumors of Matigari and his strength spread, the people begin thinking of the same question. One anonymous worker says, "Yesterday it was the imperialist settlers and their servants. Today it is the same. On the plantations, in the factories, it is still the same duo. The imperialist and his servant" (79). In short, "Matigari's homecoming was greeted by the same social, political and economic structure of the colonial period, except that the new masters were local people" (Tsabedze 75). Matigari meets this neo-colonial power structure



directly in an important confrontation with the new generation, Bob Williams and John Boy, Jr.

Matigari wants to find his family and reclaim the house he had built for Settler Williams in the colonial times. His discovery that little has changed is magnified as his attempt to reclaim the house emerges as a symbol for the struggle of the workers to reclaim their land and their country. Matigari repeatedly speaks of his fight to reclaim his house in parables, and he reduces the conflict he had with Settler Williams, the struggle against colonial forces, to a struggle for control of the house. He tells Ngaruro, a worker he has met on his journey, that the entire struggle was for the house:

You see, I built the house with my own hands. But Settler Williams slept in it and I would sleep outside on the verandah. I tended the estates that spread around the house for miles. But it was Settler Williams who took home the harvest. I was left to pick anything he might have left behind. I worked all the machines and in all the industries, but it was Settler Williams who would take the profits to the bank and I would end up with the cent that he flung my way. .

. . What a world! A world in which the tailor wears rags, the tiller eats wild berries, the builder begs for shelter. (21)

After Matigari has joined with the prostitute Guthera and the orphan Muriuki, who become his family through their common cause against the disruptive colonial and neo-colonial forces, he continues pursuing his rightful claim to the house. Matigari and the



new members of his family come within view of the majestic house on the hill and he swells with pride for the struggle he has endured in order that he might return to his house.

His pride, however, is short-lived. Matigari is indifferent to the sight that frightens Muriuki and Guthera into hiding:

A white man and a black man sat on horseback on one side of the narrow tarmac road next to the gate. Their horses were exactly alike. Both had silky brown bodies. The riders too wore clothes of the same colour. Indeed, the only difference between the two men was their skin colour. Even their postures as they sat in the saddle were exactly the same. The way they held their whips and the reins--no difference. And they spoke in the same manner. (43)

Muriuki and Guthera know exactly who these two men are: Bob Williams and John Boy, Jr. Matigari, however, is unimpressed and continues his quest to reclaim the house. The "scene can be read as a metaphor for the entire postcolonial experience" (Tobias 166), and its players as representatives of that experience. The former colonizer and the former servant now appear strikingly similar, with the only difference the color of their skin. Their mannerisms and their possessions are exactly alike, just as the oppressive nature of the neo-colonial regime is similar to the old regime. Their blending is reminiscent of Orwell's ending in his allegorical fable Animal Farm where



the pigs, as the new leaders, are in the farm house playing cards with the formerly oppressive humans, and to the observer:

Twelve voices were shouting in anger, and they were all alike. No question, now, what had happened to the faces of the pigs. The creatures outside looked from pig to man, and from man to pig, and from pig to man again; but already it was impossible to say which was which. (88)

Orwell portrays the transformation more dramatically than Ngugi, but Ngugi develops the difficulty in distinguishing between the colonial generations in the scene between Matigari and the “new” generation through the characterization of Bob Williams.

Bob Williams never directly speaks with Matigari--he is unable to speak the native language--but “he shows himself to be the driving force behind the exchange as he thoroughly manipulates John Boy, Jr.,” and he proves to be “nearly as influential as was his colonial father; but unlike his father, he has moved safely behind the scenes” (Tobias 166-67). Williams drives the exchange initially by telling Boy, “*Amuse him, a little, eh? A piece of comic theatre, eh? I will be the audience and you two the actors*” (Original italics to indicate English in the Gikuyu text, 44). Tobias argues that at this point Williams moves behind the scenes, allowing Boy and Matigari to take center stage, but that Williams is present throughout as a “director” or a “stage-manager” (167), another metaphor used to describe the role of the former colonizers in the new regime. Matigari still doesn’t know exactly with whom he is speaking, but



when he discovers they are the sons of his former foes he trembles with excitement and asks Boy if he is the same boy whom the community had sent off to study so that one day he might return to “clean up [their] cities, [their] country, and deliver [them] from slavery” (48). Although Boy was able to advance because of the communal effort to educate him, much like Salih’s narrator, Boy’s response indicates he feels no gratitude and epitomizes the cultural rupture caused by colonial intervention. He tells Matigari that their “ignorant” people need to learn about the word individual and that, “white people are advanced because they respect that word, and therefore honour the *freedom of the individual*, which means the freedom of everyone to follow his own whims without worrying about the others” (48-49). He even criticizes Matigari’s entire generation for being so ignorant that they sang about “sharing the last bean,” a reference to the traditional song that praises and celebrates the communal bond of sharing “the single bean / That fell upon the ground” (6). This criticism is especially striking when we consider that Jomo Kenyatta tells us, “. . . according to Gikuyu ways of thinking, nobody is an isolated individual. Or rather, his uniqueness is a secondary fact about him: first and foremost he is several people’s relative and several people’s contemporary” (309). Matigari represents this traditional concept, the idea that all those involved in the struggle are related, whereas Boy represents the new African who has sold the truth for personal gain.



When Matigari finally gains the opportunity to question the Minister of Truth and Justice, he discovers that Bob Williams and John Boy, Jr., are economic supporters of the political regime. This marriage of political and economical control represents two-thirds of Ngugi's neo-colonial power structure, just as the entire novel, from its source to its form to its content, represents the final third of the neo-colonial structure: cultural expression. Through the power structure, Ngugi weaves criticism of the regime into the novel. For example, at the public meeting where Matigari confronts the Minister, he makes a point of having the Minister announce that there are guests from "Western countries--USA, Britain, West Germany, France--" (111). For Ngugi, the continued foreign presence in political and economic affairs maintains the foreign hold over the native peoples. Though Matigari represents the universal struggle against injustice, this foreign presence can be read in the context of Kenyan history:

It is now a fact of Kenyan history that just before and immediately after independence, the foreign economic interests with their various local branches and enterprises embarked on a calculated campaign of recruiting new friends from among politicians, administrative cadres, the new university graduates . . . by offering them token, but personally lucrative, shares and directorships in their local countries. (Detained 53)

John Boy, Jr., is an example of one who "sold the truth" for lucrative personal gains by going into business with Settler Williams and the new regime.



Ngugi emphasizes the economical/political marriage in the new country by using the national radio--the *Voice of Truth*<sup>3</sup>--as a means of illustrating how the West maintains its presence in the country. For example, one news story announces:

*His Excellency Ole Excellence said that a friend in need is a friend in deed. He said this as he bade farewell to the British soldiers who last month disarmed a group of soldiers who had attempted a mutiny. His Excellency Ole Excellence heartily thanked the British government for allowing some of the soldiers to remain to assist with training. (7)*

The new regime relies on the former colonizer to help control the internal disagreements that arise, thereby inviting the old power back in the form of a military presence. Another announcement reports a US government official as thanking the government of Matigari's country for "*granting the USA military facilities at the coast . . .*" (132). Similar to many of the events in Matigari, this simple announcement has an actual precedent in Kenya's neo-colonial history.

Ngugi sees a historical irony in the presence of Western military bases--and what that presence represents--in independent Kenya: "In the fifties, Kenyans had fought to get rid of *all* foreign military presence from her soil. In 1980 the Kenyan authorities had given military base facilities to the USA. The matter was not even debated in Parliament. Kenyans learnt about it through debates in the US Congress" (Moving 71). The covert allowance for USA military bases again draws the new nation

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<sup>3</sup> In the English translation all the "Voice of Truth" announcements are in italics. This is to set the



into an unequal political relationship with the Western world and highlights the movement of the new government away from the people and into the neo-colonial grasp. Ngugi's fictional account of this irony in Matigari incorporates the economic exploitation that often accompanies its political counterpart. The representatives of Western countries at the Minister's speech are there as political emissaries trying to protect their economic interests. Several times Ngugi names a detailed sequence of foreign businesses in the country, and though the sequences have no essential relationship to the plot, his point is clear: this neo-colonial country is economically bound to foreign interests. At one point, as Matigari is driving through a part of the city he had never been to, the narrator begins a description:

On either side of the highway they were now driving on were tall buildings. Neon lights flashed their various names: American Express, Citibank, Barclays, Bank of Japan, American Life, Inter-Continental, The Hilton, Woolworths, Wimpy Bar, Kentucky Fried Chicken, McDonalds, Shah's Supermarket Stores, Bata Shoes, African Retailers and many others. (148)

Apart from offering detailed setting, the list has no function other than to emphasize how dominating the foreign economic interests are in the country. Throughout the novel, Matigari seems aware of this economic exploitation, even if he doesn't have the language to describe it. His power, like the power of the peasantry, lies in the power

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"Voice of Truth" apart from the narrative, and not to indicate English in the original Gikuyu version.



of observation and common sense, and not in the power of manipulating language like the politicians.

Early in Matigari's journey he marvels at seeing Africans driving their own cars, but his observation shows him to be aware of the need for economic independence, which can only come from breaking the ties to Western powers. He believes, "Now all that remained for [Africans] to do was to manufacture their own cars, trains, aeroplanes and ships" (8). He then crosses a railway tunnel and reflects how the railway served the interests of the oppressors by taking away the fruits of his peoples' labor: "After the railway was completed, it had started swallowing up the tea-leaves, the coffee, the cotton, the sisal, the wheat--" (8). Each of these reflections illustrates Matigari's awareness, but how does the common worker reconcile this awareness with the dominating presence of "General Motors . . . Firestone . . . Coca-Cola . . . IBM . . ." (148) and the other multinational corporations that have so much control? Matigari's search for truth and justice has been a search for the answer to this very question, and he thinks the Minister is the one who can supply him with an answer.

Ngugi first describes the Minister as a representative of the ruling party and uses the scene to depict the ineffectual nature of the country's one party system. The party in the neo-colonial state, once the voice of the people and leader in the fight for independence, often becomes "a means of private advancement" (Fanon 171). As



Ngugi illustrates throughout the novel, those who advance in the party gain wealth and power at the expense of the common people without ever being held accountable to those people. They are only accountable to their Western sponsors. To enforce this belief, Ngugi creates a party based on the philosophy of "parrotry." The symbol of the party is the parrot, its daily newspaper is the *Daily Parrotry*, and many of its intellectual supporters hold degrees in Parrotology. The extended image of the parrot, depicting the party as a mouthpiece that can only repeat what it hears, has a direct source in Kenyan history. President Moi gave a speech on September 13, 1984, in which he provides much of the parrotry imagery Ngugi employs. President Moi, in part, said

. . . I call on all ministers, assistant ministers and every other person to sing like parrots. During Mzee Kenyatta's<sup>4</sup> period I persistently sang the Kenyatta [tune] until people said: this fellow had nothing [to say] except to sing for Kenyatta. I say: I didn't have ideas of my own. Why was I to have my own ideas? I was in Kenyatta's shoes and therefore, I had to sing whatever Kenyatta wanted. Therefore you ought to sing the song I sing. If I put a full stop, you should also put a full stop. This is how the country will move forward. The day you become a big person, you will have the liberty to sing your own song and everybody will sing it . . . . (Decolonizing 86)

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<sup>4</sup>A reference to Kenya's first president, Jomo Kenyatta. *Mzee* is a KiSwahili word that is generally used as a respectful title for elderly men.



The reality of Moi's speech seems more fantastic than Ngugi's fictional portrayal of the party's speakers, but in each case we witness the domineering message of the neo-colonial regime: Independence isn't about freedom, it's about singing the song of the new regime.

