



Revue Baobab: numéro 5

Second semestre 2009

The role of Traditional Religion in the Independence Movements of Kenya: A Study of N’gugi Wa Thiongo’s Fiction.

Dr. Koua Méa

Département d’Anglais,

Université de Cocody.

Introduction

Kenya, like any country which faced colonization, found at a certain moment the need to fight for freedom. During that struggle for independence, African colonies had to count on many factors among which, religion. It is to be noted that the first elites who later on became founding fathers of African states that newly achieved independence were pure products of schools created by Christian missionaries. One could mention to this end the first president of Ghana Kwame N’krumah, the first president of Senegal, Leopold S. Senghor and even that of Kenya Jomo Kenyatta. In the case of Kenya, beyond the role played by Christianity, African religion also took an active part in the process that led to the freedom of this country and its people.

Our concern being the contribution of African religion to the independent movements of Kenya, we will not extend our work to all the novels by N’gugi for sake of coherence. Our analysis will thus be focused on *The River Between*, *Weep not Child* and *A Grain of Wheat* which we find appropriate. In effect, these three novels retained as corpus gather elements which largely encouraged the active role African religion played in the freedom movements. Among these elements, we shall retain two most important: The awakening of black people’s consciousness and the Kenyans’ ardent search for freedom.

I- Awakening of Consciousness

Besides the factors which contributed to the awakening of consciousness in Kenya, one should note that some elements of African religion also helped a lot the



Revue Baobab: numéro 5

Second semestre 2009

people to be conscious of their alienation. Among these elements are the effects of Mugo's prophecy then initiation.

As regards the prophecy, its effects were very positive in that it taught the people their own history. One will recall that it is through Mugo's prophecy that the origin of the Gikuyu people was revealed. That same prophecy underlined how much the Gikuyu people were living happily before the coming of the white men. They were in fact very united and were not subjected to any of the forms of alienation brought about by colonization. Besides, the prophecy mentioned that they were the owners of the land, which made of them respected beings.

In a word, the prophecy permitted the Kenyans to be aware of the political, social, economic and cultural dimension of their past history. As such, they were able to compare their former living conditions to that of the present and therefore determine whether there had been improvement or not. In this way, they might be able to assure themselves a better future. An evidence of the prophecy as a means of awareness is found with Chege's encounter with his son, Waiyaki, on the sacred hills and the impact this encounter will have on the young boy in his future struggle for the freedom of his people. In effect, during that encounter, Chege revealed to his son, not only Mugo's prophecy but also the secrets of the tribe. And, so as to warn his son that the prophecy should neither disappear nor remain unfulfilled, old Chege concluded by telling his son: «You are the last in our line»¹.

Since that very day, Waiyaki became aware of the prophecy and of the secrets of his tribe. He then realized the heavy responsibility that was awaiting him. In fact, being the last of Mugo's line, Waiyaki considered it his duty to fulfill the prophecy in order to liberate his people. The prophecy will from then on greatly influence the young boy, who will direct all his future actions towards his people's freedom.

The influence of the prophecy as a means of awareness is also shown by the interrogations addressed to Murungu by N'Gotho, concerning his misery and that of his people:

¹ N'gugi, Wa thiong'o, *The River Between*, London: Heinemann Educational Books Ltd., 1965, p.19



What happened, O Murungu, to the land you gave to us?
Where, O creator went our promised land?
Have you left your children naked O Murungu?²

In fact, N'Gotho knows very well that according to Mugo's prophecy, the land belongs to the Kenyans. He could not therefore accept that this land should become the property of the white men and that his people should be above all subjected to every form of alienation. We thus understand his indignation, which certainly led him to address Murungu in the above words. He was probably so disappointed that he could not help fighting with Jacobo, a fellow African who attempted to prevent the people from going on strike.

As for initiation, it is essential because it permits the people to know the values of their tribe. The knowledge of these values allows them to judge and appreciate any criticism the western people will make of the black continent and its people. Also, the knowledge of one's tradition permits the individual to be well integrated in his own community. Thus, he becomes more concerned with the community at large. Muthoni's ardent desire to be circumcised, and which unfortunately caused her death, was mainly due to the fact that she did not want to be marginalized. She, on the contrary, wanted her full integration in her community as she expressed it herself in answering her elder sister Nyambura: «look, please, I want to be a woman. I want to be a real girl, a real woman, knowing all the ways of the hills and ridges»³.

