

## The Importance of Oral Tradition in Ngugi WA Thiongo's Writings: A Critical Analysis of the River between and Petals of Blood

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**Abstract:** The objective of this study is to examine the stylistic and thematic functions of forms of the oral tradition in Ngugi Wa Thiongo's writings through a critical analysis of *The River Between* and *Petals of Blood*. This has become necessary because to some readers and critics, the use of elements of the oral tradition in any literary work by an African writer leads invariably to the achievement of one objective—giving an African colour or identity to the literary piece. The contribution of forms of the oral tradition such as myths, legends, songs, proverbs and rituals to the themes, philosophies, style and the writer's commitment to a particular cause are often overlooked.

**Keywords:** Aesthetics, commitment, legends, myths, oral literature, proverbs, rituals, songs

### INTRODUCTION

A logical conclusion with regard to the polyvalent role that aspects of the oral tradition play in the literary writings of Ngugi has been drawn by first of all explaining the relationship between literature, oral literature and the oral tradition. An understanding of the three terms mentioned above has paved the way for a short discussion on some of the major pre-occupations of Ngugi in his writings. Such concerns include politics, history, culture, economics and the church. The analysis of some of Ngugi's ideas on the preceding pre-occupations has been followed by the nature of the two novels and a detailed examination of the functional role of myths, legends, songs, proverbs and rituals in Ngugi's two novels. These preceding aspects of the oral tradition have been analysed by drawing attention to the way in which they re-enforce the novelist's themes, his philosophies, his commitment to certain causes and how they also sharpen his critical skills. An exploration of all these aspects of the paper has therefore led us to the conclusion that elements of the oral tradition, apart from giving an African touch to Ngugi's writings, also contribute in sharpening the style of the novelist, in developing the themes of the writer, as well as demonstrating his commitment to a particular cause.

### MATERIALS AND METHODOLOGY

The primary materials used for arguments in this study are Ngugi's two novels: *The River Between* and *Petals of Blood*. Other fictional works of the author, his essays and interviews have also been used as reference sources. Apart from these, some critical works on the writings of the novelist by other critics have been used

as secondary sources for the collection of data. All these materials have been closely examined by the researchers bearing in mind ideas drawn from the reader response theory, the theory of new historicism and the theory of sociological criticism.

### RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The meaning of "oral literature" was a controversial issue among scholars and critics in the recent past. While some were of the view that oral literature was a field of study that was totally different from written literature, others were of the opinion that the term "oral literature" was a misnomer or an oxymoron. Those scholars and critics who opined that "oral literature" was a misnomer based their argument on the fact that "literature" as a concept is derived from the Latin word "*littera*" (letters) or "*litteratus*" (literature) which is related to writing. The implication emanating from such an argument was that literature could not be oral and that the body of material referred to as "oral literature" constituted part of the oral traditions of non-literate societies. The controversy over the naming of this corpus of material in the recent past led to the coinage of the term "*orature*" by a Ugandan scholar as a designation for oral art forms. The use of such a term, however, reinforced the notion that oral art forms are not literature but something else.

The problem with some of these scholars and critics was that they had confined "literature" within narrow boundaries and had therefore failed to accept, apart from "written literature," a vast corpus of material with equally good literary qualities. Perhaps, the observation made by Chadwick (1939) in *The Distribution of Oral Literature in the Old World* is worth noting:

In civilised countries, we are inclined to associate literature with writing, but such an association is accidental... Writing is unessential to either the composition or the preservation of literature. The two arts are wholly distinct. (p.77)

Chadwick's view is supported by a number of researchers into oral arts who have, at different instances, referred to such material as "oral literature", "unwritten literature", "popular literature" or "traditional literature". Finnegan (1976), for instance, does not only entitle one of her works as *Oral Literature in Africa*, but also goes a step further in explaining that there is "a difference of degree and not of kind" between oral and written literature. (p.18) She also explains that even in our modern world where printing has become easier and affordable, we still find instances in which forms of the oral arts are used to reinforce some aspects of written literature and the vice-versa. The role of the electronic media such as radio and television in the live broadcast of certain plays and poems which were originally written is a case in point.

