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THE CRITIQUE OF GĨKŨYŨ RELIGION AND CULTURE IN S.N. NGŨBIAH'S *A CURSE FROM GOD*

Abstract

The relationship between missionary Christianity and traditional African cultures was a prominent theme in post-colonial literature during and for many years after the era of decolonisation. In contrast to the nostalgic defensiveness of many Kenyan and other post-colonial African writers, perhaps most notably Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, the Gĩkũyũ novelist S.N. Ngũbiah found not salvation but a burden in certain aspects of his pre-colonialist indigenous culture. In his novel *A curse from God* (1970) Ngũbiah challenges obliquely but unmistakably the long-accepted position of his fellow Gĩkũyũ (and first national leader of independent Kenya) Jomo Kenyatta, particularly as argued in *Facing Mount Kenya*, that a return to tribal folkways was a precondition to economic and social upliftment. This clash between a traditionalist and a modernist exemplifies the larger predicament facing African societies as they undergo rapid religio-cultural transformation.

At least as early as the 1950s, and seen perhaps most vividly in Chinua Achebe's *Things fall apart*, African *littérateurs* began to use fiction as a forum in which to challenge the tribulations resulting from the impact of European cultures on their own. In general terms, this soon became a recurrent theme in post-colonial African literature in English, French, and other languages. A minor counter-current developed, however, when some African writers began to emphasise their conviction that at least part of the genesis of the woes they saw around them came from within and criticised the facile use of foreign cultural intrusions as scapegoats, particularly when that practice distracted from what they regarded as a need for internal reform. In the present article I shall examine how one such writer, Kenyan novelist S.N. Ngũbiah, crossed verbal swords with the internationally renowned champion of Gĩkũyũ culture and first post-independence leader of Kenya, Jomo Kenyatta, in his novel of 1970, *A curse from God*.

The decade immediately following the attainment of *uhuru*, or political independence from the United Kingdom, in December 1963 witnessed an unprecedented burst of literary activity in Kenya. Commenting retrospectively

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at the end of the 1970s, Chris Wanjala of the University of Nairobi attributed this flourishing to "the very nature of Kenyan society — its openness, its wealth, its poverty" and also lauded the boldness of local publishing houses for placing on the national urban market many works by hitherto unknown authors (Lindfors 1980:151). Furthermore, literary studies blossomed at what was then University College Nairobi, and journals for the study of that subject, focussing on East Africa, gained relatively broad international circulation. Such authors of both prose and poetry as Meja Mwangi, Grace Okot, and Jared Angira joined Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o as heralded *littérateurs* whose works were regularly reviewed in both Africa and Britain, and occasionally in the United States of America, as well. Generally speaking, rapidly proliferating Christianity did not fare well under the pens of creative writers, many of whom perceived in it little more than a religious dimension of European colonial hegemony which contributed to the erosion of their traditional cultures. Especially Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o led the anti-colonial counter attack in this regard, although, as I have argued elsewhere, in his early novels his portrayal of missionary Christianity is decidedly less severe than it would eventually become (Hale 1996). To be sure, popular fiction by writers like David Maillu and Charles Mangua soon captured much of the local market, and indeed by the 1980s their kind of works, emphasising personal alienation and moral nihilism in urban Kenya, would dominate much of the national literary scene. Before that virtual takeover, however, the fundamental religious issues occupied centre stage in serious literature, as Heinemann, the East African Literature Bureau, and other publishers issued dozens of titles, some of them growing out of the prolific Students' Book-writing Scheme at University College Nairobi.

One novel that emerged from that project in the Kenyan capital was Ngũbiah's *A curse from God*. Its author was a seasoned Gĩkũyũ teacher of English who had resumed his tertiary studies in order to complete a degree in literature. It was his first noteworthy attempt to write fiction and remains his only published novel. During his years of study in Nairobi he also wrote poetry and short stories and contributed an article to an anthology of literary criticism, but his promising career as an author never came to the fruition that *A curse from God* suggested it might. In that one novel, however, Ngũbiah fired some of the most incendiary salvoes heard in the post-independence debate over the viability and relevance of traditional Gĩkũyũ culture. As literary art, *A curse from God* has obvious flaws, chiefly in the stilted English that Ngũbiah naïvely puts into the mouths of his marginally literate characters, his excessive use of Gĩkũyũ proverbs which tend to be gratuitous intrusions in the narrative and whose meanings often remain arcane, and the lack of subtlety in much of his symbolism. Lax proof-reading, moreover, allowed unidiomatic constructions to mar the narrative. Nevertheless, this novel merits scholarly consideration as a vital but hitherto almost totally overlooked argu-

ment in a debate that involved many of Ngũbiah's compatriots in their ancient yet new land.

