



JJEOSHS

Jumuga Journal of Education,
Oral Studies, and Human Sciences (JJEOSHS)

www.jumugajournal.org
submissions@jumugajournal.org

Volume 1, Issue 1, December 2018

**The Use of Indigenous Resources in Environmental Conservation in Ngugi wa Thiong'o's
*Murogi wa Kagogo: a religio-cultural perspective***

By Dr Mugo Muhia and Dr Julius Gathogo

Abstract

Ngugi wa Thiong'o in *Murogi wa Kagogo* (*Wizard of the Crow*) seeks to reclaim the traditional conservation practices which have been destroyed by colonial modernity by building on the contributions of ancestral pantheons. The article argues that the place of the diviner cum medicine man played a central role in the conservation of the environment because of the physical space he/she inhabited (mostly in shrines located in the forests, which meant that those places were treated with respect and therefore conserved) and also because he/she used various trees as a source of cure for the many ailments that people in the society suffered, trees and other vegetation around forests and hills were spared because of the central role they played in the people's lives. The role that colonialism and clamor for modernity has played in the destruction of nature is also interrogated. The article concludes that Ngugi's narrative does not champion for a movement back to the primeval past/traditional past because it is impossible anyway but for an embrace of some of traditional/indigenous practices which were used in preserving forests, water sheds, plant life and soil in order to save the environment from further degradation. In view of this, the article seeks to demonstrate how African ancestral resources are critical in environmental preservation as seen by Ngugi as a creative writer.

Key words: Colonialism and post colonialism and environmental preservation, Ngugi's indigenous ways of environmental conservation, religio-cultural perspectives and ecology

Introduction

In defining the terms, it is critical to appreciate that colonialism is the establishment of a colony in one territory by a political power from another territory. What then follows is maintenance, exploitation of indigenous resources, acculturation, assimilation of language and culture, religious-cultural domination, and the resultant expansionism. In turn, we define postcolonial studies as the academic discipline that explains, explores, analyzes, and responds to the cultural legacy of colonialism; and as our article has strived to demonstrate, post-colonialism deals with the human consequences of external control, economic exploitation, cultural subjugation, and all sorts of control, including land exploitation.

To this end, the article sets out to demonstrate that the indigenous people in the indigenous African society had clear-cut ways of preserving nature – a phenomenon which was a religious duty. The coming of colonialism and post colonialism played the devil's role of destroying ecology with impunity hitherto unknown. This is not only evident from our oral sources but also from some published works. As a creative artist, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, in his book, the *Wizard of the Crow* (*Murogi wa Kagogo*), helps us build our theoretical framework. In this book, he dwells at length on the contribution of indigenous resources in environmental preservation. Ngugi's position resonates well with those of an African theologian, John Mbiti who contends that traditional Africans live in a religious environment where natural phenomena are intimately associated with God.¹ His studies have their roots on African conception of God, humanity and nature – a conception that implies that nature is sacred hence the reason to conserve it. The cosmos is thus seen as part of God's revelation and presence.

When the colonialists and the missionaries came to Africa in the 19th and early part of the 20th century, they found an indigenous society whose task in environmental preservation was superb. In particular, trees were preserved through categorizations, in terms of food provider, building-material provider, sacred, medicinal, and as a religious duty. They also found that abundant life, in the African worldview, was only achieved when effective healing involved reconciliation with the entire cosmos – a situation that obtains to date. Human beings and the cosmos complement each other to an extent that none can exist without this interdependence.² In building on this point, Bénézet Bujo quotes H. Kessler who says:

God penetrates all his creatures with his (sic) presence. Therefore, we must not treat any of his creatures (any elephant, plant or animal) recklessly but deal with them in a sensitive manner, with empathy and reverence. Whoever commits a fault against a creature, commits a fault against God, the Creator himself.³

In view of this, everyone in the community had the natural responsibility of stewarding the 'mother earth': to tend to its trees, valleys, hills, rivers and habitation; a phenomenon which compares with the Psalmists' assertion that the environment belongs to God and all there is in it (cf Psalm 24:1). Certainly, there are African proverbs, riddles, taboos and sayings that prescribe how the pre and post missionary Mutira, and the larger African context, preserved the environment. Andrew A. Kyomo builds on this when he says:

¹ Mbiti, *African religions and philosophy*.

² See for instance Bénézet Bujo, *The Ethical Dimension of Community*, 209f.

³ See Bujo, *The Ethical Dimension of Community*: 215.

There is a proverb in my tribe (sic) that says: ‘The forest is our skin and if one removes the skin of a human being, the result is death.’ Death is at the door. We do witness the shortage of rain because the climate is affected by the destruction of the environment. People are no longer bound to our traditional African worldview. Modernisation is dominant to the extent that the culture of profit and money is made to have priority over humanisation. Money as a thing is above the worth of a human being. In such a situation, life is threatened by death.⁴

Certainly, if the forest is the people’s skin, then it means it is the total sum of their very being. It guarantees their spirituality through sacred places, provides food, fresh air, and wild fruits. It attracts rain, and is indeed a *kihitho* (hiding place) in terms of war.

Modernity and the Environment

In attempting to understand Ngugi wa Thiong’o’s *Murogi wa Kagogo* (Wizard of the Crow), we must appreciate, as a background, that the effect of modernity on the physical environment has been dire; and this has spelled doom to the existence of life in planet Earth. It now demands that concerted efforts be made to save the Earth from a looming environmental catastrophe. The paper traces the growth of modernity briefly but zeroing in mostly on its negative effects on the natural environment while interrogating the competing ideologies that hastened the said destruction. It also sets to look at the role that diviners/medicine men played in conservation of environment albeit from their presentation in literary texts.

