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LANGUAGE AND THEME IN THE NOVELS OF JAMES NGUGI (NGUGI WA THIONG'O) *

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The major theme underlying most African Anglophone writing today is the impact of Western civilisation on tribal life and customs. It now seems, with hindsight, only to be expected that the rise to power in the 1950's of a young, well-educated and articulate African élite should result in a spate of novels and poems which reflect the destruction or undermining of a traditional way of life, and at the same time an attempt on the part of the African writers to reinstate the beauty and validity of their native cultures.

To do this, the African novelist or poet who chooses to write in a European language is faced with a formidable task: to depict his own social and cultural inheritance in both an alien language and, more often than not, an alien literary form —the novel, drama, metrical verse.—«The problem», in the words of D.E.S. Maxwell, «is that of achieving a distinctive national tone against the intimidating strength of the parent language» (1) —in Ngugi's case the English literary tradition. An examination of two aspects of the novelist's art —theme and language— may serve as the first step towards determining how far it can be said that this East African writer creates a specifically African novel out of this conflict of content and form.

For political and social reasons West African Anglophone writing had a headstart on that of East Africa. The first account of his native country by an African born into slavery and later freed came from an eighteenth century Nigerian, Olaudah Equiano (2), and was followed in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries by other prose works written in English by Africans educated at missionary schools, among them Samuel Adjai Crowther, Africanus Horton and Edward Blyden. These years have rightly been termed an «apprentice period» in wich African writers set themselves to imitate European models of their age (3). Too tenuous to constitute a genuine literary tradition, these works nevertheless laid down the roots as well as the first signs of protest from which was to emerge the creative explosion of the 1950's.

This, too, was the period of incubation of the «culture shock» undergone by most Africans as a result of Christianity, and which was later intensified in the significant minority that had acquired a university education (4).

By the mid-twentieth century, the most vigorous literary activity was, in Nigeria where the Yoruba possessed a particularly rich oral tradition of myths, legends and folk-tales. This was drawn on with skill by Chinua Achebe, whose novel *Things*

Fall Apart was one of the most influential in showing the impact of British colonial rule on Ibo village life (5).

It is in Achebe's novels, too, that the ambivalent attitude towards Western culture, first seen in Equiano and in poets such as Phillis Wheatly and George Moses Horton, becomes more explicit: having willingly adopted the new values to which he has been introduced, the educated African finds himself set apart from the simpler life of the majority of his kinsmen, which is seen to have inherent weaknesses; this ambivalence greatly mitigates the condemnation of white races by the African writer, while reinforcing his protest against the injustice of the colonial process.

While in no way copying Achebe —their novels are very different both structurally and linguistically— Ngugi, one may believe, has set out to do for the Gikuyu people what Achebe had done for the Ibo: to recreate a segment of his people's history in what is essentially a story of dispossession, not only of land, but also of traditions, customs and beliefs.

In a lecture at Leeds University in 1965, later published under the title «The Novelist as Teacher», Achebe states his aim as that of helping his society «to regain its belief in itself and put away the complexes of the years of denigration and self-denigration». «I would be satisfied», he says, «if my novels... did no more than teach their readers that their past —with all its imperfections— was not one long night of savagery from which our first Europeans acting on God's behalf delivered them». Ngugi, in a paper read in 1968 and published in *Homecoming* (1972, 77) echoes this: «What the African novelist has attempted to do is to restore the African character to his history. The African novelist has turned his back on the Christian god and resumed the broken dialogue with the gods of his people» (6).

Let us look first at Ngugi's thematic progression. His four novels to date span the pre-colonial, the colonial and the post-colonial periods, and above all show the links and ruptures between the first and the last. The first of his novels to be written —*The River Between*— though actually the second to be published (1965), paints a perhaps idealised picture of the Gikuyu way of life on its first contact with European civilisation in the shape of the Christian missions. The young hero Waiyaki is the epitome of «the man between two worlds»; he is enjoined by his aged father Chege to «go to the Mission place. Learn all the wisdom and all the secrets of the white man. But», warns Chege, «do not follow his vices. Be true to your people and the ancient rites». Waiyaki is thus charged with the unenviable task of amalgamating two cultures while avoiding corruption; of acquiring Western education —to be passed on later to the whole tribe— while at the same time keeping tribal values intact. He fails to do this and is rejected by his people (7).

