



Contesting the African Public Sphere: A Philosophical Re-imagining of Power and Resistance in Ngugi's *Wizard of the Crow*

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Abstract

Habermas's ideal notion of the 'public sphere' as the necessary condition for a genuine democracy is applied here in the assessment of the ideas contained in Ngugi's *Wizard of the Crow* (2007) in an attempt to map out and understand the African public sphere. *Wizard of the Crow* employs the values of the public sphere to pass satirical comments on society's values and practices: old assumptions are re-interrogated, established world-views reviewed and class and gender silenced issues revealed and re-evaluated. This paper adopts an interdisciplinary approach by employing philosophy and literature, here taken as *Wizard of the Crow*, as investigative tools. My choice of *Wizard of the Crow* to interrogate the African public sphere is particularly guided by the fact that to really encounter the public sphere is to first of all engage it at an imaginary realm. Besides, encountering the issues highlighted in *Wizard of the Crow* away from the structural discourse of the public sphere helps to humanize and plant them in the consciousness of people who may not have access to exotic academic presentation on the subject. Preferring a philosophical re-imagining of the concerns contained in *Wizard of the Crow* is to situate them within broader analytical frameworks. By adopting the basic methods of philosophical inquiry – exposition, critical analysis and reconstruction – the issues are lifted from the domain of fiction to the space of systematized knowledge directed at presenting a comprehensive notion of the African public sphere in as far as this can be achieved.

Résumé

La notion idéale de la « sphère publique » d'Habermas, comme condition nécessaire pour une véritable démocratie, est appliquée ici dans l'évaluation des idées contenues dans l'œuvre de Ngugi intitulé *Wizard*

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of the Crow (2007), dans une tentative de mesurer et de comprendre la sphère publique africaine. *Wizard of the Crow* utilise les valeurs de la sphère publique pour faire des commentaires satiriques sur les valeurs et pratiques de la société: les vieilles hypothèses sont réinterrogées, les visions du monde établies sont reconsidérées et les questions de classe et de genre réduites au silence sont révélées et réévaluées. Cet article adopte une approche interdisciplinaire en employant la philosophie et la littérature, à travers *Wizard of the Crow*, comme outils d'enquête. Mon choix de *Wizard of the Crow* pour interroger l'espace public africain est particulièrement guidé par le fait que, confronter vraiment la sphère publique, c'est d'abord la livrer à un domaine imaginaire. Par ailleurs, confronter les problèmes mis en évidence dans *Wizard of the Crow* loin du discours structural de la sphère publique permet de les humaniser et les fixer dans la conscience des personnes qui n'ont peut-être pas accès à l'exotique exposé académique sur le sujet. Préférer une ré-imagination philosophique des préoccupations contenues dans *Wizard of the Crow* c'est les situer dans de plus vastes cadres analytiques. En adoptant les méthodes de base de la présentation de l'enquête, de l'analyse critique et de la reconstruction philosophiques, les questions sont élevées du domaine de la fiction à l'espace de la connaissance systématisée, destinée à la présentation d'une notion globale de la sphère publique Africaine dans la mesure où celle-ci peut se réaliser.

Introduction: The Public Sphere

The notion of the public sphere is most commonly associated with the work of Jurgen Habermas. In a commemorative lecture he delivered at Kyoto in 2004, Habermas stated that the public sphere as the space for reasoned communication exchange is the issue that has concerned him all his life. Habermas (1989) conceived and identified the public sphere as an area of social life that guarantees access to all citizens to interact, hold free rational discussions, identify common problems and through that discussion influence political action. By implication the public sphere as an impartial space and part of the modern 'social imaginary' (Taylor 2002) takes flesh within social and political discourses and its existence within civil society. Habermas (1964) insists that 'a portion of the public sphere comes into being in every conversation in which private individuals assemble to form a public body'.

The public sphere provides an arena for the reconciliation of private and state interest by acting as a site where public opinion is generated and distributed. By serving as an *awareness* centre the people regard it as a 'regulatory institution against the authority of the state' (Habermas 1989:27). In Habermas's idealized concept, the credentials of the public sphere include: rational-critical discourse, inclusive public; a disregard for rank; and a space that is removed from state control. The public sphere critically depends on

the ability of citizens to generate public opinion that is outside state censorship and devoid of all external coercion while at the same time positioning the opinion in a way as to influence and direct state conduct and policy. (Although state authority is the executor of the political public sphere, Habermas [1964] maintains that it is not a part of it). Ideally these opinions are expected to have the universal backing of citizens of varying status and background.

This ideal, however, has never been fully achieved. The traditional bourgeois concept of the public sphere implies for Susan Ashley (2005:7) 'the troubling assumption that the public sphere is *not* accessible to all'. Its application that is based on the characteristics of European white males excludes considerations on the basis of gender, race and other characteristics. Nancy Fraser (1992) notes that marginalized groups are not represented in the Habermasian bourgeois public sphere. There is a need for a new model to account for the interaction between excluded groups and the dominant political sphere. Instead of the common admission implied in Habermas's notion, marginalized groups form their own public spheres. She called this the subaltern counterpublics. Seyla Benhabib (1992) points to the conceptual disadvantage of pushing some issues to the private realm and dismissing them from the discussion of the public sphere. She insists that if the public sphere is to be a representative site of common debate and discussion that affects the population, then, there cannot be a separation between 'what is' and 'what is not' discussed (89).

Douglas Keller¹ doubts that democratic politics were ever fuelled by norms of rationality or public opinion formed by rational debate and consensus to the degree stylized in Habermas's notion of the bourgeois public sphere. It would be more accurate in his assessment to accept that 'politics throughout the modern era have been subject to the play of interests and power as well as discussion and debate'. Even Habermas has noted a decline in the public sphere. He attributes this to consumer culture and the influence of the mass media that has turned the public away from its critical role of 'reasoning' to one of an uncritical attitude of 'consuming'.

