



## Kihika's Bible: The recontextualisation of the Gospel in Ngugi's *A Grain of Wheat*

Marijke van Vuuren  
Department of English  
University of Pretoria  
PRETORIA  
E-mail: mvvuuren@libarts.up.ac.za

### Abstract

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*How might a post-colonial novel by the author of **Decolonising the Mind** deal with the Christian Gospel, that pillar of Western culture, used for too long to justify European imperialism in Africa and elsewhere? In **A Grain of Wheat** (1967), Ngugi depicts both the appropriation and betrayal of the Christian message by British colonialists in Kenya. One would expect the remnants of Christianity and its representatives to be waved off with some relief together with the departing government officials. Yet in the novel the Gospel survives; its recontextualisation in Kenyan history the key to its survival. Even before independence the appropriation of the Bible for a political programme is not limited to the colonists: the first freedom fighters are shown to adopt the sacrificial ethic suggested by the novel's title. This article examines the criteria for the novel's implicit judgement of Christian theologies and practices, its recontextualisation or "transgressive reinscription" of Biblical narratives, images and models of heroism for the struggle, as well as the ideological shift effected by Ngugi's revisions of the text nineteen years after its initial publication – a shift in which the Biblical text is wrenched so far from its original context as to render it meaningless for all but his programme.*

An examination of Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *A Grain of Wheat*, published in 1967, a few years after Kenyan independence, reveals the same mixture of pride, hope, disillusionment and foreboding that has characterised political discourse in South Africa five years after its first democratic

election.<sup>1</sup> Ngugi wrote the novel, originally entitled *Wrestling with God* (Sicherman, 1990:6), while he was a graduate student at Leeds University. Any reading of the novel is complicated, however, by the revisions Ngugi made to the reprinted text some years later, which reflect a shift in his own stance with regard to politics, religion and his view of art, and particularly his growing disillusionment with what he had come to see as the betrayal of the common people by Jomo Kenyatta and his ruling KANU party. A comparison between conditions in the new South Africa and Ngugi's Kenya might well include an examination of the status of religion, as Christianity had a strong presence before liberation in both countries, and was, in both cases, overtly linked to illegitimate and oppressive governments.

My focus will be on Ngugi's treatment of the Christian faith and its text, the Bible, particularly in the light of post-colonial ambivalence about Christianity and its role in the advent and theological rationalisation of colonialism. I will examine the criteria by which Christian theologies and practices are judged, as well as Ngugi's appropriation and recontextualisation of Biblical narratives and symbols in the novel, in which the gospel, like the grain of wheat of its title, takes root in Africa on terms dictated – and changed with time – by the author. The ideological shift reflected in the later alterations to the original text impacts on Ngugi's use of the Bible as intertext as well.

## 1. The politics of the colonial and post-colonial text

In a wider sense, it was not the Bible only but the written word itself that was at issue for the colonised, conscious that they were playing a catch-up game.<sup>2</sup> A number of post-colonial writers have reconstructed the histories of their country or region in their fiction, contesting the account

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1 Ngugi's own identification with the South African struggle is evident in his words, in a 1993 interview with Cantalupo, about a commissioned article celebrating Mandela's release: "I said to myself, I can't write about Mandela's release in English. I have to do it in Gikuyu language, I have to do it in an African language. What does his release mean to me as an African? As a Kenyan? As a human being for whom Mandela and the South African struggle has meant so much? ... there's a sense of engagement in Gikuyu language" (Cantalupo, 1993, 1995:209).

2 Annie Gagiano (1995:100) compares Ngugi's Kenya with that of Karen Blixen (Isak Dinesen), who recounts being questioned by her illiterate Kenyan cook as she sat down to write *Out of Africa*: "And then Kamante asks Blixen the most poignant of the questions recorded in her book: 'Msabu, what is there in books?' Power, she might have answered: power through legitimation by representation, for *she* might (and will!) write of *him*, the reverse is not possible at this stage". Of *A Grain of Wheat* Gagiano (1995:106) writes, "Ngugi's sorrowful, beautifully shaped novel is to some extent a 'reply' to the confident European denunciation of Mau Mau ...".

sent into the world in both the historical documents and fiction of the colonial powers by presenting the experience of the colonised, as the empire "writes back".<sup>3</sup> This contest of words is not unlike the military struggle that preceded it. Not only did the colonising powers have superior arms for the conquest of land; they also enjoyed control of the written word and the dissemination of information, to record and construct the history of their colonial enterprise in their own terms. For the colonised to appropriate this weapon and contest the record is to repossess the land in cultural terms, to restore history and identity to their people and – to use Ngugi's term – to decolonise the minds of those who had been subject to foreign cultural domination.