Matigari eventually gets to challenge this song by asking the Minister of Truth and Justice a question. Matigari poses his question in somewhat abstract terms. He begins by saying, "The builder builds a house. / The one who watched while it was being built moves into it. / The builder sleeps in the open air, / No roof over his head." He goes on to extend his metaphor to the irony of the tailor who "walks in rags," the tiller who has not eaten, and the worker who is empty handed. He ends with the same question he has asked of people throughout the country: "Where are truth and justice on this earth?" (113). Before answering, the Minister tells Matigari: "Stop speaking in parables. If you want to ask a question, then do so in plain language" (113). This admonition is another subtle comment on how things have changed in the new state. In Matigari's tradition, proverbs, riddles, parables, and other linguistic constructions signify a clever wit and an adroit control of language. Speaking of proverbs specifically, Mazrui argues that in many indigenous African languages "the brilliant conversationalist is he who can penetrate into the fundamental similarities between types of human experience. The incidentals of each experience might try to disguise the familiarity of the essence--but wisdom consists in capacity to discern that essence"



(152). Matigari's parables form a sequence that is meant to express the essence of the ironic oppressor-oppressed relationship in which the oppressed does all the work but gets no rewards. His conversational talent would be appreciated by an audience still familiar with the mores of traditional conversation, but the Minister is unable to discern the universality--and the wisdom--of Matigari's message.

His meeting with the Minister leads to his incarceration in a mental hospital. Because he is not willing to sing like a parrot, the government declares him crazy, and while in the hospital he realizes the reality of his struggle. For many years he had fought the enemy with arms alone; upon his return he has been "girded with the belt of peace" and tried to fight with words alone. In the hospital he makes a decision:

It dawned on him that one could not defeat the enemy with arms alone, but one could also not defeat the enemy with words alone. One had to have the right words; but these words had to be strengthened by the force of arms. In the pursuit of truth and justice one had to be armed with armed words. (131)

Matigari's realization emphasizes the importance of words and language and their relationship to the struggle, even if the struggle is violent. Words and force are used together, by both those who want to dominate and by those who resist. In Ngugi's own philosophy, this combination manifests itself in the similarity between politicians and writers, who both deal in words. Ngugi summarizes this philosophy by arguing that "the distance between the barrel of a gun and the point of a pen is very small: what's



fought out at penpoint is often resolved at gunpoint . . .” (Barrel of a Pen 9). Matigari develops a similar philosophy concerning the relationship between his spoken words and the armed struggle he has been involved with throughout time, and he tells Guthera and Muriuki that “words of truth and justice, fully backed by armed power, will certainly drive the enemy out” (138).

Matigari acts on his words by leading a revolt. The people begin fighting, using their physical force while Matigari continues using the force of his words. As he and Guthera are fleeing he exclaims, “Our first independence has been sold back to imperialism by the servants they put in power!” (172). Matigari and Guthera are eventually trapped near a river and attacked by police dogs. The dogs rip through the flesh of the two, and “their blood mingled and it trickled into the soil, on the banks of the river” (173). The scene reflects back to the beginning of the novel. Upon his return to claim his home, Matigari had stopped to wash his face in the river. The cold water brought him back to a time he and his age-mates were becoming men in the ways of the community:

The water had numbed their skin, so that none of them felt the pain as the knife cut into the flesh. Before this moment, they were mere boys, but by the time they unclenched their fists, they were men. Their blood mingled with the soil, and they became patriots, ready for the armed struggle to come. (4)



In a footnote, Ngugi explains the reference here to *mararanja*--a Gikuyu "festival of dance and song performed during circumcision" as well as the "initiation ceremony preceding armed struggle" (4). Traditionally, initiation rites for both boys and girls are performed in or around the river, and, as John Mbiti points out, in general, for those involved, "the shedding of [their] blood into the ground binds [them] mystically to the living-dead who are symbolically living in the ground" (123). Matigari and Guthera are undergoing a new initiation, for they are fighting to displace the neo-colonial regime and empower the workers and peasants for true independence. The traditional implications symbolized in their common bleeding represent the communal strength that had been disrupted, but not destroyed, by the individualism of Western philosophy. Matigari and Guthera then disappear into the river, their bodies never found.

The final episode builds on the image of the ongoing struggle and also reflects back to the opening scene. Muriuki escapes the dogs at the river and, because they all realize the struggle must be one of "arms" and "words," he sets off to collect the weapons Matigari had buried upon his initial return. He finds the AK47, the sword, and the pistol, and he prepares to load them up and return to the fight. While he is standing there, Muriuki suddenly

seemed to hear the workers' voices, the voices of the peasants, the voices of the students, and of other patriots of all different nationalities of the land, singing in harmony:



Victory shall be ours!

Victory shall be ours!

Victory shall be ours!

Victory shall be ours! (175)

With the chorus, the novel ends. Muriuki, the youthful orphan, stands armed and ready to continue the timeless fight against injustice.

Ngugi's philosophy resounds throughout his African novel: "In unity lies strength; in divisions, weakness" (Moving 172). The divisions caused by colonialism injured the collective spirit and will of the people, but Matigari's return symbolizes the hope that one day that injury will be overcome and the people will again unite. In the end, Matigari is a hopeful novel. It inspires hope for a universal fight against injustice, and it inspires hope for the people of Ngugi's homeland for the same fight. In "Matigari and the Dreams of One East Africa," Ngugi writes, "I know, in a sense more deep than words can tell, that Matigari shall one day return to Kenya, to East Africa . . ." (Moving 175). Upon that return, Matigari will continue to fight and resist the political, economic, and cultural exploitation that deny his people truth and justice.



## CHAPTER 3

### ANOTHER PATH TO THE CENTER: CHINUA ACHEBE AND THE POSTCOLONIAL AFRICAN NOVEL

Whatever happens to the soul of a little African  
child who grows up thinking of himself as Mike?

The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born, Ayi Kwei Armah

Since its initial reception in 1958, Chinua Achebe's Things Fall Apart has remained one of the most widely-read and influential postcolonial African novels. It has been translated into over thirty languages, and millions of copies have been sold worldwide. Though it was published forty years ago, it continues to be read and discussed in classrooms for its unique portrayal of colonial imposition in Nigeria. Things Fall Apart is not unique because its subject and setting are Africa; novels such as Joseph Conrad's Heart of Darkness and Joyce Cary's Mister Johnson have been read for some time, offering a glimpse into the "Dark Continent." However, whereas novels such as Heart of Darkness often project "the image of Africa as 'the other world,' the antithesis of Europe and therefore of civilization" (Achebe, Hopes 3), Things Fall Apart projects the image of an indigenous African civilization replete with its own systems of justice, faith, and social mores. The distinction between these projected images is important to recognize, for Achebe shifts the focus from a Western



interpretation of African civilization to an African-centered depiction of the rupture wrought by colonialism.

Because Things Fall Apart employs this shift in perspective, Susan VanZanten Gallagher argues that it can “in one sense be seen as the first postcolonial novel” because it was “the first widely distributed book written by an indigenous author that examined the effects of colonialism from the point of view of the colonized” (“The Dialogical Imagination” 136). Although Things Fall Apart may have been the first widely distributed book by an indigenous author, it is important to note that it wasn’t the first indigenous novel altogether. Among early African attempts at the novel, Amos Tutuola’s The Palm-Wine Drinkard (1953) is significant for a couple of reasons. First, Tutuola’s language--described by Dylan Thomas as a “young English”--conveys an African experience different from the European novels about Africa, and Tutuola’s “naiveté appealed to European readers because they were let in on the tribal imagination of the African in its pure, unsophisticated form.” Tutuola’s drunkard was received as the “unspoiled African, a literary noble savage” (Owomoyela 74). In addition to an appreciation for his insight into a “pure tribal imagination,” Tutuola is significant because of his decision to use English as his language of expression:

In the African cultural context he represents an ominous trend in which even the least alienated Africans elect to (and are encouraged to) forsake the African



languages in which they are fully competent and adopt partially-mastered European languages as their vehicles of expression. (Owomoyela 75)

In this way, Tutuola is Achebe's predecessor in both the developing literary genre and the political debate concerning the African writer's choice of language.

Similar to Tutuola, Achebe consciously wrote from an African point of view because he had grown tired of reading "appalling novels about Africa"; at one point he finally "decided that the story [Africans] had to tell could not be told for [them] by anyone else no matter how gifted or well intentioned" (Hopes 38). His story reinforces the limitation that Europeans who were writing about Africa encountered, namely, as Ngugi wa Thiong'o describes it, that "they could never have shifted the centre of vision because they were themselves bound by the European centre of their upbringing and experience" (Ngugi, Moving 4). Although Ngugi is writing from Kenya and Achebe from Nigeria, they share the common experience of being subjects to British imperialism and see the broad context of the British presence throughout Africa. For each, shifting the center of vision requires replacing the African point of view at the center, thereby reclaiming Africa's own cultural expression.

On one level, Achebe and Ngugi began reclaiming their own personal heritages by reclaiming their names. Like Armah's character in the epigraph to this chapter, Achebe and Ngugi each came to realize the irrelevance of his given Christian name. Ngugi, who was baptized James Ngugi, returned to his traditional name as a rejection



of “the slave tradition of acquiring the master’s name” (Detained xxi); Achebe “dropped his tribute to Victorian England” (Hopes 33) by dropping his given name, Albert. It is significant to recognize that each man has returned to a traditional, cultural self-definition, for it emphasizes the commitment each has to his culture and addresses the general issue of language. However, although Achebe and Ngugi share a common desire to emphasize their traditional cultures, they don’t always agree on how this emphasis should be enacted.

The ultimate and necessary step for Ngugi in reclaiming his culture is forsaking the language of the colonizer and returning to his mother tongue. Achebe, however much he agrees with the need to displace the concept of a superior European culture in Africa, stops short of rejecting the use of European languages altogether. His response to Ngugi’s defiant rejection of English is simple: “The British did not push language into my face while I was growing up” (Gallagher, Linguistic Power 260). He also writes, “I have been given this language, and I intend to use it” (Morning 62).

Because Achebe consistently differs with Ngugi on the question of language, it can be tempting to reduce their philosophies to a neat binary opposition: One rejects English while the other accepts it. Such a reduction, however, leads to an oversimplification of each writer and misses the important point on which they agree: The African writer must strive to replace the African voice at the center of discussions concerning African art and culture in the neo-colonial state.



Achebe's conscious awareness of the need to centralize his traditional culture politicizes his writing in much the same way Ngugi politicizes his own. As Wole Soyinka suggests, the African writer "is far more preoccupied with visionary projections of society than with speculative projections of the nature of literature . . . the ontology of the idiom is subservient to the burden of its concerns" (64). The concerns for both Achebe and Ngugi include the resistance to neo-colonial exploitation. Far from apologizing for addressing socio-political issues in his writing, Achebe believes "an African creative writer who tries to avoid the big social and political issues of contemporary Africa will end up being completely irrelevant--like the absurd man in the proverb who leaves his burning house to pursue a rat fleeing from the flames" (Morning 78). For Achebe, a writer's relevance is not enclosed solely within the texts, and he doesn't mimic what the European artist has taught him—"that a writer or an artist lives on the fringe of society" (Hopes 40). On the contrary, Achebe is very much a part of the society he writes from and about, and he believes that it is his duty to help his "society regain belief in itself and put away the complexes of the years of denigration and self-abasement" (Hopes 44). Ngugi would argue that these complexes manifest themselves through the "mental universe" the colonizer controls through language (Decolonizing 16), but for Achebe the message is more important than the language.



Achebe believes the “fundamental theme” the African writer needs to address “is that African peoples did not hear of culture for the first time from Europeans; that their societies were not mindless but frequently had a philosophy of great depth and value and beauty, that they had poetry and, above all, they had dignity” (Ogunbesan 37). This is not to say Achebe naïvely idealizes traditional culture, but he does feel an obligation to remind his readers of their pre-colonial heritage. He claims that he would be satisfied if his novels “did no more than teach [his] readers that their past--with all its imperfections--was not one long night of savagery from which the first Europeans acting on God’s behalf delivered them” (Hopes 45). Here Achebe makes the important qualification that the African must accept an imperfect past, for a simplistic portrayal of a romantic pre-colonial culture would subvert his attempt to present an inside look at the civilization. By presenting a fair portrayal of the culture from his perspective, Achebe is able to both criticize it and defend it. He writes, “We cannot pretend that our past was one long, technicolor idyll. We have to admit that like other people’s pasts ours had its good as well as its bad sides” (Gallagher, “The Dialogical Imagination” 148). By presenting both the positive and negative aspects of traditional culture, Achebe gives an accurate depiction of the complexity and wholeness of the civilization.