In *Weep Not Child* (1964), the white settler has arrived in the wake of the missionary and has taken possession of the most fertile lands, the former Gikuyu owners being reduced to the status of squatters on the white man's farms. «The conflict now is not one of cultures», the African critic Ime Ikkideh points out (8), although culture may be involved; it is more a fight for political independence». And political independence is bound up with repossession of the land. All agree upon this aim, but not on how it is to be achieved. The elders would be content to await the fulfilment of the prophecy of a saviour; Njoroge, another adolescent hero, is avid for education and stands for those who see the key to the future in acquiring «the white man's magic» (9).

But the younger, more militant men like Njoroge's brother Boro, demand more immediate action. Boro represents the generation that fought, uncomprehendingly, for the white man in Second World War and whose realisation of the sordid side of Western civilisation proved to be a traumatic experience. For them, resistance to dispossession takes the form of the oath of allegiance to the Mau Mau guerilla fighting group. The historical period in this novel, then, is that of the bitter colonial war known (euphemistically) as the Mau Mau Emergency, and which brings jeopardy to many a young boy's hopes and ambitions of a better life through education. (Njoroge is dragged from school and tortured, his family is disrupted, his father castrated and his brothers under death sentence.)

In Ngugi's third novel, *A Grain of Wheat* (1967), the political war has been won and we find Kenya on the eve of Independence Day —Uhuru na Kazi. This eagerly awaited event turns out to be no panacea, nor even a wholehearted celebration of jubilation. Instead, there are feelings of guilt at actions carried out during the Emergency, and the famous slogan «Harambee» —«pulling together»— rings somewhat hollow. Social stratification into classes, hitherto practically unknown (it is claimed) in Gikuyu tribal society, begins to appear, and there springs up a fringe of local collaborators, typified by the character Karanja, who acquire wealth and advancement at the expense of their own people.

The extensive felling of forest trees by the British was one of the causes of the harsh drought that afflicted the Gikuyu lands after Uhuru, and the next novel, *Petals of Blood*, (1977) finds the Gikuyu peasant toiling in a waste of dust and waterless fields, struggling against a now more oppressive alliance of foreigners and the newly propertied African elite with their motorcars and refrigerators and cushy jobs in banks and offices in Nairobi.

Ngugi as an adolescent lived through the period of the Mau Mau Emergency. For a young, educated writer with a theme such as this, based on traumatic personal experience, the obvious danger is that of producing a narration of political and historical events, rather than a novel. And in fact, politics, as well as tribal customs, do loom rather large in Ngugi's novels.

Not that this would be entirely without merit. As one of his reviewers has pointed out, Ngugi's is the first fictional account of these historical events in Kenya by an African Anglophone writer and as such, literary merit apart, it would be of social and historical value, as well as being a healthy corrective to an exclusively white viewpoint.

Other critics claim that this is not enough. In the words of Clive Wake (10) literature, however great, inevitably dates to a certain extent, but those works of fiction which cling too closely to the events of the historical moment will surely sink into oblivion.

It often happens, besides, that a preoccupation with themes goes hand-in-hand with a neglect of form. Some recent African fiction is little more than slices of sociology or anthropology; tribal customs or ceremonies or sordid scenes of Lagos life strung together in supposedly novel form, which makes somewhat dreary reading.

English literary critics, in the first joy of discovery of this new literary quarry, and uncertain how to approach works which had sprung from no definable literary tradition, at first extolled all African literature to the skies with little discrimination. More recently, a calmer appraisal has led to the insistence that African literature

in English must be judged by the same standards as any other work of literary art written in English. To adopt a more benevolent attitude would be at once insulting to the Africans and fraudulent to the reading public.

And this brings us to a basic, and leading question: Why write in English at all? Should not an African —or other non-native speaker of English— write in his own language? This question has provoked much argument, and generated rather more heat than light. If on the one hand the English critic sometimes fails to recognise that the acquisition of a language surely involves the right to use it, on the other hand, the commercial advantage of writing in English tends to be played down by the African novelist. Achebe, in another public speech, claimed that he personally had no need to write in English in order to be read, and that if he had sold 8,000 copies of *Things Fall Apart* in Great Britain in one year, he had sold over 20,000 copies of the same novel in Nigeria. This says much for the Nigerian reading public, although it is not clear how far the Yoruba speaking public is also a reading public. However, if one considers the vast numbers of English readers disseminated throughout the world, and their avidity for fiction, the advantages to be gained through choosing to try one's hand in an international language are obvious.

Leaving aside non-literary criteria, an African critic Chukwukere, surely puts his finger on the problem when he says: «the crux of the matter is not whether the language is foreign or native but how efficiently it is manipulated to depict differences in levels of characterisation and speech-processes as a whole» (11). The test therefore is the degree to which each African —or colonial— writer proves himself a real master of his medium. After all, he has Conrad's example before him, despite the understandable hostility of some African writers to Conrad (12).

