
Revolution and Recidivism: The Problem of Kenyan History in the Plays of Ngugi wa Thiong'o

Nicholas Brown

Given the immense power of the regime

. . . .

*One would think they wouldn't have to
Fear an open word from a simple man.*

—Bertolt Brecht

In a recent essay, “Art War with the State,” Ngugi wa Thiong'o engages in a dialogue with Brecht's “The Anxieties of the Régime,” the poem from which the above fragment is taken. Ngugi, who has been censored, imprisoned, and finally exiled by the Kenyan government, has more right than anybody to pose anew the question of the “subversive” power of art. This question had begun to seem at best self-indulgent—in the context of a European or American intellectual sphere that is ready enough to assimilate the most apparently “transgressive” avant-garde aesthetics under a contemplative attitude towards the object, and a commercial sphere that immediately makes over dissent and subversion into the “alternative” and into “shock value”—at worst an ideological mystification. But Ngugi's theater, which was shut down more than once by the Kenyan state, and was ultimately razed by state police, permits us to take seriously the possibility that art can be at war—in more than a metaphorical sense—with the state. What indeed is the origin of the regime's anxiety? Is it mere paranoia? Or did Ngugi's theater pose a real threat to the neocolonial state in Kenya?

Ngugi wa Thiong'o's radical transformation of the East African theater apparatus begins in earnest in 1976 with the origins of the Kamiriithu theater group—a village-based collective of peasants, workers, petty-bourgeois, and intellectuals—which produced only two plays (*I Will Marry When I Want* [*Ngaahika Ndeenda*] and *Mother Sing For Me* [*Maitu Njugira*]) before being shut down for good by the government of Daniel arap Moi. I will begin, however, with a somewhat earlier work, *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi*,¹ which he and Micere Githae Mugo started in 1974 and which was published just before Ngugi began work on the Kamiriithu project. The *Trial of Dedan Kimathi* shares the central preoccupation of the Kamiriithu plays: the attempt to narrate, and in narrating to re-think the meaning of, the Mau Mau uprising of 1952-56, whose role in forging Kenyan independence is still a matter of debate.² Moreover, it already contains, in embryonic form, the problematic that haunts the Kamiriithu plays and which will occupy the remainder of this essay.

The Trial of Dedan Kimathi begins, appropriately enough, in a courtroom, at the arraignment of Dedan Kimathi, the Mau Mau leader whose

capture and execution in 1956 put a close to the already-waning period of Mau Mau resistance (see Venys 63). But the courtroom trial only frames the real trials of the play, which are four temptations Kimathi, sequestered in his cell before the courtroom trial begins, undergoes before his martyrdom. Kimathi is first visited by his capturer, Henderson, who offers him the collaborationist option: he may save himself by betraying his fellow-fighters in the forest. The second visitation, by a triumvirate of bankers (British, Indian, and African) represents the temptation to trade real victory for a share in the spoils of colonialism. The third temptation is brought by another trio—Business Executive, Politician, and Priest, all African—who represent the hollow nationalization or Africanization of the bourgeoisie, the political class, and the Church (and perhaps the intellectual class more generally). The fourth, as Henderson returns—with gloves off, so to speak—is to capitulate under brutal violence. Kimathi refuses to submit, and is sentenced to death.

Interleaved with this narrative is the story of a Boy and a Girl, who first come onstage locked in a deadly battle over a few coins tossed by a tourist. The subplot of the Boy and the Girl represents colonialism in quite another way, as a fourth principle character, a Mau Mau sympathizer, named simply the Woman, observes:

The same old story. Our people . . . tearing one another . . . and all because of the crumbs thrown at them by the exploiting foreigners. Our own food eaten and the leftovers thrown to us—in our own land, where we should have the whole share. (18)

Continuing this allegorical subplot, the Woman ultimately unifies the two in a common effort to free Kimathi, as she asks them to smuggle a gun into the courtroom. The lesson is clear enough: that “tribalism” and other divisions, really induced by competition for scraps of colonial power, are only overcome by an armed struggle against a common enemy, forging a new national consciousness. The climax, however, as Kimathi’s death sentence is announced, is more ambiguous. The Boy and the Girl, holding the gun together, stand up, crying “Not dead” and a shot is fired; but darkness falls, obscuring the meaning of the shot. But then “the stage gives way to a mighty crowd of workers and peasants at the centre of which are Boy and Girl, singing a thunderous freedom song” (84, rendered in Swahili in the English text):

People’s Song and Dance:

SOLOISTS: Ho-oo, ho-oo mto mkuu wateremka!
 GROUP: Ho-oo, ho-oo mto mkuu wateremka!
 SOLOISTS: Magharibi kwenda mashariki
 GROUP: Mto mkuu wateremka
 SOLOISTS: Kaskazini kwenda kusini
 GROUP: Mto mkuu wateremka
 SOLOISTS: Hooo-i, hoo-i kumbe adui kwela mjinga
 GROUP: Hooo-i, hoo-i kumbe adui kwela mjinga
 SOLOISTS: Akaua mwanza mimba wetu

