

The Historical Imperative
in African Activist Literature

by
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Introduction: History As A Weapon

History is often regarded with some veneration as a reservoir of past human experiences. From it people can draw sentiments that can inspire and stiffen their wavering loyalties, see precedents and "dress rehearsals" for coping with their often confused present, and probably learn to avoid past errors. In a sense each of us is one's own telescoped past experience within a particular cultural context. Because of these reasons, then, the study of history can be said to be one of the most fundamental of the social sciences, and historical analysis one of the most basic tools for understanding human experiences.

The reservoir of history, however, has not been exploited equally by everyone. In particular, defenders of the *status quo* have made greater use of history to promote class hegemony than its opponents. As James Harvey Robinson once said,

history has been regularly invoked to substantiate the claims of the conservative, but has hitherto been neglected by the radical, or impatiently repudiated as a chosen weapon of his enemy. The radical has not yet perceived the overwhelming value to him of a real understanding of the past. It is his weapon by right, and he should wrest it from the hand of the conservative.¹

But in a footnote to his remark, Robinson goes on to observe that Marxian scholars have been an exception in this regard. Commencing as a philosopher of history, Karl Marx is deemed to have given to historiography one of its most important hypotheses by mining the past for its specific implications for the operation of the capitalism of his day, and to social science an historically-edged instrument for confronting contemporary problems.

Since 1920, when Robinson made these remarks, however, history has increasingly been regarded as an applied science of the sort. This development led to its greater utilization by scholars of different ideological persuasions. Not all history is the same, however, and different histories may end up serving the interests of different sections of the society differently. A history that is devoted to the study of the past *qua* past is likely to be conservative and of limited value to the radical political activist. The advocate of radical change seeks a history

that is exploitable in the interest of advance, a history that recaptures the past in the service of present action.

One of the greatest proponents of this latter position is Walter Rodney, who advances the idea of history as a political weapon of revolutionary struggle.² Rodney begins with the proposition that the oppressor always seeks to maintain class hegemony by implanting numerous historical myths in the minds of the oppressed, myths which ultimately act as an impediment to revolutionary consciousness and active revolutionary engagement in the present epoch. Before anything else, therefore, there is a need for historical reconstruction directed towards *freeing* the minds of the oppressed.

However, the political activist is interested not only in expunging historical myths from the mind of the oppressed, but also in *mobilizing* it. According to Rodney, the type of history and the mode of historical analysis we engage in must bring history to the door-step of revolutionary action. In other words, it is not enough to reconstruct the past; that past must also be recreated in sharp orientation to the specific intricacies of present confrontations and struggles.

The Novel As A Mode Of Historical Discourse

It is not only content and the perspective of that content that accords history its revolutionary power, but also the very mode of presentation. The novel can be regarded as one such mode. But the novel as conceived in the northern hemisphere poses certain fundamental problems for the African cultural activist who chooses to use history as a revolutionary weapon. One of the essential pillars of the concept of the novel in the north is "objective" description of reality, or what some Marxists have described as "bourgeois realism." Marjorie Boulton, for example, defines a good novel as one which "is *true* in the sense that it gives a sincere, well observed, enlightening picture of human life."³ But a "sincere" picture of life from whose point of view?

This issue of point of view poses two problems for the African cultural activist: first of all, the "participants" involved in that historical reality are often long dead, so who will provide their version of that reality? Secondly, most, if not all, sources and records bearing on such "reality" were compiled and preserved by the colonialists with an obvious bias to reflect their own mark on the historical discourse of the colonized, and serve their own interests as a colonizing class. How then does an African cultural activist retrieve the "objective" reality of the colonized from this colonial documentation?

Another principle of the novel that has come to be regarded as an essential pillar in its own right is the notion of stream-of-consciousness. The stream-of-consciousness novel is defined by Robert Humphrey as a

type of fiction "in which the basic emphasis is placed on exploration of the pre-speech levels of consciousness for the purpose, primarily, of revealing the psychic being of characters."⁴ According to this conception, therefore, there is a psychological being who has a distinct individual status in society. In terms of historical discourse this ideal of the individual reduces history to no more than deeds of individual heroes. But for such history to serve as a weapon of revolution it has to be predicated on the *collective* consciousness, will, and action of the "oppressed" and not on the individual acts of heroes. In a sense, then, the stream-of-consciousness concept of the novel stands in sharp conflict with both the idea of history as a weapon and the interests of the African cultural activist.