The concept of modernity was introduced to Africa by Christian missionaries and entrenched through imperialism and colonialism. It was brought under the guise of civilization and development even though it largely favored the West at the detriment of the indigenous African societies. European modernity ignored all forms of knowledge that existed in Africa before colonialism; it was rationalized as more civilized, advanced, and more humane as opposed to savage, barbaric, and untamed Africa. Imperialism and colonialism were to play a major role in the ensuing destruction of environment in the colonized societies through what Val Plumwood calls “ecological imperialism.”⁵

Plumwood hinges her attack on the dualistic thinking that continues to structure attitudes to the environment to the masculinist “reason centered culture that once helped secure and sustain European imperial dominance, but now proves ruinous in the face of mass extinction and fast approaching biophysical limits of the planet.” Colonial conquest introduced newer ways of farming, mining, and even hunting (not for food but for game trophies). The result was decimation of the population of wild animals and clearing of vast areas of virgin forests to pave way for large-scale commercial farming; trees were felled in their millions both for domestic use and for export. In his book, *On the Edge of the Primeval History and Man from the Primeval Forest* (1948), Albert Schweitzer exposes the evils of colonization which hinders progression of civilization.⁶ Though a German, later French, missionary medical doctor based in *Lambaréné, a town and the capital of*

⁴ Kyomo, “The Environmental Crisis as a Pastoral Challenge in Africa,” 60.

⁵ Plumwood, in Huggen, and Hellen. *Postcolonial Ecocriticism*, 4.

⁶ Schweitzer, *On the Edge of the Primeval History*.

Moyen-Ogooué in the present day Gabon, Schweitzer who became the Nobel Peace Prize winner of 1952 saw a huge incompatibility between colonization and civilization. Apart from plundering of Gabon indigenous forests as they sought timber to export abroad, the French colonizers like other 19th and 20th century colonizers enforced European education to the indigenous people. This new form of education did not yield to prosperity; rather the local Africans lost their freedom through it; for the weapons and money which were placed at their disposal by commerce turned them into servitude for its facilitation of exports – a phenomenon that made few rich. As early as the days of slave trade people became the merchandise. They were bought in exchange for gunpowder, money, lead, tobacco, and brandy.⁷

The seizure of land and the building of towns, roads and railways did not only hurt the ecology; it also exposed the indigenous African people to the cruelty and violence of the colonialists. To this end, Schweitzer exclaims, that “the tragic fact is that the interests of colonization and those of civilization do not always run parallel, but are often in direct opposition to one another.”⁸ He further noted that the environment was being polluted by diets and forms of drinks that were introduced by French colonialists. In particular, he noted that the indigenous people were dying because of alcohol that was supplied by commerce.⁹ Forbidding rum and brandy yet allowing wine and beer did not do any good to the local inhabitants.

Schweitzer noted how abuse of villagers was done when they were paid in spirits and tobacco rather than cash.¹⁰ This polluted their environment especially when the products given exposed the locals to health hazards. In time, new diseases that were hitherto unheard of in Africa begun to heard of. He cites diabetes, sleeping problems, and tooth ache begun to be part and parcel of the local African population. He goes on to explain that some of the plagues such as the sangunanetas and sand flees were imported from South America. Schweitzer’s blunt revelations drives us to wonder, whether the story that *jiggers (also called Tunga* penetrans and/or chigoe flea) *were maliciously imported* to Africa from India is true? He defended some indigenous practices as not harmful to the environment, when he for instance noted the use of alcohol by the indigenous people was limited to traditional festivals. These festivals were accompanied by a brew from the pine tree which was even less hazardous when taken in small quantities at rare intervals. The preparation of palm wine was rare because it was even forbidden among them.

Schweitzer noted that both missionaries and the colonial government had agreed on the banning of importation of spirits, but could not implement the decision because this would impact on the economy since cheap spirits attracts high import duty.¹¹ He further observed that nicotine poisoning causes constipation, nervous disturbances and loosening teeth because of tartar. Investigations however reveal that these latter diseases are largely caused by smoking. Nevertheless, such hypocritical tendencies were detrimental to the environment. Further, he saw the building of railways and roads in colonial Gabon and Africa as meaningless as long as the indigenous people were mere spectators and not participants in the emerging industries. As a few

⁷ Schweitzer, *My Life and Thought*, 222.

⁸ Schweitzer, *My Life and Thought*, 323

⁹ Schweitzer, *My Life and Thought*.

¹⁰ Schweitzer, *On the Edge of the Primeval History and Man from the Primeval Forest*.

¹¹ Schweitzer, *On the Edge of the Primeval History and Man from the Primeval Forest*:

indigenous workers, who were employed in these industries, were paid with dangerous alcoholic substances rather than money their environment was abused in diverse ways.