The consciousness of the power wielded by control over the written word may be illustrated by Ngugi's depiction of the colonial officer John Thompson, who, like Chinua Achebe's District Officer in *Things Fall Apart* (1958), plans to write a book about British imperialism and his experience in the colony. The titles chosen are sinister: Achebe's DC envisages "The Pacification of the Primitive Tribes of the Lower Niger", while Thompson's manuscript has the provisional title, "Prospero in Africa". Cartelli has shown that Ngugi taps into a familiar, even clichéd debate about *The Tempest* as colonial pre-text to allude to "the practice and psychology of colonization" (Ngugi, quoted in Cartelli, 1987:106) and Prospero's justification of his usurpation of Caliban's island, which is done by defining Caliban as "[a] devil, a born devil, on whose nature/ [n]urture will never stick" (IV.i.188-9). Colonialism is rationalised as a civilising venture which needs must benefit the colonised. Failing that, control of the text justifies his oppression by defining him as sub-human, pagan, even demonic, and impervious to any "civilising" influence.

The irony inherent in this portrayal of Thompson by a "latter-day Caliban" (Cartelli, 1987:109) underlines the unreliability of the written word, which is subject to ideology both in its inscription and its reception. This fallibility is further inscribed in the novel itself: rather than replace one version of history by another, Ngugi represents Kenyan history as many stories, often conflicting, all fallible, so that the "history" that emerges is a fluid collage of subjective experiences and memories. The authority of the narrative voice is also undermined by shifts in point of view that overturn conventions of reception, and by several slips inserted into apparently first-hand accounts as well as first-person narration. Ngugi

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3 The expression was first used by Salman Rushdie ("the Empire writes back to the Centre") and was adopted as the title of a seminal study of post-colonial literature by Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back* (1989)

therefore contests not only a particular version of history, but *any* version of written history as a construct.

## 2. The Gospel in colonial and post-colonial contexts

*A Grain of Wheat* (1967)<sup>4</sup> is one of four novels by Ngugi covering the colonial period, decolonisation and the post-colonial era in Kenya. Though the linear narrative spans the five days leading to the independence celebrations on December 12, 1963 in rural Thabai Ridge, the burden of the novel is with the preceding period, the traumatic years of the Emergency in which 11,000 Kenyans lost their lives. The protagonists deal with the ghosts of guilt, betrayal, and broken relationships. The plot concerns the hunt for the "Judas" who betrayed Kihika, leader of the freedom fighters, to the British. For the transition to independence to be realised and the nation to be reborn, the pain and guilt of this period must be dealt with. (For South Africans the Truth and Reconciliation Commission has made this aspect of transition public and conscious.)

Such a process of decolonisation must include a cultural and psychological liberation. But what then of Christianity, brought to Africa by the very missionaries who are pictured in the novel in the vanguard of the colonising armies, the religion which alienated Kenyans from their tribal customs and which unravelled the social fabric of the clan? And if control of the written text meant abuse, what of the Bible, used ideologically to justify colonisation and to subdue the Gikuyu people?

The novel's account of the role of missionaries and their Bible in colonisation provides reason for outright rejection. Ngugi portrays the missionaries' arrival with the Bible in their hands: "the whiteman came to the country, clutching the book of God in both hands, a magic witness that the whiteman was a messenger from the Lord" (*Grain*: 11). For the illiterate villagers, the "magic witness" of the "book of God" lends divine authority to the messenger. The whiteman reads from this book what is the heart of the Gospel: "The whiteman spoke of the love that passeth understanding. Greater Love hath no man than this, he read from the little black book, than a man lay down his life for his friends" (*Grain*: 12).

