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CHAPTER 1

Introduction: reading texts and contexts

Several paths are open to the reader who wants to examine Ngugi's literary and critical works in their historical and cultural context: one can choose, for example, to read them as specific commentaries on the African experience as it emerges from colonial domination and moves into the theatre of independence and postcoloniality. One could read these works from the ideological perspective provided by the author himself through his essays and social commentaries. Or one could choose to analyze Ngugi's major novels as a series of experiments in narrative form, experiments driven by the author's search for an appropriate style for representing an increasingly complex social formation. Whatever approach the reader prefers, however, several questions and problems immediately come to mind: what is the relationship between Ngugi's texts and their contexts? Indeed, what is Ngugi's immediate context? Are his novels and plays to be read as attempts to come to terms with a Gikuyu culture trying to reinvent itself in face of the problems and opportunities provided by British colonialism as it establishes its hegemony over the peoples of Central Kenya? Or are these narratives to be read as part of a larger project trying to will an independent Kenyan nation into being?

Reading Ngugi's works through his ideological pronouncements may be convenient to some readers and critics, but it is a process that presents its own theoretical problems: how do we respect his strong views on the nature of literary production, the function of culture, and the relation between art and politics without repressing the significant contradictions that are equally important to the shape and function of his novels and plays?[1] This critical problem is ultimately compounded by the fact that, while it

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seems easy to differentiate the early Ngugi (the student of English literature, the admirer of D. H. Lawrence and the "great tradition") from the later Ngugi (the disciple of Marx and Fanon and the advocate of socialist realism), this difference is not as simple as it appears to be, or as numerous critics make it out to be. There is no simple chronological framework for explaining Ngugi's literary career.[2] On the contrary, his literary works are best read as a continuous – and often agonized – search for the narrative forms that might best represent the complex culture of postcolonial Africa and as a reflection of the contradictions inherent in any attempt to synthesize aesthetic forms and cultural formations in a continuous state of flux. Ngugi's mature works suggest a confident break with his literary past, but this past continues to haunt his ideological pronouncements and narrative practices.[3] In this chapter, I will examine the social and cultural forces that characterize Ngugi's own attempt to come to terms with his colonial background and his postcolonial present.

To understand the relation between Ngugi's texts and their context, we need, among other things, to have a clear sense of the ways in which his life is wrapped up with the cultural history of Kenya since the 1920s, and how this history is, in turn, woven into his novels and plays. For as I will argue later in this chapter, if Ngugi's ambition is to produce narratives that bear witness to the historical experience – he defines the author as "a kind of sensitive needle" which registers "with varying degrees of accuracy and success, the conflicts and tensions in his changing society" – the reader's challenge is to understand how the author's idea of the historical has shaped his own identity as an African writer and how his narratives have shaped the way two generations of postcolonial readers have come to understand their history.[4] While some of the best critical works on Ngugi's novels and plays have given us a profound sense of the context in which they were produced, very little attention has been paid either to how this context has shaped the form of his works or how our notion of this context – cultural nationalism, "Mau Mau," or neo-colonialism in Kenya – has been overdetermined by Ngugi's discourse. Another purpose of this chapter, then, is to displace our notion of context as what Michael Taussig has called "a secure epistemic nest in which our knowl-

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edge eggs are to be safely hatched."[5] Instead of reading the historical context as the key to understanding Ngugi's texts, or as an objective source of knowledge, I want to provide a different kind of contextualization, one that establishes "our enormously confused understanding of history and what is meant by history?"[6] I want to explore how Ngugi's texts represent or mediate the reader's understanding of Kenya's contested history.

NGUGI AND THE DRAMA OF (POST)COLONIALISM

An obvious place to start is one of Ngugi's earliest comments on the tenuous relation between African writers and their history: "The novelist is haunted by a sense of the past. His work is often an attempt to come to terms with 'the thing that has been,' a struggle, as it were, to sensitively register his encounter with history, his people's history."[7] According to Ngugi, African writers are haunted by their past simply because the historical narratives that they thought would make their experiences more intelligible have instead confronted them with the opacity of the past. The turn to fiction, then, is one important way of clarifying the confusions created by historical events: "A writer responds with his total personality to a social environment that changes all the time."[8] And yet the idea that fiction can be a conduit of understanding and a means of confronting the past calls into question the veracity and objectivity of the history which fiction is charged with representing. But as numerous advocates of the "new historicism" have argued, the distinction between history and fiction is itself paradoxical: the narrativization of history is, after all, engendered by the author's desire to go beyond simple historicism. How does the novelist represent history without compromising it or becoming imprisoned in the past?[9]