Reference can also be made to the fact that a great deal of what we now call classical literature, especially Greek Literature, was produced orally. Up to date, some scholars including Sackey (2010) still maintain that the Homeric epics have "an oral conception" since they have qualities of oral arts such as repetitions, vivid descriptions and careful observation on the part of the composer. Similarly, *Beowulf*, an old English epic which is believed to have traces of the oral tradition has been accepted as literature and is incorporated into an anthology of English literature. The arguments advanced by scholars like Chadwick and Finnegan have convinced the literary fraternity to finally accept the fact that literature can be divided into oral and written aspects and that the difference between these two is that one is written and the other is produced, performed and preserved orally.

Research has also shown that the terms "oral literature" and "oral tradition" refer to almost the same body of material. The difference lies in the terminologies that are employed at various instances to designate the same corpus of material and the scope that each terminology refers to. For instance, in an article entitled *Oral Tradition and the Contemporary Theatre in Nigeria*, Adedeji (1971) defines oral tradition as a "complex corpus of verbal or spoken art created as a means of recalling the past."(p.2) To Adedeji (1971), the oral tradition is based on the ideas, beliefs, symbols, assumptions, attitudes and sentiments of peoples. On the typology of the oral tradition, Adediji talks about two main categories of the verbal arts. These are the literary and the historical categories. To him, the literary category refers to poetic genres such as praise and totem chants, Odu or Ifa divination

poems and songs. Other forms include proverbs, parables and incantations. The historical category includes such forms as narratives based on myths, legends and historical plays like the epic.

Still on the typology of the oral tradition, Okleme (2005) in an article entitled *Translating Ghanaian Culture: A Reading of Ayi Kwei Armah's Fragments*, observes that "the Ghanaian oral text comprises myths, legends, trickster tales, proverbs and oral poetry ..." (p.266)

All the preceding forms of the oral tradition which have been mentioned by Okleme and Adedeji have been explored by Finnegan in *Oral Literature in Africa*. Finnegan, however, categorises all the genres of oral literature under three broad forms – poetry, prose and drama. This, therefore, buttresses the observation that oral tradition and oral literature are terminologies that refer to almost the same corpus of material. Oral tradition is broader than oral literature and therefore oral literature is subsumed in oral tradition since there are aspects of the oral tradition that may not have appreciable literary qualities. This explains why in *Written Tradition, Oral Tradition, Oral Literature, Fiuriture\** (This is a term coined by the author), Devatine (2009) maintains that it is "orality that provides the roots and platform for Polynesian literature to take off and fly". (p.13)

The use of elements of the oral tradition in reinforcing written literature is not new in the African literary scene. This style has, however, been given much attention of late due to the renewed interest in African writers to express themselves on issues that are dear to their countries and the continent instead of writing on universal themes as some critics and writers would want them to do.

Consequently, writers such as Chinua Achebe in *Things Fall Apart*, Ayi Kwei Armah in *The Healers*, Kofi Awoonor in *Guardian of the Sacred Word: Ewe Poetry*, Okot p'Bitek in *Song of Lawino*, Ngugi and a host of others have, in different instances, used forms of the oral arts in their literary compositions. Writing on the influence of oral arts in African writing, Bodunde (1992) makes the following observation:

The influence which the various elements of oral traditions exert on modern African writing especially poetry is indeed tremendous. In fact... traditions can be attributed to the writers' recognition of the functions which verbal art forms perform in the society. (p.2)

Ngugi's preoccupations as a writer revolve around five main issues—politics, economics, culture, history and the role of the church in the Kenyan struggle for independence. These issues are explored in various ways by Ngugi in his *Homecoming* essays and in his *Secret Lives*. Besides this, in the blurb of *Petals of*

Blood, (1997) the *Sunday Times* observed that the narrative is “a political novel, yes, but you have to add at once ‘among other things’, since what is compelling about his political fervour is exactly that it does always set politics among others things.” This buttresses the fact that Ngugi does not just write about politics alone. To Ngugi, the church played an important role in impoverishing the souls of Kenyans by robbing them of their culture just as colonialism deprived them of their land and other material possessions. To Ngugi therefore, the missionary and the colonial administrator are brothers who fought for the same objective. Ngugi also believes that political independence cannot stand on its own when there is no economic and cultural independence. The three kinds of independence are intertwined and one cannot thrive without the others. And this partly explains why Ngugi has been immersed in politics, economics and culture right from his first novel up to *Wizard of the Crow*, one of his recent novels. Ngugi (1972) in *Mau Mau: Violence and Culture* makes the following observation in support of his clamour for true independence for Kenya and for Africa.