The misquotation is just one of Ngugi's many reminders of the unreliability of the written record. The spirit of sacrificial love in the words quoted is betrayed when just after this we read, "Soon people saw that the whiteman had imperceptibly acquired more land to meet the growing

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4 Henceforth referred to as *Grain*.

needs of his position" (*Grain*: 12). So begins the struggle for land as well as for the hearts and minds of the people.

The "whiteman" is referred to in the singular throughout. Ngugi has said that the missionary and the settler were seen as one, because "while the European settler robbed people of their land and the products of their sweat, the missionaries robbed them of their soul. Thus was the African body and soul bartered for thirty pieces of silver and the promise of a European heaven".<sup>5</sup> A reminder of this betrayal is found in a popular saying that the Mubia (missionaries) told the people to shut their eyes in prayer, "and when they opened their eyes, their land was taken" (Ngugi, 1972:33). The peasants find that the missionaries have been followed by soldiers, "a long line of other red strangers who carried, not the Bible, but the sword" (*Grain*: 12). The seamless progression from the spreading of the Gospel to the appropriation of land, imperialism and the subjugation of the population places the Bible and its message in an invidious position.

By the time the British Empire has been established in Kenya, the Christian gospel has already been used to justify land appropriation under the "hand of the Christian woman whose protecting shadow now bestrode both land and sea" (*Grain*: 12, 13). In a article written in 1993, Ngugi had already criticised the contradictory role of the Christian religion in the process of colonisation: "Christianity, whose basic doctrine is the equality of man, was an integral part of the colonialism which in Kenya was built on the inequality of man, and subsequent subjugation of one race by another" (quoted in Cook & Okenimpke, 1983:19).

In the novel, however, the Christian ethic of sacrificial love passes almost immediately to those struggling for freedom from British rule, notably Waiyaki, legendary Gikuyu hero, whose death is mentioned immediately after the description of the advent of the missionaries and the betrayal of their message. For Ngugi, the understanding of the gospel passes to the resistance movement and is recontextualised politically. Waiyaki becomes the first Christ-like martyr, a grain of wheat, "a seed, a grain, which gave birth to a political party" (*Grain*: 13). The Bible is appropriated for the struggle, with the first references to the search for a Moses figure who will save his people from foreign oppression.

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5 In a speech to the Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in East Africa, published under the title "Church, Culture and Politics" in *Homecoming* (Ngugi, 1972:32). In it he quotes the Gikuyu saying, "Gutiri Muthungu na Mubia" (there is no difference between the European and the missionary priest) as a good example of "this identification of the missionary with the settler".

### 3. Christianity in post-colonial perspective

Ngugi implicitly spells out the criteria by which Christian theologies and practices are subsequently judged. While Christian converts, priests and pastors are accepted by the villagers in the novel, some are seen as collaborators and are killed by the liberation army, the Mau Mau, during the armed struggle. On the other hand, the independence celebrations are opened in prayer by a Christian priest.

A figure who provides a case study of these criteria is the Reverend Jackson Kigondo. Seen always in his clerical collar, Jackson, as he is known, is a "respected elder" whose opinion, based on the Bible, is invited on important issues affecting the village: "Reverend here will read the word from his book and tell us what he thinks", someone will say (*Grain*: 73, 74). With access to the homes and hearts of the villagers, Jackson preaches Christ at every opportunity. He does not denigrate traditional belief but seeks a synthesis: "Ngai, the Gikuyu God, is the same One God who sent Christ, the son, to come and lead the way from darkness to the light" (*Grain*: 73). But then Jackson encounters the revivalist movement, and changes.

Then he confessed how he used to minister unto the devil: by eating, drinking and laughing with sinners; by being too soft on the village elders and those who had rejected Christ ... He was now a Christian soldier, marching as to war, politics was dirty, worldly wealth a sin (*Grain*: 74).

