NGUGI WA THIONG'O AND THE WRITING OF KENYAN HISTORY

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When Heinemann decided to reissue some of the most successful titles of its African Writers Series in a new format, Ngugi wa Thiong’o took advantage of the opportunity to revise certain details and to add significantly new passages in *A Grain of Wheat.* One of the revisions, a change in political terminology and a correction of a historical detail, hint suggestively at my topic: the emergence of Ngugi’s mature understanding of the role of history in African literature and of his own role in the rewriting of Kenyan history.

Regarding a writer as the “conscience of the nation” (Darling 16), Ngugi intends to make his compatriots see the history of Kenya for the last hundred years as the story of resistance to colonialism—and to neocolonialism.

First, in revising *Grain* Ngugi has changed the term “the Party” to “the Movement.” Bitter at the betrayal by the Kenyan African National Union (KANU) of its own ideals, he refuses to see it as the inheritor of the nationalist movement. The narrator’s explanation at the beginning of chapter 2 of *Grain* reflects popular perception of KANU (founded in 1960) as the culmination of a political evolution stemming from Harry Thuku’s East African Association (founded in 1921):

... to most people, especially those in the younger generation, the Party [Movement] had always been there, a rallying centre for action. It changed names; leaders came and went but the Party [Movement] remained, opening new visions, gathering greater and greater strength, till on the eve of Uhuru, its influence stretched from one horizon touching the sea to the other resting on the great Lake. (11, 10)

But from the moment of Uhuru, as illustrated by the local MP in *Grain*, KANU bid good-bye to revolution and embraced neocolonialism. A self-serving Party—since 1969 the *only* party, and *de jure* the only party since 9 June 1981—it cannot be linked with the idealistic Movement whose martyrs Ngugi celebrates. Hence the pointed addition given to General R. in the revised *Grain.* Following his comment “We get Uhuru today,” he says in the revision; “But what’s the meaning of ‘Uhuru’? It is contained in the name of our Movement: Land and Freedom” (192, 221); thus the Movement is explicitly identified not with KANU but with Dedan Kimathi’s Land and Freedom Army, commonly known as Mau Mau, which is of course the great historical theme of Ngugi’s writing.
Second, Ngugi has corrected a historical error. In chapter 2 the elderly Warui is reminiscing about the brutal suppression of the crowd demonstrating on behalf of Harry Thuku in 1922; the first version reads: “Three men raised their arms in the air. . . . Within a few seconds the big crowd had dispersed; nothing remained but fifteen crooked watchers on the ground, outside the State House” (14, emphasis added). The term “crooked watchers” for the slain demonstrators is startlingly evocative, but the error in number is just as startling. Even the official coroner’s figure—twenty-one—was higher; the most widely accepted figure is 150, which is what Ngugi uses in the revision (13) as well as in Detained (82) and Barrel of a Pen (30). This revision, like the change from “Party” to “Movement,” implies not mere devotion to detail but a larger mission that has come to dominate Ngugi’s thinking as a creative writer. Promising monuments to the Mau Mau fighters, the members of the Uhuru government instead busied themselves accumulating private wealth. Rather than enact the ideal of the Land and Freedom Army, the government memorialized its leader by renaming one of the principal shopping streets of central Nairobi, lined with expensive stores and businesses, “Kimathi Avenue.” Kimathi’s prophecy in 1954 that “portraits and statues of our heroes” would stand in Kenyan cities while “those of the Colonialists which stand there now will be pulled down” (qtd. in Itote, “Mau Mau” General 146) has remained unfulfilled. If the government reneged on its promise, Ngugi determined to fulfill it: his works constitute a developing monument to the freedom struggle, a struggle that Ngugi now sees as stretching from the early resistance of Waiyaki (d. 1892) right into the underground movement that (he hints in Devil on the Cross) took shape in the late 1970s and that now, called Mwakenya, challenges the government of President Daniel arap Moi. Although there is no evidence of Ngugi’s participation in Mwakenya activities, accusations of such participation by the Moi government contain a symbolic truth, for his writing has unquestionably been a major inspiration to the current Kenyan resistance.

In order to understand Ngugi’s deploying of the history of Kenyan resistance, we need to know its political, cultural, and historiographical context. We need, further, to recognize that Ngugi blurs the lines between history and literature and that, perhaps as a consequence of this blurring of the two genres, the distinction between Ngugi and his narrators and certain characters also becomes blurred. This is certainly the case in the work on which I will focus, Petals of Blood, in which Ngugi’s ideas are voiced by Karega and the lawyer (as well as by the collective “we” that at times assumes the narrative function). I will need first to sketch the evolution of Ngugi’s handling of history and his emerging perceptions of the kind of history needed for Kenya, then to discuss his challenge to Kenyan historians (and to Ngugi himself as erstwhile historian), and finally to assess his critique of the first generation of Kenyan historians—who are, of course, Ngugi’s age-mates.
Having described this background, I can proceed to discuss interpretations of resistance, focusing first on Waiyaki, perceived as progenitor of the pre-presidential Kenyatta and of Mau Mau as well, and then on Mau Mau as the largest example. In both cases we will see an intermingling of history and legend—indeed, a transformation of legend into history—as well as fierce ideological disputes. A brief reflection on Ngugi's readership will bring this essay to an end if not a conclusion; no conclusion is possible, for the story continues.

1

The "ideal" African novel, Ngugi told an interviewer in 1969, would "embrace the pre-colonial past[,]... the colonial past, and the post-independence period with a pointer to the future" (Friedberger ii)—a description of Petals of Blood, the novel that he started to write the following year. By then he knew that, like his character Munira, he "had to take a drastic step that would restore me to my usurped history, my usurped inheritance, that would reconnect me with my history" (Petals of Blood 227). Whereas Munira eventually retreats into religious fundamentalism, Ngugi has accomplished the reconnection.