Likewise, Waiyaki's decision to attend the ceremony of circumcision lies in his interest to know the ways and values of his land; and if later on, he decided to fight for his people, it was indeed because he was aware not only of his people's history, but also of their tradition. This awareness, as we can notice, led the young boy later to be fully integrated into his community and to be more concerned with the interest of the community.

² James, N'gugi, *Weep not child*, London: Heinemann Educational Books Ltd., 1964, p. 28

³ N'gugi, Wa thiong'o, *The River Between*, London, Heinemann Educational Books Ltd., 1965, p. 26



From the above, it is evident that the prophecy and initiation helped the Gikuyu to a large extent to be conscious of their different forms of alienation, which could be summed up as follows.

There is first alienation from the land. As mentioned earlier on, the Kenyans were dispossessed of their lands by the white people who, in a very curious manner, became the new owners of the lands. Thus, the Kenyans had to work on these lands as employees for the benefit of Europeans. In effect, the land has always been for Africans the main source of prosperity. As such, we recognize the importance of an individual according to the size of the land he owns. The following declaration of N’Joroge well illustrates the importance accorded to the land in Africa and particularly in Kenya:

N’ganga was rich. He had land. Any man who had land was considered rich. If a man had plenty of money, many motor cars, but no land, he could never be counted as rich. A man who went with tattered clothes but had at least an acre of red earth was better off than the man with money⁴.

This perception of the land is all the more true with the Kenyans who were taught by the prophecy that the land is a gift from God, which makes of them indisputably the true owners of the land. In such circumstances, we understand the frustration and alienation of the Kenyans when, after the advent of colonialism, the land shifted from their hands to the hands of the white men.

There is also alienation from their personality. This is evidenced by forced labour imposed on Kenyans by the colonizers with the collaboration of the Christian missionaries; the people were simply treated as beasts. The conditions in the camps also show the alienation of black people from their personality. This declaration of Mugo to Mumbi, which puts a particular emphasis on the treatment of the detainees in Rira camp, illustrates the point made above:

Once bottlenecks were hammered into people’s backsides, and the men whimpered like caged animals. That last was at Rira... I saw a man whose manhood was broken with pincers.⁵

⁴ James, N’gugi, *Weep not child*, London, Heinemann Educational Books Ltd., 1964, p. 22

⁵ N’gugi, Wa Thiong’o, *A Grain of Wheat*, London Heinemann Educational Books Ltd., 1967, p. 160



There is finally cultural alienation which results from western education through mission schools and the influence of Christian evangelization. A good example of this is N’gugi’s Christian name «James» which was given to him by the Christian missionaries at baptism. When, later on, he took a new name «N’gugi wa Thiong’o» which is an African name, the writer showed his refusal to be alienated and his search for freedom.

Also, Joshua’s attitude shows how far Christian influence was a source of alienation. In effect, not only did our Christian Joshua, formerly very close to his tradition, give up this tradition, he also had the courage to reject his own daughter, Muthoni, whom he considered as a pagan. Thus, he felt no compassion towards the latter even at the very moment she was agonizing and dying⁶. The danger in Joshua’s attitude is that he condemned all religious practices from his tribe, to such a point that he could not even accept a simple sacrifice to prevent his own daughter from dying.

From the above, we can conclude that the prophecy and initiation are among the major elements of African religion which have contributed to the awakening of the people’s consciousness. This awareness was very significant because without it, people could not have recognized that they were subjected to alienation under colonial period. The search for freedom became therefore necessary.

II- The search for freedom

In searching for freedom, the people focused their attention on two things: the affirmation of black identity and the desire to restore social justice. As regards the affirmation of their identity, the people tried to do it through different ways. However, we shall retain the two most important ones which are: the independent churches and independent schools.

With regard to the independent churches, Africans thought that one of the best ways to achieve freedom would be to break away from colonial Christianity which could no longer fulfill their aspirations. The search for freedom through a religion of

⁶ N’gugi, Wa Thiong’o, *The River Between*, London, Heinemann Educational Books Ltd, 1965, p. 58-59



Revue Baobab: numéro 5

Second semestre 2009

justice and truth, a religion whose aspirations coincide with those of the people, became imperative.