The criticisms apart, Habermas captured (at least in principle) a critical aspect of a healthy democracy: a public sphere that admits ordinary citizens in the context of egalitarian access and turns them into agents of political change through participating in rational discussion and debate targeted at state transformation but uncontrolled by the state. Based on this consideration, Habermas's notion of the public sphere and its criticisms will provide the intellectual and resource base and act as critical tools for theorizing the contest for the political sphere in this paper. All through this discourse, the 'public sphere' is generally taken in its extended sense to comprise multiple sites and concerns; sometimes locked in synergic action and at other times in conflicting reaction.

Specifically, this paper will argue for the value of literature, represented here by Ngugi's *Wizard of the Crow* (2007), in expanding the scope and deepening our understanding of the African public sphere. *Wizard of the Crow* points to the continuing importance of Habermas's study. In every society, dialogues are always taking place; nevertheless some conversations are more important than others. From the perspective of Habermas, of crucial importance is the role of critical discourse and participation by citizens in countering unjust authority and mobilizing for social transformation. *Wizard of the Crow* equally underscores the significance of debate, democratic discourses, especially at the grassroots levels and the incorporation of minor voices and local stories in reinvigorating the public sphere and strengthening democratic practices in Africa.

Wizard of the Crow

The novel *Wizard of the Crow* takes its name from a series of misunderstandings that followed the activities of the impoverished, unemployed Kamiti; and is set in a fictitious East African nation, Aburiria. The Ruler, a prototype of every dictator and the quintessential Life President, is the same as 'the country'. His mood represents the state of the nation's affairs; his sigh a warning of an impending doom; and his word the final judgment.

His three pandering Ministers have undergone plastic surgery to elongate, respectively, their tongue, ears, and eyes, the better to pronounce the Ruler's wishes, and hear and spy on dissidents. The ultimate birthday gift for the Ruler is the Marching to Heaven project: an attempt to touch the sublime while down on earth. The project is expected to be the planet's next super wonder, the world's tallest building and a platform to position the Ruler for a face to face contact with God and to elevate Africa above the West. It is a project that captures the esteem with which the Ruler is held by *his* people. It is also a project that can transport its Chairman from an average business man to visions of himself as 'the richest man in Aburiria, the richest man in Africa' and 'probably the richest man in the whole world' (173) based on bribery around contracts. The Marching to Heaven project and the plastic surgeries of the three Ministers already mentioned aside, the Ministers of Defense and Finance who went to America to negotiate loans for their ministries used respectively the occasion to upgrade a collection of pornographic videos, and to begin the process of transformation from a black man to a white man by changing his right arm to white (742). The most disquieting thing is not just power but power plus comprehensive buffoonery and the tragic combination this represents for a civilized and for civilizing a society.

With the support of his courtiers, the Ruler trimmed Aburiria to a country where there is no respect for civil liberties – free speech, freedom of worship, right of assembly and freedom to organize nonviolent opposition; and no due process as legal protection against arbitrary administrative actions (unwarranted detentions, secret arrests, forced confessions), unfair trial procedures, and fuzzy, all-encompassing laws that give extensive discretion to government officials. Vague laws against queuing represent a typical instance. There are also attempts to control the institutions responsible for producing ideas: churches, media and schools.

The Ruler's power is no ordinary power. It is the kind that sits on the brain and completely dissolves into it such that the brain is power and power is brain. As such, every thought and action that emanates from the brain automatically exudes from the seat and site of power. But everything has a price; and the higher the stake, the more intense the final result. The Ruler is shown what he wants to see and told what he desires to hear while his lackeys and flatterers maintain a screen on their thoughts, afraid to even reach out a little to each other. It is not about a plot but hidden plots.

On the other extreme, authoritarian regimes breed resistance. The Movement for the voice of the People working as an underground movement sets about scuttling all flagrant demonstrations of state power. For the Movement, the Marching to Heaven project symbolizes a corrupt, unresponsive state, a state dominated by power-interested bureaucrats and headed by a dictator obsessed with power. The protest movement takes it upon itself to uphold the economic interests of the ordinary people, the moral-ideological values of the state, peace, justice, Aburirian dignity and pride. The Movement also provokes political interest, educates citizens about political issues and values and teaches members the most efficient methods to press their policy demands on the government.

More importantly, power is faithless. Those who court power invariably experience its elusive nature: its possession is the same as inheriting the wind. There is a dilemma that confronts every power-monger: the obsession to 'step on' and the paradoxical conflict of needing the 'step' as the basis for support. Karl Popper (1962:122) avers that 'so long as one man cannot accumulate enough physical power in his hands to dominate all others, just so long must he depend upon his helpers. Even the most powerful tyrant depends upon his secret police, his henchmen and his hangmen'.

The lesson which the Ruler leaves behind is the exact opposite of what he tries to achieve. It is a moral which should always be remembered: alluring as absolute power may be, it ultimately blinds and suffocates the bearer. In the Ruler's case his world-views become ultimately self-justified and self-evident, so fixed, in fact that he becomes incapable of learning. His state of

mind becomes extremely pathological, power mad. His bent towards aggressive action and ruler-megalomania bereft him of ideas and divests him of all sense of limits as he tries to eliminate people whom he suspects oppose his ideas or dreaming of power. He will also stop at nothing to get the character, the *Wizard of the Crow*, to reveal the secrets of his knowledge which he hopes to incorporate into himself and then have the Wizard thrown into a dungeon so as to become 'sorcerer number one' (562).