GROUP: Akijitia yeye mshindi
 SOLOISTS: Wengi zaidi wakazaliwa
 GROUP: Tushangilie mazao mapya
 SOLOISTS: Vitinda mimba marungu juu
 GROUP: Tushambilie adui mpya
 SOLOISTS: Hoo-ye, hoo-ye wafanya kazi wa ulimwengu
 GROUP: Hoo-ye, hoo-ye wafanya kazi wa ulimwengu
 SOLOISTS: Na wakulima wote wadogo
 GROUP: Tushikaneni mikono sote
 SOLOISTS: Tutwange nyororo za wabeberu
 GROUP: Hatutaki tumwa tena.
 SOLOISTS: Hoo-ye, hoo-ye umoja wetu ni nguvu yetu
 GROUP: Hoo-ye, hoo-ye umoja wetu ni nguvu yetu
 SOLOISTS: Tutapigana mpaka mwisho
 GROUP: Tufunge vita na tutashinda
 SOLOISTS: Majembe juu na mapanga juu
 GROUP: Tujikomboa tujenge upya. (84-85)
 SOLOISTS: Ho-oo, ho-oo great calm river!
 GROUP: Ho-oo, ho-oo great calm river!
 SOLOISTS: From the west to the east
 GROUP: Great calm river
 SOLOISTS: From the north to the south
 GROUP: Great calm river
 SOLOISTS: Hoo-i, hoo-i how the enemy is truly a fool
 GROUP: Hoo-i, hoo-i how the enemy is truly a fool
 SOLOISTS: He killed our first-born
 GROUP: Making him the victor
 SOLOISTS: Many more have been born
 GROUP: May we celebrate a new birth
 SOLOISTS: The last-born, fighting-stick held high
 GROUP: May we ambush the new enemy
 SOLOISTS: Hoo-ye, hoo-ye workers of the world
 GROUP: Hoo-ye, hoo-ye workers of the world
 SOLOISTS: And all the peasants
 GROUP: Let us all link arms
 SOLOISTS: Let us attack the strong man in his weak spot
 GROUP: We don't want slavery again
 SOLOISTS: Hoo-ye, hoo-ye our unity is our strength
 GROUP: Hoo-ye, hoo-ye our unity is our strength
 SOLOISTS: We will struggle until the end
 GROUP: Stand we firm, we will win
 SOLOISTS: Hoes and matchets held high
 GROUP: May we redeem ourselves and rebuild anew.
 The first substantive lines of this song celebrate a truly dialectical turn:
 Hoo-i, hoo-i how the enemy is truly a fool
 He killed our first-born
 Making him the victor

The enemy is a fool because killing Kimathi made of him a martyr: the execution of Kimathi is simultaneously defeat and victory. But, like the shot that ended the action of the play, this martyrdom is itself ambiguous. What exactly is celebrated here? For what revolution was Kimathi's death decisive in any other but a negative way? Does this poem, in commemorating Kimathi's martyrdom, insist that it ultimately led to real independence?³ Or does it, rather, refer to a future victory, against a "new enemy"?

The temporality of these lines is deliberately ambiguous. (In fact, the entire song is temporally ambiguous, tending to gravitate towards the subjunctive.) I have had to translate "akaua" as "he killed," but the *-ka-* infix denotes not necessarily the past, but simply narrative succession. Generally a sequence of verbs in the *-ka-* tense is preceded by a verb with a more concrete temporality (a series of instructions, for example, would begin in the present tense), but here that is not the case. The following line is temporally indistinct as well, using the *-ki-* infix that here hinges on the tense of the previous phrase (which, as was just noted, has no distinct temporality), an effect that can be translated into English by the progressive. In the context of the play these lines refer to Kimathi; but when the play is first published and performed in 1976 (Sicherman 10), another political martyrdom would have been fresh in the mind of any Kenyan audience: the brutal murder, almost certainly by government forces, of the politician J. M. Kariuki (himself a hero of the Mau Mau period)⁴ in March 1975, an assassination that provoked rioting and "the biggest political crisis which the [Kenyatta] regime had ever faced" (*Independent Kenya* 33).

It is not necessary to grant this specific (and speculative) interpretation to see that the "new enemy" that appears four lines after this ambiguous martyrdom certainly seems to open up the play to contemporary history rather than bringing the curtain down on the defeat of Mau Mau. But there is a sliness to this line, too, that depends on the worn-out quality of the word *umoja*, "unity" (literally, one-ness) a few lines later. A hasty reading or hearing of these lines celebrating the defeat of a "new enemy" with "our unity" might turn up nothing more than the submissive repetition of a constant refrain in Kenyan political discourse: the use of "unity" as a justification for repression of dissidence or, in a somewhat less ideologically suspect context, as a call for the end of "tribalism" (which call has also often been, since colonial times, a justification for repression). Here, of course, "unity" in fact names a call for a revolutionary proletarian consciousness as figured by the Boy and the Girl; but "Our unity is our strength" sounds like something that might have come from the lips of Moi as easily as from the pen of Ngugi. Similarly for "May we redeem ourselves and rebuild anew": on a casual reading, this might sound like the perfectly acceptable Kenyatta-era rhetoric of "Harambee," the anti-tribalist national slogan of "pulling together."

Of course, the lines "Hoo-ye, hoo-ye workers of the world / And all the peasants / Let us all link arms" recall a quite different rhetoric, paraphrasing as they do the peroration of *The Communist Manifesto*. But the phrase "wafanyi kazi wa ulimwengo" has none of the recognizable urgency that the analogous phrase has in English, and "Tushikaneni mikono sote" ("let us all

link arms”) is much less threatening than “Unite!” “Majembe” and “mapanga,” a few lines later, are indeed “hoes” and “matchets,” which are of course symbols of the peasantry. But, besides being part of the peasant means of production, the *jembe* and the *panga* are formidable weapons: the machete and the Kenyan hoe, which looks more like a long-handled pick-axe. The peasant with *jembe* held high flips rather easily between a homely and a militant image.

