

**POLITICAL CONSCIOUSNESS AND MAN'S OBLIGATION TO SOCIETY:
AN EXAMPLE OF NGUGI'S *THE RIVER BETWEEN***

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Abstract

There is ironic ambiguity that clouds every issue in the novel; the ambiguity that finds Waiyaki, the acknowledged leader of the people and upholder of the traditional way of the clan, spending his formative year at a Christian missionary school; the ambiguity of the situation whereby the people can only fight the white man with his own education. This had a dire consequence as there was a disordering of priorities, putting the acquisition of knowledge before the recovery of the tribal land, which was the thing that mattered most to the people. Be it as it may, it is important to point out that the life of a patriotic leader should be tied to the life of his people. That is "man's obligation to society".

Introduction

In Kenya there is no concept of a nation. One is always a Kikuyu, a Luo, a Nandi, an Asian or a European. I think this diminishes our strength and creative power. To live on the level of race or tribe is to be less than whole. In order to live, a chick has to break the shell shutting it out from the light. Man too must break the shell and be free. Political freedom from foreign rule, essential as it is, is not the freedom. One freedom is essential. This is the freedom for man to develop into his full potential. He cannot do this as long as he is enslaved by certain shackles. Two of these are racism and tribalism. To look from the tribe to a wider concept of human association is to be progressive. When this begins to happen, a Kenya nation will be born (23).

These are the reflections of the author of *Homecoming*, to whom homecoming has become a distant mirage as he hovers round the world in hopeful anticipation for the day when 'normalcy' will return to his country and pave the way for his return. One could ink the above quotation to the comment of the Ghanaian writer, Kofi Awoonor that 'Ngugi's novelistic pre-occupation is the question of political power and the movement of history as

an essential comment on the use of this power (209). Writing in the same vein, Ali Mazrui had this to say: 'The theme of Kikuyu self-consciousness and the quest of the people for either collective fulfillment or collective reconciliation are recurrent in Ngugi's fictional works' (73). David Cook and Michael Okenimkpe have a similar comment to make: 'All Ngugi's novels pay tribute to the high-mindedness and moral courage that lead people to outface hardships and sacrifices in the pursuit of excellence, above all for the good of society at large' (28).

There is no gainsaying that *The River Between* is about power and political leadership. This is epitomized by the ancient rivalry between the two most outstanding ridges, Kameno and Mukuyu. The bone of contention lay in the claim as to where the founders of the tribe, Gikuyu and Mumbi first sojourned:

When you stood in the valley, the two ridges ceased to be sleeping lions united by their common source of life. They became antagonists. You could tell this, not by anything tangible but by the way they faced each other, like two rivals ready to come to blows in a life and death struggles for the leadership of this isolated region. It began long ago. A man rose in Makuyu and Mumbi sojourned there with Murungu on their way to Mukuruwa Wa Gathanga. As a result of that stay, he said, leadership had been left to Makuyu (1-2).

But this assertion was not acceptable to the people of Kameno. They believed that Gikuyu and Mumbi had stopped at Kameno and that as a result of that, a small hill had grown out of the soil on which they stood south of Kameno. There, Murungu had told them: 'This land I give to you, o man and woman. It is yours to rule and till..., you and your posterity' (2).

This antagonism is the epitome of the action in *The River Between* and the apparent antagonism displayed by the ridges is soon duplicated in reality by two of their human inhabitants. This was the fight between Kamau, son of Kabonyi from Makuyu and Kinuthia from Kameno. The quarrel arose because Kinuthia had called Kaman 'white man's slave'. This is important because Kabonyi was among the early Kikuyus to embrace the whiteman's religion under the fanatical leadership of Joshua. It is relevant in the sense that the idea of allying with the white man detracts from the ultimate aspirations of the Kikuyus to assert their political freedom and independence. It is during this fight that our hero is introduced and his attempt to break the fight and the uneasy peace that is achieved between the boys foreshadow the kind of role Waiyaki will later play as a moderator in the deadly struggle between Makuyu and Kameno and their human protagonists.

Consequently, we see a historical factor in the emergence of modern Kenya. The constant struggle for leadership and the disharmony among the various tribes has its origin here. To this historical factor is added the potent legend of the seer redeemer god, Mugo Wa Kabiro, who prophesied the coming of the Whiteman to Kenya to take possession of the land given to the problems that feature in the other novels of Ngugi. The land that had been given to the people was taken over by this new race of invaders that emerged from nowhere dressed like butterflies. This calls for a united action for the recovery of the land.

The dramatic conflict in the book is not only provided by this overt antagonism between the people and the ridges, it is more artistically suggested by the ironic discrepancy created between the intention, honest or otherwise of the human protagonists and the outcome of their actions. At this point, it is pertinent to introduce change, the ancient sage and the father of our hero, Waiyaki; (he himself was an extraordinary man):

Many stories ran around him. Some people said that he has the gift of magic.

Others said that he was a seer and Murunga often spoke to him. And so they said

that he could see visions of the future like Mugo Wa Kibiro, who a long time back prophesied the invasion of the Gikuyu country by the white man. Some even said that change was actually related to Mugo (8).

