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**The Black Messiah, or Christianity and Masculinity in Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o’s *The River Between***

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*Salvation shall come from the hills. From the blood that flows in me, I say from the same tree, a son shall rise. And his duty shall be to lead and save the people.*

In the emerging study of religion and literature, so far there has been little engagement with non-Western literary texts, especially not with African texts. This corpus tends to be left to postcolonial studies, and indeed scholars in this field have extensively studied African and other non-Western bodies of literature. However, scholars in postcolonial studies tend to have a secular bias and demonstrate little interest in the religious aspects of literary writings. This is surprising since religion is a recurring theme in the vast and diverse body of postcolonial literature. Writing about African literature, F. Hale (2007, p. 47) points out that

The relationship between missionary Christianity and traditional African cultures was a prominent theme in post-colonial literature during and for many years after the era of decolonisation. (… ) At least as early as the 1950s, and seen perhaps most vividly in Chinua Achebe’s *Things fall apart*, African *littérateurs* began to use fiction as a forum in which to challenge the tribulations resulting from the impact of European cultures on their own.

Addressing the above mentioned gaps—the lack of attention to African and other non-Western texts in the study of religion and literature, and the lack of attention to religion in the study of postcolonial literature—Adogame, in his introduction to a special issue of *Studies in World Christianity* on religion in African literary writings, points out that scholars ‘should begin to pay more attention to how and to what extent religion is embedded within African literary cultures; ways in which African literary scholars and their works are informed and illuminated – in their ideas and preoccupations, by religious traditions, imagery, ideas, and concerns; and how they engage with and reshape traditional and non-traditional discourses and repertoires’ (Adogame 2010, 3-4). Taking this call as an impetus, in this essay I focus on the Kenyan author Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o who, together with the late Chinua Achebe from Nigeria, is one of Africa’s most well-known creative writers with a worldwide readership. My option for Ngũgĩ is not just informed by the fact that he received his degree in English literature from the university where I am currently lecturing and where his work now is an important subject of study (Nichols 2010). More relevant to me as a student of African Christianity (rather than African literature as such) is the role of religion, in particular of Christianity, in Ngũgĩ’s writings and, related to that, also in his biography. As Nicholas Kamau-Goro (2011, 68) captures succinctly, ‘A product of the mission school, Ngũgĩ started his literary career as a Christian but later developed into a radical critic of Christianity. Despite this, Christian idioms and allegories remained prominent features of his aesthetic praxis. Of all African writers Ngũgĩ has perhaps most consistently used the Bible as a frame of aesthetic reference.’ Especially his early novels, written in the period that Ngũgĩ identified as a Christian, which also was the period of the decolonisation of Kenya, are examples of the type of postcolonial African literature referred to by Hale above, in which the relationship between missionary Christianity and traditional African cultures, but also between Christianity, liberation and anti-colonial nationalism, are central themes. In this short essay there is no room to explore these themes in Ngũgĩ’s life and work in-depth, for which I refer to other publications (Anonby 1999; Kamau-Goro 2010, 2011; Siundu and Wegesa 2010). Building upon this body of scholarship, I seek to make an original contribution by intersecting the themes of Christianity and masculinity in Ngũgĩ’s first novel, *The River Between*, focusing my reading on the figure of the black messiah.

