

SOCIAL FUNCTION OF MYTH AND EPIC:
MONGO BÉTI AND NGUGI WA THIONG'O

By

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*Le mythe participe de l'imaginaire et de
l'affectif, mais aussi du rationnel, d'où sa force
de propulsion.*

Aimé Césaire¹

*...the people make use of certain episodes in the
life of the community in order to hold themselves
ready and to keep alive their revolutionary zeal....
The great figures of the colonized people are always
those who led the national resistance to invasion.*

Frantz Fanon²

The contemporary African writer's concern with the African present sometimes finds its literary expression in the dramatization of the past. Several centuries of colonialism have radically changed the course of African history. The economic exploitation of Africa was conducted simultaneously with an ideological coercion designed to distort African history. Africa is, therefore, confronted with the formidable task of reforming this history, by reshaping it to establish its proper place. In this respect, the African writer is obliged to delve into the past to retrieve and dramatize, as legends or myths, those moments of the African history which emphasize its positive aspects.

If legend is pictorialized historical data, myth in its symbolic language, is the last stage of the development of legend. The act of recreating legends and myths hinges on three variables. The writer may use an ancient or popular myth which he endeavours to adapt to a given situation. He may also choose to use historical characters. In this case he seeks to elevate the legendary figures to a mythical level. Finally he may use both types in his narrative complex. Whatever the approach, he is still offering historical events as myth.

These myths generally present three types of events: genesis, discovery and transformation.³ When a myth describes the genesis of the world, its sub-text is either an explanation or a justification of a given social condition. This means that myths are closely associated with the relations of production within an epoch. For instance, in African oral literature, we find refer-

ences to the discovery of iron, gold, fire, musical instruments, agricultural tools, etc. In a sense, every myth recounting a technical discovery is the beginning of the genesis myth of a particular profession. It also precedes all transformation myths, for social relations constitute the reference of transformation myths. In other words, the transformation myth seeks to accentuate and qualify the relations of production within a society. When they are associated with discovery myths, they seek to show how the social relations result from certain technical improvements. The three referred to here can be found in conjunction with a single narrative framework. This privileged narrative framework is often an epic story.

The language of the epic narrative is highly metaphoric. Understanding an epic narrative therefore calls for the localization, within a social framework, of symbols less akin to variation. These symbols are usually the cultural expression of social practices. The social relations being the most tangible factors, they must occupy the attention of the student. For in the social thoughts, the student is bound to find--negatively or positively asserted, the cultural expression of social relations. The metaphoric language of epics always deals with these relations. It tends to justify or criticize social relations as they are embodied in an independent narrative world with its own rules and logic.

I

THE SPIRIT OF AKOMO BETRAYED

After a long period of silence, Mongo Béti published three novels⁴ within a short time. Seen together they convey the sense of an epic sweep materialized by their extension in time and space. The first novel, *Remember Ruben*, starts with a problem of genesis. Mor-Zamba, the hero of the novel, is a foundling. His quest for identity through the history of the Camerounian people is partially fulfilled when, at the end of the novel, he learns from his friend Abena, that he is the son of the brutally deposed but long-lamented chief of Ekoundoum. He then decides to return to Ekoundoum to begin the work of transformation which the community yearns for. *Remember Ruben* covers forty years of the history of Cameroun, through the second world war to independence in 1960.

Perpétue, the second novel, continues the story to the 1970s. The novel takes the form of an investigation into the causes of Perpétue's death. The investigation is conducted by her brother, Essola. Essola is a former militant of the Union des Populations du Cameroun (U.P.C.) a political party headed by the nationalist leader Ruben Um Nyobe, whose name provides the title for two of

Béti's novels. After having served a long jail-term in the prisons of the dictator Baba Tura, Essola is released on condition that he join the dictator's party.

Although *Remember Ruben II* is a sequel of the first novel, it does not dwell in the semi-legendary time of Mor-Zamba's childhood. It focuses on the first years of independence and shows an independent Cameroun caught in a total state of anarchy and violence. By responding to the popular call from Ekoundoum, Mor-Zamba acquires the ultimate characteristic of the epic hero. By liberating the people of Ekoundoum from a despotic chief he regains his full identity and returns to the community.

One of the pillars that sustain epic action is the reliance on myth as the leading light in the grand time swing proper to the epic narrative; *Remember Ruben* is an epic narrative both by the life it depicts and the style in which it does this. Time, as we shall see, is limitless, inexhaustible, and dense. The plot freely multiplies itself into a multitude of sub-plots born out of each other and resulting in an illusion of endlessness, through a psychological intensity that derives from the intensity of the life portrayed. Epic action develops into epic time; the action often plunges into the remote past, the apprehension of which is sometimes made possible through a name, a character who is both remote and close, and whose unmediated presence seems totally overwhelming. That character whose existence finds a place in countless stories illustrating every moment in the life of the community is the link that bridges the gulf between history and the unfathomable time of origins.

While setting up the framework of the epic story the narrator of *Remember Ruben* appeals to Akomo, the ancestral creator of the Essazam nation: this he does in order to conjure up the most fundamental pillar of the community and bring forth a time span of unlimited extent. A careful reading will show that all the elements proper to the epic form the foundations of this narrative. These elements include a mystic reference, the characterization proper to the epic hero, and divine presence often expressed in prophetic terms throughout the narrative. It will also appear to the reader that all these three major elements which set the tone for epic action are structurally interrelated in the dynamic progression of the novel.

Mythical Reference and Divine Presence

The principal mythic reference in *Remember Ruben* is a myth of origin that relates to Akomo the founder of the Essazam nation. The narrator summons his spirit by calling his name in situations where the community's behavior undergoes judgement, and compares Mor-Zamba to Akomo because the latter's action represents standard social behavior. In other words, a reference to Akomo is an

attempt to discover the ideal solution to a problem; hence, the structural connection between Akomo and the epic hero is, within the narrative, a functional relationship. The presence of the mythical ancestor is basically a normative presence, the musical tone which modulates the course of the action to be carried out. The carriers of such action, when faced with countless obstacles seem to enjoy the intervention of a superior hand guiding them while they may not even be conscious of it. Although they make errors, they swear by principles which, the narrator claims, have been laid out as a result of Akomo's life experience. Since Akomo's life experience, endless so to speak, incorporates all the values of the Essazam, it becomes clear that these values represent the higher qualities to which each clan aspires and admires; in other words these values represent the totality of the clan's values at the very moment when the heroes of the narrative seek to conquer or reconquer them.