The point here is not that the song cannot decide what it is trying to convey, but that it is in fact a sly communication in an acceptable language of a forbidden message. Taken at face value, it appeals to national unity, to Independence as the “defeat” of the colonial power (a vexed issue to which we will have to return), to the rustic values of the hoe and the matchet. But, attended to more closely, it constitutes an appeal to contemporary proletarian class-consciousness, to the defeat of the national bourgeoisie, and to a militant peasantry. At this moment, the very last moment of the play, the whole of what has passed before suddenly changes meaning. Or rather, it retains its old meaning but gains a new allegorical layer: the drama of the Boy and the Girl over a few coins is still an allegory of colonialism, but it applies equally to a neocolonial situation (understood as the perpetuation of colonial structures in a politically independent state whose economy is nonetheless dominated by foreign capital) where “tribal welfare associations” fight over shares in parastatal and multinational ventures. Kimathi’s four temptations turn into historical moments that have yet to be overcome: the betrayal of democratic national ideals in order to curry favor with the West; the scramble for the spoils of the old colonial system; the replacement of a truly egalitarian consciousness with a petty-bourgeois African nationalism; and the smothering of dissent with brutal reprisals. The daring suggestion, which could never have been made in other than this veiled allegorical fashion, is that the road not taken by Kimathi is the road taken by Kenyatta. Finally, Kimathi (Kariuki?) is not so much a martyr for Independence as a martyr for a peasant revolution which is still to come.

The Trial of Dedan Kimathi, along with the more radical theater experiments I shall turn to in a moment, ultimately calls for a redemption of the present in a utopian future: “Tujikomboa tujenge upya.” The verb *kukomboa* is already a dialectical word in Swahili, meaning “to redeem” but more literally “to hollow out,” carrying within itself both images of plenitude and poverty. *Upya* here translates most fluidly as “anew,” but it is in fact the nominal form of the normally adjectival radical *-pya*. Ordinarily, this would signify something like “novelty,” but this is obviously too prosaic for the context; perhaps it might be more accurate to translate the last line of the play as “May we redeem ourselves (through hardship) that we might build the New.” In its final moment, then, *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* is not so much the celebration of a revolutionary past (although it is this too) as the call to Utopia through a revolutionary future.

But hasn’t this “future” already come and gone once already? The allegorical double meaning of the play depends on the elision of the difference between the colonial and the postcolonial. This logic, carried further, might prompt the question of what difference there might be between the

outcome of Mau Mau and some future uprising (such as the failed coup attempts of 1981 and 1982, which only helped Moi to consolidate power). The question is a practical one, and not easy to answer; the point here is that this particular allegorical form evades the issue altogether. Left out when postcolonial history is collapsed into a narrative of the colonial period (either this or the reverse occurs also in each of the Kamiriithu plays) are the crucial years between 1956 and 1963, when, with Mau Mau defeated, the British negotiated a transfer of power with very favorable terms for the settler and expatriate communities and with very little change of existing economic structures. *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* projects a utopian possibility that is potentially the future of the present; but it does so by animating with the urgency of the present a revolutionary past whose future was far from utopian. If *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* attempts to represent the genuinely revolutionary possibility of a peasant and proletarian class-consciousness, this attempt is frustrated by Kenyan history—the fundamental referent of both this play and the Kamiriithu productions—which turns this utopian possibility into the memory of a missed opportunity.

Although the Kamiriithu plays, as we shall see, develop a similar structure on a different plane, Ngugi's experimental theater at Kamiriithu admits of an altogether different mode of explication than his earlier plays, one which depends less upon the text as the origin of meaning and more on reading the circumstances of production as text.⁵ The narrative of Ngugi's experience with the Kamiriithu theater group up to 1977—a history to which we will return—is movingly told in Ngugi's *Detained: A Writer's Prison Diary* (72-80), which was largely written—on toilet paper—during the author's year in detention for the first production at Kamiriithu.

Kamiriithu is, first of all, a place, a village in what used to be known as the White Highlands; a reader approaching Ngugi's theater from this period from a perspective that ignores this fact will come away disappointed. The primacy of the local is by now a cliché—"Think globally, act locally" being only the most easily appropriated slogan for personalized responsibility in the face of epistemic problems—but Ngugi's Kamiriithu dramaturgy is profoundly embedded in a very particular, and short-lived, political situation. An understanding of Ngugi's theater in relation to this situation tells us something more generally about the possibilities of art in a period of social unrest; but to begin with the general would ultimately be fruitless. Nor is this to say that Ngugi's plays themselves contain no wider significations; on the contrary, a sympathetic reading of his work must come to terms with the fact that at the center of Ngugi's work is the attempt to represent History itself. But the function of the particular is quite different from that which pertains in, for example, the work of Achebe or Kane, where the particular is first and foremost to be understood as an allegory of the general. The fictional histories of Umuaro or of the Diallobé are indeed local histories, and derive much of their impact from the violence done to particular modes of life and speech; but they are narrated in such a way that the general situation of which they are the allegory is apprehended almost simultaneously with the particular. Ngugi's work figures this

relationship quite differently, in that the particular through which the general is to be apprehended has none of the transparency it has in these other writers; for a reader or observer outside of this context and unfamiliar with Kenyan history, in particular of the Mau Mau rebellion and the vexed history of Kenyan independence, the story being told remains somewhat opaque, perhaps pointlessly didactic, stereotyped, even clumsy.