In my reading I will interrogate the argument made by Kamau-Goro that Ngũgĩ represents a ‘secular reconfiguration of Christianity’. It is not clear what exactly is meant with ‘secular’ in this context, but usually the word is opposed to ‘religious’. In that case, the suggestion is that Ngũgĩ’s interpretation and appropriation of the Messiah-figure in the context of colonial Kenya is secular because it is social and political *as contrasted to* religious. This suggestion is problematic, not only because in African cultures generally there is no clear distinction between religious and public or political spheres (Ellis and Ter Haar 2004), but also because it overlooks the possibility that Ngũgĩ’s deployment of the Messiah-figure in fact offers a particular religious interpretation of, and commentary on, the socio-political situation in colonial Kenya. Further, I will take issue with an essay by Andrew Hammond on representations of masculinity in Ngũgĩ’s work. Hammond (2011, 116) takes no pains to understand the messianic dimension of the novel’s main character, Waiyaki, simply referring to it as ‘arrogance’ and ‘fantasy’. Hence he fails to acknowledge the crucial difference between Waiyaki and other male figures in the novel. Though this essay is too short to offer a full exploration of Christianity and masculinity in the novel, at least I hope to explore the meaning and significance of messianic masculinity as embodied by Ngũgĩ’s protagonist.

***The River Between***

*The River Between* is Ngũgĩ’s first written (but secondly published) novel, published in 1965 —less than two years after Kenya’s independence. It was originally written in 1961 for a competition in African literature, when Ngũgĩ was studying at Makere University in Uganda.

Kamau-Goro (2010, 13) dates the setting of the novel in the 1930s, ‘a period when the Gĩkũyũ people were being intensely evangelised by European missions.’ In addition to the missionaries’ general disavowal of local African cultures and their polarising missionary strategies, in Gĩkũyũ land a particular conflict had emerged over the issue of female circumcision. This becomes a central theme in the novel—a focus that is clearly biographically informed, as becomes clear from Ngũgĩ’s childhood memoir. Here he points out that *The River Between* was an attempt to understand the ‘great historic divide’ (2011, 114)—about circumcision, but fundamentally about issues of cultural and national identity—that had begun before he was born and that dramatically shaped his childhood and youth experiences, and indeed his own identity.

The river alluded to in the novel’s title is called Honia, which means ‘cure’ or ‘bring-back-to-life’ (TRB 1). It flows through the so-called ‘valley of life’ that is sided by two ridges, Kameno and Makuyu. Directly at the beginning of the novel, with a few simple, evocative sentences Ngũgĩ sketches what Trevor James (2001, 228) has called ‘a spiritual landscape’ in which the river is the source of life uniting the two ridges. However, at the same time the river also divides the two ridges. Looking at them from the valley, they antagonistically face each other ‘like two rivals ready to come to blows in a life and death struggle for the leadership of this isolated region’ (TRB 1). Only from a God’s eye point of view the ridges can be seen as united (TRB 16). This paradox of unity and division, evoked by the image of the river, is deployed by Ngũgĩ to narrate the story of the two Gĩkũyũ communities on both sides of the valley and their different responses to colonialism and missionary Christianity. On one side is Makuyu, where Reverend Livingstone of Siriana Mission had made various converts. One of them, Joshua, becomes their leader. He zealously preaches against ‘the old ways’ and teaches the Christians to follow the white man and to obey the colonial government. On the other side is Kameno, the traditionalist village where people, under the leadership of Kabonyi, a regressed Christian, become more and more hardened in their rejection of ‘the new faith’ and do not want to be contaminated by the ways of the white man. Thus, the river dividing the two ridges ‘signifies two contesting ideological positions, prefiguring two political theories of responding to colonial subjugation’ (Kamau-Goro 2011, 72). What makes the novel so extraordinary is that this narrative of cultural conflict and polarisation as a result of the arrival of missionary Christianity and colonialism is framed in a much older narrative of rivalry between the two ridges for which Ngũgĩ invokes the sacred Gĩkũyũ myth of origins and an ancient Gĩkũyũ prophecy.