But to return to Ngugi and his treatment of historical and tribal themes. What devices does this author make use of as a means of integrating historical fact and tribal myth into a coherent work of fiction, and how successful is he?

One obvious device for presenting historical events is to filter them through the consciousness of a central character. This is what Ngugi does in the early novels, *Weep Not Child* and *The River Between*.

In each case the hero is an adolescent, and his immaturity determines his degree of perception of the historical context in which he finds himself. This perception, or lack of perception, is in turn reflected in the quality of the language he is made to use. The stylistic device here is that of «free indirect speech» in which the narrator omits those tags such as «he said» that overtly signal his presence in the text, and describes the character's perceptions in his own kind of language. This is how Njoroge sees the neigbouring town:

«Kipanga town was built in this field. It was not a big town like the big city. However, there was one shoe factory and many black people earned their living there. The Indian shops were many. The Indian traders were said to be very rich. They too employed black boys whom they treated as nothing. You could never like the Indians because their customs were strange and funny in a bad way. But their shops were big and well-stocked with things» (13).

This stringing together of a number of short, simple sentences, with very little variety in length and an almost total lack of subordination, produces on the reader

an effect of extreme simplicity and naivety. First hailed by the critics as transparent prose, it now seems to strike many ears as irritatingly monotonous, although one would hesitate to endorse such terms of condemnation as «impoverished» or «stylistic ineptitude» (14).

It does, of course, keep the reader in touch with the consciousness of villagers in general, and of the young, ingenuous hero in particular:

«You did not know what to call the Indian. Was he also a white man? Did he too come from England? Some people who had been to Burma said that Indians were poor in their country and were too ruled by white men. There was a man in India called Gandhi. This man was a strange prophet. He always fought for the Indian freedom. He was a thin man and was always dressed poorly in calico stretched over his bony body... The Indians called him Babu, and it was said the Babu was actually their god» (15).

But the thinness of verbal texture in this prose is an impediment to our full appreciation of the themes that run through this novel: loss of land and family, undermining of morale and self-respect, confusion brought about by the introduction of new values. It is as though both Ngugi and his hero have become involved in events that are too much for them. Perhaps the fault is basically one of focus, in the author's making a young, inexperienced boy the centre of the novel's dramatic events and the vehicle for his idealistic aspirations. It requieres a special kind of perception and a keen ear for the rhythms of adolescent speech to bring this off successfully, as J. D. Salinger did in *The Catcher in the Rye*.

In the two later novels Ngugi abandons the device of a central character and instead uses a group of four parallel figures whose interlocking lives and relationships make up the novel, against the background of political events. The structure of these novels is complex and relies a great deal on flash-back within flash-back. In *A Grain of Wheat* short sentences are used more effectively to reflect a rapid succession of events, as in the killing of the deaf-mute on p. 6:

«Halt!" the whiteman shouted. Gitogo continued running. Something hit him at the back. He raised his arms in the air. He fell on his stomach. Apparently the bullet had touched his heart. The soldier left his place. Another Mau Mau terrorist had been shot dead.»

In the early novels, too, Ngugi has problems of register and tense / aspectual distinctions. (The boy 'felt *a bit awed* that God *may* have chosen him...) and his use of prepositions and articles is sometimes decidedly odd (16).

On the other hand he already has a grasp of the use of irony as a literary device. Of Njoroge's father he tells us: «The feeling of oneness was a thing that most distinguished Ngotho's household from many other polygamous families... This was attributed to Ngotho, the centre of the home. For if you have a stable centre, the family will hold.» p. 40. The reader guesses that the disintegration of Ngotho's character and his death will spell ruin to the whole family.

It is also ironical, and tragic, that his downfall should be brought about by Howlands, colonial settler turned District Officer and on whose farm —in reality

his own ancestral land— Ngotho had faithfully worked for years. The parallel between these two characters is established most convincingly. Each has lost a son in the Second World War, and each secretly wonders whether the surviving son will be able to inherit the land. Each loves the land in his own way: Howlands with the pride of possession, Ngotho with reverence.

The spiritual significance of the land and its relation to tribal custom and belief which is hinted at in *Weep Not Child* is brought out with greater skill in *The River Between*. The origin of the ancestral lands is recounted in both novels; more prosaically in the one:

«And the creator who is also called Murungu took Gikuyu and Mumbi from his holy mountain... and stood them on a big ridge...»

more poetically in the other:

«...it was before Agu; in the beginning of things. Murungu brought the man and woman here and again showed them the whole vastness of the land. He gave the country to them and their children and the children of the children, tene na tene, world without end.»

