Ngugi wa Thiong'o's "Matigari" and the Politics of Decolonization.

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In his recent collection of essays, *Moving the Centre: The Struggle for Cultural Freedoms,* Kenya's Ngugi wa Thiong'o recapitulates his well-known argument that there

> have been [only] two types of history in Kenya: *the real living* history of the masses and the *approved official* history. Those who run neo-colonialism are mortally afraid of any symbols or reminders of the Kenyan peoples' history of struggle and resistance. (98)

Some critics have suggested that Ngugi's position here, taken together with the image of Kenya he represents in his novels, amounts to a simplification of Kenyan history. Abdulrazak Gurnah criticizes Ngugi for assuming that "there are only two types of people in the [Kenyan] land — patriots and oppressors" (172). James Ogude has asserted that "Ngugi's articulation of Kenyan history from a dependency theory perspective" does not "allow him to deal with specific contradictions and local divisions within Kenya, and Ngugi is therefore forced to suppress certain histories" (96-97).

In defence of Ngugi, however, one can argue that he is not in fact unaware of "specific contradictions" and "local divisions" within Kenyan nationalist politics. Viewed in particular contexts, the discourses of "nation" and nationalist ideology represented in Ngugi's novels and critical essays read as an endeavour by him to foreground the complicated nature of history and ideology within Kenyan politics. My argument in this essay is that although Kenya is figured differently — and by implication complexly — in the imagination of individuals and groups within its national community, Ngugi's contention is that residual forms of colonialism make it imperative to collapse "local divisions" and "specific contradictions" in the search for progressive forms of nationalist ideological consciousness.

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In *The Wretched of the Earth*, Frantz Fanon contends that forging such a form of consciousness is integral to the project of reversing the political, economic, and cultural dominance and debasement of colonized people by the colonial powers. As Fanon argues, national consciousness is essential to cultivating resistance in the struggle for cultural and political independence from the colonial power. Ngugi deploys the ideology of national liberation in his narratives as a way of contextualizing Fanon's projection of national consciousness within the imperatives of cultural and political practice in postcolonial Kenya. He thus also engages what he obviously considers to be the arduous nature of the Kenyan people's struggle to achieve total decolonization. Ngugi's narratives of Kenyan national liberation therefore appropriate the ideological content of Fanon's representation of the project of decolonization as an ultimate example of "national renaissance," which guarantees "the restoration of nationhood to the people" (27).[1] Also essential to an analysis of Ngugi's concept of history is the argument Fanon makes that since "the colonial context is characterized by the dichotomy which it imposes on the whole people," the cultural project of decolonization must in turn mobilize "the whole people by the radical decision to remove from it its heterogeneity," thus "unifying it on a national, sometimes a racial basis" (*Wretched* 35).[2]

The resolution to resist imperialism and neocolonial forms of domination motivates the versions of cultural and political decolonization Fanon proposes and simulates in his works. This apart, Ngugi's accounts of Kenyan history reveal also an awareness of "local divisions" and contradictions within postcolonial Kenyan politics. While arguing for a collective form of national consciousness, Ngugi is also self-conscious in recognizing the nature of "specific contradictions" within postcolonial Kenyan society. One such sign of Ngugi's awareness relates to the argument he makes that the British colonialists "trained *some* Kenyans and brought them up to look at Kenyan history with the eyes of the British bourgeoisie." As he contends further, this "attempt to bury the soul of Kenya's history of struggle and resistance, and the attempt to normalise the tradition of loyalism to imperialism has continued into neo-colonial Kenya. . . . The loyalist

homeguards of yesterday are the neo-colonial *Mbwa Kalis* (guard dogs) of imperialism today" (*Moving* 98).