In spite of all this frantic efforts, by the time the story ends the Ruler has been exterminated by the flame of power. It is an ironic twist that the impoverished, unemployed Kamiti gained a reputation as a powerful sorcerer, a *wizard of the crow*, who delivers. Without any effort in the direction of power, Kamiti has enormous power thrust on him. Here is a lesson and a moral for power seekers: in the final analysis, power chooses its own candidate.

Perhaps there is nothing new in the ethical commitment of the novel, yet the persistence of leaders turning into dictators and manipulating power as an instrument of destruction rather than a tool for service to Africa establishes the moral dimension of the story as both current and persistent. Reflecting but also anticipating the havoc of power in Africa (the ongoing Zimbabwe power crisis easily comes to mind) *Wizard of the Crow* portrays a Ruler whose pathological romance with power is the *sole* reality purchasable at any cost – unemployment, starvation, repression of all opposition and of course killing of opponents (real and imaginary).

Importantly, *Wizard of the Crow* is more than the moral affliction of a single power-confused Ruler. It is also the language of social interaction; the construction of the public sphere. Douglas Keller points to an important aspect of Habermas's notion of the bourgeois public sphere which many of its defenders and critics fail to note. The thrust of Habermas's study, according to Keller's observation, is 'precisely that of transformation, of the mutations of the public sphere from a space of rational discussion, debate, and consensus to a realm of mass cultural consumption and administration by corporations and dominant elites'.² By stressing transformation, however, Habermas points to the means by which social norms can be maintained and critiqued. Ngugi's *Wizard of the Crow* demonstrates that society can be reformed by social means.

Wizard of the Crow encourages activities that curtail the unbridled actions of state managers, that criticize narrow opinions on who constitutes society, that extend the meaning of what it means to shun authoritarian interference and that strengthen the people's voice, going beyond politeness in speaking 'truth' to the state and mediating and harmonizing private and public interest in ways that speak of Habermas's ideas. *Wizard of the Crow* employs the values of the public sphere to pass satirical comments on society's values

and practices: old assumptions are questioned, established world-views reviewed and concealed class and gender issues revealed and reassessed. Conversation is used to frame problems and solutions are proffered by principal characters in the fashion of idealized conclusions. Habermas, as already pointed out in the introduction, might not deal adequately with some issues, especially, the insufficient attention to gender and marginalized groups, but his notion of citizens engaging in rational discourse and generating public opinion that upsets unjust and authoritarian leaders is one that can be gainfully applied to major aspects of Ngugi's novel. The two dominant aspects that this paper will take up are the nature of power and resistance in African public sphere and more importantly, the character of the African public sphere.

Contesting the African Public Sphere: Power and Resistance

This paper uses the concept of the public sphere to frame the discussion about the role of power and resistance in Ngugi's *Wizard of the Crow*. The idealized vision of the public sphere calls for social integration to be founded on rational-critical discourse that promotes equal participation and communication rather than domination (Habermas 1989). The public sphere, then, is a social construction located at an impartial space where discussions, ideas, information, arguments are shared and entertained and where public opinion can be formed. In essence, Habermas's conception of the public sphere entails the role of political discourse in a democracy. This in turn implies that citizens talk about and criticize government actions, thereby turning public opinion into a political force.

In *Wizard of the Crow* the public sphere is presented as a site of intense conflict between two kinds of power: productive power and repressive power. The right to participate in political concerns is not a given, it is obtained through force, depending on the resources available to the contestants. While those on the side of repressive power – state agents – employ power as coercion and 'construction of incentives' (Shively 1997:6) and ultimately to render people as playthings; those on the side of productive power – the Movement for the Voice of the People – take up resistance and use power as a mark of freedom and interdependence and the capacity of people to change their world. Having shown these two aspects of power, in what follows I will adopt the concept of power for state power while productive power will be subsumed under resistance.

The major conflict between power and resistance in *Wizard of the Crow* is between state owners and the Movement for the Voice of the People. The notion of the public sphere as a realm of social life that admits citizens and their opinions turns it into a target of an authoritarian regime as the state both tries to appropriate it and decimate its members. The Mars Café that acts as

a rendezvous where people can sit and talk ‘for long stretches after consuming what they had ordered’ (106) is hijacked by official spies to track down dissidents. Kaniuru and two of the policemen ‘waiting to pounce on Nyawira’ (the leader of the Movement for the Voice of the People) sat ‘at separate tables in the Mars Café’ (217). This is in compliance with the Ruler’s order ‘to use all means, necessary and unnecessary to capture dissidents dead or alive and put a stop to leaflets and plastic snakes’ (136) used by the Movement to educate the populace and counter government’s unpopular policies.

The Ruler also, through the exercise of comprehensive power and a series of anti-citizen policies gradually claims all public space with the intention of silencing all opposition. To ensure that opposition is stamped out a ‘ban was imposed on queues involving more than five persons. No matter the time or place or business, it was illegal for more than five people to stand in line, whether entering a church or mosque or riding a bus or meeting in an office’ (253). The attempt to scuttle the public sphere by imposing a ban on gatherings of more than five people may be an exercise in futility. Steven Schneider (1997:17) quotes Keane as suggesting that ‘a public sphere is brought into being whenever two or more individuals, who previously acted singly, assemble to interrogate both their own interactions and the wider relations of social and political power within which they are always and already embedded’. True enough; the ban did not sufficiently hamper the activities of the Movement. Its members continued to organize and mobilize and turn every government event into an opportunity to struggle for a fundamental transformation of the system – its policy priorities, behavioural interactions that connect political leadership with mass participation, and the structural relationship between rulers and ruled. The resistance movement rejects a subordinate status based on political repression, economic marginalization and public humiliation, and tries to inculcate in their members a higher moral character. This creation of a public interest faces counter-resistance from the state and is stalled by severe difficulties. The state places a death sentence on the leader and seals off all possible space for the members’ interaction.