Preoccupied with history from the start, Ngugi has gradually altered his view of the relationship of literature to history and the relationship of himself as creative writer to Kenyan historians. From the nationalist enthusiasm of a student writer living abroad, he has moved through the middle ground of A Grain of Wheat to the forthright evangelism of The Trial of Dedan Kimathi, Petals of Blood, and the later works—a writer tested by mature combat with the forces of neocolonialism at home. It must not be forgotten that The River Between and Weep Not, Child were both written while he was an undergraduate at Makerere College in Uganda and A Grain of Wheat while he was an MA student at Leeds University in England. The burgeoning of his political awareness during his years at Leeds (1964-67) certainly affected Grain but did not fully blossom until Trial.

Ngugi's first three novels, which look back in time, form a quasi trilogy in chronological progression that runs from The River Between (1965; drafted in 1960), Weep Not, Child (1964; drafted in 1962), and A Grain of Wheat (1967; completed in 1966)—running from the female circumcision controversy that came to a head in 1929 and led to the development of Gikuyu independent schools (River), through the Emergency (1952-56) declared to suppress Mau Mau (Weep), to the critical moment of Independence (Grain). The next novel picks up chronologically where Grain leaves off: set during the twelve years up to and including the very years when Ngugi was writing it (1970-75), Petals looks at the present in the light of the past. Petals contains not only many reminiscences of Mau Mau but also panoramic
allusions to the more distant African past and to the black diaspora, going back through what Ngugi calls "a huge space of time" to show "three different phases of social formations: a long period of precapitalist, precolonialist, relations," then colonialism, and finally neocolonialism ("RW Interview" 10). The way in which past and present are viewed is reversed in the play The Trial of Dedan Kimathi (1976; written 1974–76), which looks at the past in the light of the present in an attempt to assess the enduring legacy of Mau Mau to independent Kenya. I Will Marry When I Want—the English title of Ngugi’s first Gikuyu play, Ngaahika Ndeenda—looks squarely at the present, with an implied agenda for change. Finally, Devil on the Cross, his first Gikuyu novel (Caitaani Mutharaba-ini), looks at the present in the light of the future, setting a satiric critique of contemporary Kenya against a vision of a socialist Kenya purified of neocolonialism—the fulfillment of Ngugi’s early requirement that the writer "be prepared to suggest" a future (Nagenda and Serumaga, "A Discussion" iii).

References to historical figures and events of earlier periods are nearly as important as the historical settings. Except for his apprentice plays and earlier short stories, Ngugi’s works are dense with allusions to historical personages and events, the density becoming most marked in Petals of Blood. Even where the allusions are general rather than exact—"Siriana," for example, although modeled on Alliance High School, is founded some years before the actual founding of Alliance in 1926—the fiction is deeply imbued with history.

From the beginning Ngugi deliberately mixed fictional names with those of historical characters, hoping to heighten the illusion of fictional "reality"; "as he says in the author’s note to Grain, "‘fictitious’ characters exist in a real ‘situation and [among] . . . problems [that] are real.’" Even so, he apparently felt some uneasiness about intermixing history and fiction; the author’s note also explains that historical figures "like . . . Jomo Kenyatta and Waiyaki are unavoidably mentioned." In his subsequent works, there are no such apologies and certainly no avoidance; increasingly, the fictional characters intermingle with historical characters and events, functioning as illustrators of history.

In the earlier books, historical allusions are vague and inaccurate. The representation of the 1922 demonstration and massacre in the first version of Grain, faulty though it is, at least reduced the extraordinary understatement of Weep: "People were shot and three of them died" (42). After Grain, it would seem, Ngugi read Kenyan history more attentively, unimpeded by the blinders of his colonial education. With Micere Mugo he conducted secondary research in English and primary research in Gikuyu while writing on The Trial of Dedan Kimathi, a work of the imagination that purports to contribute to the revision of Kenyan history that Ngugi regards as essential to his country’s liberation from the colonial legacy. Perhaps doing historical
research helped hone the awareness of history and of Kenyan historiography permeating his fourth novel.

*Petals of Blood* is thick with allusions to world black history and contains a number of pointed historiographical disquisitions. Indeed, the aesthetics of his fiction changes (for the worse, some critics argue), and there is often little difference between the writing in certain passages of the novel and in the closely related nonfiction written soon after (in particular, *Detained*). The scope of historical reference has widened in both time and space, ranging from the distant, legendary past "of Ndemi and the creators from Malindi to Songhai" to the nineteenth and twentieth centuries—"the past of L'Ouverture, Turner, Chaka, Abdulla, Koitalel, Ole Masai, Kimathi, Mathenge" (*Petals* 214; my italics indicate fictional characters). Against a backdrop of broadly sketched grandeur achieved long before by "the creators," the fictional characters take their place among not only the heroes of Kenyan resistance—from the early twentieth century (Koitalel arap Samoei) to Mau Mau (Dedan Kimathi, Stanley Mathenge)—but also among the heroes of resistance a century earlier elsewhere in Africa (Chaka) and the New World (Toussaint L'Ouverture, Nat Turner). To contrast with the heroes, Ngugi lists a demonology, with three historical figures from the earlier twentieth century preceding their fictional analogues from the later twentieth century: "Kinyanjui, Mumia, Lenana, Chui, Jerrod, Nderi wa Riera" (*Petals* 214).

The purpose of such collocations of historical and fictional characters is to make Kenyan readers reflect on their own place in the continuum of history. Sounding like a miniature Karega, the wise young hero of Ngugi's first children's book advises his classmates how to find their way out of the forest: "We must . . . find out where we are, in order to decide where we will go next. We cannot know where we are, without first finding out where we come from" (*Njamba Nene and the Flying Bus* 19; cf. *Petals* 127-28). The Kenyan view of the past, Ngugi said in a 1978 interview, "up to now has been distorted by the cultural needs of imperialism"—needs that led historians to show "[first,] that Kenyan people had not struggled with nature and with other men to change their natural environment . . . [and second, that they] had not resisted foreign domination" ("Interview" 10).