In his 1987 novel, *Matigari*, Ngugi's portrait of Kenyan peasants and workers in relation to the politics of national liberation illuminates this argument on several counts. Ngugi's narrative in this work both represents the struggle for national liberation and reconstructs the nature of the relationship between historical consciousness, patriotism, and nationalism. For Mau Mau fighters, patriots, revolutionaries, and nationalist fighters such as the mythical hero, Matigari, the struggle for independence is made more laborious by the unpatriotic actions of their own people; the "black man" (22), John Boy, described as the colonialist Settler Williams's "servant" (22), is represented as one of those who collaborate with the colonialists against their fellow dispossessed Kenyans.

In making a claim in *Matagari*, following Fanon, to an organization of resistance based on progressive national consciousness, Ngugi represents competing versions of Kenyan history in the stories of popular nationalism recounted by Matigari. Much of the narrative of the novel centres on the exploitative relations between the colonizers and the Kenyans, for whom Matigari is a representative. The novel makes it clear that it is not only the labour of workers and peasants-turned-Mau Mau revolutionaries, such as Matigari, which is exploited within the British imperialist and capitalist system of colonization. Indeed, this argument prompts Matigari to accuse John Boy Junior of collaborating with the colonialist. Matigari's memory, which allegorizes the historical relationship between individuals and groups within the Kenyan nation, on the one hand, and among the colonialists, on the other, is quite informative:

> You see, I built the house with my own hands. But Settler Williams slept in it and I would sleep outside the veranda. I tended the estates that spread around the house for miles. But it was Settler Williams who took home the harvest. . . . I worked all the machines and in all the industries, but it was Settler Williams who would take the profits to the bank and I would end up with the cent that he flung my way . . . I produced everything on the farm with my own labour. But all the gains went to Settler Williams. (21)

What is important to note here is that Matigari's story is also the story of John Boy, the collaborator. Matigari's struggle to repossess his land is negotiated through the power of his words and through the spread of his ideology. The Kenyan nationalist narratives of liberation, through which the process of decolonization is to be attained, are also recorded as capable of weakening and displacing the stranglehold of the imperialist narrative. Since Ngugi's novel advocates a resurgence of national consciousness, Matigari, unsurprisingly, awakes one day "from the deep sleep of many years" (21) and demands a return of his ancestral lands:

> Settler Williams, you who eat what another has sown, hear now the sound of the trumpet and the sound of the horn of justice. The tailor demands his clothes, the tiller his land, the worker the product of his sweat. The builder wants his house back. (21)

Regaining what the narrative represents as "a newly found dignity that comes from having the scales of a thousand years fall from one's eyes" (22), Matigari now has the power to reclaim what is rightly his. He seizes Settler Williams's "gun" (22), points it at him, and is on the fringe of attaining his freedom. In the colonial world which Ngugi describes, however, there is ample evidence that such simple polarizations as Matigari establishes between oppressor and oppressed are more complicated. Matigari's resolve to drive Settler Williams away and reclaim what is duly his is obstructed by the actions of his fellow Kenyan. While Settler Williams is an imperialist, a capitalist, and a traveller come from afar to colonize and to dominate, the identity of John Boy, the Kenyan servant differs in no way from that of the servant Matigari, a dispossessed Kenyan peasant.

When John Boy emerges from within Ngugi's narrative of the nation, not as a conscious revolutionary like Matigari, but as a collaborator with Settler Williams, Ngugi does not intend us to assume, as critics of his views on Kenyan politics such as Ogude do, that all Kenyan peasants and workers have "the same nationalist goals in their resistance to colonial rule" ("Ngugi's" 97). In representing the means by which John Boy wrestles Matigari to the ground in order to ensure that Settler Williams regains his power, the narrative also problematizes the nature of relations

between black Kenyan nationals and white colonialists. Such relations transcend the Manichean world of good blacks and evil whites, and expand the discourse of élite collaborationist Kenyan nationalists, on the one hand, and the dispossessed peasants, servants, and the "wretched of the earth," on the other. While such stories as Matigari recounts are meant to arouse "popular" nationalism in the minds of the Kenyan community, they are resisted not only by the élite nationalist leaders, but also by some of the "Kenyan peasants and workers" themselves. Ogude argues also that Ngugi's concept of history betrays a "linear representation of the Mau Mau as a monolithic nationalist movement devoid of any contradictions." Ngugi's idea of history, Ogude asserts, "presupposes the existence of a collective consciousness amongst the peasantry and the working class in Kenya," adding,

