

Misunderstood Saviours: Messianic Portraits in the Gospel of Luke and Ngugi's *The River Between*

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ABSTRACT: Redeeming a society, and bearing its burden, can be a gruelling mission. It becomes even more demanding when one's mission is misconstrued. Beyond the dangers that such arduous tasks attract, the saviour must demonstrate the urgency of his mission and the need for solidarity in executing it. Unfettering societies from impending danger calls for great personality. In this study, I employ a post-modern intertextual literary theory in my critical analysis of the artistic vision projected in Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *The River Between*. I argue that Ngugi's novel leverages the messianic portraits in the Gospel of Luke in its characterisation of the protagonist, Waiyaki. Waiyaki's call for unity, a political vision that is geared towards redemption, is mistaken for betrayal. Through his downfall, outright rejection by members of the tribe, which is presented more like that of a tragic heroism of Christ, the novel suggests that these divisions, internal rivalries, tribal squabbles, supremacy battles and the quest for selfish gains culminated in delays in the liberation struggle in Kenya. Kabonyi's evidently pronounced determination to outdo Waiyaki derails genuine efforts towards cultural reconciliation. What is most compelling about Ngugi's 'saviour' narrative in this novel is his juxtaposition of Christian and indigenous promises of redemption.

KEYWORDS: Misunderstood Saviours, Messianic Portraits, Intertextuality, St. Luke's Gospel, Characterisation, Post-modernism, Historiography, Metafiction

INTRODUCTION

Saving a society, and shouldering its burden, can be an arduous task, particularly when one's mission is misapprehended. Beyond the risks involved in carrying out such tasks, the saviour has to clarify his mission to rally round the entrapped. Unfettering societies from impending danger calls for great charisma. I intend to employ a post-modern intertextual literary theory in my critical analysis of the artistic vision projected in Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *The River Between*. I argue that Ngugi's novel leverages the messianic portraits in the Gospel of Luke in its characterisation of the protagonist, Waiyaki. I regard Luke's Gospel as the 'historiographic metafiction' (Hutcheon, 2004, p. 121) and in defence of Aristotle's concept of mimesis, I seek to demonstrate that Ngugi's *The River Between* derives its 'meaning and significance' from this 'prior discourse' (Hutcheon, 2004, p. 126). Hutcheon's post-modern description of intertextuality will form the basis of my literary interrogation. She avers:

[Not only is post-modern intertextuality] a formal manifestation of a desire to close the gap between past and present of the reader, [it is also] a desire to rewrite the past in a new context ... [By so doing] it directly confronts the past of literature — and of historiography, for it too derives from other texts. It uses and abuses those intertextual echoes, inscribing their powerful allusions and then subverting that power through irony (Hutcheon, 2004, p. 118).

An Intertextual Reading of Ngugi's *The River Between*

Salvation, a metafictional concept in the biblical stories of Christ recollected in Luke's Gospel, is the predominant motif in Ngugi's *The River Between*. The writer of the Gospel of Luke, what is regarded as one of the most incisive accounts of Christ's ministry, was a physician. The gist of this gospel is the saviour. Though published after *Weep Not, Child*, Ngugi's first novel, *The River Between*, can be read as a re-imagination of Christ's life in literary art. It does not 'exist as a hermetic or self-sufficient whole ... [neither does it] function as a closed system' (Worton & Still, 1991, p. 1). The central character in this novel is Waiyaki, a native of the Kameno. His redemptive role, like Jesus's, is misconstrued by his community. He descends from a legendary ancestry. Like Jesus whose ancestral roots could be traced to such celebrated kings as David and Solomon, Kameno boasts of gallant sons like Mugo wa Kibiro, the great seer of old; Kamiri, the powerful magician; Wachiori, the glorious warrior; Demi and Mathathi; it 'threw up more heroes and leaders than any other ridge.' Spiritual and political leadership are bestowed upon them by Murungu, more like the notion of Israel as God-chosen nation in rabbinic Judaism.

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In Jewish political history, saviours enjoyed noble status; they were kings, priests, prophets, and judges. Other than this social distinction, they did not exhibit any supernatural qualities. John the Baptist fits this royal bill; his gospel and fidelity to life do not give room for doubt. He prepares the way for the coming Messiah. His preaching revolved around repentance, hope, sinlessness and the power of Christ. John also speaks about the coming Messiah and clarifies Christ's role to manage the expectations of his listeners. John talks of a Messiah who is coming to baptise them with the holy spirit and fire yet for them they expect someone who is going to rule them and help them conquer their enemies and reunite the scattered tribes of Israel (Luk. 20:41-47). The Jewish tradition and John's ministry as relayed in the gospel of Luke suggests that Jesus was misunderstood. It is small wonder that they expected the Messiah to be King David's son. Ironically, David himself regards him as Lord. The fact that the prophesied Messiah eventually turns out to be a carpenter's son, a member of a plebeian as opposed to a noble family. Salvation was an elitist role, erstwhile reserved for the royal class. The Aristocrats were wary of the antithetical reactions of the underprivileged. Giving the mantle of leadership to a carpenter's son was going to disrupt this social foundation.

