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### Abstract

This essay examines the production of the sign 'woman' in Ngugi wa Thiong'o's early novel *The River Between*. The analysis of signs and of signifying systems in the novel is only viable if one examines the movements of history that have facilitated and necessitated the production of signs. Equally, it is important to examine the subject-formation of the historical person, (James) Ngugi, who acts as an agent of particular discursive practices, motivated by specific ideological interests. *The River Between* provides insight into a pivotal moment in Kenyan history – that of the Kenyan circumcision debate.<sup>2</sup> This historical moment is interesting for three reasons. Firstly, it highlights the contest between conflicting power bases (traditionalism, education, Christian revivalism, Gikuyu nationalism) in colonial Kenya. Secondly, the debate is particularly revealing of the Gikuyu woman's production as a subject under conflicting discourses and her marginalisation from political debate (since she becomes the site of contest in the debate). Thirdly, Ngugi's re-presentation of the debate in *The River Between* points to his own ideological unease in relation to the discourses that inform his novel.

BRENDON NICHOLLS

## Clitoridectomy and Gikuyu Nationalism in Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *The River Between*

This essay examines the production of the sign 'woman' in Ngugi wa Thiong'o's early novel *The River Between*.<sup>1</sup> The analysis of signs and of signifying systems in the novel is only viable if one examines the movements of history that have facilitated and necessitated the production of signs. Equally, it is important to examine the subject-formation of the historical person, (James) Ngugi, who acts as an agent of particular discursive practices, motivated by specific ideological interests. *The River Between* provides insight into a pivotal moment in Kenyan history — that of the Kenyan circumcision debate.<sup>2</sup> This historical moment is interesting for three reasons. Firstly, it highlights the contest between conflicting power bases (traditionalism, education, Christian revivalism, Gikuyu nationalism) in colonial Kenya. Secondly, the debate is particularly revealing of the Gikuyu woman's production as a subject under conflicting discourses and her marginalisation from political debate (since she becomes the site of contest in the debate). Thirdly, Ngugi's re-presentation of the debate in *The River Between* points to his own ideological unease in relation to the discourses that inform his novel.

The circumcision debate erupted in Kikuyuland in 1928 when several of the missions located there (most notably the Church of Scotland Mission) initiated a campaign against clitoridectomy and required their followers to renounce both the custom and their membership of the Kenya Central Association (KCA), a traditionalist party of which Jomo Kenyatta was the general-secretary. The Gikuyu community, under the leadership of the KCA, initiated a counter-campaign of protests, letters to the press and pro-circumcision politicking. The mission schools instructed pupils that circumcised students would not be admitted. In the short term, the debate cost the missions most of their adherents, although many later returned. More importantly, it provided the KCA with an issue around which Gikuyu solidarity could be fostered. The KCA also began to see the need for an independent school system and an African-controlled church, which would sanction both polygamy and clitoridectomy. Rosberg and Nottingham inform us that 'the missions were increasingly regarded as the spiritual edge of the colonial sword. In particular, the dominant mission role in education was no longer regarded as sacrosanct. Out of the controversy there developed a drive to establish a comprehensive educational system independent of missionary control' (125). The KCA set about establishing the Gikuyu Karing'a Education Association

(karing'a denotes 'nationalist' or 'full-blooded' [*ie.* non-hybrid]; Meyer 39) and the African Independent Pentecostal Church. The feeling regarding the issue of clitoridectomy ran so high that on 2 January 1930, one of the missionaries, Miss Hulda Stumpf, was reportedly attacked in her home and forcibly clitoridectomised (Rosberg and Nottingham 124). By 1931, more moderate voices within the church had prevailed and the air cleared.

Despite the Gikuyus' and the missionaries' representations to the contrary, the circumcision debate did not centre around clitoridectomy as a moral issue. The heat that the debate generated was largely due to the moral indeterminacy which inhered between the conflicting ideologies of the Gikuyu and the missionaries. The church's opposition to the ritual was relatively straightforward: its intent was to eliminate an operation that is painful, sometimes fatal and always irreversible (Rosberg and Nottingham 111–119; Sicherman 63–64). The circumcision procedure was not carried out in the sanitary conditions of a Western hospital and its function in terms of Gikuyu spirituality was anathema to the West's received notions of religious worship. As such, clitoridectomy was deemed a barbaric and heathen practice. The missionaries' representation of clitoridectomy was an interested one — their civilising mission consisted in the redemption of African subjects from the clutches of darkness but this mission was co-extensive with colonialism, because both involved the eradication of the Gikuyu's history, social organisation and sense of identity. Clitoridectomy produced a crisis for the missionaries because the liberal-humanist discourse that informed their activity meant that they could only recognise the Gikuyu subject's common humanity so long as that humanity was constituted in the image of the West.