In this analysis it becomes evident that the typical novel as conceived in the north is inadequate for the projection of a history with a revolutionary image. For history to serve as a weapon in creative literature, a writer must transcend the boundaries of mere description of reality and negate the notion of individual consciousness. It is in this connection that Ngugi wa Thiong'o breaks away from the traditional conception of the novel. The historical imperative has in a sense forced the activist Ngugi to revolutionize not only his own perspective of African history, but also his mode of creative discourse on that history by moulding a new kind of novel.

Ngugi agrees that the novel is a medium of communication, but does not accept its European version of being straightjacketed, flat, and predictable. Therefore, in his use of the novel Ngugi has included poems, songs, testimonies, and elements of drama, thus turning it around and moulding it into a form more in line with the function of language and literature in the African oral tradition. In this way he achieves his aim in adapting literature to a combative, liberative role. The use of fables, proverbs, songs and satire is common even in works by writers as politically diverse as Soyinka and Achebe, but only Ngugi deliberately uses these and other devices of orature as a strategy to express the collective historical consciousness and experiences of the people. This use of orature is significant because folklore draws inspiration at the grassroots. In other words, folklore is *from* and *of* the people.

Ngugi goes further than remoulding the descriptive mode of the novel and, in his latest work, *Matigari*,⁵ he in fact abandons description altogether and explores the realm of fantasy. Within this form, Ngugi is now able to resurrect the militant, historical Mau Mau and employ it to confront present-day problems. It is no wonder, then, that of all Ngugi's novels it is *Matigari*, both in its English and Kikuyu versions, that came to be proscribed by the Kenyan regime. In this text,

fantasy allows for an analytic potency that is difficult to achieve in the traditional descriptive novel.

Mau Mau In Colonialist Literature

There has always been debate between representational fiction and "historical facts." For example, questions have been raised as to whether the besieged Trojans really dragged a suspicious-looking wooden horse inside their fortified walls despite every reason to suspect a Greek trick. And indeed some historians have claimed that Paris, the Trojan prince, did not take Helen straight back to Troy after their elopement as Homer so craftily depicts in his epic, but that she was detained in Egypt and eventually returned to King Agamemnon by an Egyptian diplomatic escort.

Similarly, questions of fact and fiction have been raised with regard to the Mau Mau movement in Kenya and its depiction in literature. Was the Mau Mau movement, it is asked, a manifestation of class conflict, or was it a resurgence of Kikuyu ethnic atavism? Was its leadership a bunch of cut-throat maniacs or a dedicated team of idealists? Which one is truer to historical reality: Kenneth Wateene's crazed Dedan Kimathi or Ngugi wa Thiong'o's and Muchere Mugo's⁶ idealistic Dedan Kimathi? These questions pervade the whole span of African historiography.

As a reservoir of human experience, the past can be idealized to imbue peoples with a sense of their identity, or debased to create self-doubt and despair. Many writers have written about Mau Mau, ranging from writers like Robert Ruark⁷, who views the Mau Mau as evil, to writers like Micere Mugo and others, who reject this depiction of the Mau Mau. Therefore, the question over colonial history of the Mau Mau becomes a point of polarization within a longer ideological discourse. But many modern writers on Mau Mau history have simply extended this polarization because they too share the same sources recorded and preserved by colonialists.

For Ngugi, the history of Mau Mau is a symbol of resistance against oppression that has direct bearing on the present-day politics of Kenya. It is this realization that has forced Ngugi to abandon his earlier trend of writing about the Mau Mau from a colonially-recorded liberal point of view and to go into super-realism, thus elevating the historicity of Mau Mau as a collective grassroots past to a level where questions of "historical fact" take a new form. At this level no one individual can claim exclusive knowledge of what happened—the participants, not "experts," now become the custodians of their history. Thus freed from earlier limitations, Ngugi is now able to recreate history and use it as a weapon in his writing, and thus provide the ideological terms for a new

perspective on the Mau Mau movement and Kenyan history. Ngugi can therefore claim that his writing is something liberating and new, untainted and uncontested by colonial discourse.