It is to be noted that while for Christianity, life on earth is less important than life after death. African religion on the contrary gives more importance to life here and now. So, while every effort is made by Christianity to have its members prepare themselves for life after death, African religion on the contrary promotes the struggle for life on this earth. It does so, because life on earth is what matters most of all. This is why Africans will appeal to their religion in very concrete ways, whenever they are in trouble or simply when their life is threatened. This is shown by the forest fighters who would make sacrifice of pigs and invoke Mount Kenya before facing the enemy. An evidence of this is the following revelation by Lieutenant Koinandu, one of the forest fighters:

Oh, we did sacrifice with pigs and ate the meat afterwards. We prayed twice a day and an extra one before any expedition to wrest arms from European farms. We stood up facing Mount Kenya:
Mwenga we pray that you may protect our hideouts.
Mwenga we pray that you may defend us behind and in front of our enemies⁷.

Considering the numerous prejudices suffered by Kenyans here on earth during the colonial period and given the fact that Christianity is rather concerned with life after death, it appears absurd for them to continue following a so-called religion of salvation, which seems incapable of saving them from their present sufferings.

The nostalgia to return to their traditional religion therefore grew within the people who thought they could find solutions to their anxiety through a religion of their own. Thus came into existence the Gikuyu independent churches.

In effect, these churches aimed at enforcing the action already undertaken by the party. It is important to know that the party itself originated from the betrayal of the people by the leaders of Christianity and the frustrations created by colonizers as we shall discover in these extracts from *A Grain of Wheat*:

⁷ N'gugi, Wa Thiong'o, *A Grain of Wheat*, London, Heinemann Educational Books Ltd. 1967, p. 20



The origin of the party can, so the people say, be traced to the day the white man came to the country, clutching the book of God in both hands, a magic witness that the Whiteman was a messenger from the Lord. His tongue was coated with sugar, his humility was touching.⁸

Some people saw the Whiteman had imperceptibly acquired more land to meet the growing needs of his position. He had already pulled down the grass-thatched hut and erected a more permanent building. Elders of the land looked beyond the laughing face of the Whiteman and suddenly saw a long line of other red strangers who carried not the Bible, but the sword.⁹

Waiyaki and other warrior leaders took arms. The iron snake spoken of by Mugo quickly wriggling towards Nairobi for a thorough exploitation of the hinterland... The Whiteman with bamboo poles that vomited fire and smoke hit back.¹⁰

The first excerpt shows the strategy adopted by the missionaries to have the confidence of the people when they first reached Kenya. In effect, beside their humility, these missionaries also «knew how to use their tongue». And this is how they succeeded in convincing the Kenyans who did not hesitate to welcome them as true brothers. To prove their sympathy, they even went as far as to erect huts for the missionaries. Furthermore, some left their traditional religion to become Christians.

In the second extract, the white man is more concerned with his material position, such as the acquisition of lands. His humility has given way to mockery as shows his laughing face. The betrayal of religious leaders will be confirmed by the coming of other white men who, instead of the Bible, carried swords.

The last extract puts more emphasis on the enslavement of the people shown by the construction of railways referred to as «the iron snake». In the face of this enslavement and particularly with the exploitation of the land, some people viewed the whiteman's action as a betrayal and rose against colonialism. This is how the party was born with Waiyaki as the leader.

⁸ Ibid., p. 12

⁹ Ibid., p. 12

¹⁰ Op.Cit, p. 12



Unfortunately, many warriors will be arrested and Waiyaki, their leader, will be savagely killed as show below:

Long after, Waiyaki had been arrested and taken to the coast, bound hands and feet. Later, so it is said, Waiyaki was buried alive at Kibwezi with his head facing into the center of the earth.¹¹

Thus, it was to continue Waiyaki's action that the Gikuyu independent churches were born with Harry Thuku. These churches aimed at giving sense to the lives of the underprivileged. In these movements, the people attempted to adapt their religion to Christianity, especially to the book entitled *Exodus*, since it resembles the story of the people of Kenya. An evidence of this is the way the majority of the leaders of these religions try to imitate Moses, the hero of *Exodus*. As we shall notice in the following quotation, to free his people, Harry Thuku addressed the colonial Administration almost in the same way as Moses addressed Pharaoh to free the Israelites.