Even in such a short extract as this, two things stand out. First, the fact that the legendary ancestors of the tribe, Gikuyu and Mumbi, are obviously the East African counterparts of Adam and Eve (17).

Second, there is a marked advance in Ngugi's control of language. He is now more aware of the complex rhythms of English, and the Biblical evocations which were evident in *Weep Not Chid* are here handled to greater effect. (It seems that *The River Between*, although written first, was withheld from publication, presumably because Ngugi was not satisfied with it; this fact would explain the progress in style and sophistication of this novel.)

But let us turn for a moment to theme. In our analysis of the specifically African quality of Ngugi's fiction we have a non-fictional description of traditional Gikuyu life with which to establish a comparison. This is the work entitled *Facing Mount Kenya: the Tribal Life of the Gikuyu*, an ethographic study written in 1938 and presented as a doctoral thesis in the Department of Anthropology at the University of London, by Jomo Kenyatta, the charismatic national leader of the Gikuyu —his adopted name means «Burning Spear»— and prime mover of the unification movement and the national slogan «Harambee = Pulling together». (Kenyatta later published a pamphlet (1944) under the title «Kenya, Land of Conflict» in which he set forth the Africans' grievances and which contributed to the achievement of independence.) (18)

In a preface to *Facing Mount Kenya*, Prof. Malinowski commends the objetivity of Kenyatta's work while at the same time commenting on the perhaps inevitable misuse of European terminology in such antitheses as Church-State, legal system —economic system when applied to tribal life. (This fault is largely corrected in the later pamphlet.) This kind of lenguage creeps into Ngugi's later novels as he attempts to portray the emergence of a new kind of African society in Kenya.

What is illuminating in the early novels is to note how the accounts of tribal

customs and myth correspond in the two writers, sometimes almost word for word. This means that such memorable passages as those that relate the story of creation or the prophecies about the coming of the white man are not «inspired inventions» of Ngugi as some critics have supposed, who apparently haven't read Kenyatta. Nor are they, it goes without saying, mere copies of Kenyatta's writings. Rather, both authors capture and perpetuate in written form the lore and legend of an Iron Age civilisation. We must remember that in a preliterate community tribal history is commited to memory, passed on from generation to generation, the details preserved from distortion by constant repetition in ritual singing and chanting. (Kenyatta describes a ceremony during which the children's recitals of their tribal history are corrected by the elders) (19).

Ngugi's achievement is to have worked this mass of lore and myth into the very thread of the novel. In *The River Between* the beginning of the prophecy is related in dialogue:

«You have heard of Mugo wa Kibiro?»
«Yes.»
«He was a seer... he saw things... the future unfolded before his eyes...»
«Mugo was born and grew up in Kameno before he went to tell people what he saw. For he saw many butterflies, of many colours, flying about over the land, disrupting the peace and the ordered life of the country. Then he cried aloud and said: "There shall come a people with clothes like butterflies..." People did not believe him» (20).

But instead of continuing in this mixture of direct and reported speech, he dramatises the rest of the prophecy and works it into the narrative by making Waiyaki the direct descendant of the seer:

«We are his offspring. His blood flows in your veins.
«Waiyaki stood as if dumb. The knowledge that he had in him the blood of this famous seer, who had been able to see the future, filled him with an acute sense of wonder.» (21)

The gradual unfolding of the prophecy will from now on be bound up with Waiyaki's life, and will form the basis of the novel. For Waiyaki, being the last of his line, is destined, unwillingly because he knows himself to be too young and inexperienced to shoulder the burden, to fulfil the prophecy of a saviour. The parallel with Christ is obvious here, heightened by the aura of Biblical language:

«Salvation shall come from the hills. From the blood that flows in me, I say from the same tree, a son shall rise. And his duty shall be to lead and save the people.» (22)

Without a detailed knowledge of the syntax of the North Bantu languages, it is impossible to say whether the Biblical cadences favoured by Ngugi correspond to the deep structure of his own language or merely reflect the indelible impression made on a young and sensitive mind by the author's first contact with English in the form of missionary teaching and the Christian church services.

Certainly, the use of Biblical language is appropriate to the theme of a people struggling to free themselves from bondage, and not surprisingly, Ngugi specifically identifies his people with Israel; Kenyatta himself looms in the background and phrases from Exodus are worked into the text:

«There was a man sent from God whose name was Jomo. He was the Black Moses empowered by God to tell the white Pharaoh: Let my people go.» (23)

The language of religion —as David Crystal and Derek Davy have pointed out (24)— is perhaps the most distinct variety a language possesses. But liturgical and Biblical language is not restricted to religious situations. On the contrary, it has a cultural function and, in English certainly, has acquired an enormous impact which extends far beyond the original religious context in which it appears. In literature and in oratory, a deliberate, evocative use is made of its terminology; this Ngugi does, to a greater or lesser extent, in all his novels. In fact, two of them are prefaced by extracts from the Authorised Version (Exodus and Corinthians), and in *A Grain of Wheat* the Mau Mau guerrilla fighter, Kihika, carries round him his «own personal bible» with verses underlined in red: a typographical device used in the Book of Common Prayer to facilitate the congregation's speaking in unison.