Ngugi And The History Of Mau Mau

In the field of African literature (and perhaps of African academics in general), there is probably no other intellectual who is a better known practitioner of the Rodneyan notion of "history as a weapon" than the Kenyan writer Ngugi wa Thiong'o. In addition, like Rodney, Ngugi draws no boundaries between his academic work and his political activities, between principle and practice. It is not surprising, therefore, that when Bogle-L'Ouverture decided to launch the Walter Rodney Memorial Lecture Series it was to Ngugi the sponsors turned for the inaugural lecture in 1985.⁸ Our thesis here is that history has gradually come to play the role of weapon in Ngugi's works, partly because of the gradual conjunction of his intellectual and political action.

In the remainder of this paper, we intend to look at Ngugi's six novels in terms of how history has evolved into a weapon in response to the increasing intimacy between his academic intellection and his political activism.

As a general observation, many African novelists have, at one point or another, incorporated aspects of history into their creative works, albeit in a fictionalized manner. This was particularly true of novels written during the last phase of colonialism in the 1950s and in its immediate aftermath (in the 1960s). In a sense, this was a reaction to the humiliating historical experience wrought by colonization, and a "proper" recollection of that history was seen by many as therapeutic to Africa's self-image, as a process of purging the remnants of the ghost of colonialism. But as the expectations regarding *uhuru* became increasingly shattered and disillusionment set in, the references to history became less frequent, or at best, less central to creative works. Ngugi, however, stands out as one of the exceptions in this regard. The degenerate conditions of the post-colonial era, far from causing him to abandon his concerns with the colonial past, seem to have prompted his historical consciousness with even greater zeal.

The Mau Mau movement of liberation has been central to Ngugi's historical thrust in his novels. But the treatment of Mau Mau in Ngugi's pre-*Petals of Blood* novels differs in a substantial way from *Petals of Blood*⁹ and the novels after it. In particular, the history in pre-*Petals* works is essentially reformatory and lacks the punch that would jolt Ngugi's readers into expunging the myths purveyed by colonial misinformation. This was the time when Ngugi

was still James Ngugi, a yet-unliberated product of colonial education whose writings, making a fetish of principles like "reasonableness," "fairness," and "objectivity," could only blunt even the most critical of our minds.

The first major change that one observes in Ngugi's novels from *Petals* onwards is that of perspective, of a shift from a rather liberal view to one that is more radical and leftist. This coincides with Ngugi's involvement in opposition politics of a clandestine nature, one which culminated in his appointment as the Chief Spokesman and Coordinator of the Kenyan underground political movement, *Mwakenya*, in August 1990. Beginning with *Petals*, Mau Mau is featured in a more radical, more pungent manner, not as a past *qua* past, but as a living past woven into the intricacies of present life and whose silent throbbings are felt throughout today's society. The apex of this literary orientation is reached in Ngugi's most recent novel, *Matigari*, in which the Mau Mau, personified by the main character Matigari, is literally resurrected to continue with the struggle.

The depiction of Mau Mau in Ngugi's last three novels changes not only in perspective but also in emphasis, in the kinds of issues he chooses to stress or underplay, within the world of fiction. Here we shall focus on six issues which demonstrate this change of emphasis in Ngugi's novels.

1. The National Issue

Most publications on the Mau Mau movement have tended to portray it as an exclusively Kikuyu affair. But there is strong evidence that, while the Kikuyu did indeed constitute the overwhelming majority, the organization gradually transcended a uni-ethnic base to become multi-ethnic. Early during the movement's history, for example, one of the colonial officers is known to have said,

The real out-and-out Mau Mau leaders are also doing more to try and win over other tribes in Kenya to their cause. There is evidence that they have succeeded with many individuals in other tribes and certain black spots in other tribal areas; their influence seems to be affecting the people more deeply and there are signs of real organization developing.¹⁰

With such recruitment efforts, then, the movement was beginning to acquire a national character.