The first omission to which Ngugi calls attention concerns the history of common people, who were completely ignored by colonial and postcolonial historians despite the professed interest of the latter in "the history of the inarticulate" (Temu and Swai 3-5). Ngugi's call for a history of the anonymous masses reacts to the commonplace of his early education, when it was in the interest of colonial historians "to stress what they claimed was the natural logic of Europeans in colonizing and dominating the Kenyan" (Wanjohi 668). Sir Philip Mitchell (governor of Kenya, 1944-52) saw "the
Native as hampered by a past in which he has been notoriously slow to meet what Dr. Toynbee has described as the challenge of his environment,” evincing “a singular incapacity either to devise for himself or to adopt from others the means of improving his material or intellectual life” (Lord Hailey, in Mitchell xiii). “Nothing, except a little gradual change,” had occurred to the “ignorant and primitive population” in East Africa during the thirty thousand years between Stone Age man and Dr. Livingstone (Mitchell 18–19)—a conception of Africa as “primitive, static, and asleep or in a Hobbesian state of nature” that has long since been exploded (Boahen 23). Given his premise, Mitchell naturally celebrates “what an enlightened colonialism can do for the dark places” that still preserve the static barbaric past (268). In contrast, Kenyan historians today note the ability of precolonial peoples to adapt to difficult material conditions.

The second element neglected by colonial historians—resistance to foreign incursions—divides into two parts: the history of mass movements and the history of heroes. A focus on certain heroes and on the creation of nation-states can help support the newly independent African states, led by heroes like Kenyatta, so that the postcolonial becomes, in Ngugi’s terms, the neocolonial. Thus the new historians, wittingly or not, become servants of the state: “. . . we are,” William R. Ochieng’ has rather pompously but correctly declared, “the founding fathers of the Kenya nation” (“Colonial African Chiefs” 46). Nation building necessarily involves myth building, and myths, as the Tanzanian historian Nelson Kasfir has said, may “decolonise African peoples by restoring their dignity” (qtd. in Neale 48). It is the choice of myth that is crucial. Many of the intellectual clashes in contemporary Kenya are between rival mythologies—very often between conflicting myths of Mau Mau but also between the historians’ myth of a past splendid insofar as it rivaled white successes, and Ngugi’s myth of the people’s centuries-long “heroic resistance . . . their struggles to defend their land, their wealth, their lives” (see Neale 49, 106; Were and Wilson 44; Ngugi Petals 67).

2

Although Ngugi’s conception of Kenyan history and his charges against the historians are open to some question, the call for action with which he concluded the interview quoted earlier has obvious relevance to his own practice as a novelist:

Kenyan intellectuals must be able to tell these stories, or histories, or history of heroic resistance to foreign domination by Kenyan people . . . looking at ourselves as . . . as a people whose history shines with the grandeur, if you like, of heroic resistance and achievement of the
Kenyan people. . . . I feel that Kenyan history, either pre-colonial or colonial[,] has not yet been written. ("Interview" 11)

That history, he says in Detained, will show the "history of Kenyan people creating a . . . fight-back, creative culture" (64). Because of the deficiencies of professional historians, Ngugi argues, at the present time this story can be better told through literature.

Petals of Blood insists at some length on revising Kenyan historiography, first through the futile efforts of Karega to find suitable history texts for his pupils—a genuine difficulty, according to Neale (see ch. 2)—and then in Karega's appeal to the lawyer for help in his quest for "a vision of the future rooted in a critical awareness of the past," an awareness more specifically of economic history (198). The lawyer sends him "books and a list of other titles written by professors of learning at the University," the same university where Ngugi taught. But the books fail to answer his questions.

In a calmly magisterial review of "Three Decades of Historical Studies in East Africa, 1949–1977," Professor Bethwell A. Ogot, doyen of Kenyan historians, remarks ironically on those who have been disappointed in their search for "a usable past," people who "are seeking freedom to tackle present-day problems . . . without constantly looking over their shoulder for precedents from the dead and irrelevant past" (31). But the past is neither dead nor irrelevant to the searcher who seeks the roots of the present in the past. Ogot forgets that the past may become "usable" if suitably constructed. His own mainly biographical Historical Dictionary of Kenya (1980), useful for what it contains, is badly marred by its omissions, lacking any mention of the notorious detention camps and significantly omitting some of the "heroes" and "traitors" whom Ngugi has increasingly invoked—Laibon Turugat, Stanley Mathenge, Fennet Brockway (Kenyanized as Fenna Brokowi in Grain 56; 63), and many others—as well as some of the important episodes of resistance, such as the Giriama Rising of 1914. In other "neocolonialist" texts, the past is, from Ngugi's point of view, distorted: Mau Mau fighters are depicted as "extremists"; the colonial government, as an agent of "constitutional advance" leading to "a multi-racial society" (Were and Wilson 270–72; cf. Buijtenhuijs, Mau Mau 75). Precolonial history, according to the Mitchell-like "professors of learning," depicts "wanderlust and pointless warfare between peoples" evincing "primitivity" or "undercivilization" (Petals 199). Ngugi may allude here to Ochieng', who sees African history up to 1900 as the story of "migrating hordes" and says that Africa failed to become "civilized" ("Undercivilization" 2–3, 5, 8, 16).

In contrast to this approach, there is Karega's capsule history of Africa:

In the beginning he [Mr. Blackman] had the land and the mind and the soul together. On the second day, they took the body away to barter it
for silver coins. On the third day, seeing that he was still fighting back, they brought priests and educators to bind his mind and soul so that these foreigners could more easily take his land and its produce. (Petals 236)

The binding of mind and soul, Ngugi maintains, still exists and is the reason Kenya needs a new historiography. Karega speaks for his creator when he tells Munira:

Our children must look at the things that deformed us yesterday, that are deforming us today. They must also look at the things which formed us yesterday, that will creatively form us into a new breed of men and women who will . . . struggle against those things that dwarf us. (Petals 247)

Ngugi's understanding of his major theme, the history of resistance, has broadened since his undergraduate writing when his knowledge was limited to the Mau Mau rising and to a few major figures or episodes—Waiyaki's resistance and death in the early 1890s, Harry Thuku's campaign against colonial restrictions in 1921–22, the female circumcision controversy of 1929–31. In these works, legend carries equal weight with documentable history. Particularly in The River Between and Weep Not, Child, he emphasizes the prophecy of the seer Mugo wa Kibiro, with its dual message of the coming of the white man and the folly of resistance; there is an implication here, as Gitahi-Gititi has observed, that aside from Mau Mau and a few other episodes, "the Gikuyu people offered no resistance to colonial penetration" (36)—an implication that Ngugi began to correct in A Grain of Wheat and wholeheartedly attacked in The Trial of Dedan Kimathi and Petals of Blood.