Waiyaki's role is misunderstood by members of his community, who are yearning for a warrior who can lead them into a battle against the intruder (the coloniser). His birth, like that of Jesus, engenders a political rift. He upsets the Herodian status quo, which is spearheaded by the collaborator-turned-defender-of-the-Agikuyu-community Kabonyi. His story echoes the biblical metanarrative of Samuel's message to the people of Israel. The Israelites insisted on an earthly king in spite of the many pleas that Samuel made. In Old Testament, this reaction is presented as myopic as it illustrates the absence of spiritual conviction, yet it is also regarded as an indication of political conviction on the part of the Israelites, who believed that any political lacuna would expose them to the physical wrath of their warring neighbours. They were obsessed with an earthly king. The political destiny of their nation depended on winning physical battles; consequently, they rejected Samuel's message and literally demanded for a king. They misapprehended the role of the prophesied messiah. Kabonyi and his ilk project a similar thesis; they are calling for 'Action Now' as opposed to 'Education for Unity and Unity for Political Freedom.'

That Ngugi's story begins with the description of two ridges – Kameno and Makuyu – is noteworthy. In between these ridges is the valley of life. Besides these ridges and the valley, there are other ridges and valleys which the narrator accords little significance. These ridges allude to Israel's neighbouring countries such as Syria, Palestine and Lebanon, which, as opposed to Occidental political space that Israel continues to enjoy, are largely Orientalised or marginalised. Through the valley of life flows a river named Honia, which is Ngugi's re-imagination of the symbolically powerful role of the Jordan River in Israel's history. Nothing excites people more than its strong will to live. It is the soul of Kameno and Makuyu because it unites them; it is the only thing that brings members of these opposing communities together. It unites Jews, Christians and Muslims. In the traditional architecture of Said's (1978) postcolonial world, the East symbolises the Orient; nonetheless, Israel, by virtue of her spiritual and political ancestry, enjoys an Occidental dominance in the Orient. This metanarrative of spiritual and political entitlement is presented as the genesis of the conflict between Kameno and Makuyu. This antagonism, the tug of war between these two communities, dominates the preliminary pages of Ngugi's novel.

The two boys, who would become Waiyaki's disciples, emerge from the bush and begin to fight on a plain, the only such level stretch of land in Kameno. This geographical setting projects the biblical intertext of Ngugi's imaginary world. One is Kamau, the son of Kabonyi from Makuyu and the other is Kinuthia, an orphan who lives with an uncle in a village beyond the two ridges away from Makuyu. When the struggle gets to its peak, Waiyaki appears and commands the duo to stop fighting. In an effort to reconcile the boys, a stretch of accusations and counter-accusations are presented before him. He reminds them of the oath of brotherhood they had sworn to adhere to. Despite Kamau's persistent quest for retribution, he manages to reprimand him to let go of Kinuthia. This incident illustrates Africa's political 'boyhood' at the inception of colonialism; petty internal squabbles blinded African citizens. These pettifogging rivalries dominated the first phase of the liberation struggle in African societies and threatened to shred the cultural fabric that brought African communities together. The reconciliatory role that Waiyaki plays in this conflict gives an inkling of his leadership. It is not only an embodiment of Waiyaki's charisma, but it is also a demonstration of his suitability as the saviour of the Agikuyu community.

Waiyaki, like his father, Chege, who is introduced in retrospect as a renowned elder in Kameno, is representative of the few African citizens who enjoyed the rare benefit of political hindsight at the inception of colonialism in Africa. Chege had married three wives two of whom had died during the great famine, childless. The only one who had survived the calamity had brought him forth many daughters and only one son – Waiyaki. Chege is adored because he holds a wealth of knowledge on the ways of the land and the hidden things of the tribe. Believed by many to be a descendant of Mugo wa Kibiro, Chege possesses the visionary quality that won Mugo (the great seer) respect from his people. His prophecy about the invasion of the white man, largely misunderstood just like Mugo's, is initially treated with little seriousness.

Even though Waiyaki strongly believes in the redemptive power of education, his message is vehemently resisted by the so-called traditional diehards. He will be the black saviour of his people just as Jesus, though he is misunderstood at some degree depending on the expectations they have of him. His birth is prophesied by Mugo wa Kibiro, who appears to represent Prophet Isaiah. He, like Jesus, is the prophesied black saviour. The spiritual responsibility foreseen by Mugo, is relayed to Waiyaki by his father, Chege. Compelled by the need to safeguard the purity of Agikuyu polis from the corrupting influence of missionaries, Chege takes Waiyaki

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to the sacred grove – a ground traditionally revered for its piousness for it is believed to have sprung out of the place where Gikuyu and Mumbi stood – where he unveils Waiyaki's high purpose:

'Now, listen my son. Listen carefully, for this is the ancient prophecy....I could not do more. When the white man came and fixed himself in Siriana, I warned all the people. But they laughed at me. Maybe I was hasty. Perhaps I was not the one. Mugo often said you could not cut the butterflies with a panga. You could not spear them until you learnt and knew their ways and movement. Then you could trap, you could fight back. Before he died, he whispered to his son the prophecy, the ancient prophecy: "Salvation shall come from the hills. From the blood that flows in me, I say from the same tree, a son shall rise. And his duty shall be to lead and save the people!" He said no more. Few knew the prophecy. Perhaps Kabonyi, who has betrayed the tribe, knows about it. I am old, my time is gone. Remember that you are the last in this line.' (Ngugi, 1965, p. 20)