The Gikuyu's argument was more complex — at least, from an outsider's point of view. Jomo Kenyatta's account of clitoridectomy, which Ngugi follows in *The River Between*, is the clearest exposition of the ritual and its importance in Gikuyu culture. In *Facing Mount Kenya*, Kenyatta describes circumcision as 'a deciding factor in giving a boy or a girl the status of manhood or womanhood in the Gikuyu community' (133). He continues: 'No proper Gikuyu would dream of marrying a girl who has not been circumcised, and vice versa. It is taboo for a Gikuyu man or woman to have sexual relations with someone who has not undergone this operation' (132). Furthermore, those 'detribalised' Gikuyu who did wish to settle down with an uncircumcised partner would not have enjoyed the blessing of their family and would have faced exclusion from the homestead, disinheritance and, therefore, landlessness. Kenyatta continues:

It is important to note that the moral code of the tribe is bound up with this custom and that it symbolises the unification of the whole tribal organisation.... The *irua* (ceremony) marks the commencement of participation in various governing groups in the tribal administration, because the real age-groups begin from the day of the physical operation. The history and legends of the people are explained and remembered according to the names given to various age-groups at the time of the initiation ceremony. (134)

More importantly, the parents of the initiates became members of the governing council of elders (*kiama*) subsequent to the initiation of their first child. The ceremony was thus central to the social organisation and the organisation of power within the Gikuyu community. However, circumcision was also of crucial importance to the organisation of sexual difference and male privilege in the community:

Before initiation it is considered right and proper for boys to practice masturbation as a preparation for their future sexual activities. Sometimes two or more boys compete in this, to see which can show himself more active than the rest.... Masturbation among girls is considered wrong, and if a girl is seen touching that part of her body she is at once told that she is doing wrong. It may be said that this, among other reasons, is probably the motive of trimming the clitoris, to prevent girls from developing sexual feelings around that point. (Kenyatta 162)

Clitoridectomy was thus tantamount to an erasure of one aspect of female desire by a male-dominated culture. Allied with this negation was a series of cultural relations that the operation enacted and instituted. It not only dispossessed Gikuyu women of one site of bodily pleasure, but also dispossessed them of material possessions. Becoming a woman among the Gikuyu meant submitting to exclusion from the ownership and inheritance of land and from access to political decision-making. In short, clitoridectomy enacts the relations of male dominance and female submission that constitute a patriarchal social order.

The Gikuyu woman's body is instrumentalised in the establishment of male prerogatives. She is allocated an important 'place' within culture, in spite of the fact that she will never own that place. Her body founds the (male) right to property, the male prerogative in the homestead, male accession to power, the male-defined dialectic of desire. Her desire (which exceeds her reproductive functions) is effaced in order to naturalise her subjection in culture. Spivak is apposite here:

Male and female sexuality are asymmetrical. Male orgasmic pleasure 'normally' entails the male reproductive act — semination. Female orgasmic pleasure (it is not of course the 'same' pleasure, only called by the same name) does not entail any one element of the heterogenous female reproductive scenario: ovulation, fertilisation, conception, gestation, birthing. The clitoris escapes reproductive framing. In legally defining woman as an object of exchange, passage or possession in terms of reproduction, it is not only the womb that is literally 'appropriated'; it is the clitoris as signifier of the sexed subject that is effaced. All historical and theoretical investigation into the definition of woman as legal *object* — in or out of marriage; or as politico-economic passageway for property and legitimacy would fall within the investigation of the varieties of the effacement of the clitoris.

(1987, 151 [emphasis in original])

There was far more at stake in the circumcision debate than the Gikuyu woman's right to determine whether or not to submit her body to clitoridectomy. In fact, her assenting or dissenting voice was never an issue. Rather, the central (but

unspoken) issue in the debate was the material composition of the Kenyan state. In order to clarify this point, I shall make use of Louis Althusser's essay, 'Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses'. Althusser argues that the capitalist state reproduces itself in two ways. Firstly, it must reproduce the skills and materials required for production. Secondly, it must reproduce the labour force's submissive relationship to the organisational hierarchy of the state:

To put this more scientifically, I shall say that the reproduction of labour power requires not only a reproduction of its skills, but also, at the same time, a reproduction of submission to the rules of the established order, i.e. a reproduction of submission to the ruling ideology for the workers, and a reproduction of the ability to manipulate the ruling ideology correctly for the agents of exploitation and repression, so that they, too, will provide for the domination of the ruling class 'in words'. In other words, the school (but also other State institutions like the church....) teaches 'know-how', but in forms which ensure *subjection to the ruling ideology* or the mastery of its 'practice'. (6–7 [emphasis in original])

Althusser claims that the ruling ideology of the state is promulgated by Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs), which include the religious ISA (the system of different churches) and the educational ISA (the school system). ISAs such as these become 'not only the *stake*, but also the *site* of class struggle' (21 [emphasis in original]) in the proletariat's attempts to ward off the ruling class's exploitation and to seize control of the state. In pre-Independence Kenya, the Christian church's contribution to colonialism was to ensure a docile populace, who could look forward to the Kingdom of Heaven in the afterlife while enduring servitude on Earth. Equally, the school system functioned to produce an African élite, who would emerge as a buffer class between the settler's neo-aristocracy and the Kenyan peasantry. In other words, the Ideological State Apparatuses constituted by the school system and the missions enabled and perpetuated the exploitative social formations in colonial Kenya. In political terms, the circumcision debate marks a decisive juncture in the history of Gikuyu resistance to colonial rule.<sup>3</sup> The emergence of the independent schools and the African churches was tantamount to the emergence of powerful new ISAs in the Kenyan state, instituting a counter-colonial discourse. These ISAs, like the Gikuyu nationalism they fostered, had their ideological roots in Gikuyu traditionalism. The advent of *Mau Mau*,<sup>4</sup> twenty years later, may be viewed as an attempt by the Gikuyu people (and others) to usurp the Repressive State Apparatuses (the army, the police, the homeguard, the courts) that enforced the last vestiges of colonial domination in Kenya.

