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History, Intertextuality, and Gender in Ngugi's *Petals of Blood*

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In this article, I will argue that *Petals of Blood* offers at least two models for anti-Imperial history.¹ The first is a model of black world historical struggle. We might call this epochal struggle. The second is a model of Kenyan national struggle. We might call this a generational struggle. *Petals of Blood* is interesting, because in it we see Ngugi's political vision widening out from a decolonising nationalism to broader anti-Imperial axes of identification. I think that this widening out can be traced to Ngugi's University of Leeds research on George Lamming in particular, and to his wider reading in Caribbean literature more generally. It is useful here to recall that *Petals of Blood* is named after a line in Derek Walcott's poem, 'The Swamp',² and that it alludes to at least two of V. S. Naipaul's novels (*The Mystic Masseur* and *The Mimic Men*)³ as the narrative unfolds. But it is the influence of Lamming in particular that we might identify with the making of *Petals of Blood*. In fact, Lamming's *In the Castle of My Skin*⁴ might even be read as the genesis of a plot structure for *Petals of Blood*. As we know, *Petals of Blood* begins with the drought (mirroring Lamming's flood), continues with the journey to the city to protest to the MP (equating to the strike and the riots in *In the Castle of My Skin*), and it concludes with a final phase in which the apparent marketability of Theng'eta results in the influx of corrupting economic forces and the establishment of New Ilmorog (just as Lamming's landlord Creighton has sold up and the new owners have decided to sell the villagers' homes out from under them). The death of Ngugi's Nyakinyua before she loses her land mirrors closely the death of the old woman in Lamming's village before the Friendly Society and the Penny Bank evict her husband to the Alms House. Both novels mix third person and first person narration. Both interweave a series of perspectively-bound narratives amplify each other's dimensions and build to the profundity of a fully elaborated historical perspective.

In Caribbean literature and in the black diaspora more generally, Ngugi discovers a shared past of world historical proportions, and a community whose grievances and possibilities are global in scope. Within this radically amplified arena, *Petals of Blood* undertakes an aesthetic of reconnection in which Caribbean, African-American and African struggles for liberation are mutually informing and enlivening. Accordingly, the affiliations of *Petals of Blood* are diasporic, the scale of its ambition is epic, and I would argue that its structure is almost biblical. This is no exaggeration. In *Homecoming*, Ngugi writes that ‘there is something about the Jewish experience – the biblical experience – which appeals to the West Indian novelist. Biblical man has been a slave and an exile from home’.⁵ We should remember here that the Yeatsian section headings of *Petals of Blood* (‘Walking . . . Toward Bethlehem . . . To Be Born . . . Again . . . La Luta Continua!’) read like an extremely abbreviated account of Christian belief, encompassing the Jewish exodus from Egypt, the birth of Christ and, naturally enough, the Second Coming. What I think we have in *Petals of Blood* is a vision of socialist liberation as the realisation of a faith in collective human potentials, and a vision of black world history as culminating in apotheosis. In this understanding, freedom crafts a god who may be recognised only in the dignity of other men (and women!). Hence, *Petals of Blood* is, in one possible reading, nothing less than a bible of African world-historical experience. Its theology, if that is the right word, very precisely engaged with global Cold War politics, opposing itself quite consciously to anti-Communist Christian evangelism during the Cold War (Wurmbrand, Graham).⁶ We might say that *Petals of Blood* opposes evangelical Christianity’s ideological functions during the Cold War with a form of theological belief rooted in worldly institutions.

That leads us onto the second model of history in *Petals of Blood*. This second model is of Kenyan national history as a generational history of struggle. The novel is using an idea of generational history, derived from Gikuyu customary institutions, to think about democratic forms

of political power. To understand this, we need to remember that *Petals of Blood* relies to some extent upon indigenous mechanisms of naming associated with circumcision and clitoridectomy. Gikuyu oral history was remembered via the significant names given annually to the circumcision age-sets, and these names link each generation to the significant historical events that accompany their rite of passage into manhood or womanhood. These processes provide one means via which Gikuyu oral history was remembered and retold. We see an example of this mnemonic history at work when Munira narrates his recollection of going to school at Siriana:

Siriana, you should have been there in our time, before and during the period of the big, costly European dance of death and even after: you might say that our petty lives and their fears and crises took place against a background of tremendous changes and troubles, as can be seen by the names given to the age-sets between Nyabani [‘Japan’] and Hitira [‘Hitler’]: Mwomboko [a dance] . . . Karanji [‘college’?], Boti [‘forty’], Ngunga [‘army worms’], Muthuu [a dance performed before circumcision], Ng’aragu Ya Mianga, Bamiti [‘permit’], Gicina Bangi, Cugini-Mburaki [‘black market’].⁷

The names of the age-sets were given annually, after the harvest, so that Gikuyu oral history had a seasonal and cyclical pattern. As we can see, many of these names are Anglicised corruptions. Some allude to colonial conflict. For example, the Hitira age-set was named in solidarity with Hitler, a fellow enemy of the British colonial power. In its filtering of communal history through the age-sets, *Petals of Blood* is privileging a notion of generational history. When this history is viewed diachronically through its naming mechanisms, it gestures towards a lineage of struggle. The novel also draws on the Gikuyu custom of *itwika*, in which there was a peaceful transfer of power from one generation to the next, approximately every 30 years. This peaceful transfer of power ensured a ‘democratic’ system of government, because no generation could exercise power for all time.⁸ There

are signposts in *Petals of Blood* that it is reviving this idea of *itwika* as a form of cyclical and revolutionary democracy. *Itwika* was introduced when the *iregi* age-set revolted against a despotic king, following which power passed peacefully to the *ndemi* age-set who settled to cultivate the land. In *Petals of Blood*, Karega's name invokes the *iregi* age-set. Nyakinyua and her husband are of the *ndemi* age-set.⁹ When, Nyakinyua refers to the corrupt Member of Parliament for Ilmorog as 'this Ndamathia which only takes but never gives back',¹⁰ she refers directly to the banishing of a river-monster (Ndamathia) by the Ndemi generation after the first *itwika*.¹¹

We can see here the narrative's blueprint for the revolutionary overthrow of the neo-colonial Kenyan government. Via its heroes of resistance – Ndemi, Kimathi and Karega – *Petals of Blood* argues for the revolutionary institution of a 'democratic' form of Gikuyu government to replace colonial and neocolonial misrule. History here is generational, and therefore ultimately democratic.

Of course, generational histories require a vehicle of production. Implicit in this generational theory of political power is a rhetoric of reproduction which takes women's mothering capacities as its locus. But this rhetoric of reproduction is fraught because paternity does not work in this novel – the father's name will not stay still. To put this another way, the web of cultural and historical allusions in *Petals of Blood* makes the putative father's name multiple instead of unitary. In other words, *Petals of Blood*'s affiliation with wider modes of struggle (in the Caribbean, among African-Americans) means that we soon encounter a proliferation of signs that undercut the act of naming that ordinarily brings paternity and a male lineage into being.

I want to demonstrate this proliferation of signs in the examples of Abdulla and his Mau Mau comrade Ole Masai. In a discussion with Wanja and Karega about names, Abdulla reveals that his own name has its origins in a category mistake:

Karega quoted the proverb. ‘Somebody a long time ago asked the question: What’s in a name? And he answered that a rose would still be a rose even by another name.’ . . .

‘Names are actually funny. My real name is not Abdulla. It is Murira [one who asks].

But I baptised myself Abdulla. Now everybody calls me Abdulla.’

‘You mean, you thought Abdulla was a Christian name?’ Wanja asked.

‘Yes. Yes.’¹²

Abdulla’s real name [meaning ‘one who asks’] poses questions and although his self-given name passes as a mistake, it quite fortuitously alludes to the dissident Kenyan Swahili poet, Abdilatif Abdalla, who was sentenced to three years imprisonment in 1969, for publishing a pamphlet entitled ‘Kenya, Where Are We Heading?’¹³ The name of Ole Masai, Abdulla’s comrade in Mau Mau has similarly plural origins. Popularly known by the Gikuyu nickname ‘Muhindi,’¹⁴ he is the son of Njogu’s daughter and Ramjeeh Ramlagoon Dharamshah, who occupied the shop prior to Abdulla’s arrival. ‘Ramlagoon’ is, of course, an allusion to ‘Ramlogan,’ the troublesome shop-owner in V. S. Naipaul’s *The Mystic Masseur*. We are told in *Petals of Blood* that Ole Masai hates ‘himself, his mother, his father, his divided self’.¹⁵ His name denotes ‘the son of a Maasai’¹⁶ and his character is ‘based in part on Joseph Murumbi (who is half-Maasai, half-Goan), a Kenya African Union activist educated in India [and the] first vice-president of Kenya.’¹⁷ Where, then, should we locate the name of the father that Ole Masai hates? Is it Dharamshah, Murumbi, or Ramlogan? Is his name given by a Maasai, a Goan, or Ole’s comrades among the Mau Mau insurgents? Equally, why should Ole Masai hate his ‘divided self’ when his comrade Abdulla’s name is a mistaken Christian baptism and when Ole Masai himself descends partly from a picaresque novel by the Caribbean novelist, V. S. Naipaul?