The question arises, for whom is Achebe depicting this civilization? We have already seen that Ngugi came to believe that the question of audience is answered by



the choice of language, but Achebe's sense of audience is broader than Ngugi's. Things Fall Apart was in large part Achebe's reaction to Joyce Cary's novel Mister Johnson, which the editors of Time once declared "the best novel ever written about Africa" (Cary vii). Achebe wanted to rewrite the novel from an African perspective, but all along he had a dual audience in mind. In an interview, Achebe explained how Cary's novel inspired him to write Things Fall Apart: "It was clear to me that it was a most superficial picture of--not only of the country--but even of the Nigerian character and so I thought if this was famous, then perhaps someone ought to try and look at this from the inside" (Gallagher, "The Dialogical Imagination" 148). His inside look resulted in a novel that has distinct messages for distinct audiences. For outsiders, his story is intended to demonstrate "their own incomplete and distorted view of African culture" (Gallagher, "Linguistic Power" 260), while for his own people the novel is a proud reminder of a displaced heritage. Achebe includes himself in the latter group and has retrospectively recognized that on a personal level Things Fall Apart "was an act of atonement with [his] past, the ritual return and homage of a prodigal son" (Hopes 38). He seems satisfied that his novel is not limited by his choice of language, but the question still remains: How effectively does he reach his dual audience using English as the vehicle for the novel?

Ngugi's strategy to reach secondary audiences is to write in Gikuyu or KiSwahili and allow broader access to his novels through translation. Achebe has also



been translated, but, unlike Ngugi, he doesn't have a readily accessible mother tongue in which he can write. When the Christian missionaries attempted to standardize Achebe's mother tongue, Igbo, their main objective was to create a written form of the language for the purpose of spreading the Bible in native languages.<sup>1</sup> Igbo, however, existed in numerous dialects. In order to translate the Bible into one indigenous language, the missionaries attempted to formalize one common Igbo out of six diverse dialects. The end result was a fusion called "Union Igbo," but as Gallagher points out, "the resulting compilation bore no resemblance to any one of the six dialects. Yet this 'Union Igbo' . . . became the official written form of the language, a strange hodge-podge with no linguistic elegance, natural rhythm or oral authenticity" ("Linguistic Power" 261). Ngugi has the advantage of a unity between his culture and the Gikuyu language, while Achebe is left to choose between writing in one of two culturally disjointed languages. He considers Union Igbo a "nonstarter" and, thus, his choice is English.

Ngugi argues that the African novelist writing in English continues to pay homage to the colonizing culture and develops a hybridized tradition, a "tradition in transition, a minority tradition that can only be termed as Afro-European literature; that is, the literature written by Africans in European languages" (*Decolonizing* 27).

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<sup>1</sup>From *Morning Yet On Creation Day*: "The *Igbo* people (called *Ibo* by the English) inhabit southeastern Nigeria . . . *Igbo* is both the people and their language" (My italics; 93). I will use *Igbo* throughout my discussion.



Instead of preserving African heritages, Ngugi argues the Afro-European tradition is both culturally and economically dependent:

Thus the African novel was further impoverished by the very means of its possible liberation: exposure of its would-be-practitioners [sic] to the secular tradition of the critical and socialist realism of the European novel and the entry on the stage of commercial publishers who were outside the colonial government and missionary control. (Decolonizing 70)

If Ngugi appears unfairly critical of African writers, it should be noted that he includes himself as one of the targets of criticism. He admits that he was “part and parcel” of the new tradition, for his first four novels were written in English.

Ngugi’s transformation came shortly after he published his final English-language novel, Petals of Blood, and was imprisoned without any formal charges. It was in detention that Ngugi decided he needed to “attempt a novel in the very language which had been the basis of incarceration” (Decolonizing 71). This transformation was so severe that Ngugi’s longtime friend and publisher Henry Chakava suggests “Ngugi regretted that he had enriched the English language and culture with his novels Weep Not, Child, The River Between, A Grain of Wheat and Petals of Blood without giving anything back to the community, culture and language that had inspired them” (16). In addition to the shift manifested through Ngugi’s novels, we can see a shift in his assessment of fellow African writers.



In 1972, Ngugi praised Chinua Achebe: "What the African novelist has attempted to do is restore the African character to his history. The African novelist has turned his back on the Christian god and resumed the broken dialogue with the gods of his people. . . . Writers like . . . Chinua Achebe have paved the way" (Homecoming 43). He goes on to describe Achebe's novels collectively as "a brave and successful attempt to recreate the dynamic spirit of a living community" (44). Although Ngugi never completely abandons his admiration for Achebe and "many others" writing in the Afro-European tradition--including Soyinka, Armah, and Ousmane--in 1986 he did reassess the complexity of the genre in the neo-colonial state:

The light in the products of their fertile imaginations has certainly illuminated important aspects of the African being in its continuous struggle against the political and economic consequences of Berlin and after.<sup>2</sup> However we cannot have our cake and eat it! Their work belongs to an Afro-European literary tradition which is likely to last for as long as Africa is under this rule of European capital in a neo-colonial set-up. (Decolonizing 27)

Ngugi doesn't deny the talents of his fellow writers, and he admires the aspirations of his predecessors and colleagues, but he does argue that the writer in this new tradition "did not always understand the true dimensions of those aspirations, or rather he did

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<sup>2</sup>The "consequences of Berlin" refers to the 1884 Berlin Conference. In Moving the Centre Ngugi maintains the Conference symbolizes the history of oppression within Africa, for at the Conference Africa "was carved up into 'various spheres of influence' of the European powers" (37). Perhaps the most important consequence of the decisions made at Berlin was the issue of language; after the spheres of



not always adequately evaluate the real enemy of those aspirations" (*Moving* 62). The real enemy in the colonial state had been easily identified by skin-color, but in the neo-colonial state there is a much more complex system of associations and relations, including the relationship between a writer and his language.

Ngugi and Achebe disagree on the significance of this very relationship, and Achebe takes a critical stance regarding Ngugi's defiant rejection of English. In an interview, Achebe directly questions the legitimacy of Ngugi's choice of Gikuyu: "He is almost as extremist as Moi.<sup>3</sup> (Laughter) I am against a one-party state. Ngugi is probably not, depending upon the kind of party" (Roy 173). Likening Ngugi to the "totalitarian regime" of President Moi, Achebe calls into question the motives of Ngugi and the entire language debate. He goes on to say, "What we are seeing here is people who are politicking with language, that's all" (Roy 173). This blatant dismissal of Ngugi's position highlights the difference in their attitudes. Achebe clearly questions the political imperative embodied in Ngugi's language debate, and at one point he argues, "the language problem is not solved by taking doctrinaire positions" (Roy 173). He recognizes and has spoken of the need to centralize indigenous heritages in cultural activities, yet he remains, if not supportive, at least accepting of English as his language. He reasons that with the different indigenous languages throughout Nigeria,

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influence had been arbitrarily carved, African territories were defined by the language of the European power controlling the particular territory.

<sup>3</sup>A reference to Kenyan president Daniel Arap Moi, with whom Ngugi has a relationship of "mutual opposition" (Personal Letter 5/19/98).



not to mention the many more throughout the African continent, English can be the common language that allows for cross-cultural communication:

Where am I to find the time to learn the half-a-dozen or so Nigerian languages each of which can sustain a literature? I am afraid it cannot be done. These languages will just have to develop as tributaries to feed the one central language enjoying nation-wide currency. Today, for good or ill, that language is English. (Morning 58)

Although this statement cannot necessarily be considered an endorsement of English, it does reflect what Achebe considers “the reality of present day Africa” (Roy 174).

The reality of present day Africa includes a movement of indigenous cultures attempting to reclaim their displaced heritages. Such projects lead to the heart of the language debate, for the importance of language is intricately connected to a sense of culture, and to another point of disagreement for Achebe and Ngugi. Ngugi recalls his childhood as an alienating process, whereby the colonial power influenced him and other students away from their worlds and into the imaginative worlds of English literature and, by association, culture: “the child [in the colonial system] was now being exposed exclusively to a culture that was a product of a world external to himself” (Ngugi, Decolonizing 17). The most destructive result of this cultural alienation was the underlying assumption that the external world was somehow superior to the indigenous way of life. For Ngugi cultural imposition has no redeeming



characteristics and, in fact, the mental control attained through cultural alienation allows for economic and political exploitation to follow, completing the neo-colonial domination. By controlling the mental universe through language, the colonizer was able to control the colonizeds' "tools of self-definition in relationship to others" (Decolonizing 16), thus confusing and, ultimately, alienating the natives. With such a strong condemnation of the colonial process, Ngugi's eventual defiance appears to be a logical evolution against the neo-colonial powers. Achebe, on the other hand, has a different recollection of his upbringing under British colonial control, and within this difference are the seeds that would eventually flower into their disagreement on the language debate.

We can find comparable imagery in Ngugi and Achebe to help us understand their theoretical and philosophical differences. Both writers use suicide as a motif in their novels, but they use images of it in different ways. Near the end of Things Fall Apart Okonkwo hangs himself, symbolizing the end of the traditional way of life. He wants to continue fighting the white man's religion and government, but he realizes he is alone; the others had already "broken the clan." In a last effort to rally support for his fight, Okonkwo speaks in a parable:

Eneke the bird was asked why he was always on the wing and he replied: "Men have learned to shoot without missing their mark and I learned to fly without perching on a twig." We must root out this evil. And if our brothers take the



side of evil we must root them out too. And we must do it *now*. We must bale this water now that it is only ankle-deep. . . . (187)

In the middle of Okonkwo's speech, a government messenger intrudes and commands that the meeting be stopped. Okonkwo draws his machete and hacks the man's head off. At this point, Okonkwo can either take his own life or die at the hands of the colonizers. He takes his own life, even though suicide was thought to be an abomination by the tribe. Okonkwo's death symbolizes a new age in the village, an age which will include the white man's culture and ideas.

Ngugi also employs this image, but his characters stop short of giving in and actually killing themselves. While Matigari is searching for truth and justice at the law courts he comes upon some men awaiting trial. The men are talking about the growing legend of the warrior who has returned to fight for truth and justice. The men don't realize it is Matigari himself when he engages them in conversation:

"Tell me, my people! Where in this country can one find truth and justice?"

"What did you say?"

"I am looking for truth and justice in this country!"

"You really brought yourself to these courts in search of truth and justice?"

"But is this not where judges and lawyers are to be found?" Matigari asked.

"Shall I answer your question with the real truth?"



“Yes. I am looking for no justice other than the justice which has its roots in truth.”

“Let me give you a bit of advice, then. Go get a rope and hang yourself immediately . . . For your kind of questions will lead you to the grave . . .”

He went away, shocked. (82)

The suicide image in this dialogue serves as an alternative--as it did for Okonkwo--to the questioning of those in power. Although Matigari is questioning the neo-colonial regime and Okonkwo the initial colonial presence, each man comes to the point of despair: is it better to fight or to give in? Okonkwo sees no alternative, so he gives in. Matigari, on the other hand, does not go away and get his rope. He continues his search and his resistance to the new regime.

Ngugi develops a similar scenario in his novel Weep Not, Child. Written in 1964, it portrays a peasant family trying to resist the neo-colonial regime and fight for what is rightfully theirs. In the final scene of the novel, Njoroge is ready to give up. He has lost hope in the resistance and “he knew the tree well . . . he had prepared the rope” (135). Like Okonkwo, Njoroge seems ready to hang himself, but like Matigari he comes to realize the fight isn’t over. Njoroge is saved by his mother, who finds him in the forest and simply says, “Let’s go home” (136). Ngugi’s use of the suicide



motif helps him illustrate the importance of resistance and of fighting to reclaim the African heritage, while Achebe's motif hints at a new age of a hybridized society. The differences in their uses of the imagery reflects the differences in their philosophies concerning the postcolonial state.