This extraordinary background helps prepare us for the messianic role that Waiyaki was to play in the course of events. Chege was the custodian of an ancient prophesy concerning the redemption of the land, and he has waited all these years to divulge the knowledge to the rightful person. With Waiyaki's celebration of his second birth, it was time for the father to unfold to him the ancient prophecy. Chege took Waiyaki to the hills deep south of Kameno. They went to the Sacred Grove and Waiyaki was introduced to the fauna. The history of the tribe was revealed to him and he drank from a calabash of trust and responsibility. The lyricism with which the land scope of the ridges is evoked as Chege and Waiyaki approach the 'hill of God' is remarkable:

The ridges were all flat below his little feet. To the east, the sun had already risen. It could now be seen clearly a huge red ball of shouldering colours. Strands of yellowish-red thinned outward from the glowing centre, diffusing into the thick grey that joined the land to the clouds. Far beyond, its tip hanging in the grey clouds, was Kerinyaga. Its snowcapped top glimmered slightly, revealing the seat of Murungu. The ridges slept on. Kameno and Mukuyu were no longer antagonistic. They had merged into one area of beautiful land, which is what, perhaps, they were meant to be (19).

This is the harmonious political atmosphere that Ngugi envisage for Kenya. Chege was now poised to make his revelation to his son. The time for him to unburden his heart, to relieve it of the load it has borne for years had come as he and his son stood at the 'seat of God'. He showed him 'Kerinyaga', 'the mountain of He-who-shrines-in-Holiness'. That is the seat of Murungu that made Gikuyu and Mubi and gave them the land. As he was about to make the revelation, his voice vibrated and Chege seemed to gain in stature and appearance so that Waiyaki though him transfigured:

Salvation shall come from the hills. From the blood that flows in me I say from the same tree a son shall arise. And his duty shall be to lead and save the 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 vice. Be true to your people and the ancient rites (24).

Here, one sees this ironic discrepancy. While Chege is asking Waiyaki to learn the ways of the white man, he is at the same time telling him to a voice being contaminated by the education. We are made aware of the basic contradiction in such a situation. It is like Ezeulu, the chief priest of Ulu, sending his son, Oduche to the white man's church with its disastrous consequences. As far as Ngugi is concerned, like the Israelites, the people of Kenya are still waiting for the savior.

Joshua's house is the indication of the intrusion of the world on Makuyu. It is the centre of the new relation that negates the aspirations of the Gikuyu people. The Christian element introduces a new dimension, for as far as the Christians were concerned, the Gikuyu God was 'the prince of darkness'. The society is therefore divided into two opposing camps. The centre of the new religion is Makuyu under the fanatical leadership of Joshua; Mabonyi has also embarked the new religion as we have seen earlier. The burden of keeping the tribe's purity and sovereignty lay on Kemeno. The issue that sparked off the

first signs of the dichotomy was circumcision. The fact is a historical one as Jomo Kenyatta recalls the total war declared on clitoridectomy in the 1920s:

For many years there had been much criticism and agitation against Irua of girls by certain misinformed missionary societies in East African, who see only the surgical side of the Irua, and without investigating the pathological importance attached to this custom by the Gikuyu (45).

What was to have been a more or less routine ceremony turns into tragedy with the death of one of the female initiates, Muthoni, the daughter of Joshua. The consequence of her death brings the simmering conflict of ideas and personalities between the two ridges to a dangerous head.

Muthoni's act of rebellion is the first attempt by any of the protagonists to bridge the gap of ideological and religious differences between the warring ridges. Although her action is a personal rather than a symbolic one in the sense that it is taken in pursuance of personal fulfillment, it nevertheless suggests the kind of problem the hero will be faced with when he later tries to reconcile the opposing ridges.

The significance of Muthoni is her attempt to reconcile the two ideologies, but the fact that she loses her life in the attempt is even more portentous for the hero, who, in his own fashion, will soon attempt to cross the dangerous bridge. Although she fails, the courage of her symbolic gesture is a lasting tribute and reward in itself.

The death of Muthoni led Siriana Missionaries to toughen their stand against traditional custom. At the urging of Joshua, they decided to bar anyone who does not renounce circumcision from being a member of Christ's Church or a student in the school. The death of Muthoni also brought about a split in the church. Kabonyi broke loose of Joshua and the gap between Makuyu and Kameno widened.

The expulsion of the 'pagans' from the Siriana school shook the sensibilities of both educated and uneducated Gikuyu independence school Movement of the 1920's and 30's were schools that belonged to the people who rebelled against the missionaries. Ngugi attended one himself. By juxtaposing events from his own fictional world with actual historical events, Ngugi gives validity to his story which must be seen to move within a recognizable time frame.