Although the founder's name does not appear until the second chapter of the novel, it is subtly announced by references to a divine presence. Thus, at the very beginning of the story the narrator offers a prelude of the action to come.

This prelude typically brings together Mor-Zamba, a child, a foundling, face to face with a mean old man, into a clash, at dawn. Engamba accuses the little orphan of stealing oranges when he could have had a hot meal had he only asked for it. His excessive anger at the child's refusal to follow him is beyond reason, and we can easily recognize in the confrontation two familiar characters in West African tales: The mean, ugly and hypocritical hyena versus the little, weak and clever hare. We can also recognize the humorous caricature of the wrong and the right, the criminal and the victim, the terrorist and the terrorized child, both standing in a David and Goliath posture by the road, at dawn. Having presented the situation, and the origin of Engamba's quarrel, the narrator, acting as the judge of the conflict summons "La Providence" or "Le Ciel" to his help. Thus, remembering the past he states:

*Certes, le jeune voyageur s'en est pris à un oranger poussé sur les terres du clan; mais, traditionnellement un tel arbre n'appartient pas plus aux occupants du sol qu'aux passants qui, dans la nécessité, en jouissent librement, comme de l'eau de la rivière, de la fraîcheur de l'ombre sous la feuillée ou de tout autre de ces biens que fournit La Providence. Personne n'a planté cet oranger, autant qu'on s'en souviendrait; personne n'en revendiquerait la propriété.*⁵ (p.10)

Obviously the heavy argument in the defense of Mor-Zamba the wandering child is that Providence is on his side because his side represents Truth and Truthful Providence is rightful Providence.

After all, isn't Mor-Zamba a child of unknown origins? The old man who adopts him is convinced that in addition to his mysterious origin:

Mor-Zamba était affligé d'une mystérieuse infirmité: il était sans doute sourd ou muet ou les deux à la fois. Le Ciel lui avait inspiré de s'arrêter à Ekoumdoum, comme on voit parfois des animaux des bois s'approcher des habitations des hommes, quand la souffrance et le chagrin de la maladie leur font chercher des soins. (p. 17)

In both these excerpts the narrator uses the terms "Le Ciel" and "La Providence" in connection with Mor-Zamba's meeting of the clan of Ekoumdoum through the mediation of two elders of the city: the hostile Engamba and the nameless yet hospitable old man who is simply referred to as "Le sage vieillard" or "Le bon vieillard." Later on we shall see why this namelessness reminiscent of the creator's in the early stages of the narrative is important in conferring upon the old man the status of a prophet.

The creator's name, however, is mentioned several times as the story proceeds. It is useful to note that the narrator mentions Akomo while Mor-Zamba is being persecuted as the collective scapegoat of the citizens of Ekoumdoum. Their intolerance of Mor-Zamba's presence in the city turns Engamba and his gang of hypocrites into fanatics.

Undoubtedly the narrative hook consists here in isolating the name Akomo, thus leading us to the last paragraph of the chapter for a concise description of the character. The last sentence of the paragraph links Akomo to Mor-Zamba once more by a subtle rhetorical question.

Les bardes à l'instrument harmonieux, chantres savants des exploits d'Akomo, nous offrent des versions diverses des origines du héros qui fonda notre antique race. Les uns le disent issu d'un arbre, d'autres né du serpent du grand fleuve dont une rive borne la vie et l'autre la mort; d'autres avouent ne point savoir d'où il vint étant apparu soudain, jeune homme immense, fort et beau, la voix tonnante, le pas martial et noble, le front sillonné d'éclairs, le coeur magnanime. Qui donc irait se prévaloir de la douteuse extraction d'Akomo pour lui refuser son hommage? (p. 32)

In this question there is hardly any veiled allusion to Mor-Zamba as a descendent not even as a human replica of Akomo. In any case the similarity of origins is all too clear to leave any doubt that those who seek to drive Mor-Zamba out of the city on the basis of

his unknown origins are criminals in the face of the traditions of the community. Although Mor-Zamba is continually mistreated Akomo is not mentioned by name again until the end of the third chapter when at the end of a dinner, Abena attacks the youth of the city as a bunch of hypocrites. The old man tells the assembled youth a didactic tale based on Akomo's experience among giants as a warning against failing to live up to their traditions.

After this short reference to Akomo, the creator of the Essazam nation is seldom mentioned by name; more and more the narrator refers to him as "La Providence" or "Le Ciel."

It is interesting to note that the mythic reference in its divine character is brought into the story by little drops of details in the manner of a pointillistic picture. The pointillistic introduction of Akomo into the story in chapter two, for example, is consistent with the general modulation of the narrative itself. In this book each major part of the plot is dominated by a mythical figure be it Akomo, Ruben, or Abēna. But, with the exception of Abēna, their names disappear from the text of the second Ruben novel (*Remember Ruben II*) when the decisive battle takes place in the city of Ekoumdoum. At this point Abēna survives through the freedom fighters and through mother Ngwane-Eligui -- The Old, who is his mother as well as the adoptive mother of Mor-Zamba.

For the moment let it suffice to point out the musical function of modulator played by the mythical Akomo. As Durand suggests: "Plus que de raconter comme le fait l'histoire le rôle du mythe semble être de répéter comme le fait la musique."⁶ The myth of Akomo reiterates at the social level the ideals and aspirations of the Essazam which in turn are going to be unravelled by the narrator of *Remember Ruben I & II*, in different settings, at different times, within different social relations as the struggle for justice continues.

The Epic Hero As A Human Replica of Akomo

The role which Akomo, in mythical reference, plays in the prelude of the narrative also serves as the model for the hero of the epic story. As we pointed out, Mor-Zamba is subtly likened to Akomo, the mythical creator of the Essazam nation. When the narrator asks: "qui donc irait se prévaloir de la douteuse extraction d'Akomo pour lui refuser son hommage?" he is suggesting that Mor-Zamba deserves the same treatment as Akomo. Furthermore the question follows a description of Akomo whose origins, we are told, are as mysterious as Mor-Zamba's. Akomo is described as a strong noble man endowed with a great heart. This characterization of the creator is enlarged, in the narrative, into Mor-Zamba as a heroic character; here mythical traits find their concrete --

that is convincing -- expression in context. Using superlatives, the narrator describes Mor-Zamba as a particularly gifted young man.

