

Immature Democracies in Africa: A Review of Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *Wizard of the Crow*. Harvill Secker, London, 2006.

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It's hard to know where to begin a review of a novel spanning over 750 pages and intended "to sum up Africa of the 20th century in the context of global forces of world history," as its author, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, says. *Wizard of the Crow* is about the historical emergence of what Thiong'o calls "corporonialism;" or what perhaps the ruling elites of the African continent and their Western mentors might want to call "good governance." Things aren't as simple as they were during the 'Cold War' years when a ruler, or The Ruler, as the nameless head of state of the Free Republic of Aburiria is simply referred to throughout the book, could simply rule. In the good old days, "they [the West] used to shower him with praises for dispatching thousands of his own people to eternal silence. . . . [N]ow, even after he had assured them that he was ready to repeat what he had done for them, they were lecturing him about restraint and the new global order !"

Ngugi wa Thiong'o goes way beyond scathing sarcasm and excruciating irony in painting an absurdly farcical picture of an African state caught in intricate webs of corruption, exploitation, and megalomaniacal leadership. And yet, the book is never bitter or defeatist. In fact it is a celebration of the people's capacity to persevere in enduring struggle; to maintain their human dignity and a spirituality rooted in the soil of their native lands.

Central to the narrative, is a love story between Kamiti, a Gikuyu name meaning 'of the trees', and Nyawira, meaning 'she of work'. Kamiti has a Masters in Business Administration (MBA) from an Indian university for which his family and village made great sacrifice to send him. Nyawira is an educated secretary working for Titas Tajirika owner of the Eldares Modern Construction Company. She is also the underground leader of a movement called the Voice of the People. As the story unfolds Tajirika is appointed the chairman of a committee responsible for the "Marching to Heaven" project. The idea of the project is to succeed where the biblical Tower of Babel failed and to construct "a building to the very gates of Heaven so that the Ruler could call on God daily to say good morning or good evening or simply how was your day today, God?"

Marching to Heaven was the ingenious idea of the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Machokali, who had earned the gratitude of the ruler by traveling to England to have his eyes surgically enlarged so that he would be better prepared to keep an eye on the interests of the Ruler throughout the globe. This incidentally led the Minister of State, Sikiokuu, Machokali's arch rival in garnishing the good graces of the Ruler, to fly off to Paris to have his ears enlarged. Sikiokuu's demonstration of loyalty was, of course, immediately rewarded by his appointment to head the secret police known and feared by the citizenry of Aburiria as M5.

But back to Marching to Heaven. Where is the funding to come from for this project of biblical proportions?

Yes, where else, but the Global Bank.

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Accordingly, a great reception is planned to invite the executives of the Global Bank, headquartered in New York City, to come to Aburiria to be wined, dined and persuaded of the merits of the project for development of the country. Unfortunately for Machokali, Nyawira and the Movement for the Voice of People organize the poor inhabitants of the slums of Eldares (the capital city of Aburiria), to converge on the luxury hotels where the receptions are taking place. Sikiokuu having heard rumors of the possibility of such a demonstration had the police prepared and low-and-behold a melee breaks out in which Kamiti, who had changed from his MBA job hunting suit to the rags of poverty in order better to beg for a meal, and Nyawira, having left her secretarial position earlier in the day to help organize the demonstration, are flung together by fate, chased through the alleys and pathways of Eldares and land up hiding together as the police are searching the neighborhood behind a door on which Kamiti had placed a warning: THIS PROPERTY BELONGS TO A WIZARD WHOSE POWER BRINGS DOWN HAWKS AND CROWS FROM THE SKY. TOUCH THIS HOUSE AT YOUR PERIL. SGD. WIZARD OF THE CROW. Kamiti's warning works. The police are frightened away; and thus, the Wizard of Crow is born.

The plot twists and turns as Ngugi provocatively weaves together multiple narrative perspectives in which at times as readers we are surprised to realize that we are hearing an account of events we thought we were already familiar with but from a different perspective. Among other maladies that the Wizard must deal with is the breakout of something called "white-ache" among various members of the ruling elite that surround the Ruler. It seems that no matter how much money one accumulates there is just something missing. Tajarika after taking bags and bags of Buri notes (Aburirian money) home following his first day of being chairman of the Marching to Heaven project, realizes at his current rate of income he could become one of the richest men in the world. He is suddenly struck dumb. He tries to explain to his wife, but all he can manage to spit out is: "if . . . if only, . . . if only!!!!!"