At the time of its publication, *A curse from God* was reviewed in Kenya, and subsequently literary critics have given it brief notice in surveys of East African literature. Kenyan reviewers almost invariably conveyed a severely condensed and distorted image of the scope of this novel by focussing their attention almost exclusively on Ngũbiah's uncompromising indictment of polygyny. Samuel Ngugi, then at the University of Nairobi, lauded the novel, describing it as "a vehement attack on the polygamous practice in the Kikuyu society" which Ngũbiah showed "as being outdated and impracticable, almost inhuman, in modern times". Ngugi referred briefly to other tribal folkways that appear in *A curse from God* but believed that they were included principally "to enhance both the theme and the plot of the novel", i.e. to place polygyny into even bolder relief (Ngugi 1970:50-53). Another critic, Bahadur Tejani, judged that this work rotated around "the choice between polygamy and monogamy, the traditional Gĩkũyũ and the neo-Christian values, that tear apart the life of Karagu [*sic*], the central character" (Tejani 1971:148). Concentrating on Ngũbiah's literary technique, he did not comment on other social issues in this work.

Subsequent critical assessments have further homogenised the message of *A curse from God*. Writing in the mid-1970s, the British critic O.R. Dathorne reduced this novel to "an attack on polygamy" and insisted that it has "nothing to relieve it" but judged Ngũbiah's style as "for the most part good" (Dathorne 1976:125-126). During the following decade, Jacqueline Bardolph wrote cryptically from Nice that *A curse from God* typified the early Kenyan novel in which "the issues are always moral, or metaphysical, a battle between warring life-forces", but what the ethical protagonists were in Ngũbiah's work she did not specify. Bardolph conceded obliquely, however, that he maintained the artistic quality of his novel by retaining "control ... over the subject matter" (Bardolph 1984:41, 50). David Maughan-Brown makes no mention of Ngũbiah's literary output in his commendable study of *Land, freedom and fiction: History and ideology in Kenya*.

A more rigorous reading of *A curse from God* than that which critics have thus far lent it reveals that while Ngũbiah takes aim at polygyny as practised by rural Gĩkũyũs, this is only the most lurid target in his shooting gallery of tribal folkways at which he fires his piercing verbal bullets. Considering the work in its historical context, and examining the other themes large and small in Ngũbiah's novel, it becomes obvious that he is levelling a broadside against much of traditional Gĩkũyũ religion and culture as atavistic and inimical to the interests of Kenyans generally after the attainment of *uhuru*. In the present article I shall explore dimensions of Ngũbiah's message of cultural

rejection by first describing how Jomo Kenyatta, the advocate *par préférence* of Gĩkũyũ tradition, extolled aspects of it during the 1930s as the salvation of East Africa from the devastation of colonialism, and then probe Ngũbiah's perception and dismissal of those same dimensions of his tribal culture. In one vital respect I shall go beyond this contrapuntal approach by touching on Ngũbiah's severe criticism of the excessive consumption of alcohol amongst the Gĩkũyũ, a practice that Kenyatta certainly did not celebrate in *Facing Mount Kenya*. This theme permeates *A curse from God* as immoderate drinking accompanies most of the practices that Ngũbiah castigates.