The orphan child has the highest physical qualities among his age mates. He also appears to be the most giving of all; he spares no energy in benevolence. Generous and non-opportunistic, he receives no return in land but he can make enemies as well. In fact, having to construct his own house unaided, he finds himself accused of laziness by the old woman, Mbolo, for taking a rest. Mor-Zamba and Abéna build an entire house on their own. Although they enjoy the expertise and guidance of the old man, nobody else is willing to help them gather the material necessary for the construction. This accomplished -- a task customarily performed by a whole team of young men, often assisted by young women -- Mor-Zamba and Abéna have become celebrated as an exceptional duo in the slogan: "Abéna et Mor-Zamba se sont ligués: quelle montagne ne soulèveront-ils pas?"

Furthermore Mor-Zamba's courage and determination in life remain unparalleled in the narrative. This particular aspect of the character appears in his long apprenticeship as a truck driver in Kola-Kola, in his confrontations with the police in Oyolo as well as his *tour de force* in saving the life of Ruben nearly at the cost of his own. Even in the camp Gouverneur Leclerc, a notorious forced labour camp, his kindness and compassion have no limit.

If Mor-Zamba's description is based on a sketch of Akomo, his formative years are those of a disinherited prince, alienated from his people and the power his father once held. The numerous difficulties he encounters during his quest appear to be the classical obstacles that emerge on the itinerary of the epic hero.

To begin with, Mor-Zamba's appearance in Ekoumdoum is comparable to a rebirth. We can see in it a striking resemblance with the biblical story of the messiah, but beyond even that, is the overwhelming observation that in most epic narratives the hero's origin appears problematic.

Mor-Zamba appeared in the city as an orphan. The theme of orphanhood is quite common in African tales and it has been used by many contemporary African writers, including Cameroonian novelists.⁷

Orphan tales are characterized by a quest in the form of a journey made impossible by countless obstacles that mushroom on the road that the orphan takes. However the orphan as an asexual character always comes across as an old woman, an old man, a child-like figure or better still an animal or a tree, who offers the child invaluable guidance. The quest of the orphan, like the

quest in general within African narratives, is patterned after initiation processes into manhood or womanhood.

In his first novel *Ville Cruelle* Mongo Béti uses an orphan called Banda who, as a fatherless boy in a patrilineal community, was partly raised by women. In *Le Pauvre Christ de Bomba*, Denis is an orphan child whose quest fails, much like Banda's. It appears that the failure in these orphan children's education is due to the alienating character of the colonial situation.⁸

In *Remember Ruben* Mongo Béti has carried this technique to its full completion; the quest of the orphan closes on a man who is ready for life, to say the least. In the folk-tale the successful orphan is usually rewarded for his perseverance in intelligently undoing traps or by surmounting obstacles during his initiation journey; he receives a fabulous material wealth or more often appears extraordinarily wise. This successful quest is completed in what one may call "the *Remember Ruben* cycle." Mor-Zamba is an orphan found at a crossroad on the outskirts of the city. He is typically hungry and dressed in threadbare clothes. The narrator metaphorically describes him as an animal to signify his love for freedom and his closeness to nature as well as, by implication, his leery attitude to society as a being deliberately kept on the margin of mainstream Ekoumdoum.

Mor-Zamba is, however, an unusual orphan. Like Sunjata who was born a cripple, Mor-Zamba strikes the people of Ekoumdoum as a mute and deaf child; this physical disability, if nothing else, sets him apart from the other children of the city. Mor-Zamba's muteness and deafness symbolize his state of infancy, of a newly-born in terms of society. His inability to communicate in society cripples him. Like Caliban, Mor-Zamba must seek the usage of language for redress. Another mythical element present in the story is reminiscent of a biblical story. It is clear that the great majority of Ekoumdoum is hostile to the orphan child. In addition to Engamba's personal anger at the child the entire city seems to be at odds with Mor-Zamba. For the first time the Essazam are undergoing a clinical case of xenophobia and like the people of Christ, Ekoumdoum decided to cast stones at one of its own children. Despite the fact that Mor-Zamba is adopted by an elder of the city the children of Ekoumdoum led by Engamba's son break the sanctity of the good elder's home and proceed to terrify and persecute the innocent orphan even while he is eating his first hot meal in a long time.

In the light of the events unravelled by the narrator it seems appropriate to talk about Mor-Zamba being born in Ekoumdoum; it is in Ekoumdoum that he recovers the use of speech, is given a name, raised, and nearly married without ever being accepted by the people of the city. Apart from the old man and Abéna and his mother, the birth of Mor-Zamba only attracts the curious, the

talkative, and generally hostile people led by Engamba.

Le bruit de l'évènement, qui n'avait d'abord troublé que la partie de la cité attendant à l'â route, déborda bientôt sur ses artères les plus lointaines et même sur l'arrière-pays. Comme des pèlerins qui s'en vont adorer une idole, on vit arriver des foules processionnaires, à la fois ferventes, gaies et éût-on dit sacrilèges, qui venaient dans la maison du vieillard et, comme elle fut bientôt bondée, dans ses environs, avides de contempler cette merveille inouïe: Un enfant errant et solitaire. (p. 20)

The origins of Mor-Zamba are revealed at the end of *Remember Ruben I*. In reality the foundling is the direct grandson of the legitimate chief of Ekoumdoum who died in mysterious conditions and whose family was thereafter deliberately scattered away from Ekoumdoum. As the descendent of the legitimate chief of Ekoumdoum it appears that Mor-Zamba is not only a legitimate citizen but a person who could claim the seat of the chief. It should be noted that the theme of orphanhood deepens when the narrator reveals the fact that Mor-Zamba's mother was also an orphan.