Gramatical features of Biblical language that Ngugi makes use of include:

—Negatives with postposed «not» as in the title «Weep Not Child» and, in dialogue: «Leave me not behind, friend» a character says in *Grain of Wheat* (25),

— The frequent use of imperatives, sometimes with archaic pronominal forms:

«Watch ye and pray, said Kihika!»

or archaic lexical items:

«Arise. Heed the prophecy. Go to the Mission place.» (26)

— The absence of contracted forms in auxiliaries, which makes dialogue sound somewhat stilted:

«Would it not have happened?» says Mugo.
«Cannot you for a moment leave a man alone?» (27)

— Equally formal is the retention of relative pronouns ruled by prepositions when presentday English prefers omission of the relative, transference of the preposition: In the heat of a quarrel Ngugi's characters use this unlikely formal style:

«It's to you that I am speaking», and «My mother has a good house in which to live.» (28)

The possessive relative pronoun «whose», absent from all informal speech today, is put into the mouth of an adolescent boy who asks:

«Nganga on whose land we have built?» (29)

— The occasional Object —Subject— Verb order: (odd syntactic order)
«Great love I saw there» (30)

— The very frequent use of the modal auxiliary «shall» with its original value of obligation (note the frequency of generic nouns too, in):

«Those with feeble hearts shall be wiped from the earth. The strong shall rule. The weak need not remain weak. Why? Because a people united in faith are stronger than the bomb. They shall not tremble or run from the sword. Then instead the enemy shall flee... A few shall die that the many shall live. That's what crucifixion means today. Else we deserve to be slaves.» Kihika, the guerilla leader in *A grain of wheat* (31).

Especially interesting is the way the phonetic criterion dominates the grammar. This involves balanced structures, through splitting the text into short parallel or coordinated sentences, reminiscent of the verses in the Book of Common Prayer:

«The strong shall rule. The weak need not remain weak.»
«A few shall die that the many shall live» (32).

It is characteristic of Ngugi, however, that he mixes his styles even in the same stretch of dialogue; thus Kihika rounds off his liturgical outburst with a colloquial flourish:

«That's what crucifixion means today. Else we deserve to be slaves.»

(This use of «else» is not only colloquial, but possibly dialectal, picked up, perhaps, at Leeds, where Ngugi spent some time.) And sometimes his ear fails to distinguish the two styles as when Joshua, the hell-fire preacher, rallies his congregation with the words: «Let's pray» instead of «Let us...». Even today in liturgical language the contraction is never made.

On the lexical level religious language is extremely distinctive, and Ngugi's vocabulary reflects many of the archaisms which were items of general currency in the late 16th and early 17th centuries, but which survive now only as petrified relics of a distant past. Such words are: «thereafter», «arise», «heed» (and the archaic preterite «shat»).

Often lexical words usually reserved for an elevated style are inserted into otherwise homley dialogue:

«You seem be seeking a quarrel tonight!»
«He fears the night will catch him.»
«All these people are waiting for you... they cry for you» (33).

The effect is that of suggesting the dignity of an ancestral mode of speech. How

far this is intentional it is impossible to say, but one may give Ngugi the benefit of the doubt because he is *selective* in his biblical references. There are a great many liturgical features he does *not* make use of. (No verbal forms such as «hast», «doth», «saith», etc., except in Joshua's speech.) In fact, rather than specific lexical items, it is the syntactic and stylistic devices that prove to be the most evocative.

No sooner does Ngugi master one style of writing, however, than we find him plunging headlong towards the pitfalls of another. (This is undoubtedly the sing of a young writer with something to say, and still experimenting with the means to say it.) In *Petals of Blood*, he stumbles into the snares of officialese. This novel is about the lives of four people held as suspects on a murder charge; the action is set against the background of corruption of the new African ruling class, the impoverishment of the villages and the dearth of teachers and schools. Again using free indirect speech, the headmaster Munira explains to another character how «after internal self-government, the colour bar in schools admissions and the allocation of teachers was removed. The result was that while the former African schools remained equally poorly equipped, they now also lost the best of the African teachers. These were attracted to the former Asian and European schools which remained as high-cost schools with better houses, equipment, teaching aids» (p. 107). This reads like the report of a commission for the Ministry of Education rather than a novel, and there is a great deal of this in *Petals of Blood*. Although there is some natural-sounding dialogue too, characters tend to discourse on African problems for pages at a time. Such lengthy speeches inevitably tend to slow up the movement of the novel, which seems to me less dynamic than *A Grain of Wheat*.