Ngugi implicitly criticises a religion which is unworldly and separatist, its emphasis on individual salvation while community is shunned and injustice overlooked.<sup>6</sup> Jackson, too, is given a slip: not much knowledge

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6 In "Church, Culture and Politics" Ngugi (1972:33) writes, "... apart from the doctrine that poverty and the poor were blessed and would get their reward in heaven, the missionary preached the need to obey the powers that be ... No matter how morally corrupt Caesar was, the African Christian was told to obey him. In this case Caesar was the colonial power. To tell the African that politics and political action was a dirty game and inconsistent with the Christian faith was a very easy step"

More recently, he has also been scathing in his criticism of what he calls "Jesus-is-my-personal-saviour religions", beamed to Kenya by American television evangelists ("The Cultural Factor in the Neo-Colonial Era", Ngugi, 1993:52). Pointing out the link between this brand of Christianity and neo-colonialism, capitalism and American imperialism, Wise (1995:54) writes (of post-colonial Kenya): "When TV evangelists like Jimmy Swaggart and Oral Roberts are broadcast into the homes of many Kenyans but a world-renowned author like Ngugi is banished as a political threat to the state, it is not insignificant that such evangelical efforts have been accompanied by the ever-expanding presence of the US Armed Forces and US business ventures in Kenya ..."

of the New Testament is needed to recognise that, in eating and drinking with sinners, Jackson was in good company. Now a strict division is drawn between the saved and the sinners, and into the latter group fall those who have not been converted.

The a-political revivalist movement, we are told shortly afterwards, is the only organization allowed by the government to flourish during the years of the Emergency.<sup>7</sup> Then, for all his unworldliness, Jackson becomes an ally of the colonial regime, calling on Christians to fight side by side with the white man, "their brother in Christ" (*Grain*: 191). It is evident that in Ngugi's eyes a theology which purports to be spiritual and unsecular colludes either unwittingly or deliberately with oppressive power structures. In Ngugi's representation, the true "brothers in Christ" would be, not the whites who have betrayed their own gospel, but the resistance movement, those who are prepared to die for their friends. This identification, however, also begs some scrutiny.

The Gospel survives, a grain of wheat in new soil, its recontextualisation the condition for its survival. A preacher from a church banned during the Emergency is asked to open the independence celebrations in prayer, and the assembled crowd is united in its responses. To the Rev. Morris Kingori, God is not the God of the white man but one with the God known to the Gikuyu people as Marungu. He addresses the "God of Isaac and Jacob and Abraham, who also created Gikuyu and Mumbi and gave us, your children, this land of Kenya ..." (*Grain*: 189). Kenyans are children of God through their first parents Gikuyu and Mumbi; their claim to the land they have fought for is divinely ordained. The prayer is rich in Judaic references: the deliverance from slavery in Egypt, the Passover lamb and the shedding of blood, the journey across the desert to the promised land, the tears of Rachel for her children – evidence of the identification with Biblical narratives of suffering, hope and deliverance. Departing from the individualistic emphasis of the revivalists, Kingori's prayer celebrates community: "You who said that where two or three are gathered together, you will grant whatsoever they ask, we now beseech you with one voice, to bless the work of our hands as we till the soil and defend our freedom" (*Grain*: 189).

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7 It is instructive to compare the words of E. Carey Francis, the influential headmaster of Alliance High School which Ngugi attended: "Nowadays, the Government is very friendly to Christianity. There is a dangerous side. I am dubious about Christianity 'because it is useful'; there might be a time when it was not useful and we should still have to stand for Christianity 'because it was true'..." (from an address to the Royal African and Empire Societies in London in 1955, i.e. during the Emergency in Kenya. Included in Sicherman, 1990:394).

This indigenous form of Christianity is similar to the purged faith which Ngugi proposed in an earlier novel, *The River Between*:

For Waiyaki knew that not all the ways of the white man were bad. Even his religion was not essentially bad. Some good, some truth shone through it. But the religion, the faith, needed washing, cleaning away all the dirt, leaving only the eternal. And that eternal that was the truth had to be reconciled with the traditions of the people. A people's traditions could not be swept away overnight. That way lay disintegration. Such a tribe would have no roots ... (Ngugi, 1965:162).