In reference to the question of the origins of the hero Okpewho makes the following observation:

--the hero of the (epic) song usually has the advantages of birth that set him above the rank and file. Sunjata is the son of a king and later himself a mansa (emperor). His mother, Sogolon (Sukulung) is the "buffalo woman" and then brings to the hero all the mystic force of her totemic personality.... Silamaka of the Silamaka epic is the son of the chief Macina. Ozidi is of the ruling house of orua -- his father is killed by fellow townsmen and his entire career builds up to his absolute sovereignty. The hero of the Kambili epic is the son of Kanji, a general of the emperor Samory Toure...Mwindo of the Mwindo epic is the son of Tubondo.⁹

In epic stories the hero indeed has outstanding origins. Although the hero may be of an extraordinary descent that does not confer upon him the distinction of hero; on the contrary it may be the origin of his difficulties. In any case it appears that he must lose all socially inherited privileges and seek to regain his humanity through an unusually terrifying number of obstacles. The hero starts out with the bare minimum or even worse, without support. He is an oppressed child, lives a depressed adolescence and as he enters adulthood he begins to make slow and painful accomplishments. What sustains the action and secures the attention of the audience is a line of victories that

pearl the growth of the character. Of the greatest and most encouraging victories of the disinherited child is his ability to survive. To survive orphanhood, physical handicaps, poverty and other temporary physical and moral disabilities is a considerable achievement.

It has been implied that there is something admirable embedded in the origin of the child. On the contrary, it is because the hero is socially the ultimate orphan that he must struggle harder than everybody else. When he finally regains what some have always enjoyed by birthright, no one disputes the validity of his achievements and the place he secures for himself and for the entire community is the ultimate goal of his quest and the measure of his greatness.

Prophetic Statements

The social birth of Mor-Zamba, the narrator of *Remember Ruben* tells us, seems to indicate the beginning of problems for Ekoumdoum. In Chapter 4, Part I, the narrator tells us that the arrival of Mor-Zamba in the city has coincided with the beginning of a rather bleak period in the history of Ekoumdoum. It seems as if providence had elected to send premonitory signs to those who had abandoned the principles of Akomo and "the ancestral cult" for their own extravagance and greedy appetites.

...Mor-Zamba a marqué pour notre cité le début d'une malédiction, après quoi tout est devenu étrange, plus douloureux, eût-on dit, plus inquiétant, plus hostile peut-être, en tout cas plus amer, comme si une pression malveillante eût projeté tout le jus de la vie dans l'avenir et que nous fussions désormais condamnés à l'attente incertaine et d'autant plus crispée. Quant à cet avenir, il nous paraissait un pays très lointain auquel nous n'accéderions, si cela devait jamais arriver, qu'après bien des fleuves traversés au risque de la vie, bien des combats avec des ennemis de toute sorte; ou plutôt, il menaçait de se révéler, au moment d'y toucher, équivoque, tel que ces rêves qui mêlent les visions d'horreur aux splendeurs ineffables. (p.44)

In portraying this future of fierce battles for the well being of the community the narrator is also functioning as a prophet, by reading in the past and disclosing the vision of the citizens of Ekoumdoum as they looked to the future. Epic narratives often include prophecies as a structural device in the development of the story. In *Sundjata*,¹⁰ the narrative line is constantly sustained by prophecies. These prophecies are sometimes found in the mouth of a child, in the words of the narrator or, more often, in the words of an elderly character. In *Remember Ruben* the wise elder who adopts Mor-Zamba plays the role of the prophet.

When Mor-Zamba narrowly escapes death by drowning in the hands of Engamba's son, the narrator's description of the old man gives us a sense of the importance of the event and the message he wants to deliver to Ekoumdoum. The old man is seen as a voice coming out of the darkness, thus losing his former identity of flesh and blood creature to become the divine messenger.

Il attendit la nuit tombante...; alors il se posta au milieu de l'artère voisine de la route, sonna longuement du cor et déclara d'une voix d'autant plus saisissante qu'elle nous parvenait des ténèbres et retentissait comme la voix même de la Justice survenant après le Crime. (p. 26)

The immediate act of purification which the words of the prophet occasion only provide temporary relief from the hostility of Ekoumdoum for Mor-Zamba.

When against all rules Engamba refuses to marry off his daughter to Mor-Zamba, the prophet once again emerges in the old man. Angered by the hypocrisy of the elders in support of Engamba, the old man consults the oracles. The result of his test is clear; the council of elders have transgressed the sacred tradition of the community. This time the prophet curses the city.

La Justice a bel et bien été blessée et la providence consultée, nous annonce un malheur par la voix de ces oiseaux. Le clan a enfreint une règle sacrée et il en sera bientôt chatié; je réunirai le conseil demain et je dirai: "votre lâcheté ainsi que l'égoïsme et l'orgueil d'Engamba ont dénoué les chaînes du malheur; il plane désormais au dessus de nos têtes; il va s'abattre sur nous.... (p. 76)

It is important to note that the prophet often makes his statements at night. The night, suggests Durand, is the positive inversion of the day; it is the very substance of time, it is a non-polemical time, a time of intimacy. As such it is the appropriate time for revelations or prophecies. Prophecies, however, are to be heard before they are seen and the prophet who sees them does so beyond the realm of the day because his reading is based on senses other than mere casual observation.

Another premonitory sign associated with prophecies is found in the presence of animals. In *Remember Ruben* the gods who are betrayed manifest the omen all night through a concert of owls.

The old man's prophecy and curse quickly manifest themselves in the precipitous departure of visitors from the city, the sudden death of the old man soon thereafter and the kidnapping of Mor-Zamba for forced labor. The kidnapping of Mor-Zamba by the

colonial troops triggers Abéna's departure and it seems as if the best citizens of Ekoumdoum leave the city in order to escape imminent catastrophies. The narrator takes the role of prophet and details the signs of problems that lay ahead for the city. Part I of the novel practically closes on a chapter that outlines briefly the woes to befall the city.

Ainsi donc, dans l'espace d'une saison peut-être autant du moins que nous puissions nous en souvenir encore exactement, notre cité perdit ses deux meilleurs coeurs, son âme, dirait-on. Nous ne nous en aperçûmes pas tout de suite, mais ce fut comme une blessure qui jamais ne devait vraiment se refermer. Nous allions être minés vingt ans durant, par on ne sait quoi de grinçant, comme ce qu'éprouve peut-être le nouveau-né, expulsé soudain du sein palpitant et tiède qui l'abritait, meurtri par la lumière crue du jour, étourdi par la cacophonie de la vie, broyé par la vibration glacée de l'air. (p. 82)

Once again the narrator compares Mor-Zamba to Akomo but this time he associates Abéna to the comparison. When Abéna and Mor-Zamba leave Ekoumdoum the narrator for the last time utters the name "Akomo" as if to bless the two companions.