Ngugi does nothing to dispel this opacity by leaving important words, phrases, and songs in Swahili or Gikuyu even in his English and “translated” works; indeed, now is probably the time to address, briefly, Ngugi’s famous “farewell” to the English language (*Decolonising* xiv) and his determination to compose only in Gikuyu and Swahili. One is treading on treacherous ground if one takes too far the epistemological argument that African experience can only be captured in African languages (see 4-33). After all, the experience Ngugi narrates above all others is the experience of worker and peasant life under multinational capitalism, “our people’s anti-imperialist struggles to liberate their productive forces from foreign control” (29)—an experience that does not originate in an African context in the same way as do African languages. Similarly, the proprietary view of culture—in which European languages are seen to be stealing the vitality of African languages “to enrich other tongues” (8) in the same way as neo-colonial economic regimes enrich the first world at the expense of the third (see also *Penpoints* 127)—has polemical value but does not do justice to the complex dynamics of cultural borrowing, to the possibilities of hybridity and *métissage*. From a perspective of “cultural decolonization,” neither can this impulse towards “national” languages be rigorously separated from the petty-bourgeois impulse towards cosmetic “Kenyanization” from which Ngugi is careful to distance himself and which, as we have seen from the example of *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi*, is always to be criticized or lampooned in his plays and fiction.

This is not to dismiss out of hand the question of language; on the contrary, it will soon become apparent that it is Ngugi’s shift to Gikuyu that opens up a whole new set of dramatic possibilities and strategies that had not existed before. One might conceive of this shift in terms of audience: how else could a historical and self-conscious awareness of their proletarianization be inculcated in a Gikuyu audience except through their language? But here the word *audience* is already wrong and implies a set of relations which Ngugi’s theater aims to clear away; further, to leave the matter there would oversimplify the problem by framing in purely ethnic terms what is, here, also an issue of class relations. It is not that the Gikuyu are “addressed” by Ngugi through the medium of the play; rather, composing in Gikuyu makes possible a whole new set of social relations among the intellectuals and peasants, proletarians, and bourgeois that made up the Kamiriithu collective.

We might think of the choice to compose in Gikuyu as a means by which the play “addresses itself” not to an audience but to a situation of which it is the narration:

Ngaahika Ndeenda [*I Will Marry When I Want*, the first play to be produced by the Kamiriithu group] depicts the proletarianization of the peasantry in a neo-colonial society. Concretely it shows the way the Kiguunda family, a poor peasant family, who have to supplement their subsistence on their one and a half acres with the sale of their labor, is finally deprived of even the one-and-a-half acres by a multi-national consortium of Japanese and Euro-American industrialists and bankers aided by the native comprador landlords and businessmen. (Ngugi, *Decolonising* 44)

This is an accurate enough summary by Ngugi of his and Ngugi wa Mirii's own play, at least as it appears at first glance. But *I Will Marry When I Want* is less a representation of social reality than a process or event that both prepares and allegorizes some quite other historical possibility. Indeed, Ngugi's dramaturgy only makes sense within the context of an historical situation that it not only represents, but addresses in order to change.

This brings us back to the geographical place on which the drama of the Kamiriithu cultural project was staged. Kamiriithu is a village in Limuru, in the Kiambu district, part of the former "white highlands," where the historical ground of the Mau Mau rebellion is almost dizzyingly close.⁶ Although the geographical location "Kamiriithu" predates the colonial period, Kamiriithu village was first set up as an "emergency village" during the Mau Mau period. As in some Central American countries, areas where guerrilla activity was suspected were razed, suspected Mau Mau sympathizers and guerrillas like Ngugi's older brother sent to detention camps or killed, and new, concentrated, easily administered and isolated villages set up in the place of the older, more diffuse communities. The narrative of the play *I Will Marry When I Want* resonates with this much larger history; but also it frames the memories of the participants themselves. The colonial-era events to which the text of *I Will Marry When I Want* constantly refers took place within living memory; in a particularly poignant example, a prop manager who "made imitation guns for the play at Kamiriithu was the very person who used to make actual guns for the Mau Mau guerillas in the fifties" (*Decolonising* 55). Within the play this revolutionary memory is vividly and painfully enacted:

It was then
 That the state of Emergency was declared over Kenya.
 Our Patriots,
 Men and women of
 Limuru and the whole country,
 Were arrested!
 . . .
 Our homes were burnt down.
 We were jailed,
 We were taken to detention camps,
 Some of us were crippled through beatings.
 Others were castrated.
 Our women were raped with bottles. (27)

But it is not only the colonial past and the struggle against it which are inscribed in the very landscape in which the theater sat, but the neocolonial present as well. The arrogance of the original settler expropriation of land—the dispossession of the peasants’ means of production that is the engine that has driven Kenyan history—was such that near Kamiriithu some of the most fertile land on the continent was converted into hunting grounds, race tracks, and golf courses for the entertainment of the European farmers. Twenty-five years after the Mau Mau uprising, when Ngugi engaged in his Kenyan theater projects—indeed today, fifty years later—the old pleasure grounds—controlled now by the new ruling class, for whom the landless peasants were still a source of cheap labor—remained as powerful reminders of how little had changed with the end of direct European colonialism.

This neocolonial situation is, of course, the setting of the play itself, which, as we have seen, represents the present-day continuation of the colonial expropriation of land:

Our family land was given to homeguards.

Today I am just a laborer on farms owned by Ahab Kioi wa Kanoru.

(29)

The very name of the African landlord—baptized Ahab, after the ultimately humbled King of Israel, of whom “there was none who sold himself to do what was evil in the sight of the Lord like Ahab” (I Kings 21.25)—is a complex signifier that pulls together both historical moments, the colonial and the neocolonial, in a single figure. Besides appearing to be a transformed version of the settler name “Connor,” “Kanoru” simply interposes a syllable into the name of Kenya’s ruling (and, at the time of these plays, only) political party, KANU (Kenya African National Union). The form of the name (“wa Kanoru”) suggests “son of Kanoru,” son of KANU, as well as “son of Connor.” Although KANU was originally the more radical of the two parties existing at Independence, it gradually came under control of GEMA (Gikuyu, Embu, and Meru Association), a “tribal welfare organization” that controlled much of the land in Limuru as well as interest in manufacturing concerns. The KANU government, allied from an early stage with comprador business interests, is accused of granting foreign multinationals fantastic terms to locate factories in Kenya, without instituting any controls on where profits accumulate.⁷

The foreign-owned Bata shoe factory, which comprises the major industry in Kamiriithu, is one such entity, referred to here by a character in *I Will Marry When I Want*:

You sweat and sweat and sweat.