It will therefore, be seen that in the Kenyan scene of the last sixty years you cannot separate economics and culture from politics. The three are interwoven. A cultural assertion was an integral part of the political and economic struggle. (p.26)

But quite apart from politics, culture and economics, Ngugi also believes that history is an important part of the novelist’s concerns. To him, the novelist at his best “must feel himself heir to a continuous tradition” (Ngugi, 1972). The novelist must find himself “swimming, struggling and defining himself in the mainstream of his people’s historical drama”. (p.39)

To Ngugi, time present and time past are both in time future and time future is contained in the past. Therefore, it is important to know one’s history in order not to repeat the mistakes of the past but rather take some inspiration from some of the illustrious deeds of the past.

It is true that Ngugi advocates true and comprehensive independence for Kenya and for Africa in his literary works, but quite apart from the fight for the achievement of such independence in Kenya, the novelist is equally much concerned about the system of governance that will ensure that every individual in Kenya enjoys the fruit of true independence. To Ngugi, it is socialism, not the kind of socialism in Armah’s *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*, but the type of true socialism that the Tutes, the Asars and the entire companionship of Ankh fight for in *Osiris Rising* that should be put in place in Kenya. Ngugi does not support a form of socialism that will concentrate

political power and economic resources in the hands of the few elite in the Kenyan society as it is obtained in *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*. He does not also believe in capitalism as a more appropriate economic system that is suitable for Kenya and for Africa in general and this explains why Ngugi (1972) observes in his *Homecoming* essays that:

Literature is a course primarily concerned with what any political and economic arrangement does to the spirit and the values governing human relationships. Nobody has passed through the major cities of Europe ...amidst plenty and luxury enjoyed by so few. (p. 16-17)

On the issue of culture, Ngugi believes strongly in the preservation and promotion of African cultural values. The novelist does not, however, believe that culture is static and must be maintained at all cost even when it is evident that certain aspects of it are outmoded. He is much aware of the dynamic nature of culture and this partly explains why in *Towards a National Culture*, (1972) he maintains that:

Culture, in its broadest sense, is a way of life fashioned by a people in their collective endeavour to live and come to terms with their total environment...but we must bear in mind that they are derived from a people’s way of life and will change as the way of life is altered. (p. 4)

Apart from the use of forms of the oral tradition in his literary works which, in itself, is an indication of Ngugi’s attachment to the promotion of African cultural and moral values, the novelist also believes that African languages should be given much attention in our schools just as English language is given the same recognition. To him, language is culture and we cannot promote African values and culture when we do not encourage the use of African languages in our schools. It is not expedient to promote the use of English language which is an embodiment of English culture to the detriment of African languages and culture. This accounts for the reason why between 1968 and 1969, when Ngugi was appointed Special Lecturer in the Department of English at the University College in Nairobi, he and two other lecturers proposed the abolishment of the English Department.

In addition to the proposal for such a radical change at the university, Ngugi has also chosen to write much of his latest fiction in Gikuyu. In an article entitled *Why I Write in Gikuyu*, (2007) Ngugi explains the reasons for his attachment to the Gikuyu language in the following terms:

Language is the primary means of communication, knowledge and culture. It is the key link between

all the realms that make up a community: wealth, power, values and the self-definition and evaluation of a community world. (p. 57)

It is quite interesting that though Ngugi has been much critical of all the governments in Kenya in all his writings, he has not been imprisoned for any of the literary works that he produced in English language. *Ngaahika Ndeenda*, a play written in Gikuyu and translated into English as *I Will Marry When I Choose* was rather banned in Kenya and it was the same play that landed Ngugi in jail between 1977 and 1978. This tells us how effective Gikuyu language is as a means of getting Kenyans to understand Ngugi and his concerns on certain issues in Kenya.

*The River Between*, (1965) originally entitled *The Black Messiah* is Ngugi's first novel though it was the second to be published after *Weep Not Child*. The setting of the novel is in Kenya, precisely in the ridges of Makuyu and Kameno which are separated by the Honia River. The story is set in pre-colonial Kenya.