The journey to this secret place opens a window for self-discovery as it offers a significant learning opportunity. The 'oilskin of the homestead' is rubbed into his skin and a new chapter begins. He learns a lot about his community, ranging from the medicinal value of trees to the supernatural power that is felt in their presence. This experience brings him closer to his father than he had never felt before. His arrival at the Mugumo provides him with an opportunity to have a panoramic view of the whole Agikuyu country. This discovery is an important step towards his transformation. Unlike Jesus's visit to the temple which was unknown to his parents (*NIV*, 1984, Luk. 2:41-52), Waiyaki's journey to the sacred grove is Chege's initiative. It is worth noting, nonetheless, that he does not inform his mother of this journey. Besides, his father's role in this story is double-edged; he performs an earthly and spiritual role. His role is 'semiotically polyvalent' (Kristeva, 1980, pp. 50-60). He transforms into a deified figure – in Plato's world, possessed by a form of 'divine madness' – when he recollects Mugo wa Kibiro's prophecy. His transfiguration is what Kristeva calls 'a modality of transformation' (1980, p. 89).

Standing under the tree of Murungu accords him a rare clarity of vision; from this sacred ground, he is able to survey the whole Agikuyu land and the tranquillity of other ridges. This sacred place offers him a unique opportunity to internalise his messianic role. His role as the saviour is intertwined with cultural reconciliation and bridging tribal divisions. This not just part of the learning curve; it is a revelation of the practical measures that his mission requires. It instils courage in Waiyaki's journey towards manhood for although 'in body, he was still a boy'; he 'felt a heaviness making him a man' days after visiting this revered ground (Ngugi, 1965, p. 21). It is instructive to note that Chege takes Waiyaki to the sacred grove after the second birth, a rite of passage, which is a pre-requisite for an Agikuyu man's final initiation into manhood through the ritual of circumcision. During this ceremony, ululations and shouts are heard from women, who acknowledge this major transition in his life: 'Old Waiyaki is born. Born again to carry on the ancient fire' (Ngugi, 1965, p. 12). Again, the symbolic significance of Honia, like the Jordan River, is invoked here. Waiyaki's mother dips him into the water of the Honia river, 'and he came out clean' (p. 12). James (2001) posits that, '[echoing] the Christian sacrament of baptism, including the ideas of being made anew to fulfil a spiritual vocation' (p. 235), Waiyaki's redemptive role begins after this ritual. It appears impractical to ignore the centrality of intertextuality in the interpretation of Waiyaki's mission. This occasion not only 'signals [Ngugi's fiction's] dependence [biblical] canon, but [it also] reveals its rebellion through its ironic abuse of it' (Hutcheon, 2004, p. 130).

Siriana Missionary School parallels Jesus's journey to the wilderness (Luk. 4:1-2). Like Jesus who embarks on this forty-day journey in the wilderness upon his return from Jordan, Waiyaki begins this journey after his second birth. This second birth, it would appear, does not only fortify his resolve to learn the white man's secret magic and power, but it also protects him from evil. Though the number of days he spends at Siriana is not explicitly indicated, Waiyaki, like Christ, he refuses to give in to the white man's temptation. So, like Jesus, he does not 'eat'; he is not easily swayed by the missionaries. He joins Siriana to learn the white people's knowledge, not for learning's sake but to use it against them. He understands the corrupting power of the white man's culture, but he stands guided by his father's warning: 'Arise. Heed the prophecy. Go to the Mission place. Learn all the wisdom and all the secrets of the white man. But do not follow his vices. Be true to your people and the ancient rites' (Ngugi, 1965, p. 20).

Ngugi's novel provides an unjaundiced view of these misapprehensions; while Joshua and other new converts can be excused for their uncritical consumption of Christian values, Livingstone and his ilk cannot. In what amounts to religious intolerance, Siriana administration bans all Gikuyu children with 'pagan' parents. To cement his vision for an enlightened Agikuyu mass, Waiyaki builds a school in Kameno when he and his friends Kinuthia and Kamau are thrown out of Siriana. This pioneering venture propels Waiyaki to a more influential position as he becomes a source of admiration. His passion for education earns him the name 'Teacher.' He is also acknowledged as the saviour. His elevation to a leadership role emanates from this education initiative. He inspires confidence; however, even though they regard him as the one who can lead them to victory against colonial oppression, Waiyaki's vision goes beyond this. He hopes to reconcile the ridges through education; he believes that education has the potential to engender ethnic and cultural tolerance.

Although Waiyaki wins the confidence of the villagers, his social vision is not quite as aligned with theirs. They expect him to initiate a revolt against the white man that would culminate in the recovery of their lost lands and their dignity as a people. Reconciling Kameno with their perceived enemies, particularly Christians – the very enemies that Mugo wa Kibiro and Chege had warned them against – was going to be a tall order. Besides, heroic efforts of warriors in battle dominate the myths and folklore of the Kameno community. Learning the white man's secret magic and power is expected to propel him to even larger-than-life feats.

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It was likely to confirm their fear that the white man's ways had corrupted him. Like the gospel of Luke, Waiyaki's philosophy of redemption is not tailored towards one ethnic group; instead, it accommodates people of all races and human conditions. The central theme of Luke's Gospel is that redemption is an all-inclusive mission. Whereas the writer of Luke's gospel projects the image of Jesus as the saviour of all humanity, not everyone believed in his mission. He was initially rejected by a majority of Israelis. The kind of opposition he faced in his ministry is akin to Waiyaki's.