Harry denounced the Whiteman and cursed that benevolence and protection which denied people's land and freedom. He amazed them by reading along letters to the Whiteman, letters in which he set out in clear terms people's discontent with taxation, forced labour on white settler's land, and with the soldier settlement scheme which after the first big war, left many black people without homes or land.¹²

The independent churches were also places for political discussions as this quotation shows.

Harry asked the people to join the party and find strength in unity. They spoke of him in their homes; they sang his praises in teashops and on their way to Gikuyu independent churches on Sundays.¹³

The role of independent churches was very significant in the process of the struggle for freedom because, besides the independent churches in Kenya, many other churches of the same type spread nearly all over Africa. We have for instance, the

¹¹ N'gugi, Wa Thiong'o, *A Grain of Wheat*, London, Heinemann Educational Books Ltd., 1967, p 12

¹² *Op.Cit*, p. 13

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 13



Revue Baobab: numéro 5

Second semestre 2009

«Kimbangisme» and the «Mastwanisme» in the Congo created by Simon Kambangou and Andre Mastwa.¹⁴

There is also the Harris religion by William Wade Harris which started in Liberia before reaching other regions of the West African coast, Côte d'Ivoire inclusively.

As a conclusion, we shall note that in all these independent churches, the followers were taught to fear only God, so as to be less afraid of the whiteman's power which had been until then considered as limitless. Thus, Harry Thuku's movement became so important with time. And the white men, who found it a threat, arrested Harry and assassinated him just as they did to Waiyaki.

Now concerning independent schools, let us say that as much as Christianity used schools to achieve its goals, African religion also found in schools, a weapon for its struggle. This is why the people created independent schools. In fact, for the people, these schools were also places where they could learn the white man's knowledge and his ways. People generally say that an enemy appears more dangerous when you do not know him well. And did the prophecy not foretell that the Gikuyu people could not fight the white men without knowing their ways? "Mugo often said, you could not cut the butterflies with a panga. You could not spear them until you learnt and knew their ways and movements. Then you could trap, you could fight back".¹⁵

Thus, it was a necessity for Kenyans to know their enemy very well before they could fight back. Chege, in sending his son, Waiyaki, to school thought of that. Likewise, after the break with Siriana, Waiyaki, who was also driven from that mission only because he had accepted circumcision, felt the need for his people to know the white man's skills? He therefore created "Mariosioni",¹⁶ an independent school which spread later on, throughout the land.

In effect, the people's interest and attachment to these schools were very obvious when we consider the following discussion between some parents and

¹⁴ Ibrahim, Baba Katé et Elikia M'Bokolo, *Histoire Générale de l'Afrique*, Vol. 8, Paris, ABC, 1977, p. 77

¹⁵ N'gugi, Wa Thiong'o, *The River Between*, London, Heineman Educational Books Ltd, 1965, p20

¹⁶ Ibid, p.67



Revue Baobab: numéro 5

Second semestre 2009

Waiyaki, the new teacher: “Hey, teacher! Beat them hard. We want them to learn”.¹⁷

In fact, the decision by Siriana mission to refuse all the pupils who took part in the ceremony of circumcision or whose parents had not renounced this practice, led the people to be fed up with the whites and to find in these schools of their own, a refuge. This explains their thirst to have children become educated, a means to know the Whiteman’s knowledge and be able to free the tribe one day.

The desire to free black people grew to such a point that they gave up their passivity; they decided to fight against social injustice and dependency. Of the different struggles for social justice in Kenya, the Mau-Mau movement appears as a most significant one. For a good understanding of this movement, some historical facts need to be recalled.

In effect, Kenya is by far a multiracial country. Besides the Indians who settled in this country and who are mainly involved in commercial activities, we have the white settlers comprising the colonizers and the missionaries. Both the Indians and white settlers aimed at exploiting the people. However with an activity such as forced labour imposed on black Kenyans by the white Settlers, the latter were viewed in the end as the main oppressors. This feeling also originated from the heavy taxes which Kenyans were compelled to pay for the colonial Administration. Thus, from trade unions like the development movement in 1925, the Gikuyu central Association created by Jomo Kenyatta and the Kenya African Union in 1944, the Mau-Mau movement was finally born in 1952.