According to the origin myth, Murungu, the Gĩkũyũ God, told Gĩkũyũ and Mumbi, the original parents of the Gĩkũyũ people: ‘This land I give to you, O man and woman. It is yours to rule and till, you and your posterity’ (TRB 2). The age-old conflict between Makuyu and Makeno concerns the question on what side of the river Gĩkũyũ and Mumbi stood when Murungu showed them the land, and related to that, which of the two villages can claim spiritual superiority and leadership. By deploying the Gĩkũyũ myth, with its sacred claim on the land, at the beginning of a novel that deals with the loom of colonialism, Ngũgĩ sets up an almost ontological contestation between Gĩkũyũ religious mythology and the Christian colonising ideology. Adding to this, he evokes the prophecy of one of the great historical Gĩkũyũ prophets, Mugo, who in precolonial times already had prophesied the coming of the white man: ‘There shall come a people with clothes like butterflies’ (TRB 2). Mugo the seer, as historian John Lonsdale (1995, 241) points out, advocated a restrained response, warning his people to resist nor to welcome the strangers but to learn from them, out of his conviction that if the Gĩkũyũ ‘renewed themselves and learned the secret of the invaders’ power the latter would in the end depart.’ As we will see later, this advice becomes the adagium of Waiyaki, the protagonist of *The River Between*.

**The black Messiah**

In addition to foreseeing the arrival of the white man, later in the novel the reader learns that Mugu, before he died, had also whispered an ancient Gĩkũyũ prophecy filled with messianic hope: ‘Salvation shall come from the hills. From the blood that flows in me, I say from the same tree, a son shall rise. And his duty shall be to lead and save the people’ (TRB 20). As Kamau-Goro (2010, 12) points out, these prophecies are ‘clad in a multi-voiced idiom. The Christian nuanced idiom of “salvation” notwithstanding, Mugo’s language reflects the metaphoric richness of Gĩkũyũ egalitarian culture now threatened by foreign influences (clothes like butterflies) as well as the language of Gĩkũyũ traditional kinship and lineage ties (from the same blood).’ The importance of lineage ties is underlined in the novel when Chege, a respected elder in Kameno of whom the people believe that he is a seer, one day takes his only son, Waiyaki , to the sacred place on top of ‘the hill of God’ to tell him that he actually is Mugo’s offspring, the last in the line. Narrating Mugo’s death-bed prophecy about salvation coming from the hills, Chege instructs his son, in line with Mugo’s advice mentioned above:

I am old, my time is gone. Remember that you are the last in this line. Arise. Heed the prophecy. Go to the Mission place. Learn all the wisdom and all the secrets of the white man. But do not follow his vices. Be true to your people and the ancient rites. … And keep on remembering, salvation shall come from the hills. A man must rise and save the people in their hour of need. (TRB 20-21)

Thus, at this sacred place, standing under the tree of Murungu, from where they could survey the land and see the ridges laying in peace, Waiyaki learns about the secret messianic prophecy of a saviour coming from the hills and is told that he is the last in the line of those who might fulfil it. It is here that a sense of messianic masculinity is instilled in him. As the narrator describes, in the days after the event Waiyaki ‘felt a heaviness making him a man. In body, he was still a boy’ (TRB 21).

It is significant that, in the story line, his father took him to the hill directly after Waiyaki has gone through the second-birth ritual which, as a *rite de passage*, prepares him for his final initiation into manhood through the ritual of circumcision. At this occasion, the women had shouted, ‘Old Waiyaki is born. Born again to carry on the ancient fire’ (TRB 12). Afterwards, his mother had dipped him into the water of the Honia river, ‘and he came out clean’. Only after this ceremony which, in the words of James (2001, 235), ‘echoes the Christian sacrament of baptism, including the ideas of being made anew to fulfil a spiritual vocation’, Waiyaki’s messianic mission can begin. It seems that one must be completely insensitive to the religious imaginary and mythology deployed by Ngũgĩ to ignore the significance of prophecy, initiation and vocation, and to interpret Waiyaki’s so-called ‘messianic fantasy’ as a form of masculine arrogance (Hammond 2011, 116).