The River Between has a sturdy messianic intent, and the characterisation of Waiyaki is, in many ways, predicated on the metanarrative of Christ. The image of Christ as projected in Joshua's teachings closely resonates with Waiyaki's mission to save Kamenio. Jesus's mission, on the one hand, was to redeem Christians; Waiyaki's mission, on the other hand, is to free the people of Kamenio from the bondage of slavery imposed upon them by the white man. Waiyaki seriously embarks on this journey after the second birth, which resembles Jesus' baptism in the Jordan River before taking up his messianic responsibilities (Luk. 22:1-6). Mugo wa Kibiro's prophecy of salvation coming from the hills alludes to the messianic prophecies about the coming of Jesus Christ. Certainly, both prophetic traditions are made part of the contestation between Gĩkũyũ mythology and Christianity, such as when Joshua, the zealous convert, meditates on Isaiah's prophecy of a virgin bearing a son whose name shall be Immanuel: 'Isaiah, the white man's seer, had prophesied of Jesus. He had told of the coming of a messiah. Had Mugo wa Kibiro, the Gĩkũyũ seer, ever foretold of such a saviour? No. Isaiah was great. He had told of Jesus, the saviour of the world' (Ngugi, 1965, p. 29).

Waiyaki's desire for unity and cultural diversity is best illustrated by the feeling that Joshua's teachings evoke in him. When Waiyaki attends Joshua's church, the hymn about 'the good news of Christ our Saviour' stirs a mysterious yearning in him. He leaves the church with a conflicted heart. The narrator reveals, 'As the hymn reached his ears, he again felt that insatiable longing for something beyond him, something that would contain the whole of himself' (Ngugi, 1965, p. 87). He understands the limits of the oath of purity and togetherness, yet he longs for Nyambura's love. He faces Muthoni's dilemma: her desire to participate in circumcision and become a woman and her love for her father's church. Her determination to register for circumcision compels her to go against the grain. She eventually enrolls for this initiation ceremony against her father's wish. She leaves Makuyu and joins her aunt (Njeri) at Kamenio to distance herself from Joshua. Nyambura and Waiyaki's persuasions do not deter her from compulsive desire. Joshua's ultimatum does not change her mind; she sticks her plan against all odds. Her exceptional gallery is admirable as it bolsters Waiyaki's vision.

The learners' enthusiasm in an infrastructurally deplorable school environment demonstrates an indefatigably unquenchable thirst for education. Marioshoni School with its poorly structured, terribly leaking and hardly accommodating buildings remains the envy of many a parent. Once again, the three learners at Siriana Mission – Waiyaki, Kamau and Kinuthia - coincidentally find themselves teaching in the same school. Heated debate and arguments about the injustices of the white man take centre-stage in the teachers' desultory conversations, yet Waiyaki seems to be more preoccupied with the widening disunity between Joshua's followers and the breakaway elements. Although he appears to agree with Kinuthia's position that it is high they put a stop to colonial oppression, he opts to take a passive stand because of the distrust he holds for Kamau. Kinuthia, like Jesus's disciples who did not quite understand his ministry, is enthusiastic about the need for rebellion. Some sense dawns on Waiyaki as he understands the magnitude of colonial burden on his people, but he prefers to concentrate on academic issues. The installation of the Kiama is a significant culture event, yet he ignores it almost completely when Kamau brings it up. He does not want to confine himself to the narrow traditional customs. He regards the school's dilapidated infrastructure as one of the most pressing issues. As expected, he instructs Kamau to remind them to come with jembes and spades in preparation for the mudding of the walls.

The idea of schooling gains traction in the community and Marioshoni (Waiyaki's school) becomes popular. Waiyaki's reactions are still mixed; he experiences moments of glee and grief in nearly equal measure. His father, worried sick about his son's political destiny, falls ill and refuses to go to a white man's hospital, fearing for his life. Unlike John, who admits to being incapable of wielding the power of Christ, Chege does not explicitly admit this. Nevertheless, his actions demonstrate that he does not fully understand the nature of his son's mission. Chege's role, like John's, is preparatory. Despite sending his son to Siriana to learn the white man's secret magic and power, he does not appreciate the necessity of modern hospital facilities. Like other ignorant Agikuyu traditional diehards, he believes that the white man is responsible for Muthoni's death and that she had been poisoned in a hospital. His death is, therefore, a result of his ignorance and misunderstanding. Ironically, Chege's death shocks him, yet it reinvigorates his education campaign. Instead of clarifying his social vision to his disciples, he focuses on education. So many schools to quench his people's thirst for the white man's knowledge. Corporal punishment is an object of satiric attack in this novel; children are victims of physical assault by teachers yet their parents feel proud of these teachers. When children arrive home 'with tear-washed faces,' parents encourage teachers to 'beat them hard.' These parents do not have internalised the essence of education. This is a cause for alarm, but the widening rift between the two opposing camps concerns Waiyaki more. He is neither here nor there but he is contented with this stand for he has won the admiration of members of his tribe.

Waiyaki's determination to reconcile the two factions is symbolically presented in the story as a stubborn spirit. When this spirit sends him back to Makuyu, he finds himself in Joshua's church and the multitude Joshua commands amazes him. Joshua's sermon puts him in doubt over his own for in the biblical world, one is either a sinner or a follower of Christ. Waiyaki becomes guilty when the obsolete customs of his tribe are condemned. When the congregation joins Joshua in a hymn, he escapes as a result of shame.

