

**TOWARDS LITERATURE AS A RECONSTRUCTION OF HISTORY:
A STUDY OF NGUGI WA THIONGO AND MICERE GITHAE MUGOS'
*THE TRIAL OF DEDAN KIMATHI***

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ABSTRACT

The play, *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi*, by Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Micere Githae Mugo, does not only reconstruct the history of Kenya's independence struggle; it goes on to show how postcolonial African society owes siamese fidelity to the glaring hypocrisy of struggle and independence that is akin to the concept of "two legs bad, four legs good" in George Orwell's *Animal Farm*. This paper seeks to examine the trial's importance, its verdict, and its literary implications. It forges the discourse against the backdrop of Cultural Studies Theory. The study's premise is that the three notions of history, culture, and literature have a symbiotic relationship. The essay comes to the conclusion that literature, culture, and history are interdependent, like cojoined twins, each of which is essential to the other.

Keywords: Kenya, Reconstruction, Trial, Culture, History, Literature, Colonialism, Neo-colonialism.

INTRODUCTION

In order to discuss how *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* by Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Micere Githae Mugo reconstructs Kenyan history, what the trial was after, and the outcome, it is necessary to briefly review the events that occurred in Kenya during the postcolonial era that made the country's sociocultural environment so uncomfortable that it sparked a violent self-rule movement. Kenya is a nation in East Africa that was colonized by the British in 1888 and made a protectorate in 1895. The introduction of the Lake Victoria railway line, which linked Nairobi to the coast, signaled the expansion of British influence inland. It was made a British crown colony in 1920, and the politics of grabbing fertile land followed. The Kenyans were forcibly evicted from their fertile

native land and were left with sparsely populated, semi-arable pieces. He had to lease farmland from the colonial farmers, and they also set the buying prices for the farm products from that specific farm, in order for the Kenyan peasant farmers to survive in this mess of arable land grabbing. This was a true instance of economic exploitation on two fronts.

The white farmers subtly occupied the productive farmland while keeping Kenyan peasants on the semi-arable, poorer-soil land. The treatment of the various Kenyan ethnic groups, the majority of whom were the Kikuyus, sparked growing resistance that resulted in the foundation of the Kikuyu Central Association (KCA) in 1924, under Kenyatta's direction. Its main demands included the restoration of expropriated lands or compensation for them, the expansion of education, and the removal of trade restrictions against Africans in Kenya. Palmowski noted that the Kenya African Union (KAU), a more comprehensive and all-encompassing union, was established in 1944. But after the KAU was outlawed, a violent guerrilla movement appeared. It was born out of Kenyans' growing frustration with KAU's cautious and conciliatory approach to solving problems.(83)

The militia movement was the notorious Mau Mau. The colonial regime in Kenya proscribed mau mau and tagged it a terrorist organization. The white man does not want to hear anything about Mau Mau. It is a pestering bug or mosquito in their broad daylight reverie. When the colonialists stepped aside by handing over political powers to the Kenyan elite class, expectations were high that the much heralded uhuru had come, and that their political and economic malaise would be addressed and healed. As Wa Thiong'o noted in the *Petals of Blood*, "Now that we have an African Governor and African big chiefs, they will return some of the fat back to these parts" (82).

Unfortunately, the Kenyan political class was only a stooge for the colonialists, as it continued to perpetuate the same acts just like the colonialists. Political disenchantment developed as a result of the era's blatant corruption and exploitation. Edward B. Tylor defined culture as "that complex system whose members' knowledge, belief, art, novels, law, customs, and any other talents and habits acquired by man as members of society," and this is the definition that Marj Orie Hogan uses in her book *Academic's Dictionary of Sociology* (100).