Both novels belong to Ngugi's earlier period, when the faith instilled by his Christian schooling was still evident in his writings.<sup>8</sup> His protagonist separates "eternal truth" from the cultural and political "dirt" which has obscured it, and seeks to preserve the roots of indigenous tradition. "Can the core of the Christian faith find anchor in some of these (indigenous) symbols", Ngugi asked the Assembly of the Presbyterian Church, "or must it be for ever clothed in the joyless drab and dry European middle-class culture?" (Ngugi, 1972:35). In his next novel, Ngugi would reject Christianity outright: "while *The River Between* momentarily holds out the possibility of the Church's redemption by virtue of its inherently truthful and valuable elements, *Petals of Blood* describes anti-capitalist and even bluntly oppositional forms of Christianity (besides the institutional Church) as ... inextricably linked to the neo-colonization of Kenya" (Wise, 1995:45). Its protagonist "knows" that "religion, any religion, [is] a weapon against the workers" (Ngugi, 1978:305).<sup>9</sup>

#### 4. Ngugi's appropriation of the Bible

In *A Grain of Wheat* the Christian text survives into the post-colonial era not only in the events of the novel but, more significantly, in the very fabric of Ngugi's text. *A Grain of Wheat*, as the title suggests, is rich in Biblical allusions and has at its heart the titular reference to the death and resurrection of Christ. Ngugi's appropriation of the Biblical text is most evident in that he takes the Bible out of the hands of the

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8 Ngugi has described himself as "rather too serious a Christian" during his high school years (in an interview quoted by Sicherman, 1990:4). By 1972 he described himself as "not a man of the Church ... not even a Christian". Yet he has continued to use Biblical imagery because of its wide appeal. At Leeds, while writing *A Grain of Wheat*, he was reading Fanon, Marx and Engels and moving to the left, so that the novel is in many respects a transition between Ngugi's earlier and later work.

9 Wise (1995:45, 46), noting that this novel was written while Ngugi was staying in the (then) Soviet Union, points out that this "uncritical acceptance of the orthodox Soviet critique of Christianity" is evidence of the "increasingly less tolerant, if not rigid and dogmatic, direction" of the later Ngugi's political agenda.

missionaries and places it in those of the freedom fighter, Kihika. Epigraphs to the novel are said to be quoted from "Kihika's Bible". Some mediation is therefore suggested, a reading which will be different from that of the colonial powers and their theological apologists. "Ngugi's aim", writes Michael Valdez Moses (1991:211), "is the appropriation, or 'transgressive reinscription' ... of a work central to the Western tradition. By means of a deliberate recontextualising of passages from the Old and New Testament, Ngugi transforms a text which was used ideologically to subdue the Gikuyu people, into one which serves as a vehicle for their liberation from British imperial rule".

In the novel *Kihika* – the nearest approximation to a hero figure that Ngugi has allowed – always carries his Bible with him, and quotes from it frequently. After his execution by the British, his well-thumbed Bible remains as a legacy to those who continue the struggle and enjoy the fruits of liberty. Its underlined verses provide a selection and emphasis which is vastly different from that of the missionaries in its focus on divine concern for justice and salvation for the oppressed: a liberation theology. One underlined passage read by Kihika's "disciples" is: "He shall judge the poor of the people, he shall save the children of the needy, and shall break in pieces the oppressor. For he shall deliver the needy when he cometh; the poor also and he (sic) that hath no helper" (*Grain*: 22).

Kihika preaches a Christ-like self-sacrifice, according to the message of the first missionaries, "greater love hath no man than a man lay down his life for his friends". This giving of the self is communal: "I die for you, you die for me, we become a sacrifice for one another. So I can say that you ... are Christ. I am Christ. Everyone who takes the oath of unity to change things in Kenya is a Christ" (*Grain*: 83).

The application of this "carrying the cross" for one another is, however, a reduction: anyone who takes the oath (joins the Mau Mau to overthrow the imperialist yoke) becomes "a Christ". The willingness to die for one another glosses over the readiness to kill and completely overlooks atrocities committed by the Mau Mau – which receive little mention in the novel, and are excised or justified in the revised version.<sup>10</sup> For Kihika, martyrdom has meaning only if it "changes things" historically; this is his definition of a "true sacrifice" (*Grain*: 83). By his standards, the death of

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10 Ngugi (1972) has defended the use of violence against injustice in "Mau Mau: Violence and Culture" in *Homecoming*.