We have trawled through a fair amount of fine detail and I would like to conclude with some larger propositions. The first of these is that *Petals of Blood*'s two models of history (generational and epochal) simply cannot work together. And the reason that they do not work together is that they occlude a key term – and that term is femininity in all of its agencies, varieties and possibilities. For *Petals of Blood*'s ideas of generational struggle to work, we would need a stable notion of lineage. For a stable notion of lineage to work in a patriarchal society, we would need a stable idea of paternity in place. And the only way that paternity can ever be stable is via an act of unequivocal naming when the father claims the child for culture. This is something of a difficulty in a novel whose literary allusions and political affiliations are promiscuous. This is also something of a difficulty in a novel whose key female character is Wanja, who becomes a highly successful prostitute in the final part of the novel. These difficulties are not insurmountable. *Petals of Blood* is profound enough and rich enough to answer them all. One possibility we might entertain when reading for history and for intertextuality in *Petals of Blood* is to turn towards a clandestine intertext in the novel – the covert history of female struggle in Kenya and especially the secret history of prostitutes who turned their revolutionary sexuality to the service of the Mau Mau struggle. By reading the novel against the grain in that way, we might exceed narrow rhetorics of reproduction and begin to comprehend new forms of revolutionary agency.

¹ Parts of this article have previously appeared in modified form in Brendon Nicholls, *Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Gender, and the Ethics of Postcolonial Reading* (Burlington, Vermont: Ashgate, 2010). They are reprinted here by kind permission of Ashgate.

² Walcott, Derek, 'The Swamp,' *Collected Poems, 1948-1984* by Derek Walcott (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1987), pp. 59-60.

³ Naipaul, V. S., *The Mimic Men* (London: Picador, 2002 [1969]) and *The Mystic Masseur* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1977).

⁴ Lamming, George, *In the Castle of my Skin* (New York: Longman, 1979).

⁵ Ngugi wa Thiong'o, *Homecoming: Essays on African and Caribbean Literature, Culture and Politics* (London: Heinemann, 1975), p. 89.

⁶ Graham, Billy, *World Aflame* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1965) and Wurmbrand, Richard, *Tortured for Christ: Christians Suffering in Communist Prisons* (New York: Spire Books, 1969).

⁷ Ngugi wa Thiong'o, *Petals of Blood* (London: Heinemann, 1986 [1977]), p. 27. See Sicherman, Carol, *Ngugi wa Thiong'o: The Making of a Rebel* (London: Hans Zell, 1990), pp. 236-9, for a detailed explanation of the names of the age sets. All translations are taken from this source.

⁸ Kenyatta, Jomo, *Facing Mount Kenya: The Tribal Life of the Gikuyu* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1968 [1938]), pp. 187-97. See also Carol Sicherman, *Making of a Rebel*, pp. 166-7.

⁹ Carol Sicherman, *Making of a Rebel*, p. 166.

¹⁰ Ngugi wa Thiong'o, *Petals of Blood*, p. 116.

¹¹ Jomo Kenyatta, *Facing Mount Kenya*, pp. 187-97.

¹² Ngugi wa Thiong'o, *Petals of Blood*, p. 61.

¹³ Ngugi wa Thiong'o, *Moving the Centre: The Struggle for Cultural Freedoms* (London: James Currey, 1993), p. 94.

¹⁴ Ngugi wa Thiong'o, *Petals of Blood*, p. 137.

¹⁵ Ngugi wa Thiong'o, *Petals of Blood*, p. 137.

¹⁶ Carol Sicherman, *Making of a Rebel*, p. 228.

¹⁷ Carol Sicherman, *Making of a Rebel*, p. 152.