The story is both messianic and legendary. It is messianic in the sense that it traces the origin of a prophecy that envisions the possibility of a messiah rising from the hills to save the people of Kenya from the effects of colonisation. Waiyaki, like his father and Mugo Wa Kabiro, sees himself as the promised messiah and feels that the onus lies in him to save his people. He tries to use western education as his instrument for fighting for independence for his people. The only problem with Waiyaki's method is that he fails to recognise that his people do not just need western education alone but that they also need their land which is their primary source of livelihood. Consequently, they need to take desperate measures that will ensure that they are liberated from the shackles of poverty. It is no wonder that Waiyaki is rejected by his own people despite his good intentions and the immense contribution that he makes towards the provision of an affordable education for his people. For like the archetypal messiah, Waiyaki's kith and kin have to reject him to enable him achieve the state of martyrdom as the novel closes.

The story is also legendary for as Killam (1975) observes in *An Introduction to the Writings of Ngugi*:

Waiyaki is part of the legend of his people and Ngugi presents him in folk-heroic terms by exploiting similarities between the role he is assigned to play as a saviour with that of the biblical Christ, against a legendary history which reveals a strong association between Gikuyu and Christian creation myths. (p. 33)

The main theme of the novel deals with the conflict between two groups within a single tribe, one of which lives on the Makuyu ridge and the other on the Kameno

ridge. This conflict has its roots deep in the history of the tribe and it is given a contemporary emphasis when western ideas, specifically in the form of Christian teaching find their way into the tribe. But alongside this theme, other sub-themes such as the value of western education, the theme of the preservation and promotion of indigenous cultural values and so forth are given adequate expression in the novel.

*Petals of Blood* is Ngugi's fourth novel. Like his first three novels (*The River Between*, *Weep Not Child* and *A Grain of Wheat*), *Petals of Blood* is set in Kenya but not in pre-colonial Kenya or during the struggle for independence in that country. It is set in post-independence Kenya at Ilmorog, which, at the outset of the story is a remote village but suddenly develops into a modern town with a highway, factories, tourist sites and so forth at the close of the narrative.

The story is divided into four parts. Part One is called "Walking", Part Two: "Towards Bethlehem", Part Three: "To Be Born" and Part Four: "Again La Luta Continua". The story is told through different narrative techniques. At different instances in the novel, the story is told by one or other members of the town of Ilmorog, through the recollections of one or another character, sometimes by an omniscient narrator in the first person plural 'We'. Also, the story is not narrated in a chronological order as it pertains in *The River Between*. The present tense actions of the narrative take about ten days, the stories of the lives of the main characters as the novel unfolds span twelve years. But apart from this, Ngugi also goes back and forward in time, to the 1890s when the exploitation of Kenya by Europeans began and in some instances to the pre-historical period of Africa.

Since the nature of the novel is that of a detective story, Ngugi's technique of using a broken chronology is appropriate. What Ngugi achieves through the use of this technique and interrupted accounts of individual stories as these relate to the central investigation in the novel is a process of gradual revelation of incident, character, motive and psychological make-up.

In *Petals of Blood*, Ngugi explores further some of the themes that have been given expression in his first three novels. He examines the value of western education, the meaning of the Christian faith, the effects of colonialism and neo-colonialism on the lives of Kenyans as well as the disappointment of the people in post-independence Kenyan rulers. But quite apart from these themes, history also becomes a living tissue in *Petals of Blood*. The history of post-independent Kenya is given so much prominence in the novel that one is tempted to believe that the narrative is not the product of pure fiction. For, as Ngugi observes in *The Writer and His Past* (1972).

The novelist is haunted by a sense of the past. His work is often an attempt to come to terms with the

thing that has been, a struggle, as it were, to sensitively register his encounter with history. (p. 39)

The first element of the oral tradition which has been used in *The River Between* and *Petals of Blood* is myths. Myths belong to the group of narratives generally referred to as tales in the oral tradition. Thus, quoting Bascom (1965) and Finnegan (1976) in *Oral Literature in Africa* observes that:

Myths are prose narratives which, in the society in which they are told are considered to be truthful accounts of what happened in the remote past. They are accepted on faith; they are taught to be believed; .... sky or underworld. (pp. 361-362)

Thus, the definition of myths in the preceding lines does not only assert their authoritative and aetiological nature but also emphasizes their religious colouring. They are taught to be believed and not to be questioned and as such, can be a reliable source of our answers to questions on African cosmology. The characters that usually feature in myths and the serious context in which they are often narrated distinguish them from the less serious type of tales such as animal tales.