The above, among other factors, have made the last century see ecological abuse through activities such as the plunder of natural resources in the colonized societies by the imperial powers. The dawn of 21st century has seen the same powers stand at the forefront in championing for environmental conservation, a rather ironical stance. Indeed, Huggan and Tiffin when commenting about the effect of colonialism on the North American indigenous populations captures this irony:

The triumph of Anglo- European settlers over North American (and subsequently South Africa and Australia) indigenous populations was effected over the ensuing centuries through environmental – and hence cultural – derangement on a vast scale, such destructive changes were premised on ontological and epistemological differences between European and Indian ideas of human and animal being-in-the-world. The ultimate irony is that in the twenty-first century the West is increasingly attempting to re-think and recapture the very respect for animals and nature that the very early settlers so righteously scorned.¹²

Glassow explains some of the ontological differences, especially as practiced by the English people, using what he refers to as “English theology of the land.”¹³ He posits that this theology supported the colonizing imperative because it gave rise to an entrenched English belief that “it was right to colonize open spaces, they also believed that they had a God-given calling to cultivate all uncultivated land.” Upon arrival at these far-flung societies they carried with them memories of a well ordered “England-as-garden, its expanses divided into neatly-walled or hedged fields.”¹⁴ Glassow continues to say that “this memory of an ordered land of demarcated fields was then translated into the religious ideals of English missionaries.”¹⁵ This was guided, as Camaroff quoted above opined, by the theological belief in the Garden of Eden story, which they believed, was ordered, and cultivated. This became the prism upon which they judged societies which did not cultivate land in an ordered way. To Glassow, it therefore became imperative “that a successful missionary would include cultivation of land as one of the signs of moral and spiritual success.”¹⁶ Missionary work and imperialism, in this regard, played a surrogate role as far as destruction of environment was concerned.

Olaoluwa explains that large-scale environmental and ecological degradation in Africa was given impetus by colonialism desire of African resources, which had defined the rise of imperialism in the first place.¹⁷ This awareness of the gradual decimation of Africa’s flora and fauna has been recorded in literary works, he gives an example of events in Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* “where ecological depletion begins with the clearing of the evil forest for the building of a church by western missionaries.” Setting aside of such spaces, as the evil forest, served to conserve the

¹² Huggan and Tiffin. *Postcolonial Ecocriticism*, 11.

¹³ Glassow, “1820 Settlers, Open Spaces, and Theology: 163.

¹⁴ Camaroff quoted in Glassow, “1820 Settlers, Open Spaces, and Theology”, 164.

¹⁵ Glassow, “1820 Settlers, Open Spaces, and Theology: 164.

¹⁶ Glassow, “1820 Settlers, Open Spaces, and Theology: 164.

¹⁷ Olaoluwa, “There Was a Time”, 126.

environment but upon the commencement of Christian missiology some of these practices were seen as barbaric and demonic and therefore needed to be expunged. Achebe's text shows a critical awareness of the relationship that exists between culture and nature and particularly the many oral narratives in the book bring out the extended interaction between human beings and non-human.

Matheca Itu (Piercing the Sky/ Touching the Sky) As an Ecological Disaster

The narrative of Ngugi's novel, *Murogi wa Kagogo (The Wizard of the Crow)*, revolves around the construction of what the narrator says is the highest building ever to be built on earth, in fact it has been planned along the biblical story of the Tower of Babel.¹⁸ It is a kind of a modern day realization of this ancient biblical dream. Mwathani (the Ruler) and the president of the state of Aburiria have given all his attention towards the completion of this project. Machokali, the Minister in charge of Foreign Affairs, lyrically appraises the benefits that the building will have – upon completion; it will out-wonder all the existing wonders of the world: the pyramid of Egypt, Taj Mahal, the Hanging Gardens of Babylon, the Great Wall of China etc. It will also be a major tourist attraction site boosting foreign exchange and increasing the country's financial output to the advantages of all citizens of Aburiria.¹⁹

The funds for the construction of this modern day wonder is being solicited from the Global Bank, the Minister for Foreign Affairs had therefore invited the members of the bank for a dinner, in one of the best hotels in Eldares, the capital city of Aburiria. But the meeting is disrupted by members of an underground movement dubbed, *Kiama Kia Mũgambo wa Mũingĩ*, meaning, "The Voice of the People" who are masquerading as beggars claiming that the proposed building will lead to the enslavement of the people through loan repayment. The police break the beggars' demonstration and in the ensuing melee; two of them find themselves being chased by three indefatigable police officers. After a long chase, two police officers give up the chase but one of them continues pursuing the beggars through the outskirts of the city's biggest slum, Santalucia and through open grassland that surrounded the city.²⁰

The chase takes them back to Santalucia, where the beggars manage to shake off the police officer by entering into one of the many shanties in the slum. Unable to trace them, the officer started going from one door to door in his search for the two fugitives, crouching near the window and surveying outside, they realize that they are about to be apprehended. It is at that moment when one of them remembers that as young children they used to scare people by pretending to be wizards. They would look for dead lizards, frogs and wild poisonous fruits, tie them together and then hang them on the side of the road. They would wait by the bushes to see the reaction of passersby and to their amusement even grownups would be scared away. This is what he did to scare away the policeman: "*agicaria na nduma nginya akiona kahindi agicoka akiungania tutangari akimunengera hamwe na kiratathi gia gikatoni [A] gicoka akiandika na ndemwo nene: WIMENYERERE GUKU NI KWA MUROGI WA KAGOGO URIA UGOGORAGA(sic) MAGOGO RIERAINI NA MAITHO TU. HUTIA MURANGO UYU WONE NGANGA MBUTE*" in the darkness he found some bones, and then picked some pieces of tattered clothes and a piece of carton. He then wrote in bold letters: BE WARNED THIS HOUSE BELONGS TO THE WIZARD OF THE CROW ONE WHO MAKES THE CROWS FALL FROM THE AIR AND DIE BY USING HIS EYES ONLY. DARE TOUCH

¹⁸ wa Thiong'o, *Wizard of the Crow*.