*The River Between* was originally entitled *The Black Messiah*. Even though Ngũgĩ changed the title, it is clear that the novel has a strong messianic motive, and that Waiyaki in subtle ways is modelled after the biblical figure of Christ (Anonby 1999). The above mentioned ceremony of second birth resembles the story about Jesus’ baptism in the river Jordan after which he took up his messianic mission. Mugo’s prophecy of salvation coming from the hills echoes Old Testament messianic prophecies that Christians believe to refer to Jesus Christ. Indeed, both prophetic traditions are made part of the contestation between Gĩkũyũ mythology and Christianity, such as when Joshua, the zealous convert, meditates on Isaiah’s prophecy of a virgin bearing a son whose name shall be Immanuel: ‘Isaiah, the white man’s seer, had prophesied of Jesus. He had told of the coming of a messiah. Had Mugo wa Kibiro, the Gĩkũyũ seer, ever foretold of such a saviour? No. Isaiah was great. He had told of Jesus, the saviour of the world’ (TRB 29). Likewise, when Waiyaki later in the novel attends Joshua’s church where the congregation sings a hymn about ‘the good news of Christ our Saviour’, he steals out with a disturbed heart because, ‘As the hymn reached his ears, he again felt that insatiable longing for something beyond him, something that would contain the whole of himself’ (TRB 87). The dramatic end of the novel, where Waiyaki and his vision are tragically rejected by his people, is narrated in a way that resembles Jesus’ passion narrative, with Waiyaki’s childhood companion, Kamau, paralleling Judas’ betrayal of Jesus; his friend Kinuthia echoing Peter’s denial of Jesus; and with Kabonyi who presides the assembly acting as a counterpart (though less neutral) of Pilate (Anonby 1999, 244-5).

Ngũgĩ’s appropriation of the biblical language of salvation, and indeed of the typical Judeo-Christian term ‘messiah’, in order to depict his non-Christian Gĩkũyũ protagonist, is of course significant and can be seen as subversive. Kamau-Goro (2010, 13) interprets it as a ‘secular reconfiguration of Christianity’:

The reification of the Christian notion of messianism in the person of a black man highlights the ‘black’ aspect of Ngũgĩ’s ideological consciousness which reflects his awareness of the black person’s disadvantaged position in the postcolonial world. It is satirical of the conventional association of the saviour with whiteness and thus highly subversive of the discourses of Christianity and colonialist historiography in relation to the black persons’ identity in the world. (ibid, 15)

Indeed, it is obvious that Ngũgĩ’s notion of a black messiah reflects an ideology of black consciousness and opposes European missionary Christianity with its intricate links to colonialism. However, I am not sure whether this necessarily implies a *secular* reconfiguration of Christianity. The international black consciousness movement, after all, has always had a strong religious underpinning. In the United States, Henry McNeal Turner (1834-1915), bishop of the African Methodist Episcopalian Church, already in 1898 famously claimed that God was black, and Baptist minister and theologian Howard Thurman (1900-1981) in his 1949 book *Jesus and the Disinherited* associated Jesus with the black people. In 1963, the black leader Malcolm X, himself a Muslim, stridently asserted that ‘Christ wasn’t white. Christ was a black’—a claim that later became central in black theology (cf. Douglas 1994). Thus, the black religious movement has a tradition of thinking about Christ in social and political terms, and in the same line Ngũgĩ’s deployment of the Messiah-figure can well be a critical religious interpretation of, and commentary on, the socio-political situation in colonial Kenya, and missionary Christianity in particular. After all, via South Africa, American black religious movements had also gained influence in colonial Kenya, such as through the African Orthodox Church in the region where Ngũgĩ grew up (Ngũgĩ 2011, 113). In his memoirs Ngũgĩ narrates that, being exposed to paintings of a black Christ at Alliance Highschool in 1956, he was quite sympathetic to the views that ‘Jesus was not born in white Europe’ and that God had ‘revealed Himself in the different colors of different cultures’ (Ngũgĩ 2012, 92). Against this background I suggest that Ngũgĩ’s image of the black Messiah does not so much represent a secular reconfiguration, but a critical appropriation of Christianity, showing that religious culture, and indeed Christianity, ‘may constitute a site of resistance to colonialism’ (James 2001, 231). It is fascinating to see how Ngũgĩ creatively plays with the theme of the black Messiah, combining Gĩkũyũ religious traditions with biblical themes and the Judeo-Christian messianic tradition in his depiction of Waiyaki. At the same time, this line is not developed far enough to allow for a detailed Christological reading of Waiyaki—he may be *modelled after* Christ but does not really become an *image of* Christ in a meaningful theological way. The messianic figure of Waiyaki does represent, however, a religious critique of black peoples’ disadvantaged position in the colonial dispensation and in missionary Christianity.