The implication of the statement above is that culture, which is the culmination of human activity within a geographic space that makes up the history of the specific place, is complex. If this behavior or activity spreads to other people, a culture is created. Because of this, there is little

distinction between culture and history. History, on the other hand, is limited to past activities that may not repeat themselves in the future, whereas culture is a recurring event or activity that has the potential to be duplicated in the future and become the norm. A culture can change. History is given life by the dynamism of culture. A culture cannot exist in the absence of history, and history cannot exist in the absence of culture. Nearly all of Kenya's sociopolitical history may be summed up in the phrase "culture of civil/political agitations." In this view, Amilcar Cabral stated in his article "National Liberation and Culture" that culture is the forceful ideological or idealistic representation of the material and historical reality of the controlled or to-be-ruled society.

The playwrights use the real-life Dedan Kimathi as inspiration for their leadership model for Africa in *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi*. They accuse the African elite class, which creates the African leadership, of betraying the masses by using the historical figure to attack and criticize it. Kimathi's authors "saw certain features that are necessary to any creative political combatant against present-day (neo) colonialism," according to the play (32). Dedan Kimathi, according to Brain Crow, is a manifestation of the radical left wing nationalism, vociferous in its denunciation of neo-colonialism and the bourgeoisie's collusion in it (25).

THE SYMBOLISM OF KIMATHI'S TRIAL

The trial of Dedan Kimathi is therefore the trial of all Kenyan peasants. The unwavering spirit of the Kenyan people is personified by Kimathi. Every time something goes wrong in Kenyan society as a whole, this spirit has the potential to be repeated. In this sense, Kenya's culture and the ongoing historical landscape of its material life will be continuously shaped by this tenacious spirit. In the First Movement (page 3), slaves and forced workers marching while singing songs of protest and anger are shown. Procession of slaves and forced laborers singing defiance and agitation songs:

Leader: Away with oppression! Unchain the people!

Crowd: Away with oppression! Unchain the people!

Leader: Away with exploitation! Unchain the people!

Crowd: Away with exploitation! Unchain the people!

Leader: Away with human slaughter!

Crowd: Unchain the people!

Leader: Brothers, we shall break..

Crowd: Exploiters' chains!

Leader: Rally round the gun!

Crowd: Make a new earth!

This clearly shows that the struggle is collective rather than personalized. Furthermore, the woman says of the trial of Kimathi that:

Woman: The trial of our strength
Our faith, our hopes, our resolve
The trial of loyalty
Our cause..... fast movement. (14)

This demonstrates even more how Kimathi represents the peasants of Kenyan collective resolve. The lack of personal names for the Woman, Boy, and Girl characters demonstrates that they, too, are archetypes of Kenyan women: mothers, wives, and freedom fighters who support the cause and have endured numerous hardships but who are willing to work with their male counterparts to bring about the desperately needed "uhuru" in Kenya. This further strengthens the argument for this claim. The Boy and the Girl, as characters, represent the future generations—generations that have been mistreated, ignored, distorted, and made hopeless. The fight to completely destroy the mechanisms that leave them helpless is their only chance for success. They say "No!" as a result of this. Although Kimathi as a persona did pass away, Dedan Kamathi cannot pass away; his spirit (of the struggle) endures in their hearts forever. Thus, it has been the culture of Kenya's poor peasants to fight for their rights whenever they are violated. This spirit of cooperation in the face of exploitation, corruption, and societal ills ought to have permeated Kenyan history and culture. However, the incomprehensible problem is how Kenya's elites, who directly benefited from the murderous efforts of the Mau Mau, failed to give the legendary battle its due place in Kenyan history. The only thing that makes sense is that they are worried that this will take attention away from the wealthy few and put it on the cultural life of the people of Kenya.

However, why was the official Kenyan play that was presented in Nigeria for Festac '77 denied permission to perform there? The play's cover page attests that this performance received the loudest applause from the audience. The trial's opening night could well be compared to a gala, with a full house and a level of audience participation uncommon in Nairobi that culminated in a large portion of the audience joining in the closing triumphal dance down the center aisle and spilling out into the street. (reverse cover page).