A curse from God spans 241 pages divided into twenty chapters. Ngũbiah employs a conventional omniscient narrator viewpoint in tracing the course of a Gĩkũyũ family in rural central Kenya north of Nairobi from early in the twentieth century until the eve of *uhuru* in 1963, focussing primarily on a man named Karugu, who is entrapped in and represents conservative tribal culture. The narrative begins *in medias res* with the first of an interminable series of quarrels in which the fifty-year-old Karugu violently threatens to override the objections of his wife, Wanjiru, who has given birth to six children, and take a woman called Muthoni as his second spouse. Muthoni joins their household shortly thereafter. Before the end of the first chapter Ngũbiah describes how Karugu beats Wanjiru as both wives scream and the children in this already enmeshed polygamous marriage cow in fear. The two women are at odds with each other from the outset; Karugu exacerbates an inherently impossible situation by favouring the considerably younger and physically more attractive but indolent Muthoni and allowing her to feign illness in order to avoid performing household chores.

In the third chapter Ngũbiah begins to locate one fundamental root of Karugu's repugnant behaviour by employing a flashback in which he relates how as a teenager he had embarrassed his strong-willed father, Ndonga, by stealing a neighbour's bananas, a misdeed which Karugu's brother duly reports to their father and pays for his honesty by suffering a severe fraternal drubbing. Their father responds by disowning Karugu, who thereupon leaves his home village and migrates to another in which one of his cousins is about to be circumcised in a communal *rite de passage* involving a large number of boys and girls. Karugu decides to participate.

Subsequently Ngũbiah inserts other flashbacks to reveal how Karugu temporarily overcame the disadvantages of his disrupted adolescence by attending a mission school, saving money that he earns pulling a ricksha in Nairobi, buying a small farm at Gathugu, and taking Wanjiru as his wife at age twenty-three. The young couple prosper on their smallholding, but having lived for several years in Nairobi Karugu is now bored by agrarian life. Furthermore, as Christians he and his wife find themselves partly isolated in their community.

Seeking to overcome his *ennui*, Karugu begins to wile away hours with friends who imbibe *njohi*, or sugar cane beer, at a shop in the village and eventually becomes an alcoholic. He also becomes sexually involved with woman who works at that establishment. Karugu's farm remains profitable, but the mounting needs of his growing family quickly erode his earnings, which in turn leads to greater anxiety on his part. He sells some of his land in an effort to makes ends meet, but this move predictably exacerbates his financial predicament after a short time by reducing his agricultural income. At this point he marries Muthoni, who eventually bears six children.

Entirely unable to support both broods of children he has sired and simultaneously purchase large quantities of alcohol for personal consumption, Karugu returns to Nairobi and secures humiliating employment as a houseboy serving an Indian family. During the early 1950s he joins the Mau Mau independence movement, a move which costs him several years' incarceration in detention camps after colonial troops raid the Indian house in which he works and arrest him. In his absence, Karugu's wives become even more antagonistic towards each other and separate completely. In one of his less subtle symbolic scenes, when Karugu returns to the village after five years in custody, he finds Wanjiru living with her offspring in a clean and relatively well-maintained three-roomed house in its eastern end amongst people sympathetic to the loyalist Home-guards, while Muthoni and her ragged children inhabit a shack on the impoverished western side of the village, where political sympathies lie with the Mau Mau. He nevertheless favours his second wife and spends nearly all his time in her dilapidated abode. Limp efforts to unite the two families founder on the shoals of Karugu's favouritism of Muthoni and his spouses' intense dislike of each other. He proposes a common garden, for example, and this briefly flourishes, but when Muthoni jealously refuses to share her portion of the produce their short-lived experiment in co-operative agriculture abruptly ends.

In the meantime some of Wanjiru's children have received educations, and one of them, her son Ndonga, has qualified as a teacher and is earning enough money to contribute to his mother's maintenance. He moves to Nairobi, however, where he impregnates his youthful concubine. Karugu insists that they wed, but to his intense chagrin neither he nor his son has sufficient capital to pay the bride's family more than token compensation for her. At almost the same time, one of his daughters marries, but her husband angers Karugu by being unable or unwilling to pay for her. Eventually Karugu decides to disown the children that Wanjiru has borne him and calls a meeting of village elders ostensibly to seek their approval of this action. The parley is little more than an exercise in self-righteousness in which he absurdly claims to have maintained neutrality in familial disputes, attempted to create unity,

and provided for his children's education. Taking his propensity for scapegoating to an extreme, Karugu blames the strife within his dual family on "a curse from God", hence the title of Ngũbiah's novel. The unsympathetic elders refuse to condone his disinheriting of his family but also fail to denounce any aspect of his behaviour.