> for Ngugi, all Kenyan peasants and workers had the *same nationalist* goals in their resistance to colonial rule, and the *same interests* continue to inspire their resistance in the post-colonial state. (97; emphases added)

What we have in Ngugi's work taken as a whole, Ogude insists, is a situation in which Ngugi "subsumes what may be local or regional interests of the peasants into *national* or *class issues*" (97; emphases added). This charge, however, also cannot be substantiated when Ngugi's consciousness of Kenyan history is evaluated at even a very fundamental level in the ideology of his narratives.

One thing which the narrative of *Matigari* makes clear is that collaboration in either the interests of the colonized or the colonizers, always transcends national, racial, and class interests. While one of the essential preconditions for the continuing survival of Settler Williams and his fellow imperialists is the support they receive both from the colonial state apparatus and the élite African nationalist politicians who manipulate and betray their own people, individuals like John Boy who are very much down the social ladder and who, like Matigari, lay claim to a common national identity as peasants are portrayed as active collaborators with the colonialists. Collaboration, articulated on either part of the ideological divide between the colonizer and the

colonized, transcends the group interests of the élites and exemplifies the integrated actions of members of the different classes of society. In his depiction of British colonialism and its settler culture in Kenya, Ngugi represents different forms of consciousness in relation to the questions of "class," "nation," and "race." All Kenyans, particularly the workers and peasants, are victims of colonialism; however, some of the most dispossessed still collude with their oppressors in ways which suggest their lack of national consciousness. Ngugi is very much aware that the struggle for independence was not one of *all* Mau Mau freedom fighters, *all* peasants, and *all* workers versus colonizers. Rather, the struggle for independence and the postcolonial struggle for decolonization and national liberation, as the narratives of *Matigari* and almost all of Ngugi's other works make clear, occur between specific groups of Africans against the colonizing force.

Ngugi's representation of the transformation of John Boy's family from servants within the British colonial system to élites within the postcolonial Kenyan nation further emphasizes his argument that the colonial state provided the occasion for particular individuals within society to perpetuate their selfish interests. He thus contends that in

> fighting for independence, *some* of the African intelligentsia only wanted that which was forbidden to them, or rather they saw the struggle in terms of their immediate needs, nurtured by the social position they had attained under the colonial system. They wanted to wear the same clothes and shoes, get the same salary, live in the same kind of mansions as their white counterparts of similar qualifications. (*Homecoming* 12; emphasis added)

Matigari can be read as making tropes of this argument, particularly when its narrative repositions John Boy Junior, son of the collaborator John Boy, as one of the leaders of the post-independent Kenyan nation who have successfully fulfilled such an ambition. In this capacity, John Boy Junior is no longer a servant or a member of the majority of the peasants and "the people" who inhabit a subservient relationship to colonial authority. In a moment of radical confrontation, Matigari asks John Boy Junior:

> Are you the boy we sent abroad? The boy the cost of whose education we all contributed to, singing with pride: Here is one of our own and not a foreigner's child over whom I was once insulted? The boy for whom *we* sang: He shall come and deliver us from slavery? The boy we sent off to study, saying that a child belongs to us all, that a nation's beauty was borne in a child, a future patriot? (48; emphases added)

According to John Boy, however, Kenya

> has remained in *darkness* because of the *ignorance* of our people. They don't know the importance of the word "individual," as opposed to the word "masses." White people are advanced because they respect that word ["individual"] . . . which means the freedom of everyone to follow his own whims without worrying about the others. (48; emphases added)

Fanon locates this alienation of the indigenous bourgeoisie from their people as originating in the colonialists' desire to maintain their dominance over the colonized. As he observes of colonialism's controlling mechanisms and its strategies of domination, the colonialist bourgeoisie "hammered into the native's mind the idea of a society of individuals where each person shuts himself up in his own subjectivity, and whose only wealth is individual thought" (36). For Ngugi, declaring African communal bonds as primitive or irrational is simply part of the logic of colonization which creates for the African a dependency complex in which white civilizational values are lauded over African ones. The colonialist ideology of individual self-development is assimilated by the indigenous élite and by nationalist politicians, whose movement away from group notions of kinship and communal bonds of identification seems to them a sign of material progress.