Il nous faudra attendre vingt ans pour connaître enfin, bribe par bribe, l'odyssée digne d'Akomo, vécue par les deux plus admirables enfants d'Ekoumdoum. (p. 83)

Thus, all references to Akomo cease as the narrative flows outside the confines of Ekoumdoum toward the colonial city.

The narrator's use of the word "odyssée" characterizes the narrative as an epic story and constitutes an "invitation" to the reader to participate in the adventure. The invitation to read *Remember Ruben* as an epic story is justified in the text by the presence of various elements used in a manner proper to the epic narrative. The narrative uses a myth of origin as the basis of the story. It also depicts a character whose heroic deeds are likened to the deeds of the mythical creator of the Essazam nation. We have tried to show how much the development of the narrative itself depends on the simple yet revealing use of prophetic statements which allow the narrator to outline future developments in the life of Ekoumdoum, becoming thus a major narrative technique.

II

THE TREE OF LIFE SHALL BLOSSOM

The works of Ngugi display a significant usage of myths.

They are utilized, structurally, as support canvas for the epic action that spans his trilogy of Kenya. His novels (*Weep Not, Child*, *A Grain of Wheat* and *Petals of Blood*) are set within the context of social crises in the history of Kenya. The first two novels are set within the context of the Emergency, also known as the "Mau-Mau" uprising, which was declared to destroy the Land and Freedom Army set up in 1952 by the Kenyan people to fight the British colonial occupation of the country. His fourth novel, *Petals of Blood*, is located in the decade or so that followed Kenya's successful struggle for self-rule.

In order to appreciate the epic quality of the novels it is necessary to read them as one long narrative. This prescription arises out of the established link between the three works in the broad historical, social and geographic context which they share. Moreover these three books are focused on the "Mau-Mau" uprising and its effect on individual and social life in Kenya. The narrative as a whole, however, is more ambitious than a simple description of a social crisis. It dramatizes the spirit of a people through their history in order to arrive at and dwell on some particular moments, turning points, as it were, in their quest for freedom.

This giant scope, the scope of an epic narrative, is depicted in *Weep Not, Child*. It could easily get out of hand if it were to be contained in such a short novel; it would be, one might say, too loaded, too heavy a novel; one that evokes the spirit of an epic story without embracing the totality of its cosmological, all-encompassing quality. Indeed Gerald Moore has indicated that "In this novel, Ngugi has a tragic scheme of more than adequate scope."¹²

The novel presents a grand scope in time and space. It traces a continuum that goes as far back as Gikuyu and Mumbi, the ancestral founders of Agikuyu. In space, the novel evokes remote lands beyond Kenya and East Africa: Germany, Egypt, Jerusalem, Burma where characters such as Mboro had gone, fighting somebody else's wars and who, now, dream of carrying their experiences into a meaningful action, an odyssey towards regaining their own freedom. So, in a sense, *Weep Not, Child* is a microcosm, indeed a narrative matrix of the larger epic narrative which is subsequently continued in Ngugi's other novels. If it is "a novel of childhood,"¹³ then it celebrates the birth of a generation of Freedom Fighters resolutely bent on transforming Mugo Wa Kibiro's prophecies into reality in order to establish a bridge between their present and past on the one hand and to sow the grain of wheat which appears to germinate in *Petals of Blood* on the other. It is indeed, the overwhelming restlessness of such a spirit -- i.e., social forces -- that conveys a sense of tragic imprisonment in the small confines of Ngugi's first published novel. This restless spirit is later on released in *A Grain of Wheat* and

Petals of Blood where it finds a fuller, more detailed expression.

In addition to the grand span in time and space *Weep Not, Child* gives a prominent place to myth, prophecy and land. Here the narrator evokes the beginnings of the so-called "Mau-Mau" uprising and outlines the parameters -- both human and natural -- within which it takes place. We shall show how it progressively builds up on a select number of episodes cast in mythical language; how it stresses, on every occasion -- especially in myths and prophecies -- the importance of the land issue; and finally, how this microcosm paves the way for *A Grain of Wheat* which, of necessity, leads to *Petals of Blood*.

Creation Myth

Weep Not, Child opens with a description of the town of Kipanga; this description is characterized by dual oppositions between village (Mahua) and town (Kipanga); road and track; valleys and plains; the rough and sickly land of the Black people and the green land of the White people. At the end of this descriptive passage the image of "four ridges that stood and watched one another" brings the entire scene into focus.

Yet it is in Kipanga that the narrator's attention is drawn to the peculiar image of a man presented as the prophet -- god of the Indian people. From the Indian shops of Kipanga the towering shadow of Mahatma Gandhi looms into the narrative as the celebrated leader of the Indians; a messiah whom they venerate and respect. In the African community it is even rumored that Gandhi is the god of the Indians. The image of Mahatma Gandhi and the struggle of the Indians for freedom appear exemplary to the Gikuyu in their quest for freedom.

*There was a man in India called Mahatma Gandhi. This man was a strange prophet. He always dressed poorly in calico stretched over his body. Walking along the shops, you could see his photograph in every building. The Indians called him Babu, and it was said this Babu was actually their god. He had told them not to go to war so that while Black people had been conscripted into the army the Indians had utterly refused and had been left alone. It was rumored that the White men in Kenya did not like them because they had refused to go to war against Hitler.*¹⁴

The presentation of Gandhi establishes a thematic precedent -- in the midst of a colony emerges a local messiah who leads his people to freedom -- which lends weight to the coming of the Gikuyu leader so often prophesized by the seer Mugo Wa Kibiro. The coming of this leader is an essential theme in the novel because

of the message of hope and freedom which it carries; it is especially important to the African peasants who have lost their land to the white settlers; but they see the coming of the messiah as a pre-condition of the recovery of their land. Their claim to the land goes as far back as their ancestors Gikuyu and Mumbi. Ngotho's faith in the prophecy is sustained by his underlying belief in the divine power of Murungu, creator of the ancestors.

Ngotho's belief in Murungu handing over the land of the ridges to the Gikuyu is revealed when, in a familial scene, Nyokabi induces him into telling their children a story. As it turns out the story is more than a simple folktale; it is the Gikuyu myth of origin. This is a unique passage in Ngugi's writing for it is the only one in which we find a full account of this myth.