The over-reliance on power and its coercive possibilities eventually leads to political stasis – an inability to respond to crisis situations with innovative policies and strategies. It is this that eventually turns power on itself, leaving the Ruler exposed and fragile and making it relatively easy for a new-comer (Tajirika) to engage in power games to eliminate the Ruler and take over power. This is in direct contrast to the way the members of the resistance group protected Nyawira. Their activities in setting up a people’s court to sanction domestic offenders, using the People’s Assembly to demand the truth about the murdered Minister of Foreign Affairs, sensitizing the public

through leaflets, helped to revitalize the democratic sphere by bringing private, hidden and new issues to public attention. It is a triumph for the public character (dialogic communication based on respect for common good) of the public sphere as against the controlled nature (one-way communication anchored on authoritarian disregard for public concerns) of power-directed leadership.

More so, it is the contradictions created by the Ruler and his cohorts that provide the basis for transformative change. The truth is at a deeper level of power relations the irresponsible exercise of power breeds resistance. In the last resort, building a healthy democracy and a progressive nation critically depends on tensions – conflict, contradiction and resistance. Indeed the Movement came as near as any to realizing the possibilities of a democratic public sphere. *Wizard of the Crow* underscores the value of protest and the need to encourage the spirit of criticism on which intellectual excellence is anchored, bearing in mind that social relations will never be free of power.

There is something, however, all resistance movements should know: namely that resistance can be manipulated and turned into surrender. The women's protest dance during the dedication of Marching to Heaven aimed at shaming state power is explained to visiting delegates as 'a sacred Aburirian dance performed only before most honoured guests' (242) by the Ruler and his Minister of Foreign Affairs. Again the date chosen by the Movement for a 'general strike and the day for the rebirth of the nation' (669) is thwarted by the Ruler who fixes his birthday celebrations on the same date. As such the call for a one-day general strike by the Movement to mark the Day of National Self-Renewal 'lost the power of threat as the government declared the day a public holiday' (669). In addition, the queues formed by the people in *Wizard of the Crow* to expose high unemployment were converted by government as proof 'that people were voting with their feet in support of Marching to Heaven' (199). To sustain a high-powered resistance calls for continuous re-strategizing, creative applications and the ability to be many steps ahead of the oppressor. In Aburiria where there are very few free spaces, the Movement reconverted the unemployment queue into 'a site of democracy where gatherings did not require police permits' (199) and 'decided that whenever they wanted to have a meeting, they would form a queue. They would use the queues for purposes of political mobilization' (199-200). Also the actual denunciation of the Marching to Heaven project and the Global Bank's involvement in saddling Africa with loans is made possible for the Movement by the 'democratic space guaranteed by the bank we oppose!' (246). The logic here is that to carry out an effective resistance there is a need to turn a seeming surrender into a fertile site to *resist* surrender.

The African Public Sphere

Habermas's conception of the public sphere as a discursive space where people gather together to deliberate on issues and problems of mutual concern has an endorsement of freedom and openness surrounding it. In theory, at least, it projects rational public opinion as both outside state control and an effective check for government excesses. In essence, the public sphere mediates and moderates the political atmosphere. Habermas's ideal notion of the public sphere as the necessary condition for a genuine democracy is applied in the assessment of the ideas contained in *Wizard of the Crow* in an attempt to map out and understand the African public sphere.

Wizard of the Crow portrays the African public sphere as very fluid. The happenings in the private sphere project into the outer workings of the public sphere as the events in the public sphere determine and direct the inner activities of the private sphere. One of the theories advanced for the strange illness of the Ruler is 'the tears, unshed, that Rachael, his legal wife, had locked up inside her soul after her fall from his grace' (6). In fact the women protesters that shamed him during the dedication for Marching to Heaven shouted at him to 'set Rachael free!' (250). In this way, an issue that is consigned to the domestic arena is made public and also brought to the attention of global audience. Also the beating that Tajirika, chairman of Marching to Heaven, received from members of the People's Court on account of beating his wife is situated within the principle that 'what happens in a home is the business of the nation and the other way around' (435). Nyawira, the brain behind the Movement, insists on the need to intensify 'struggle against all gender-based inequalities and therefore fight for the rights of women in the home, the family, the nation, and the world' (428). *Wizard of the Crow* points to the changing nature of the African public sphere by highlighting issues that are usually kept in a reserved area, thereby sending a clear message for the incorporation of such concerns in the construction of a healthy social space where citizens and government can play out their roles.

The role of the public character³ in advancing the cause of the public sphere is also stressed in *Wizard of the Crow*. The police officer, Arigaigai Gathere, is one such character. Through his accounts, usually rendered in bars, the happenings in the state-world are transmitted to the people. For instance, it was from him that the people gathered information on what transpired during the Ruler's visit to America. It was, in fact, on his recommendation that the *Wizard of the Crow* was sent to America to cure the Ruler of his malady of words. Much as the public character may not always be in possession of all facts, his/her strategic positioning of being in contact with a wide spectrum of activities and people helps to promote the free flow

of information and generate a variety of criticisms which are essential elements for revitalizing the African public sphere.

Wizard of the Crow also reveals why the position of constitutional theorists concerning protest movements is not tenable in most African political spheres. Charles Andrain and David Apter (1995:147) observe that constitutional theorists expect protest movements to advocate their demands for policy changes through the orderly processes of representative government. Protesters should seek to redress their grievances through established institutions like competitive political parties, legislatures, executive agencies, bureaucracies and courts instead of using disruptive tactics such as riots, rebellions, sit-ins and mass demonstrations.