Ngugi's first attempt to deal with this problem is to place himself at the junction where history (the context) and his writings (the text) meet. We can explore this juncture more clearly by examining three autobiographical moments in which Ngugi presents the writing self as the mediator of contexts and texts. The first instance can be found in one of Ngugi's earliest attempts to connect his autobiography to history and the paradoxical claims it makes on

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the writing self. Here, Ngugi begins by positing the condition of the possibility of his identity as a writer at the point when he confronts the material condition of his family, namely its state of marginality in relation to a colonial plantation: "I grew up in a small village. My father and his four wives had no land. They lived as tenants-at-will on somebody else's land... Just opposite the ridge on which our village was scattered were the sprawling green fields owned by the white settlers."[10] The opposition between the peasant and the settler appeals to Ngugi's imagination because it provides powerful metaphors for the historical struggle between the colonizer and the colonized. This struggle becomes, in effect, the key to understanding the history of colonial and postcolonial Kenya.

Beyond this opposition, however, there is a more subtle reflection on the nature of the colonial relationship, a melancholic moment that connects the author to his colonial childhood through memory and the emotion it conveys:

> One day I heard a song. I remember the scene so vividly: the women who sang are now before me – their sad faces and their plaintive melody. I was then ten or eleven. They were being forcibly ejected from the land they occupied and sent to another part of the country so barren that people called it the land of black rocks. This was the gist of their song:
>
> And there will be great great joy
> When our land comes back to us
> For Kenya is the country of black people
> And you our children
> Tighten your belts around your waist
> So you will one day drive away from this land
> The race of white people
> For truly, Kenya is a black man's country.
>
> They were in a convoy of lorries, caged, but they had one voice. They sang of a common loss and hope and I felt their voice rock the earth where I stood literally unable to move.[11]

What may appear to be a self-indulgent autobiographical account can be seen, on closer examination, to be an important technique for connecting the reader to some of the central tropes in Ngugi's early works – exile and displacement, the emotive language of nationalism in Kenya, and the politics of decolonization.

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How do texts and contexts interplay in this instance? For one, Ngugi identifies with the dispossessed on their way to exile precisely because their state of displacement mirrors that of his own family; indeed, the scene of deprivation is vividly recalled almost twenty years later because of its powerful emotion of loss, an emotion that readers will recognize as indispensable to the form and meaning of Ngugi's early novels. Secondly, as I have argued elsewhere, the discourse of emotions is central to Ngugi's narrative practice because of its deep roots in Gikuyu nationalist songs and Christian hymns (*nyimbo*), songs whose plaintive melodies simultaneously recall the losses of the native land and the prophetic moment of return and restoration.[12] Finally, the occasion which Ngugi witnessed at the age of ten or eleven was itself a major historical event, one of the defining moments of nationalism in Central Kenya: the peasants he had seen in a convoy of lorries were Gikuyu squatters evicted from the Olenguruone settlement on their way to forced exile in the semi-desert landscape of Yatta in Eastern Kenya.

As historians of nationalism in Central Kenya have noted, Olenguruone, itself the site of a major confrontation between the colonial state and Gikuyu squatters over land rights and representation, inaugurated the phase of armed resistance to colonialism, leading, shortly after, to the declaration of the state of emergency in Kenya. The significance of the squatters' defiance against colonial authority, notes Tabitha Kanogo, "lay mainly in its pivotal role as a rallying point for Kikuyu unity against the colonial government and the Olenguruone crisis was largely important in strengthening the people's commitment to the single goal of dislodging the colonial government."[13] But if Olenguruone was to become "a symbol of Kenyan anti-colonial resistance," it was because of the melancholic discourse it generated and the influence this had in stirring nationalist emotions; as a discursive event Olenguruone was propelled by twin themes – loss and prophetic expectations – which were to become the defining sentiments of the cultural grammar of nationalism in Central Kenya when Ngugi was coming of age.[14] These themes dominate his early works, most notably *The River Between* and *Weep Not, Child.*

But if Ngugi is writing about a defining moment of his political

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culture – and a key integer of his relationship to this culture – why does he not provide his readers with a fuller historical account for these events? Why does he not introduce the heroic struggle at Olenguruone in more concrete terms? Why is the historical context taken for granted? The most obvious explanation is that Ngugi's main interest is in the images generated by history rather than the historical event itself. This answer, however, does not explain Ngugi's omission of the concrete historical event, for as the rest of the essay indicates, Ngugi's search is for precisely the kinds of histories repressed by the colonial library: "The song I heard as a child then spoke of things past and things to come. I was living in a colonial situation but I did not know it."[15] Here, as is often the case in his early works, Ngugi is caught between two contending texts, the Gikuyu song promoting themes of national restoration and a colonial historiography which seeks to repress such themes. While Ngugi's sympathies were perhaps always with the nationalist cause, he had to struggle for many years to figure out the appropriate style for representing the history of colonialism from the perspective of its victims.