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He has now been officially recruited into the new Kiama and he understands that an offence of this nature would be intolerable. His determination to win Nyambura's love blinds him to this reality. The cultural differences between Kameno and Makuyu do not seem to bother him. He pursues her in the full glare of his political enemy, Kamau.

Waiyaki's cultural tolerance mirrors Christ's indiscriminate approach in his ministry. He finds Joshua's determination to lay a strong Christian foundation in his family and win more souls. Joshua's approach to biblical teachings is traditional as it is Moses-like. He, in Nyambura's confession, would want his children to follow Livingstone's teaching to the letter. This is why Nyambura dissuades her sister from contemplating circumcision. He insists that his daughters must stand by his Christian values. He disowns his daughter, Muthoni, when she leaves for her aunt's place in a bid to register for circumcision. He distances himself from her even on the verge of her death. He soldiers on in his religious mission, arguing that the death of Lot's wife did not deter obedient believers from their mission.

The death of his daughter, a typical case of an understated tragedy in the novel, hardly dampens his spiritual conviction. He, contrariwise, steps up his campaign for Christ. In fact, he believes that Muthoni's death is a testimony that he needs to intensify his campaign against what he regards as satanic practices, ironical as it may sound. Like Job, Muthoni's death is a test of his faith. Job had lost all he had, including his family, for standing by God. This tragedy is also a confirmation of God's victory over Satan. Like Job who lost his family and remained faithful to God's ideals, he regains his spiritual vigour upon her daughter's death and begins to preach with a refreshed conviction. This is not surprising as he had reacted the same way when Kabonyi defected together with a number of believers. When his only hope of family reconstruction, Nyambura, falls out with him; he not only disowns her, but he also continues with his gospel of hope. Joshua's unflinching desire to win new souls cannot go unnoticed, ridiculous as it seems. His understanding of Christianity and the conception of salvation is a ludicrous one. His blind apemanship of Western values is ridiculed. He would stop at nothing to execute God's justice even if it meant beating his wife. He establishes two schools (one in Makuyu and another in Ngenia) to suppress Waiyaki's popularity and holds a rally in a bid to win souls. He turns his campaign into a political competition. Joshua, like Moses 'but not quite,' is representative of the dangerous consequences of blind and uncritical acceptance of an alien ideology. Lacking any critical intelligence, it would appear, he accepts Christianity, a naivety that is also as melodramatic as the 'obsequious foolishness' of Nweke in Achebe's *A Man of the People* (1966). His religious fanaticism is not only humorous but also detrimental, radical and borders on religious extremism. It is this blind obsession that leads to the disintegration of his family.

The cultural vision projected in Waiyaki's education is Afrofuturistic as it is transcendental. This 'betweenness' can be read as Bhabha's (1994) third space of cultural enunciation. That he dedicates his life to education is, therefore, unsurprising. During the parents' meeting at Marioshoni School, he displays an unrelenting professional spirit. His additional role as the clerk of the Kiama does not slow him down. Exhibiting an unflinching zeal, he is glad to be part of Marioshoni's success story. During this meeting, songs are sung to emphasise the value of education. While parents do not understand the nexus of this campaign and Kameno's quest for political liberation, they are proud of their children's progress. Waiyaki, in his introductory speech, reiterates the need for provision of more educational facilities. The applause he receives feels Kabonyi, his political archrival, with immense envy. When Kabonyi is given a chance to address the crowd, he chastises Waiyaki's claims and misplaced priorities. He, instead, advocates for a more confrontational approach to the fight for independence. Arguing that the white man's education is in no way superior to the Agikuyu's, he appeals to the people's pride and wins their hearts. The conciliatory approach that Waiyaki takes wins him greater favour from the audience. Despite Kabonyi's fury, Waiyaki's is pronounced leader and later forced to take an oath of allegiance to the purity and togetherness of the tribe.

Waiyaki's return to the sacred grove, which alludes to the Mount of Olives where Jesus prayed before his crucifixion and where he often retreated during his ministry (Luk. 21:37; Luk. 22:39), offers him a rare moment of contemplation; he puts his thoughts (the thoughts that had haunted him for a long time) into perspective after prevailing upon the tree's mysterious power. In this desperate appeal to the controller of the universe and the destinies of men, he unravels a new vision for his people – Education for Unity and unity for political freedom. Still, he evades the possibility of a confrontation with the Kiama over his engagement with an uncircumcised girl. During this moment of self-reflection, he recognises Nyambura as an integral cog in his unity campaign machine. He, like Jesus, visits the sacred grove before his crucifixion. For the likes of Kabonyi, his arraignment before the Kiama elders is a golden opportunity for vengeance. Other members of the community regard this as the best chance to seek clarity over the indelible rumours they had heard about him. Kinuthia, like Christ's loyal followers, is seriously worried about the intention of the Kiama to use Nyambura, who is now in their custody, as a secret weapon to tarnish Waiyaki's credibility. Taking advantage of the crowd's impatience, Kabonyi leads a protest against the perceived traitor before the arrival of Waiyaki.