While the debate may have had far-reaching consequences for the Gikuyu populace, the central figure in the debate — the Gikuyu woman — is conspicuously silent. This silence may be understood in terms of Althusser's remark that '[ideology] represents the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence' (36). In terms of this formulation, the Gikuyu

woman's identity as 'a woman' is produced by the ritual of circumcision and its attendant cultural implications — it was only by submitting to clitoridectomy that the Gikuyu woman could call herself 'a Gikuyu woman' (or, for that matter, 'a patriot'). Equally, it was only by refusing to be circumcised that the Kenyan Christian woman could call herself 'a Christian woman' (or, for that matter, 'a good colonial subject'). In Althusser's terms: 'all ideology hails or interpellates concrete individuals as concrete subjects' (47). Despite the hostility that developed on both sides, the result of the circumcision debate was the production of a regime of signs in which the Gikuyu patriarchy and the colonial patriarchy colluded to silence the Gikuyu woman.<sup>5</sup> Evidence of this collusion may be found in the strikingly similar conclusions that Kenyatta and the missionaries drew from the events in 1931: that circumcision was a custom ingrained in Gikuyu culture, and that it was best left to die out by itself.<sup>6</sup>

Although the Gikuyu traditionalist community was the only party to advocate clitoridectomy in the debate, the missionaries' Christian belief-system entailed the suppression of the clitoris by a more subtle mechanism — as an example, one might cite the myth of the Immaculate Conception (as Tobe Levin's essay on *The River Between* does) in which Mary's motherhood is co-extensive with a lack of participation in the act of coitus, which in turn constitutes an effacement of female desire: Mary is an icon of 'woman' defined exclusively as a mothering-function. In addition, Gayatri Spivak has provided an incisive critique of the ubiquitous symbolic clitoridectomy of women:

Psychological investigation in this area cannot only confine itself to the effect of clitoridectomy on women. It would also ask why and show how, since an at least symbolic clitoridectomy has always been the 'normal' accession to womanhood and the unacknowledged name of motherhood [Spivak refers here to Freud's assertion that women's psychosexual maturity rests upon a change from clitoral to vaginal orgasm], it might be necessary to plot out the entire geography of female sexuality in terms of the imagined possibility of the dismemberment of the phallus. The arena of research here is not merely remote and primitive societies.... The pre-comprehended suppression or effacement of the clitoris relates to every move to define woman as sex-object, or as means or agent of reproduction — with no recourse to a subject-function except in terms of those definitions or as 'imitators' of men. (1987 151)

The upshot of the collusion between colonial-Christian and traditionalist-nationalist ideologues in the circumcision debate was that both camps decided upon a shared referent (the peasant woman) and differed only as to whether she should be symbolically or physically clitoridectomised.

Ngugi's own subject-formation is an uneasy synthesis of the colonial and counter-colonial ideologies that competed for primacy in the circumcision debate. He was born into a family of *ahoi* (tenant farmers) and, although his parents were located within the Gikuyu peasantry, they distrusted Gikuyu traditionalism. Their landlords were devout members of the Church of Scotland Mission. The

first three years of education Ngugi received were at a mission school (Kamaandura). He then transferred to the Maanguua Karing'a school, which was one of the independent schools, and underwent circumcision at the age of fifteen. He then attended Alliance High School, where he became 'rather too serious a Christian' (Sicherman 1990 4, quoting the Amoti interview). Shortly after writing *The River Between* in 1961 (originally and revealingly titled *The Black Messiah*), Ngugi wrote an article for the Kenyan newspaper, *Sunday Nation*, with the propitiatory title of 'Let Us Be Careful About What We Take From The Past'. The article argues 'for selective retention of things from the past in keeping with "our progress to a higher and fuller humanity" [and] finds the Gikuyu "the worst offenders"', citing "brutal" female circumcision and bride price as customs that have "completely outlived" their purposes' (Sicherman 1989 11).