¹⁹ wa Thiong'o, *Wizard of the Crow*.

²⁰ wa Thiong'o, *Wizard of the Crow*.

THIS DOOR AND SEE WHAT WILL BEFALL YOU (*Mbuku ya Mbere na keru*, 86),” who upon reading the notice announcing the presence of Murogi wa Kagogo/ Wizard of the Crow actually flees in fear. But AG comes back very early the following morning this time dressed as a civilian seeking the services of the wizard.²¹ It is after Kamiti’s (the name of one of the beggars) encounter with AG that his work as a diviner begins in earnest. He formerly comes to be referred to as Murogi wa Kagogo. Through AG’s oral rendition of Murogi wa Kagogo’s exploits, his fame grows like bushfire, and all, from ministers to senior people in the government, the poor and the rich, come to him for healing and divination. Tajirika (the Chairman of the Construction of Matheca Itu) is happy when his strange ailment (his inability to speak but grunt incoherent sounds) is treated that he gives out the three sacks of money he had received as bribes by those who wanted contracts so as to supply goods and service for the construction of the wonder building. The circulating rumours were that: “... *gutiri murimu o na uriku wakuuragira Murogi wa Kagogo maitho tondu murimu wagwa mwena uyu, akaguithania nague*” (there is neither disease nor ailment that is too difficult or strange for wizard of the crow. Anyone who visited Kamiti’s practice went home healed (*Mbuku ya Gatatu*: 3)).²²

All the major events in the texts: Mwathani’s illness, Tajirika’s predicament, Kamiti’s rise and near fall, the activities of the underground movement and Nyawira’s role in it, Machokali’s disappearance etc have been triggered by the proposed architectural behemoth. However, it is the activities of The Voice of the People that are central to this paper’s argument. At the core of the movements’ opposition to the construction is the entrenchment of the economic dependency without due regard as how these loans acquired to power development will be paid, the other is the usefulness or value of some of these undertakings and the official corruption that goes with them. This is epitomized by the clamor of rich business people in fighting to get the tenders for the supply of construction materials through every means available: offering huge bribes to Tajirika, the chair of the building, and even visiting witch doctors.²³

The building also brings to the fore the relationship between developed countries and developing countries. The global flow of capital is seen not as pathway to Third World development but a process that engenders modern day slavery, where after the money that has been given to fund development projects is misused but still has to be paid for. This leaves the majority of the poor struggling as a lot of the country’s revenue goes to the repayment of the loans. The spread of global capitalism therefore aids in undermining freedom in these societies while also destroying the natural environment. This is what Nyawira explains to Kamiti: “*Matheca Itu! Kinyũmba giki gikũnyua ciiruru ciothe cia bũrũri ũyũ witũ: tũrĩyũaga riũa kũ na mbura ha? Īrĩguthaga maĩ kanuaini ka aria anyotu na irio kanuaini ka aria ahũtu. Mahĩndi ma andũ ni mo raiya ya bũrũri witũ. Tũkaaruta kũ mwĩri na ngoro ya bũrũri* (*Mbuku ya Mbere naya Keri*, 253)/ Piercing the Sky!²⁴ This huge building will destroy our land: where will we shelter ourselves from the sun and rain? It will snatch water and food from the mouths of the thirsty and the hungry. Skeletons will replace the people of this nation. Where will we get the body and the soul of our nation.” Nyawira summarizes the ecological effect that will ensue after the construction of this tower; the destruction

²¹ wa Thiong’o, *Wizard of the Crow*.

²² wa Thiong’o, *Wizard of the Crow*.

²³ wa Thiong’o, *Wizard of the Crow*.

²⁴ wa Thiong’o, *Wizard of the Crow*.

will greatly reduce the quality of life and lead to the shrinking of water sources, something that will result to widespread hunger and despair.

The other effect of modernity can be stretched to cover the distortion of Africans understanding of themselves. One of the critical components of colonial modernity was the need to change the colonized cultures and way of life in order to make them useful to the colonizing process. The other was the blatant disavowal of the colonized sense of history and therefore identity, institutionalized programs that slowly sought to undermine traditions accompanied these processes – at the forefront were religious institutions, formal educational institutions, and direct involvement of colonial administrators. This in the end internalized an inferiority complex that persists to this day i.e. the color of the skin, where black as color was subtly labeled inferior to white: this kind of inferiorisation is textually depicted with Tajirika's attempt to undertake a plastic surgery into to change his color to white. Human beings can be looked at as organisms inhabiting a particular ecosystem, it means then that our biological make-up, including the color of our skins, enables us survive the conditions of the environments we find ourselves in. Does a thing like plastic surgery or body enhancement operation (as performed by Tajirika, Machokali or Sikiokuu) then affect our proper interactions with our environment?²⁵

It is therefore apparent that the proposed construction has a far-reaching ramification to not only the physical environment but also to the human beings. The interactions between the Aburirian leaders and the funders of this building negatively affects their dignity and their own conceptualization of themselves vis-à-vis the Western definition of Africa and the Africans.