Eventually Karugu sinks still deeper into alcoholism and general dereliction. He belatedly realises that he was happier as a monogamist and convinces himself that he has ruled his family with a strong hand in accordance with Gĩkũyũ practice. In a drunken rage, Karugu attacks Muthoni's children and inadvertently kills one of them with an axe. Again blaming his conduct on God, he understands that he is doomed and elects to end his suffering by committing suicide. In a symbol possibly borrowed from Ngũgĩ's *The river between* and also reminiscent of Judas Iscariot's suicide, he hangs himself from a tree along a river that runs through the two ends of the town.

Ngũbiah makes it clear from the outset that his narrative is not merely a tale of personal degeneracy and familial strife but involves issues of religio-cultural change and adaptation in an historical context. He establishes his rhetorical territory in a seven-line prefatory poem titled "Wheel of time":

> The wheel of time spins round and round,
> Through the earth, the air and the sea;
> The subtle ride with time and tide,
> And christened blessed sons of God!
> The dunces misconstrue zone and need,
> And slip and flop and crashed by time,
> And dubbed victims of A curse from God!

Despite his crass language, Ngũbiah does not adhere slavishly to a strict line of demarcation in tracing the fortunes of his Gĩkũyũ characters who either adapt to or resist historical change in their country. In fact, very few of the men, women, and children in *A curse from God* seem particularly blessed in any visible sense. Suffering of one kind or another afflicts nearly everyone in this novel as Ngũbiah traces a half-century of turbulent Kenyan history. Nor can it be said that in general those characters who most staunchly represent tribal tradition labour under more tribulation than their ethnic fellows who more readily adapt to modernising currents. At best, Ngũbiah argues for the necessity of accommodating historical change and jettisoning those aspects of Gĩkũyũ culture as a precondition for the coming of fuller *uhuru*, especially with regard to the status of women, but also as he believes it can release people from bondage to excessive consumption of alcohol and other debilitating practices.

Ngũbiah does not refer explicitly to either Kenyatta of *Facing Mount Kenya*, but that well-known defence of tribal culture nevertheless constitutes an

unsurpassed manifestation of the traditions that Ngũbiah attacks. Kenyatta based much of his case for the value of Gĩkũyũ tradition on relations between men and women. Perhaps nothing reveals the optimism and, arguably, the *naïveté* of his cultural loyalty more poignantly than his generalisations about youthful Gĩkũyũ sexuality and large, polygamous families. He asserted without qualification that young men and women were taught how to control their sexual desires responsibly by engaging in a limited, non-penetrating form of intercourse called *ombani na ngweko*. This practice, Kenyatta, asserted, is "the very foundation stone upon which to build a race morally, physically and mentally sound" because it "safeguards the youth from nervous and psychic maladjustments" (Kenyatta 1938:155). He was equally optimistic about the beneficent influence of the matrimonial estate. "Marriage, and especially parenthood, gives a man his full share in the common happiness and qualifies him to think for the common good", Kenyatta proclaimed from the male viewpoint that dominates his depiction of Gĩkũyũ culture. After taking one or more wives and becoming the father of children, a man can "show his capacity for wise administration and for dealing intelligently and justly with other people", and the behaviour he evinces towards his dependent family he "is expected to do on a larger scale in the interests of the community as a whole" (Kenyatta 1938:315). In accordance with his male perspective, Kenyatta ascribed the principal responsibility for polygyny to the women in question. Within a year of marriage, he insisted, first wives typically begin to plead with their husbands to take additional spouses in order to share their burdens, especially following the birth of the first child (Kenyatta 1938:176). In another declaration that is particularly relevant to Ngũbiah's dissenting opinion, Kenyatta informed readers that "there is a fundamental idea among the Gĩkũyũ that the larger the family is the happier it will be". As a vital component of this supposed familial bliss, moreover, "in the Gĩkũyũ system of marriage the presence of children is a sure sign of keeping the two coupled together in harmony". When given this combination of polygyny and prolific parenthood, a man gains "his full share in the common happiness" and is in a position "to think for the common good" (Kenyatta 1938:185, 315).