It is perhaps not surprising that *The River Between* reflects Ngugi's ideological unease in relation to the Gikuyu woman. On one level, the text reinforces the production of women in terms of traditionalist ideology. For example, the free indirect discourse attributed to Chege reveals the social importance with which clitoridectomy is invested: '[circumcision] was a central rite in the Gikuyu way of life. Who had ever heard of a girl that was not circumcised? Who would ever pay cows and goats for such a girl?' (37–38). The passage is ambiguous. Firstly, it is ironic that it is precisely Chege's son (Waiyaki) who falls in love with an uncircumcised 'girl' (Nyambura). Yet Chege's thoughts prove to be prophetic: events intrude upon the young lovers' plans and prevent them from marrying according to either a Christian or a traditional custom. As prophecy, Chege's assertions are validated; as irony, they are deflated. This should point us to Ngugi's ambivalence in regard to both Gikuyu traditional and Western belief systems, which play out their confrontation in terms of the sign 'woman' (or 'girl') that can only be produced in exogamy. The exchange of women in Gikuyu culture (and implicitly in the novel) is an exchange that cements social and political relationships between men. Circumcision therefore provides a seal on the act of exogamy — it invests 'the goods' with value.<sup>7</sup>

In one of its less equivocal moments, *The River Between* resorts to a free indirect discourse that unwittingly exposes circumcision as a cornerstone upon which the Gikuyu patriarchy is founded:

Circumcision was an important ritual to the tribe. It kept people together, bound the tribe. It was at the core of the social structure, and a something that *gave meaning to a man's life*. End the custom and the spiritual basis of the tribe's cohesion and integration would be no more. The cry was up. Gikuyu Karinga. Keep the tribe pure. Tutikwenda Irigu [we do not want uncircumcised girls]. It was a soul's cry, a soul's wish. (68 [my emphasis])

Beyond the sexist language in this passage and its construction of a masculine performative 'we' that articulates the destiny of women's bodies in an unimpeachably spiritual register, *The River Between* is a little simplistic in its



reduction of an entire tradition to one custom.<sup>8</sup> However, the text's emphasis on the 'spiritual' importance of circumcision also obscures its material importance in disciplining the Gikuyu subject:

The knife produced a thin sharp pain as it cut through the flesh. The surgeon had done his work. Blood trickled freely onto the ground, sinking into the soil. Henceforth a religious bond linked Waiyaki to the earth, as if his blood was an offering. Around him women were shouting and praising him. The son of Chege had proved himself. Such praises were only lavished on the brave. (45)

The blood that drops onto the earth during circumcision is supposed by the Gikuyu subject to naturalise his/her bond with the land. This representation obfuscates the fact that, unlike the empowering outcomes of the operation upon men, clitoridectomy functions to acculturate the Gikuyu subaltern woman<sup>9</sup> and to appropriate her body in the service of oppressive social relations. The ritual re-enacts this silence because the subject (whether male or female) is expected not to cry out, nor to register pain (Kenyatta 1938, 146). The material basis of circumcision becomes manifest if one examines these silences in the text. If the ritual serves to naturalise the relationship between the subject and the land, it may be viewed as a legitimising enactment of Gikuyu proprietorship of the land. In a number of places, the text refers to a secret language of the Kenyan highlands; a language that the coloniser does not understand. The content of this secret language is not explicitly revealed to the reader, but it forms part of a coded reference to Gikuyu proprietorship of the land at one point in the narrative:

On sunny days the green leaves and the virgin gaiety of the flowers made your heart swell with expectation. At such times the women could be seen cultivating; no, not cultivating, but talking in a secret language with the crops and the soil. Women sang gay songs. (79)

The secret language of this passage is one which links the subaltern woman with the land and that which issues from it — the flowers have a 'virgin gaiety' (which might, in turn, imply the pristine agrarian society prior to the advent of colonialism) and likewise the women sing 'gay' songs. Equally, in the Kenya of the early 1930s, the secret language of the KCA's involvement in the circumcision debate was that the preservation of the ritual formed part of its program for the reclamation of land alienated from the Gikuyu, and the reinstatement of a traditional social order which was beginning to lapse under the weight of colonial incursion.

The alignment of 'women' (or 'mothers', or 'virgins') with nature serves to legitimise a broader narrative that divests women of a controlling hand in the realms of culture and politics. This narrative is expressed in one of the Gikuyu myths that appears more than once in Ngũgĩ's work. Waiyaki asks why antelope do not flee from women. Chege replies:

‘You do not know this! Long ago women used to rule this land and its men. They were harsh and men began to resent their hard hand. So when all the women were pregnant, men came together and overthrew them. Before this, women owned everything. The animal you saw was their goat. But because the women could not manage them, the goats ran away. They knew women to be weak. So why should they fear them?’

It was then Waiyaki understood why his mother owned nothing. (15)

This passage naturalises Gikuyu male privilege and prerogatives in Ngugi’s text and in the traditional society from which the myth is drawn. The implication in the myth is that society is best ruled by those (men) who can best instil fear into (their) others. More importantly, the myth may be linked to the rite of circumcision in this way: if clitoridectomy (symbolic or real) is the pre-requisite of a patriarchal construction of woman in terms of a uterine social organisation — under which woman’s excessive desire is effaced so that the womb may be appropriated for its reproductive potential — then the myth depicts the rise of the patriarchy by an appropriation of women’s reproductive capacities. The myth comprises a symbolic effacement of the clitoris, and it undergirds a patriarchal Symbolic that is predicated on the effacement of female sexuality. The myth thus serves to legitimate the practice of clitoridectomy and its cultural effects. Further, it serves to counter the peasant woman’s claim to political self-representation. In a sense, the circumcision debate and the myth that legitimises male power conspire to place the subaltern woman in a double-bind from which even Ngugi’s hybrid female characters cannot escape. The circumcision debate meant that a woman’s political choice was exercised through her physiological status (clitoridectomised or not) and the myth legitimising male power implies that it is precisely women’s physiology which prevents them from exercising political power.