Why was it praised outside but rejected at home? According to history, the play was outlawed in postcolonial and independent Kenya. Kenya rejected allowing it to be performed there

in the national theater. Even the play area where it was forcibly staged was later closed, and a polytechnic was built there in its place. Why is there such animosity toward a play that depicts an essential part of their history, a history that details a painful conflict in which they, the leaders, are the main winners? It was suppressed at all costs rather than given a respectable position in Kenyan history. Why? This indicates that colonialism is still in effect inside the Kenyan elite circle, even if it has been officially abolished. As Wa Thiong'o points out, colonialism targeted the land, what the land provides, and the people who work it first, making this a significant attack on Kenyans. This might be done through direct occupation, like in Kenya's settlement regimes, or through pure political-economic control, like in Uganda, Nigeria, Ghana, and other places where the colonial state was managed with the aid of local institutions and personnel. The colonizers tried to control education, religion, language, literature, songs, and dances, among other things, to make sure that their economic and political control was complete and effective.

In order to eradicate the culture of dissent in the minds of Kenyan workers and peasants, the play was banned or, more accurately, proscribed from being performed in government buildings in Kenya. The way that people behave is influenced by the social surroundings and rules that are created as a result of their activities or behaviors. People or people frequently accept the current social climate, while some change their social environment. In order to prevent the Mau Mau activities, exploits, and history from influencing Kenyan culture, postcolonial authorities and the small bourgeoisie of Kenya uphold the social laws established by the colonial regime. If they do, Kenya will become unruly due to its agitation-based culture. This repression creates the ideal environment for widespread corruption and exploitation to flourish. On the other hand, the bourgeois class regularly exploits the peasants, the oppressed, and the last of the land. This class must be kept submissive, passive, and unconscious. Anything that would incite the populace to spill the nation's milk should be suppressed as mercilessly as possible.

However, when history and culture appear unable to fend off the attack on them, literature steps in to save the day. To depict that battle, a literary form that may be read, heard, and seen (the drama genre) is recreated. By doing this, the culture of conflict is given a new foundation upon which to grow, which in turn renews history. If it weren't for Wa Thion'o and Mugo's efforts, most of us wouldn't have learned more about the Kenyan independence fight, which was exemplified by the Mau Mau revolt. For this reason, Ngugi wa Thiong'o writes in *Writers in Politics* that;

African literature is an essential part of those cultural forces that destroyed the hegemony of imperialism in the world. They may not have created a new world, but by their struggles they have cleared the ground for new foundations. (25).

There are two different casts of African characters. One group consists of a cast of ideologically motivated individuals whose words and deeds serve as an example of African leadership. Dedan Kimathi serves as the representative of this group, which also consists of the guerilla combatants, Woman, Boy, and Girl. These people, exemplified by Kimathi, are fiercely opposed to slavery and colonialism because they are fully aware of their crimes. The second set of African characters are those black people who, out of self-interest, have chosen to support the white man and are collaborating with him to subjugate other black people. Wambararia is one of these traitors who betrayed their people.

Unfortunately, most of Africa's leaders, those that the wealthy class has produced, belong to his group rather than Kimathi's patriotic group. Patriotism, fueled by a comprehensive grasp of the twin evils of slavery and colonialism and the inferiority complex they force upon them, is the operative term for Kimathi's group. The novel's black characters are content to live in the slave- and colonial-era atmosphere, and they lack inferiority complexes that might otherwise encourage exhibitionism. Thus, exhibitionism is the important word for this group.

The play's first scene, which is a courtroom scene, has the following stage directions:

Courtroom: A white Judge presides. Near him is seated
a fat important-looking African clerk...(Dedan Kimathi:3)

If one may wonder, what, in a world of slavery and colonial rule, causes a man to feel important and appear fat? Answer: selfishness, avarice, egocentrism, and self-interest. The court clerk belongs to the African elite in the world of the play, just like contemporary African leaders do. The current crop of African leaders shares the court clerk's ego. These are the leaders who desert their subjects, much like the court clerk.