The narrative movement covers four significant stages. The description of the first stage is underscored by violence stemming from natural forces in a world devoid of human life. In this stage natural phenomena occur and assert their presence: in the beginning "there was wind and rain" as well as thunder and lightning. The second stage reaches its peak with the emergence of the sun, forecast by the growth of the tree of life which is associated with Gikuyu and Mumbi. The third stage focuses on human activity and movement from and to places, from the mountain to the ridges, through Mukuruwe wa Gathanga. This movement of Gikuyu and Mumbi is instigated by the creator who, like the parent who teaches the child to walk by guiding its first steps, takes them to places. In the text Murungu is obviously the real acting force:

*Murungu took Gikuyu and Mumbi from this Holy Mountain
.... He took them to the country of the ridges...stood
them.... He finally took them to Mukuruwe wa Gathanga..
.. There was wind and rain. And there was also thunder
and terrible lightning. The earth and the forest around
Kerinyaga shook. The animals of the forest whom the
Creator had recently put there were afraid. There was
no sunlight. This went on for many days so that the
whole land was in darkness. Because the animals could
not move, they just sat and moaned with the wind. The
plants and trees remained dumb. It was, our elders
tell us, all dead except for the thunder, a violence
that seemed to strangle life. It was this dark night
whose depth you could not measure, not you or I can
conceive of its solid blackness, which would not let
the sun pierce through it.*

*But in this darkness, at the foot of Kerinyaga,
a tree rose. At first it was a small tree and grew
up, finding a way even through the darkness. It wanted
to reach the light, and the sun. This tree had life.*

It went up, up, sending forth the rich warmth of a blossoming tree -- you know a holy tree in the dark night of thunder and moaning. This was Mukuyu, God's tree. Now you know that at the beginning there was only one man (Gikuyu) and one woman (Mumbi). It was under this Mukuyu that he first put them. And immediately the sun rose, and the dark night melted away. The sun shone with a warmth that gave life and activity to all things. The wind and lightning and thunder stopped. The animals stopped wondering and moved. They no longer moaned but gave homage to the Creator, and Gikuyu and Mumbi. And the Creator, who is also called Murungu, took Gikuyu and Mumbi from His holy mountain. He took them to the country of ridges near Siriana and there stood them on a big ridge before He finally took them to Mukuruwe wa Gathanga about which you have heard so much. But he had shown them all the land -- yes, children, God showed Gikuyu and Mumbi all the land and told them:

*'This land I hand over to you. O man and woman. It's yours to rule and till in serenity sacrificing only to me, your god, under my sacred tree.'*¹⁵

In the beginning there was violence. Out of the violence grew the tree of life. Despite the violence and lack of nourishing light the tree was able to grow up. It is under this tree of life that the Creator placed Gikuyu and Mumbi and gave them the land. Here lies Ngotho's faith in the inevitable coming of the prophet-leader and, out of chaos, the reestablishment of order. Ngotho reads the myth as a parable of the present and the prophecy of Mugo wa Kibiro only serves to deepen his faith, to anchor it, as it were, to the fundamental element, the land. The deepening is created by repetition, and repetition serves memory; it emphasizes the presence of things.

The story might have ended as another account of Gikuyu origin myth if Nyoroge, in his innocence, had not asked the question: "where did the land go?" thus bringing his father to bridge the remote past to the present. Ngotho, then, continues his chronicle of the history, recounting the long spell of drought, the coming of the white man and his subsequent appropriation of the land.

This is a myth of origin extended into the chronicle of the history of the peoples of Kenya. It is possible to trace the development and use of Gikuyu myths and legends in Ngugi's writings. It shall be noted that if the various narratives echo one another they do not simply duplicate each other but expand coherently into a unified body which expresses a situation and registers its evolutions and transformation.

In *The River Between*¹⁶ the narrator makes reference to Gikuyu and Mumbi in order to remind the antagonistic clans of their common ancestry beyond their individual claims to "spiritual superiority and leadership." The emphasis here is rather on their collective right to the land given to them by the Gikuyu god. Murungu -- not an alien God -- should be the center of Agikuyu life. In the context of the Emergency this is a paramount preoccupation for the landless Ngothos; for how do you sacrifice to Murungu under his "sacred tree" if the very land on which it stands is inaccessible. The modification in the reported spoken words of Murungu registers a modification of directives: 'go after the land,' it seems to say. It is precisely in such instances that *Weep Not, Child* differs clearly from *The River Between* while it indicates a new turn in Ngugi's writing, from the dramatization of a cultural antagonism to an open political conflict, land being the issue here instead of circumcision.

The Land

The land issue is at the heart of *Weep Not, Child*. The loss of the land is tragic and its recovery vital for the African peasants. The knowledge of this situation only heightens Ngotho's sorrow; but it is not only his consciousness of the trap of history that makes his predicament so painful; the gravity of the pain which he experiences is intensified by the fact that he ends up working on the very land that had been stolen from him in order to guarantee the welfare of the impostor. On a daily basis, Ngotho is confronted with the painful reminder of his plight and the image of his failure as the custodian of the sacred land-temple trusted upon him by his ancestors.

The love which Mr. Howlands nurtures for the same piece of land has often been compared to Ngotho's attachment to the land. Aside from the dubious origin of his ownership of the property (Mr. Howlands can justifiably be read as Mr. Howlands), his attachment to the land has a different quality; it is of a very recent origin and as such, cannot claim the support of tradition. Ngotho's relation to the land, on the other hand, goes as far back as the Creation of the first human beings; it is an absolute truth that sustains his hope in a better future. Whereas Howlands relies on a strong individual ownership of the land, Ngotho sees the land as an ancestral communal property. For him the land is not only a source of livelihood but life itself. In the words of the narrator, "Ngotho was too much a part of the farm to be separated from it." The way in which a Gikuyu peasant sees his relationship to the land is stressed in this saying: "There can be no ground for friendship with one who seeks to deprive you of your land, women and cattle."¹⁷ Of course in the case of a peasant economy, removing the land from the peasant amounts to cutting off his life support system; hence the impossibility of a reconciliation between the settler colonialist and the dispossessed African peasant is, at this point, sealed off.

This tension around the land issue becomes apparent early in the novel when Njoroge asks Ngotho: "Where did the land go?" Ngotho is compelled to give his audience a coherent explanation of the way in which successive events led to the landlessness of Africans. It appears that the British settlers have gradually succeeded in appropriating the land from Africans who had been weakened by a long spell of drought of uncertain origin.