The Traditional Diviner as an Environmental Conservationist

John S. Mbiti in his book *Introduction to African Religion* looks at the diviners as religious officials or leaders charged with conducting religious ceremonies, offering sacrifices and acts of divination indeed according to him “they are human keepers of the religious heritage.”²⁶ Encapsulated in African religious philosophy and thought was everything that surrounded human societies, the everyday lived experiences and more fundamentally “man's reflections on the universe, the questions about its origin, the earth and the sky, the problem of evil and suffering, the phenomena of nature, and many other problems.”²⁷ All this according to Mbiti became the matrix of religious ideas and practices, as human beings sought answers to the above dilemmas and in their attempt at “making human life safer and better.”²⁸ Religious practice gave rise to a need of setting aside places of worship away from the people's everyday habitations, which were “regarded as holy and sacred places where people meet with God.”²⁹ Religious leaders became keepers of these shrines, the respect and honor accorded to the secluded place normally groves, forests, rivers etc afforded them the protection they needed ensuring that the natural vegetation that sprouted and grew within and without these places were conserved.

One of the main characters, Kamiti, in Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *Murogi wa Kagogo/Wizard of the*

²⁵ wa Thiong'o, *Wizard of the Crow*.

²⁶ Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religions and Philosophy*, 12.

²⁷ Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religions and Philosophy*, 16.

²⁸ Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religions and Philosophy*, 16.

²⁹ Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religions and Philosophy*, 16.

Crow is molded along the figure and conceptualization of a traditional diviner. Kamiti is born with innate knowledge of divination. In traditional Gikuyu society, those who were destined to become diviners and medicine men were born with a special mark, and sacrifices had to be performed to welcome them to the world and to anoint them for their calling. According to an existing Gikuyu myth, such personalities were born holding a nut or a cowry (*mbugu* or *kiuma*), which the diviners used in foretelling ailments and other calamities. Kamiti, like his great grandfather before him, was born clutching a cowry in his hand, but his father wanted to differ this calling, which he perceived was not of any benefit to his son as it meant free service to the society at the expense of his own material prosperity.

Original myths also, the Gikuyu one included, narrate of the state that the universe was in at the very beginning. They speak of thick forests full of trees of all kinds, huge rivers brimming with fishes and other marine life, plains teeming with wild animals and mountains, and other beautiful features captivating to the eye. Against such abundance and plenty, wars were few and varied and conflicts between wild animals and human beings were minimal, but the modern destruction of the natural environment has led to the proliferation of the said conflicts. In advocating for the conservation of the environment, Kamiti wants to take humanity towards the better world they have lost through the selfish pursuit of materialism. This view is supported by Vambe when he explains that “myth is a narrative that gives symbolic meaning to the relationship between people and the natural environment in which human beings participate consciously to transform that nature and the social so that they move towards a desired goal.”³⁰

Kamiti is remodelled along the lineage of the Great Gikuyu seers and prophets of old, who had the welfare of the community at heart and who used their divine gifts not for self-enrichment but for the greater good of the society. His father tells him “*Mundu Mugo ndahuthagira kiheyo kiu gwitongia, tiga ngo cia mwiri, irio, na nyumba ya gukoma.*” (Medicine men or prophets do not use their gift in enriching themselves except for the bare essentials like food, clothing and shelter (*Mbuku ya Gatatu*: 27)).³¹ But Kamiti takes long before hearkening to his life’s calling, unbeknown to him his life of tribulation serves to ground him into the nature of his calling. His ability in fleeing from his body momentarily makes him understand fully both the beauty and the ugly side of Aburiria and indeed the whole world:

... eyona e kanyoni rieraini na akaigua mwago akihurutwo mathagu ni eho
 ... Rieraini ni bururi ungi na arerete kuu iguru gutiri handu ona ha atonaga
 miena yothe na kwa nduriri cia Aburiria. O na aikari a miena na miena ni
 matigani te miaririeni, mwihumbireini na mimathireiniya ciaki cia muoyo...
 aakoraga mbica o ta iyo mwiri wake wari: huta na nyota na wagi nguo.
 Mataunini maria manene, Ithunu cia makatoni kana mathikirebu ma mitoka
 ni yo yaari micii ya ciana na andu agima... Macambaini na kuo no taguo.
 Tumigunda tuhunyuku tukang’ethanira na ngundu nduru macani, igwa,
 kahuwa na mbamba. Macamba maiyuire ngiri na ngiri cia ng’ombe iracuhia
 nyondo ni iria. (*Mbuku ya Mbere nay a Keri*: 43-44).

He was soaring in the air like bird, enjoying as the wind beat against his wings. From the sky, he could see all the corners of Aburiria inhabited by the

³⁰ Vambe, *African Oral Story-telling Tradition and the Zimbabwean Novel in English*.

³¹ wa Thiong’o, *Wizard of the Crow*, p.27.

various communities. They spoke different languages and their dressing style and ways of earning their daily bread were not the same. In the larger cities, the majority lived in shanties and ghettos. In the rural areas he could see the differences between the rich and the poor, the latter had small unproductive pieces of land juxtaposed to tea, coffee and cotton plantations.³²

In his ethereal sojourn, Kamiti realizes that he is not alone. He is in the company of a majority of Aburirians whose existence, like his, is a painful experience. He now knows what ails his people and can help them find a lasting cure. He is, in Coupe's view, brought close to the figure of Shaman, since it is the Shaman who knows how to enter into the spirit of nature on behalf of the tribe.³³ He has to go back to the beginning, to the history of his people's traditions and unearth the discarded but still valuable lore to aid in the recovery of the nation. He must therefore become a prophet of the new age "advocating a recovery of archaic spirituality as the answer to the contemporary world's problems."³⁴