According to the Agikuyu community, Waiyaki, like Jesus who was expected to lead the Israelites into wars against their perceived political enemies, is supposed to spearhead a physical confrontation against the coloniser. In their minds and really, in the minds of all the Jews at that time the Messiah was going to be a political and military leader much like King David or perhaps like some of the Judges of Old Testament and he would free them from the oppression. This is the image of the arrival of Christ conjured up in their minds from all the different Old Testament prophecies regarding the Messiah. A Jesus-led insurrection against Israel's sworn enemies was bound to be disastrous. They feared the possibility of Israel's destruction; the temple and the nation would be wiped

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by their merciless adversaries. This feeling of political uncertainty heightens anxiety just like Waiyaki's mission which fans flames of ethnic tension.

Whereas the general population is increasingly persuaded to believe that Waiyaki is the prophesied saviour, who would eventually free them from colonial bondage, his activities rattle aspiring leaders like Kabonyi and his son, Kamau. Kabonyi and his ilk believe, like the Pharisees, that Waiyaki should not be allowed to continue deluding the people of Kamenno. His leadership, they believe, spells doom for the Agikuyu country. Kabonyi, angered by the recognition given to this young man by the members of the tribe, launches a revenge mission against Waiyaki for undermining him. What appears to annoy him most is that the age difference does not seem to bother his people; members of the tribe do not give him the respect that befits his age. He, therefore, in compensation for this, shoots down all the proposals that Waiyaki makes during board meetings. His Christ-like role is loosely, and parochially so, regarded as a political one. He is laying a strong foundation for the future of the Agikuyu community, an entirely different and much greater than what the Pharisaic thoughts of Kabonyi portend. Waiyaki is the saviour, but not the kind of saviour his people think he is. Rescuing the Agikuyu community from the yoke of colonialism is the least of his concerns; he is seemingly executing a master, rabbinic as it were, plan for free the entire African community from the devastating consequences of ignorance. Education is a powerful tool for socio-political and economic empowerment. The myopic views of pseudo-politicians like Kabonyi are as ill-informed as they are out of tune with modern social realities.

A Christ-like humility defines Waiyaki's character. When Waiyaki lays his feet on the traditional platform to articulate his political vision, he maintains an unrattled stature. In his prefatory remarks, he congratulates the people on their response to his call. He narrates the history of the tribe, quoting legendary figures like Mugo and Wachiori. He then highlights his achievements and distances himself from Kabonyi (the destructive). When Kabonyi stands to counter his challenge, he levels accusations against Waiyaki including his being Joshua's follower, uncleanness, sluggishness and secret association with the white man. Waiyaki satisfactorily defends himself and accentuates his call for unity. When the greatest hour of reckoning comes, Waiyaki is subjected to the most unthinkable form of public humiliation and asked to deny his association with Nyambura. Although he is at loss to explain his well-meant intention, he faces the reality and accepts the challenge. Mysteriously, everyone melts away and breathes a sigh of relief when he is handed over to the Kiama. He strongly defends his love for her before the Kiama elders. He tells the elders that the oath does not forbid him to love. Even when it is clear that members of his tribe are against this affair, he stands by Nyambura. He believes that his affair with Nyambura is a necessary evil in his clamour for unity.

Waiyaki, regardless of his resemblance to Christ, ultimately adopts a doctrine of reconciliation, tolerance, and unity that he feels will resolve all conflicts between the two contending mountain ridges. "Unity was the answer," he says. In the passage below, Ngugi describes Waiyaki's perhaps naive aspirations towards national unity. His failure shows that bridging the gap was impossible. 'And the river Honia went on flowing between them, its beat rising above the dark stillness, reaching through the hearts of the people of Kamenno and Makuyu.' Shows that Waiyaki's efforts made the reconciliation worse. This shows the similarities between Waiyaki and the messianic figure in The Gospel of Luke as far as their ministries are concerned because Jesus Christ never had easy time bringing salvation to Christians in fact they nailed him on the cross and even disowns him. (Luk. 22:54; Luk. 23:26).

'For a moment he dreamt the dream. It was a momentary vision that flashed across his mind and seemed to light the dark corners of his soul. It was the vision of a people who could trust one another, who would sit side by side, singing the song of love which harmonized with music from the birds, and all their hearts would beat to the rhythm of the throbbing river.' (Ngugi, 1965, p.137). While Waiyaki recognises that Joshua's teaching is a threat to his own influence, he appreciates aspects of Christianity, especially its focus on love and sacrifice. He fails to capitalise on his chances to call for reconciliation between Kamenno and Makuyu. Procrastination of this important responsibility is his major undoing; his preoccupation with the repercussions of conveying his unity call clouds his judgement. He does not recognise the urgent need to explain what he intends to save his Agikuyu community from. He is convinced that his education campaign is important in his salvation, yet he fails to rationalise his priority. His obsession with education blinds him to other significant cogs in this wheel. He, for example, resigns from the Kiama, a critical decision-making organ, yet he still hopes to keep abreast of the political developments in his community. In Kamenno, political authority is bestowed upon this council of elders; political and jurisdictional decisions are made by this organ, yet Waiyaki resigns from the council and still hopes to maintain his political clout. Kamau, the son of his fiercest political rival, takes his position. He, like Christ, means well for his people. Unlike Joshua and Kabonyi who adopt a mosaic stance on cultural matters, he appreciates Christianity's teachings on love and sacrifice, even though he belongs to the Kiama. This speaks of his objectivity; he recognises the positive aspects of both Christianity and Agikuyu tradition. He advocates for cultural integration. He appears to exhibit a rare clarity of vision yet he remains reluctant to rally his community behind his social vision. To this extent, he is partially responsible for his failure.