In Ngugi's pre-*Petals* writings it is the Kikuyu component of the Mau Mau movement that is given prominence. The characters are distinctly Kikuyu in name and identity, with sentiments and aspirations

rooted in a Kikuyu order of things. The main characters in all three pre-*Petals* novels, for example, bear an obvious Kikuyu imprint in their cultural predisposition.

Beginning with *Petals*, however, a de-emphasization of the Kikuyu factor occurs. Some of the characters (e.g., Abdalla of *Petals*) do not even carry Kikuyu names, and for those who do, their cultural practices do not appear to be peculiarly Kikuyu-bound. In other words, Mau Mau veterans are given an increasingly "Kenyanopolitan" personality. Even where characters are identified as Kikuyu, their "Kikuyu-ness" is generally subsumed under a more national appearance. Ngugi thus tries to draw on the nationalist strand of the militant Mau Mau to fan the fires of political opposition to the prevailing state of neocolonial oppression along broad *national* rather than narrower *ethnic* lines. The "Kenyanopolitan" personality of individual characters in *Petals* and beyond thus serves as a personification of the national consciousness of the Kenyan people.

2. The Class Issue

There is a sense in which the ethnic "essence" is regarded by many to exist in its "purest" form in a rural milieu. Urban influences are seen as contaminants of ethnic culture. The essence of Kikuyu culture and identity, therefore, would be said to exist in rural Kikuyuland. It was almost natural, therefore, that a Kikuyu-based Mau Mau in Ngugi's earlier novels would at the same time be predominantly rural-based with the *peasantry* forming its class backbone. The peasantry, as the primary embodiment of African revolutionary potential is a theme that recurs in virtually all of Ngugi's writings, and the evident changes in this regard mainly concern the degree of radicalness of the peasantry and its centrality in the struggle *vis-a-vis* other classes. Nonetheless, the "Kenyanopolitanization" of the Mau Mau in Ngugi's later writings has almost automatically led to a de-emphasization of the peasant base of the movement, and here and there one gets glimpses of Mau Mau as a much broader alliance of oppressed peoples from various classes.

The issue of class changes not only in terms of *inter-class* alliances, but also in terms of *intra-class* cohesiveness. In the pre-*Petals* novels, members of the same oppressed class, the peasantry, sometimes seem to be at variance with regard to the nature and strategies of the Mau Mau. Some characters from the oppressed classes express reservations about the politics of Mau Mau.¹¹ But in later works members of the oppressed classes are more idealistically united in their struggles against colonialism. In *Petals* and the ones after, therefore, the class content of the Kenyan anti-colonial struggle is expressed in terms that would make it of direct relevance to the present Kenyan

politico-economic scenario and in conformity with a more socialist vision of society.

3. The Gender Issue

In the minutes of the "Kenya Parliament," the legislative body of the Mau Mau movement, it is reported by Karari wa Njama that male warriors felt that the role of female members should be circumscribed to "fetching firewood, cooking and serving the whole camp, cleaning utensils, mending warriors' clothes and washing leaders' clothes."¹² From such reports, then, one is left with the impression that women had no more than a marginal or at best a secondary role in the anti-imperialist struggle.

Despite these sentiments of the male warriors, however, there is increasing evidence from ongoing oral-historical research that the women members of the Mau Mau movement played a more active role than hitherto acknowledged. It is this newly acknowledged Mau Mau woman that Ngugi tries to capture in his later writings. His pre-*Petals* writings have virtually nothing to say about women in Mau Mau, and the women outside Mau Mau are not depicted as having played a particularly positive role in the broader politics of resistance. For instance, in *Weep Not Child*, it is women from the ranks of the oppressed who oppose the strike called to immobilize the colonial economy and dissuade their husbands from participating in this crucial act of laying down the tools.¹³

However, beginning with *Petals* we start seeing women, both those with and without a Mau Mau background, being allocated more central and progressive roles in the history of the Kenyan people's struggle for political and economic emancipation. From Wanja in *Petals* to Guthera in *Matigari* women now emerge as an integral part of the movement for liberation, struggling side by side with men. In other words, they begin to emerge as freedom fighters in their own right and not as mere appendages of male "strugglers." In these works, then, history is invoked to promote not only class alliances but also gender alliances in facing the revolutionary challenges of modern Kenya.

