

Remembering the Nation

Allegory in the Literature of Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o

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Abstract

This thesis traces how national allegory is employed, developed, and altered in the early novels of Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o. Primarily guided by Fredric Jameson's essay on national allegory and his assertion that the category is "profoundly discontinuous, a matter of breaks and heterogeneities, of the multiple polysemia of the dream rather than the homogenous representation of the symbol," this study explores how *A Grain of Wheat* (1967) and *Petals of Blood* (1977) reconstruct the dislocated memory of the individual through the traumatic history of the collective, and how this reconnection of the private and public allows for a new imagining of the postcolonial nation.

The ambivalent motif of shared cultural memory and its many figurations throughout these novels are investigated extensively. In *A Grain of Wheat*, the motif of betrayal, experienced by nearly every character in the novel, signals an ironic, introspective turn on national unity and an examination of the unfulfilled promises of the Mau Mau's decolonial struggle. Told through the characters' individual flashbacks to one another, principally through the arch-traitor Mugo, the memory of betrayal is seen as simultaneously the hollowing of social bonds and the basis for collective regeneration, with the survivors of the Emergency recognizing and negotiating the pitfalls of national consciousness while dedicating themselves to redeeming those who sacrificed their lives for it. Benedict Anderson's essay on memory and forgetting and Frantz Fanon's critique of the national leader are vital components to this discussion of how the novel employs the motif of betrayal and memory in order to counter the mandate by Jomo Kenyatta to "forgive and forget" the Mau Mau's struggle against Kenyan loyalists and colonial occupants.

Whereas *A Grain of Wheat* was primarily concerned with the immediate aftermath of independence on the national psyche, *Petals of Blood* directs our attention to the epic volume of history and the metamorphoses that the nation undergoes in its constant battle against imperialism and its desire for unity. The ambivalent motif of betrayal in *A Grain of Wheat* is mirrored by the motifs of ceremony, fire, and education in *Petals of Blood*, which are employed to construct a Janus-faced history of the nation exploited by the neocolonial government for its self-interest, and intervened upon by the workers and peasantry to cultivate a tradition of renewed resistance. Anderson's essay on Walter Benjamin's Angel of History is discussed in reference to how the postcolonial nation inherits the state from its predecessor, and Fanon and Ngũgĩ's essays on national culture are considered for their dialectical frameworks of history and the cultivation of "combat literature." In both these novels of his early career, Ngũgĩ sought to imagine how the nation could rejuvenate the energy and idealism of the Mau Mau uprising and empower the Kenyan workers and peasantry into a different, more equitable, socialist mode of the nation.

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Introduction

The title of this thesis evokes what Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o says about the postcolonial nation in *Something Torn and New* (2009), where he describes colonial contact with Europe as the "dismemberment" of Africa: "An act of absolute social engineering, the continent's dismemberment was simultaneously the foundation, fuel, and consequence of Europe's capitalist modernity" (5). But it wasn't just the removal of bodies and resources that characterized European imperialism in Africa, but just as brutally, the way the colonists "dismembered the colonized from memory, turning their heads upside down and burying all the memories they carried" (7). From this fragmentation of Africa and its memory, the imperative that Ngũgĩ imparts onto postcolonial writers, poets, and scholars is to "re-member" the nation and the continent, both by recalling precolonial past that was "torn" away with the arrival of imperialism, and more importantly, by creating "something new" from this traumatic encounter. As Ngũgĩ writes, "the political and cultural struggles of Africans since the great dismemberment wrought by European slavery and then colonialism have been driven by the vision of wholeness. These struggles, taken as a whole, have been instrumental as strategies and tactics for remembering the fragmented" (29).

This thesis examines how two of Ngũgĩ's early novels, *A Grain of Wheat* (1967) and *Petals of Blood* (1977), "re-members" the fragmented history of Kenya and its struggle for decolonization in the 1950s. In his remembrance of the past, Ngũgĩ intervenes in the (neo)colonial narratives of Kenya's history that were employed to manipulate, divide, and stunt the populace from imagining what the national and postcolonial community could be. In the decades after Kenya's independence in 1963, during the time when Ngũgĩ wrote his early novels, Kenyans saw the postcolonial state increasingly ruled by the authoritarian leader Jomo Kenyatta,

who once embodied the community's ideals for decolonization and national independence during their struggle. It is from this standpoint of disappointment, irony, and the specter of colonialism that Ngũgĩ produced *A Grain of Wheat* and *Petals of Blood*, novels written about the nation's broken history and attempts to articulate new visions of the nation. These novels are part of a wider project by postcolonial writers to write against European representations, and to dispel the myth that colonialism ceased after colonies gained their independence. In opposition to the asphyxiated vision of Kenya that Ngũgĩ saw being produced by the colonists and by Kenyatta's administration, both of which created boundaries and resentments between the nation's ethnic groups, Ngũgĩ sought to breathe new oxygen into Kenyan culture with his literature, which presented the Kenyan people as a united collective and the principal agents of national change. Often praised by scholars and critics for their mastery of the novelistic form and their combination of genres and modernist techniques, *A Grain of Wheat* and *Petals of Blood* offer complex accounts of the nation's history, its fissures and ambivalences, and how it can be used to chart a new path for collective belonging.

Driven by this "vision of wholeness" to reconnect the past with the present, and to imagine new horizons for cultural innovation and collective regeneration, Ngũgĩ's novels sought chiefly to "re-member" the Mau Mau rebellion (1952-1957), also known as the Kenyan Land and Freedom Army. A coordinated assault by the peasantry of Kenya's largest ethnic group, the Gĩkũyũ (to which Ngũgĩ belongs), their uprising forced Britain to formally grant Kenya independence in 1963. But the rebellion provoked one of the most horrific, yet forgotten, acts of colonial repression through the Kenyan State of Emergency (1952-1960). Caroline Elkins documents in *Imperial Reckoning* (2005) how the British facilitated a system called the "Pipeline," which entailed the deportation of hundreds of thousands of Gĩkũyũs into

concentration camps, the mass enclosure of villages that were sometimes worse than the camps, and a “murderous campaign” to regain control of the colony (xvi). Loyalists and Home Guards, who were Africans that supported Britain’s occupation of Kenya, were also employed to enforce the Emergency and maintain the Pipeline. Their brutal crackdown on the Gĩkũyũ would eventually end the Mau Mau rebellion in 1957, but Gĩkũyũ resilience and public outrage in England brought about Kenya’s independence, with Jomo Kenyatta as Kenya’s first Prime Minister. However, in the years after independence, Ngũgĩ saw the memory of the Mau Mau and the struggles of the Kenyan peasantry sidelined by Kenyatta’s neocolonial government. Mirroring Britain’s propaganda outlets that labeled the Mau Mau a savage, uncivilized band of killers, Kenyatta disparaged the memory of the Gĩkũyũ revolt as a “disease” that needed to be forgotten by the populace (Kenyatta 189). With the Mau Mau’s demands for land redistribution unanswered, and Kenyatta working closely with the British government and the remaining white settlers, the question arose among the survivors of the Emergency: what did the Mau Mau fight for?

Faced with Kenyatta’s call for collective amnesia and his manipulation of the nation’s history for his own ends, I argue that Ngũgĩ’s novels and their strategy of remembrance produce national allegories, which evoke a different history of the nation by recentering the Mau Mau uprising, while employing motifs that open up the fragments, paradoxes, and ambivalences of the nation. Fredric Jameson proposed the idea of national allegory in his essay on “third-world” literature, where he argued that novels from postcolonial nations never just articulate the private narrative of the individual, but are infused with political dimensions that relay the experience of the national collective. As Jameson writes, “the story of the private individual destiny is always an allegory of the embattled situation of the public third-world culture and society” (69). This

means that the characters and the events of the postcolonial novel always represent the historical trajectory of the nation, the achievements and failures of the collective, the imaginings of where the nation might be heading to next, and the intrusion of international capitalism reshaping the material and symbolic structures of the nation. This leads to his claim that there is a radical difference between the material situations of the “first” and “third world” nations, with the third world experiencing the “displacement of the older forms of collective life from a land now seized and privatized,” whereas first world nations are already entrenched in the postmodern culture of late capitalism (84). According to Jameson, this material difference between the first and third worlds can be comprehended in their cultural productions, and he argues that in the postmodern first world, private life and libidinal drives are thought to be “incommensurable with the abstractions of economic science and political dynamics” (69). But for Jameson, the west’s emphasis on the individual is molded by the historical circumstances of postmodernism, with political allegory still permeating at the level of the unconscious in first world texts. By contrast, political allegory exists at the conscious level in third world texts, where the depiction of private sexuality and the individual psyche are directly interlaced with politics and history, which Jameson describes “as a set of loops or circuits which intersect and overdetermine each other” (73). National allegory is specific to third world texts, as the memory and desire for older forms of communal life that are now uprooted by international capitalism re-emerge in the private and libidinal dynamics of the novels’ characters.