Ngũbiah's perspective on all these matters is almost diametrically opposed to that of Kenyatta. Underlying much of what he argues in this regard, Ngũbiah patently rejects the Gĩkũyũ practice of regarding wives as property and beasts of burden to be dominated by their husbands as an atavism that is incompatible with modern, Western-influenced concepts of womanhood that have entered Kenyan society and begun to affect female thinking and behaviour. He allows this understanding to evolve during the half-century of narrative and near the end of the plot underscores that a generation gap has emerged with regard to the new mentality. Kimura, one of Karugu's younger neighbours, organises a beer party at which polygamists from the village discuss their

particular marital institution and broach ideas for its improvement. One of the oldest participants, Wanyoike, incorrigibly represents a bygone era in which men dominated women and owned virtually everything. He blames the younger generation for bringing matrimonial tribulations on itself by relaxing the traditional male iron grip. "In the past, a man said and it was done", he recalls wistfully. "Man did not argue with a woman. The idea of arguing with a woman! It makes me sick even now" (217). At the other pole, Kimura asks,

> What does one do if he marries a woman who will claim equality to her husband? A woman who will tell you that you are partners in the home and that you have equal rights over everything at home. A woman who tells you that she is not a beast of work and who quarrels with you if you buy meat and eat it in the buying-centre? (225).

Wanyoike concedes that such a woman is an anomaly in a polygamous society and should rather be

> the wife of a monogamist of the modern type, I mean of the educated type. She is the modern type of woman, and the women of these days are not made for polygamous homes (225).

When another elderly man adds that "the right type of women" are needed to make polygamy succeed, Kimura administers the *coup de grâce* to the assumption underlying the entire discussion:

> I think if it had been women who were drinking this beer, they would have said that what you need to make a successful home is the right type of man (226).

When juxtaposed with this discussion, Kenyatta's nostalgic presentation of polygamy becomes little more than a musty museum piece reminiscent of an archaic and irrecoverable era in the history of the East African family.

Ngũbiah's portrayal of extramarital sexual relations also calls into question the tenability of Kenyatta's defence of the previously mentioned form of limited intercourse. To be sure, sexual intercourse nowhere becomes a predominant, explicit theme in *A curse from God*. For all her faults, Muthoni is not depicted as an adulteress. Indeed, the one instance of sexual relations outside formal marriage involves the generally upright Ndonga, the eldest son of Karugu and Wanjiru, and his young concubine in Nairobi. Her untimely pregnancy contradicts Kenyatta's assertion that the young Gĩkũyũs conduct their sex lives in a way that is "the very foundation stone upon which to build a race morally, physically and mentally sound" because it "safeguards the youth from nervous and psychic maladjustments".

Kenyatta also defended the practice of circumcision, including that of girls, which especially during the decade immediately preceding the publication of *Facing Mount Kenya* had become a hotly debated topic in the Kenyan mission field, as the Church of Scotland and other missionary agencies applied pressure on the Gĩkũyũs to give up this deeply entrenched custom. The resulting controversy led to rifts that further fragmented the constellation of Christian denominations in Kenya. Kenyatta resolutely defended the practice, including clitoridectomy, as an innocuous and dignified ritual in which the initiates are segregated by gender and

> a woman specialist, known as *moruithia*, who has studied this form of surgery from childhood, ... in quick movements, and with the dexterity of a Harley Street surgeon, proceeds to operate upon the girls (Kenyatta 1938:146).