Jesus failed in that it did not bring freedom from the Roman yoke (*Grain*: 83).<sup>11</sup>

The "grain of wheat" of the title is such a sacrificial death for the sake of community. The epigraph to the final section of the novel is from John 12:24 (in Kihika's Bible): "Verily, verily I say unto you, Except a corn of wheat fall into the ground and die, it abideth alone: but if it die, it bringeth forth much fruit".

The reference to the organic image of Christ's life-giving death contrasts the refusal of sacrifice and its fruit, remaining "alone", with the rich harvest of sacrifice and the plurality of "much fruit". The sacrificial ethic is contrasted with the view of the collaborator, Karanja: "every man in the world is alone, and fights alone, to live" (*Grain*: 128).

The first political martyr in the novel is the historical figure of Waiyaki, who died in custody and was said to have been buried alive: the seed which gave rise to the resistance movement, linked from the outset with the land.<sup>12</sup> The fictional Kihika, the "high priest of this our freedom" (*Grain*: 22), is the next, publicly hanged from a tree by the British in what is called a "crucifixion"; his betrayer is referred to as a Judas. These deaths are not "failures" as Ngugi would have it; they provide a centre for resistance which gives birth at last to freedom and autonomy.

The independence celebrations, then, are heralded by images of birth, as the "pregnant earth" (*Grain*: 178) brings forth a nation reborn, its birth pangs having been suffered in the hardship of the Emergency years. Ngugi gives a spiritual dimension to his vision of the political regeneration of a people in the cycle of suffering, death and renewal which he connects with his title, and, through another epigraph from Kihika's Bible, with the new heaven and new earth of the Apocalypse.

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11 Cf. Walker's (1983:175) view: "Kihika, even in his use of the Christian symbols, is able to transform those symbols and use them to re-establish ties with the gods of his people. Through this synthesis, the people have been given the will and the desire to bring about change".

12 In 1968 Ngugi translated a pamphlet written by Mbugua Njama, based on oral history, entitled "The Prayers of Waiyaki". It includes the traditional belief in a cycle of life, death and rebirth, with a syncretistic incorporation of Christian belief: "When Waiyaki died he prayed earnestly that God would resurrect him ... Let us say that Waiyaki, when he died, went to the right hand of God, and because God loved his people he heard Waiyaki's prayers ... that he might return again to his own country to lead his people from slavery. So Waiyaki was born again as a young child with another name ...". This child becomes Jomo Kenyatta (Sicherman, 1990:353).

Eileen Julien (1983) has argued that, while Kihika is Ngugi's hero of the struggle, a different kind of heroism for the post-colonial years is explored in the strange anti-heroic figure of Mugo, the hermit. This reclusive figure who, unbeknown to the villagers, is the Judas who betrayed Kihika, is hailed as a hero by the community. The temptation is to play the part assigned to him – and Mugo indulges in fantasies of playing the role of Moses – but instead he confesses his part in Kihika's death at the celebrations, and remains in the village to await his execution. The courage required for self-knowledge and the expiation of guilt, the choice of community with death rather than self-aggrandisement at the cost of community, or escape and separation – these are the marks of heroism for the period in which the pain and guilt of the past must be redeemed. In the first edition of the novel all the major characters bear burdens of guilt. Mugo's confession is a redemptive act which leads others to search themselves, notably the prominent Gikonyo who, with his wife Mumbi, is reminiscent of the first parents of the Gikuyu people, Gikuyu and Mumbi. Their reconciliation, made possible by Mugo's confession, opens the way for the true birth of the nation (the independence celebrations having aborted). Personal redemption therefore gives rise to a social and communal redemption – only at this point is the new life promised by independence realised. Sharma (1983:167) has argued that for this reason the Christian vision is essential to the novel, whose concern is with "rebirth and regeneration, the end of brokenness and alienation and the restoration to wholeness and community".<sup>13</sup>

The two Biblical figures for heroism are Jesus and, as may be expected, Moses, as Ngugi explores the "let-my people-go" theme.<sup>14</sup> Significantly, however, the Moses model is connected mainly with Mugo's early dreams of individual heroism, the valorisation of the saviour figure, while he remains isolated from the community, denying his treason. Ngugi treats the community's natural longing for a saviour figure with some circumspection. His wariness of individual hero figures is reflected in the lack of a living hero in the novel, and in the insistence that the least in the community can be heroic in redemptive acts for the sake of others. Yet

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<sup>13</sup> Cf. the view of G.D. Killam: "Given that Ngugi's interest is in character and in the moral choices that humans have to make ... all of the principal characters can be said to reflect in their experiences in the novel, the process of birth, growth, death and rebirth implied in the Biblical quotation (the epigraph to the novel)". (In Walker, 1983:52.)