Jameson’s postulate of national allegory has garnered significant criticism from postcolonial scholars since the publication of his essay, with Aijaz Ahmad’s critique the most widely discussed. Many critics, especially Ahmad, take issue with how Jameson’s employment of national allegory reduces the heterogeneity of characters, moods, genres, and events within a

“third world” novel into a single narrative and category: the entire collective experience of the nation. Furthermore, Ahmad and others claim that Jameson’s use of “third world” is itself dubious, arguing that this term is a latent form of Orientalism through which the American literary critic others and reduces all nonwestern texts and cultures into a single category, regardless of the diversity of nations, cultures, and languages that resist this totalization. Because of the reduction that national allegory imposes, the agency of “third world” nations and cultures are nullified and “defined purely in terms of an ‘experience’ of externally inserted phenomena” (Ahmad 100). Jameson’s projection of the Three Worlds Theory onto nonwestern texts is an ideological “classification [that] divides the world between those who make history and those who are the mere objects of it” (Ahmad 100). However, many scholars have defended Jameson, such as Neil Lazarus in *The Postcolonial Unconscious* (2011). Lazarus argues that scholars such as Ahmad have misread Jameson’s intentions for deploying terms from the Three Worlds Theory, and that Jameson is actually critical of the “first-worldist” ideological point of view. As Lazarus writes, “The ‘American’ ideology [that Jameson presents] is evidently not the ideology of all Americans, but a particular (and of course severely restricted) view of the world, issuing from a particular standpoint” (102). Jameson uses the “first-worldist” point of view as a foil to argue for an expansion of world literature beyond the western canon. Instead of reducing “third world” nations into the mere objects of history, Lazarus points to how the label has been used as a banner for agency against the exploitation and inequality of international capitalism: “‘Third-worldness,’ as a regulative ideal, is born out of anticolonialist and anti-imperialism struggle. It gestures towards a world in which autonomy and popular self-determination will be politically meaningful concepts” (106). Jameson’s conception of national allegory isn’t Orientalist or “first-worldist” as Ahmad reads it, but can be used to recognize the autonomy and political desires of

postcolonial nations for meaningful collectivity beyond the inequalities imposed by colonialism and capitalism.

As this thesis will show, the psyches of Ngũgĩ's characters and their libidinal dynamics are the sites of national allegory, where the stories of Kenya's independence, its traumas from the Emergency, and the disillusionment of Kenyatta's administration are expressed. Indeed, as Simon Gikandi argues, the personal dimension of Ngũgĩ's novels which reflect his own experiences of colonialism are attempts at situating his subjectivity in the public sphere where "individual experiences become collectivized" (9). But Jameson also emphasizes that national allegory is radically fragmented, a linguistic structure that is in "constant change" and that transforms "at each perpetual present of the text," as opposed to the homogeneity of the symbol (73). This flux of national allegory allows for a complex set of distinct meanings to emerge, revealing the fissures and ambiguities of the nation and how its history is altered by the political struggles of the present. While the private sexual relationships of characters are metaphorical of social regeneration and utopia in Ngũgĩ's texts, they also exist in tension with images of impotence and infidelity which allegorize the stagnation of national culture and the severance social bonds. These tensions open up contested visions of the nation and the political conflicts that raged in Kenya while Ngũgĩ was writing his novels, including the legacy of the Mau Mau and loyalists, the struggles between the rural and urban, and the conflict between workers and the neocolonial elite. Ambivalent motifs of betrayal, confessional memory, Gĩkũyũ customs, and traumatic violence, are other manifestations of national allegory that this thesis will investigate, with national allegory dramatizing the personal traumas of the individual characters and how they relate to the "social nightmare" of Kenya's colonial history and its current neocolonial situation (72).

In “re-membering” the contested fragments of Kenyan history and connecting them to the nation’s present political struggles, Ngũgĩ’s texts unravel how new “imagined communities” of the nation can be conceived and put into practice. This notion of “imagined communities” is taken from Benedict Anderson, where he claims that the nation is profoundly fictive: “it is an imagined community—and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign” (6). Here, it’s important to note that the nation as “imagined” for Anderson is not negative, such as an ideological mystification which obscures the “real” community, but is characteristic of all communities, which are not to be distinguished “by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined” (6). Although the nation is a relatively recent invention emerging through the capitalist development of the printing press, newspaper, and novel, its imagining retroactively posits its own past. As Anderson writes, “If nation-states are widely conceded to be ‘new’ and ‘historical,’ the nations to which they give political expression always loom out of an immemorial past, and, still more important, glide into a limitless future” (11-12). The nation’s projection of continuity with the past is what gives the imagined community its emotional power and resonance among its members, as it takes on an aspect of religious imaginings of the community by transforming instances of fatality and contingency into progression and destiny (11). Not only is Ngũgĩ interested in imagining a nation mobilized politically against colonialism and imperialism in a Marxist sense, but he is invested in Anderson’s conception of the community which answers questions about the regeneration of life and humanity’s belonging in the universe. By intervening into Kenyatta’s narrative of the nation, Ngũgĩ writes a history of the nation that places the Mau Mau rebellion at the center of its history, which focuses on the Kenyan peasantry and workers as the sources of the nation’s connection from the precolonial past to its regeneration into the future.

Ngũgĩ's imagining of the Kenyan national community and its history was deeply influenced by Frantz Fanon's theory of the postcolonial nation in *The Wretched of the Earth* (1963), especially the role of the intellectual in the people's decolonization struggle. For Fanon and Ngũgĩ, the history of the postcolonial nation is a continuous struggle towards collective liberation, the memories of which are threatened by the colonial encounter and the neocolonial manipulation of the nation's history. "With a kind of perverted logic," Fanon writes about colonialism, "it turns its attention to the past of the colonized people and distorts it, disfigures it, and destroys it" (149). By demeaning the colonized people's history, the colonist imposes his ideology on the "the colonized country's past and future," which goes beyond the physical subjugation that colonialism inflicts on the colonized; instead, it is a subjugation that the colonized internalize by degrading their own selfhood and history (149). But in the struggle for decolonization, colonialism's abjection of the colonized peoples' past is negated, and African culture and history is celebrated by the colonized intellectual. However, for Fanon, the colonized intellectual risks indulging himself in a fixed vision of culture that is alienated from the people's nationalist struggle for liberation. When the intellectual "realizes that the existence of the nation is not proved by culture but in the people's struggle against the forces of imperialism," he produces literature that has entered the "combat phase" that is as dynamic as the people's praxis for liberation (159). Ngũgĩ identifies himself with Fanon's "combat phase" of the colonized intellectual, with his texts imagining a changing history of Kenya "with the intention of opening up the future, of spurring [the people] into action and fostering hope" (167). His employment of national allegory is analogous to Fanon's conception of a national history that is changing with the present moment of political struggle. As a form of activist literature, Ngũgĩ's novels seek to

imagine a future that lies ahead for Kenya's working people and peasantry beyond colonialism and neocolonialism.

Chapter One examines the ambivalent motif of betrayal in *A Grain of Wheat*, where it represents the severance of social bonds but also the means for its regeneration. Utilizing Anderson's conception of forgetting through remembrance, I discuss how the novel's protagonist, Mugo, is commemorated by his village as a Mau Mau hero despite his secret betrayal of another revered fighter, Kihika, during the Emergency. Mugo's commemoration allegorizes the ironic transformation of Kenyatta after Kenya's independence, who called for the collective amnesia of the Mau Mau rebellion. *A Grain of Wheat* signals Ngũgĩ's introspective turn on national consciousness and the failures of the postcolonial state to live up to the hopes and dreams of the Mau Mau rebellion, and how Kenyatta's rewriting of history seemed to be taking hold of the Kenyan populace. However, despite the hollowness of national independence, and the divisions that still lingered between the Mau Mau veterans and loyalists, Ngũgĩ saw that fissures created by trauma and betrayal could allow for a new emergence of national unity. When the novel's characters recall their memories and traumas of the Emergency through their flashbacks, negotiations, and reconciliations, they open up new visions of the nation that counter Kenyatta's call for collective forgetting.

Chapter Two investigates how *Petals of Blood* frames a history of the Kenyan nation that is in constant resistance against imperialist forces, a resistance depicted through the ambivalent motifs of ceremony, fire, and education. Taking place over the span of 12 years, the stories of the four main characters, Munira, Abdulla, Wanja, and Karega, and their entanglement with the village of Ilmorog, construct the novel's national allegory of Kenya's post-independence and Kenyatta's increasingly authoritarian and chauvinist government. *Petals of Blood* signals

Ngũgĩ's engagement with Fanon's concept of "combat literature" to cultivate a dynamic history of Kenya towards a socialist vision of the nation opposed to the reckless greed of Kenya's neocolonial government. The depiction of Kenyatta's resurrection of the Mau Mau oath of unity allegorizes the stagnation of national culture which has regressed into ethnic chauvinism.