Siren.

It’s six o’clock, time to go home.

Day in, day out,

Week after week!

A fortnight is over.

During that period

You have made shoes worth millions.
 You are given a mere two hundred shillings,
 The rest is sent to Europe. (34)

But this contemporary experience refers back to the past: the factory alluded to here is dramatized as a part of the characters' (contemporary) daily life, but the "general strike" (68) that comes up later in the play was actually a 1948 strike at this very factory, well within the memory of many villagers. This event, while not strictly a general strike, was simultaneous with a more general phenomenon with which *I Will Marry When I Want* links it. Mass "oathing," the administration of oaths of unity among squatter populations, began in Kiambu district during this time and spread to the rest of the highland areas. The "general strike" is enacted in the play not through a representation of the strike itself but through an oath administered to the strikers. The militant (indeed, military) language of the oath makes it clear that, within the context of the play, this oathing is identical with the Mau Mau movement (indeed, the oathing of squatters during this time, simultaneous with the Bata strike, did contribute to the Mau Mau movement [Sicherman 74]):

If I am asked to hide weapons
 I shall obey without questions.
 If I am called upon to serve this organization
 By day or night,
 I'll do so!
 If I fail to do so
 May this, the people's oath, destroy me
 And the blood of the poor turn against me. (69)

The narrative building-blocks of the anti-colonial struggle—which in themselves can be acceptable content for the KANU government—refer to a moment in history, brief but within memory, when the peasantry and rural proletariat seemed poised to take over the position of the subject of Kenyan history. As with *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* but centered in the present rather than in the past, the contemporary history which dominates the play is narrated in continuity with this older history: "African employers are no different . . . from the Boer white landlords" (20). Moreover, the elision of the moment of Independence is thoroughgoing, so that the strike against the Bata plant in 1948 becomes a protest against current conditions, and the Mau Mau oath of unity ultimately becomes a call for revolutionary action in the present, once again projecting, by means of a revolutionary past, the possibility of a future when this appropriation of History by the peasantry and proletariat has indeed taken place:

A day will surely come when
 If a bean falls to the ground
 It'll be split equally among us,
 For -

The trumpet—
 Of the workers has been blown
 To wake all the peasants
 To wake all the poor.
 To wake the masses (115)

The elision of the break between the colonial and postcolonial situations is figured not only within the play but, by a twist of fate, between the play and its social context. In a dazzling if depressing irony, the play mentions an old colonial law designed to prevent the swearing of Mau Mau oaths:

It was soon after this
 That the colonial government
 Forbade people to sing or dance,
 It forbade a gathering of more than five.

This law, stating that “more than five people were deemed to constitute a public gathering and needed a licence” (Ngugi, *Detained* 37), is still on the books: and it is precisely this license which was withdrawn from Kamiriithu by the government in November 1977, effectively ending the run of *I Will Marry When I Want* (58).

But the content of the play forms only part of the allegorical raw material of the play; as with Brecht’s learning-plays, or *Lehrstücke*, the circumstances of its production and the relations among the participants and between the participants and the audience determine the meaning of the play as much as the content itself. In the following pages I will refer to Brecht’s dramatic theory, particularly to the theory of the *Lehrstück*, or learning-play, but I should make it clear that this should not be taken to represent a thesis on the influence of Brecht on Ngugi’s dramaturgy. The importance of Brecht’s work for Ngugi is well known, but we have every reason to be suspicious of the language of “influence,” a force that only works in one direction. The Brechtian language of *Umfunktionalisierung*—“re-functioning,” which implies a kind of retro-fitting of older techniques to meet new circumstances—poses a solution by reversing the positions of subject and object: the historical author, rather than projecting a whole complex of anxieties, becomes mere raw material to be *umfunktionalisiert* into something original. What is of interest here is not Brecht’s influence on Ngugi, but why a late twentieth-century Kenyan playwright should find useful models for political theater in a particular form of late-Weimar drama.

As Fredric Jameson points out in his gloss on Reiner Steinweg’s thesis on the *Lehrstück* (63-65), more decisive to the meaning of the learning-play than its content are the circumstances of its production: the relations between the actors and the text, the director and the actors, the actors and the stage, the actors and each other. The *Lehrstück* is not a didactic form if by that it is meant that the audience is simply to be edified by its content; instead, the play is most essentially its rehearsals, in which the meaning of the narrative, and even the narrative itself, is constantly elaborated and disputed. The public performance is secondary, one possible performance

among many, which happens, this time, to be witnessed by nonparticipants. The text itself becomes not exactly a pretext but the provocation for a learning process (which, even in its formal outlines, has political and philosophical content). The Kamiriithu project dramatizes, to an extent that perhaps even Brecht's theater never did, the possibilities of the *Lehrstück*.