<sup>14</sup> The expression is Nadine Gordimer's, used in some weariness of the use of a motif fast becoming hackneyed in resistance literature.

the villagers long for a hero. They weave legends about Mugo, ignorant of his treason. The same crowd<sup>15</sup> "recreates history" around the person of Jomo Kenyatta, leader of the liberation struggle, about to be the first president of an independent Kenya:

They sang of Jomo (he came, like a fiery spear, among us), his stay in England (Moses sojourned in the land of Pharaoh) and his return (he came riding on a cloud of fire and smoke) to save his children. He was arrested, sent to Lodwar, and on the third day came home from Maralal. He came riding a chariot home. The gates of hell could not withhold him. Now angels tremble before him (*Grain*: 189, 190).

Kenyatta is identified with both the risen Christ and Moses. The fact that the same people who are patently mistaken in their hero-worship of Mugo see Kenyatta as their saviour casts doubt on his heroic stature. And indeed, in the novel the first disquieting signs of corruption and neo-colonialism are evident. At the time when the novel was written, Kenyatta was still a hero; later Ngugi was to see him and his ruling elite as having betrayed the rural peasantry who had fought for freedom. In an introductory note Ngugi refers to the novel's fictional situation as "sometimes too painfully real for the peasants who fought the British yet who now see all that they fought for being put on one side". This betrayal is foreshadowed in the figure of Mugo, who is not the hero people think, but a traitor to their cause. Mugo, however, redeems himself. Kenyatta and his ilk do not. The "chariot" that brings Kenyatta home to victory turns all too soon into the "long cars" (*Grain*: 60) of the *wa-Benzis*, the neo-colonialists.<sup>16</sup> One example is the inaccessible MP for Rungei (seeing him is like "trying to meet God", one woman complains [*Grain*: 54]), who cheats a syndicate of peasants out of the land they hope to buy and farm. The land is not restored to the people; instead those who have not suffered for freedom reap its benefits.

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<sup>15</sup> Significantly, Ngugi effects a shift from the predominant third-person point of view used in the novel to the first person – plural, in keeping with his emphasis on community – at this point in the novel. "We" are said to weave legends about Mugo. The narrator is therefore positioned inside the community, or *is* the voice of the community. This narrator is also mistaken in the choice of hero – a reminder of the fallibility of the text.

<sup>16</sup> In *Detained* (published in 1981), Ngugi wrote, "In the novel *A Grain of Wheat*, I tried, through Mugo who carried the burden of mistaken revolutionary heroism, to hint at the possibilities of the new Kenyatta ... but that was in 1965-6 and nothing was clear then about the extent to which Kenyatta had negated his past, nor the sheer magnitude of the suffering it would cause to our society today" (quoted in Cook & Okenimpke, 1983:89). Cook and Okenimpke comment. "The implication is that it would have required at least a symbolic death of Kenyatta and the values he epitomised as a condition for creating a new just Kenya".

Ngugi therefore treats the need for a heroic saviour figure, a Moses, as potentially dangerous, centring his novel rather on the grain of wheat, the Christ-like life of service and sacrifice, his emphasis on community, not on the individual. His use of Biblical myth is vital to his vision of the spiritual regeneration of a people. In his recontextualisation of scriptural material he shows the Bible to be a site of contesting interpretations – which of course it has always been. It seems, however, that in dusting off the colonial dirt from the gospel and replanting it, Ngugi has chosen to overlook the spiritual and transcendent, and has simply appropriated the text for another political agenda.