This problem can be clarified by referring to a second autobiographical moment. This one comes from Ngugi's seminal introduction to *Secret Lives*, his collection of short stories, a collection which, because it spans most of his writing career, is defined as "my creative autobiography":

> My writing is really an attempt to understand myself and my situation in society and history. As I write I remember the nights of fighting in my father's house; my mother's struggle with the soil so that we might eat, have decent clothes and get some schooling; my elder brother, Wallace Mwangi, running to the cover and security of the forest under a hail of bullets from colonial policemen; his messages from the forest urging me to continue with education at any cost; my cousin, Gichini wa Ngugi, just escaping the hangman's rope because he had been caught with live bullets; uncles and other villagers murdered because they had taken the oath; the beautiful courage of ordinary men and women in Kenya who stood up to the might of British imperialism and indiscriminate terrorism. I remember too some relatives and fellow villagers who carried the gun for the whiteman and often became his messengers of blood. I remember the fears, the betrayals, Rachael's tears, the moments of despair and love and kinship in struggle and I try to find the meaning of it all through my pen.[16]

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What we have here is a catalogue of the conflicting events and emotions that have gone into the making of the writer: the troubled and impoverished household and a mother's struggle to educate her children, the bitter struggle between nationalists and loyalists, and the mixed feelings of fear and betrayal created by the state of emergency. And while Ngugi has clear ideas about the historical origins and implications of these events, he sees himself caught in the middle of an interpretative dilemma: how does one make sense of a past that still haunts the writer in the postcolonial present? It is in this context that the act of writing is posited as an instrument of finding the meaning "of it all."

One might, of course, ask why Ngugi struggles to give meaning to events that would appear to be self-evident, especially in 1975 when he wrote the preface to *Secret Lives*. Had not his discovery of Marxism and its language of class consciousness and ideological struggle provided him with the appropriate language for understanding the Kenyan past? Had not the decade of decolonization in Kenya clarified the terms of independence and thus the meaning of the nationalist struggle against colonial domination? The truth is, while Marxism provided Ngugi with an instrument for understanding postcolonial culture, it could not account for, or indeed give meaning to, historical events which the author himself had witnessed, experiences which, as he noted in the passage cited above, came back to his mind every time he tried to write about the past. Indeed, decolonization in Kenya had made the writer's relationship with the past more complicated for an unexpected reason: the ruling elite was so afraid of its immediate past that it was busy reinventing an alternative version of "Mau Mau" and the state of emergency in order to legitimize its position.[17]

But there is an even more important reason why Ngugi posits his writing career as a continuous struggle to understand himself in a colonial and postcolonial situation defined by compromised histories: even as the novelist draws on his own subjective experiences to invest his version of the past with moral authority, the astute reader cannot fail to notice the gap that separates him from this past. Ngugi writes from the position of one who remembers the recent African past vividly, but he does not seem to be connected to this past except through its remembrance and – ultimately – its representation in narrative. If Ngugi's works seem to be driven

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by an ardent desire for the historical, it is because history, even the history of events experienced first-hand, seems to be blocked by the narratives designed to represent it. This blockage comes from two sources: first, the events which Ngugi considers to be central to his own understanding of Kenyan history – land alienation, colonial terror, and nationalist resistance (or "Mau Mau") – were, until the publication of his works, considered to be absences, voids, or silences.[18] Secondly, because Ngugi was a student in a privileged colonial school and university college when the events he remembers took place, he was never part of their immediate context. He was connected to the drama of history through his family and class, but separated from them through his colonial education.