The shape of Ngugi's learning plays begins to emerge with the history of the Kamiriithu center itself. As is suggested by the passages above, the Kamiriithu theater and its first production developed with explicit reference to a particular manifestation of the neocolonial situation. It is against this neocolonial backdrop that Ngugi helped to develop the cultural wing of the Kamiriithu Community Education and Cultural Centre, which began in the mid-1970s as an initiative by village groups for renovating a defunct youth center.⁸ In 1976, the villagers who had built the Centre asked Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Ngugi wa Mirii, the director of the literacy program, to write a play to be produced by the Centre. This play, which ultimately became *I Will Marry When I Want*, incorporated biographies written during the literacy program, which also became a kind of political seminar (Björkman 52). The outline produced by the two Ngugis was hammered out by the collective into a working script, which incorporated older songs and dances that were re-learned and *umfunktioniert* for their new context. Meanwhile, members of the collective who had renovated the Centre designed and built an open-air theater—apparently the largest in East Africa (60)—to accommodate the production. Since the theater was outdoors, the rehearsals were public: thus, the production was open to critical commentary from the village as a whole. The final product, by Ngugi's account, bore little resemblance to his original script: “[T]he play which was finally put on to a fee-paying audience on Sunday, 2 October 1977, was a far cry from the tentative awkward efforts originally put forth by Ngugi [wa Mirii] and myself” (*Detained* 78). When the production opened on the twenty-fifth anniversary of the beginning of the Mau Mau uprising, it was a towering success: critics from Nairobi refused to believe that the musicians and some of the actors were villagers rather than ringers brought in by Ngugi. After seeing the play, several villages sent delegations seeking advice on beginning projects along the lines of Kamiriithu. After nine performances, the play was shut down by the KANU government, its license withdrawn for reasons of “public security.” Soon afterwards Ngugi himself was arrested at midnight and put in detention.

After being held in prison without trial for a year, during which he wrote—also on toilet paper—much of his first novel in Gikuyu, translated into English as *Devil on the Cross*, Ngugi was released, along with all other political prisoners in Kenya's prisons, as suddenly and surprisingly as he had been taken. (Jomo Kenyatta had died, and Daniel arap Moi, who had taken over the presidency, released all political detainees in December 1978. His reasons, it turned out, were far from altruistic; he was in fact releasing mainly enemies of the old Kenyatta-centered power structure which still threatened his young presidency. These events, as we shall see, are signs of the conditions that led to the possibility of Ngugi's theater.) While Ngugi had been in prison, the Kamiriithu group had not languished

but had in fact grown both in number and in ambition. When Ngugi completed the outline of *Mother, Sing for Me*, a musical composed in several Kenyan languages, two hundred villagers volunteered for the production (Björkman 54). The script, set in the '30s, was a thinly veiled allegory—so thinly veiled that, as in a Brechtian parable, this veiling itself is an impudence—of the betrayal of independence by the new ruling class. Like the earlier play, it was filled in and altered by the group; the ending, as with Brecht's *He Who Said Yes*, switched polarity before the play took final form. It was to premier at the National Theatre in March 1982.⁹ When the group went to take final rehearsals there, it found the gates locked, with the police standing by. After the play moved to a new rehearsal space at the University, people flocked to the rehearsals; every evening the house was full four hours before rehearsals began (really full—people were sitting on the stage, in the lighting booth, at the windows, down the stairs); Uhuru highway was blocked each afternoon; whole villages chipped in to hire buses to take them in to the city for the rehearsals. According to one estimate (Björkman 60), twelve to fifteen thousand people saw the production in ten performances. The show had never been advertised. After ten rehearsal-performances, the government banned the play, forbidding the Kamiriithu group to use the University theater. Soon after, police—police in Kenya carry machine guns—were sent to Kamiriithu to raze the theater complex to the ground. The two Ngugis and the play's director, Kimani Geau, were forced to flee the country. Whence the “anxiety of the regime” at the root of such extraordinary reprisals?

Official Kenyan theater under British colonialism and after must be considered somewhat of a special case in that its ideological underpinnings did not need to be discovered by dramatic theory; colonial theater was already explicitly ideological. During the Mau Mau period, popular anti-colonial songs and dances were countered by propaganda theater: captured rebels in the countryside or suspected sympathizers were shown sketches and plays demonstrating the relative wages of confessing and not confessing, recanting and not recanting, informing and not informing (see Kariuki 128-29). Meanwhile, in the capital, there was a more traditional European theater whose function was, quite explicitly, to help create a national bourgeoisie by bringing together the African, Asian, and European privileged classes under the influence of a shared British culture. As the representative of the British Council in East Africa from 1947 through Mau Mau put it:

It was hoped that through the theatre the goodwill of the European community could be gained, European cultural standards could be helped, and, later on, members of the different races [elsewhere, with reference to the Kenya National Theatre, the “*leading people* of all races” (73, italics added)] could be brought together by participation in a common pursuit which they all enjoyed. (Frost 196)

This theater continued after Independence (and still continues) with its ideological function barely altered: the National Theatre in Nairobi, from

which Ngugi's *Mother Cry for Me* was banned, continues to put on a steady stream of bland European fare—Andrew Lloyd Webber has had a considerable presence—to which, as Fanon prophesied, the new ruling class fawningly flocks. Ngugi's indignation at the behavior of this class (e.g., the “modern African bourgeois with all its crude exaggerations of its borrowed culture” [qtd. in Björkman 73]) echoes Brecht's famous comment that the bourgeois theater audience assumes the bearing of kings: “One may think a grocer's bearing better than a king's and still find this ridiculous” (Brecht 39). The bearing of the audience reveals the ideology of the theater apparatus, which was explicitly in the Nairobi of 1978 what it was implicitly in the Berlin of 1929: the audience's kingly attitude of complacent and utterly passive consumption reveals in itself the attitude of pure exploitation. At the same time, this attitude is only a mask that hides the fact that the audience, imitating a class whose position it can never occupy, is at the same time itself the dupe.

As is well known, Brecht's epic theater—as opposed to his learning theater, to which we will shortly return—addresses itself to this audience in an attempt to transform it. The famous *Verfremdungseffekt* does not merely estrange the content from the viewer but reveals the fissures that already lie within the logic of everyday life under capitalism. The dominant figure of the epic theater has to be the exposure (by text, techniques of acting, and production itself) of the theater apparatus as an allegory of the demystification of production in general (a privileged example is *St. Joan of the Stockyards*, where one level of literal content consists of the demystification of the meat-packing industry). The epic theater reveals to the bourgeois audience their contradictory relationship to the social world; it is a critical theater, a theater of negation.