In effect, the Mau-Mau movement was a political, cultural and economic movement created by the peasant masses. It aimed at driving out Europeans, seizing the government and giving back to the Kenyans their stolen lands. To achieve this goal, Kenyan traditional religion played a great part, especially in the taking of oath by the forest fighters as stressed in *A Grain of Wheat*.

In *The River Between*, emphasis is once again put on the role of the oath through the Kiama, a secret society created by Kabonyi. For the Kiama, «the oath taking implies allegiance to purity and togetherness of the tribe». Furthermore, as

¹⁷ Op,Cit, p.68



Revue Baobab: numéro 5

Second semestre 2009

Kihika points out: «you take the oath to confirm a choice already made».¹⁸ In fact, it is obvious that, without making a choice in advance, the oath taking will be of no significance, for it can be later on betrayed by some people. This explains why Karanja, among many other characters, confessed the oath in *A Grain of Wheat*. In effect, Karanja never believed in the liberation of his people. He was so much convinced of the white man's power that he sided with the latter to protect his own interest instead of that of his community. Having chosen to fight for his personal interest, Karanja could not but betray the oath which aims at seeking the interest of his community.

Furthermore, the oath served as a stimulus and was one of the major elements of the unification of Kenyans. Although some people used the oath for individual purposes, as in the case of Kabonyi in *The River Between*, the oath taking permits to bind the people together. This explains the forest fighters' determination to oppose the colonial forces despite the inhuman repression of the latter. Finally, the effect of the oath taking explains and even shows how a people can be united through religion.

Unfortunately, because of lack of skills among the Kenyans, the riposte of the British was very dreadful for the people who died in great number. Nevertheless, this was the seed of Kenya's independence as it is expressed in the title of N'gugi's third novel: *A Grain of Wheat*.

CONCLUSION

This analysis has shown that African religion played an important role in the freedom movement of Kenya. Beside what could be said about it today, it is to be noted that this religion was one of the weapons used by the people to combat colonization and achieve independence. The proliferation of independent churches in Africa today, with the imprints of animism and also the fact that African Christians are still bound to their traditional religion practices like sacrifices although the Bible forbid them to do so, may convince any of us that Christianity is far to meet the need

¹⁸ N'guigui, Wa Thiong'o, *A Grain of Wheat*, London: Heineman Educational Books Ltd, 1967, p.167



Revue Baobab: numéro 5

Second semestre 2009

of the people. Animism is not bad as such provided that its aim which is to promote harmony and unity among the people is well understood and is not misused.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

A- PRIMARY SOURCES

N'gugi, James. *Weep Not Child*, London: Heinemann Educational Books, Ltd., 1964

N'gugi, Wa Thiong'o. *A Grain of Wheat*, London: Heinemann Educational Books Ltd., 1967

N'gugi, Wa Thiong'o. *The River Between*, London: Heinemann Educational Books Ltd., 1965

B- SECONDARY SOURCES

Agossou, Jacob(ed). *Christianisme Africain, une fraternité au-delà de l'Ethnie*, Paris: Karthala, 1987.

Dammann, E. *Les religions de l'Afrique*, Paris, Payot, 1964

Ibrahim, Baba, kané et Elikia, M'Bokolo. *Histoire générale de l'Afrique*, Vol. 8 : *L'Afrique Coloniale*, Paris : ABC, 1977

Zahan, Dominique. *Religion, spiritualité et pensée Africaines*, Paris: Payot, 1970.

C- CRITICAL STUDIES ON N'GUGI'S NOVELS

Cook, David. A "New Earth: A Study of James N'gugi A *Grain of wheat*," *East African Journal*, Vol. 6, N° 12, 1969

Killam, G.D. *An Introduction to the Writings of N'gugi*, London, Heinemann Educational Books Ltd., 1980

Lloyd, Williams. "Religion and life in James N'gugis *The River Between*," *African Literature Today*, Vol. 5, London: Heinemann Educational Books Ltd., 1971

N'gugi, Wa Thiong'o. *Church, Culture and Politics: An Extract from Homecoming*, London: Heinemann Educational Books Ltd., 1972