**Messianic masculinity**

I already referred earlier to the subtle way in which Ngũgĩ associates Waiyaki’s messianic role to the theme of masculinity. A further gender-specific reading of *The River Between* reveals that Ngũgĩ in fact sets up a competition between the main male characters in the novel concerning messianic masculinity. Apart from Waiyaki there is, on the one hand, Joshua, the fanatical Christian convert whose originally Hebrew name means ‘God is salvation’ and thus challenges Mugo’s prophecy that ‘salvation shall come from the hills’. He is depicted as a typical Christian patriarch: ‘Joshua was such a staunch man of God and such a firm believer in the Old Testament, that he would never refrain from punishing a sin, even if this meant beating his wife’ (TRB 31). When one of his daughters, Muthoni, against his will decides to indulge herself in the ceremony of circumcision, she ceases to exist for him, and when she dies as a result of the complications he does not show any emotion on his face. His uncompromising persona leads him to also lose his other daughter, Nyambura, who follows her heart and falls in love with Waiyaki, ‘her black Messiah, sent from heaven after Muthoni’s death to come and rescue her from disintegration’ (TRB 134). Joshua’s name with its reference to the messianic motif is thus rather ironic, since the only salvation he can think of is concerned with the soul, ‘making him fanatically cling to whatever promised security’ and alienating him from his people and from the ‘life-giving traditions of the tribe’ (141). Opposite to Joshua is Waiyaki who does have sympathy for the Christian faith, but exactly for those teachings not embodied by Joshua: the elements of love and sacrifice, which correspond with his own temperament (TRB 100). For Waiyaki, these teachings are the essence of Christianity and need to be reconciled to the traditions of the people in order to become ‘a living experience, a source of life and vitality’ (TRB 141).

On the other hand there is Kabonyi, the only one who, according to Chege, might also know about the prophecy and who indeed throughout the novel is competing with Waiyaki because he considers himself, or otherwise his son Kamau, to be ‘the saviour for whom the people waited’ (TRB 144). Initially a Christian convert like Joshua but later the zealous leader of the Kiama, which was founded to preserve the purity of the tribe against the white man, Kabonyi seeks to undermine Waiyaki’s popularity and authority among the people, among others by publicly addressing him as ‘young man’ (while other elders called him ‘the Teacher’ (TRB 81))—using age as a basis to subordinate his opponent’s masculinity. The conflict between Waiyaki and Kabonyi, in the words of Kamau-Goro (2010, 14), ‘revolves around the identity of the saviour foretold in the ancient prophecy’ but ‘more fundamentally, there’s a conflict over the interpretation of the prophecy and the strategies to face the colonial threat.’ Kabonyi’s messianic agenda is a conservative one: it is concerned with the social, cultural and political preservation of the tribe and its customs, leading to a radical rejection of everything associated with ‘the white man’, including their fellow tribe members, Joshua and his followers. Opposite to this, Waiyaki’s major concern is the unity of the tribe, which in his opinion can only been reached through education—following Mugo’s advice to learn the secrets of the white man—and which, he believes, in the end will lead to political freedom. Waiyaki is the ‘synergetic leader who appropriates elements of tradition and colonial modernity to espouse an ideology of passive, long-term resistance to colonialism’ (Kamau-Goro 2010, 16).