Kamiti, like most main characters in Ngugi's other novels, has extraordinary powers. But while others spearhead the struggle to emancipate their people through armed struggle, he wages his own from the point of view of mental decolonization and physical healing. He tells Nyawira that "*Nii ndi mugo wa ngoro. No uria riu njui ni ati ma ngoro na mwiri ni inyitane... Ngoro ina abiya ni irenda mwiri wi na abiya.*" (I am a healer of human hearts and soul. But I know that the soul and the body are one. A strong soul requires a healthy body) (*Mbuku ya Mbere na ya Keri*).³⁵ He also preaches the gospel of environmental conservation in an effort to saving his people from self-destruction. He is both a traditional healer and an eco-psychologist. In his desire to reconcile the masses to their degraded natural environment, he has to educate them about the need of conserving the environment. According to Roszak, the goal of eco-psychology "is to awaken the inherent sense of environmental reciprocity that lies within ecological unconsciousness. Other therapies seek to heal the alienation between person and person, person and family, person and society. Eco-psychology seeks to heal the more fundamental alienation between the person and the natural environment."³⁶

The postcolonial subject is faced with new and daunting challenges, ranging from bad governance and environment problems brought about by the destruction of the natural vegetation to strange diseases and ailments emanating from changing lifestyles, among others. They therefore require novel solutions in tackling the many obstacles that threaten their very survival. Kamiti, masquerading as the wizard of the crow, is Ngugi's answer – the antidote that the postcolonial subject needs in order to heal his/her body and soul, as they prepare for the physical confrontation spearheaded by Nyawira. This is what he tells Nyawira when he says: "*Inyui murumbuyanire na cia miri na nii na cia ngoro.*" (You and your people will deal with the matters of the body and I will take care of the spiritual needs).³⁷

³² wa Thiong'o, *Wizard of the Crow*, 43-44.

³³ Coupe. *Myth: A New Critical Idiom*, 197.

³⁴ Coupe. *Myth*: 202.

³⁵ wa Thiong'o, *Wizard of the Crow*, 320.

³⁶ Roszak, *The Voice of the Earth*: 320.

³⁷ wa Thiong'o, *Wizard of the Crow*, 320.

But before Nyawira goes on with her business, Kamiti has to teach her how to heal the body by use of traditional herbal knowledge. She is therefore taken through rigorous training in the forest as Kamiti explains to her the healing powers hidden in different tree species found in the forest and the importance of environmental conservation:

Kiu nio kiari kiambiriria gia Thukuru ya Mutitu ya Ndawa na miti. Muthenya mugima matindire makiurura o hau hakuhi a githunu na matiaithiririe mimea iria yari hau. Nyawira ndari eciria ati kahumbu kanini uguo kahota gukorwo na maugi maingi uguo... O muti kana mumea uri indo inya: miri, magoko, mathangu, na mahu a, na indo icio ciothe ni cio ikuwite kihonia kia mioyo ya andu... Munuhi miti o uguo ni munuhi wa muoyo. Kumenyarera macigiriria maitu ni kiambiriria kia gucaria na kumenya njia itu (Mbuku ya Mbere na ya Keri: 321).

That was the beginning of Forest School of Herbal Medicine. They spent a whole day near their habitation and did not exhaust the plants which were there. Nyawira could not imagine that such a small area could have so much knowledge on herbal medicine... Every tree or any plant has four important things which have healing abilities: roots, barks, leaves and flowers. To destroy trees is to destroy human life... our identity as a people is tied to the care and concern we give to our environment.³⁸

Any struggle to emancipate the people either from hunger, disease or bad governance must be tied to environmental conservation. There is a direct relationship between the world of nature and humanity, especially because human beings in their entirety depend on nature for their livelihood. According Masinde and Carmen (123) “traditional communities hold strong beliefs in the healing power of plants and animals or parts of them; in their ability to provide people with strength both physical and spiritual.” Conservation of nature therefore is not an option for humanity especially because of the role it plays in nurturing life.³⁹ Roszak, as quoted by Coupe, believes that, given the damage we are doing to external nature, we will eventually have to come to terms with the damage that is thereby being done to our own internal nature.⁴⁰ We must recognize the link between ... soul and earth. This is the link that Kamiti alludes to, the relationship between nature and man is symbiotic but humanity has everything to lose in destroying nature.

It is this image, one of a destroyed ecosystem that confronts Nyawira as she goes to search for Kamiti:

Tene tene weru uria uthiururukiirie Eldares wakoragwo uri kimamo kia nyamu mithemba miingi ta huria, njogu o na nguuu. Hindi iyo mundu ni angiakorire ngari na ngatia ikomete manyekiini ciohetie irio cia cio, [N]duiga na maroro ma cio ni cionekaga itacukite kuu kana ringi cinamiriirie ngingo cia cio iguru ria miriricua, na cio njagi na micoro ya cio cihenagie iri o kunene. [N]o riu ni kwagarurukite muno. Nyamu ni ciathamiire miena ingi. Mai matigire kurera tene na ngu u igithira. Nyeki ndiraihaga muno, na ni yumaga riria kuri riua, na cio mburi na

³⁸ wa Thiong'o, *Wizard of the Crow*, 321.

³⁹ Masinde, and Tavera. "Introduction," 123.