The learning theater—both Brecht's and Ngugi's—implies quite another perspective on artistic production, on the “theater apparatus” that ultimately produces bourgeois theater. As we have seen, the exposure of this apparatus as the exposure of capitalism itself is the trope that governs the epic theater; traces of this might be identified in Ngugi's earlier plays, as for example in *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* where the theatrical trappings of the courtroom trial reveal its status as a kangaroo court:

Enter Shaw Henderson dressed as a judge. Not in disguise. He should in fact be seen to believe in his role as judge, to acquire the grave airs of a judge. Judge sits down. The audience sits. Clerk gives him the file. Judge looks at it. (24)

The governing trope of learning theater, however, is not the exposure of the theater apparatus as it is but rather its transformation. Its social goal is not to expose a bourgeois audience to the contradictions of its own ideology, but to create a new ideology, the New in a utopian sense; this goal is figured in the production of the learning play itself, which takes on a radically new form regardless of the form or content of the final “product,” which is finally not so much a performance as an experience of group praxis and a new historical self-consciousness. The original rift in the Marxist narrative of capitalist production—the alienation of the worker from the

product of his or her labor—is metaphorically bridged by the unity of audience and performer. This is radicalized in the theater of Ngugi, where the totally reified social apparatus of the Nairobi theater is replaced by the Kamiriithu project, where the village that built the theater, that wrote the songs, that acted the parts, and whom the performance was designed to reach—and who, in some cases, had lived the history, fought the revolution, and experienced its betrayal—are all identical. It is a constructive theater, one truly at home only in an historical moment when one can imagine a radically transformed world as a concrete possibility. It is, in other words, a utopian theater. Even if what is represented is a dystopic present, the relations of theatrical production all suggest that the deepest content of Ngugi's learning-plays is a utopian future where producer, consumer, and the owner of the means of production are all identical. And indeed, in the final moments, against all expectations, *I Will Marry When I Want* calls for such a future:

The trumpet of the masses has been blown.
 Let's preach to all our friends.
 The trumpet of the masses has been blown.
 We change to new songs
 For the revolution is near. (115)

The figural fusion of producer and consumer in the learning play—of which Ngugi's theater is a radicalization—only pre-figures the real unification which is seen as a concrete possibility. Outside of this element it becomes spurious; the metaphor of art as production, which we use so carelessly today, degenerates from metaphor into mere metaphor, and as such mocks the possibility of a real resolution to the rift that separates humanity from itself. However, the metaphor which, post-Brecht, had become a cliché, has occasionally been vitally performed when the historical situation permits. The real unity of producer and consumer—that is, the destruction of these categories themselves—can only come about when the producer can imagine himself as the subject of history. Brecht abandoned the learning plays when their historical moment passed, when it became obvious that the possibility of workers' revolution had been preempted by the rise of the Nazi party. Brecht's learning-play phase, which began with *Lindbergh's Flight* in 1929, ended with his own flight from Berlin after the Reichstag fire. He did produce one later Lehrstück, *The Horatians and the Curiatians* of 1934, but the fact that this was a Soviet commission rather confirms than contradicts the assertion that the learning play depends on the possibility of imagining a utopian future.

Are we any closer to understanding the anxiety of the state when confronted with Ngugi's theater? The government of Daniel arap Moi in Kenya now seems so secure—despite recent news of so-called “ethnic violence”—that it is easy to forget how tenuous the pro-capitalist KANU government was in the late 1970s. It must be remembered that when Kenyatta became prime minister of a newly independent Kenya in 1963, he was—despite his accommodation of settler interests and the maintenance, post-1963, of a significant landholding class—a hero of national independence. His

anti-imperialist days as the leader of the Kenya African Union had led to his imprisonment as a Mau Mau organizer. As a matter of historical irony, Kenyatta's involvement with Mau Mau resistance, never very deep, was at its lowest when he was detained; however, when he was released it was as a hero of national liberation, and he was regarded as such until his death, even among populations who were hurt by his accommodation of multinational, and particularly American, business and military interests. However, the period during which Ngugi was developing the Kamiriithu project (*I Will Marry When I Want* began rehearsals in June 1977, and *Mother, Sing for Me* was scheduled to open in February 1982) was a profoundly precarious period for the Kenyan government. From 1975 on it was obvious that Kenyatta was ill and would not live much longer; the behind-the-scenes politicking that went on over his succession left the ruling party severely factionalized and weakened,¹⁰ while the Left politics of MP J. M. Kariuki (assassinated, as mentioned earlier, during this period) gained popularity and momentum. With incredible tenacity and some skillful politics, Moi, who had been Kenyatta's vice-president since 1967, managed not only to make sure he was appointed interim president after Kenyatta's death in 1978, but to win the 1979 election as well. But the popular support for Moi, who, pre-Independence, had been staunchly allied with the settlers while Kenyatta was in detention, could command nothing like the loyalty Kenyatta had earned, and his presidency was bought with patronage that his government could not keep up for long. In August 1982, seven months after *Mother, Sing for Me* was banned from the National Theater, the Air Force, supported by university students, staged a coup attempt. The aims of the coup have never been made clear, although it seems certain that, despite originating with the military, it was an attempt to move the country to the Left: at least popularly, the alliance of the highly educated air force with the student community suggested opposition to the single-party system. The appearance of the Kamiriithu project, like Brecht's *Lehrstück* period, took place in a brief window when radical political change seemed to be a possibility.