4. The Local Issue

One of the many factors that are said to have inspired the Mau Mau movement was the participation of Kenyans in the Second World War as members of the King's African Rifles. The war is supposed to have exposed the Kenyan African to military skills, to democratic ideals which other people around the world were fighting for, and to the reality that, after all, the white man is not infallible.

In Ngugi's pre-*Petals*' depiction of the Mau Mau, World War II definitely figures in shaping the consciousness of some of the characters involved in the Mau Mau movement. Boro and some of the other characters in *Weep Not Child*¹⁴ who are central in spurring the movement to militant action are all veterans of the Second World War. But beginning with *Petals* the idea that there were any external factors that inspired the Mau Mau is completely obliterated. The Mau Mau thus emerges as a completely local affair in its motive and inspirational force. It is the collective consciousness of the *local* people forged by *local* conditions that generates the Mau Mau momentum. The Mau Mau is sometimes said to have been, materially, one of the most self-reliant anti-colonial movements of the twentieth century. Ngugi broadens that self-reliance by tracing the intellectual and political foundations of the anti-colonial struggle to the Kenyan soil.

5. The Ideology Issue

There has been some debate in Kenya about the ideological character of the Mau Mau. Was the movement prompted by some parochial attachment to the land bequeathed to the offspring of Gikuyu and Mumbi? Or was it based on a more encompassing political ideology?

Unfortunately, the concept of ideology is used without common agreement as to its meaning. For our purposes we shall define ideology as a set of beliefs about society and politics which seeks to understand how the entire society is organized, what goals should be promoted and what methods should be employed to achieve them.

What then was the ideological thrust of the Mau Mau movement? In a sense, Mau Mau's ideology was dynamic in that it kept on changing with new experiences. There is little doubt that it started as a "narrow" struggle for "ancestral land," but ultimately assumed the broader goal of national independence and self-determination. There is even evidence that in its later phases the movement became inspired by Pan-African sentiments.

Now, in Ngugi's pre-*Petals* novels, it is the narrower ideology of the Kikuyu people as the rightful heirs of the land of Gikuyu and Mumbi that is most prominent. A certain spirituality pervades the ideology at this stage. Biblical parallels are made between the Agikuyu and the Jews as chosen people in bondage fighting for the promised land.

In *Petals* and beyond, however, the ideological spirituality seems to capitulate to a more materialist view. The fight for liberation is now presented not in terms of the dispossession of the Ngai-given right

of the Kikuyus to Kikuyuland, but to class forces of domination and imperialism.

6. The Leadership Issue

In our discussion of the interplay between literature and history we have intimated that there has been a tendency in northern historiography to give prominence to the role of individuals in historical processes. This tendency is perhaps most pronounced in attempts to individuate leadership, in the quest to designate individual leaders of otherwise collective historical events. Subsequently the failures and successes, the setbacks and achievements of entire movements with great historical missions are sometimes reduced to the weaknesses and strengths of individual personalities. This is a notion of history and leadership that is rejected by many radical activists as it is deemed arrogantly elitist and counter-revolutionary in essence.

Yet this is precisely the notion of Mau Mau leadership that informed Ngugi's pre-*Petals* novels. In *Weep Not Child, The River Between*¹⁵ and *A Grain of Wheat*,¹⁶ we have specific individuals who, though not necessarily visible, are clearly identified as leaders of the movement. These leaders emerge virtually as abstract entities, and they are seemingly not of and from the people they are supposed to lead. In addition, because of the stream-of-consciousness character of these novels, these leaders are so "psychological" that they remain socio-politically inactive; their internal debates weakens their leadership image and sows seeds of mistrust within the ranks of the leadership. This leadership mould unsurprisingly creates a society which passively awaits the intervention of the redeemer, the leader. And when the leader fails to deliver, the society is consumed by apathy and demoralization.