From 1976 on Ngugi has made plain his determination to participate in the decolonizing of Kenyan history. Indeed, in his later works he deliberately has dealt with periods and figures neglected by professional historians, as when he set his suppressed musical Maitu Njugira ("'Mother Sing to Me'"), in the 1930s, a period "almost totally ignored by Kenyan historians" (Gachie 13). Maitu Njugira dramatizes "actual history" based on Ngugi's research into "the actual laws and ordinances" of the 1930s (Gachie 13). "These things of the past cement the present," said one of the actors (qtd. in Gachie 19); they create links to the future and at the same time implications too unpleasant for the government to countenance. "Writers are surgeons of the heart and souls of a community" (Decolonising ix), but official Kenya declines the operation, retaining the old Kenyan history.

But what does the phrase "Kenyan history" mean? Karari Njama describes the pre-high school curriculum at Alliance High School in the 1940s, where Ngugi studied a decade later:
In History we had been taught all the good the white man had brought us—the stopping of tribal wars, guaranteeing security . . ., good clothings, education and religion, easy ways of communication and travel . . . and, finally, better jobs that would make it easy to raise the standard of living above the uneducated Africans. . . . In teaching Kenya History, the question of land was cunningly omitted. (Barnett and Njama 96)

This is the background for the school strike in Petals: “We wanted to be taught African literature, African history, for we wanted to know ourselves better” (170). Why should a student seeking an “education that will fit [him] in [his] own environment” be given instead “a lot about English Pirates and English Kings, and practically nothing of his local geography and history”—an education that makes him “a misfit in his own community?” (Kakembo 7).

History was the field that offered the most scope to African intellectual initiatives in the 1940s and 1950s, but these had to take place outside of official confines because for an African to take “an interest in his people’s past was unhealthy, . . . a betrayal of the civilization to which he attached himself when he was educated and baptized a Christian” (Rosberg and Nottingham 132). Well before Independence, however, nationalist stirrings provided unofficial alternative education at Alliance High School, where a secret political and educational organization taught “how the English people acquired their supremacy, how they came to our country, how they alienated our lands, and how hypocritical they are in their Christianity” (Barnett and Njama 100).

Although the official history of colonial times has gone, no comparably assured version has replaced it,5 for three main reasons: first, the particular historical bias imparted in the waning days of colonialism to the first post-Independence generation of African intellectuals, a bias incorporated in language; second, the absence of substantial written documentation for much of the precolonial past, which poses formidable problems of reconstruction from oral, linguistic, and archaeological sources; and, third and most important, the continued politicizing of intellectual discourse in the period following Independence.

The colonial view of history did not simply disappear at Independence, when European scholars of African history began to be replaced by their African pupils. “The history of East Africa,” wrote Sir Reginald Coupland in 1938, “is only the history of its invaders”; it is thus the history of “the comings and goings of brown men and white men on the coast,” behind which stretches the Conradian “impenetrable darkness” of Black Africa (14). Trevor-Roper’s now-classic formulation of this attitude (9), uttered only two months before Kenya’s Independence, is, as Feuser has shown (53–54),
typical enough of European attitudes then and for a more than a hundred previous years.

Deeply imbued with European values, the nationalist historians who emerged in the 1960s often took their mentors' history and produced "the older version turned upside down, with many of its faults intact" (Neale 4; cf. Temu and Swai 154). They took it for granted that progress was evolutionary and that "unity is the basis of progress" (Neale 3-21, 155), the latter assumption familiar in Kenyatta's theme-slogan, "We all fought for Uhuru" (cf. the Politician in Trial 47 and Kimeria in Petals 153). The carryover of European assumptions was, however, masked by an appearance of African nationalism. In the 1960s—the "golden age of consensus" (Temu and Swai 63)—historians dwelt on three themes: "the bliss that was African life before the coming of the Europeans"; "the injustice of colonialism"; and "how gloriously the African fought his way to Uhuru" (Atieno Odhiambo, "Mind Limps" 7-8).

Ngugi himself, with his automatic adjective "glorious," seems to fall into this self-congratulatory pattern of thinking when he has his narrator reflect:

[Ilmorog] had had its days of glory: thriving villages with a huge population of sturdy peasants who had tamed nature's forest . . . And at harvest time . . . the aged would sip honey beer and tell the children, with voices taut with prideful authority and nostalgia, about the founding patriarch. (Petals 120)

Although the phrases roll out automatically in this passage, later Karega rejects such "worship" of the past in a passage that sounds like Ngugi's own recantation: "Maybe I used to [worship] it: but I don't want to continue worshipping in the temples of a past without tarmac roads, without electric cookers, a world dominated by slavery to nature"; the people who "tamed nature's forest," he feels, had become nature's slaves (Petals 323; cf. Trial 72). Furthermore, Ngugi's sharp distinction between traitors and collaborators saves him from the tendency of historians as well as politicians to paint all colonial peoples as somehow resisters (see Neale 107-08).