What does it mean to talk of representative government or competitive political parties in a country like Aburiria where there is 'no tomorrow beyond the Ruler' (751)? He is the country and every other interest derives its existence or extinction from the vagaries of his mood. In response to international pressure the Ruler introduced democracy. But that is only in name; in content its definition is what the Ruler says it is: 'he would be the nominal head of all political parties. This meant that in the next general elections, all the parties would be choosing him as their candidate for the presidency. His victory would be a victory of all the parties, and more important for Aburirians, a victory for wise and tested leadership' (699). Instead of the introduction of democracy to extend public political discourse and critique that would usher in new democratic ideals or at least bring substantial transformation of the existing one, new measures were introduced to further stifle the existing freedom. The Ruler's new Baby democracy 'would do away with secret ballots and introduce the queuing by which one openly stood behind the candidate of one choice. Direct democracy. Open democracy' (699). It does not require sustained reflection to imagine what would happen to an Aburirian who refused to line up behind the Ruler. Indeed the first time the Special American envoy suggested to the Ruler that his Ministers might be interested in forming opposition parties, the Ministers vehemently rejected the idea. In their vociferous denial they claimed that 'we in Aburiria know only One Truth, One Party, One Country, One leader, One God' (580). All these 'ones' of course, refer to the Ruler. The fawning gets to a point that one is convinced it is all fiction; yet at that exact moment all surrounding factual evidence speaks of a reality that even (although it is difficult to imagine) surpasses fiction par excellence.

A few examples will suffice. At a time when Nigerians were breaking under the yoke of the late Abacha repressive regime, there were both the much touted two million Man March in support of his bid for life-presidency, and the Youth Earnestly Ask for Abacha campaign. Let us accept that Abacha

is past tense. On September 16, 2008, Channels Television was closed by security operatives of the Federal Government of Nigeria without recourse to legal provisions due to the news item that President Yar'Adua had resigned on account of his health status. From Senegal, in September 2008, El Malick Seck's newspaper, *24 Heures Chrono*, was banned from publication for three months and the publisher jailed for three years for printing an article considered offensive to President Abdoulaye Wade. At least, the sentence was a court judgment even though many think it was an unfair one and that Mr Seck was a victim of authoritarian rule because his paper dared to publish an uncomfortable truth.

Mugabe, president since 1980, insists that without him there is no tomorrow for Zimbabwe and none of the senior officials of his Party has dared to voice public criticism. As a matter of fact, one of Mugabe associates, Didymus Mutasa, once told the BBC that in Zimbabwean culture kings are only replaced when they die and that Mugabe is their 'King'. Mugabe, himself, at the heat of the power crisis in December 2008 'stated that 'Zimbabwe is mine'. So even after a power-sharing agreement between him and the opposition leader, Morgan Tsvangirai, in September 2008, Mugabe on October 11, 2008 declared that his party would retain control of all key ministries like military and police. This stalled the power sharing agreement until February 11, 2009 when Tsvangirai reluctantly took the oath of office as Prime Minister. Even at that, Mugabe still retains control of the army, police force and security establishment, while Tsvangirai's party is compelled to accept the less-powerful ministries of Health, Education and Finance. Whether the power sharing agreement will work still remains to be seen. The conditions – release of political prisoners, removal of the central bank governor, among others, set out by the Movement for Democratic Change – are still to be met. The accident that claimed the life of Tsvangirai's wife and left him with neck and head injuries on March 6, 2009 is viewed with suspicion by some of his party members as another attempt on his life even though Tsvangirai said he believed there was no foul play involved. Yet, the fact that Mugabe and his allies could be suspected at all shows how brittle the agreement is. More importantly, by the time of the agreement Zimbabwe has reached a state of complete social and economic collapse. The central bank had introduced 10 billion Zimbabwean dollars to keep pace with stratospheric inflation that had soared to 231 million percent, cholera epidemic had claimed at least 4000 people and infected more than 87,000, and unemployment rate had risen to nearly 90 percent with just one adult in five holding a regular job. It is estimated that Zimbabwe needs at least \$2bn to stabilize its economy. This situation, of course, did not stop Mugabe from celebrating his 85th birthday on February 28, 2009 with a lavish bash that reliable estimates put at the cost of R1m.

Again, with the World Bank's new finding that Africa has been 'the least successful region of the world in reducing poverty' (Schiffers 2008) and the number of poor people in Africa doubling 'between 1981 and 2005 from 200 million to 380 million' (ibid), and especially at the height of grinding poverty (no water, food or transport to a clinic, and the world highest rate of HIV infection) for most of Swazi citizens, the Swaziland King, Mswati 111, celebrated '40-40' (his birthday and the country independence) on September 6, 2008 with an official budget of \$2.5m which economic experts claim to be at least five times more. Two days protest of trade unions and civic groups ahead of the celebration did nothing to alter the style and grandeur of the event.

In a political environment harbouring politically repressed, economically marginalized and socially oppressed citizenry, alienated and enlightened workers, advanced capitalist accumulation that shuns human needs, a parasitic bureaucracy controlled by an extremely highhanded and power-neurotic Ruler, the logic of constitutional theorists is difficult, if not impossible, to sustain. It has been noted that 'bad governance inadvertently and paradoxically results in high political mobilization of a radical kind' (Ayoade 1997:2).