Whereas Ngugi recalls his childhood as a battle between two opposing cultural forces, Achebe celebrates his upbringing at the "crossroads of cultures." He recognizes there are potential dangers at a cultural crossroads, namely the internal struggle to reconcile disparate cultural mores, but he also points out the potential within such a convergence. Achebe does not want the idea of cultural crossroads reduced to a simplified opposition: "I am not talking about all that rubbish we hear of the spiritual void and mental stresses that Africans are supposed to have, or the evil forces and irrational passions prowling through Africa's heart of darkness" (Hopes 34). Instead, he emphasizes the perspective that can be gained in a heterogeneous environment. Growing up in a Christian home, Achebe viewed Igbo culture from a bit of a distance, but it was this distance that allowed him to appreciate each culture more clearly. In "Named for Victoria, Queen of England" Achebe explains his perspective at length:

If anyone likes to believe that I was torn by spiritual agonies or stretched on the rack of my ambivalence, he certainly may suit himself. I do not remember any undue distress. What I do remember is a fascination for the ritual and the life on the other arm of the crossroads. And I believe two things were in my



favour--that curiosity, and the little distance imposed between me and it by the accident of my birth. The distance becomes not a separation but a bringing together like the necessary backward step which a judicious viewer may take in order to see a canvas steadily and fully. (Hopes 35)

The synthesis Achebe describes here contributes to his justification of English and his prevailing disagreement with Ngugi. Ngugi wants to retreat completely from English, whereas Achebe argues that “a language spoken by Africans on African soil, a language in which Africans write, justifies itself” (Hopes 93).

Key to this justification, Achebe believes, is the manifest potentiality of transforming English into an effective language for trans-continental discourse. Speaking of Nigeria alone, Achebe recognizes the efficient reorganization of “hundreds of autonomous communities” into one country. Achebe is not condoning colonialism, but he does go on to say, “Let us give the devil his due: colonialism in Africa disrupted many things, but it did create big political units where there were small, scattered ones before” (Morning 57). Within these new political units, one of the main tools of administration was language. The colonial powers spread their languages across particular territories, enabling peoples who previously had no common language to communicate. Achebe observes that colonialism “did bring together many peoples that had hitherto gone their several ways. And it gave them a language with which to talk to one another. If it failed to give them a song, it at least gave them a tongue, for



sighing” (Morning 57). In addition, Ernest Champion suggests the language that had been imposed for “purposes of bureaucratic efficiency and social control would now become a tool in the hands of the oppressed to be used in multiple ways, not the least of which was to challenge the injustices and inequities of the colonial order” (57).

English allows writers across the continent to fight the common colonial forces with a unified voice.

Ngugi argues that a European-language based voice, regardless of how unified it appears, relies too heavily on European economic and cultural standards to be considered African. Achebe, however, views it differently. In 1965 he observed the developing literature in a broad context, a context which allowed the African writer to enter a world-wide dialogue: “What I do see is a new voice coming out of Africa, speaking of African experience in a world-wide language” (Morning 61). English allowed, and continues to allow, the African a broader audience to which he can tell his story, and he can also use the language in a way that is both “universal and able to carry his peculiar experience” (61). Achebe is speaking of a transformed English that is “still in full communion with its ancestral home but altered to suit its new African surroundings” (Morning 62). He does not believe that all uses of English necessarily maintain a colonization of the mind, and he continually expresses the need to develop an English that both communicates with English speakers world-wide and delivers the African experience from the Africans’ perspective. The key, of course, is transforming



the language to match the message, and Achebe is confident in the potential of this transformation:

Most African writers write out of an African experience and of commitment to an African destiny. For them, that destiny does not include a future European identity for which the present is but an apprenticeship. And let no one be fooled by the fact that we may write in English, for we intend to do unheard of things with it. (Hopes 74).

Here Achebe anticipates the argument that the use of English will constrain the African writer to Western forms and genres; he counters by again emphasizing the transformative potential of English.

Achebe's support for English relies on a theoretical belief in the syncretic character of postcolonialism. His own upbringing at the crossroads of cultures exposed him to this character, and in an interview he explained: "There's no one tradition that we are talking about. We do have several traditions. We have the indigenous tradition . . . the ancient traditions of literature before, but we also have today. . . . we need to create a synthesis out of these two" (Gallagher, "The Dialogical Imagination" 140). The syncretic nature of this emerging tradition, whereby "previously distinct linguistic categories, and, by extension, cultural formations, merge into a single new form" (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 15), allows Achebe the freedom to explore what he calls the "reality of modern Africa," and Gallagher argues that "Achebe's multifaced life



results in his being unusually well placed to represent and deploy the different voices of his culture in such a synthesis" (140). Things Fall Apart, through its frank portrayal of indigenous culture and colonial activity, exemplifies this synthesis in an English that Achebe employs to carry the weight of his own African experience. Oliver Lovesey criticizes Achebe for his failure "to acknowledge the problems of uncritically adopting the genre of the oppressor" (156), but Achebe himself recalls that African novelists "have sometimes been informed by the West and its local zealots that the African novels . . . are not novels at all because they do not quite fit the specifications of that literary form which . . . was designed to explore individual rather than social predicaments" (Hopes 54). Barbara Harlow adds, "Chinua Achebe is a novelist, but his works, although as novels they derive from a European genre and tradition, nonetheless challenge the formal criteria of those generic conventions" (xv). Things Fall Apart may derive from the Western novel, but through his use of language and emphasis on social dynamics Achebe appropriates the Western form to serve his ends of telling the Africans' story, and thereby revising the "genre of the oppressor."

Although Things Fall Apart was Achebe's first novel, and by far is his most widely-read work, his other novels--No Longer at Ease, Arrow of God, and A Man of the People--also portray life from an African perspective in an "Africanized" English. This Africanization of English is the third process in a sequence that Ali Mazrui believes is necessary for reforming English to better suit postcolonial states worldwide.



The first process entails the “de-Anglicization of the English language” (13), which comes about logically with the spreading of English throughout the world. Next, English must be “de-racialized.” Mazrui argues that the language, “because of its origins as a language of white-skinned people, has accumulated a heritage of imagery which invested the word ‘black’ with negative connotations” (13). Words such as “blackmail” or “blackheart,” for example, carry negative connotations that exemplify the implicit relationship between the color black and imagery in the English language. Because these images are so ingrained in the language, Mazrui believes the “African writers have a special role to play in experimenting with usages [of English] more appropriate to the African experience” (13), and Achebe offers a specific example of how he tries to do this in a passage from Arrow of God.

In the story, Ezeulu, a Chief Priest in the village, is sending his son Oduche to the Christian school, and he explains to the boy the specific reason why he is being sent:

I want one of my sons to join these people and be my eye there. If there is nothing in it you will come back safe. But if there is something there you will bring home my share. The world is like a Mask, dancing. If you want to see it well you do not stand in one place. My spirit tells me that those who do not befriend the white man today will be saying *had we known* tomorrow. (Arrow of God 45-46)



Achebe uses this passage in his essay “The African Writer and the English Language” to provide an example of how he uses English to suit his African experience. He provides an alternative passage purportedly conveying the same message, but in a different style:

I am sending you as my representative among these people--just to be on the safe side in case the new religion develops. One has to move the times or else one is left behind. I have a hunch that those who fail to come to terms with the white man may well regret their lack of foresight. (Morning 62)

Achebe describes the first passage as being “in character” while the second lacks any specific personality. The main difference between these alternatives is the figurative imagery employed in Achebe’s text. The priest’s speech contains metaphors that rely on African sources, such as the Mask and the intuitive force of the priest’s spirit, whereas the second alternative delivers a straightforward message that is void of any specific characterization. We can employ the same type of analysis using a short paragraph from Things Fall Apart to illustrate Achebe’s use of English.

“Part Three” of the novel begins with the following paragraph:

Seven years was a long time to be away from one’s clan. A man’s place was not always there, waiting for him. As soon as he left, someone else rose and filled it. The clan was like a lizard; if it lost its tail it soon grew another. (157)



Achebe uses direct statements here, but the language takes advantage of African imagery and is “in character.” Okonkwo is just returning to his village after serving a seven-year exile for inadvertently killing a clansman, and we can see how the communal sense of societal “place” has been affected during his exile. There is an implicit order of ascension within the village hierarchy, and we learn that Okonkwo has lost his prior standing through his absence. Achebe develops this idea by moving into a description that is pertinent to his African audience. The lizard and its regenerative capabilities is a familiar image to those living in the tropical climate of West Africa, thus Achebe “is using judgment and instinct to select the type of imagery that is appropriate to the time, place, and people he is trying to picture” (Lindfors 50). Achebe strives to attain a balance between using English as an effective vehicle for expression and retaining an African personality.

Achebe believes in the African writer’s ability to use English effectively, but to the question can the writer “learn to use it like a native speaker,” Achebe’s answer is, “I hope not.” The goal is not to become like Western novelists, but rather to develop a distinct style and form tailored to express the African experience: “The African writer should aim to use English in a way that brings out his message best without altering the language to the extent that its value as a medium of international exchange will be lost” (Morning 61). Things Fall Apart is Achebe’s attempt at achieving this dual objective of presenting his culture from an inside perspective and using his language in a universal



manner that still retains a particular African character. As I have pointed out, Achebe thought of his first novel as a response to Joyce Cary's novel about Mister Johnson, a Nigerian civil servant whom Robert M. Wren describes as a "European monster, a culturally vacuous stage Irishman dressed in black skin and voiced with a bad approximation of West African pidgin English" (107). In addition to the limits of Cary's approximation of language, Mister Johnson provides a limited view of the Nigerian character that Achebe attempts to rectify in Things Fall Apart.

To illustrate the limits of Cary's characterization, it may be helpful to compare two passages from his novel. The first describes Mister Johnson's perception of his homeland:

To him Africa is simply perpetual experience, exciting, amusing, alarming or delightful, which he soaks into himself through all his five senses at once, and produces again in the form of reflections, comments, songs, jokes all in the pure Johnsonian form. Like a horse or a rose tree, he can turn the crudest and simplest form of fodder into beauty and power of his own quality. (112)

Mister Johnson is portrayed as little more than comic relief, his life a random sequence of experiences that define his existence. Instead of a rational character within a communal context, Mister Johnson is described as a being who is alive only through his senses and not his intellect. Immediately following Johnson's perception, Cary offers the impressions of Celia Rudbeck, the newly arrived wife of Johnson's English boss:



But to Celia Africa is simply a number of disconnected events which have no meaning for her at all. She gazes at the pot-maker without seeing that she has one leg shorter than the other, that she is in the first stages of leprosy, that her pot is bulging on one side. She doesn't really see either woman or pot, but only a scene in Africa. (112)

Like Mister Johnson, Celia views Africa from a disconnected vantage. But unlike Johnson, her vantage is not attributed to an inherent inability, but to an indifference. When Johnson brings her to his home, her curiosity is again raised but only in a trivial way: "Her eyes are full of curiosity, carefully fostered, but they are blind to the reality before them. They see only native huts, African bush; not human dwellings, Johnson's home, living trees" (117). Cary's characters both view Africa--and Africans--on a primal level, one that is commensurate with horses, rose bushes, and living trees. It was these stock characterizations, in part, that inspired Achebe to respond through his novel Things Fall Apart.

He wanted to address the misrepresentation of both the Nigerian character and the pidgin English Cary employs in Mister Johnson. Achebe's use of language in Things Fall Apart represents "the multiplicity of the Nigerian world during colonization, and Achebe does not reduce the heteroglossia of that world to a single, univocal language" (Gallagher, "The Dialogical Imagination" 140). Instead, he combines a formal English, an Africanized English that mimics the Nigerian vernacular



English he grew up with, and some key Igbo words and phrases that defy translation to form the language of his novel. The language of Things Fall Apart is dependent on whether or not the language is being used “in character.” For example, the novel begins with a series of simple statements: “Okonkwo was well known throughout the nine villages and even beyond. His fame rested on solid personal achievements. As a young man of eighteen he had brought honor to his village by throwing Amalinze the cat. . .” (7). C.L. Innes argues that this opening “suggests a kinship between the speaker and his implicit audience” that reveals the narrator as a “recorder of legend” (“Language” 112), thereby characterizing the narrative voice as distinctly African. The implicit characteristic of the narrative voice may be that of an African oral storyteller, implying a cultural distinction, but the language this voice uses is often a straightforward English, implying a linguistic universality. More noteworthy than this use of standard English, however, is Achebe’s use of Igbo words and his ubiquitous experimentation with an Africanized English that appears frequently in the characters’ voices and, at times, in the voice of the narrator.