Vinjinia, Tajarika's wife, both of whom are devout members of the All Saints Cathedral, decides, on the advice of Nyawira – Tajarika's secretary and covert leader of the Movement of the Voice of the People, to take Tajarika to the Wizard of the Crow. Sure enough the Wizard is able to relieve Tajarika by soliciting his most secret desires and fears, culminating in: "if . . . if . . . my skin . . . was not . . . black; if only . . . if only . . . I was white . . .!"

It's true; at times Ngugi seems to go a bit over-the-top, beyond the legitimate tools of literary license and almost drowns in what is simply ridiculous. But then we turn from literature to the reality of the 'news' that Kenya which "was known as an anchor state in East Africa," has somehow descended into a state of crisis, and despite all of the 'sweet talk' of the recent 10th summit of the African Union in Addis Ababa, the AU is obviously incapable of effectively addressing or in some cases even acknowledging the growing crises in Darfur, Chad, Kenya, Somalia, Zimbabwe or the Congo.

Thus, in my opinion, Ngugi wa Thiong'o is not an 'Africa pessimist' as many might want to label him, but an African and, indeed global, realist. 'Realist' not in terms of sophisticated theories of Political Science and International Relations, but realist in the sense of committed to using his literary genius to give us an honest many-faceted appraisal

of our current situation. Specifically concerning his homeland of Kenya, in an interview from 2006 he was commenting on how he was finishing *The Wizard of Crow*, just as Daniel Arap Moi's rule was coming to an end and President Kibaki was coming to power on an anticorruption platform:

When Moi suffered his electoral defeat I said, 'What we have in Kenya is Moi-ism without Moi.' . . . There has been a terrible moral decay. An individual can go; but the system continues The civil service is the same. The head is no longer there. We won't get out of this until we change the system and realize what Moi-ism actually meant (Socialist Worker, 4 November, 2006).

Concerning corporate driven neo-liberal globalization:

Personally I feel that out of the imperial chaos that is ruling the world will emerge a more global awareness that corporatism – what I call in the novel 'corporonialism' – can only bring disaster. . . . It must be replaced by something else, also global in nature, but overcoming global corporatism On the one hand globalization is very depressing, but in another way our globalization opens possibilities. Social movements in Africa, Europe or Latin America can communicate. So the possibility is that in the very act of globalization we see the roots of a genuine global community (ibid.).

Yes Ngugi is just as much, if not more, of a partisan as he always has been through such novels as *Petals of Blood*, *Devil on the Cross* – secretly written entirely on toilet paper while imprisoned, and *Matigari*. But this time he has turned to a more humorous genre in an attempt to reach the inner reaches of his reader's historical consciousness and conscience.

So when the Ruler travels to New York to personally lobby the Global Bank to fund his Marching to Heaven project and falls ill with a strange condition called "Self Induced Expansion (SIE)," which totally stumps the Harvard doctors, but which the Wizard of Crow – quietly flown from Aburiria to New York in light of the egregious situation, we aren't really surprised to find that he has somehow become a bit pregnant.

What, the manly Ruler, pregnant?

Yes, and some months later the Crow's diagnosis is confirmed. The Ruler gives birth, or more accurately, explodes, and "Baby Democracy" is born in the Free State of Aburiria.

Now, I feel like I should remind the readers of this review that Ngugi completed the *Wizard of Crow* long before recent developments in Kenya, let alone Ethiopia, but well, this is one reason that I'm suggesting it is a truly realistic, if somewhat refreshingly magical, piece of literature.

As the story progresses, Kamati, of the trees, with his MBA degree too learns from his father, that he comes from a long tradition of healers, and despite himself becomes the *Wizard of the Crow*. He and Nyawari, she of work, take refuge in the caves and forests of Kenya, sorry, Aburiria, as the Movement of the Voice of People takes deep but covert roots for a long term, perhaps never-ending struggle, and while the Global Bank and the Ruler nurture the new born baby.