Wizard of the Crow also points to the influence that new technologies have on the African public sphere. With new and sophisticated methods of news production, there is a global awareness on the need for a more delicate handling of political issues. When in the past the West (America) encouraged the Ruler to engage in a national massacre in order to protect American interests (579) the special American envoy on a visit to the Ruler is uncomfortable with the idea of a twenty-first century 'national massacre. To be televised. Live' (579). Instead he reminds the Ruler that 'we are in the post-cold war era, and our calculations are affected by the laws and needs of globalization' (580). The first in this consideration is to create a democratic space for capital to move as its own logic demands (580). To be sure, after Aburiria democratized the high points scored by the Ministers of Defense and Finance during their state visit to America were signing of agreements for loans to enable Aburiria to buy arms from the West and agreements with several oil companies to explore oil and natural gas and mining companies to prospect for gold, diamonds, and other precious metals (710). There is a lesson here: in the new global game of correct public appearance, behind the scene manoeuvres and manipulations are critical. As a matter of fact, the head of the Aburirian Military informs the special American envoy that the measure the military is going to use to contain the 'unauthorized processions' (579) is to 'encircle it with armoured cars and the latest guns you (America) sold to us sometime ago – old, but against unarmed civilians, still lethal' (579). *Wizard of the Crow* points to the need for a careful appraisal before embarking on any commitment so as not to endanger the public sphere.

The role of the military and police in influencing the African public sphere is a subtext in *Wizard of the Crow*. The Ruler relied on the forces to maintain his position and uproot any dissenting voice. The hunt for the members of the Movement and the character *Wizard of the Crow* is assigned to the police. It is with the help of the army and police that the Ruler in the early days of the Cold War crushed the communist insurgency in Aburiria in order to show his support for the West. He eliminated 'seven thousand and seven hundred citizens in just seven days' (579). The Ruler, of course, frequently reminds 'the nation that the only votes that mattered were those cast for him by the armed forces' (234). Indeed his first doubt regarding his omnipotence came when 'he issued an ultimatum followed by an order for the armored division to clear the people's Assembly', but 'instead of tanks running over the dissidents, there, on the television screen, were army boys and young civilians greeting one another with high fives for the entire world to see' (643). In effect, the armed forces play an active role in expanding or contracting the public sphere in Africa. For instance, Mugabe's tenacious hold on power is made possible by the loyalty and public support of Army, Police and Secret Service Chiefs who have vowed never to 'salute' or support the opposition leader Morgan Tsvangirai who is believed to have secured more votes in the Presidential election that took place in March 2008. Perhaps the most disquieting thing about the character of the African public sphere that *WOC* highlights is that after so many years of independence not much has really changed. Violence and fear still dominate the political landscape. The globalized feature of the twenty-first century Africa is very much like its twentieth century pre- and post-independence era. In Ngugi's *Weep Not, Child* (1964) and *A Grain of Wheat* (1967) people are arrested under the pretext of breaking vague laws; some brutally killed by being labeled Mau Mau terrorists. In *Devil on the Cross* (1982) it is the military and police that create the enabling environment for opposition to be silenced. The protesters campaigning against the activities of some rich subversive elements are attacked; some killed, and many arrested by the law enforcement agents. Ian Roxborough (1979:125) notes that 'the military is a central part of the state apparatus. To view it as somehow "outside" politics is frequently misleading'.

There is also the difficulty of access caused by the mutation of the public sphere to a *secret* sphere in the notion of African public sphere contained in *Wizard of the Crow*. The understanding of the publicness of the public sphere entails that its debates and discourses should be held in the open – in an area identifiable both metaphorically and physically if access is to be gained. *Wizard of the Crow* documents a political atmosphere where citizens are not free to create social space or engage in rational critical discourse. To voice even a

minimal opinion against the Ruler is a virtual invitation to be fed to the 'crocodiles of the Red river' (452). The only way to sustain opposition is to go underground or into exile (234). This creates a problem for access. An interested person may find it difficult to locate the space of a public sphere. This entails that an insider-connection is necessary. For the character *Wizard of the Crow* to join the Movement he had to rely on Nyawira. And despite his intimacy with Nyawira he knew nothing about the Movement until he became a member. This mutation of the public sphere into the secret sphere entails that members have to be assessed for correctness before being inducted as a *wrong* recruit will invariably spell doom for the Movement.

Wizard of the Crow also treats information as vital in reinvigorating the public sphere. Books provide good resource base for information and extension of knowledge production. As such the ideas and facts contained in books are critical for the advancement of a healthy public sphere. *Wizard of the Crow* chronicles a consistent attempt to distort the facts and history of the nation. A memorandum for a new national education programme require that 'all institutions of learning, from primary schools to university colleges, would be required to teach only those ideas that came from the supreme educator' – the Ruler (565). Also 'anybody who aspired to write and publish could do so only under the name of the Ruler' (565). The professor of history who dared to write a book entitled *People make History, then a Ruler makes it His Story* (20) was imprisoned for ten years without trial. The realization of the Ruler that his loyal biographer 'had no imagination to sugarcoat reality and make it more palatable' (709) was all it took to eliminate the loyal biographer. In his place, the Ruler employed a white royalist from London to fabricate a biography of 'the Ruler through the Ruler's eyes, with material generously provided by the Ruler and his handlers' (709). The effect of this convoluted history on the public space will hamper effective knowledge production in the continent, compromise political participation and diminish individual self-development, misdirect research and world views. Invariably, attention will be paid to the wrong issues or where the distortion is discovered fresh resources will be channelled to combat the errors. William A. Williams (1983:149) notes that 'history never provides programmatic answers. But it does guide one to ask the right questions and that is crucial to developing the right answers'. All this will entail huge resources that should have gone into other areas of development.