"Neocolonial" historians—Ngugi names "[Bethwell A.] Ogot, [Godfrey] Muriuki, [Gideon] Were and [William R.] Ochieng"—are merely "following on similar theories yarned out by defenders of imperialism" who "insist that we only arrived here yesterday" (Petals 67). "Arrival" for such historians, Ngugi implies, means arrival of the "modern" (i.e., Western-style) nation—even though, as John Lonsdale has remarked, "the most distinctively African contribution to human history could be said to have been precisely the civilized art of living fairly peacefully together not in states" ("States and Social Processes" 139). There are, consequently, "many questions about our history which remain unanswered," such as the
history of international trade before the Portuguese “ushered in an era . . . that climaxed in the reign of imperialism over Kenya” and the resultant “heroic resistance” (Petals 67).

An evaluation of Ngugi’s charges against Kenyan historians should start with the correction implied in his own more recent work. Detained, indeed, stands in mild reproof to the author of Petals of Blood, for in the later book Ngugi demonstrates research in books like Ghai and MacAuslan’s Public Law and Political Change in Kenya (see Detained 44) and, more significantly, in works by the very historians he reviles in Petals, including Ogot and Ochieng’. A work by another of the supposed “neocolonial” historians, Gideon Were’s Western Kenya Historical Documents, stands as an example of important research in oral history; Were’s use of the word “documents” to describe the contents of his book implicitly challenges the notion that historians depend on written documents (see also Vansina 173–202; Mazrui, Cultural Engineering 4–7; Temu and Swai 113). Finally, the treatment by Godfrey Muriuki of the early colonial paramount chief Kinyanjui, in a widely respected study focusing on precolonial Gikuyu history, stands as a good example of precisely the kind of history that Ngugi calls for. Muriuki makes plain that Kinyanjui—one of the “traitors” who were “collaborators with the enemy” (Detained 55) to whom Ngugi repeatedly refers (Petals 214, Trial 32, Detained 82)—was typical of those chiefs created by the British out of “nonentities in the traditional society”: men who, in gratitude for their masters’ donation of power, were willing to support British interest “at all costs in order to bolster up their position and influence outside the traditional structure” (Muriuki, History 93). Yet while Muriuki’s own accomplishment as a historian is impressive, he himself acknowledges that historical studies in Kenya have accomplished little and, in fact, are in crisis, with student enrollment plummeting and research funds nonexistent (“Historiography” 205, 213).

Besides the ideological or political-prudential reason for the absence of consensus on Kenyan history, there is another and very practical cause: events and people lacking a connection with Europeans were also often lacking written documentation, and the historian must unravel oral history and analyze physical and linguistic evidence in order to assemble a coherent account of historical developments. Ngugi’s narrator explains: “Just now we can only depend on legends passed from generation to generation by the poets and players . . . supplemented by the most recent archaeological and linguistic researches and also by what we can glean from between the lines of the records of the colonial adventurers” (Petals 67–68). It remains to be seen whether this kind of history, necessarily local and tribal, can be incorporated in a truly “national” history, one that would achieve Ngugi’s goal of unifying the country.

These problems of documentation, although imposing, pale before the
third cause of historiographical difficulty: contemporary politics, which of course involves the dominant neocolonial ideology. What one of Ngugi's principal intellectual antagonists, William R. Ochieng', has said of Detained—"to Ngugi history is simply a propaganda instrument in the service of a chosen ideology" ("Autobiography" 97)—could be said generally of historical writing, although in both genres the best writing rejects propaganda for legitimate and knowledgeable interpretation. A month before Kenyan Independence, Ali Mazrui observed (echoing Ernest Renan) "that one essential factor in the making of a nation is 'to get one's history wrong'," to be "selective about what did happen" so as to build national unity (On Heroes 21). Characteristic of the 1960s and early 1970s, the vigorous tone of the statement, as well as its content, is a direct contradiction of the colonialist historians' claim that knowledge is neutral, a claim that deflected any challenge on ideological grounds.

There are no "pure facts"; everything "involve[s] interpretation" (Petals 246). But writers must be conscious that they are interpreting. Writers on history must recognize that the basic terms of historical writing—"collaboration," "resistance," "nationalism"—still need definition, and Ngugi gives them a nudge in this direction. "The government says we should bury the past," the betrayer Mugo says in A Grain of Wheat, but Gikonyo cries: "'I can't forget. . . . I will never forget" (59; 67). It is therefore essential to "choose your side" (Petals 200). This injunction marks a distinct change in Ngugi's fiction; the experience of detention and his more extensive reading in Kenyan history have helped him recognize that "an intellectual is not a neutral figure in society" (Omari 1).

Interviewing Ngugi shortly after the publication of Detained, Emman Omari suggested provocatively that in his "extremity the objectivity is buried": "You have melodiously clapped hands for active resisters like the Kimathis; and . . . you have snapped at the Mumias" (Mumia, an early colonial chief patronized by the British, was their enthusiastic ally). Ngugi acknowledged Omari's implications: "When writing history for our children, which things do we want them to admire? Should they emulate traitors or heroes?" (1). And Ngugi knows who is who, with Waiyaki foremost in the pantheon of heroes and Kinyanjui, Waiyaki's betrayer, prominent among the traitors. This either/or mentality unfortunately characterizes much of the intellectual and political discourse in Kenya today, despite appeals for finer discriminations.

The issue, as Ngugi sees it, is whether Kenya's rulers wish to lead a truly independent country, or whether they are—as he charges—merely lackeys for multinational businesses, the "thieves and robbers" of Devil on the Cross. Although historians have a particular responsibility to attempt clear-headed analysis, most remain partisan: like their own colonial teachers, they "delighted in abusing and denigrating the efforts of the people and their
struggles in the past” (Petals 199). Despite his bias, Ngugi’s challenge makes *Petals of Blood* “compulsory reading” for African historians (Neale 144), while at the same time his own efforts have met with considerable criticism, partly for scholarly reasons and partly for political ones. Establishment critics accuse him of negativism in his earlier works and lack of artistry in his more recent, “committed” writing: as soon as he “seemed to have an axe to grind”—that is, after *A Grain of Wheat*—“he . . . ceased to be a creative writer” and wrote mere “propaganda” (“‘Exiled’ Dissidents” 4, 7).