⁴⁰ Coupe, L. *Myth*: 202.

ng'ombe ikoimiria mbaru. [G]utuikania weruini ucio wari uhoro wa muthenya mugima. Nyawira aambiriirie rugendo kiroko na aakinyaga ndereini riua rigithua. (Mbuku ya Mbere na Keri, 238-39)

Long ago the forest that surrounded Eldares city was the home to animals of all kinds like buffaloes, elephants and hippotamus. During those times, it was common for travellers to find leopards and cheetahs waylaying their prey inside the long grass, [G]iraffes with their colourful skins could be seen bending their long necks on top of acacia trees and zebras with their white-coated skins feeding from a distance. [B]ut now things have changed. The animals have since disappeared. Pools of stagnant waters are no more and so the hippos have disappeared. The grass no longer grows tall and constantly dries up during the hot season which makes the cattle lack food. Walking through this dry perch was a torturous ordeal and therefore Nyawira had to start her journey very early in the morning.⁴¹

Human activities such as agriculture, habitation, poaching and cutting down of trees have led to the shrinking of forests and death of wild animals. It is this reality that Kamiti wishes to reverse. In many societies forests were revered because of the many benefits they had upon the lives of the people: they were the shrines, the dwelling places for the spirits, the burial grounds and as Iwe aptly observe: "Forests are the subject of a great deal of myth, legend and lore. Societies most closely entwined with forests tend to regard them with a healthy respect, awe at their splendor and majesty, sometimes dread and fear of the powerful spirits that lurk within them. Ancestors often find their resting places in forests, many wandering in various states of unease and spitefulness."⁴² This is point is stressed by Macaria Mwangi in his comments on proverbs as used in Ngugi's *Caitani Mutharaba-ini*. He explains the importance of forests among the Agikuyu people using a proverb that describes the human heart as a forest:

In the lore of the Aagikuyu community the heart is usually taken to be analogous to a forest. Living in a region characteristic of the tropical forests of Africa, the community traditionally considered the forest as pivotal to the well being of its members: it is the life giving, life sustaining reservoir from which the springs and the rivers flow, providing water for life. Its flora and fauna fed the people by providing fruit and firewood for the former and meat for the later. In times of adversity, it served as a haven of retreat for safety. Is it then not quite congruous that the heart (which to the Aagikuyu is the essence of being,-- quite indistinguishable from the soul) is deemed akin to the forest insofar as in it resides the deepest secrets, fears, despairs, most cherished dreams, et cetera, that the individual may leash or unleash to secure his happiness, his survival or at his own peril? It is this contextual social matrix that the proverb, "*Mutitu uri ngoro nduunagwo ngu igathira* (CM 1) (the forest in the heart is not cleared of all its firewood), should be appreciated.⁴³

⁴¹ wa Thiong'o, *Wizard of the Crow*, 238-239.

⁴² Iwe, "Symbols and Selectivity in Traditional African Medicine," 351.

⁴³ Mwangi, "The Aesthetics of Gikuyu Language, 79.

It is inside the forest, at least the part which is yet to be destroyed, that Kamiti and Nyawira seek refuge, the former wants to renew his spiritual strength and the latter is fugitive, a special group of police officers has been set up to specifically capture her. Kamiti tells Nyawira that they must stay in the forest for some time in order to know understand themselves before going back:

Reke tuikare guku tuthikiririe uria miti na nyamu igutwira, tumenye hitho cia weru uyu. [R]eke twambe tuhithuririo hitho ni njata na riua. Reke twambe twimenye, tumenye ngoro citu, tumenye hinya ucio uratindika mioyo itu umite ku, uhana atia, uturoretie ku. Let us stay for a while in the forest so that we can tap the knowledge hidden in the forest. Let its secrets be revealed to us. Let us search and know ourselves better, so that we can understand where the power that is pushing our souls comes from, (Mbuku ya Mbere na keri, 256).⁴⁴

In the forests, he regains his artistic prowess in sculpture. Under the shades of a Mukuyu tree, Kamiti starts resurrecting the gods of the African people: “*Kiroto kia Mbaratha ya ngai cia Abirika gitinaini kia Mukuyu gucira cia kuhonokia ngoro ya Abirika,*” (It was a dream about the gathering of the African Gods under a Mukuyu tree, deliberating on what to do so as to save the heart of Africa) (Mbuku ya Mbere na ya Keri, 323)].⁴⁵ His retreat into the forest and caves of Aburiria is similar to the withdrawal common to all mythical/epical heroes, a time when their strength and commitment to struggles ahead is tested.

Like all mythical heroes found in African mythology, Kamiti’s birth is extraordinary. He is born holding a nut firmly in his hand as a mark of his anointment. In *The Mwindo Epic* of central Africa, the hero, Mwindo, is born wearing a little bag of the spirit Kahindo, the goddess of good fortune, slung across the left side of his back.⁴⁶ Sundiata of Old Mali has his birth foretold by a hunter and the occasion of his birth is accompanied by cataclysmic happenings, which announce the coming of the Hero. Kamiti is therefore placed within the larger paradigm of great heroes ensconced in African traditional mythology. His prowess as shaman is needed now more than ever to save his society from an environmental catastrophe.