Achebe uses Igbo words in Things Fall Apart to help legitimize Igbo culture by exemplifying the developed language of the indigenous peoples, and it “provides evidence that these ‘native’ peoples were in fact civilized” (“Achebe’s Representation”). Achebe integrates Igbo words into the fabric of his text, which “forces the reader to look outside of his or her own language constraints, and hopefully



identify more with the culture that is being presented” (“Achebe’s Representation”).

For example, early in the story the narrator describes how Okonkwo’s father, Unoka, and his fellow musicians looked forward to the time immediately after the harvest:

“Unoka would play with them, his face beaming with blessedness and peace.

Sometimes another village would ask Unoka’s band and their dancing *egwugwu* to come and stay with them and teach them their tunes” (8). Achebe sets the Igbo word apart by italicizing it, and he supplies enough context for understanding, but he doesn’t offer a translation within the text. Instead, he provides a glossary of Igbo terms at the end of the novel where we learn *egwugwu* means a “a masquerader who impersonates one of the ancestral spirits of the village” (192). Within the text, however, the presence of these Igbo words alone is a constant reminder that this language is representative of a larger society.

At other times, he provides enough of an explanation of his Igbo words to provide a context for his readers without interrupting the narrative flow. The narrator’s description of Unoka helps illustrate this usage: “Unoka was an ill-fated man. He had a bad *chi* or personal god, and evil fortune followed him to the grave, or rather to his death, for he had no grave” (20-21). Achebe qualifies *chi* in this passage, informing the outside reader that it has to do with a personal god, but this is a minimal definition of a complex spiritual presence in Igbo beliefs. Robert Wren reveals a more complex understanding of this term: “*Chi* is a generic word for ‘god’; *chi* means ‘day’; *chi*



*ukwu*, *Chukwu*, is literally 'great God,' the Supreme Being; *chi* is part of Chukwu: the part that each person shares of the Supreme Being; *chi* is one's personal god, with one at all times, in all places, under all conditions" (42-43). Even though Achebe doesn't overwhelm his narrative with extended definitions of *chi*, he does provide enough context to "force the reader to investigate some aspect of the culture" ("Achebe's Representation") that wouldn't be necessary had he used only the rough translation of "personal god."<sup>4</sup> As Innes observes, the presence of these words "rarely lets [Achebe's] reader forget the otherness of Igbo culture and the language which embodies it" (Gallagher, "The Dialogical Imagination" 140). The constant exposure to Igbo words forces the reader to consider the cultural context from which the words develop and the author's relationship to that culture.

Another technique Achebe utilizes to emphasize the relationship between the language and cultural portrayal within the novel is his prodigious use of proverbs. Although the proverbs are expressed in English, their very presence represents a linguistic manifestation of Achebe's cultural heritage. Proverbs reveal a communal philosophy about life, for they are

. . . metaphorical formulations that analogize a problematic situation to one that is a self-evident concretization of a recurring pattern of relationships. The underlying idea is that no situation is unique or new but has occurred before in

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<sup>4</sup>Achebe explores the concept of *chi* more thoroughly in his essay, "*Chi* in Igbo Cosmology," which is included in Morning Yet On Creation Day.



one guise or another in the tribal experience, and an acceptable way of confronting it has already been devised. (Owomoyela 16)

Because the proverb itself assumes the community has already dealt with a problem, the wisdom contained within the short saying belongs to the community and helps formulate communal beliefs. One who effectively speaks in proverbs, therefore, is thought to be wise in the ways of the tribe. Owomoyela develops this idea: "In practically all African communities, to be able to employ proverbs aptly is to be widely respected because the ability is interpreted as a sign that the speaker has ready access to the communally sanctioned code of behavior and can be relied upon to give the right direction to others" (17). The proverb expresses tribal codes of behavior so thoroughly that it was the "most used [oratorical form] in the traditional African court of justice" (Makouta 16). By using proverbs throughout his novel, Achebe expresses the wisdom and sense of justice from traditional culture, an expression which aids his determination to present the wholeness of pre-European civilization.

A few examples of Achebe's use of proverbs suffice to illustrate the role of proverbs throughout the novel. Achebe introduces the first proverb in Things Fall Apart by telling the reader, "Among the Ibo the art of conversation is regarded very highly . . ." (10). The second half of the sentence then reiterates the importance of proverbs, ironically, through a proverb: "proverbs are the palm-oil with which words are eaten." The proverb appears with the slight introduction but without extended



explanation. Achebe leaves it up to the reader to decode the imagery, but this first example sets the context for understanding the significance of the many proverbs that will follow. In another example, Okonkwo employs a proverb expressing his justification for killing the lad Ikemefuma. Ikemefuma had been retribution from one of the neighboring villages because one of its members had murdered the wife of Udo, one of Okonkwo's fellow villagers. The people of Umuofia decided that Ikemefuma should live with Okonkwo, and the boy became part of Okonkwo's family. Eventually, an oracle tells the villagers that they have to kill Umuofia, and rather than be thought weak, Okonkwo takes the lead in killing the boy who has become like a son to him. Obierika warns Okonkwo that his involvement in the sacrifice may have dire consequences, but Okonkwo tries to justify his involvement with the help of a proverb:

“The Earth cannot punish me for obeying her messenger,” Okonkwo said. “A child's fingers are not scalded by a piece of hot yam which its mother puts into its palm.” (64)

Again, the proverb fits into Okonkwo's speech naturally and justifies his actions by referring back to the tribal belief in the power of oracles. Okonkwo tries to justify his role in killing the boy by submitting to the authority of the oracle. Obierika realizes the truth in Okonkwo's proverb, and he agrees, but qualifies his agreement by adding, “but if the Oracle said that my son should be killed I would neither dispute it nor be the



one to do it" (64-65). Obierika cannot dispute the sense of justice contained within the proverb, only the details of how the proverb is interpreted.

In the second example, Achebe works the proverb into the pattern of speech without recognizing its source. At other times, such as the first example, Achebe stresses the communal nature of the proverbs by attributing them to anonymous collective or representative sources. For example, the narrator describes the effect the full moon has on the activity of the community by saying, "As the Ibo say: 'When the moon is shining the cripple becomes hungry for a walk'" (14). Another time, Okonkwo introduces his use of a proverb by recognizing a communal source: "As our people say, a man who pays respect to the great paves the way for his own greatness" (22). A final example attributes the proverb to an "old man": "'Looking at a king's mouth,' said an old man, 'one would think he never sucked at his mother's breast'" (28). The anonymous old man symbolizes the collective memory of the people which serves as a repository for proverbial wisdom. Achebe's impressive use of proverbs contributes to the novel in many ways: "Proverbs do not merely convey a quaint charm, nor are they only part of the elaborate conventions of Ibo society, they have a very important role to play in conversation and are an indispensable aspect of Achebe's style" (Palmer 62). Palmer argues that the proverbs serve Achebe on the stylistic level as well as, in part, revealing conventions of Igbo society. Proverbs play an important part in Achebe's overall intention in Things Fall Apart, which was to write a novel



employing an Africanized novelistic style that presented Igbo culture with all its imperfections.

Achebe's use of proverbs and Igbo words connects his narrative to his cultural heritage, while the standard English and the realistic form of the novel relate to a Western tradition that Achebe is, in part, responding to. This synthesis brings "together oral and written cultures--the language of traditional Igbo epic and proverbs and the European realistic novel" (Gallagher, "The Dialogical Imagination" 141) to form a new genre and an Africanized English that represents the syncretic nature of Achebe's world. I have already examined Ngugi's criticism of this genre, which is steeped in the essential belief that a novel written in a European language cannot be truly African, but Achebe celebrates the syncretic potential of merging African and Western art forms. To the colonialist critics who dismissed his idea of the African novel, Achebe responded, "Let every people bring their gifts to the great festival of the world's cultural harvest and mankind will be all the richer for the variety and distinctiveness of the offerings" (Hopes 89). Achebe's consistent theme in discussing the future and potential of African art is the recognition and celebration of diversity.

His marriage of the traditional and foreign in Things Fall Apart represents what Achebe views as the reality of modern Africa, which need not be seen in the essential distinctions Ngugi elicits. For example, whereas Achebe integrates proverbs into his style as a reminder of the cultural connections present in his writing, Ngugi has a more



critical interpretation of using proverbs in the Afro-European novel. In response to a speech Achebe gave in 1964, in which he spoke of the “fatalistic logic of the unassailable position of English in [African] literature,” Ngugi reflects on how that belief guided many African writers in the years following independence: “We were guided by it and the only question which preoccupied us was how best to make the borrowed tongues carry the weight of our African experience by, for instance, making them ‘prey’ on African proverbs and other peculiarities of African speech and folklore” (Decolonizing 7). Instead of validating cultural and artistic traditions, Ngugi views the use of proverbs as a superficial stylistic feature that feeds borrowed tongues, and thus, he believes a proper marriage between the old and the new, the oral and the written, must be constructed in the language of the society that has developed and inspired rhetorical traditions, such as the use of proverbs. Achebe later admitted that the “fatalistic logic of the unassailable position of English” left him “more cold now (1974) than it did when [he] first spoke about it,” but even with these doubts, he admits: “And yet I am unable to see a significantly different or a more emotionally comfortable resolution of that problem” (Morning xiv). The most comfortable and effective resolution Achebe sees is his appropriation of English and experimentation with transforming it to empower an African voice.

Although Achebe feels some discomfort with the role of English in the postcolonial state, his conclusion to Things Fall Apart illustrates the futility of ignoring



the reality of modern Africa. Okonkwo refuses to relinquish his traditional way of life to the missionaries and colonial administrators, and the result is his tragic suicide. Throughout the novel, Okonkwo has proved his loyalty to the communal way of life, even if this loyalty causes him personal torment. Gareth Griffiths argues that “Okonkwo is destroyed because he performs more than is expected of him, and sacrifices his personal life to an exaggerated, even pathological, sense of communal duty” (70). When the community which has supported and inspired Okonkwo’s sense of duty is disrupted and diluted by outside forces, Okonkwo, because of his obdurate refusal or inability to adapt, rapidly becomes an anachronistic warrior. After Okonkwo kills the government messenger, he realizes how alone he is: “Okonkwo stood looking at the dead man. He knew that Umuofia would not go to war. He knew because they had let the other messengers escape. They had broken into tumult instead of action. He discerned the fright in that tumult. He heard voices asking: ‘Why did he do it?’” (188). Okonkwo is unable to comprehend this inaction, for “he was a man of action, a man of war” (14), and his instinct is always to fight. The narrator’s final description of Okonkwo’s actions exudes a desperate objectivity: “He wiped his machete on the sand and went away” (188). After killing the messenger with his machete, Okonkwo realizes how helpless his fight is, and he simply goes away.

With Okonkwo gone, Achebe shifts the perspective in his short conclusion: “Achebe’s effect in the final chapter . . . is obtained by shifting from the dominant



(Umuofian) viewpoint to that of the white intruder” (Griffiths 70). If Okonkwo was a representative of the traditional values and way of life, then his death represents a concomitant end to that way of life. The new Umuofia, for better or worse, will be a synthesis of the old way of life and the new colonialist culture. The novel ends from the point of view of the District Commissioner, who is considering the effects of Okonkwo’s death on his own African experience:

In the book which he planned to write he would stress that point. As he walked back to the court he thought about that book. Every day brought him some new material. The story of this man who had killed a messenger and hanged himself would make interesting reading. One could almost write a whole chapter on him. Perhaps not a whole chapter but a reasonable paragraph, at any rate.

There was so much else to include, and one must be firm in cutting out details.

He had already chosen the title of the book, after much thought, *The Pacification of the Primitive Tribes of the Lower Niger.*” (191)

The District Commissioner reduces Okonkwo’s life, and all that his life represented, to an interesting paragraph.