However, my reading of *The River Between* has not taken into account the contradictory status of the characters that are a synthesis or middle ground in the ideological divide between Western Christianity and Gikuyu traditionalism. These characters are hybrid and are therefore offered a revolutionary potential in the text. It is clear that the text privileges these characters: the title, *The River Between*, refers to the Honia river, which serves as an ‘ideological between’ — a negotiated position in the conflict between the Makuyu and Kameno ridges. Perhaps the most important of these hybrid figures is Muthoni. Her decision to be both Christian and circumcised is revolutionary in the context of the circumcision ‘debate’ and her justification of this decision provides Waiyaki with the first inklings of how he may assist in the liberation of the Gikuyu from colonial rule. Muthoni says, ‘I want to be a woman. Father and Mother are circumcised. But why are they stopping me, why do they deny me this? How could I be outside the tribe when all the girls born with me at the same time have left me?’ (44). Her position exposes the inconsistency of her father, Joshua’s, prohibition of circumcision. However, although her position offers her a

revolutionary potential in the text, it does not offer her liberation from the strictures of the Gikuyu patriarchal order: 'I want to be a woman made beautiful in the tribe: a husband for my bed; children to play around the hearth' (44). Clearly, to be 'made beautiful in the tribe' is to acquire an ideologically-determined beauty which supports the patriarchal organisation of the Gikuyu. If clitoridectomy erases female desire in order to produce wives and mothers, then Muthoni's words indicate that she will find her own fulfilment in the role that has been allocated to her. Muthoni's hybrid status is further confirmed by her final words: 'I am still a Christian, see, a Christian in the tribe. Look, I am a woman and will grow big and healthy in the tribe.... [Tell] Nyambura I see Jesus. And I am a woman, beautiful in the tribe...' (53). Nevertheless, Muthoni's death functions to negate the possibilities that the text affords her — she constitutes a failed attempt at an ideological synthesis of the Gikuyu traditionalist and Christian stances in relation to clitoridectomy. Significantly, the injuries she sustains during the operation can be cured neither by Gikuyu traditional remedies, nor by Western medicine (50). Incidentally, Muthoni's death signals another negated possibility in the text. In Gikuyu, Muthoni means 'a relative by marriage', and the reader later discovers that a marriage between Waiyaki and Nyambura is fated not to take place.

The second hybrid character is Waiyaki. He is referred to as the 'Black Messiah', and there is some suggestion that Waiyaki is the Jesus that Muthoni has seen on her deathbed (103). He is described in terms that evoke both Gikuyu traditionalist and Christian discourses:

[His] voice was like the voice of his father — no — it was like the voice of the great Gikuyus of old. Here again was a saviour, the one whose words touched the souls of the people. People listened and their hearts moved with the vibration of his voice. And he, like a shepherd speaking to his flock, avoided any words that might be insulting. (96)

Equally, Nyambura — Muthoni's sister and Waiyaki's lover — is offered a revolutionary position. She is Christian and uncircumcised, and therefore outcast unclean according to the Kiama. She defies Joshua's order not to love Waiyaki (134) and when Waiyaki comes to warn Joshua and his followers of the Kiama's plans to harm them, Nyambura does the unthinkable by declaring her love for him:

Joshua was fierce. He hated the young man with a hatred which a man of God has towards Satan. There was another murmur in the room. Then silence reigned as Nyambura walked across towards Waiyaki while all the eyes watched her. Waiyaki and Joshua must have been struck by her grace and mature youthfulness. She held Waiyaki's hand and said what no other girl at that time would have dared to say, what she herself could not have done a few days before.

'You are brave and I love you.' (136)

Nyambura's voice at this point becomes a powerful instrument for dissembling the hardened ideological positions which contribute to the crisis in the text. However, her voice is never permitted to exert any influence upon the action. Like Waiyaki, Nyambura becomes a sacrificial victim of the Kiama; the scapegoat onto whom all of the Gikuyu community's guilt and hatred are transferred.

If hybrid characters such as Waiyaki, Nyambura and Muthoni are privileged in the text, one might wonder why their ostensibly revolutionary potential is negated: why do they fall foul of circumstance or of self-interested powermongers such as Kabonyi? Significantly, Kabonyi is the archetypal villain, and, rather than attempting to achieve a synthesis of the two ideological poles posited in the novel, he fluctuates between them, first as a Christian convert and later as the leader of the Kiama. The answer to my question has less to do with Ngugi's contradictory formation under Christian and Gikuyu discourses than it has to do with his contradictory position within the emergent educated élite in post-independence Kenya.