Because of this, precolonial traditions are represented as ambivalent sites of political struggle and the manipulation and rewriting of national history. However, this ambivalence of traditions, symbols, and histories of the nation also affords an alternative imagining of the nation, which Ngũgĩ intervenes into to explore a socialist, equitable, and just vision of history with Kenya's working classes and peasants as the main agents of change.

The novels of Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o remain masterful examples of the postcolonial experience of the emerging nation as it "re-members" its own fragmented history and struggles against the exploitative forces of international capitalism. As Ngũgĩ pens, "The novelist is haunted by a sense of the past. His work is often an attempt to come to terms with 'the thing that has been,' a struggle, as it were, to sensitively register his encounter with history, his people's history" (*Homecoming* 39). When the contradictions of the nation are examined through the lens of national allegory, they don't undermine nation, but provide openings from which the nation draws its political and popular power. In Ngũgĩ's novels, these ambivalent fissures of national allegory become the registers for his utopic imaginings of the Kenyan nation. Like a puzzling dream, a waking nightmare, or a piling wreckage, the histories and traditions of the nation still haunt the living by reminding us of the collective ties, paradoxes, and struggles we contend with in our supposedly private lives in our ever-increasingly globalized world.

Chapter One: Betrayal in Unity: The Emergence of the Nation in *A Grain of Wheat*

Ngũgĩ's third novel marks a major transformation in his literary and political project. For one, Ngũgĩ scholars often remark how the discovery and influence of Frantz Fanon and Marxism become prominent in *A Grain of Wheat*, with some speculating whether he first picked up *The Wretched of the Earth* before or in the midst of writing the novel. This discovery of Fanon and Marxism would eventually lead Ngũgĩ towards his famous break from English to writing novels in his native language Gĩkũyũ, which he begins with *Devil on the Cross* (1982); and he argues in *Decolonising the Mind* (1986) that other African authors should also write in their own languages. But *A Grain of Wheat* was also, according to Simon Gikandi, the novel which cemented Ngũgĩ's mastery of the novel, where his unique depiction of disjunctive and sprawling subjectivities encapsulated the contradictions underlying the "arrested decolonization" of Kenya's independence (103). Whereas his first two novels, *Weep Not, Child* (1964) and *The River Between* (1965), were linear narratives that dealt with the emergence of nationalism under colonial rule, *A Grain of Wheat* signals a reflective turn on national unity as it unfolds the confused, hesitant, and guilty consciousnesses of an ensemble of characters careening towards Uhuru, the day of Kenya's formal independence from the British colonies. This shift in form not only represents Ngũgĩ's engagement with modernist experimental techniques of the novel, such as irony, disillusionment, and indeterminacy, but also illuminates the contradictions of an emerging national consciousness that is attempting to forget its traumas of decolonization while the populace still feels haunted by the past's lingering presence.

A Grain of Wheat then is a sweeping study of the achievements and failures of the Mau Mau rebellion (1952-1957), a guerilla revolt made up of landless Gĩkũyũ peasants against the colonial regime. Through flashbacks, the novel attempts to reconcile this painful history of

division and revolution with the uncertain future of Kenya's independence. Because of how Ngũgĩ combines history, politics, and literature in *A Grain of Wheat*, postcolonial scholars have often discussed how Ngũgĩ's novel is an allegory for the Kenyan nation, where individual characters and their trajectories are read to represent the nation in its entirety. These discussions often reflect one of the claims in Fredric Jameson's provocative essay on "national allegory," where in the "third-world" or postcolonial context, "allegories are conscious and overt: they imply a radically different and objective relationship of politics to libidinal dynamics" (80). This conscious representation of national allegory contrasts with the novels from the western or "first-world" context, where the "allegorical structures... are not so much absent first-world cultural texts as they are *unconscious*" (79; emphasis in original). *A Grain of Wheat* appears to embody the former formulation of self-conscious national allegory: Mugo, the protagonist, is tasked by his village, Thabia, and the local sect of the national independence Movement to become their chief representative and to give a speech in the upcoming Uhuru celebrations. Mugo is specifically chosen because of his heroic acts during the Kenyan State of Emergency (1952-1960), and for leading a hunger strike while interned in one of the British concentration camps. Because of his perceived heroic deeds for the nation, Mugo is held up as an individual who mirrors the national collective. However, the central irony of the novel is that Mugo in fact betrayed one of the most revered freedom fighters from the Thabia village—Kihika—who valiantly led a raid against a colonial garrison and killed the sadistic District Officer (DO) Thomas Robson.

Mugo's betrayal of Kihika and his subsequent ironic connection with the emerging Kenyan nation intertextually refers to Kyrilo Razumov from Conrad's *Under Western Eyes* (1911). In Conrad's novel, Razumov is a student attending the University of St. Petersburg who

is caught up in the violent revolutionary activity against the Russian Czarist regime during the late 19th century. Victor Haldin, another student and revolutionary, asks Razumov to help hide him from the Czarist police after he bombs Mr. de P—, the Minister of State. After grudgingly agreeing to help Haldin hide and make his escape from the police, Razumov eventually turns Haldin into the Russian authorities. However, instead of moving on with his life set out before him in academia, Razumov is pressured by the Czarist regime to infiltrate a cell of Russian revolutionaries who are exiled in Zurich. Here, Ngũgĩ rewrites Conrad's novel to challenge the decolonial hopes of freedom, land, and unity that the populace projected onto the emerging Kenyan nation-state, but were then apparently squandered by the incoming independent government. But where the voice of *Under Western Eyes* is cynical towards both the conservative Czarist regime and the radical revolutionaries, Ngũgĩ presents a more ambiguous vision of nationalism that explores its genuine emancipatory efforts and the uncertainties underlying the promises of the Kenyan independent state to directly express the will of the people who fought for (and in some instances, against) independence.

While Mugo's ironic veneration by the community mirrors Razumov's exaltation by the revolutionaries and Haldin's sister in *Under Western Eyes*, his unwitting ascension as a national hero also sets in motion his growing awareness that his selfhood is rooted in the nation's collective trauma and history of decolonization. Through being made into a monument of the nation's idealized past, Mugo becomes a trusted figure to Gikonyo and Mumbi, a married couple in Thabia, who relate to him their own acts of betrayal committed against the nation during the Emergency. From their confessions, we learn that Gikonyo's marriage with Mumbi, the sister of Kihika, is strained because of her infidelity with Karanja, Gikonyo's romantic rival in their youth. This tension is exacerbated since Karanja was a Home Guard and chief who oversaw the

internment of the old Thabia village while Gikonyo was held in a concentration camp, and through her infidelity, Mumbi gives birth to Karanja's son. But Gikonyo himself is also implicated in betrayal: when interned in the Yala camp, he confesses the Mau Mau oath of unity to be reunited with Mumbi, a move scorned by the rest of the Mau Mau inmates in the camp. But after finding out about Mumbi's perceived disloyalty, Gikonyo completely ignores her son and becomes a pragmatic businessman who prioritizes building his personal wealth over helping the struggling community. In the present, Mugo repeatedly refuses to become Thabia's chief and to give a speech on Uhuru due to his inner torment and regret for having betrayed Kihika. General R. and Lt. Koina, two members of the Movement's local sect and who were Kihika's comrades in the Mau Mau, relay to Mugo their plan to execute Karanja on Uhuru since they mistakenly suspect the latter to be the one who betrayed Kihika. On the day of Uhuru celebrations, General R. asks for Kihika's traitor to step out of the crowd, only to be surprised when Mugo comes forward and publicly confesses instead. The novel ends with Mugo's secret trial and execution by the Party, and Gikonyo and Mumbi agree to repair their relationship and to recognize her and Karanja's son as a member of their family.

Through the binaries of sacrifice/betrayal, memory/forgetting, and confession/denial, we can read *A Grain of Wheat's* depiction of fractured national consciousness to be deeply connected with the themes of national "emergence" found throughout. The State of Emergency, or just "the Emergency" as the main characters often refer to it, is shrouded in a misty haze of painful memories that weigh upon each character. But the epigraph opening *A Grain of Wheat*, a verse from First Corinthians that also provides the title of the novel, describes a sowed seed that is "not quickened, except it die," a parable which reflects the pursuit of nationalist ideals through the Mau Mau uprising, where then these ideals "die" through the divisions the Mau Mau

sprouted amongst the Gĩkũyũ and under the horrific repression of the State of Emergency. But even in this death of the original seed, “thou sowest not that body that shall be, but bare grain, it may chance of wheat, or of some other grain.” Through the death of this seed, which entails the betrayals, violence, and competing theories of what the nation is in reality during the Mau Mau uprising, a new “emergence” of national consciousness is unexpectedly born out of these traumatic acts of national betrayal and violent loss of life.