Ngũbiah was of a different opinion, and in *A curse from God* Karugu witnesses and participates in a communal circumcision ceremony that differs markedly from that of *Facing Mount Kenya*. In this case the village ritual, like so much else in Ngũbiah's portrayal of rural Gĩkũyũ life, is accompanied by prodigious consumption of alcohol. Before the circumcisions begin, the villagers are "jumping madly" with "upraised hands flapping above their heads like wings of injured fowls" (83). The women present are "ululating madly" (85), while other observers are "shouting wildly" and "frisking crazily from one pool to the other" (86). Karugu nevertheless feels "a crazy desire" to participate, though only to escape the isolation of not doing so. Silently pressured by custom into having his penis lacerated, he experiences "sharp pain" during the brief operation, which is conducted in sexually mixed company (86). The girls also endure a more exacting operation than that which Kenyatta describes as merely having the tips of their clitorises trimmed (Kenyatta 1938:146); Ngũbiah's young female characters lose theirs "right to the root" (87). Their voices remains almost entirely unheard in this portion of the narrative; there is no evidence of enthusiasm on their part for this ritual, although there is amongst their male counterparts.

A third line of defence that Kenyatta had drawn encircled the institution of the traditional Gĩkũyũ "magician" or prophet. This son and grandson of such men devoted the twelfth chapter of *Facing Mount Kenya* to "Magical and Medical Practices", emphasising what he regarded as the essential linkage between the two. Kenyatta did not deny the existence of the *morogi*, or witch, in Gĩkũyũ society. He lamented, however, that

> the white man's administration does not usually differentiate between a purely medical and a ceremonial doctor (magician) and the nefarious practitioner, *morogi*, but all go under the name of "witch-doctors".

Furthermore, like virtually every other aspect in Kenyatta's perception of Gĩkũyũ life, these were parts of an integrated culture that should be left intact to the greatest degree. He concluded that

> they, like religion, are inspired by the daily economic and social activities of the people, and ... run through and fertilise these activities and refer them to the mysterious forces which surround human life (Kenyatta 1938:305, 309, 316-317).

Again, Ngũbiah portrays this venerable indigenous institution in vastly less fawning terms. Indeed, under his pen the local healer becomes little more than an exploitative practitioner of fraud who subsists on the credulousness of the other villagers. The one major episode involving such an individual occurs after Ndonga, the eldest son of Muthoni (who confusingly bears the same name as that of his half-brother, the eldest son of Wanjiru) falls into a household fire as a toddler while no-one is supervising him. The child survives but spends six weeks in hospital and emerges partly deformed and without sight in one of his eyes. The accident almost immediately leads to mutual recriminations between Karugu and Muthoni as he accuses her of intentionally injuring Ndonga and insists that she leave his household while she disingenuously claims to have been holding Ndonga in her lap but fallen asleep. In fact, as Ngũbiah narrates retrospectively, she had actually been dancing all night in circumcision celebrations when her unattended son had been injured (52). Further abdicating personal responsibility, Muthoni suggests aloud that "devils or witchcraft" lay at the heart of the matter, rhetorical conjecture that Karugu summarily rejects (51). Indeed, taking his *non credo* a step further, he declares to elders in the village that he has nothing to do with devils (52). One of those men counters this by suggesting that a "witch-doctor" be consulted to determine "why the devil should try to destroy Karugu's son" (52).

Following Ndonga's six-week convalescence in hospital, Muthoni consults a "renowned witchdoctor" called Wangai, whose reputation amongst his neighbours rests on little more than his success in avoiding a legal loss in a major land dispute and the intensity of his invocations of God. Muthoni finds this distinguished oracle tending a small herd of cattle near his hut. Heeding his directive, she gathers half a dozen sticks, five of which she associates with devils, an evil eye cast upon her by a jealous woman, the dissatisfaction and grumbling of her father, a sorcerer who has bewitched her hut at the behest of Wanjiru, and Wanjiru bewitching her by breaking a cooking pot. Muthoni re-enters the hut and hands the sticks to Wangai, who arranges them on a piece of leather and, after praying towards the four holy mountains of the Gĩkũyũs, pours small black marbles on the same fragment of leather. When the largest of these spheres comes to rest against the stick that represents

bewitchment by Wanjiru's command, Muthoni informs Wangai of this imputed association, and he counsels her to apprise her husband of the finding and request him to hire "a good witchdoctor who can remove the spell of the witchcraft" (55). Despite his reputation as a powerful spiritual healer, Wangai is thus only a passive individual who merely utters a few prayers and facilitates Muthoni's self-serving, self-justifying attribution of blame to others.