Displaying their profession’s common inability to accept literary interpretations of their field—rejecting that “blending of fact and fiction [that] . . . is precisely what makes it important” (Fleming 20)—historians object both to Ngugi’s carelessness with details and to his promoting myth as history. Ngugi is conscious of this element in his writing: “This Harry Thuku [whose followers, demonstrating against his arrest, were massacred by police] has already moved into patriotic heroic legends and I have treated him as such in the early chapters of *A Grain of Wheat*” (Detained 82). But Ngugi also knows the historical Thuku, who fought against “forced labour, female and child slavery, high taxation without even a little representation, low wages, and against the oppressive kipande [pass] that the workers were obliged to carry with chains around their necks” (Detained 81)—all, except for the mention of “slavery,” elements of Thuku’s campaign frequently mentioned by historians. Literary treatments of history include legend as well as “facts” because writers seek to discover “not only what has happened”—the historians’ task—“but the ways in which things are felt to happen in history” (Neale 187). And the ways in which things are felt to happen may actually affect the way things do happen. Ngugi’s Kenyan readers know full well how indistinguishable the exploits of Dedan Kimathi the historical figure (1920–57) are from those of Dedan Kimathi the legendary figure, and how the legend in turn inspired military action—facts—by Kimathi’s followers.

Another major twentieth-century historical figure who became mythologized is Jomo Kenyatta, who is referred to a number of times in *A Grain of Wheat* and *Weep Not, Child*—often by his popular name, “The Burning Spear,” a characteristic mythologizing appellation. Ngugi’s treatment of Kenyatta was the subject of another paper by Ochieng’ at the 1984 conference, a reproof for the mythologizing portrayal in the early novels and an attack on Ngugi’s later analysis of Kenyatta as a failed hero, one who betrayed his country. Again controversy ensued, with Ochieng’ defended by his colleague Henry Mwanzi through the same technique that Ochieng’ had used in attacking Ngugi’s depiction of the Mau Mau as a national liberation
movement—bald assertion. It is difficult to write history about legends. Kenyatta may not have been the "fire-spitting nationalist that Ngugi imagined him to be" (Ochieng', "Ghost" 10), but Ngugi's imagination was not peculiar to himself, as Ochieng' acknowledges; he grew up with "myths" and "tribal gossip" about Kenyatta that then became part of history when people acted upon their beliefs (Ochieng', "Ghost" 3, 10).

A fascinating example of such mythologizing occurs in the history—or story—of Waiyaki, a Gikuyu leader of resistance against the British in the early 1890s. Whether Waiyaki was consistently such a leader is open to doubt, as are the circumstances of his death. But in A Grain of Wheat, doubts matter far less that what Ochieng' disparagingly calls "rumor" or "gossip"—the legend of "Waiyaki and other warrior-leaders [who] took arms" against the "long line of other red strangers who carried, not the Bible, but the sword" (Grain 12; 12). Defeated by the superior technology of "the whiteman with bamboo poles that vomited fire and smoke," Waiyaki was

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 to the centre of the earth. . . . Then nobody noticed it; but looking back we can see that Waiyaki's blood contained within it a seed, a grain, which gave birth to a political party. (Grain 12–13; 12; emphasis added)

The weight Ngugi gives to what "is said," to "rumor" and "gossip" as agents in forming the imaginative life of his people, makes it clear that he knows that actual historical force of what "is said"—its role in politics. Myths made things happen during the Emergency.

The "facts" regarding Waiyaki are difficult to come by. He probably was not buried alive head downward. The most plausible hypothesis to account for the legend is that of T. C. Colchester, a colonial official, in an unpublished note. Colchester observes that until the 1930s the Gikuyu did not ordinarily bury their dead; Waiyaki's burial would have seemed so abnormal as to suggest that he had been "killed by burial," and, as Colchester adds, the coincidental death and burial at Kibwezi some years later of Waiyaki's antagonist, William J. Purkiss, might have fed the legend (2). As far as Waiyaki's character goes, Muriuki is no doubt historically correct: "He was neither the 'scheming rogue'—breathing treachery, fire and brimstone—of the company officials, nor was he the martyr" imagined by nationalists (149). But what is finally most important, where Ngugi is concerned, is not the evaluation of historians but Waiyaki's role in Gikuyu folklore—Waiyaki as martyr, "tortured . . . fighting for his country," an avatar of "the second disciple of God . . . Jomo Kenyatta" (Mau Mau song qtd. in McIntosh 99 n. 129).
Waiyaki—or his legend—caused future events: “When he died, he left a curse that we should never sell our land or let it be taken from us” (Gikoyo 35). The impossibility of confirming the deathbed curse is less important than the belief that people had in its truth, a belief that influenced events sixty years after Waiyaki’s death. Waruhiu Itote (a leading Mau Mau general known as “General China”) describes a Mau Mau reprisal modeled on Waiyaki’s legendary martyrdom, a reprisal that particularly inflamed European opinion. Having been told by a witch doctor that to win the war the Mau Mau “must bury a European alive with a black goat,” a Mau Mau did precisely that in 1954: “They buried him [Arundell Gray Leakey] with his face downwards, as we hear Waiyaki was buried by the Europeans at Kibwezi” (Itote, Mau Mau in Action 26–27; emphasis added). The phrase, as we hear, like Ngugi’s so it is said, testifies both to the strong Gikuyu awareness of their own history in the Mau Mau period and to the power of myth to affect events.

The nearer to the present day the historians get, the more obviously embroiled in controversy their task becomes. The most immediate questions about the relationship of past to present have been provoked by the Mau Mau rising; among the most urgent is the question whether Mau Mau was merely a manifestation of local (Gikuyu) nationalism or, as Ngugi argues, a central and catalytic event in the struggle for Kenyan independence. Whereas Europeans spoke of Mau Mau as a barbaric and atavistic reversion and many educated Africans recognized intelligent and ruthless adaptation, the fighters themselves, agreeing with neither view, commonly saw a mainly laudable and certainly necessary re-creation of the past—a mistake, in the opinion of Karari Njama, himself one of the few educated Mau Mau leaders (Barnett and Njama 413, 336–37). To counter that view, part of the job of first-generation historians was to develop comprehension of the past as not static (the view of illiterate Africans as well as of Europeans) but dynamic.