Ngũgĩ’s depiction of the nation then goes beyond the purely political aspect of anticolonial nationalism, and lends itself to a religious imagining of the national community that is deeply concerned with what Benedict Anderson calls “the links between the dead and the yet unborn, the mystery of re-generation” (11). National allegory in the novel, rather than a unified, one-to-one representation of the nation embodied by individual characters, is radically fragmented and polysemous. In Ngũgĩ’s novel, motifs of betrayal, rather than signaling the severance of national ties, become allegorical for the Kenyan national experience of moving forward in a postcolonial world while still being tied to the romanticized past of the Mau Mau uprising, which was in fact violently divisive. This depiction of betrayal shared by the community reveals the novel’s suspicion of individual heroes who try to embody the ideals of the nation’s history—specifically Jomo Kenyatta, Kenya’s first Prime Minister (1963-4) and President (1964-78), who paradoxically urged Kenyans to “forgive and forget” the divisions caused by the Mau Mau’s revolution for national independence so that unity could flourish (Speitkamp 207). Through Mugo’s confession on Uhuru and the relationship of Gikonyo and Mumbi, the novel allegorizes an alternative vision of national reconciliation that recognizes and negotiates instances of trauma and betrayal from the nation’s past, in opposition to Kenyatta’s official doctrine of unity through collective amnesia.

1. The Mau Mau: History, Memory, and Forgetting

In *A Grain of Wheat*, the history of the Mau Mau pervades the narrative as a traumatic focal point which tethers the central characters to the past while Uhuru is only days away. The uprising emerged out of decades of colonial repression, where resentments against the administration accumulated as Africans were displaced from their homesteads in order to make room for European settlers to farm and cultivate their own agricultural economy (Barnett 25). Many Africans became squatters on lands which were forcibly taken by European settlers, and it was part of a broader practice in colonial Kenya to keep Africans in the lowest economic status in society (Barnett 26). From the 1940s to the 1950s, decentralized and radicalized networks of landless Gĩkũyũ squatters began oathing rituals which unified dispersed villages against the colonial regime (Elkins 28). These rituals would combine elements of traditional Gĩkũyũ oaths, Christian symbolism, and modern political objectives to liberate the newly christened Kenyan nation from colonial powers (Barnett 59-60). Tensions heightened as colonial authorities caught wind of these oathing rituals, and when Senior Chief Waruhiu, the most prominent Gĩkũyũ loyalist of the colonial administration, was assassinated in broad daylight in 1952, the governor of Kenya declared a State of Emergency; thus ensued four years of ruthless fighting between colonial authorities and the Mau Mau (Elkins 36-7).

However, the conflict was not just between Gĩkũyũs and colonists; the Mau Mau also split the Gĩkũyũ population into the supporters of the insurgency and those loyal to the colonial regime. Before the conflict erupted, loyalists such as Chief Waruhiu “became enormously wealthy and powerful at the expense of their fellow [Gĩkũyũ]” through being granted administrative roles and privileges over Gĩkũyũ reserves (Elkins 29). Likewise, loyalists were seen as betrayers to the land and freedom cause, and became the first targets of the Mau Mau’s

attacks. Barnett notes there were a number of “premature acts of violence” attributed to the beginnings of the uprising that first targeted Gīkūyūs, such as “the firing of Government loyalists’ homes” in 1952 (67). Settler properties were also destroyed in the months leading up to the Emergency, along with loyalists increasingly found murdered (Elkins 32). After the Emergency was declared, one of the most violent acts by the Mau Mau against the loyalists was dubbed the “Lari Massacre” by British media/propaganda outlets in 1953, where the homestead of loyalist Chief Luka was set on fire, and as many as ninety-seven residents, including women and children, were either burned or hacked to death by insurgents—which incited retaliatory massacres by the colonist and loyalist forces against the Mau Mau and its supporters (Elkins 45).

As the Mau Mau became more organized and widespread, so did the oath of unity, with some initiates forced to take the oath upon pain of death (Barnett 57). While these oaths united Gīkūyūs in the political objective to reclaim their lands, the ambiguity of its dissemination led the oath to take on multiple meanings for “land and freedom” depending on the initiate’s age, gender, and origin (Elkin 28). Elkins gives examples of the oath expressing the desire for some Gīkūyūs to reject the loyalist chiefs and their administrative power, or for young men to reclaim lands closed off by the colonists, or for young women to share more equally in communal and farming labor with men (28). While the oath functioned to make initiates feel “reborn” in the new national community, it was also compulsory for many Gīkūyūs who were more ambivalent towards the Mau Mau’s claims and methods for land and freedom (Elkins 26). This was in part because the oath was seen as a binding commitment to not betray the Mau Mau to the colonial authorities, as in the case of the vow “may this oath kill me,” which carried the weight of the Mau Mau’s reprisals to the oath’s betrayers (Elkins 26). The oath’s symbolic performance to

establish national unity also enforced divisions among initiates between those who were and weren't truly committed to the Mau Mau.

On the other side, the meaning of “loyalists” began to shift as the colonists started to recruit Home Guards, ground forces comprising Gĩkũyũ men trained and led by European officers, to enforce the State of Emergency. Along with being tasked to hunt down Mau Mau insurgents in the forests, Home Guards would become integral in maintaining Britain's especially brutal system of deportations and detention camps called the “Pipeline,” which possibly held anywhere from 160,000 to 360,00 Mau Mau insurgents, along with the enclosure of villages which held almost the entire Gĩkũyũ population—about 1.5 million people—with the imperial mission to “civilize” them (Elkins xii-iv). By the end of the conflict, British records show that fewer than one hundred Europeans were killed along with eighteen hundred loyalists by Mau Mau insurgents (Elkins xvi). These records also show that more than eleven thousand Mau Mau insurgents were killed, but Elkins believes that these archives leave out the true devastation of Britain's effort to reclaim their colony: “there was in late colonial Kenya a murderous campaign to eliminate [Gĩkũyũ] people, a campaign that left thousands dead, perhaps hundreds of thousands, dead” (xvi). Although the Mau Mau was ultimately defeated in 1957 with the capture and execution of revolutionary leader Dedan Kimathi, the uprising had already set in motion the process that led to the British authorities formally granting Kenya independence in 1963.

The utter desolation left in the wake of Britain's campaign to “win back” their colony was picked up by Jomo Kenyatta in 1963. Although Kenyatta was arrested by colonial authorities in 1952 on the belief that he was the “mastermind” behind the Mau Mau, he was in actuality a “conservative politician who had never supported Mau Mau's oathing or guerrilla

tactics” (Elkins 361). In fact, despite how beloved he was by the Gĩkũyũ and how his arrest helped motivate the Mau Mau insurgency, Kenyatta would become a gift to the remaining white settlers, loyalists, and England’s leadership for his hardline stance against preserving the memory of the Mau Mau, and for his refusal to compensate veterans who had suffered in Britain’s detention camps (Elkins 361). Prior to his presidency in September 1962, Kenyatta gave a speech in Githunguri, a Kenyan agricultural town, telling them to forget the divisions caused by the Emergency, and that “[w]e must have no hatred towards one another. Mau Mau was a disease which had been eradicated, and must never be remembered again” (Kenyatta 189). This was due to Kenyatta’s commitment to reshaping Kenya into a moderate nation that could attract European businesses and investments, which necessitated the exclusion of the radical nationalist politics espoused by the Mau Mau. The hopes of land and freedom pursued by the Gĩkũyũs were swiftly dismissed by Kenyatta’s administration, which told them “nothing is free” (Elkins 361).

Kenyatta’s response to Mau Mau insurgents was essentially, “If they wanted their land back... they would have to purchase it like everyone else” (Elkins 361). Of course, for many of these former detainees, they had almost next to nothing to return to from Britain’s detention camps.