This final paragraph stands against the story Achebe has just finished. The shift in perspective signifies a shift in the society that will never be the same, but Achebe doesn’t project an explicit condemnation of the District Commissioner. The Commissioner’s thoughts reflect the colonial experience from his own point of view,



and instead of developing an argument against that particular experience, Achebe is more interested in “a meaningful appraisal of what has been lost and what gained, and a clear analysis of where the writer and his contemporaries stand in the list of residual legatees” (Griffiths 68). Central to this appraisal is Achebe’s deliberate choice to present Umuofia as a complete but imperfect society. He never intended to write a Utopian novel which characterized the natives as “good” and the Europeans as “bad,” and, in fact, “by the very act of writing Achebe’s stance is contiguous to that of the commissioner. Both seek to reduce the living, oral world of Umuofia to a series of words on the page; and they are English words, for Achebe as well as for the commissioner” (Griffiths 68). The main difference, of course, is Achebe’s ability to present this living oral world from the synthetic perspective of his multifaceted experience, and Harlow argues that Okonkwo’s story “can be seen as an African/Nigerian/Ibo response to the study announced in the novel by the European district commissioner” (xv). In this way, the novel can be read as the indigenous response to the otherwise European representation that Achebe acknowledges in reference to Mister Johnson.

Overall, Achebe employs elements from all aspects of his experience--traditional as well as European-influenced--that in the aggregate define his own understanding of how *things fell apart*. He resists sentimentalizing Igbo culture by exposing both its strengths and weaknesses, offering an overview of traditional culture. In addition to



this cultural aspect, the novel is also a personal endeavor for Achebe. Griffiths believes that “the novel is a vehicle of self-discovery” for Achebe, and that in general . . . writing is an activity through which the African can define his identity and re-discover his historical roots. This self-defining function of the novel is . . . especially important to writers in a post-colonial situation, especially where their exposure to European culture has led to an undervaluing of the traditional values and practices. (68)

While this process of self-definition through writing has led Ngugi back to his mother tongue, it has inspired Achebe to transform the colonizers’ language to better match his experience. Although the two disagree on the specific means, they both desire to return the indigenous African perspective to the center of African cultural affairs.



## CHAPTER 4

### THE POLITICS OF CHANGE: NGUGI WA THIONG'O, ALICE WALKER, AND FEMALE CIRCUMCISION

I see Jesus, and I am a woman, beautiful in the tribe . . .

from The River Between, Ngugi wa Thiong'o

In this short passage from Ngugi's novel The River Between, Muthoni, a young woman who is dying due to complications from her circumcision, encapsulates what Dennis Hickey views as an "ideological conflict" that is pertinent to any discussion of postcolonial literature and politics: "The conflict between the right of a people to cultural autonomy and self-determination, on the one hand, and the right of a woman to control her own destiny, and indeed her own body on the other" (231). The particular issue Ngugi explores in his novel that represents this ideological conflict is the controversial tradition of female circumcision. The newly arrived Christian missionaries have convinced some of Muthoni's people, including her own father, that female circumcision is "wrong and sinful" (25), but Muthoni holds on to the belief that only through circumcision can she become a woman in the ways of the tribe. Muthoni's desire to reconcile her father's Christian beliefs with her own beliefs in the traditional initiation rite of circumcision exemplifies Hickey's conflict, and it emerges as a central theme throughout Ngugi's novel. This ideological conflict also dominates



as a theme in Alice Walker's novel Possessing the Secret of Joy. However, whereas Ngugi addresses the issue from a cultural viewpoint--his narrator concludes that a "people's traditions could not be swept away overnight" (141)--Walker makes it clear that she believes female circumcision is not circumcision at all, but rather a form of female genital mutilation that is simply brutality and torture inflicted upon innocent victims.<sup>1</sup>

Walker's novel, published nearly thirty years after The River Between, explores the modern complexity of the ongoing struggle for postcolonial societies to gain autonomy over their own internal cultural affairs. By focusing on Walker and Ngugi, one can go "beyond this particular case [of female circumcision] and to the heart of two broader (and interrelated) dilemmas which are the focus of continuing dispute: the problematic of tradition, and the problematic of change, in the colonial and the postcolonial world" (Hickey 232). Hickey organizes these "broader dilemmas" into a neat binary opposition of "tradition versus change" in a colonial relationship, but this particular case is complicated by Walker's underlying premise--that "torture is not culture" and therefore all forms of female mutilation should cease--and several interrelated components that challenge her otherwise absolutist position and force us to consider Walker's claim to authority on African customs and practices not as a neo-

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<sup>1</sup>The controversy surrounding this topic begins with its name. Mary Ann French points out that proponents of the tradition call it "female circumcision"; opponents label it "female genital mutilation" (F1). The label one employs expresses an implicit understanding of the procedure as either traditional and symbolic, or brutal and oppressive. For my project, when using references I will try to remain faithful to their term of choice, unless noted otherwise.



colonial cultural chauvinist from the *West*, as some have suggested, but as a descendent of the culture under question. Furthermore, one must consider the social context in which female circumcision/mutilation takes place as well as other wide-ranging socio-political implications.

First, Walker claims an authority to write against this particular African tradition because as a woman of African descent she believes she is speaking for her ancestors. In an interview with Paula Giddings, Walker explains the source of her authority:

Slavery intervened. As far as I'm concerned, I am speaking for my great-great-great-great-grandmother who came here with all this pain in her body. Think about it . . . she might have been genitally mutilated . . . . The other answer is when Africans get in trouble, whom do they call? Everybody. They call on people they shouldn't even talk to--trying to raise money, appealing to people to fight their battles . . . they invite all of these experts from Europe and the United States to go there to say their bit about AIDS, to sell them condoms. So they can accept what I--someone who loves my former home--am saying. They don't have a leg to stand on, so they better not start hopping around me. (60)

Walker's tone gets increasingly harsh in this justification, and her answer is peculiar for a couple reasons. She first recognizes her African heritage, and any concern that time and distance have removed the direct relationship between her and that African heritage



disappears in Walker's argument, for she admits that she loves Africa, even calling it her "former home." Walker then justifies her intervention in African affairs by pointing out the existing Euro-American influence on Africa. She reasons if the neo-colonial state, in which foreign powers continue to control African affairs, exists anyway, then the Africans should at least listen to her. She posits herself as a surrogate mother concerned about her former home, but she appears equally dictatorial, as if she alone can solve the problems of that former home.

The second part of Walker's answer seems particularly specious, as she justifies her involvement at the same time she criticizes the involvement of "experts from Europe and the United States." The fact is, and it is a fact that incites the debate over Hickey's "ideological conflict," Walker is also from the United States, and her involvement deserves a critical analysis. Because she is from the United States, and thus a part of the conceptual *Western* world I noted in chapter 1, her determination in raising awareness against female mutilation as a crime against basic human rights can be seen as a conflict with the right of peoples to continue practicing female circumcision as an expression of what Hickey calls "cultural autonomy." I will return to this ideological tension concerning Walker's authority as a *Westerner*, but first I want to develop a context for understanding the first part of Walker's answer to Paula Giddings, namely that she believes she is speaking for her ancestors who were taken from Africa for the purposes of slavery.



It is important to recognize that although Walker in no way represents a collective African-American<sup>2</sup> voice, she is not the first African-American to explore the relationship between African-Americans and their collective African heritage. In 1962 the South African critic and author Ezekiel Mphahlele observed that the "American Negro" had begun ". . . to do research into African cultures and history . . . [partly as] an act of identification, a projection into one's African origins . . ." (42). Mphahlele went on to cite several major African-American authors who had by then begun to write about their African origins.<sup>3</sup> Though none of these authors could lay claim to a representative voice speaking for all African-Americans, their efforts established a literary dialogue concerning the relationship between African-Americans and their collective African heritage.

James Baldwin offers a concrete example of this literary dialogue among African-Americans. While he was at the Conference of Negro-African Writers and Artists in Paris during the fall of 1956, Baldwin came to realize a common bond held by those of African descent worldwide. The conference was attended by people from around the world, and for Baldwin

. . . it became clear as the debate wore on that there *was* something which all black men held in common, something which cut across opposing points of view, and placed in the same context their widely dissimilar experience. What

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<sup>2</sup>I will use the commonly--though not universally--accepted label "African-American" unless the context demands otherwise.

<sup>3</sup>See Mphahlele's chapter entitled "Roots."



they held in common was their precarious, their unutterably painful relation to the white world. What they held in common was the necessity to remake the world in their own image, to impose this image on the world, and no longer be controlled by the vision of the world, and of themselves, held by other people. What, in sum, black men held in common was their ache to come into the world as men. And this ache united people who might otherwise have been divided as to what a man should be. ("Princes" 28-29)

Baldwin realized that blacks worldwide were fighting against a Western hegemony which had continually defined whites as well as blacks, and his perspective and language are strikingly similar to Ngugi and Achebe, who speak of returning the African perspective to the "center" of African expression. The common struggle continues to be for people of color to reclaim their own definitions and perspectives on their place in their world, yet the common obstacle continues to be overcoming the racism which perpetuates neo-colonial exploitation.

In 1979, while he was a Distinguished Visiting Professor at Bowling Green State University, the realization Baldwin had in Paris concerning the black man's common relation to the white world was enhanced by a meeting with Chinua Achebe. Upon agreeing to a dialogue with Achebe, Baldwin told his colleague Ernest Champion: "If we meet, the connection between slavery and colonialism will become all too embarrassing" (Champion xi-xii). Though Baldwin didn't expound on this



connection, the racism common to both slavery and colonialism was enough for him to place these dissimilar experiences of colonialism and slavery in the same context. Similarly, in the 1950s Richard Wright had begun “. . . to theorize about the shared history of suffering that linked the experience of slavery, Jim Crow, and racism in African American lives with the impact of colonialism and neo-colonialism on the large populations of Asia and Africa” (Singh xvii). Wright himself, who had left America for Paris in 1946, traveled to the Gold Coast in 1953--later to become Ghana--and recorded his observations in Black Power. In the opening of his text, Wright clarifies that though he had been a member of the communist party from 1932 to 1944, his political affiliation at the time of his trip was ambiguous and his main concern was the “problem of freedom” (xxxvi). In this way, Wright went to the Gold Coast not looking to make political statements or proclaim “. . . the notion of a racial soul or mystique that links all people of African descent” (Singh xii). Instead, Wright was concerned with the overall potential for industrial and economic development for poor people throughout the world and, in fact, his concern for a personal connection to Africa made him feel uneasy.

As he was considering a visit to Africa for the first time, Wright underwent a personal interrogation which highlights his uncertainty. As family and friends ate their Easter brunch and conversed, Wright escaped into his own world of thoughts on Africa:



I heard them, but my mind and feelings were racing along another and hidden track. *Africa!* Being of African descent, would I be able to feel and know something about Africa on the basis of a common “racial” heritage? Africa was a vast continent full of my “people.” . . . Or had three hundred years imposed a psychological distance between me and the “racial stock” from which I had sprung? . . . My emotions seemed to be touching a dark and dank wall . . . *But, am I African?* (Original italics, 4)

Wright’s enthusiasm, coupled with his uncertainty, reveals an ambiguity pertaining to his own understanding of his relationship to Africa, but during his travels Wright made the following observation:

I understood why so many American Negroes were eager to disclaim any relationship with Africa . . . the American Negro’s passionate identification with America stemmed from two considerations: first, it was natural part of the assimilation of Americanism; second, so long had Africa been described as something shameful, barbaric . . . that he wanted to disassociate himself in his mind from all such realities . . . . (73)

Far from his initial ambivalence, Wright came to believe that one of the effects of being an American of African descent is this disassociation resulting from the shameful image of the African. In the colonial context, Ngugi would argue that this disassociation signifies a triumph for the oppressors. He believes “it is the final triumph of a system



of domination when the dominated start singing its virtues" (*Decolonizing* 20). The system, or the society, subtly persuades the oppressed--in Wright's case the African-Americans and in Ngugi's case the formerly colonized Africans--that their traditions are inferior and, therefore, easily and sensibly replaceable and, eventually, replaced.