However, as Ngugi has become more and more of a political activist, he has downplayed the individual aspect of leadership in favor of collective leadership. In flashbacks and reminiscences of the Mau Mau in Ngugi's later novels, one no longer gets the impression that the destiny of the movement is in the hands of an individual leader, the hero, the redeemer. The notion of collective leadership reaches full maturation in *Matigari* where the main character is in fact no more than a symbol of the entire movement. In *Matigari*, in other words, the movement is its own leader.

In this way, then, Ngugi attempts to prompt revolutionary action from the people by making each feel a part of the whole in terms of determining the direction of the action. By portraying "revolution" as a

process of collective intellect and action, Ngugi has in fact vested in every individual an element of leadership.

Conclusion

In the foregoing, we have tried to show that in his presentation of the history of the Mau Mau, Ngugi has demonstrated a change both in perspective and in points of emphasis. The perspective has assumed a more radical character, with greater emphasis placed on such issues as class alliances, the non-ethnic character of the movement, the progressive role played by women, the primacy of local over foreign factors in prompting the movement, and the collective nature of leadership.

Our contention here is that all of this may have been done with the explicit objective of sharpening the weapon of history, of rendering history a more potent tool of revolution. Beginning with the more modest attempt to expunge our minds of the negative myths about Mau Mau in *Petals*, Ngugi finally tries to use the weapon of history for agitative ends in *Matigari*. In the latter he tries to mobilize Kenyans into revolutionary action against the *status quo*. But clearly, this revolutionary action is encouraged along certain ideological lines and national, class, and gender alliances, with the local situation supplying the motive force and resources. There is a sense in which the very history of the Mau Mau is juxtaposed over present politico-economic conditions of oppression and exploitation, and reconstituted lessons of the movement are invoked to prompt present-day revolutionary action.

Notes and References.

- 1 J. H. Robinson, *The New History* (New York: McMillan, 1920), p. 252.
- 2 See Walter Rodney, *Groundings With My Brothers*, (Chicago: Research Associates School Times, 1969).
- 3 Marjorie Boulton, *The Anatomy of the Novel* (Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1975), p. 5.
- 4 Robert Humphrey, *Stream of Consciousness in the Modern Novel* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1958), p. 4.
- 5 Ngugi wa Thiong'o, *Matigari* (London: Heinemann, 1987).
- 6 M. Mugo, *The Death of Dedan Kimathi* (London: Heinemann, 1976).
- 7 R. Rurak, *Something of Value* (New York: Doubleday, 1955).
- 8 Ngugi wa Thiong'o, "The First Walter Rodney Memorial Lecture," (London: Friends of Bogle, 1985).
- 9 Ngugi wa Thiong'o, *Petals of Blood* (London: Heinemann, 1980).

¹⁰Cited in Alamin Mazrui, "Ideology, Theory and Revolution: Lessons from the Mau Mau," in *Race and Class*, 28: 4, p. 55.

¹¹See, for instance, *Weep Not Child*, p. 94.

¹²Quoted by Mazrui, *Ibid.*

¹³See *Weep Not Child*, p. 60.

¹⁴See *Ibid.*, pp. 57, 76, 78.

¹⁵Ngugi wa Thiong'o, *The River Between* (London: Heinemann, 1965).

¹⁶Ngugi wa Thiong'o, *A Grain of Wheat* (London: Heinemann, 1967).

IN ALL GREAT HARMONIES
THERE IS ALWAYS A VOICE OF DISCORD

FAME IS THE REWARD OF THE DEAD,
THE LIVING MUST CONTENT THEMSELVES
WITH REPUTATIONS

THE EYE THAT CAPTURES A FLEETING MOMENT
SWEARS IT HAS SEEN A VISION

THE WORLD IS ROUND BECAUSE
IT IS CONSTANTLY MOVING

A RULER IS A PERSON,
IT IS PEOPLE WHO CALL HIM A RULER

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