In *The River Between*, Ngugi uses myth to establish how Murungu, the creator, gave the land of Kenya to Gikuyu and Mumbi, the father and mother of the Kenyan nation. According to the myth, Gikuyu and Mumbi did not buy the land but it was given to them and their posterity from the hands of Murungu, the creator himself. This implies that the land does not just become the inalienable right of Kenyans but that there is a kind of religious bond between Kenyans and their land. Any attempt to dispossess Kenyans of such a land means an attempt to take away their lives from them. To Kenyans, South Africans and Zimbabweans and to all Africans, the importance of land cannot be overemphasized. Ngugi (1965) records the myth in the following terms: "And Murungu had told them: 'This land I give to you, O man and woman. It is yours to rule and till, you and your posterity.'"(p. 2)

Ngugi raises the issue of land in the preceding myth because he understands what land means to Kenyans and to all Africans. The theme of alienation and dispossession has been and will always be one of the favourites of Ngugi in his writings. The land in this context is symbolic of all that is African and which has been taken away from Africa through colonialism or its other forms. To Ngugi, in a society where capitalism is allowed to take root and where the wealth of the whole nation is concentrated in the hands of few politicians and the elite group, it is the land that becomes the only means of livelihood for the masses.

In *Facing Mount Kenya*, Kenyatta (1979) underscores the importance of land to Kenyans in the following terms:

Communion with the ancestral spirits is perpetuated through contact with the soil in which the ancestors of the tribe lie buried. The Gikuyu consider the earth as the 'mother' of the tribe, for the reason that the mother bears her burden for about eight or nine months while the child is in her womb...But it is the soil that feeds the child through a lifetime; and again after death it is the soil that nurses the spirit of the dead... (p. 21)

It is therefore, not surprising that Ngotho, Warija, Nyakinyua and so forth all show a special attachment to the ancestral land in Ngugi's writings.

In *Petals of Blood*, Ngugi uses another myth to explain the Gikuyu concept of creation. In the myth, the earth is portrayed as the beautiful sister of the Moon and whom Rain, Sun and Wind try to woo. At the end of the courtship, it is Rain that carries the day and this explains why the Earth swells anytime it rains for the rain drops are believed to be the sperms of Rain. Further still, it is believed that the rain drops constitute the sperms of God the Creator and that man sprang from the womb of mother earth after the first downpour. From whichever angle that we look at the myth, one thing comes out clearly. The importance of land and for that matter mother Earth cannot be overemphasized. The Earth is the mother of the nation, a concept shared by the Akans in Ghana who normally refer to it as *Asase Yaa*. Land is the source of livelihood for the living and the final resting place for the departed ancestors. Rain is equally important in the feeding process of the people by mother Earth. Without rain, the soil cannot support plant growth so as to produce food for feeding the people. This, in part, explains why in *Petals of Blood*, rain occupies a very important place in the needs of the people of Ilmorog. The argument in the myth that man sprang from the womb of Earth may explain why in African philosophy, it is generally believed that man is made of earth and shall return to it once he dies.

The myth itself is recorded by Ngugi (1977) in the following terms:

The older folk told stories of how Rain, Sun and Wind went a-wooing Earth, sister of Moon and it was Rain who carried the day and that was why Earth grew a sudden belly after being touched by Rain. Others...beginning. (p. 96)

Thus, the two preceding myths which are both forms of the oral tradition have been used by Ngugi to explore his theme of dispossession and alienation in the Kenyan and African context. They also seek to explain the Kenyan concept of the meaning of land, rain, the earth and the place of man in the universe. The myths are therefore vehicles for transmitting African cultural values and concepts about the earth in which we live.

Another form of the verbal arts which has been used by Ngugi in the two novels is legends. A legend is a tale like a myth but differs from it in some aspects. Finnegan (1976) explains the difference between myths and legends in the following words.