Though apparently realising that this ostensibly religious ritual has been little more than an exercise in fraud and personal dishonesty, Muthoni feels "relieved" because she can adduce the verdict of the authority of a respected healer to support her assertion of innocence with regard to her son's accident (55). She returns to the household and violently accuses Wanjiru of bewitching her. When Karugu arrives shortly thereafter, he is incensed that Muthoni has consulted a healer and responds to her effrontery by beating her. Ngũbiah's assault on Gĩkũyũ healers and soothsayers is far more incisive and less strident than his attack on polygyny, but he nevertheless leaves no doubt that he regards traditional medicine men as essentially illegitimate.

At the end of the 1960s Ngũbiah rejected all of this and more in the Kenyatta tradition of asserting conventional tribal values and practices. The rural Gũkũyũ society he portrays is one in which premarital sexual relations are conducted irresponsibly and lead to pregnancies out of wedlock, plural wives are at each other's throats and resent the practice of polygyny, husbands abuse and exploit their spouses interminably, and both marriage and large broods of children are the fountainhead of suffering rather than a source of hope, happiness, and altruism. The presentation of these interlocking tribulations is virtually unrelenting. Particularly striking in the light of Ngũbiah's prefatory poem is how little any of his characters apart from Kaguru's eldest son Ndonga adapts to historical change, his rotating "wheel of time". Nearly everyone else in this sombre novel is trapped in convention. The agents of rural social and cultural transition, seen most clearly in Wanjiru's sons, are Christianity and education, and the influence of these two institutions does not manifest itself directly in much of Ngũbiah's narrative, although they lurk in the background throughout much of it.

Ngũbiah criticises not only specific tribal practices, but the behaviour of the Gĩkũyũ in general. To a great degree he portrays them as violent, profane, drunken, unhygienic, and abusive in the language they use on each other, discourse rich in derogatory zoological epithets. The men in particular are depicted as lazy, self-orientated, and generally lacking in beneficent community spirit. Peer pressure prevents them from shedding folkways that Ngũbiah finds objectionable and inhibiting. There is no hint that these negatively characterised and destructive attributes are the result of European domination of Gĩkũyũland; in Ngũbiah's eyes, they are endemic to the rural Gĩkũyũ culture

that nurtured him, his contemporary Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, and, a generation earlier, Jomo Kenyatta. In the closing lines of his renowned book, that father of modern Kenya had predicted that unless "the African" fought to cast off the shackles of European hegemony, "rival imperialisms" would continue to "drive their fangs more deeply into his vitality and strength" (Kenyatta 1938:318). To Ngũbiah writing some three decades later, it seemed evident that the venom of widespread beliefs, attitudes, and practices in Gĩkũyũ culture was crippling his ethnic fellows and impeding the advent of true *uhuru* in their post-colonial world.

In their respective portrayals of the rôle of indigenous Gĩkũyũ culture in either saving or hobbling the colonised people who have maintained it, both Kenyatta and Ngũbiah arguably took considerable licence in the interest of rhetorical effect. Presumably neither man intended to present a disinterested treatment of the matter in which both positive and negative effects would be placed on the scales and weighed objectively. The elder Kenyan perceived virtually nothing objectionable in the ways of his ancestors, while his subsequent adversary in the arena of debate, having witnessed intense familial tribulation in Gĩkũyũ society, was quite unwilling to grant that those customs and mores could serve more than the most marginal legitimate purpose in the rapidly modernising world of post-colonial Kenya. Ngũbiah's fictional representation of his rural ethnic society reflects vividly the shadows which had befallen it but allows practically no light. To some observers, keenly aware of the dynamics of social and cultural change which have been inflicted on Kenya throughout the twentieth century, the resulting picture, at least when considered in isolation, is arguably no less distorted and naïve than that which the equally zealous Kenyatta had presented a generation earlier. Both sides of the argument nevertheless merit scholarly consideration as earnest indigenous pleas for coming to grips with the disruption and cultural pluralism which colonialism had wrought.

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Keywords	*Trefwoorde*
Gĩkũyũ religion	Gĩkũyũ-godsdiens
S.N. Ngũbiah	S.N. Ngũbiah
A curse from God	*A curse from God*