Waiyaki now embarks on a policy of building schools for the people. He saw it as a kind of mission, the practicalization of his father's injunction to imbibe 'all the wisdom and all the secrets of the white man' (24). The old man knew the appropriate political weapon with which to fight the white man: 'Waiyaki was made to serve the tribe, living day by day with no thoughts of self but always of others' (85). This is a realization of man's obligation to his fellow man and to society:

Waiyaki led a busy life. With teaching and organizing the schools, and now as a clerk of the new Kama with its meetings and ceremonies, he seemed to live hour to hour in action. He was now known all over the ridges. Children knew him and hailed him as 'Our Teacher'. Old men and women also called him the teacher (104).

He became not only the Teacher, but the champion of the tribe's way and life. Their expectation of him soon grew beyond the secular education, to the responsibility of political fulfillment: 'He is a match to the white man, these men who had wanted to

annihilate Gikuyu and Mumbi' (112). While Waiyaki was busy spreading his gospel of education, the vicious Kabonyi was busy concentrating all his energy into the rouging of Christianity and all foreign customs. He aimed at this through the Kaima, whose secretaryship Waiyaki had relinquished due to other pressures. Kabonyi then went about preaching the need to keep the tribe pure.

All true sons of the tribe had to take an oath of allegiance to the Kaima. On the surface, Kabonyi and Waiyaki's goals were identical. They were both fighting for retention of those customs of the tribe, like circumcision, that form the core, the spiritual basis of the tribe's cohesion and integration. Their methods of approach were however on a collision course. While Waiyaki passionately believed in educating the people in the white man's ways as a means of driving him out, Kabonyi, without actually coming out against education, was busy waging a campaign to undermine Waiyaki's efforts. As a member of the governing board of the new school, Kabonyi constantly opposed Waiyaki on any suggestion for its improvement.

This was not the only obstacle in the way of Waiyaki in fulfilling his mission. The gulf between Joshua's followers and the rest of the people was widening more and more. Things seemed to be moving to a dangerous climax. There were now three elements in the struggle with diametrically opposed views. Joshua had negated the aspirations of the Gikuyu people and had come to a point of no return. His concern was to see what forays he could make into Kameno to win converts for his church. And this was being pursued with all the energy and intransigence of a fanatic. For him there was no compromise with the rest of the 'Pagans'. The Kaima, on the other hand, wanted the recovery of the land. But Waiyaki felt that his mission of enlightenment through education would only prosper through reconciliation, tolerance and unity. Thus Waiyaki's vision was at variance with those of his fellow countrymen. That was the first sign of the failure of the 'messiah'.

All the above of course spring from the same root as the ironic ambiguity that clouds every issue in the novel; the ambiguity that finds Waiyaki, the acknowledged leader of the people and upholder of the traditional ways of the clan, spending his formative years at a Christian missionary school; the ambiguity of the situation whereby the people can only fight the white man with his own education. These had their dire consequences. Waiyaki's absence from the hills had kept him out of touch with the things that mattered to the tribe. The most important of course is the recovery of the land but Waiyaki's sojourn in Siriana led to his mis-ordering of priorities, putting the acquisition of knowledge before the recovery of the tribal land.

These were not the only obstacles that militated against Waiyaki and the attainment of his mission. Reference has already been made to the ironic ambiguity that clouded a number of issues in the novel. Also the basic contradictions have been mentioned – Chege sending his child to learn the ways of the white man without being contaminated by the learning, 'In this Chege did not see it as a contradiction that he, embodiment of the true Gikuyu, should have sent his son to the very missionary centre whose existence he had always opposed' (44).

What might be termed, perhaps, the final irony of the novel is analogous to this; that Waiyaki, the son of Chege, should fall in love with Nyambura, the uncircumcised daughter of fanatical Joshua, and stake his hero-hood on his freedom (despite his recognition of his responsibility to the people), to marry whosoever he pleases. Waiyaki at one point compares the predicament of his situation with the ambiguous effect of the rain on the land:

Suddenly he became angry, not with the white man or Kinuthia. He was angry with the rain. The rain carried away the soil, not only here but everywhere. That was why land, in some parts, was becoming poor. For a time, he felt like fighting with the rain. The racing drops of water had turned to filth and mud. He subsided. He now felt like laughing hearty. Even here in this natural happening, he could see a contradiction. The rain had to touch the soil. That touch could be a blessing or a curse (76).

This was the issue at Waiyaki's trial by the Kaima. He was pronounced a 'traitor' and an enemy of the people. At his trial, Waiyaki asked the Kaima whether he was not free to do whatever he wanted with his own life and whether he was not free to marry whosoever he pleased. These are crucial issues in relation to the novel's theme. We would say without mincing words that as a leader of his people Waiyaki is not free to do what he wanted with his own life. The life of a patriotic leader should be tied to the life of his people. This is 'Man's Obligation to society'. Obviously Ngugi is making an indirect thrust at the present leaders who feel like Waiyaki.

Of course we know that Waiyaki is not a traitor. His rejection by the people underlies the irony and tragedy of Waiyaki's vision and indeed Ngugi's vision for Kenya. This has not been achieved today and that is why Ngugi is afloat in the world. It was not achieved at Waiyaki's time too. This was due to the influence of men of bad faith like Kabonyi and puritans like Joshua. Ngugi is calling for the elimination of such attitudes and the bringing together of the country under one banner.

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