This general class of narratives cover those which are regarded locally as true, particularly by the narrator himself and his immediate audience, but differ from myths in being set in a much less remote period when the world was much as it is today...dynasties. (p. 368)

In *The River Between*, mention is made of legendary figures like Mugo Wa Kabiro, Wachiori, Dami na Mathathi and so on. Besides, the story of the protagonist itself is legendary in nature. Some critics are of the view that the original title of the novel, *The Black Messiah*, actually refers to Kenyatta (1979) who is also known as The Black Moses in political circles. The story of *The River Between* revolves around the struggle by an individual to save his people from disunity and the white man's colonising activities but who, at the end of the narrative, is rejected by his own people for flimsy reasons.

In *Petals of Blood*, the legendary stories of Ole Masai and Dedan Kimathi are given new dimensions. Kimathi's ideals in life and his trial also constitute the subject matter of Ngugi's play, *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi*, which he co-authored with Micere Mugo. But quite apart from the legendary tales of Masai and Kimathi, Ngugi also refers to other legendary figures across the African continent. They include names like Chaka, Toussaint, Samori, Nat Turner, Nkrumah, Arap Manyei and others.

The novelist does not refer to the stories of all these legends just for decorative purposes. Their tales have a functional role in the history of Kenya and in Ngugi's campaign for a true independent Kenya or Africa. Reference to figures like Kimathi or Ole Masai really accords them the important place that they deserve in Kenya's history. Kimathi and other independence fighters were easily forgotten after Kenya obtained its independence. By using these legends in his fictional writings, the author does justice to their memory and sacrifice by reminding Kenyans and his readers of the illustrious deeds of these historical figures. Ngugi also hopes to encourage and inspire all those who are willing to fight against neo-colonialism, injustice or greed in Kenya and in Africa by referring to such immortal figures in the history of Kenya. The legends are also referred to in order to remind the present authorities of the extent to which they have betrayed the independence cause.

Consequently, Ngugi does not just succeed in reminding his people of their history and the need for them to learn from it but he also succeeds in inculcating

the values of selfless service in his readers. He equally admonishes them against greed as the heroic deeds of these legendary figures are juxtaposed against the selfish deeds of traitors like Kimeria, Chui and the rest.

Songs also constitute another form of the oral tradition that has been used by Ngugi in the two novels. The songs vary in nature but they all suit the circumstances in which they are performed. Since it is not possible to analyse all the songs in the two narratives, few samples have been taken from both sources and their utilitarian aspects have been discussed.

In *The River Between*, we do not have many songs as one may find in *Petals of Blood*. The only song worth analysing in *The River Between* is the one sang by the school children during the meeting between Marioshoni school authorities, the parents and the pupils. The song itself summarises the changing circumstances in Kenya and the need for the indigenes to change their tactics in their war against imperialism. The land which is so special to the indigenes is taken away by the whites. Without land, one cannot rear animals and so the sheep and cattle no longer exist in the country side. The song recognises the need for parents to send their children to school to acquire the white man's learning for the battle that Kenyans are now fighting is not the battle of spears and shields. It is simply a battle of brains. The song thus emphasizes the serious effects of colonialism on Africa and the importance of education. It is, however, sad that in many instances in the fictional world of Ngugi and in the real life situation in Kenya, western education turns out to be the effective instrument used by the few educated ones to rob the masses of their only possession-land. The song itself is registered in the novel by Ngugi (1965) in the following words:

Father, mother  
Provide me with pen and state  
I want to learn  
Land is gone  
Cattle and sheep are not there  
Not there anymore... to learn. (pp. 93-94)

In *Petals of Blood*, songs ranging from lullabies to songs on topical issues have been used by Ngugi. One of the important songs in the novel is the one that Munira taught his pupils on work and wealth. The song places importance on cows, goats, crops and money which are all forms of wealth. In the rural setting, wealth is not measured only in terms of money but in terms of livestock as well. The song also emphasizes the importance of rain in the lives of rural dwellers that depend on it for successful farming seasons. But apart from these aspects of the song, it also exhorts the children to value work for work is wealth. This important aspect of work is also underscored by the

French writer and philosopher, Voltaire. In *Candide*, Voltaire (1978) through the Turk, argues that work takes away three evils from us: boredom, vice and poverty. "... le travail éloigne de nous trois grands maux: l'ennui, le vice et le besoin." (p. 177).