In the context of my current discussion concerning Alice Walker and her claim to authority, Baldwin and Wright are important because they help develop an understanding of a common history of suffering for both African-Americans and Africans at the hands of the "white world." They do not necessarily speak for the entire African-American community, but their ideas help place Walker's own ideas in a broader historical context. The dualistic position of the "black world" suffering at the hands of a "white world," however, is complicated because although Baldwin and Wright, and of course Walker, are all of African descent, they are also clearly of the *West*. In chapter 1, I noted that *Western* alludes to the peoples and policies of the United States and those European countries which have historically maintained a presence in African countries. Abiding by the above dualism and definition of the *Western* world, Baldwin, Wright, and Walker are both victims and victimizers. It is at this point, where dualisms fail to express the complexity of the situation and the categories for description seem to collapse, that Walker's direct claim to a relationship with her African ancestors becomes problematic. In Hickey's terms, Walker's voice must be considered in relation to the ideological conflict between her position as a



*Westerner* on the one hand, and as an advocate for the universal rights of women to control their own bodies on the other.

In addition to claiming her cultural heritage to validate her intervention in African affairs, in the film Warrior Marks<sup>4</sup> Walker claims solidarity with the women who face the possibility of genital mutilation. As a child, one of Walker's brothers accidentally shot her in the eye while he was playing with an air-rifle. Young Alice was partially blinded, and she felt "isolated and oppressed" because the injury had been inflicted by a male, leaving her helpless and comfortless. Walker felt that even her mother sided with her brother, thus leaving the young girl to bear the pain herself. In retrospect, she has said that only as a "consciously feminist adult" did she realize she had a "patriarchal wound" and that "it was [her] visual mutilation that helped [her] 'see' the subject of genital mutilation" (Warrior Marks 17-8). For Walker, this wound allows her to "walk with, not beyond" women who face the possibility of genital mutilation because in each instance a patriarchal wound is being inflicted, and Walker dismisses any cultural justification for such a wound.

Walker considers her heritage and her solidarity with females sufficient authority to justify her active denunciation of female mutilation, and to those who still question her authority she responds, "sometimes you have to take a political or moral

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<sup>4</sup>Walker and Pratibha Parmar have produced both a book and film by the same title. Much of the book documents the making of the film, so reference to the film may overlap reference to the book and vice versa. Each work is cited at the end in my "References" section.



stand, whether it's your own or someone else's culture" (Warrior Marks 270). She reveals her stand in Possessing the Secret of Joy in its peculiar dedication:

*This Book is dedicated*

*With Tenderness and Respect*

*To the Blameless*

*Vulva.*

She never pretends her novel is merely a story; it is, rather, from the start a socio-political criticism both challenging a ritual that affects millions of women around the world and calling for the eradication of what she considers ritual violence against women. Her novel, however, is so adamant in its condemnation that it simplifies a "painful, complex and difficult issue" (Warrior Marks 94-5). Walker has become a strong voice against all forms of female genital mutilation, and she clearly has a political imperative:

I wrote my novel as a duty to my conscience as an educated African-AmerIndian woman. To write a book such as this . . . about a subject such as genital mutilation, is in fact, as far as I am concerned, the reason for my education . . . I know only one thing about the "success" of my effort. I believe with all my heart that there is at least one little baby girl born somewhere on the planet today who will not know the pain of genital mutilation because of my work. And that, in this one instance, at least, the pen will mightier than the



circumciser's knife. Her little beloved face will be the light that shines on me.  
(Warrior Marks 25).

Walker's position is clear, and she intends to "stand with the mutilated women, not beyond them" (Warrior Marks 13), but in her passion she oversimplifies an issue that entails much more than physical or gender-specific violence.

Circumcision in and of itself is a controversial tradition that must be considered in a cultural context. Although Walker's fight is specifically against female genital mutilation, others such as John Mbiti and Jomo Kenyatta view circumcision for both females and males as an integral part of traditional society. Mbiti, for example, believes "initiation rites have many symbolic meanings" (121), and these meanings justify circumcision for both boys and girls in Mbiti's mind as signs of communal unity and initiation; symbolically, a girl becomes a woman in the same way a boy becomes a man--through circumcision. In general,

. . . [the] cutting of the skin from the sexual organs symbolizes and dramatizes separation from childhood: it is parallel to the cutting of the umbilical cord when the child is born . . . the shedding of his [or her] blood into the ground binds him [or her] mystically to the living-dead who are symbolically living in the ground. (123)

Ngugi's portrayal of circumcision in The River Between matches much of Mbiti's argument that circumcision rites for both males and females possess significant



symbolic meaning. When Waiyaki, the protagonist of the novel, is preparing for and experiencing his circumcision, the narrator speaks of the social significance of the rite: "All his life Waiyaki had waited for this day, for this very opportunity to reveal his courage like a man. . . . The surgeon had done his work. Blood trickled freely on to the ground, sinking into the soil. Henceforth a religious bond linked Waiyaki to the earth, as if his blood was an offering" (45). Circumcision allows Waiyaki to demonstrate the bravery necessary to be a "man" in the eyes of the tribe, but it also binds him to the tribe in the mystical way Mbiti describes. In this way, the physical act of circumcision is secondary to the symbolic gesture.

This distinction between the physical and the symbolic is developed by Jomo Kenyatta: "The physical operation on the genital organs of both sexes . . . signifies that the individual operated upon has been given . . . all the essential information on the laws and customs of the tribe" (155). For Waiyaki, this information was passed on during his recovery. The attendants aiding the newly initiated would tell stories that were "a part of their education" (47), a part that was only available to the adults of the tribe. Walker's concern, of course, is not so much with male circumcision, but it is important to realize the cultural context in which both boys and girls experienced these rites that Kenyatta regards "as the very essence of an institution which has enormous educational, social, moral and religious implications, quite from the operation itself" (133). In fact, both historically and in Ngugi's novel, Christian missionaries were



integral in the eradication of female circumcision and more hygienic modifications for male circumcision in traditional Gikuyu culture. Kenyatta believed many of the critics of circumcision never looked beyond the operation to see the “psychological importance attached to this custom” (135), and Eustace Palmer concurs that “the missionaries’ failure to appreciate the symbolic importance of circumcision, its life-giving, self-fulfilling function, partly leads to the disasters of the novel” (13). In addition to the cultural divisions wrought by Western influence--namely Christianity--one of the disasters of the novel is the death of Muthoni.

Muthoni is torn between her Christian father’s command to denounce tradition by converting to Christianity and her desire to be “a woman made beautiful in the tribe” (44). The ideological conflict between the old and the new, the African and the Western, the traditional and the Christian manifests itself in Muthoni’s personal dilemma, and she states it directly: “I am a Christian . . . but I also want to be initiated into the ways of the tribe” (43). For Ngugi, the issue is not strictly some universal morality governing the potential mistreatment of women; rather it is a problem of the rupture caused by the intrusion of a new set of ideals and beliefs. Achebe employs a similar conflict in Things Fall Apart when Okonkwo’s son Nwoye is drawn to Christianity, in part, because the traditional violence inflicted upon his “step-brother” Ikemefuma and the treatment of newly born twins--Nwoye had heard that “twins were put in earthenware pots and thrown away in the forest” (60)--force him to



question the values of Ibo society. The two examples exemplify the problematic in forcing one cultural set of values upon another, regardless of how obvious it seems to the foreign culture. For Walker, female genital mutilation is obviously wrong and harmful to women, and yet Ngugi's character defies her father and partakes in the ceremony with her age-mates. Ngugi is not simplifying the issue, as Achebe isn't, and after a difficult circumcision, Muthoni dies of complications. Ngugi uses her death to iterate the conflict for Muthoni; her dying words are: "I see Jesus. And I am a woman, beautiful in the tribe" (53). In life, Muthoni attempted to reconcile her tribal heritage with the Western religion, but in death she represented the tragic consequences of colonialism.

Near the end of the novel, Waiyaki considers the divisive effects the Western presence has had in his community. He has stood between the new converts and the traditionalists, trying to fashion a "reconciliation between the two parties . . . and the chasm of conflict which divides them" (Hickey 232). But this attempt proves impossible, just as Muthoni's attempt proves tragic. Waiyaki does not altogether reject the new ideas, for he recognizes that even the white man's religion is "not essentially bad" (141), but he balances that with an important contextual observation:

But the religion, the faith, needed washing, cleaning away all the dirt, leaving only the eternal. And that eternal that was the truth had to be reconciled to the traditions of the people. A people's traditions could not be swept away



overnight. That way lay disintegration. Such a tribe would have no roots, for a people's roots were in their traditions going back to the past . . . . (141)

The new faith cannot forcibly replace the old system of values; that would essentially destroy the history of the people. Ngugi uses female circumcision as an example of this broader context, not necessarily embracing the procedure itself, but offering it as a conflict between cultural assimilation to a new system and holding on to tradition, even if it potentially kills. Waiyaki, again charting the *river between* these two extremes, reflects on the significance of the specific issue in its broader context:

Circumcision of women was not important as a physical operation. It was what it did inside a person. It could not be stopped overnight. Patience and, above all, education were needed. If the white man's religion made you abandon a custom and then did not give you something else of equal value, you became lost. (142)

Although Mbiti, Kenyatta, and Ngugi stress the cultural and symbolic importance of circumcision--for both boys and girls--and Ngugi even suggests in the passage above that in time a suitable replacement may emerge, Walker stresses the very physicality of the procedure and dismisses the cultural argument quite concisely in her film Warrior Marks when she says, "torture is not culture." The patience Waiyaki speaks of implies the tradition will continue indefinitely and is not enough for Walker; she firmly believes all forms of female genital mutilation must end immediately and completely.



Walker's attitude and methodology elicit conflicting reactions from critics.

First, there are those who support her belief in the universal moral imperative of ending all forms of violence against women, regardless of cultural context. Lorna Sage, for example, believes "cultural difference shouldn't be allowed to mask cruelty, or to hide it under the cover of guilty silence" (22). Fran P. Hoskin adds, "the myth about the importance of 'cultural traditions' must be laid to rest" (10) because *Westernization* is the goal of every country where the custom is practiced. Hoskin employs the same rhetoric as Walker when she justifies her outspokenness with the assertion that African countries are already seeking Western intervention in other matters, so holding onto the myth of tradition is only an excuse to continue female mutilation--what Awa Thiam, an African feminist, describes as "the most eloquent expression of oppression of women by men" (*Warrior Marks* 290). Many critics may agree with Thiam's premise that female circumcision is oppressive, and they believe, like Waiyaki, education and patience are needed to reshape cultural traditions and sense of tribal unity, but they are concerned with the other half of the ideological conflict--the right of a people to cultural autonomy.

Even Robin Morgan and Gloria Steinem, who agree with Walker's opposition to any form of genital mutilation, recognize the suspicion of many Africans "that Western interest in the matter is motivated not by humanitarian concerns but by a racist or neocolonialist desire to eradicate indigenous culture" (96). This suspicion may actually



be hindering the process of social change and increasing the sense of rupture, because in the face of Western pressure the continuation of female circumcision “gains added significance as a means of resisting tribal colonization” (Buckman 90). Ngugi portrays the significance of resistance in The River Between. Muthoni’s decision to defy her father’s orders and undergo the traditional circumcision rite represents the resistance of the traditional faction within the tribe to the new, Christian values. Though “circumcision [had been] the central rite in the Gikuyu way of life” (37), it “was taking on a new significance” (31) in the relationship between the converted Christians and the Gikuyu traditionalists. Muthoni’s death only increased the tension and complexity of this relationship. For the Christians, her death made it clear to all “that nothing but evil could come out of adherence to tribal customs”; but for the traditionalists, Muthoni’s death “had clearly shown that nothing but evil would come out of any association with the new faith” (58). Ngugi uses the particular tension concerning the continuation of female circumcision to represent the broader tension between the traditional way of life and the emerging Christian way of life. Each side views Muthoni’s death in a societal context; instead of concern over the death of a specific girl, there is tension between “tribal customs” and the “new faith.”