But this is a very dense piece of writing (it took six years to complete) and Ngugi obviously feels deeply involved in the problems of the emerging Kenya society. Perhaps too involved; for he seems to be rejecting his former poetic, metaphorical style of writing in favour of a more realistic, more militant attitude.

In that novel many a striking image appears to owe its origin to Ngugi's native tongue:

«The missionary centre hatched new leaders.»
«People are full of wild tongues» = wild talk (35).

A character's disappointment on returning from detention camp was «like warm water in the mouth of a thirsty man». A traitor is «a friend who is not a friend», one whose «tongue is coated with sugar» (36). The traditional legends of Gikuyu myth are cleverly brought up to date as the prophecy is fulfilled before the characters eyes: thus, the whiteman is «the stranger with the scalded skin» whose «iron snake was quickly wriggling towards Nairobi for a through explitation of the hinterland. Could they move it? The snake held on to the ground, laughing their efforts to scorn. The whiteman with bamboo poles that vomited fire and smoke, hit back».

The device of reduplication, as in:

«His heart beat tom-tom» (37).
«They never listened to the political talk-talk of a few men» (38).

though apparently common in African languages, is rare in Ngugi; his ear no doubt telling him that reduplication is so exceptional and aberrant in English it strikes the hearer as invariably frivolous, thus producing an effect opposite to that intended (39).

More frequently, his imagery represents just a slight deviation from the expected. Examples abound of the type:

«Then in the twitching of an eyelid...» = «twinkling of an eye... all was gone».
«Mugo rose before the birds» = «dawn».
«Tell me another person who would have exposed his soul for all the eyes to peck at.»

And again, in fear, «he became stiff, as if a pin had pricked his buttocks» (40).

That Ngugi's grammar of expectancy differs in certain ways from Standard British or American English is clear in:

«Nobody had the mouth to throw words back at Mwathi» = the boldness (41)

—by this device he achieves a convincing representation of an alien language, without resorting to the use of pigdin, which would be totally inappropriate if we remember that African characters talking to each other would use normal grammatical structures.

It is only rarely that the native deep structure obliterates the English surface structure so that, although the general effect is meaningful, a particular term may defy explanation:

«These from that side of Nyeri... are people to be feared; you never know what they may carry in their finger-nails or under their armpit.»
«... his prosperity was attributed to "something under the armpit"» (42).

African words are sparingly used and, in the earlier novels, only in contexts in which their meaing is absolutely clear. But any initial hesitation Ngugi may have felt in sprinkling his text with items of Swahili is overcome by the time he writes *Petals of Blood*, and is perhaps a further indication of his more militant attitude in the 1970's. How many of these words are likely to take root in English one would not dare guess. Despite the well-known capacity of the English language to digest foreing words, Africa has so far provided a very tiny quota in comparison with, say, India. Anthony Kirk-Greene has suggested a number of reasons for this, to which we might add one more: namely, that (43) the referents of the African words we encounter in these pages, although of vital significance to Gikuyu tribal life, are unlikely to become part of European culture. So, while Englishmen returned from India with their jodhpurs and gymkhanas, their curry and chutney and gin-panis, all welcome additions to the English way of life, they show no desire to adopt the African «panga» or «jembe» as tools, use a «sufuria» to heat up food or work on a «shamba» or allotment; nor are English husbands likely to opt for a «thingira» or husband's thatched hut, while their wives each has her own. A

similar system to the «rika» or age-grading may be said to obtain in English schools —Kenyatta suggests the comparison—but no English schoolboy—and much less schoolgirl—would be anxious to go through the initiation ceremony of circumcision or cliteridectomy—the «irua»—as a *rite de passage*.

A more permanent impact may, I think, be achieved by the author's use of symbols derived from his native land culture, symbols which carry an aesthetically pleasing «unity-in-division» significance (44). The most memorable of these is the Honia River *(in the River Between)* which is the source of life and symbol of new growth; its meaning is «cure» and its importance is registered in the opening sentences of the novel:

«The tow ridges lay side by side. One was Kameno, the other was Makuyu. Between them was a valley. It was the valley of life.» But the river also divides the christianised half of the tribe —those of the Makuyu ridge— from the adherents of the traditional tribal ways —the opposite ridge of Kameno. The two ridges are seen, symbolically too, as «sleeping lions» which, «when awake, will come to blows in a life-and-death struggle». When the split comes, the church in Makuyu draws inspiration from Honia river while at the same time the rites of circumcision are celebrated along the bank... In the end it remains the only symbol of hope as it flows down the valley.