The song itself is recorded in the novel as follows:

Cows are wealth  
Work is wealth  
Goats are wealth  
Work is ... rains! (p.21)

Ngugi employs the preceding song in a satirical manner in the novel. For in the world of the novel, the reader comes face to face with the realisation that it is not hard work and honest labour that makes one rich in Kenya. It is cheating, corruption, selfishness and the rule of the survival of the fittest that can make one rich overnight. This state of affairs as it exists in the novel is not what Ngugi wishes for his fellow Kenyans and Africans.

Another song which the novelist uses to explore the important role that the church played in impoverishing Kenyans through evangelism and other forms of imperialism is recorded on page 135 of the novel:

They say that there's famine  
But they don't say there's famine  
Only for those who  
Would not eat the bread of Jesus  
Many houses... Jesus. (Ngugi, 1977)

The church's role in pre-independent Kenya and even in post-independent Kenya cannot be underestimated. To Ngugi, the church in Kenya is not just an agent of European imperialism but also contributes in no small way towards the spiritual, cultural and physical impoverishment of Kenyans. For as Ngugi observes in *Church, Culture and Politics*, "acceptance of the Christian church meant the outright rejection of all the African customs." The result of such a stand taken by the church on indigenous customs is that "the missionary robbed people of their soul." (1972:32) This observation made by Ngugi on the effect of the church's activities in the lives of Kenyans is attested to by the behaviour of characters like Mr. Ezekiel Waweru and Reverend Jerrod in *Petals of Blood*. They claim to be men of God but they are the most greedy and cold-hearted characters that one can come across in the novel.

Thus, through a few songs which have been examined, it becomes evident that Ngugi scores a very good point in using some elements of the oral tradition to express his concerns and ideas. The themes of the value of western education and the disillusionment with post-independence leadership in Africa are

preoccupations that Ngugi shares with Armah in *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* and with Achebe in *A Man of the People*.

The other form of the oral tradition which Ngugi uses sparingly in the two novels is proverbs.

A proverb is defined by Cuddon (1977) in his dictionary as:

A short pithy saying which embodies general truth. It is related in form and content to the maxim and the aphorism. Common to most nations and peoples, it is a form of expression of great antiquity. (p.706)

Proverbs are used in different contexts and a proverb cannot have meaning unless it is used in the right situation. Proverbs can be used to advise, rebuke, or shame another person in complaisance. Quite apart from these functions of proverbs, they can also be used to give warning, to smooth over a disagreement, to ridicule, to mock at another person and so forth. Whatever the situation in which they are used and the function that they are intended to perform, proverbs in general share two general characteristics. Finnegan (1976) makes the following observation on the general features of proverbs:

First, there is the sense of detachment and generalisation inherent in proverbs. The speaker stands back, as it were, from the heat of the actual situation and draws attention, for him or others, to its wider implications. (p.407)

In *The River Between*, the first proverb that one comes across is "the oilskin of the house is not for rubbing into the skin of strangers." (p.3) This is a proverb that has wider implications. But from the context in which it is used, it points to the notion that it is dangerous to divulge one's secrets to a complete stranger. For in doing so, one may end up opening doors for the stranger to study the weakness of his host and to use the knowledge of that weakness against his host. It is because the whites were accepted into the midst of Africans during the pre-colonial period that they managed to know the secrets of petty disagreements among the various tribes and capitalised on them to further weaken the unity of the indigenes.

Another proverb which one can find in the narrative is recorded on page 125. It goes like "it is the hidden soul in your body that kills you" (Ngugi, 1965). The preceding proverb is used by Joshua to express his disappointment and shock at the fact that it is his own daughter, Muthoni, who disgraces him by going for excision without Joshua's knowledge. In a much wider context, however, Ngugi seems to sound satirical here again as he tries to point to the fact that it is Africans themselves who have always been their own enemies. It

is Africans who betrayed figures like Kimathi, Mugo Wa Kabiro, Wachiori and so forth. The betrayal of the African cause does not therefore come from the Ironmongers, the Fraudshams or the Howlands alone but also from the Kabonyis, the Chuis, the Kimerias and so on.

In *Petals of Blood*, a number of proverbs have been used effectively by Ngugi to put across his concerns. The first of these proverbs is found on page 18 which states that wealth is sweat on one's hands. This proverb conveys the belief of the rural dwellers in hard work and honest labour. They do not know how to cheat their fellow Kenyans through western education. On page 180, two other proverbs are used in the interaction between the delegation that goes to the city and Nderi Wa Riera. The first one, "No elephant is unable to carry his tasks, however big and weightful" is used by the MP to explain the load of work that he has to do as a Member of Parliament and a minister. The irony of the situation is that the duty which is implied in this context is not a duty to the government and the people of Kenya. It is rather a duty to personal business. Nderi Wa Riera does not even visit his constituents and monies taken from them for the provision of potable water have gone down the drain without any explanation.