In *A Grain of Wheat*, Kenyatta’s mandate to forget is embodied by Thabia’s ironic commemoration of Mugo. On one level, Gikandi suggests that Mugo is made into the “scapegoat” of the community in the novel’s opening, “the representation of the villagers’ pain and suffering during the emergency and the depository of their anxieties” (109). However, when the community persistently misreads his character as the noble hero of the nation, they also distort the history that Mugo represents. This disquieting claim about the historical amnesia that underlies national unity in *A Grain of Wheat* is echoed in Benedict Anderson’s argument that forgetting through remembrance is an integral strategy for cementing national unity in the

modern nation-state (199). When discussing Ernest Renan's lecture "What is a Nation?", Anderson notes the paradox of Renan listing the St. Bartholomew's Day massacre, which his audience would be able to recall from their public education, as an event that would need to be forgotten in order for national unity to be cultivated: "the essence of nation is that all individuals have many things in common, and also that they have forgotten many things" (Renan 11). This paradox of "already having forgotten' ancient tragedies," Anderson notes, "is a prime contemporary civic duty" of the modern nation (200). Through being reminded of the antiquity of pre-national tragedies and their bitter conflicts, these divisions become retroactively re-contained under the heading of 'national remembrance' and subsequently are forgotten. As Anderson argues, "Having to 'have already forgotten' tragedies of which one needs unceasingly to be 'reminded' turns out to be a characteristic device in the later construction of national genealogies" (200-1). Forgetting though remembrance is the foundational ideological act of national unity according to Anderson, and Mugo, as the unwitting figure of national remembrance, is likewise propped up as a figure of historical distortion. This projection of Kihika's memory through Mugo, his betrayer, is what Gikandi calls the villagers' realization that "the past can only be recuperated through deviations, repressions, and misinterpretations," which come from their desire to remember the ideals of land, freedom, and unity that have failed to materialize under Kenyatta's administration (117).

With this parallel between Mugo and Kenyatta as figures of unity through collective forgetting, Fanon can be brought in as a useful critic of the leader who captures the hopes, memories, and desires of the postcolonial nation. "Refusing to break up the national bourgeoisie," Fanon writes, "the leader asks the people to plunge back into the past and drink in the epic that led to independence" (126). Fanon urges the masses take the leading role in directly

shaping the national government to their image, a synthesis of the nation's mind and body politic where "the party is not the authority but the organization whereby they, the people, exert their authority and will" (128). But Fanon also cautions against any merging between the national party and state authorities; otherwise, he contends, it would be "the fastest way for the party militant to achieve his selfish ends" (128). This is perhaps the central struggle that *A Grain of Wheat* contends with as the masses canonize Kihika and his betrayer Mugo, and the memory of the romanticized, nationalist past is overshadowed by Kenyatta's administration. Fanon goes further to warn that "[w]e must not cultivate the spirit of the exceptional or look for the hero, another form of leader. We must elevate the people, expand their minds, equip them, differentiate them, and humanize them" (137). While Kihika is undoubtedly depicted as one of Fanon's "revolutionary elite emanating from the people... empower[ing] the masses to step onto the stage of history," the way he is remembered as a martyr points to an act of historical forgetting shared across the community. Part of this amnesia lies in how the Mau Mau was also violent against the supposed subjects of national unity. After all, the first victims of the Mau Mau were Gĩkũyũ administrators loyal to the colonial regime. National consciousness then isn't just fractured through the disappointment of post-independence, but fracture in fact constitutes Kenyan national consciousness during the process of decolonization.

2. Mugo: The Prophet of National Fragmentation

Betrayal, treason, and murder—these actions are depicted as some of the most severe crimes one can commit against the community throughout historical memory. Treason is perhaps the highest crime one can commit against the nation-state, and betrayal has its own unique place in the western cultural imagination, such as in the ninth and lowest ring of Hell in the *Inferno*, where the most notorious traitors in history are sent to be punished for eternity. Yet, in political

practice, treason and betrayal are complicated by the anticolonial and post-independence struggles of the new Kenyan nation in *A Grain of Wheat*. Mugo, as the novel's central figure of betrayal, is the Judas to the Christ embodied by Kihika. However, in a twist of irony, Mugo is venerated by the community as a national hero who contributed to the Mau Mau movement, and who comes to represent the lives lost during the State of Emergency. When Mugo is approached by the Movement to become the village's chief, Gikonyo tells Mugo, "we all know the part you played in the movement. Your name and that of Kihika will ever be linked together" (23). But Mugo spurns the community's association of him and Kihika, and later on reiterates Kenyatta's doctrine of "forgive and forget" to Gikonyo, telling him, "I try to [forget]. The government says we should bury the past" (66). Mugo then is caught in a double-life between his private and public self, which Gikandi notes "can be seen as evidence of Ngũgĩ's mastery of the bourgeois novel—especially of his ability to create a unique individual defined by his alienation from his self and community... [which] ultimately undermines the desire for allegory in *A Grain of Wheat*" (109). However, to read Mugo as the archetypal figure of the alienated, bourgeois individual leaves out how Mugo's alienation is symptomatic of the community's larger betrayal of the memory of the Mau Mau uprising and its contribution to Kenya's independence. Through remembering Kihika through Mugo, the community ironically partakes in Kenyatta's mandate to forget the struggles of the Mau Mau uprising.

The novel opens with Mugo waking up from a nightmare; lying on his bed paralyzed, he watches as a "clear drop of water... delicately suspended above him... fattened and grew dirtier as it absorbed grains of soot," threatening to drop into his eye which he can't close (1). Surrounding him in this dream are also the "sooty locks [hanging] from the fern and grass thatch [that] all pointed at his heart" (1). This dream, which could also be sleep paralysis, is the first

hint of Mugo's psychological turmoil which plagues him throughout, and we are soon shown that this inner turmoil is political, a product of his betrayal of Kihika to colonial authorities during the Emergency. The objects of his hut return Mugo's gaze of the political community he has betrayed, and in seeing him for who he really is (a traitor to the Mau Mau), they threaten him with a judgment that paralyzes his sense of individuality and bodily autonomy. When Mugo finally awakens before the piercing water drop reaches his eye, he is keen on keeping to himself, away from his pesky neighbors in the Thabai village. Mugo's alienation then operates through a parallel which bridges the public realm with the psychological: the judgmental gaze that Mugo intuitively expects from the villagers around him manifests in his dreams by being displaced onto the objects of his hut which sense his guilty conscience—turning Mugo into a national allegory for the residual, historical trauma undermining Kenya's independence. Through this opening of Mugo's nightmare, he has already internalized the public perception of his betrayal of Kihika, and this knowledge constantly returns to him as he tries to bury this past and continue on with his life.

However, even before the Emergency, Mugo and Kihika are shown to be opposing reflections of each other that prefigure the divisions, failed promises, and betrayals which become the reality of Kenya's post-independence. In the days before the Mau Mau and the Emergency, Mugo attends one of the Movement's meetings where Kihika delivers a speech calling for collective action, even violence, against the colonial regime. (Interestingly, Kenyatta is rumored to give a speech at this meeting, but does not actually attend.) In his speech, Kihika exudes assertive charisma as he "unrolled the history of Kenya, the coming of the whiteman and the birth of the Party," which captures the attention of his audience, including Gikonyo and Mumbi: "Their eyes were fixed on Kihika; their lives seemed dependent on his falling words"

(14). However, Kihika's speech turns more ominous when he prophesizes a "great sacrifice" imminent in their future: "A day comes when brother shall give up brother, a mother her son, when you and I have heard the call of a nation in turmoil" (15). Mugo is horrified by Kihika's anticipation that betrayal is seemingly necessary in the struggle for national independence. Kihika's radical politics, shown to be influenced by the Bible in his colonial education, but now turned against the oppressors, entails the commitment to sacrifice oneself, or even one's own family or kin, for the whole community. During the meeting, Mugo experiences a moment of distance and alienation from those listening intently to Kihika's speech:

He could not clap for words that did not touch him. What right had such a boy, probably younger than Mugo, to talk like that? What arrogance? Kihika had spoken of blood easily as if he was talking of drawing water in a river, Mugo reflected, a revulsion starting in his stomach at the sight and smell of blood. I hate him, he heard himself say... (15)

Mugo is disturbed by Kihika's revolutionary allusions to the people's "blood" being spilled for the sake of the nationalist cause, which Mugo suspects to be really for Kihika's own self-interests and egotism. But the people around him do not share the same skepticism, and again, he feels isolated from those who embrace Kihika's revolutionary fervor: "he looked at Mumbi, wondering what she was thinking. Her eyes were still fixed on her brother. Everybody's eyes were on the platform" (15). However, Mugo's hatred doesn't just arise from his suspicion that Kihika is acting out of his own self-interest, but also from his secret wish to be like Kihika: "Mugo experienced a twang of jealousy as he too turned and looked at the speaker" (15). It is at this moment when Mugo and Kihika lock eyes with one another, and he finds himself struck with guilt. Hatred gives way to intimate recognition, which terrifies Mugo, and it is as though "only Kihika and Mugo were left on the stage" (15). Not only does he desire to become a

nationalist figurehead and leader like Kihika, but he also sees himself called forth in fulfilling Kihika's ominous prophecy of nationalist sacrifice and betrayal.