These latter contradictions are outlined in Ian Glenn's Goldmannian reading of Ngugi's fiction. Glenn emphasises Ngugi's class position within post-independence Kenya and he lists four features that characterise the emergent intellectual élite in newly independent states. Firstly, the intellectual élite plays a mediating role between the colonised's traditional culture and Western culture. Secondly, it has an exaggerated sense of its own importance and representativeness in the shaping of the nation state and its ideology.

The third notable feature of intellectual élites is that they are especially likely, by virtue of their training, outlook and position, to stress intellectual and abstract solutions to social and political problems.... The fourth feature of the intellectual élite is that a member is a member, paradoxically, by having his (*sic*) own views, opinions, conscience, judgement. He is likely to clash with traditional religious belief, marriage practices and value systems. This stress on individualism offers the temptation of a life of private consciousness, but in view of the élite's sense of idealism and of its own importance, this temptation will be resisted or take particular forms. The two most important exceptions are the pursuit of a separate religious goal or destiny for the transcendent self, or the exaltation of the self in the most individualistic of relationships, that of romantic love, with its insistence on the signs of a unique and individual attraction. (62).<sup>10</sup>

Waiyaki exhibits all of these features. He is initiated into Gikuyu customs by his father and by undergoing circumcision. He also receives an education at the Siriana mission school. He sees himself as a visionary who has been chosen to redeem the Gikuyu community from the conditions of its oppression, and the wistful solution Waiyaki offers to these conditions is that of education. Further, it is precisely Waiyaki's ambition to enter into a companionate marriage with Nyambura that marks his position as a half-outsider in relation to the Makuyu and Kamenno communities. If Waiyaki does share with Ngugi the features that

characterise the intellectual élite, one might expect the narrative to represent him in a considerably sympathetic light. Why then is Waiyaki abandoned to the discipline of the Kiama by the conclusion of the novel? Why is there a strong suggestion that his lover, Nyambura, will be circumcised or immolated? The unexpected turn of events at the conclusion of the novel may be explained by Ian Glenn's remark:

Clearly the situation and dilemma of the heroes [of Ngugi's novels] is structurally related to that of the élite whose alienation is, paradoxically, their source of power. How are we to understand the persistent failure and sacrifice of the hero? Is it a resurgence in African writing of the colonial novelist's theme of the tragedy of the educated African, the man of two worlds? In some sense, yes, it seems to me that the novels reflect the strain of this mediating position, this double alienation, and exonerate the hero by suggesting that the task of modernising his primordial attachments or satisfying the various allegiances is impossible, that the contradictions cannot be lived out. At the same time, in death as sacrifice, the élite finds an ideal individualist gesture and intellectual act through which the opposites may be reconciled. (63)

Although the two central female characters in *The River Between* are not explicitly demarcated as intellectual figures, their mission school education and missionary father demarcate their class affinity with wealthy literate minority. It is clear that, like Waiyaki, these female characters respectively represent two poles of hybridity in the narrative: Muthoni is clitoridectomised and Christian, while Nyambura is uncircumcised and in love with a circumcised Gikuyu man. This construction offers each of the sisters a reconciliatory potential in the narrative, and yet this potential is negated by Muthoni's death and Nyambura's uncertain fate. I would suggest, in agreement with Glenn's critical position, that *The River Between* plays out the possibilities and failures of a male intellectual consciousness attempting to be representative of an emergent nationalism.

Ngugi's re-inscription of the myth of Waiyaki supports this latter contention. The 'real' or 'historical' Waiyaki entered into a treaty with Lord Lugard,<sup>11</sup> then later initiated resistance against the British. He was captured and killed (allegedly by being buried upside down while still alive). Nationalist historians depict Waiyaki as an early Gikuyu martyr and a forerunner of nationalist resistance to colonial domination. Mbugua Njama's pamphlet (in Sicherman 1990, 350–55), which Ngugi translated into English, is a representative example of this trend. However, Cora Ann Presley labels Waiyaki 'an early collaborator' (9). More importantly, she notes: 'Kikuyu oral tradition maintains that Waiyaki was an ambitious young man from a poor lineage who believed he could become a man of status, wealth and authority by working with the Europeans' (63). I would not like to argue for either the educated nationalist élite's, or the illiterate peasantry's, representations of Waiyaki. Rather, I would read the differences between the two versions as an allegory of the crisis of representativeness that confronts Ngugi

as an African intellectual, removed from his constituent class by an education which is as disabling in political terms as it is enabling in socio-economic terms.

Of course, the Waiyaki of *The River Between* is not the unqualified hero/martyr of nationalist accounts, but he is always partially inscribed by the Waiyaki of myth. This may be seen in the passage that relates to the Second Birth: 'The women went on shouting but Waiyaki did not see them now. Their voices were a distant buzz like another he had heard in a dream when a swarm of bees came to attack him' (1965 12). Two points are important here. Firstly, the dream of the bees is a proleptic moment in the narrative; it prefigures the immolation of Waiyaki and Nyambura and thus enhances the suggestion that Waiyaki is a prophet chosen by the Gikuyu gods to lead his people. Secondly, it also resonates with a moment of divine intervention in the myth of Waiyaki. Waiyaki has been captured and is being taken to the coast by British soldiers. A group of warriors is following them in order to free Waiyaki by force:

It is very significant that there were many guards with him, and when they were travelling ... near Kabete a beehive, which no one had touched, fell from a tree, and the bees burst out and attacked the people who were guarding Waiyaki. The warriors wanted to fight; now they were being helped by the bees.