Other major symbols are to be found in the Messianic motif (the Christ-like figures of Waiyaki and Khika) and in the rite of circumcision itself as a symbol of purification and the attainment of maturity. A comparison with Kenyatta's account of the «irua» demonstrates the sureness and delicacy with which Ngugi handles this theme. Although he does give certain explicit details, it is the psychological and spiritual transformation, rather than the physical operation, that we feel the initiates undergo, and believe Muthoni when she says: «I am a woman now, beautiful in the tribe». (Kenyatta too stresses the spiritual aspect.) But in the novels, all references to the incidental beliefs and practices which smack of magic and superstition, and which so abound in Kenyatta's study, are noticeably absent. The sprinkling of powders to counteract evil designs, the interminable sacrificing of animals and tying up of guts, the sprinkling of blood to propitiate ancestors, the ritual shaving and «vomiting of evil deeds» —these have no place here or elsewhere in Ngugi's novels, at least on those occasions on which the reader's sympathy is enlisted. Instead, ritual details which have some natural or scientific basis are selected: ritual pre-initiation bathing may be a symbol of purification, but the initiates know that the icy-cold water also produces numbness to the knife.

By such a process of selection, Ngugi reinforces his symbols and creates an effect of authenticity without alienating the reader or dividing his sympathies.

Finally, as we hope these few extracts have illustrated, Ngugi is still experimenting at combining his native East African themes with his adopted language —English. At his best, he achieves a language which does not stray too far from Standard, but far enough to be personal and to evoke an alien rhythm and structure. And one thing is certain: after reading four novels of Ngugi's, no European reader will again dare speak of the Kikuyu of Fort Hall, but of the Agiguyu of Muranga.

NOTES

* This is a slightly modified version of a paper read at the English Department of the University of Oviedo in February, 1980.

(1) Maxwell, D. E. S.: «Landscape and theme». John Press (ed.): *Commonwealth Literature*, Heinemann, 1965.

(2) Equiano, Olaudah. *The Interesting Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa the African*, London, 1789. (Reprinted in 1967 as *Equiano's Travels*, edited by Paul Edwards, Heinemann, London.)

(3) Jahn, Janheinz: *A History of Neo-African Literature*, Faber, London, 1968.

(4) University colleges were instituted at Accra and Ibadan in 1948, and the resulting increase in the number of young Africans with a literary education proved to be a mayor factor in determining the prolific literary output of the 1950's and 60's. Inspired by the idea of 'Négritude' and the Francophone literary journal *Présence Africaine*, founded by Léopold Sédar Senghor, Aimé Césaire and Léon Dumas in 1947, the Anglophone journal *Black Orpheus*, first edited in 1957 by Ulli Beier and Janheinz Jahn, and the Mbari Club, founded in 1961, became important outlets of literary expression and of independent Nigerian culture in general.

(5) Achebe, Chinua: *Things Fall Apart*, Heinemann, London, 1958.

(6) Ngugi Wa Thiong'O (James Ngugi): «The Writer and his Past», based on a paper given to the Kenya Historical Association (Nairobi Branch) 1968, and subsequently at the Ife conference on African writing in the same year, published in *Homecoming*, Heinemann, London, 1972, p. 43.

(7) Ngugi's first three novels were originally published by Heinemann in the *African Writers Series*. Page numbers quoted in this paper refer to the subsequent editions of Heinemann's Educational Books series:
Weep Not Child. Heinemann, London, 1964, 1976.
The River Between. Ibid. 1965, 1976.
A Grain of Wheat. Ibid. 1967, 1975.
Petals of Blood. Heinemann's Educational Books, London, 1977.

(8) Ikiddeh, Ime: «James Ngugi as Novelist». Eldred D. Jones (ed.) *African Literature Today* 1-2-3-4 (n.° 2, 1969) Heinemann, 1972, p. 4.

(9) The magical or sacral significance of reading and writing, the apprenticeship of which is seen as a revelation to the initiated, has an obvious parallel in the status accorded to the interpretation of runic symbols in early Germanic society; the main difference being that, for the unlettered African, the «magic» to be acquired from the white races included, in addition to reading and writing, the acquisition of a European language,

(10) Wake, Clive: «The Political and Cultural Revolution.» Pieterse C. and Munro D. (eds.). *Protest and Conflict in African Literature*, Heinemann, London, 1969, p. 50.