This ideological tension is the point at which many African critics question Walker’s authority and motive in both Warrior Marks and Possessing the Secret of Joy. As “well-intended” as Walker’s involvement may be, she often raises the suspicion of



African women whose resentment derives from the view of Western involvement as little more than “an invasion of privacy, as interference in African affairs, and as yet another form of imperialism” (Lighfoot-Klein 167). For instance, some African women are suspicious that the “Western matriarchy . . . is at least as controlling and self-serving as its male counterpart,” and Thiam “suggests that the continuation of this ritual is at least a partial reaction or response to colonialism and the imposition of Western values upon these cultures” (Bass 5). Because these women view Walker as a part of the Western matriarchy of which they are suspicious, they defend their customs rather than submit to Walker’s rhetoric. Seble Dawit, an Ethiopian human-rights lawyer, and Salem Mekuria decry Walker as a “heroine-saviour” and describe Warrior Marks as being “emblematic of the Western feminist tendency to see female genital mutilation as the gender oppression to end all oppressions instead of as an issue worthy of attention itself” (Kaplan 124). The implication here is that Walker is using the particular issue of genital mutilation as an attempt to declare her own universal moral assumptions, rather than considering the specific context and concerns of the issue itself. Dr. Nahid Toubia, a Sudanese surgeon, goes so far to accuse Walker of using this particular topic for her own career: “Walker is a writer whose star is fading. This is a very sensitive issue that she’s trying to sensationalize in order to get the limelight back” (Kaplan 124). Whether one takes the criticism this far or not, when considering



female circumcision itself, one must consider the cultural and political implications involved.

In Possessing the Secret of Joy, Walker oversimplifies two key components of the broader issue in order to augment her political statement. Her depiction of female genital mutilation takes place in a fictional tribe that is supposed to represent all of Africa. The *Olinka* are Walker's creation, for "having no particular place in Africa to claim, she claimed it all" (Benn 36). This claim is inherently problematic. Walker is limited--like Joyce Cary, and Joseph Conrad and other Western artists writing about Africa--by her Western perspective. By fictionalizing a generic "Africa" Walker reduces the continent at large to a monolithic society representing the various cultures of Africa. Although such a reduction ". . . allows her to make generalizations--some of them useful and cogent, some of them questionable and overextended . . . this strategy leads to a certain loss of precision and location" (Hickey 240). Hickey argues that this loss of precision is particularly evident in Walker's insertion of Adam and Olivia, two African-American missionaries, in her novel because their presence "deprives the text of any real sense of a colonial past, or the sense of a persisting or enduring impact by colonial actors which extends into the present" (240). By placing these missionaries at the heart of her novel, Walker seems to ignore the "colonial moment" in her approach, which is ultimately aimed at calling "for the abolition of a custom which is very much alive in the present" (240). Ngugi, on the other hand,



uses the Gikuyu society of Kenya as a specific historical and cultural context for his story: “the colonial experience in Kenya and the trauma and dislocation which accompanied it are neither an abstraction nor an invention” (240). In this sense, Ngugi’s use of the particular controversy of female circumcision is not the underlying imperative in his novel, but rather a trope in his broader thematic exploration of the trauma and dislocation of the colonial experience. Because Ngugi has the “advantage of a sharply defined historical context” (Hickey 240), the reader can assess the particular rite of circumcision in a specific context.

Female mutilation/circumcision occurs throughout parts of Africa, but no one tribe can be said to typify Africa’s diverse cultures. Moreover, not all African peoples practice female circumcision, and within those communities that do there are variations of the procedure that Walker fails to acknowledge. In general, the rites of female circumcision may vary from *sunna*, which involves the “removal of the prepuce or hood of the clitoris, with the body of the clitoris remaining intact” (Warrior Marks 367), to the extreme *infibulation* or *Pharaonic circumcision*. This extreme procedure is the one Walker addresses in her novel, and it entails considerable damage to the female. Following the removal of the of the clitoris, the labia minora and much of the labia majora, the remaining sides of the vulva are stitched together to close up the vagina, except for a small opening that is preserved with slivers of wood or matchsticks, leaving the female with a proportional opening which makes necessary bodily functions



painful and often unhygienic. By employing only the most severe variation of female circumcision, Walker clearly focuses on the physicality of the procedure rather than the complex cultural and symbolic meanings that Ngugi highlights.

In Walker's story, Tashi--an African who has married an American missionary and has been living in America--returns to her homeland to join in the fight for liberation. As part of her return, Tashi--like Muthoni--voluntarily undergoes infibulation because "she recognized it as the only remaining definitive stamp of Olinka tradition" (63), and because the "leader"-- a Jomo Kenyatta-like figure who stirs the emotions of his followers to fight against imperialism--had called their people to "return to the purity of [their] own culture and traditions" and to remember their "ancient customs" (115). Each author complicates the issue of female circumcision by creating characters who choose to be circumcised. In reality, women have always had an essential role in the rite, and "it is usually the women who carry it out, and who carry it on" (French F4). Thiam believes women "took it upon themselves to preserve certain customs," and even if these women did not "challenge their state of bondage to men, [African women] nevertheless pay tribute to these women" for holding onto cultural traditions (Bass 7). Both Muthoni and Tashi think of their initiations into their respective tribes as cultural, if not political, statements that affirm their heritage against the specter of Western imposition.



In her youth, Tashi had been defensive of her culture; at one point she lashed out at Olivia, the daughter of an American missionary and the sister of Tashi's future husband, Adam: "Who are you and your people never to accept us as we are? Never to imitate our ways? It is always we who have to change" (23). At this point, it seems as though Walker is moving towards recognizing the cultural double-consciousness that female circumcision represents, but Tashi's sense of cultural pride dissolves immediately following her infibulation, and Walker's focus becomes the personal psychological journey of Tashi. The start of her severe psychological problems, chronicled throughout the novel through her meetings with an authoritative and insightful psychiatrist, coincide with the infibulation, indicating a direct relationship between the physical procedure and the individual alienation. However, Tashi's problems derive from a much more complex history.

She belongs to one of the first generations of Olinkans to experience a Western presence, and she becomes very good friends with Olivia and Adam. As she grows closer to Olivia and Adam, and closer to the new ideas and beliefs precipitated by the missionary presence, Tashi is torn more and more by these cultural forces. She eventually marries Adam and moves to the United States, and in doing so confuses the direct ties to her heritage. Walker's narrative employs multiple perspectives, as the reader hears the story through the various characters and when Tashi is speaking in her "American persona" her name shifts to Evelyn. This shift is significant in that it



represents how Tashi's whole sense of self in relation to her traditional way of life has been affected by her American experience. When, therefore, Tashi returns to undergo infibulation voluntarily the coherent tribal context has been diluted, but Walker presents Tashi's pain as the direct result of the physical operation and not of the disruption caused by her cultural confusion. Walker returns to the physicality of the operation again and again, stressing the damage the procedure itself inflicts. At one point Tashi's husband, Adam, graphically describes Tashi's pain: "It now took a quarter of an hour for her to pee. Her menstrual period lasted ten days. She was incapacitated by cramps nearly half the month . . . cramps caused by the residual flow that could not find its way out" (64). Although examples of the physical implications serve Walker's purpose in raising a political awareness of and movement against these procedures, the examples simplify the complex cultural issues that I have highlighted throughout this chapter.

Walker is unashamedly adamant in her denunciation of genital mutilation, and she unequivocally dismisses any room for cultural justification. She concludes that the secret of joy is "RESISTANCE," but not the resistance to neo-colonial forces Ngugi champions but a resistance to the patriarchal wound that she believes is wrong because young females are injured. And yet, as much as many African feminists agree with Walker, they "seem to understand that they neither have to denigrate a culture nor destroy it to change it," and they are not "enshrouded in helpless, hopeless ignorance and misery--longing for rescue by the West and Alice Walker" (Bass 10). Although



Walker has been repeatedly singled out since the publication of her novel, it is important to add that she is not alone. At the Fourth World Conference on Women, held in Beijing in September 1995, the women of the world addressed the problem of "female mutilation." The *Platform for Action* noted that "conditions that subject [girls] to harmful practices, such as female genital mutilation, pose grave health risks," and it went on to encourage governments to place "special focus on programmes for both men and women that emphasize the elimination of harmful attitudes and practices, including female genital mutilation" (Section C, paragraphs 95 and 108a). It is important to note here the emphasis the *Platform* places on governmental programmes. Although government programmes to change cultural practices may be as suspicious as colonial ones, especially in the postcolonial context, the local emphasis places the responsibility and agency to act in the hands of African governments rather than serving as a decree from the West to enact Western morality in indigenous communities.

Throughout this study, I have considered the tension between formerly colonized peoples and their ongoing struggle to reclaim their identities in a global community. I have focused on Ngugi wa Thiong'o not in an attempt to prove he is either *right* or *wrong* in his politics, but rather to lay out some of the pertinent issues facing Ngugi as an African, a Kenyan, and a Gikuyu in what Ngugi would suggest is a neo-colonial world. For Ngugi the tension resulting from the ideological conflict between economic, political, and cultural autonomy on the one hand, and cultural



imperialism on the other, reaches from the essential level of language to the complex systems of belief and collective identity. Ngugi recognizes the complexity of his own identity, for he proclaims his ethnic loyalty to Gikuyu traditions, but he also recognizes the broad affinities that tie him to the peoples of black Africa and the parallel experiences of colonialism and imperialism that have afflicted these peoples. Arguing an essential relationship between a people and its language, Ngugi takes a firm stance against the continued use of English in the Gikuyu community from which he comes. In addition to his determination as former British colonial subject to de-emphasize the use of English as the vehicle for expression by his own people, Ngugi advocates a universal determination to maintain indigenous languages and cultures. He describes the importance of languages throughout the world in the following metaphor:

A world of many languages should be like a field of flowers of different colors. There is no flower which becomes more of a flower on account of its color or its shape. All such flowers express their common "floralness" in their diverse colors and shapes. In the same way our different languages can, should, and must express our common being . . . all our languages should join in the demand for a new international economic, political, and cultural order.

(Moving 39)

Ngugi's metaphor indicates his belief in the inherent necessity of maintaining languages throughout the world. Just as the "floralness" of a flower is an expression of its



diversity, the language of a people is an expression of its collective identity. The sum of these identities is the diversity that Ngugi calls us to celebrate rather than diminish, and he believes breaking the economic, political, and cultural grasp of neo-colonialism can only be broken if peoples maintain their collective identities through struggle and resistance.

My study has also demonstrated some of the complications to Ngugi's clear vision of maintaining indigenous languages and, by extension for Ngugi, cultures. Chinua Achebe serves as an African contemporary of Ngugi's who agrees with much of Ngugi's political imperative in freeing formerly colonized African states, but who disagrees with Ngugi's contention that the answer begins with the denunciation of, in their respective cases, the English language. Instead, Achebe posits a syncretic potential for English by which the language is transformed to carry the weight of the African experience. Achebe challenges Ngugi's denunciation and calls for an appropriation of English rather than an adamant denial of its importance to what Achebe calls the "realities" of modern Africa.

A final complication I have explored is that of Alice Walker, an African-American woman, and her determination to call for an end to female genital mutilation. Walker's determination complicates my discussion of Ngugi because it places the conflict between cultural autonomy and what some regard as cultural chauvinism at the forefront of the discussion. The question remains: Does Walker's advocacy for



eradicating female genital mutilation exemplify a fight for basic, universal human rights, or does it an attempt to maintain a neo-colonial control over the cultural autonomy of certain peoples? Any answer to this question is complicated by Walker's own claims to her African heritage, the cultural context in which these rites take place, and the underlying ideological conflict of postcolonial politics that I have addressed throughout this paper.

Ultimately, the questions I have raised throughout will be answered by the ongoing struggle of indigenous peoples to reclaim their agency in cultural, political, and economic affairs. As Ngugi notes, cultures and societies are not static entities; rather they are constantly in the process of developing. For the postcolonial African societies I have explored, the central theme for this development is the reconciliation of the struggle for self-determination with the historic reality of colonial imposition. In this reconciliation, any decolonization of the mind must begin by *moving the center* of economic, political, and cultural control back into the hands of those who maintain the struggle for voice, identity, and agency in order to retain autonomous and thriving cultures in a global community. The emerging cultures will be a fusion of traditional cultures, imperialist culture and, perhaps most important, the culture of resistance.



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