The Prophecy

There is a close relation between Ngotho's unflinching faith in his right to the land and the strong hope that he will recover the lost land. This relation is built on and sustained by the prophecies of Mugo wa Kibiro, the celebrated Gikuyu seer who is often referred to in Ngugi's novels has been acquainted with him in *The River Between* when he said to his people:

*Arise -- Heed the prophecy. Go to the mission place
-- Learn all the wisdom and all the secrets of the
white man. But do not follow his vices. Be true to
your people and the ancient rites.*¹⁸

The man who foretold the arrival of the white man and the building of the railway has also predicted the coming of the black messiah, a leader whose arrival will bring about the restitution of the land to the Gikuyu. If in spite of every obstacle Ngotho keeps a strong faith in Mugo's prophecy it is because all the preceding ones had been painfully true.

Prophecies, we have observed, are also a structural device for the epic story; they allow the action of the story to unfold smoothly. The teleological movement which guides Ngotho stems from a line of unflinching prophecies and his strong faith in the eventual fulfillment of the present prophecy. In a sense this prophecy is already in the myth of origin of the Gikuyu; Mugo's prophecies are no more than a re-affirmation of the established semantic development we find in the myth of origin. We know the beginning and we are aware of the end. Whatever happens in between is a part of the necessary ordeal that leads to the fulfillment of the prophecy, the self-realization of the spirit of Murungu.

In *The River Between* this prophecy is interpreted by Chege as a myth of education. School education in the ways and secrets of the white man was expected to bring freedom so when the white people denied the Gikuyu the use of their schools, the Gikuyu built their own. The people believe in the words of the seer when he says: "Go to the mission place. Learn all the wisdom and all the secrets of the white man." The theme of education continues to occupy a central place in *Weep Not, Child* in Njoroge's obsession with education; nevertheless it is treated

as a less serious issue, as a piece of adorning artifacts of a child's romantic vision of the world.

Mugo's prophecy about the arrival of a black Messiah is what keeps Ngotho alive and hopeful, waiting. It does not only make of him a believer in the inexorability of freedom and in the recovery of the lost land; it also turns Ngotho into a passive man. The frequency with which the word "waiting" is applied to him in the text is simply overpowering. Ngotho seems to surrender to his present condition with the belief that it will end someday. How do we explain Ngotho's attitude? Is it caused by impotent old age faced with seemingly insurmountable events? Or does it develop from the deeply mystical thought of a man who lives in a world that is completely fraught with mystical beliefs? Whatever explanation we choose needs to be placed in the context of colonialism. Ngotho is a product of colonialism as much as Boro is a by-product of it. In the words of Fanon: "The first thing which the native (the colonized person) learns is to stay in his place, and not go beyond certain limits."¹⁹

In contrast to his father, Boro does not approve of passivity. He does not believe in prophecies -- not even in Mugo's promised leader-saviour. He despises his father's inactive attitude in the face of tyranny. If his father is a victim then Ngotho shows no compassion for him. In contrast to his father Boro is a man of action. He advocates violence as a means to recover the people's lost land and, with it, their dignity. He quickly dismisses the prophecy as an irrelevant superstition and wonders: "how could these people have let the white man occupy the land without acting" and -- worse still -- how can they continue serving the man who has taken their land?

The opposition between father and son is polarized in the father's reluctant passivity and the son's determination for active resistance. When the land returns to the people it will be brought by violent action -- everything else having failed. It is not enough to believe in the prophecy; it needs to be fulfilled. Ironically Boro, who does not believe in prophecies, is one of those who, as Freedom Fighters, helped Kenya gain self-government.

As for Ngotho he waits and dies, like his father who, having lost his land "died lonely, a poor man waiting for the white man to go." While "waiting for the prophecy to be fulfilled" Ngotho hires himself out to work on the very piece of land that his father once owned. He is conscious of the anathema which this waiting surrounds him with and humiliates him in the eyes of his own children. On the morning following his conversation with the children Ngotho remembers how

the voice of Ngotho had cut deep into him, cut into all the lonely years of waiting. Perhaps he and others

had waited for too long and now he feared that this was being taken as an excuse for inactivity or, worse, a betrayal.²⁰

Weep Not, Child ends in the destruction of Ngotho's family by the violence of the Emergency; the introduction of the state of Emergency announces the general mood that prevails in *A Grain of Wheat* where violence appears in its psychological, ideological and physical forms. Moreover it is in *A Grain of Wheat* that Boro's advocacy and use of violence is revived by Kihika in the scene of his meeting with Mugo in particular.²¹

The Messiah

Although Boro declares his contempt for what he calls "superstitious beliefs" in a future messiah, there is no doubt that during the Emergency he became one of the people who rallied around Jomo Kenyatta as their leader and responded to his call for a general uprising against the colonial government. As a freedom fighter Boro participated in the armed struggle and partook of the creation of the Jomo symbolism in its most durable form: the embodiment of freedom. Indeed the freedom fighters are the people who backed the prophecy of Mugo Wa Kibiro and gave it some substance, body and soul, by bringing it to fruition.

Jomo is often referred to as the much awaited messianic leader in Ngugi's novels.

In *Weep Not, Child* the narrator says:

There was a man sent from God whose name was Jomo. He was the Black Moses empowered by God to tell the white Pharoah "Let my people go!"²²

Comparing the Gikuyu people with "the children of Israel" Njoroge came to the conclusion that "although all men were brothers, the black people had a special mission to the world because they were the chosen people of God," which explains his brother's remark that Jomo was the Black Moses.²³

The same idea is repeated throughout *A Grain of Wheat*. On the day of Uhuru celebration

They [the people] sang of Jomo (he came, like a fiery spear among us), his stay in England (Moses sojourned in the land of Pharoah) and his return (he came riding on a cloud of fire and smoke) to save his children. He was arrested, sent to Lochar, and on the third day came home from Maralal. He came riding on a chariot home. The gates of hell could not withhold him. Now angels trembled before him.²⁴

The reader is reminded of a similar passage devoted to Mahatma Gandhi. Repetition is characteristic of symbolism. The image of a leader engraved in the prophecies of Mugo is offered again and again in various figures throughout the narrative.