In *The Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon elaborates on how colonialist strategies of cultural domination provide one of the most successful means of converting the native nationalist bourgeoisie away from their traditional cultural values. As he further points out, the "colonialist bourgeoisie, when it realizes that it is impossible to maintain its domination over the colonial countries, decides to carry on a rear-guard action with regard to culture, values, techniques and so on" (43). Like Fanon, Ngugi is able to argue in *Matigari* that the denigration of African communal

modes of sociocultural and political organization by African leaders is itself a product of a discursive formation and ideological construct specific to the project of mental and psychological colonization of Africans perpetrated by colonialist ideology. The prerequisite for mental decolonization, according to Fanon, hinges upon a situation where "the native who has the opportunity to return to the people during the struggle for freedom" discovers the falseness of colonial ideologies (36).

In representing the ambivalent legacies of John Boy's tradition of colonial education, then, Ngugi addresses the broader cultural implications for African societies of the individualism and élitism adhered to by their nationalists. The repression of notions of community is also Ngugi's critique of the assimilation of recycled versions of colonialist ideology and European enlightenment philosophy. Consequently, at the heart of the conceptualization of "progress" and "civilization" in the language of John Boy Junior, Ngugi's caricature of a bourgeois nationalist leader or politician, is an uncritical privileging of the notion of individualism over community. Ngugi's critique is explored through the triumphalist disposition of John Boy's harangue of African communal bonds. Thus, as John Boy further informs Matigari when the latter champions the idea of national liberation,

> You walk around fettered to your families, clans, nationalities, people, masses. If the individual decides to move ahead, he is pulled back by the others. What's the meaning of the word "masses"? (49)

Using the African's experience of colonialism, Ngugi explores the place of such ideologies in the imagination of African leaders by questioning the élite African's perceived unanimity with so-called colonial notions of individualism. At stake in Ngugi's discussion of nationalism here is his view that colonialist ideology and its modes of domination remain central to the obvious contradictions in the forms of bourgeois nationalist thought which prevail in the postindependent and postcolonial period in Kenya. His response to what he considers the falsified consciousness enunciated by the John Boys of Kenya is unequivocal: "Those who run neo-colonialism are mortally afraid of any symbols or reminders of the Kenya peoples' history of struggle and resistance" (*Moving* 98).

The project of recovering the dignity of the colonized is therefore at stake in Ngugi's allegory of the nation and his discussion of nationalism in *Matigari.* Like Fanon, Ngugi is interested in reaffirming the dignity of the vilified and colonized African. Thus Ngugi suggests that by remaining insensitive to the plight of the majority of African "people," by denigrating notions of "nation" and "community," by excluding the "masses" from their developmental policies, and by reimposing upon African societies the hegemonic discourses of colonialist ideology, nationalist leaders privilege their relationship to colonial culture over indigenous African modes of communal existence to the detriment of their nations. Ngugi's identification of a nationally oppressed Kenyan people is therefore also usefully appraised by situating his polemic in relation to his contestation of colonialist ideology and European enlightenment thought and the dependency complexes engendered by such forms of discourse.