Joshua and Kabonyi represent the two ideological poles in their different responses to missionary Christianity and colonialism. However, they are united in their hate of Waiyaki who is a threat to them precisely because he seeks to negotiate and synthesise their positions.

In terms of masculinity, both Joshua and Kabonyi, as Hammond (2011, 116) observes, ‘share a belief in the aggressive, autocratic regulation of family and community’. The suggestion in the novel, then, is that the effects of colonialism on male identity in twentieth century Kenya is generally negative because typically patriarchal aspects of masculinity were reinforced both among the Christian converts and the traditionalists. Hammond points out that compared to his contenders, ‘Waiyaki appears to represent a more sympathetic style of leadership. The emphasis that he places on education leads to an advocacy of non-violent methods of political resistance, and his ambitions to overcome local divisions through the promotion of tribal unity stands against the masculinist creeds of competition and self-aggrandisement’ (Hammond 2011, 116). By simultaneously criticising Waiyaki for his ‘messianic fantasy’, Hammond however fails to acknowledge how Waiyaki’s more sympathetic character and the level of responsibility he demonstrates in fact are shaped by the sense of messianic masculinity instilled in him from an early age. Indeed, Waiyaki does not turn out to be the strong leader who is able to realise his vision of education, unity and freedom. The opposing forces are too strong. Because of his love for the uncircumcised daughter of Joshua, Nyambura, and his refusal to publicly deny her, Waiyaki’s own people leave his fate in the hands of Kabonyi’s Kiama. Waiyaki’s defeat at the end of the novel, then, is not because of ‘moral indecision’ (Hammond, ibid), and also not only because he ‘has internalized the ethos of Western individualism’ and therefore ‘finds it difficult to subordinate his individual will to the demands of a communal polity that has its own ancient rules of belonging’ (Kamau-Goro 2011, 74), though the latter certainly may play a role. For Waiyaki, his love for Nyambura—who does not meet the criteria of the tribe—is not just a private affair but is an integral part of his battle for unity (TRB 143). Their mutual love demonstrates that it is possible to transcend the division between Christians and traditionalists, so denying Nyambura would imply giving up the vision of unity of the tribe. Refusing to deny her, Waiyaki knows that he risks his life but he cannot but be true to his messianic mission.

**Conclusion**

In a fascinating way Ngũgĩ in *The River Between* merges Gĩkũyũ indigenous religious traditions with Christian idioms and imageries to develop the idea of the black Messiah in the context of colonialism, missionary Christianity and emerging nationalism. This presents an intriguing example of the creative appropriation of Christianity in African literature. The novel reflects Ngũgĩ’s criticism of a type of Christianity that is irrelevant to the daily concerns and social, cultural and political challenges faced by its adherents, but it also reveals his hope that an alternative, contextually meaningful configuration of the Christian faith is possible.

Brendan Nicholls (2010, 46) raises the question why the ‘ostensibly revolutionary potential’ of a hybrid character such as Waiyaki, who is clearly privileged in the text, is negated in the novel. His answer relates the figure of Waiyaki to Ngũgĩ himself, specifically ‘his contradictory position within the educated élite in post-Independence Kenya’ (ibid), which is an interesting suggestion. However, I would like to question the idea that the political potential of Waiyaki is necessarily negated because of his ostensible defeat. Keeping in mind the similarities between Waiyaki and Jesus Christ, we are reminded that the death of a Messiah actually can have life-giving potential and can bring about salvation. Ngũgĩ does not explicitly hint at this possibility, yet the closing sentences about the river Honia flowing between the ridges, down through the valley of life, ‘reaching into the heart of the people of Makuyu and Kameno’, emphasise the uniting rather than dividing function of the river. The implicit suggestion, then, is that the sacrifice of Waiyaki and Nyambura somehow has a purpose and that their reconciliatory path between tradition, Christianity and modernity in the longer term might reunite the ridges.

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