### 5. Ngugi's revised text

Ngugi's revisions of the novel for the 1986 edition certainly provide evidence of the kind of recontextualisation which violates the substance of the Gospel. After his own disillusionment with developments in Kenya and his brushes with government (including a year in detention without trial in 1978), Ngugi was no longer prepared to portray the ruling Kenya African National Union (KANU) as heirs of the struggle begun with Waiyaki. He changed all references in the novel to "the Party", to "the Movement" – meaning the Land and Freedom Movement or Mau Mau, the armed wing of the struggle. He came to seek hope for the peasantry in a continued armed struggle for the restoration of land. Needing now to valorise the Mau Mau, he effected radical changes to two passages which in the original text had revealed the personal guilt of Mau Mau fighters, one for the rape of a white woman doctor, and another for the death of a priest, Jackson Kigondo. The rape is excised and replaced by clichéd rhetoric on the abuse of privilege on the part of the woman. The killing of the priest remains, but is justified by nothing less than an appeal to Scripture and the name of Christ.

The original account, from General R's address at the independence celebrations, follows:

Tell them about this, a voice in him insisted. Tell them how you and Kihika planned it. This picture and the voice disappeared. Now it was the face of the Rev Jackson Kigondo that stood before him, mocking him, accusing him. 'He looked like my father', General R had once, in a moment of weakness, confessed to Lt. Koinandu, soon after they had killed the man of God. Jackson had consistently preached against Mau Mau in churches and in public meetings ... He called on Christians to fight side by side with the whiteman, their brother in Christ, to restore order and the rule of the spirit. Now, every detail of that scene as they surrounded the preacher's house and hacked him to pieces, glowed before General R. Jackson never showed fear. He knelt down and as the pangas whacked him dead he prayed for his enemies. This act had

almost unnerved General R. He called on his followers to dip their pangas in the man's blood that all might share the guilt. Why did the man's face now suddenly appear before him? You had to die, he addressed the face, but the words did not leave his throat ... (*Grain*: 191).

In the revised version Jackson is no longer given a Christian martyrdom, nor is he called the "man of God". It is not R's guilt that summons him, like Banquo's ghost, to spoil the public savouring of triumph:

Now it was the face of the Rev Jackson Kigonda that stood before him. Jackson had consistently preached against Mau Mau in churches and in public meetings ... He called on Christians to fight side by side with the whiteman, their brother in Christ, to restore order and the rule of the spirit. Three times had Jackson been warned to stop his activities against the people. 'In the name of Jesus, who stood against the Roman colonialists and their Pharisee homeguards, we ask you to stop siding with British colonialism!' But Jackson became even more defiant. He had to be silenced. It was the same Jackson who now stood before him, mocking him, 'We are still here. We whom you call traitors and collaborators will never die!' (*Grain*: 220).

Now the brutal murder is not described; only its necessity is retained. Having been warned three times (a Biblical number) "in the name of Jesus", Jackson had made his own elimination inevitable by his intransigence in working "against the people". Ngugi irons out the fruitful moral ambiguities of the original, in which a heroic freedom fighter can be overtaken by guilt and a misled priest and collaborator can yet be a Christian hero. His view of art had become more didactic:

When writing history for our children, which things do we want them to admire? Should they emulate traitors or heroes? We must draw a line between those who held out consistently and those who collaborated (Ngugi in an interview with Emman Omari [1981]. Included in *Sicherman* [1989:358]).

And who is the Jesus whose name is used to justify the killing of the priest? This recontextualised Jesus is a freedom fighter who opposes both colonial powers and their collaborators. These easy identifications do not fit. This is no longer the Gospel of Christ, or even the gospel according to Kihika. It is the gospel of Jesus Barabbas, the zealot who did, indeed, oppose Caesar, and was prepared to kill to this end. Here Ngugi's gospel has acquired new dirt which obscures its "eternal truth". His concern is not with "the eternal", with the spiritual truths which he had hinted at in an earlier novel, but with his political and ideological programme, into which the Bible can no longer be recontextualised without suffering violence. Ngugi, in his final writing, does not "wrestle with God" but sacrifices Him with those who through the ages have chosen

Barabbas. Nevertheless, the original novel, which seeks to understand rather than to praise or blame, which embraces moral ambiguity instead of drawing a line between heroes and traitors, also provides a generous (if reductionist) acceptance of the Christian gospel and provides fruitful soil for a cleansed "grain of wheat", free of colonial pollution.

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### Key concepts:

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