(Mbugua Njama, qtd in Sicherman 1990, 352)

There is an obvious difference in the function of the bees in the two stories. In the myth, they protect Waiyaki. In the novel, they attack him. Ngugi's novel reinscribes the myth in order to act out the idealistic scenario of the individual sacrifice/martyrdom of the hero. It is a gesture which reconciles Ngugi's position with that of the illiterate peasantry (as Ian Glenn suggests) and it accords with Ngugi's Christian worldview at the time of writing — the sacrificial victim/messiah reunites the collective.

Given that Ngugi's novel broadly follows Kenyatta's anthropological defence of circumcision in *Facing Mount Kenya*, there is a very revealing disparity between the two accounts of the Second Birth:

His mother sat near the fireplace in her hut as if in labour. Waiyaki sat between her thighs. A thin cord taken from a slaughtered goat and tied to his mother represented the umbilical cord. A woman, old enough to be a midwife, came and cut the cord.

(Ngugi 12)

[The] gut is cut in a long ribbon, and while the initiates stand in one group close together the ribbon encircles them, being tied so as to cover the navel of those on the outside of the circle. They stand in position for a few minutes; then the midwife comes along with a razor dipped in sheep's blood and cuts the ribbon in two. This symbolises the cutting of the umbilical cord at birth. This is done to express the rebirth of the initiate. (Kenyatta 150)

Ngugi reinscribes the Second Birth in two ways. Firstly, it takes place before Waiyaki's circumcision, rather than afterward (as in Kenyatta's account).

Secondly, Ngugi's account deals — revealingly — with an individual, rather than with a collective. Ngugi's text is marked by an individualism (which, in turn, evidences a self-interested account of Gikuyu culture and resistance). Further, this account of the Second Birth defines Ngugi's version of Kenyan history as a history of individuals, heroes, martyrs.

We have seen that Ngugi rewrites aspects of circumcision and Gikuyu myth in accordance with his position within the intellectual *élite*. Despite the discrepancies that the novel's interested accounts of circumcision involve, there is also a sense in which *The River Between* leaves intact the gender disparities produced by circumcision and the nationalist ideologies that the Kenyan circumcision debate first enabled. The effacement of female desire is crucial to such nationalist ideologies, since their representations of women rely fundamentally upon the iconography of motherhood. In her analysis of *The River Between*, Tobe Levin locates the socio-cultural basis for clitoridectomy in a masculine fear of clitoral power. In an even-handed way, Levin highlights Ngugi's ironic juxtaposition of traditional Gikuyu and Christian religious belief:

Christianity's failure is perhaps of far greater concern to the author than the obviously reactionary stance of the Kiama.... One needs little maturity to doubt the credibility of an organisation condemning clitoridectomy but espousing belief in a virgin birth. In fact, concerning sexual matters, the tribe appears to be infinitely more sophisticated than the Christians. For example, the clitoris is at least acknowledged by the former (being too powerful, it is removed), while the organ has been treated by western ideology as though it didn't exist. (214)

Levin also draws on Marielouise Janssen-Jureit's useful observation that clitoridectomy serves to produce docile wives. The ritual enables Gikuyu culture to appropriate the female desire that threatens to introduce social disorder. Equally, in the Kenya of 1929, the female body is appropriated for the production of manpower, which the 'post-colonial' state in embryo requires in order to be born. In terms of this dynamic, Gikuyu women's bodies are the baby-factories that service culture. There are resonances of this appropriation in Ngugi's subsequent novel, *A Grain of Wheat*. At the conclusion of this novel, Gikonyo envisages a pregnant Mumbi. In Gikuyu mythology, Mumbi is the mother of the Gikuyu community, and Mumbi's (the character's) pregnancy presages the birth of a new Kenya. Thus, Mumbi is situated on either side of the present — as part of a mythical past and an uncertain future — and is therefore excluded from history. She only achieves historical presence once she has been inseminated by her male counterpart.<sup>12</sup>

If we wish to interrogate Ngugi's production of woman as a sign, we may trace many of his later heroines back to the production of women in the circumcision debate. Gikuyu nationalism took shape around the issue of clitoridectomy. At this juncture in Kenyan history, the Gikuyu woman's body became a metaphor for the social composition of the state. To be uncircumcised

was to uphold the Christian-colonialist establishment and to be clitoridectomised was to support the institution of an independent Kenya, purified of colonial influences and controlled and peopled by Africans. The role of Gikuyu women in the debate was productive inasmuch as they helped to initiate the resistance that would later topple the colonial order, but it was a role that has proved to be expensive in retrospect. Immediately after independence, Kenyatta's first legislative act was to abolish the prohibition on clitoridectomy. Levin comments on the increasing prevalence of the operation in latter-day Kenya. She remarks that there has been:

an accelerating neglect of the rite accompanied by the spread of excision performed in hospitals on girls at increasingly younger ages, for whom the amputation is totally divorced from any kind of moral, ethical or even sex-educational dimension. The death of 14 young girls in 1983 led to the passage of an edict against the operations in Kenya. At the same time, law without the force of custom remains impotent....  
(216)