The Agikuyu community is a microcosm of the African continent. The reactions of members of this community are representative of the responses of African citizens at the onset of colonialism. Different African states were colonised by different European countries and these colonialists employed different governance systems. Africans staged a protest and waged war against colonial dominion. Ngugi's *The River Between*, in its choice of geographical setting and language, presents Kenya during the inception of

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the colonialists. Kameno allegorically represents Kenya, which was colonised by the British. Ngugi's novel attempts to retrace the history of the struggle and highlights the setbacks that informed the struggle for independence.

Several factors led to this liberation struggle. One of these is the imposition of European rule. In the text, the traditional administrative order is eroded; the coming of the white man ushers in a new political dispensation. Elders of the Kiama are angered by the decision of the white man to establish a Government Post behind Makuyu. For the likes of Kinuthia, the white man had mistaken the hospitality of the Africans for a weakness. They had taken advantage of this and dethroned African leaders. Kinuthia captures this ingratitude and self-imposition when he says: 'I shall take the example of my father, for example, if you like. He is the head of the family. Suppose another man, Karanja or Njuguna, for example, comes in and we offer him hospitality. Suppose after a time, he deposes my father and makes himself the head of the family with the right to control our property ...' (Ngugi, 1965, p. 62). The second bone of contention is land. The value attached to its significance is ineffably unimaginable. To interfere with it and its people is to attack their very social and cultural institutions. It is the basis of the people's power. Without it, the epitome of success, good harvest, cannot be realised. The fact that the coming of the white man denies the Agikuyu the opportunity to cultivate their land and take full control of this invaluable asset seriously bites their conscience. The settlers position themselves in fertile areas and occupy large portions of land. This is one of the things that prompt them to stage a protest against this colonial invasion. Besides, Africans are compelled to pay taxes. The Government Post behind Makuyu is charged with this duty. Ironically, they are forced to pay taxes for the houses they have built on their pieces of land. It is the introduction of hut-tax that drives Kabonyi and his ilk to demand for 'Action Now.'

Waiyaki's call for unity, like Christ's ministry, falls on deaf ears because he fails to address the people's pressing political needs. As far as his people are concerned, he fails to reassert the community's cultural pride. He is incapable of defending the people's dignity. He does not seem to appreciate the emotional, ancestral, spiritual and cultural attached to lands contrary to what the promised saviour was to do. He places more premium on teaching and a romantic relationship with an uncircumcised girl at the expense of his most important leadership role in the Kiama. He flagrantly defies the traditions of the community and attacks the very cultural foundation he had sworn to protect. He is, thus, a political disgrace. Humorous as it appears, by asking parents to facilitate the building of latrines and other learning expenses; he increases the burden of a nation that is grappling with hut-tax and landlessness.

In many ways, Ngugi's *The River Between* integrates Agikuyu religious traditions with Christian expressions and metaphors to reify the notion of a black Messiah in the context of colonial oppression, contemporary Christian evangelism and emerging cultural nationalism. In this novel, Christianity, particularly the notion of salvation, is fascinatingly appropriated in African fiction. The close resemblances between Waiyaki and Jesus Christ cannot be gainsaid. In both cases, what seems to be a case of tragic downfall opens a new window of opportunity for redemption. This is not overtly expressed in Ngugi's novel, but intimated in the closing sentences: River Honia flows between the ridges, down through the valley of life, 'reaching into the heart of the people of Makuyu and Kameno,' underscoring its potential to unite the opposing factions. 'The two ridges lay side by side, hidden in the darkness. And Honia river went on flowing between them, down through the valley of life, its beat rising above the dark stillness, reaching into the heart of the people of Makuyu and Kameno' (Ngugi, 1965, p. 152). Waiyaki's sacrifice, like the crucifixion of Christ, is not in vain; it serves a higher purpose and charts a reconciliatory path between tradition and Christianity. He and Nyambura make a bold cultural statement: love overrides the confines of traditional or mosaic laws. To insist that the core responsibility of the saviour is to lead a physical against the colonial regime is to underestimate the social vision of the protagonist.

Like Christ, Waiyaki, identifies himself with the teaching role. He is the Teacher. The capitalisation of the letter 'T' is an intentional form of graphological deviation. His teaching role, like the biblical rabbi, is accorded motivated prominence in the novel. Ideally the Messianic expectations can be summarised as such: Messiah will be a Son of King David, Messiah will reunite the scattered tribes of Israel, Messiah will rule from Jerusalem, Messiah will oversee the operation of the temple into the future, Messiah will usher in the first time of global peace, Messiah will teach Torah from Jerusalem, The nations will come up to Jerusalem to learn Torah and that nations who refuse to send delegates during the Messianic Age to come will be cursed with drought for the year that follows. The Christian concept of messiah includes the belief that he was the literally the son of God. He was to sacrifice his life to atone for all sins of all men. He was part of a trinity – god, spirit, son. He would be both king and priest. That he fulfilled the Torah. That he was of a virgin birth. (Luk. 3:15-16)