Mongo Bati also uses symbolic recurrences in his novels. As the narrative proceeds the *Creator* disappears, leaving the stage for the old wise man of Ekoumdoum who, as a prophet is not only a mediator but also an indispensable element in bringing things together. After him, Mor-Zamba occupies the center of the narrative, alternating with Ruben and Ouragan-Viet. Of the three characters Ruben is -- like Jomo in Ngugi's novels -- the closest to an embodiment of a "Black Messiah." Nowhere to be seen he nevertheless occupies an important part in the narrative; his words and actions which are all related to the efforts of his organization and people permeate all things and influence the course of the entire narrative; his invisibility is comparable to the invisibility of Jomo among the familiar characters in the novels.

In Ngugi's works Jomo is portrayed as the leader, and although the same semantic reading is applied to both characters Jomo is given a bigger representation than Gandhi. Ngugi uses two narrative models that inform the entire story of *Weep Not, Child*. These narrative models are the legend of Gandhi, and the Gikuyu creation myth. As the presentation of Gandhi paves the way for the emergence of the Gikuyu leader/Saviour, so does the creation myth prepare the terrain for the atmosphere of violence which characterizes the novel. The parallel between Gandhi and Jomo is obvious enough; but the violence is merely suggested in the creation myth in the birth pangs of human life neatly associated with nature (the tree of life). There is, lying dormant in this single narrative, Ngugi's obsessive theme of the quest for life; the necessity for the grain to die before its eventual rebirth in something greater; the quest for the lost land and for freedom. The operative methods of the search are sometimes explored in school education as the people seek out the "secrets" of the white man or -- as it turns out in *A Grain of Wheat* -- in armed struggle. In a general fashion this question is simply a quest for light in an obscure labyrinth; but to be more specific it is a quest for a transformation of knowledge. Society, no longer at ease, is feverishly seeking, against the forces of disaster, a greater, because more adequate, form of living.

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Conclusion

Both Ngugi and Bati share this vision suggested in *Weep Not, Child* and *Remember Ruben*. Otherwise how do we account for the

tribulations of Mor-Zamba, and especially, for the long quest of Abéna for a gun in Europe and Asia, far beyond the corners of his native land? The immediate cause is social as Mor-Zamba loses a young bride to an old man who enjoys the support of the tyrannical faction of elders led by Engamba. This event highlights a time of darkness for the traditional democratic institutions grimly illustrated by the coup d'état of Engamba's party. Abéna decides that there is fault with the way things are run. His analysis of the situation leads him to the conclusion that the oppressed needs to invest less in his search of a wife and more in his quest for a gun. Obviously these two terms (wife and gun) which are graphically polarized in the novel have a symbolic import.

In *Weep Not, Child* the reader discovers a cobweb of myths and legends which not only dramatize the past of the Gikuyu but also serve as the form that carries a certain vision of history (we have suggested that Ngotho's teleological view of historical developments is guided by his faith in the prophecy of Mugo Wa Kibiro). This vision of history leans on the collective understanding of events (use of popular myths and legends) and explains the individual by the collective in a cosmological order. Such a narrative perspective is characteristic of the epic story.

The quest for freedom which takes Abéna and Mor-Zamba far away from their native home is pursued and unraveled in a sequel. Although Ngugi does not present his narrative as a sequel in terms of identifying the same characters in subsequent books, the quest for freedom which is outlined in *Weep Not, Child* remains central to the novels that follow it. It is a long quest that goes even beyond the advent of self-rule into a new era when life has already assumed, in many ways, a new form and when oppression, being internally inflicted, must be combatted with new means.

NOTES

¹ Aimé Césaire in an interview in *Jeune Afrique*, No. 1142, Nov. 24, 1982, p. 74.

² Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, Grove Press, 1968, p. 69.

³ C. Meillassoux, "Le mâle en gésine ou de l'historicité des mythes," *Cahiers d'Etudes Africaines*, Vol. XIX, 1979, p. 353.

⁴ The three novels are:
Remember Ruben, U.G.E., Paris, 1974.
Perpétue, Buchet/Chastel, Paris, 1974.
La ruine presque cocasse d'un Polichinelle (Remember Ruben 2), ed. des Peuples Noirs, Paris, 1979; a fourth novel, *Les Deux*

Mères de Guillaume Ismael Dzewatama, futur camionneur, is forthcoming from Buchet/Chastel in January 1983.

⁵ *Remember Ruben*, U.G.E., Paris, 1974. Further references to this edition of the book will be indicated in the text after each quotation.

⁶ Gilbert Durand, *Les Structures Anthropologiques de l'Imaginaire*, P.U.F., Paris, 1960, p. 390.

⁷ For example, F. Oyono, and A. Fantouré.

⁸ For a study of the theme of orphanhood see Gerald Storzer, "Abstractions and Orphanhood in the Novels of Mongo Béti," in *Présence Francophone*, No. 15, 1977.

⁹ Isidore Okpewho, *The Epic in Africa*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1979, p. 85.

¹⁰ D. T. Niane, *Sundiata: An Epic of Old Mali*, Longmans, London, 1965.

¹¹ The three novels by Ngugi Wa Thiong'o which are considered in this study are the following:

Weep Not, Child, Macmillan, New York, 1969.

A Grain of Wheat, Heinemann, London, 1971.

Petals of Blood, E. P. Dutton, New York, 1977.

All subsequent references are made to these editions of the novels.

¹² Gerald Moore, *Twelve African Writers*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1980, p. 270.

¹³ Moore, p. 269.

¹⁴ *Weep Not, Child*, p. 25.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, pp. 45-46. Other references to this story are found in *The River Between*, pp. 2, 8 and 22-24, and *A Grain of Wheat*, pp. 13, 15 and 83.

¹⁶ Ngugi Wa Thiong'o (as James Ngugi), *The River Between*, Heinemann, London, 1974, p. 2.

¹⁷ Jomo Kenyatta, *Facing Mount Kenya*, Random House - Vintage,

n.d. (first published 1938), p. 22.

18 Ngugi, *The River Between*, p. 24.

19 Fanon, p. 52.

20 *Weep Not, Child*, p. 52.

21 *A Grain of Wheat*, pp. 215-219.

22 *Weep Not, Child*, p. 15.

23 *Ibid.*, p. 78.

24 *A Grain of Wheat*, p. 248.