In concluding this review of *the Wizard of the Crow* as a magically realistic novel I would like to refer readers to the birth and development of something that came to be baptized 'polyarchy' in the 1980s, following the *Crisis of Democracy* which had broken out in the so-called 'developed' world during the 60s and early 70s. You remember all that

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civil rights and human rights and even economic rights and anti-war 'sentiment'. In 1967, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. went so far as to say that his government, the United States of America, was the "greatest purveyor of violence in the world," "on the wrong side of a world revolution," and initiated the "Poor Peoples Campaign" a few months before his assassination. Well according to the Trilateral Commission at the time, the real problem was that people were just expecting way too much; there was too much 'democracy'.

What - The United States of America on the *wrong* side of a world revolution in the middle of the so-called 'Cold War'? Heaven forbid!! It all depends on how you look at it.

Well, as Samuel Huntington explains - one of the Trilateral Commission's authors of the *Crisis of Democracy* in the 70s, one of the fathers of 'polyarchy' in the 80s, and the *Clash of Civilizations* in the 90s: "Defining democracy in terms of goals such as economic well being, social justice and overall socio-economic equity" is just not "very useful (Huntington 1989: 12-13)."

In reference to 'polyarchy' William Robinson describes it in the following terms:

[It] refers to a system in which a small group actually rules and mass participation in decision-making is confined to leadership choice in elections carefully managed by competing elites. . . . the state is the domain of the dominant classes, while the popular classes are incorporated into civil society under the hegemony of the elite . . . which is the formula for the exercise of consensual domination (Robinson 1996, as quoted in Burbach and Tarbell 2004: 72).

According to Robinson, the concept of 'polyarchy' was developed as it began to become clear that the U.S could no longer unconditionally support such blatantly anti-democratic regimes as those of Moi in Kenya, Marcos in the Philippines, Pinochet in Chile, Duvalier in Haiti, and The Ruler in The Free State of Aburiria. At least they couldn't continue to do so in the name of 'freedom and democracy' and still expect to be taken seriously. Such governments would have to reform or be politely shoved aside by some more responsible and oxymoronic 'democratic ruling elites'. Thus 'baby democracies' were conceived throughout the world whether through rape, seduction or divine intervention.

In essence, the *Wizard of Crow* is a complex a non-reductionist reflection on this period of human history from the perspective of a brilliant Kenyan author whose consciousness emerged during the times of the Mau Mau uprising, grew through independence and heartbreaking neo-colonial disappointments and imprisonments, and is still very warm heartedly struggling forward, fully acknowledging the entrenched historical realities of our times. True, in terms of summing up "Africa of the 20th century in the context of global forces of world history," there is very little, if any, reflection on the trials of independence under distorted forms of Marxism-Leninism or even relatively enlightened African Socialism, but that's not really Ngugi's story to tell. The real challenge to my realist interpretation is that there is almost no reference to ethno-cultural conflict.

Well, may be that is Ngugi wa Thiong'o's very real, hopeful, magical and spiritual challenge to the people of Aburiria.

Perhaps, I can close by letting Nguni speak for himself:

Art is a most potent tool. Think of art as a flower. The flower is an expression of the entire plant, but additionally the flower holds the seeds for the future of the plant.

Without romanticizing it, art is by its very nature revolutionary. You cannot think of art – even a picture on the wall – without movement and change. And that is why the moment of social revolution is when the movement and art come together for a period and that's why that moment whether it is old, new or avant garde it links with the movement. After that moment they will tend to part company.

In my book *Penpoints, Gunpoints and Dreams*, I theorized about literature, art and social movements. The state is conservative by its very nature – even the most revolutionary state. There cannot be a revolution everyday. The state creates law, which it has to conserve and so on. While art, in its very nature as art embodies the idea of change.

But you shouldn't forget that societies in the past did not have states, as we know it. Look at the various norms that were accepted and controlled the relations between one person and another. They were very strong moral norms.

In my view the goal of human society is not just to feed and clothe and shelter. There must be a spiritual dimension. For me religion is an expression of our desires and our spiritual being. There is no reason why art will not always express our ethics or ideals. Stories will always be there. The struggle to transform ourselves will always be there and that struggle will always be expressed in art (Socialist Worker, 4 November, 2006).

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