This prophecy comes to fruition in the messy backdrop of the vicious Emergency, the memory of which opens up the wounds of the divisions caused by the Mau Mau and the loyalist Home Guards. Mugo is seen at first isolated in his hut in the new Thabia village, and through sheer luck, is managing to escape the horrors of colonial repression and deportation to the detention camps. However, his seclusion from the public nightmare is disturbed when Kihika assassinates the brutal DO Thomas Robson, and in retaliation, a wave of colonial violence is brought down on Thabia. Whistles warning of the attack echo across the village before the sounds of gunshots and screaming. Just before the attack, Mugo is seen proudly examining his newly built hut after the old village was razed to the ground by the Home Guards, and indulges in religious fantasies where "his heart dialogued with strange voices... [which] faded into once voice from God calling out Moses, Moses! And Mugo was ready with his answer. Here I am, Lord" (183). This vision of becoming the prophetic shepherd parallels Mugo's desire to become a nationalist leader for the community, a role which Fanon would describe as taking on an unequal relationship with the masses by imagining them to be a flock of sheep meant to be led—and not the other way around.

This self-aggrandizing fantasy is disrupted when Kihika enters Mugo's hut amidst the outside chaos. As Kihika explains himself to Mugo, the latter reflects on how "[h]e spoke quickly, nervously, and paced around the fireplace... Could this be the man who had once spoken at a public meeting...?" (185). Not only is Mugo still skeptical of Kihika's revolutionary politics and fearful he will be caught by the Home Guards, he is terrified by the suspicion that Kihika has actually gone mad. For Mugo, Kihika's daring revolutionary struggle against the

regime has brought nothing but suffering for him and the village: “Why should Kihika drag me into a struggle and problems I have not created? Why? He is not satisfied with butchering men and women and children. He must call on me to bathe in the blood?” (188). From his point of view, the struggle against colonialism should not bother those who have kept to themselves and refused to pick a side. Here, Mugo isn’t just an alienated subject of colonialism, but allegorizes the Gĩkũyũs ambivalent towards the Mau Mau’s radical politics and their compulsory demand for all Gĩkũyũs to support their cause. But Kihika’s intrusion to Mugo’s hut forces him to recognize that his existence is caught up in the wider sociopolitical conflicts occurring around him, and that he must pick a side to survive.

Kihika explains to Mugo that he needs his help in organizing an underground resistance in the new Thabia village, impressed by how he is a “self-made man” who had “suffered” (187). Mugo answers that he hasn’t even taken the oath of the unity to formally join the Mau Mau, to which Kihika replies,

But what is an oath? For some people you need the oath to bind them to the Movement. There are those who’ll keep a secret unless bound by an oath. I know them... In any case how many took the oath and are now licking the toes of the whiteman? No, you take an oath to confirm a choice already made. The decision to lay or not lay your life for the people lies in the heart. The oath is the water sprinkled on a man’s head at baptism. (187)

Kihika is an idealist because, as Peter Nazareth points out, he’s “willing to sacrifice himself for the sake of others,” but in this speech, he’s also an idealist in the sense that he holds a Platonic ideal of nationalism, where the practice of oathing is merely symbolic and liable to be rendered meaningless by subsequent acts of betrayal (144). True nationalism for Kihika is a “choice already made” in one’s inner self before he symbolically confirms it to the community. Mugo

sees this idealistic fervor as more proof of Kihika's madness, and incompatible with the division and violence the Mau Mau has sprouted among the Gĩkũyũs. While he agrees to meet with Kihika again to organize an underground movement in the new village, Mugo is distressed at being thrust into danger. Mugo thinks he's saved when he sees a poster with a price on Kihika's head, imagining himself as Isaac "saved from death," and repeating to himself, "I am important. I must not die" (191). As he hurries to the new District Officer, Mugo envisions "various possibilities [that] opened before him. He would buy more land. He would build a big house. He would find a woman for a wife and get children... His place in society would be established" (192). Mugo views turning in Kihika as his chance to become fully independent, win respect from the community, and to even start a family. While a wish of national belonging is expressed in this dream, Mugo also venerates in it the figures of the colonial "headmaster... judge... [and] Governor" who are "great" through their singular, elevated position in society (192). Mugo doesn't just want to lead the community, but seeks to dominate it by becoming a loyalist or by replacing the colonists themselves. This aligns him with Fanon's national bourgeoisie that "imposes itself in a spectacular manner [as the State], flaunts its authority, harasses, making clear to its citizens they are in constant danger" (111). But this fantasy shatters when Mugo becomes a victim to such a power. He tells the new DO, John Thompson, of his meeting place with Kihika, and once he thinks he has a "new-found friend" with Thompson, he is spat at and slapped by him (194). Mugo then descends "back in his nightmare," and with the world around him seemingly falling apart, he expresses regret for his decision: "He did not want the money. He did not want to know what he had done" (195).

Although misguided by his religious self-aggrandizing fantasies, where we see him flip from Moses to Isaac when confronted by Kihika's radical commitment to the nation, Mugo had

felt it was his *duty*—and perhaps even a nationalist one—to sacrifice Kihika to the colonial authorities instead of himself. Through Mugo’s betrayal, Kihika is also rendered the “seed” which “dies” in the novel’s epigraph, the representative of the Mau Mau’s ideals of national unity which paradoxically were also a cause of violent division between the Gikūyūs. Mugo believes this sacrifice will unlock a new beginning for himself as a powerful member of his community, but this again turns out to be another idealist vision that “dies” when put into action. Instead, Mugo’s subsequent turmoil holds him back from fulfilling his desire to become a savior-leader for the nation. When the State of Emergency ends and interned Kenyans return to their villages, Mugo is one of the first to speak at a gathering hosted by the Party. He tells the crowd, “In those days [in the camps] we did not stay alive because we thought our cause strong. It was not even because we loved the country... We only thought of home” (64). Family, according to Mugo, was what drove detainees to stay alive through the cruelty of Britain’s detention camps, until he experiences a sudden moment of alienation which interrupts him from continuing further: “At first Mugo enjoyed the distance he had established between himself and the voice. But soon the voice disgusted him. He wanted to shout: that is not all... I did not long to join my mother, or wife or children because I did not have any. Tell me, then, who could I have loved?” (65). Mugo walks off the platform back to his hut, but his incomplete speech has already cemented him as an unselfish, legendary hero among the villagers: “People in the meeting said the man was so moved he could not speak any more” (65). Although Mugo is alienated by the distance he feels from his own voice and self, the scene also illustrates how the public misreads his behavior as that of a noble hermit who has sacrificed much for the community. But Mugo’s figuration as a national hero in the public’s imagination torments him because he cannot properly confess that he is guilty of having betrayed Kihika and the Mau Mau to the colonists.

In this light, Mugo is also shown to be a double of Kenyatta and his injunction for the nation to forget its history. Although Kenyatta turned out to be a harsh critic of the Mau Mau and spurned any attempts to preserve its memory as president, he was initially seen by the movement as the personification of the uprising's desire for land, freedom, and unity. During the gathering where Mugo gives his first speech, the Party also makes a call for Kenyatta to be immediately released from prison: "People would not accept any other person for the Chief Minister" (63). It is with searing irony that the narrator observes how the Party turns away from its grassroots support of the "Movement," another term for the Mau Mau, to rally around Kenyatta to literally become the voice of a divided people who just survived the Emergency, or helped perpetuate it:

[The party leaders] asked everyone to vote for party candidates in the coming elections: a vote for the candidate was a vote for Kenyatta. A vote for Kenyatta was a vote for the Party. A vote for the Party was a vote for the Movement. A vote for the Movement was a vote for the People. Kenyatta was the People! (63).

Similarly, on the day before Uhuru, Mugo is lauded by the elder Wambui to the other villagers: "Independence Day without him would be stale; he is Kihika born again" (175). But whereas Kenyatta becomes the leader of the Kenyan nation seeking to moderate its nationalist fervor and open the country up to international investment, Mugo slinks away from any public role, and is especially distressed by how the community remembers him as a reincarnation of Kihika: "They cry for you," Mumbi tells Mugo in a final attempt to bring him to the Uhuru celebrations (178). But Mugo cannot escape the past, and as he becomes increasingly confronted by the villagers' admiration of him as a national hero, the landscape around him recalls the memories that he represses, such as when he saves Wambuku, Kihika's former partner, from being whipped by a Home Guard: "The whole scene again became alive and vivid" (168). However, this scene of the

past which lives on in the present remains to Mugo “a nightmare whose broken and blurred edges he could not pick or reconstruct” (168). This growing recognition that the past continually haunts the present convinces him to open his private self to the public during the Uhuru celebrations.