The question elided in *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi*, however, resurfaces in another context. In *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi*, the allegorical representation of revolutionary consciousness subverted itself by celebrating as heroic victory—the future peasant revolution—what it must simultaneously show to be defeat—the failure of the past peasant revolution. The logic of Kimathi's martyrdom—victory-in-defeat—cannot ultimately be separated from the logic of Kenyan independence: defeat-in-victory. The later experimentation with the theater apparatus at Kamiriithu figures revolutionary consciousness in a different way, projecting by its very relations of production a utopian possibility along the lines of that which had opened up historically from 1952-56. This possibility is ultimately sealed off again, not by any internal dynamic, but by history itself; which is, in a certain way, internal to the Kamiriithu project after all. The "August Disturbances" that put a punctuation mark on the Kamiriithu project ultimately served only to justify Moi's consolidation of power as he continued to transfer police services from executive to party control, including the paramilitarization of the KANU Youth, which answered only to party authority. When the Kamiriithu

project began, the populist and relatively permissive government of Jomo Kenyatta was weak and on the defensive; his strong-arm successor had yet to consolidate power, and indeed it seemed unlikely that he could hold on to it; prominent Left politicians were gaining popularity. It ended when Moi's regime consolidated power and Kenya became a state governed by a single political party with its own paramilitary. One might well ask when—and where—such a window will open again.

NOTES

1. Translations from the Swahili are my own.
2. The question of whether Britain's handing over of power was a matter of British and world politics or directly due in some way to Mau Mau uprising is a matter of constant debate. A valuable resource (contemporary with the Kamiriithu plays, but still current) for this central issue is a 1977 special number of Kenya Historical Review, edited by William R. Ochieng' and Karim K. Janmohamed, *Some Perspectives on the Mau Mau Movement*. See esp. Maina wa Kinyatti and Kipkorir.
3. Ngugi's recent writing seems to endorse this simpler reading. See *Penpoints* 48.
4. See Kariuki's remarkable memoir, *Mau Mau Detainee*.
5. In discussing the Kamiriithu plays, "Ngugi," like "Brecht" in another context, actually signifies a number of people in collective effort. The shorthand is, I think, admissible, since Ngugi is, if nothing else, the reason we are aware of these plays. Ngugi himself is always careful to make clear others' contributions to his theater projects, as Brecht was not always concerned to do.
6. Much of the information in this paragraph summarizes *Detained* 72-80.
7. See *Independent Kenya*, particularly ch. 2, "KANU and Kenyatta: Independence for sale," 13-36.
8. This narrative of the Kamiriithu Community Education and Cultural Centre is synthesized from accounts in Ngugi, *Detained* 72-80; Ngugi, *Decolonising* 34-62; and also Björkman 51-56.
9. For a more detailed account of the production of *Mother, Sing for Me*, see Björkman 57-60.
10. The most lively account of post-Independence Kenyan politics is probably D. Pal Ahluwalia's *Postcolonialism and the Politics of Kenya*. See particularly ch. 3-6, which try to make sense of political movements in the period between Kenyatta's illness and the attempted coup of 1982. For a specifically Marxist account, see *Independent Kenya*.

WORKS CITED

- Ahluwalia, D. Pal. *Postcolonialism and the Politics of Kenya*. New York: Nova Science, 1996.
- Björkman, Ingrid. *Mother, Sing for Me: People's Theatre in Kenya*. London: Zed, 1989.

- Brecht, Bertolt. *Brecht on Theater: The Development of an Aesthetic*. Ed. and trans. John Willett. New York: Hill and Wang, 1964.
- _____. "The Anxieties of the Régime." *Poems 1913-1956*. Ed. John Willett and Ralph Manheim. London: Methuen, 1976. 296-98.
- Frost, Richard. *Race Against Time: Human Relations and Politics in Kenya before Independence*. London: Rex Collings, 1978.
- Independent Kenya*. Anonymous (sponsored by the Journal of African Marxists in solidarity with the authors). London: Zed, 1982.
- Jameson, Fredric. *Brecht and Method*. London: Verso, 1998.
- Kariuki, J. M. *Mau Mau Detainee: The Account by a Kenya African of his Experiences in Detention Camps 1953-60*. London: Oxford UP, 1963.
- Kipkorir, B. E. "Mau Mau and the Politics of the Transfer of Power in Kenya, 1957-1960." *Kenya Historical Review* 5.2 (1977): 313-28.
- Maina wa Kinyatti. "Mau Mau: The Peak of African Nationalism in Kenya." *Kenya Historical Review* 5.2 (1977): 287-311.
- Ngugi wa Thiong'o. "Art War with the State: Writers and Guardians of Post-colonial Society." *Penpoints* 7-35.
- _____. *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature*. London: James Currey, 1986.
- _____. *Detained: A Writer's Prison Diary*. London: Heinemann, 1981.
- _____. *Penpoints, Gunpoints, and Dreams*. Oxford: Clarendon, 1998.
- _____. and Micere Githae Mugo. *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi*. London: Heinemann, 1976.
- _____. and Ngugi wa Mirii. *I Will Marry When I Want*. Trans. Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Ngugi wa Mirii. London: Heinemann, 1982.
- Ochieng', William R., and Karim K. Janmohamed, eds. *Some Perspectives on the Mau Mau Movement*. Special issue of *Kenya Historical Review* 5.2 (1977).
- Sicherman, Carol. *Ngugi wa Thiong'o, the Making of a Rebel: A Sourcebook in Kenyan Literature and Resistance*. London: Hans Zell, 1990.
- Venys, Ladislav. *A History of the Mau Mau Movement in Kenya*. Prague: Charles UP, 1970.