(11) Chukwukere, B. I.: «The Problem of Language in African Creative Writing.» Eldred Jones (ed.) *African Literature Today*, n.° 1 (1969), 1-2-3-4, Heinemann, 1972, p. 17.

(12) Achebe, in the *Times Literary Supplement* of February lst, 1980, p. 113, denounces Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, not for its prose but for what he calls its «mindlessness» and «pretty explicit animal imagery» surrounding the portrayal of African characters. «In the entire novel», says Achebe, «Conrad allows two sentences in broken English to Africans: the cannibal who says 'Catch 'im, eat 'im' and the half-caste who announces 'Mistah Kurtz —he dead'.» Achebe has no doubt «that the high rating of this novel in Europe and America is simply that there it fortifies fears and prejudices and is clever enough to protect itself, should the need arise, with the excuse that it is not really about Africa at all».

(13) *Weep Not Child:* p. 7.

(14) Palmer, Eustace: *An Introduction to the African Novel*. Heinemann, London, 1972.

(15) *Weep Not Child:* p. 8.

(16) In the misuse of prepositions, examples abound of the type:
«His mind would not dwell in the act» *A Grain of Wheat*, p. 184.
«What would have happened if Mugo had not arrived on time.» (Where the meaning is «in time to save him). p. 198.
«What did it matter with him if...» *Weep Not Child*, p. 97.
Prepositions and adverbial particles are frequently absent as in:
«But as the years went...» for «went by» *Weep Not Child*, p. 97.
«... the turn-boy egged the driver», where 'egg' = 'incite' is now obsolete except with 'on' (OED) *A Grain of Wheat*, p. 198.
«She longed to curl against her aged mother» *ibid.* 202 (= 'curl up').
«He saw the Mbere and Nyamberi hills that cut Embu from Ukambari» instead of 'cut off'. *Ibid.* p. 211.
Count and non-count uses of nouns are occasionally confused as in: «... food and drinks». *Ibid*, 195.

Two idioms are sometimes blended as in: «He pretended not to look at me yet kept stealing eyes at me...» *ibid*, 88 where «stealing eyes» seems to be a combination of «stealing glances» and «making eyes at».

(17) In the glossary of Gikuyu words which completes Kenyatta's study we learn that Mumbi —Eve— 'potter', 'moulder' or 'shaper', which recalls the semantic content of certain praise-names attributed to God in Old English poetry.

(18) Kenyatta, Jomo: *Facing Mount Kenya: the Tribal Life of the Gikuyu.* London, 1938. (Reprinted Secker and Warburg, 1953).
Kenya, Land of Conflict. Internacional African Service Bureau Publications, Manchester, 1944.

(19) Palmer: *op. cit.*, p. 3.

(20) *The River Between:* p. 18.

(21) *Ibid:* p. 19.

(22) *Ibid:* p. 20.

(23) *A Grain of Wheat:* p. 58.

(24) Crystal, D. and Davy, D.: *Investigating English Style.* Longmans, London, 1969, p. 147.

(25) p. 63.

(26) *The River Between:* p. 20.

(27) *A Grain of Wheat:* p. 48.

(28) *Ibid:* p. 145.

(29) *Weep Not Child:* p. 85.

(30) *A Grain of Wheat:* p. 13. This constitutes an unusual syntactic order for present-day English. A similar deviation is that of the displacement of the adverb as in:
«I then beg you...» *A Grain of Wheat*, p. 160
«How dirt can so quickly collect in a clean hut.» Ibid. p. 210.

(31) Ibid: p. 167. We note also the frequency of deadjectival generic plural nouns —'the strong, the weak'— characteristic of biblical language.

(32) Cf Crystal, D. and Davy, D.: *op. cit.*, p. 157.

(33) *Ibid:* 145, 160, 152.

(34) Also worthy of note are the collocations of 'blood' with 'tree' or 'grain' which do not normally occur outside religious language.

(35) *A Grain of Wheat:* p. 13, 14.

(36) *Weep Not Child:* p. 87.

(37) Ibid: p. 86.

(38) Ibid: p. 77.

(39) Cf Newman, Stanley S. and Gayton, Anna H.: «Yokuts Narrative Style», Dell Hymes (ed.) *Language in Culture and Society.* New York and London, 1964, p. 162.

(40) *A Grain of Wheat:* pp. 37, 52, 202.

(41) *Petals of Blood:* p. 114.

(42) *Ibid:* p. 135.

(43) Kirk-Greene, Anthony: «The Influence of West African Languages on English.» John Spencer (ed.). *The English Language in West Africa*, Longmans, London, 1971, pp. 123-4.