3. Gikonyo and Mumbi: A Failed Return to Paradise

After the Movement’s initial meeting to make Mugo the village’s chief and speaker at the Uhuru celebrations, Gikonyo feels drawn to relate his own experiences about the Emergency to Mugo. Like Mugo, Gikonyo is alienated from those around him, and this barrier is caused by the psychic trauma he suffered when interned in the colonial detention camp: “It was not like prison,” he tells village elders Warui and Wambui when they exit their first meeting with Mugo (27). But when Gikonyo finds himself “surprised at his own sudden burst of feeling,” he discovers that the others are seemingly uninterested: “He could not clearly see Wambui or Warui in the dark. It seemed to him that he had only spoken to empty air” (27). Although Gikonyo believes his occupation as a rising businessman and politician can bury the traumas of the Emergency, with his “hard work [being] a drug against pestering memories,” his faltering relationship with Mumbi shows that his own success is not enough to counter his disenchantment with postcolonial Kenya (27). Gikonyo avoids acknowledging his disintegrating marriage with Mumbi, embodied by Mumbi’s son with Karanja (a loyalist Home Guard), whom he completely ignores while living under the same roof. When Gikonyo returns to their home after meeting with Mugo, Mumbi implores Gikonyo, “Let us talk about it... the child” (30). However, Gikonyo replies “with acid emphasis,” “There is nothing to talk about” (30). Gikonyo not only wants to forget his past with Mumbi, but wants to avoid the living remnant of this traumatic history manifested by her son.

This private marital conflict allegorizes a wider sociopolitical division caused by the Emergency seen reemerging in the present: the period when Mau Mau insurgents were forcibly taken from their families and deported to detention camps while Home Guards watched over the destruction and enclosure of their home villages. Mumbi's child is a living scar of this estrangement from the ideal of domestic life that Gikonyo refuses to confront. Before the Emergency, Gĩkũyũ families were in a state of crisis under colonial rule, with settlers increasingly appropriating their farmlands while the Gĩkũyũ population grew with the introduction of western medicine (Elkins 14). According to Elkins, "Land and family entitled [young Gĩkũyũ men] to certain privileges within the [Gĩkũyũ] patriarchy; without land a man would remain socially a boy" (14). Women were also held up to gendered standards which tied their social status to the ownership of land. "A woman needed land to grow crops to nurture and sustain her family; without it in the eyes of the [Gĩkũyũ] she was not an adult" (Elkins 14). When the Mau Mau rebellion erupted, the Gĩkũyũ family would become major component in motivating the nationalist ideals of land and freedom as insurgents tried regaining the farmland monopolized by the white settlers: "for some... the slogan [land and freedom] represented future hope of finding farms in the overcrowded reserves that were large enough to feed their children" (28). Under the pressure of colonialism, the Gĩkũyũ family helped politicize and inspire support for the nationalist objectives of the Mau Mau.

When the Mau Mau's resistance shattered Britain's expectation that their regime would be swiftly consolidated through the Emergency, Governor Evelyn Baring ordered in 1952 the forced removals of Gĩkũyũs suspected of being loyal to the Mau Mau (Elkins 56). Those living outside the reserves and who squatted on European farms were packed into lorries and transported to transit camps, which "quickly became notorious for their squalid and overcrowded

conditions” (Elkins 58). As the conflict kept raging, villages were summarily destroyed and families moved into barbed-wire enclosures watched over by Home Guards (Elkins xiv). Men and women suspected of being affiliated with the Mau Mau were interned without trial into the massive Pipeline system of detention camps and were transported daily by lorries, buses, and railroad freight cars (Elkins 131). After the defeat of the Mau Mau, when Gikũyũ returned from the detention camps to their home villages, “Silence was a widespread remedy for coping with the difficulties of family reunification” (Elkins 270). Many men found their villages utterly disfigured and their surviving families emaciated by the Emergency, and chose not to relate their experiences of the Pipeline to avoid reopening fresh wounds (Elkins 269-70). Similarly, the wives of the returning deportees saw their husbands’ return as a “bittersweet moment of joy and shame,” as many women bore children during the Emergency who were called *nusu-nusu* or *chotara*, meaning half-caste, and were “physical reminders of the repeated rapes they had endured” by the Home Guards (Elkins 269). As a mirror to Kenyatta’s doctrine to “forget” the Mau Mau and the wounds of the Emergency, Gikonyo’s refusal to acknowledge Mumbi’s son allegorizes the widespread repression of the collective trauma of family separation, as both men and women felt ashamed for not being present and able to support each other as a domestic unit.

When Gikonyo visits Mugo in his hut with the intention of telling his story of the detention camps, he admits that “a time came when I did not care about Uhuru for the country any more. I just wanted to come home. And I would have sold Kenya to the whitemen to buy my freedom” (67). But when he does return, Gikonyo discovers that home has also changed during the Emergency: “Where is the Mumbi I left behind?” he asks Mugo (67). Gikonyo then delivers a history of the old Thabia village and his relationship with Mumbi, where we can see how the ideals of the Mau Mau’s nationalism clashed with one another under the onslaught of the

Emergency. Before the Emergency, when Gikonyo and Karanja were rivals over Mumbi, they and other young men and women would race each other to observe the trains arriving at the local station, an ambiguous symbol of modernization and colonialism the villagers first enjoy as a spectacle, but that would subsequently take the men to colonial detention camps as part of the Pipeline. One day, Karanja beats Gikonyo to the train station, but Gikonyo wins their romantic rivalry by staying behind with Mumbi, where they then make love and soon after marry.

Gikonyo tells Mugo that Mumbi made him “feel whole, renewed,” and the day of the race was “like being born again” (97). Mumbi, whose name derives from the legendary maternal figure who with her partner, Gikuyu, gives birth to the Gĩkũyũ people, is rendered an allegorical figure of the maternal earth and the Kenyan nation which bridges the past with hopes of regeneration in the future. This ideal of the nation personified by Mumbi motivates Gikonyo to join the Mau Mau and initially face down his deportation to the detention camps. He clings on to the belief that “[h]is reunion with Mumbi would see the birth of a new Kenya,” an imagining of the national community left unchanged by the Mau Mau’s resistance and the subsequent campaign by the British to reconquer their colony by almost any means necessary (103).

Gikonyo’s vision that “Mumbi... [is] the only unchanging reality” invigorates him to stay alive in the Yala camp, and he hopes that the unity and defiance shared by the other Mau Mau detainees is strong enough to resist the colonists’ pressure to confess the oath (103). But gradually their optimism deteriorates: first, they learn the news that Kenyatta lost his case at Kapenguria and will be imprisoned, and then Gatu, a fellow Yala detainee known for his resilience and uplifting stories, is murdered in his cell by the guards (103; 108). Gikonyo is especially traumatized by Gatu’s death, and similar to Mugo’s reaction to Kihika intruding and bringing danger to his life, the world around Gikonyo mutates into a surreal nightmare: “Barbed-

wire, barbed wire everywhere. So it was today, so it would be tomorrow... There was nothing beyond it.” (109). This hellish vision of the surrounding camp not only signals Gikonyo’s increasing detachment from the real world, but his estrangement from the image of national wholeness and renewal that he projected onto Mumbi. To resist a psychotic break, Gikonyo cuts himself on barbed-wire and enjoys a “strange exhilaration,” reassuring himself that he is still alive (109). Gikonyo then returns to his cell still suffering a breakdown, and has a vision of Mumbi appearing before him as an immaculate angel, bringing him hope that home hasn’t changed. Following Kihika’s prophecy that one day “brother shall give up brother” during the turmoil of the nation, Gikonyo chooses to sacrifice his commitment to the Mau Mau to reunite with Mumbi again, and confesses the oath to the colonists (110).

Gikonyo betrays the oath not for self-interest, but because Mumbi is his last vestige for national unification and the hope to generate a “new Kenya” from the nightmare and sterility of the Yala camp. But his wish to “see Mumbi and take up the thread of life where he had left it” becomes another seed that dies prematurely (111). Upon returning home, not only has Thabia dramatically changed through the Emergency, appearing to Gikonyo as “just another detention camp,” he is rendered speechless by the discovery of Mumbi’s child with Karanja (115). The experience of Yala was not just a self-contained reality behind barbed-wire, but has enclosed and transformed his vision of domestic life with Mumbi, whom he had presumed to be unchanged, and stirs his anxiety about her sexuality. Mumbi’s liaison with Karanja, and Gikonyo’s corresponding patriarchal hostility and jealousy towards her, reflects how, for national allegory, libidinal investments reflect the political. Mumbi is the personification of a Kenya taken over and violated by the Gĩkũyũ Home Guards who supervised the mass enclosure of villages. Gikonyo, as the returned detainee, spirals into depression over Mumbi’s betrayal, leading him to

question the existence of any social or national unity that isn't inherently hollow or deceptive: "She had betrayed the bond, the secret, between them: or perhaps there had never been any communion between them, nothing could grow between any two people" (115). With this vision of national unity dead and buried for Gikonyo, he becomes a petty capitalist, mimicking those higher on the socioeconomic ladder (usually European or well-off Indian traders) by purchasing maize cheaply during the harvest season, and hoarding it until he can sell it in the market at a high price (56-7). Although Gikonyo spurns Mumbi and claims to not love her any more, he cannot escape from his deep-seated wish to reunite with a vision of Mumbi that returns to their idealized past, nor from the living reminder of their separation embodied by her son with Karanja.