Matigari's narrative of the Kenyan nation represents the African leader's individualism and alienation from communal African bonds as fundamentally a crisis of identity. The John Boys of Kenya are oblivious to the reality that even within the culture of colonialism which they mimic notions of "community" and "nation" themselves figure prominently as legitimate markers of identity. Fanon again is instructive on this question observing that the settler who "makes history and is conscious of making it" constantly "refers to the history of his mother country." For precisely this reason, Fanon argues, the colonizer's identity "clearly indicates that he himself is the extension" of his "mother country." In engaging in a history of colonization, then, the "history which he writes" becomes the "history of his *own* nation" (40; emphasis added). The culture of colonialism therefore also inevitably engenders a multiplicity of cultural discourses and practices, including narratives of family and kinship bonds that colonialism's discourse of bourgeois civility otherwise disparages. In denouncing supposedly non-progressive notions of "community," colonial culture also positions its subjects in a subservient relationship to the culture of the colonialist's own "mother country" or nation. In transforming the African subject into a putatively free individual, or a "civilized" native, the ideology of

colonialism thus legitimates a form of cultural authority over its subjects which derives in large measure from its invention of a co-opted model of individualism for the Other. In "'normalizing' the colonial . . . subject," as Homi Bhabha argues, the discourse of "[colonial] civility alienates its own language of liberty and produces another knowledge of its norms" (86). Colonial culture is not merely the result of a particular historical logic or an individualistic ethic but is fashioned also out of a combination of different sociocultural, political, and ideological practices. What is clear, then, is that colonial culture is not exclusively constituted in relation to the notion of individuality. The liberal ideology of colonial discourse is also the site for undoing the notion of the colonized individual as a free subject. If the colonizer's positioning in relation to his "mother country" and to his "own nation" marks a definitive moment in the production of colonialist ideology, the colonizing agenda guarantees that, by writing its history in relation to its "own nation," colonialism "others" its African subjects.

Ngugi's most important argument is that colonialism, which is intensely critical of tribal African and other communal bonds, has itself been greatly influenced by similar notions of kinship. In essence, bourgeois modes of colonial civility are themselves intricately linked with bonds of tribal and communal kinship. *Matigari*'s narrative of identity therefore intimates that while colonial culture works to unfetter its mimics from communal bonds of kinship, such as "tribe," "clan," "family," and "nationality," the historical reality is that colonialism ultimately defines itself in relation to groupings such as "family," "clan," and "tribe." In Ngugi's allegorical parody of élite African leadership through the John Boys of Kenya, the author therefore responds to and contests the substance of their notions of "civilization" and "progress" by radically examining nationalist ideology and neocolonialism within the context of Fanon's call for revolutionary mental decolonization and for the reformation of colonized native subjectivities.

Ngugi's narrative also plays out the significance of Bhabha's argument that mimicry within colonialist discourse is "the effect of a flawed colonial mimesis in which to be Anglicized is

emphatically not to be English" (87). In his analysis of colonialist discourse, Bhabha argues also that "the epic intention of the civilizing mission . . . often produces a text rich in the traditions" of irony and mimicry. As Bhabha contends further, "the discourse of mimicry is constructed around an *ambivalence*; in order to be effective, mimicry must continually produce its slippage, its excess, its difference" (85-86). If we take Bhabha's analysis of mimicry within colonial discourse as a useful context for evaluating Ngugi's representation of the language of the Kenyan neocolonial élite, the extent to which his narrative of identity in *Matigari* also largely alludes to the historically ambivalent self-conceptions of the élite African leaders and nationalists who mimic the ideology of colonial discourse becomes clear. Bonds of community, of "families, clans, nationalities, people," and "masses" often form part of the political rhetoric of African nationalists; however, these nationalists also ultimately renounce such bonds for allegedly progressive forms of Western individualism to which they ultimately adhere.

John Boy's validation of so-called Western individualism over communal African bonds of association is yet another of Ngugi's parodies of the ideological unimaginativeness of élite African leadership and bourgeois nationalist thought. In *Matigari*, the political corruption which issues out of the self-centredness and individualism of Kenyan politicians and the alienating habits of these leaders are both signs also of the diseased evolution of nationalist politicians whose ideological convictions are shaped by a gross misinterpretation of history. The postcolonial bourgeoisie who emerge in Ngugi's narrative of nationalism to indict themselves are also those who, in his view, remain defenders of a system destructive to the soul of their national communities.