Researchers and academics have suggested that this collaboration with the oppressor is not always a betrayal. They go on to claim that it is a method of feigning weakness and appropriating strength to support one's own perspective. This is crucial since we are informed that in the same stage direction:

“Kimathi: chained, is in the dock.” Guarding him were Waitina, a European District cum police officer, and two African KAR soldiers, heavily armed (Dedan Kimathi:3).

The key point here is that, with firearms in hand and the oppressor's guaranteed protection, these two are given the ability to rule over and manipulate the populace. South Africa's situation is as described above. We have witnessed leaders who, despite the opposition of their people, are kept in power by force of arms, Western support, and protection. These leaders often have enormous egos and a tendency toward exhibitionism. A conversation between a wealthy-appearing black chief and a slave trader who appeared to be hungry on white paper may be found on page 5 of the play. For a lengthy, fancy piece of cloth and a plethora of ornaments, several powerful black men and women are traded (Dedan Kimathi:5). Additionally, we hear about a black labor force working on a plantation under the brutal, savage control of another black overseer. Inspecting the work is a white master who approaches (Dedan Kimathi: 5).

The nasty and cunning manager and the black chief stand in for the kind of leaders that Africa has produced. Leaders unable to break free from the mindsets of slavery and colonialism. Leaders who develop an inferiority complex as a result of this turn against and betray their own people to prove their own worth.

When former and present African leaders are examined, it becomes clear that they were actually just mediocre, self-centered, opportunistic, and small-minded individuals. Still a mirage of selfless leadership. These are characters from the play, including Wambararia. According to Kimathi, these people are:

Kimathi: You lie! Which people? Loyalists?...Traitors! Simpletons!... all slaves you have deceived in the past.

Henderson:... Your brother Wambararia?

Kimathi: why tire my ears with names of traitors? Kimathi: He sold out for his stomach (Dedan Kimathi: 32-33).

In Africa, this is true. Leaders are traitors who betray their followers for personal gain in order to live in opulent houses, fly private jets, receive medical treatment overseas, and send their children to the best schools abroad—all of which amount to exhibitionism. Shaw Henderson, the oppressor and colonizer, admits:

Henderson: It was the same with all the others. China, Gath, Hungu, Gaceru. And even

your own brother, Wambararia! our collaborations... (Dedan Kimathi: 34).

In fact, this group of leaders compromises with other powers and betrays their own people. They mistakenly believe that they know more than is necessary to govern a country. They are amateurs who aspire to organizations like the IMF and the World Bank and look to their former colonial rulers for guidance. They connect their nations to the global neocolonialist system, which impedes progress by incorporating their nations into it. Due to their failure to reject the inferiority complex brought on by their failure to reject the slave and colonial mentalities, they are unable to set a progressive course for national development. They also lack development consciousness. They use the same neo-colonial strategies as Wambararia and co., which makes their people more susceptible to outside manipulation.

For the avoidance of doubt, the drama includes a few of these black characters who serve as a representation of the decadent class of leaders produced by the African elite group. A politician, a banker, and a priest all belong here. Observe the banker:

Politician:... in state house. In London...

we shall be given our independence

(Dedan Kimathi: 46).

These are all neocolonization agents. Africa does not require this type of leader. Africa needs leaders that are patriotic, unselfish, and willing to sacrifice themselves like Dedan Kimathi. Leaders who are aware of the need to resist the inferiority feeling that is engendered by slave and colonial mentalities. Dedan Kimathi is an African leader who is keenly aware of the effects of colonialism and slavery on the psyche of Africans. He is a selfless patriot. He says these words in the play for the first time:

Kimathi: by what right dear you, a colonial judge, sit in judgment over me? Judge!.....Kimathi, I may remind you that we are in a court of law.

Kimathi: an imperialist court of law (Dedan Kimathi: 25)

This represents a complete and unwavering rejection of the slave and colonial mentalities that foster inferiority complexes. For his people, he has lofty aspirations. In response to all the tantalizing promises offered to him personally for his gain and glorification, he says:

Kimathi: Kimathi Wa Wachiuri well never
betray the people's liberation struggle never!