Levin's claims are supported by the statistics in one available study of clitoridectomy in Kenya, which claims that 4.74 million of the 7.9 million women in Kenya in 1985 had undergone clitoridectomy — a figure of roughly 60 percent (Kouba and Muasher 99).

If this trend has continued unchecked, then it would appear that the Kenyan patriarchy is producing docile women as effectively as it ever has. Furthermore, the only difference between the Kenya of today and the Kenya of the thirties would be that the patriarch now has Western medical technology at his disposal. I am not claiming that Ngugi shares complicity in these atrocities, but rather that his consistent and idealistic equation of the female character's body with the body of the state contains problematic implications for Kenyan women, and does not afford them the emancipation it initially appears to promise.<sup>13</sup>

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> This research was undertaken with the generous financial assistance of the Centre for Science Development and the University of Cape Town.
- <sup>2</sup> Although I am aware that 'circumcision' is a dangerous term to employ in the description of an amputation that differs substantially from the operation performed on men, I have retained the term in places. In my opinion, 'clitoridectomy' might be a far more disabling term in an analysis of this kind, since it might confine a feminist discourse to the specifically corporal (or 'bodily') effects of the operation. I therefore use 'clitoridectomy' to denote the physical operation, and I reserve 'circumcision' to imply the cultural effects attendant upon the rite.
- <sup>3</sup> In this context, Hickey's argument (1995) that the missionaries at least raised objections to a gender-oppressive cultural practice is slightly myopic. The missionaries intervention at a politically sensitive time had the upshot of hardening ideological positions and harnessing clitoridectomy to Kenyan nationalism for many years beyond the initial circumcision debate. Hence, this intervention probably set back the anti-clitoridectomy cause by about fifty years.



- <sup>4</sup> The predominantly Gikuyu *Mau Mau* uprising took place between 1952 and 1957. Its association in the European mind with brutality and barbarism led to a disproportionate backlash against the Gikuyu and to extreme civilian hardship. Despite its military failures, *Mau Mau* precipitated Kenyan Independence in 1960. For an expanded account of *Mau Mau* see my 'The Landscape of Insurgency: Mau Mau, Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Gender' (forthcoming)
- <sup>5</sup> Patrick Williams' description of the Gikuyu 'female agency as ideologically trapped' (1999 34) is pertinent here.
- <sup>6</sup> Not astonishingly, Waiyaki — the protagonist of *The River Between* — reaches a similar conclusion (Ngugi 141–42).
- <sup>7</sup> My argument is indebted to an article by Elizabeth Cowie, entitled 'Woman as Sign'. Cowie contends that the sign 'woman' is socially constructed in terms of the relationships in which women are positioned by exogamy. On one level, the Gikuyu patriarchy's intervention in the circumcision debate had the upshot of regulating the exchange of women. The KCA claimed, in a letter to the press, that the missionaries' attempts to outlaw clitoridectomy were motivated by a desire to secure uncircumcised 'girls' as wives (see Arnold 121).
- <sup>8</sup> James Ogude has written of the novel, 'The polity is constituted almost exclusively through a religious myth of origin and the whole issue of "tribal tradition" is collapsed into one single institution — circumcision, which is seen as a fulcrum of the community' (16).
- <sup>9</sup> Although I have not chosen to quote or summarise Gayatri Spivak's essay, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?', my argument is indebted to her insights.
- <sup>10</sup> Glenn also notes a fifth feature which does not inform my analysis.
- <sup>11</sup> Lord Frederick John Dealtry Lugard was a former military man who 'spent four decisive years in East Africa (1888–92)' (Sicherman 1990 147–48) during which he established the first British East Africa Company station in Kikuyuland (with Waiyaka's agreement) and urged the inclusion of Uganda into the British Empire. Lugard's other achievements include bringing Nigeria under British Administration (1895–1902) and acting as the Nigerian Governor General (1912–1919). Lugard was the architect of the British policy of Indirect Rule in Nigeria. In a beautiful irony, Kenyatta's anthropological studies under Malinowski in London (1936), which led to the publication of *Facing Mount Kenya*, were completed with the assistance of a scholarship from the International African Institute, chaired by Lugard (Arnold 28).
- <sup>12</sup> Referring to Ngugi's earliest short story, 'Mugumo' Simon Gikandi states that reproduction 'is justified by its capacity to give life to the new nation' (2000, 44).
- <sup>13</sup> Regarding solutions for Gikuyu women, Levin notes that one activist (Awa Thiam) has gone so far as to suggest radical lesbianism for gender-oppressed African women (220).

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