The second proverb, "there is no house with a male child where the head of a he-goat shall not be eaten" is used by Njuguna. (p.180) It is a succinct saying that encapsulates the delegation's complete belief in their Member of Parliament to be able to come to their aid. After all, they are not asking Nderi to cough up money from his pocket to salvage them from the effects of the draught. They simply want him to communicate their plight to the central government and the general public so that they can come to their assistance. As it turns out in the novel, Nderi refuses to help them and rather reads a different meaning into the delegation's journey to the city. It is Abdulla's donkey with its cart that draws the attention of the public to the delegation's visit to the city and this really provides the magic solution they need to solve their problem.

All the proverbs that have been analysed so far have something to do with Ngugi's concerns in his writings. These preoccupations include corruption in post-independence Kenya, the effects of colonialism on Africans, disillusionment with post-independence governments in Africa and the rest. But in addition to the reinforcement of these themes in the novels, the proverbs, songs, legends and myths also enable Ngugi to do a little bit of "showing" which Okleme (2005) describes as inadequate in his essay entitled *The African Novelist and Commitment: A Study of Petals of Blood*:

We have mentioned that both "telling" and "showing" are skilfully blended in the novel, but sometimes, the telling is overdone and we feel

some showing would have rendered the presentation more artistically successful. (p. 146)

The last aspect of the oral tradition which Ngugi uses in the two novels is ritual art. The rituals in question here are initiation and circumcision rites which embody elements of drama such as songs, dance, sacrifice and so on. In *The River Between*, Ngugi gives a vivid description of the rites associated with Waiyaki's second birth and his circumcision. He also makes mention of the dance and song associated with such ceremonies. He does not, however, provide us with any sample song that goes with circumcision rites. In *Petals of Blood*, the eros-opera preceding the initiation rites and in which Nyakinyua and Njuguna act as performers, provides an opportunity for the former to sing about the recent history of Ilmorog. The eros-opera is recorded on pages 207 to 209 of the narrative.

It is interesting to note that the need for a national culture remains one of Ngugi's major concerns in his writings. Ngugi advocates cultural purity and the need for the promotion of such a culture through characters like Chege, Muthoni, Nyakinyua, Njuguna and others. This is not to say that Ngugi preaches strict adherence to a culture that is static and archaic, a culture that will be of disservice to Kenyans and put them in servitude as Kabonyi's Kiama or the Kamuene Cultural Organisation seeks to do.

## COCLUSION

It is evident from the argument in the study that an effort has been made to discuss some forms of the oral tradition that Ngugi uses in his writings. Other aspects of the verbal arts such as oaths, animal tales and the rest have not been examined in the study. However, a few elements of the oral tradition which have been selected from the two novels and discussed in this study point out to one thing\_Ngugi scores good aesthetic points by resorting to their use.

Thus, the first major function of aspects of the oral tradition in Ngugi's writings is to provide him with an avenue to be able to express the themes of his writings. Such themes are better expressed through the use of myths, rituals and so forth as demonstrated in the exegesis of the paper. The second role that forms of the oral tradition play in Ngugi's writings is to provide a context for him to express his commitment to certain objectives. Ngugi is not just a staunch supporter of the promotion of African culture and its values but he also tries to demonstrate to us the way such values and forms of culture can be promoted. He does this by incorporating them into his themes. Also, Ngugi is able to "show" us what goes on in the Kenyan society instead of "telling" us such things through the use of forms of the oral tradition. Finally, Ngugi is able to carve an identity that is distinctive to him through the

use of oral art forms in a genre that is neither new to the world nor African in origin. It is this distinct identity that Ekwensi (1956) refers to in an article entitled *The Dilemma of the African Writer*:

The African writer must first look back to his own heritage. Then he must look around at what is available to him. If he decides to adapt existing forms to suit his needs, he can still bring to those forms trends of identity and distinction which will give him a place in forms known and accepted by the world at large. (pp. 701-702).

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