Closely related to the public sphere as an area where information and misinformation are gathered, the *Wizard of the Crow* points to the need to interrogate the language of the public sphere. For instance, the media is an important player in shaping the debate and discourse in the public sphere. It

is important to understand the interest it represents. It is both possible for the media to serve as the agent of domination and manipulation or function as the source of enlightenment and understanding. In *Wizard of the Crow*, the media did not mention the activities of the Movement to frustrate the Marching to Heaven launching. Instead ‘the headlines of the following days were all about the special birthday gift and the impending arrival of the Global Bank mission’ (22). In Aburiria the Ruler is news, ‘his every moment – eating, shitting, sneezing, or blowing his nose – captured on camera’ (3). Indeed the ‘Radio is the dictator’s mouthpiece’ (609). Here language adopts a hegemonic stance and all contrary views are neutralized. An Aburirian Minister admits that ‘sometimes we do actually imprison people for asking questions, but only those that question established truths or that undermine the rule of law or how this country is governed’ (410). Short of platitudes, what are established truths, what is rule of law or how this country is governed, in a country where ‘the Ruler and the country are one and the same’ (161) and ‘there was only one party, and the Ruler was its leader ... The Ruler was the sole voice of the people, and they loved it so’ (24). In Douglas Kellner’s⁴ view, ‘language suffers its contradictions, it is situated within a conflict between truth and untruth, universality and particularity, communication and manipulation’. Depending on the interest language is made to serve it can critically promote or undermine the activities of the public sphere. For instance a misinformed electorate is most unlikely to make a well-informed choice in elections. This point is particularly valid given the bent towards individualism and the emerging role of the media as the main force in political mobilization, socialization, communication and dissemination of information during an election period. There is a need, then, to appraise the language of the public sphere in order to ascertain the degree of its effectiveness in advancing the ideals of the African public sphere.

Wizard of the Crow also highlights the impact of globalization on the African public sphere. A major feature of globalization is the emergence of a transnational public that can act as a global court where domestic events are closely monitored and scrutinized for possible sanction. Government can no longer afford to think exclusive thoughts or take isolated actions. The Ruler’s attempt to cover the murder of one of his Ministers by accusing him of plotting against his government and seeking political asylum was countered by the American Ambassador who told him that ‘intelligence services all over the world are telling us that your Minister is not seeking asylum anywhere’ (641). In fact, most of the happenings in Aburiria become known to the global sight at times even before the Ruler gets to know of them. The Ruler on a visit to America first heard of the resurfacing of queues and women retaliatory action towards men from the representatives of the Global Bank (499).

The point is that such a free access zone while placing a certain restraint on public condemnable acts also prompts international profile comparison. A continent that aims at a favourable public image, an essential element for continental progress, should be cautious of the goings-on in its public space. The caution though should be less for prudence and more for genuine commitment towards citizens' welfare. For instance, the Marching to Heaven project was purely aimed at egocentric achievement. The crowning benefits (?) are to achieve what the architects of the Tower of Babel failed to achieve, 'the only other human attempt to reach Heaven's gate' (248); to present the 'one and only super wonder in the world' (248); and finally, to practically establish the Ruler as the other face of God. During the dedication of the project, the Minister of Foreign Affairs announced that 'the Aburirian masses are ready to forgo clothes, houses, education, medicine, and even food in order to meet any and every condition the Bank (Global) may impose on the funds it releases for Marching to Heaven' (248). He easily swears by 'the children of the children of the children of the children of our children to the end of the world ... that we shall pay back every cent of the principal along with interest on interests ad infinitum' (248). The persistent protest of the Movement against the project did not push the government to reassess its position. Instead any one associated with the Movement is declared an enemy of the state and wanted dead or alive. It was only the Global Bank's refusal to bank roll the project because of deficit economic benefits that brought it to an end.

It is difficult to understand this mind set that is completely at variance with the interest of its people and can only be checked by outside intervention. More importantly, the critical issues that should have been considered in the conception of the project were the only ones that were left out. To begin with, the queuing in Aburiria is as a result of mass unemployment and the large gathering at the dedication of Marching to Heaven is because most of the people 'thought that the Global Bank was on a mission of doling out dollars directly' (248). The implication is clear: there is mass poverty. Whether Marx is completely right or not, his articulation of the importance of the economic in determining all other aspects of life is critical in understanding modern life, the relation between nations and power statements in world politics. A continent that understands this cannot engage in economically porous ventures. And if that continent is an economically disadvantaged continent in world affairs, then, the consequences of such an act assumes multiple dimensions – political, social, technological, defense, and even the right to speak and be taken seriously is either denied or granted in fragments. It is less wonder that the Ruler fails to secure audience with the American

president during his visit to America and has to make do with attending 'prayer breakfast' in which 'he was only one among thousands who had paid thousands of dollars a plate' (484), the purpose of which is 'to raise money for the American president's charities' (484). Clearly, in an era where technology strongly defines international relations, for a technologically disadvantaged country to seek funds for a white elephant project is the height of political misadventure.

Again, there are no calculations on the effect of such project on the environment: what will be the degree of risk vis-à-vis the advantage? Will it contribute to global warming? What measures can be put in place to contain the potential consequences of global warming – rising sea levels, desertification, spread of disease (like malaria), poor harvests (especially in Africa), and changing climate patterns? Will it pass the eco-efficiency test?⁵ Anthony Giddens (2001:626) suggests that the massive flooding that occurred in Mozambique in March 2000 may not be unconnected with global warming. He further notes that the report of (in January 2000) a panel of eleven climate experts from diverse scientific fields shows that 'emissions from the developing world are also increasing rapidly particularly in countries that are undergoing rapid industrialization' (625-626). It is estimated that developing countries are more likely to be most affected from the consequences of global warming because they have fewer resources with which to create the needed sources of protection (Giddens 2001; Cheru 2008). *Wizard of the Crow* underscores the significance of packaging the continent well and positioning it strategically in world affairs and links this to the strength of the African public sphere.