In their common enterprise of national interpretation historians and writers should support one another, carrying out what the American scholar St. Clair Drake told Ochieng’ was the “sacred duty . . . to redeem our race through the written word” (Ochieng’, “The Scholar”). Such cooperation does exist; one testimony, indeed, to Ngugi’s skill as a literary-historical artist has been citation of his novels by social scientists to illustrate their points (see, for two of many examples, Wanjohi 668 and Furedi 355). But too often the two professions manifest a kind of sibling rivalry evident during a 1984 conference of the Kenya Historical Association devoted to “The Historiography of Kenya: A Critique,” which included analyses of literary treatments of history. The literary critics who attended the sessions were quick to point out their colleagues’ deficiencies as literary analysts. The historians, said the critic Chris Wanjala, “showed lack of basic understanding about the way literature worked” (31). In a riposte to Wanjala, the historian Henry
Mwanzi dismissed "Ngugi's fans" for having "an emotional attachment to the man" that blinded them to "his falsification of our history." In fact, some historians' political antipathy to Ngugi prevents rational discourse. Ochieng' roundly admits that he cannot bear to read Ngugi (his "style bores me to death"), but his aversion did not stop him from writing a review of *Detained* that concludes: "Ngugi is operating beyond the limits of his role as a writer. He is terrorising us ("Dignitaries Not Spared" 47–48). Ochieng's difficulty in reading Ngugi stems partly from the disabling effect of his animus and partly from too narrow a conception of "history," excluding the contribution of legend from its purviews.

The wars of the intellectuals and the post-Uhuru battle for recognition of the ex-freedom fighters were linked in February 1986 during the first commemorative meeting of ex-Mau Mau fighters. One purpose of the meeting was "to find ways to write the history of the Mau Mau movement" as a national phenomenon, refuting non-Gikuyu historians' allegations "that the Mau Mau was a tribal movement or a civil war" (Mutahi 13). To the veterans their history seemed to have vanished. Ngugi's career-long emphasis on Mau Mau has to be seen as a form of resistance to this betrayal by oblivion, as a monument in words to the heroes of the forests.

Remembering for Ngugi requires the painful acknowledgment of imperfection. The heroic Mau Mau model, as readers of *A Grain of Wheat* know, fits few actual freedom fighters; for every Kimathi-style Kihika, there may be dozens or hundreds of Muegos. If the writing of history depends on the truth-telling of the survivors, how dependent are we on the Muegos who conceal the truth? There are records: even while in the forest, the freedom fighters kept "records [that] would form a book of history which would be read by our future generations," a leitmotif in Karari Njama's memoirs (Barnett and Njama 326, cf. 334). These records showed an effort to place contemporary history in a wider context, although the ill-educated writers often knew little of that context. The writer of "A Book of Forest History" —a Mau Mau document captured by British forces—reported a meeting in the forest on 5 December 1953 during which he "learnt a lot of new things and ideas," chiefly concerning alleged English parallels to Mau Mau activities: from the Roman period through the seventeenth century, it seems, the British took oaths and entered the forest, staying "about 120 years" under the Romans ("Book" 2–3). british resistance to Roman imperialism, by offering a precedent to Kenyan resistance, validated the later resistance to British imperialism.

But Kenyan historians have either avoided the Mau Mau records as political hot potatoes or have been so partisan and careless—as in Maina wa Kinyatti's *Kenya's Freedom Struggle*, which omits essential documentation—that they have not advanced our understanding. When previously secret official documents relating to Mau Mau became available in 1984 under the
thirty-year rule, the *Standard*, a Nairobi daily, published reports of the "top-secret Mau Mau papers" that focused on British policy. Despite their fairly innocuous content—the first article, with front-page banner headlines, discussed British thinking behind the June 1953 banning of the Kenya African Union—the dispatches aroused such official ire that the *Standard* ceased its reports (see 14 Feb., 1, 6; and 20 Feb., 20). Popular distrust of professional historians is consequently endemic. One speaker at the Mau Mau commemorative meeting urged "that the books and papers authored by Professor Ochieng be banned from Kenyan schools, a proposal that was thunderously supported" (Mutahi 14) although hardly likely to take effect, especially since Ochieng had just published the first textbook of Kenyan history and was shortly to assume the chair in history at Moi University. Furthermore, President Moi contributed to the 1986 controversy by declaring that the history of the Mau Mau should not be written.

In the same year, a time of sharply escalated repression of intellectuals, Moi made clear his choice of patriotic historian by naming Professor Ogot, who sees Mau Mau as a narrowly tribal rather than as a national struggle, to the position of chairman of the Posts and Telecommunications Corporation. There could be no better confirmation of Temu and Swai's assertions that the so-called "new history . . . has resulted in the production of history to serve a new class of exploiters" (53, 81; cf. Wrigley 123). "Small wonder, then," add Temu and Swai, "that side by side with the development of postcolonial Africanist historiography has developed a crescendo of intellectual McCarthyism" (53)—a remark particularly apt to Kenya in the period following Ngugi's necessary self-exile, imposed in 1982. One of the sad if understandable results of the repressive political climate in Kenya has been the drying up of creative writing, a theme of R. N. Ndewga's reviews (or "laments," as she calls them) of the year's work, published in the *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* (see 20.2 [1985]: 2 and subsequent years).

These are not merely professional but deeply personal matters. Ngugi's political ideas result from an effort to foster an organic connection between his past as the child of peasants steeped in tradition and his present as an international author, the kind of connection that Karega has maintained and that Munira has lost. A spectator of both public and his own private history, Munira suffers from an inability to feel an organic and constructive link to the past: "The repetition of past patterns had always frightened him. It was the tyranny of the past that he had always tried to escape" (Petals 249).