He is selfless. He is self sacrificing and read to give his life for the good of the people and so he says: To end slavery, exploitation Kimathi will never sell Kenya (Dedan Kimathi: 35 – 36).

Kimathi exhibits complete and utter abhorrence of the slave and colonial mentalities repeatedly throughout the play, on times too numerous to list individually. But we must not ignore this:

Kimathi.. We must continue to make more guns... every camp...should have its own factory....Start clothing factories...we have excellent materials. Put more effort in education. We must know our history (Dedan Kimathi: 67).

In actuality, and in opposition to this goal, we have leaders who will import rice, fish, and chicken from outside rather than construct world-class hospitals and schools, send their children overseas for world-class education, or support the cultivation and production of high-quality food. All of these are exhibitionist inclinations brought on by an inferiority complex that drives them to try to prove that they are more significant than the rest of society and even equal to their former colonial overlords through these activities. Simply put, this is neocolonialism.

THE ATTENDANT EFFECT AND OUTCOME OF KIMATHI'S TRIAL

The Trial of Dedan Kimathi has cleared the ground for the Kenyan cultural foundation of holding or demanding accountability of their leaders in public offices. Literature, here to the fore, is the voice that cannot be silenced. Literature demonstrates its potential to re-engineer and configure the culture of society and entrench history.

In the board rooms, parliaments, and in the deep recesses of the Kenyan Bourgeois class, the masses cannot have justice; their situation would not change for the better, as Kimathi declares at the end of the play before he is convicted: This could pass for an aphorism for the struggling masses.

The Dedan Kimathi trial has made it possible for Kenyans to hold or demand that those in positions of authority in their country be held or held accountable. The voice of literature is now speaking, and it cannot be silenced. The ability of literature to reshape and configure societal culture and ingrain historical narratives is demonstrated.

As Kimathi says at the end of the play before he is found guilty: "This could pass for an aphorism for the struggling masses." The masses cannot find justice in the boardrooms, legislatures, or in the hidden corners of the Kenyan bourgeois class:

Justice, he argues:

Kimathi: In the court of imperialism! There was never and will never be Justice for the people Through a revolutionary struggle Against all the forces of imperialism Our struggle must therefore continue. (Third Movement 82).

This is the field on which our justice-demanding culture ought to stand. The phrase the class fears the most is used by the peasants to demand responsibility from the Kenyan authorities. One of the most effective ways to rehumanize the dehumanized Kenyan masses is to assert their damaged rights and restore their image as subjects. In this sense, culture preserves Kenya's core history, which was nourished, perpetuated, and enlivened by literature.

All four of Dedan Kimathi's trials took place in his cell. Footage from the courtroom, historical scenes from Kenya, and Kimathi's interactions with the Mau Mau fighters are mixed throughout these. Awareness of Kimathi as a role model for African leadership requires an understanding of all of these. The leader who ensures Africa's progress and prosperity must reject neocolonialism and be aware of, and rid themselves of, colonial and slavish mentalities that breed exhibitionism and inferiority complexes.

CONCLUSION

It is a truism that literature does not exist in a vacuum. This has been exemplified and typified in the play, *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi*. We have seen the nexus between cultural history and literature, and how literature preserves culture and history. We see how the play represents archetypal characters that are visible in post-colonial African society. Indeed, the play is a creative and artistic endeavor. Despite recalling historical events, it does not chronicle them because no attempt is made to stay true to the historical facts that serve as its backdrop. From the preponderance of what this study has shown, the point must be made that the generation of leaders who will advance Africa won't materialize until the African elites who make up the core of its leaders reject neocolonialism and rid themselves of the inferiority mindset that years of enslavement and colonialism forced upon them. We also need people with the "Kimathian" disposition and spirit to challenge the establishment of neo-colonial hegemony that has largely installed itself with visible wanton socio-political rape and impunity.

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