Wizard of the Crow also points to some silent zones – frozen thoughts in the mind that nonetheless define the activities of the public sphere. The best representative of this is the 'if' syndrome in which the afflicted person loses all power of speech except the occasional barking of the word 'if'. The character *Wizard of the Crow* diagnosed this as 'a severe case of white-ache' (180); a code for power which all the sufferers agreed with. This acute yearning to be white freezes the thoughts of the afflicted person and renders the individual incapable of any productive action, while at the same time directing a sphere of activities – discussions, decisions – around the sufferer. And depending on who is afflicted, the fate of a nation can hang in the balance. When the Ruler was struck by the malady of words, the purpose for which he and some of his cabinet members went to America was suspended and his people literally 'lost count of the days. Perhaps weeks' (487) in their search for a cure. Most frustrating is the fact that by reverting to silence the sufferer

disconnects the link between the private and public sphere and also withdraws from meaningful cooperation with other human beings.

Wizard of the Crow uses the 'if' syndrome to draw attention to the need to intensify the agenda of decolonizing the African mind. A robust public sphere cannot be cultivated by people dominated by internal insecurities. Claude Ake (1996:16) observed that 'the lack of self-confidence has been obvious in the behaviour of many African leaders'. Typical examples noted by Ake were Idi Amin longing for white aides; Emperor Jean Badel Bokassa longing for long-forgotten and better-forgotten French monarchs; and the decision of some African governments to disallow the speaking of African languages and the wearing of African traditional clothes in parliament. Ake renounces such states of mind and insists that 'development requires changes on a revolutionary scale; it is in every sense a heroic enterprise calling for consummate confidence'. For Nengwekhulu (1981:200) 'one should never assume that it is easy to eradicate psychological attitudes which took the oppressor centuries to cultivate'.

Wizard of the Crow champions an equitable gender public sphere. The critical role women can play in advancing democratic space is given adequate attention. The chairperson of the Movement is a woman, Nyawira. Under her able leadership the Movement expanded democratic sites by providing spaces for people to debate and counter most of the corrupt policies of the government. Their focus is on the politics of change. They achieve this by seeking ways to mobilize the under-represented majorities. For instance a subset of the Movement, the People's court, took up the case of Vinjinia, the ever battered wife of Tajirika, the chairman of Marching to Heaven. It is after this encounter that Tajirika's relationship with his wife moved from that of master and servant to one of mutual acceptance, respect, sharing, communication and tolerance. This way the equitable stance in the private sphere is carried into the public sphere to reflect a new balance in power relations that exceeds granting women the right to vote. Indeed, *Wizard of the Crow* offers an important contribution in the poll of theories that aim at providing new interpretative spaces in the effort to appreciate the new developments which are transforming our world.

Conclusion

Habermas's model of the public sphere is applied here in the analysis, criticism and attempt to understand the make-up of the African public sphere. The choice of Ngugi's *Wizard of the Crow* to interrogate the conduct of the African public sphere is one such application. My choice is particularly guided by the fact that to really encounter the public sphere is to first of all engage it in an imaginary realm.

Ngugi's fictional world acts almost as a direct restitution of his understanding of events in the real social and political life in Africa. The uprising of unscrupulous mediocre who thrive best in a corrupt atmosphere of repressive regimes in African political life is underscored as a serious threat to not just politics but the public sphere in general – the moral emptiness of the political arena is unleashed on the general public sphere. Let us allow for the fact that the Ruler is a fictional creation and therefore probably more than a man in real life might be. Let us further grant that an imaginative writer has more liberty to stretch human frailties. Granted these excuses, *Wizard of the Crow* still retains its validity as a serious attempt to capture and raise some of the most pressing problems underlying Africa today: the wrong application of power among most of its bearers and the lack of interest on the part of most leaders and some citizens to create and nurture a civil society founded on such core values as respect, excellence, hard work, commitment, and of course, honesty and integrity. Ngugi⁶ in an interview he granted Ken Olende about *Wizard of the Crow* and the state of the continent today avers that 'there is no reason why art will not always express our ethics or ideals ... The struggle to transform ourselves will always be there and that struggle will always be expressed in art'. Indeed he views his literature as a 'global literature' which 'raises concerns with which everybody can identify, concerns in which we can all see ourselves'.

Wizard of the Crow is both a retrospective glance and a futuristic proclamation – the figure of the Ruler as a representative of the dictatorial propensities, viciousness and rigidity of the modern African ruler should be seriously addressed. Finally, encountering the issues highlighted in *Wizard of the Crow* away from the structural discourse of the public sphere helps to humanize and plant them in the consciousness of *even* people who may not have access to exotic academic presentations on the subject. This is one profound sense in which literature, here exemplified by *Wizard of the Crow*, helps to expand and deepen our understanding of the African public sphere.

Notes

1. See Douglas Kellner, 'Habermas, the Public Sphere, and Democracy: A Critical Intervention'. (<http://www.gseis.ucla.edu/faculty/Kellner.html>). 8 July 2008.
2. Ibid.
3. I am borrowing an insight from Anthony Giddens (2001) who describes the public character as a fixture of sidewalk life who is in regular contact with a wide spectrum of people.
4. See Douglas Kellner, op. cit.

5. I am borrowing an insight from Anthony Giddens (2001: 631-632) who defines eco-efficiency as 'developing technologies that are effective in generating economic growth, but which do so at minimal cost to the environment'. For him 'the use of eco-efficient technologies can produce forms of economic development that combine economic growth with positive policies for the environment'.
6. See Ngugi wa Thiong'o interview on his new novel, *Wizard of the Crow*. (http://www.socialistworker.co.uk/article.php?article_id=10062). 15 July 2008.

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