Involvement in personal history seems to be a prerequisite for involvement in public history. Munira asks, "Could I resurrect the past and connect myself to it, graft myself on the stem of history even if it was only my family's history outside of which I had grown? And would the stem really grow, sprouting branches with me as part of the great resurgence of life?"
But Munira hardly knows his siblings, feels both rejection and admiration of his father, is remote from his mother. Nonetheless, despite his claim to be disconnected from his past, he is overwhelmed by his discovery that Karega was the lover of his sister (the only sibling with whom he felt any connection) and that she killed herself soon after being told by her father to choose between Karega and her family. He also is distressed by the link between Karega’s family and his own: Karega’s mother was an ahoi on his father’s land, and Karega’s brother Ndung’iri was probably a member of the Mau Mau gang that cut off his father’s ear. Only by working through these connections, by converting distress into understanding, could Munira become reintegrated; instead, he retreats into a crazed, ahistorical religiosity.

And there is a societal parallel to Munira’s dislocation, in the transformation of the religious center of Ilmorog, “where Mwathi had once lived guarding the secrets of iron works and native medicine” (Petals 281), into an archaeological museum, “a site for the curious about the past, long long before East Africa traded with China and the Indies” (266). “The mythical Mwathi” (302) in one sense does not exist and in another exists perennially; his traditional wisdom voiced, we deduce, by his spokesperson, Muturi; he thus stands for the continuity of past with present, which is broken by the earth-moving machines and the archaeologists’ scientific labeling. It is the voice of Mwathi that Ngugi’s later work strives to transmit.

The very density and casualness of Ngugi’s allusions to Kenyan historical events and figures in his work published after 1975—as well as the proliferation of untranslated Gikuyu words and phrases—accords with the decision he made, upon completing Petals of Blood in October 1975, to write his creative work in Gikuyu. Further, he asserts that “the true beginning of my education” took place in “the six months between June and November of 1977” when, developing his first Gikuyu work in concert with Kamiriithu peasants, he “learnt [his] language anew” and “rediscovered the creative nature and power of collective work” (Detained 76). With Decolonising the Mind in 1986, he said farewell to all writing in English (except, his practice has shown, journalism). Some months later, in September 1986, Heinemann Kenya published his second Gikuyu novel, Matigari ma Njiruungi, but readers of Gikuyu had little chance to buy it: in February 1987, in yet another act of intellectual suppression, the Kenyan government confiscated all copies in bookshops.

Implicitly, the main audience for Ngugi’s work now in both his languages is Kenyan—not just readers of Gikuyu but those Kenyans who must rely on English (there have, however, been some translations into Kiswahili, encouraged by Ngugi). With the switch to Gikuyu or Kiswahili, “I can directly
have dialogue with peasants and workers,” for he is now “not only writing about peasants and workers but . . . for peasants and workers” (Omari 15). This change in audience clearly has had an effect on the intermixed genres of Devil on the Cross. Readers unacquainted with Gikuyu will increasingly depend not only upon translation but—in the case of non-Kenyans at least—upon a more extensive cultural interpretation. The book is not closed on the interrelationships between literature and history; Ngugi has, however, turned a new leaf.9

NOTES

1. The additions and corrections are included in MS 337272 in the library of the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London. This is actually a number of separate items; I refer here to the copy of the first version of Grain, marked by Ngugi for revision, and the typed list of corrections to be incorporated in the revised 1986 edition. The manuscript is fully described in my Ngugi wa Thiong’o: A Bibliography of Primary and Secondary Sources: 1957–1987 (Oxford: Hans Zell, 1989). Page references given here to Grain are first to the first edition, second to the revision.

2. Oddly, Ngugi does not correct the erroneous date of 1923, which he uses in Grain (13, 73, and 208) and Secret Lives (43).

3. He is, however, currently the chairman of Umoja, an umbrella organization of dissident groups abroad that supports Mwakenya.


5. Ochieng’’s A History of Kenya is a text intended for Kenyan O-level students; the article A in the title is significant, acknowledging the impossibility of writing The History.

6. For example, Ogot and Ochieng’ published their article on Mumboism in 1972, nine years before Ngugi completed Detained, in which he mentions “the Mumboist leaders Muraa wa Ngiti, Oteyno, Ongeare and others in the 1920s” (49); all of these relatively obscure figures are treated by Ogot and Ochieng’ (153, 157, 160–61, 172), whose article may be the source of Ngugi’s allusion.

7. I am grateful to W. H. Thompson, who “captured” this document and deposited it at Rhodes House, Oxford (Mss. Afr. s.1534), for permission to quote it.

8. He has since been named chairman of Kenya Railways. For his view of Mau Mau, see “Politics.”

9. This research was supported (in part) by two grants from the PSC-CUNY Research Award Program of the City University of New York, number 6-66038 and number 667040. In revising the essay, I have benefited from conversations with academics and others in Kenya whom I cannot thank by name because of the political sensitivity of the topic, as well
as from readers' reports. Two major historiographical studies that have appeared since completion of this essay in mid-1987 are Bogumil Jewsiewicki’s immense paper “African Historical Studies as Academic Knowledge: Radical Scholarship and Usable Past, 1956–1986” commissioned by the ACLS/SSRC Joint Committee on African Studies for presentation at the African Studies Association meeting 20–22 November 1987, and the June 1987 issue of the African Studies Review (30.2, published in 1988), devoted to “African History Research Trends and Perspectives on the Future.” An additional work awaiting non-Gikuyu readers is Wangui wa Goro’s English translation of Matigari ma Njiruungi (Heinemann, 1989), which promises to carry on Ngugi’s concern with history; speaking as a choric voice, the title character, Matigari, declaims: “... I was there at the time of the Portuguese, and the time of the Arabs, and the time of the British,” provoking the black neocolonialist to whom he speaks to interrupt: “Look, I don’t want history lessons” (“Matigari” 93).

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