This separation is succinctly captured in a third autobiographical moment, this time an essay on the Biggles series of adventure stories popular in British colonial culture. Ngugi cannot help recalling his initial encounter with the Biggles stories at Alliance High School, at the height of the "Mau Mau" war in Kenya, as a strange case of imperial irony:

> I met Squadron-Leader James Bigglesworth, DSO DFC MC, at one time of the Royal Flying Corps, Later the Royal Air Force, and known to his readers as simply Biggles, at Alliance High School, in Kenya, back in 1956. It was a colonial school in a colonial world. The school, founded by an Alliance of Protestant Missions way back in the thirties, was the leading elitist school for African children. Its motto, "Strong to Serve," expressed the ideals of the school: to produce leaders who, of course, had the necessary character and knowledge to faithfully serve King and Empire... It was a school where Kipling's poem "If" was so very important. And of course Shakespeare...[19]

The central irony here relates to Ngugi's anxieties about his own relationship to the Englishness represented by Bigglesworth and colonial culture: had he, in the security of the colonial school, come to identify with the forces of civilization against the barbarism of nationalism that lay just outside the gates of Alliance High School?[20] Did he turn to writing fiction as a way of reconciling the world represented by his parents and brothers, struggling against British colonialism, to the imagined ideals of Biggles's Englishness? In reading Bigglesworth's pro-imperialist books in 1955 and 1956,

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Ngugi was caught in what he aptly describes as "a drama of contradictions":

> Biggles, the flying ace and squadron leader of the Royal Air Force, could have been dropping bombs on my own brother in the forests of Mount Kenya. Or he could have been sent by Raymond of Scotland Yard to ferret out those who were plotting against the British Empire in Kenya. Either way he would have been pitted against my own brother who, amidst all the fighting in the forest, still found time to send messages to me to cling to education no matter what happened to him. In the forests they, who were so imbued with a sense of Kenya nationalist patriotism, had celebrated my being accepted into the same Alliance High School where I was to meet Biggles, an imaginary character so imbued with a sense of British patriotism.[21]

Here, as in the other autobiographical moments considered above, the drama of colonial contradictions cuts several ways: the colonial text (the adventures of Biggles) seeks to promote an unquestioning identification with Englishness in the African student's mind; but this identification can only be achieved by negating one's specific social and historical context, and even betraying kin at war with British colonialism. The nationalists have taken up arms against colonial governance and rule – and by extension the culture of Englishness – but they still take time off to celebrate the author's admission into the citadel of colonial culture in Kenya. What, then, is the connection between "nationalist patriotism" and "British patriotism"? Ngugi has to create imaginary narratives to make sense of it all.

In calling attention to Ngugi's personal investment in his texts and contexts, my goal here is not to posit his writing as purely subjective or continuously self-reflective; on the contrary, my intention is to show how he sees his own relationship to the defining moments of colonialism and postcolonialism in Kenya as connected to larger ideological questions. In trying to understand himself (in colonial culture), Ngugi produces narratives in which individual experiences become collectivized, as it were. Indeed, the most radical distinction between Ngugi's earlier works and his mature novels, as we shall see in subsequent chapters, is his shift from the bourgeois notion of the subject of the novel as an individual struggling in a world that has – in Georg Lukács's

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famous term – been "abandoned by God" to the Marxist notion of novelistic characters as embodiments of historical forces which they must understand and control to retain their identity.[22]

In these circumstances, the later Ngugi would seem to fit Frederic Jameson's controversial notion of the Third World artist in the era of multinational capitalism. Jameson's argument – or "sweeping hypothesis," as he calls it – is that what Third World cultural productions "seem to have in common and what distinguishes them radically from analogous cultural forms in the first world," is their allegorical function: these productions are to be read as *"national allegories"* because they reject the radical split, common in Western realist and modernist novels, "between the private and the public, between the poetic and the political, between what we have come to think of as the domain of sexuality and the unconscious and that of the public world of classes, of the economic, and of secular political power."[23] While most of the criticism directed at Jameson's postulation is well founded, there is no doubt that for writers like Ngugi, the ideal mode of cultural production is one which overcomes the split between the private and public realms.[24] His emphatic claim is that the best kind of writing is done in the name of the nation and the social collective: "A nation's literature which is a sum total of the products of many individuals in that society is then not only a reflection of that people's collective reality, collective experience, but also embodies that community's way of looking at the world and its place in the making of that world."[25]

Because Ngugi has so clearly located his later works in what Jameson calls the "life-and-death struggle with first-world cultural imperialism,"[26] his novels and plays can be seen as an attempt to establish the forms in which the story of the struggle between the global narrative of capital and local stories of resistance can be told. For this reason, the problems that haunt Ngugi's works – questions of language, power, and knowledge – are as much about literary form as they are about ideological preferences. Jameson identifies this problem succinctly when he notes that if the dilemma of radical writers like Ngugi, especially after the "poisoned gift of independence," is how their ideological "passion for change and social regeneration" can find appropriate narrative agents,

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