Conclusion

The statement that literature borrows from society has especially been given clarity by the relationship of some of the events in Ngugi’s novel and what happened in Kenya between the government and Wangari Maathai, an environmental crusader. Suffice it say that the notion of environmental conservation in Ngugi’s novel seems to have been given agency by the late Wangari Maathai (1940-2011) who died a year before the novel was released. Indeed, it should be remembered that she led a spirited struggle and demonstrations against the construction of a building sponsored by KANU that was to be situated in Uhuru Park. An ardent environmentalist and human right crusader, she spent a better part of her life championing for the conservation of natural environment. Nyawira seems to apotheosize Wangari Maathai. Wangari was to win the Nobel Peace prize in 2004 for her work as an environmental conservationist and human right crusader. In her acceptance speech she spoke about the relationship between environment,

⁴⁴ wa Thiong’o, *Wizard of the Crow*, 256.

⁴⁵ wa Thiong’o, *Wizard of the Crow*, 323.

⁴⁶ Ford, *The Hero with an African Face*: 172.

democracy, and peace positing that destruction of environment undermines the quality of life. She spoke about the dangers faced by humanity because of the continued decimation of nature, opining that, activities that devastate the environment and societies continue unabated. Today we are faced with a challenge that calls for a shift in our thinking, so that humanity stops threatening its life-support system. We are called to assist the earth heal her wounds and in the process heal our own – indeed, to embrace the whole creation in all its diversity, beauty and wonder. This will happen if we see the need to revive our sense of belonging to a larger family of life, with which we have shared our evolutionary process.⁴⁷

An appeal to traditional and indigenous ways of conservation becomes one of the steps that can help salvage nature from total annihilation. These are the concerns harbored by Ngugi's two main characters, Kamiti and Nyawira, which seem to be entwined with Wangari Maathai's advice. Indeed, the poignant advice that Kamiti gives to Nyawira is the crucial place that conservation can and should play in the contemporary society - something that melds perfectly with a part of Wangari's quotation above, “*mũnũhi wa miti ni mũnũhi wa muoyo. Kũmenyerera macigĩrĩra maitũ ni kiambirĩria gĩa gũcacia na kũmenya njĩra itũ*/one who destroys nature destroys life. Taking care of our environment is the beginning of our own identity.”⁴⁸

Clearly Ngugi wa Thiong'o, in his Wizard of the Crow has helped to re-engineer the debate the critical value of ancestral resources in conserving nature. Children were taught in African indigenous society to revere nature as God's will. Considering that the indigenous society is deeply religious community, the reverence for nature becomes a religio-cultural duty. This quest for ecological preservation, as a religious duty, has indeed lost its enthusiasm, especially in the 21st century Africa. For us to redeem the situation there is need to sensitize and educate “our people” – the society on the value of indigenous resources in conserving nature. In particular, parents should be encouraged to learn traditional practices that show positive human qualities of environmental preservation and thereafter pass them onto children. In the formal school curriculums, the need to integrate indigenous environmental conservation methods is paramount. In school activities, physical activities that seek to preserve nature should be emphasized at all levels of education.

References

Coupe, L. *Myth: A New Critical Idiom*. London: Routledge, 1997.

⁴⁷ wa Thiong'o, *Wizard of the Crow*, 323.

⁴⁸ wa Thiong'o, *Wizard of the Crow*, 321.

- Ford, C. W. *The Hero with an African Face: Mythic Wisdom in Traditional Africa*. New York: Bantam Books, 1999.
- Glassow, P.S. "1820 Settlers, Open Spaces, and Theology: A Reflection on how the 1820 Settlers' Theological Views Shape our Understanding of Uninhabited Land." *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae*, Dec.2012, Vol. 38 (2) (163-71).
- Huggen, C. and Hellen Tiffin. *Postcolonial Ecocriticism: Literature, Animals and Environment*. London and New York: Routledge, 2010.
- Iwe, M. M. "Symbols and Selectivity in Traditional African Medicine." *Cultural and Spiritual Values of Biodiversity*. Ed. Darrel Addison Posy. Nairobi: Intermediate Technology Publication, 1999.
- Kyomo, Andrew. "The Environmental Crisis as a Pastoral Challenge in Africa," 57-63, in J. N. K. Mugambi and Mika Vähäkangas eds. *Theology and Environmental Responsibility*. Nairobi: Acton, 2001.
- Maathai, W. "Nobel Lecture." <http://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/peace.htm>. 2004
- Masinde, Isabella and Carmen Tavera. "Introduction." *Cultural and Spiritual Values of Biodiversity*. Ed. Darrel Addison Posy. Nairobi: Intermediate Technology Publication, 1999.
- Mbiti, J.S. *Introduction to African Religion*. Nairobi: EAEP, 1992 (Reprint).
- Mwangi, M. "The Aesthetics of Gikuyu Language in Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *Caitani Mutharaba-ini*." University of Nairobi: Unpublished M.A Thesis, 2002.
- Olaoluwa, S. "There Was a Time: Postcolonial Ecology and Mourning in Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *Wizard of the Crow*." *European Journal of English Studies*. Online Publication, 21.8.2012 (125-36).
- Roszak, T. *The Voice of the Earth: An Exploration of Ecopsychology*. Grand Rapids: Phanes Press, 2002.
- Schweitzer, A. *On the Edge of the Primeval Forest & More from the Primeval Forest: Experiences and Observations of a Doctor in the Equatorial Africa*. Soho Square: Adam and Charles Black, 1948.
- Schweitzer, Albert. *My Life and Thought: An Autobiography*. London: George Allen & Unwin Limited, 1935.
- Vambe, M. T. *African Oral Story-telling Tradition and the Zimbabwean Novel in English*. Pretoria: Unisa Press, 2002.