Just like the calls for crucifixion of Christ that filled the air as Jesus was presented before Pilate (Luk. 19:41-44), shouts of 'traitor' rent the air when Waiyaki is presented before the Kiama elders. Waiyaki is betrayed by one of his disciples, Kamau. Jewish Messiah is expected to be a political leader, Jesus fails in this. The very people who heaped praises on him for his initiatives call him traitor. They do not even accord a chance to defend his actions. He is condemned for breaking the mosaic laws of Agikuyu community. According to the people, his relationship with an uncircumcised girl irreparably taints his image as a leader. Like Christ, he is not only misunderstood, but he is also sacrificed by the very people that once admired him for establishing local schools to open learning opportunities for their children. His obsession represented as a typical case of misplaced priorities. He appears to regard education as an end in itself; but the people of Kameno whose leader he is supposed to be, consider it as a means to the much more important end of keeping the tribe pure and expecting the white man. Waiyaki's tragedy, therefore, is that of a commanding personality who, despite the very best intentions, is blinded by personal ambitions. By failing to clarify his socio-political vision, he does not connect

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with his people, fails to see their aspirations, fails to bring his own into line with them, fails to implement the most important components of his policy and allows his opponents to exploit his shortcomings. His tragic downfall, like that of Muthoni who fails to reconcile her opinions with those of her father's, is symbolic of the consequences of radicalism in the quest for cultural reconciliation. He, like she, does not recognise cultural marriage as a gradual process. He is blinded by his thirst for cultural marriage that he fails to allow members of the two ridges to accept this as a necessity. Like Christ, he does not fully accomplish his redemptive role. The ending of the story offers a glimmer of hope; the villagers 'felt guilty for betraying teacher.' This reaction speaks of vindication. The fact that they felt relieved because the burden of judging their teacher had been transferred to the Kiama elders further reifies their guilty conscience.

CONCLUSION

Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *The River Between*, using the historiographic metanarrative in the Gospel of Luke, to reveal the misapprehensions that overshadow spiritual and non-spiritual quests for redemption. I have argued that the Ngugi's juxtaposition of the life of Christ and the black messiah encapsulated in the character of Waiyaki is a deliberate attempt to highlight more forcefully the tribulations that saviours go through as they execute their redemptive roles. At another level, the writer presents the shortcomings that informed this struggle. One of these shortfalls is disunity. Despite their quest for independence, there are wide divisions between members of the tribe. Instead of channeling their energy to struggle for salvation from the bondage of slavery, they fight among themselves. Kabonyi, for instance, is spending sleepless nights tactfully scheming for the downfall of Waiyaki. He does not stop at anything to ensure that he brings him down. Another clear division is that between Kameno and Makuyu. The Kiama elders seem to be more concerned about dissociating themselves from Joshua's followers than anything else. The internal rivalry is driven by hunger for power, deep-seated hatred, self-centredness and pious illusions of self-righteousness. Joshua, seemingly mystified by and drunk with the canons of biblical morality, rubbishes all forms what he regards as 'paganism.' Blinded by the subjective interpretation of the Christian values he perpetuates, Joshua contributes to the widening rift between the two opposing ridges. Exhibiting an unquestioning acquiescence of parochial biblical interpretations, he is unable to appreciate the true essence of Christianity, particularly the redemptive role of Christ.

That Waiyaki and his vision are tragically rejected by his people is narrated in a way that resembles Jesus' passion narrative: Waiyaki's childhood companion, Kamau, is an allusive projection of Judas' betrayal of Jesus; Kinuthia's actions parallel Peter's denial of Jesus; and Kabonyi and other elders of Kiama who preside over Waiyaki's case echo the judicial role Pilate's team. Kabonyi's character also alludes to the 'historiographic metanarrative' of Herod and the political elite during the birth of Christ. From the foregoing discussions, it is evident that he relies on his knowledge of the prophecy to manipulate the masses for egotistical political gains. He misleads the people of Kameno to oil an unhealthy political competition with Waiyaki for Kameno leadership. Instead of engaging in constructive criticisms, he employs diversionary tactics. He plants political seeds of division to destroy Waiyaki's image and counter his popularity. Driven by his deep-seated hatred, he diverts the people's attention from Waiyaki's messianic role. Nonetheless, Kabonyi is not entirely to blame for Waiyaki's tragic downfall. Waiyaki's hasty decisions such as his premature resignation from his position as clerk of the Kiama and his premature declaration of love for Nyambura make him susceptible to Kabonyi's nefarious schemes.

Ngugi appears to suggest that the struggle for liberation in Africa, particularly Kenya, hit a snag because the Africans themselves failed to resolve their internal political differences. Instead of working against a common enemy, they decided to make schemes and counter-schemes against their own 'brothers and sisters.' Waiyaki's struggle for internal unity, a political vision that is geared towards redemption, is mistaken for betrayal. Through his downfall, outright rejection by members of the tribe, which is presented more like that of a tragic heroism of Christ, the writer is insinuating that it is these divisions, internal rivalries, tribal squabbles, supremacy battles and the quest for selfish gains that culminated in delays in the liberation struggle. Kabonyi's evidently pronounced determination to outdo Waiyaki derails genuine efforts towards cultural reconciliation. What is most compelling about Ngugi's 'saviour' narrative in this novel is his juxtaposition of Christian and indigenous promises of redemption.

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