In this context, Ngugi's representation of the contradictions of identity formation in postcolonial Kenya is essential to substantiating Fanon's contention that reclaiming communal and national bonds as legitimate political constructs is an ideological manoeuvre central to the decolonizing agenda. The imperative for Fanon is that the

> immobility to which the native is condemned can only be called into question if the native decides to put an end to the history of

> colonization — the history of pillage — and to *bring into existence the history of the nation* — the history of decolonization. (40; emphases added)

The project of reaffirming the "authentic" identity of the Kenyan nation, Ngugi intimates, would derive from placing faith in, and making tangible African cultural, economic, and political institutions within a nationally defined context. The significance of the parody of John Boy's thoughts on Kenyan national and cultural identity in *Matigari* is a reiteration of Ngugi's concern that nationalist leaders and politicians must produce discourses of self which incorporate notions of community and "nation." Ngugi's ideological posture is integral to his vision of what a truly Kenyan nationalist ideology must represent. In Ngugi's view, the integration of indigenous African modes of social, cultural, and political organization into Kenya's developmental policies would ameliorate Kenya's condition of postcolonial disillusionment. In this connection, Ngugi has argued that, concerning Kenyan nationalist politics, there

> has been little attempt at breaking with our inherited colonial past — our inherited economic and other institutions, apart from blackanizing the personnel running them. There has been no basic land reform; the settler owning 600 acres of land is replaced by a single African owning the same 600 acres. There has been no change in the nature and structure of ownership. (*Homecoming* xvi)

For Ngugi, the so-called Africanization of national economies in African societies which followed independence, has not resulted in an abandonment of colonialist modes of thought and governance. What he proposes instead is a reinforcement of the project of nation-building through the appropriation of valuable African institutions. In his view, African institutions must not be allowed to remain marginal within the project of nation formation. The return here by Ngugi to a discussion of the nation as an imagined community is consequently an endeavour to interpret Kenya's cultural crisis by associating the activities and cultural projects of African leaders and nationalist politicians with certain forms of ideological essentialism. An insensitivity to the notion of community and to the social and cul-

tural practices which emerge out of such a lack of consciousness is represented by Ngugi as a central problem within Kenyan nationalist ideology and politics.

Although Ngugi wa Thiong'o has invoked Fanon's discussion of the imperative of decolonization as one which unifies members of the national polity on a national and sometimes a racial basis, he has also rewritten Fanon's text somewhat differently by problematizing the coherent relations assumed to exist between members of the national body. Yet, it would be fair too to point out that Fanon himself recognized that any attempt to define the relationship between a genuine national consciousness and its potential for revolution as simple would lead up a blind alley, since such a tactic could not account for the unstable nature of nationalist ideological rhetoric and its political practice in relation to the historical process of decolonization. By locating his argument within the oppressor and oppressed of such specific ideological contexts, Ngugi questions some of the contradictions within the politics of decolonization and the discourses of African leaders and nationalist politicians. In successfully conscripting the story in *Matigari* — a different version of nationalist history — into a critique of the national liberation project, Ngugi invokes the body of the postcolonial nation itself as a highly contested site.[3]

NOTES

1 See Ogude's view that reading Fanon, in particular, "must have transformed Ngugi's views on a number of issues, ranging from violence for liberation to the nature of neo-colonialism" ("Ngugi's" 94). See also Lewis Nkosi's comment that Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* is one of the texts which "Ngugi read thoroughly and thoroughly assimilated" (200).

2 Fanon's argument on ideological unification within colonized and postcolonial societies on a "national" and "racial" basis requires proper qualification as far as Ngugi's and several other narratives of postcolonial politics are concerned. This argument, subverted by Fanon himself within *The Wretched of the Earth*, is much more complex. A potentially essentialist ideological viewpoint on this issue notwithstanding, my concern here is both to show how Ngugi's recovery of a narrative of nationalist resistance makes tropes of unification along the lines of "the whole people" on a "national" and even "a racial basis," and simultaneously to deconstruct such an ideological perspective.

3 For the "subversive political character" of the novel, see Ngugi's note to the English edition of *Matigari*.

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