Gikonyo's story makes a deep impression on Mugo, who is reminded of his own internment in the detention camps, and attends to his house the next day suddenly inspired to lead the Uhuru celebrations and become the village's next chief. But Mugo finds only Mumbi at the house, and when she invites him sit down, she hints that Gikonyo had not really told the full story of their deteriorating relationship. What Gikonyo forgot to mention, Mumbi tells Mugo, was how their first home was burned down by the Home Guards after he was deported to the Pipeline (135). As she recalls the flames that engulfed her and Gikonyo's hut, she relates to Mugo, "[s]omething gave way in my heart, something in me cracked when I saw our home fall" (136). The ruins of old Thabia are reflected in Mumbi's character, and the initial image of national unity crumbles as Mumbi experiences the enclosure of the new village while isolated from Gikonyo. In his absence, Mumbi is tasked with looking after her and Gikonyo's family, a role once delegated to the patriarchs, as new waves of colonial reprisals are brought upon the village in response to Kihika's successful attacks leading the Mau Mau. Faced with starvation or

arbitrary execution by the Home Guards, she accepts the help of Karanja when building a new hut in the enclosed village, new Thabia, and grows wearier with the prospect that Gikonyo might never return from the detention camps. Karanja then confesses the oath he took with Gikonyo and Kihika, and joins the Home Guards overseeing the new village. Mumbi is horrified when Karanja becomes the next village chief, but he helps protect Mumbi and her family from starvation and violence, and even helps her younger brother attend a prestigious colonial school. But at this point, Mumbi felt “tired and bored with living” (145). Juxtaposed with Gikonyo and his idealistic remembrance of domesticity, Mumbi is depicted wanting a physical, sensual presence as her hopes for Gikonyo’s return are gradually diminished. As she relates to Mugo, “[f]or what is life unless you live for a person you love, a man who is breathing, whom you can see, and touch?” (145). To Mumbi during the height of the Emergency, “Gikonyo was dead. And the Emergency was never going to end” (145). However, when Karanja breaks the news that Gikonyo is coming back from detention, Mumbi is overwhelmed with joy, and in an ambiguous moment of psychological disorientation, she lets Karanja have sex with her.

Mumbi describes this “betrayal” of Gikonyo as a moment of madness: “I was in a strange world” she tells Mugo, and explains that she didn’t fully realize what was happening with Karanja until it was already over (146). Although the novel depicts Mumbi as particularly sensual, which further connects her to the maternal image of fertility and rebirth that is deeply invested in the nationalist slogan “land and freedom,” both her and Gikonyo experience a moment of psychic dissonance and fragmentation where their physical experience of the Emergency is cross-wired by their mental image of Kenyan unity. Gikonyo cuts himself on the camp’s barbed-wire to feel reconnected with his body, and confesses the oath in order to reunite with Mumbi. Likewise, Mumbi lets Karanja have sex with her because of her dissociation

between her body and mind and the desire to have the two reconnected. But ironically, both are mistaken in their confusion about how to reunite their dissociated selves with each other, which allegorizes how a part of Kenyan unity was sacrificed in the Mau Mau's conflict for independence, when the Emergency forced family separations, and Gikūyū Home Guards facilitated the enclosures and massacres of their own home villages. Mumbi's son with Karanja is an allegorical reminder of this period of intra-familial violence and sacrifice among the Gikūyūs, which Gikonyo, following the orders of Kenyatta, actively tries to forget and avoid, even when her son lives under the same household.

4. A New Kenya: National Remembrance and Reconciliation

The novel's climatic scene, where Mugo publicly confesses his betrayal, comes to the forefront as the novel's pivotal allegory for the regeneration of Kenyan unity which overcomes the alienation of individuals who, following Kenyatta, deliberately try to forget the grisly past of the Mau Mau's emergence and defeat. Instead, what the novel imagines is a new national foundation that rebuilds communal trust and transparency by having individuals acknowledge and negotiate instances of betrayal, division, and trauma experienced in their shared national history. Through Mumbi and her retelling of the past to Mugo, he finally changes his mind about speaking on Uhuru and continuing to hide his guilt from the public. Mumbi, an allegory for the nation's fertility and prospects of regeneration, becomes a "glimpse of a new earth" to Mugo, a figure through which he envisions the possibility of reconnection and transparency with the organic community (230). After he confesses his betrayal to Mumbi and she flees from his hut, he feels he has "lost her trust" and is now "vile and dirty," but when villagers surround his hut to sing him songs and he realizes Mumbi had kept his secret hidden, Mugo has a revelation about his relationship with the community: "Every word of praise carried for him a piercing irony.

What had he done for the village? What had he done for anybody? Yet now he saw this underserved trust in a new light, as the sweetest thing in the world” (231). This culminates on the evening of the Uhuru celebrations where General R. gives a rousing speech to the public about Kihika’s traitor still walking among them, and readies himself to single out Karanja to have him ostracized and executed. But Mugo steps out from the audience instead and takes the mic from the General: ““You asked for Judas,’ he started... ‘That man stands before you, now’” (218). When Mugo finishes his confession, instead of a violent reaction from the crowd, they create a path to let him through, where they then “bent down their heads and avoided his eyes” (218). Mugo’s confession breaks the spell of his association with Kihika’s romanticized memory projected by the community, with the audience seeing in him a reflection of themselves who have also betrayed, or repressed, the nationalist ideals that drove the Mau Mau uprising. Mugo’s confession doesn’t tarnish the memory of Kihika, but recognizes that the post-independent nation has failed to actualize or redeem what Kihika and the Mau Mau fought and died for, which was obscured by the community venerating Mugo as Kihika “reborn.” But instead of a return to the past, as represented by General R’s obsession to find and execute Kihika’s traitor, the novel envisions a new conception of national unity that remembers the sublimity of the Mau Mau and the horrors of the Emergency, and recognizes the impossibility of the nation’s ideals of unity to be based on Kenyatta’s mandate to forget its history.

Mugo’s public confession also reverberates through Mumbi and Gikonyo’s relationship. During the morning celebrations of Uhuru, an impromptu race spurs Gikonyo and Karanja to repeat their youthful rivalry over Mumbi, which ingloriously ends as the two characters trip on each other just before the finishing line, and Gikonyo is sent to the hospital for his broken left arm (211). Neither ex-Mau Mau or Home Guard wins the race on Uhuru, leaving the fate of the

nation totally open and the past unsettled between the two factions. However, when Mugo's confession reaches Gikonyo in the hospital, he experiences an epiphany about the specter of the past and his relationship with Mumbi: "He increasingly longed to speak to her about Mugo and then about his own life in detention. What would she say about the steps that haunted him?" (241). This reopening of the past also turns his mind to the future, and leads him to thinking about accepting Mumbi's child as part of the family: "He had never seen himself as father to Mumbi's children. Now it crossed his mind: what would his child by Mumbi look like? (241). When Mumbi visits Gikonyo, now determined to act independently from his ownership and patriarchal jealousy, she is surprised by Gikonyo's change of mind to acknowledge her son. But she is still wary of leaving the past behind and accepting Gikonyo swiftly back into her life, telling him,

People try to rub out things, but they cannot. Things are not so easy. What has passed between us is too much to be passed over a sentence. We need to talk, to open our hearts to one another, examine them, and then together plan the future we want (243).

Mumbi rebukes Gikonyo's previous refusals to acknowledge the past and the failed expectations both characters went through during the Emergency. Instead of clinging to the old vision of Mumbi and her allegorical connection to the nation lost during the Emergency, Gikonyo realizes "that in [the] future he would reckon with her feelings, her thoughts, her desires—a new Mumbi" (243). Although the novel ends with their marriage open-ended, Gikonyo envisions that they reunite, as he imagines carving a stool as a wedding gift for Mumbi depicting a man, child, and a woman pregnant (243). The novel's national allegory concludes with the acceptance of a changed nation that has gone through the throes of the Emergency and is able to reflect on this experience. *A Grain of Wheat* imagines Kenya's future lying with the Gikūyūs, both ex-Mau

Mau and loyalist, being able to lay bare the atrocities of the past in hopes of regenerating a new community in the postcolonial nation.

The individual characters of *A Grain of Wheat* and their gradual retelling of history to one another explores what Fredric Jameson claims is the direct link between the private and public sphere within the postcolonial novel, where the narrative of the individual cannot avoid rendering the whole story of the collective (85-6). Through Mugo's ironic veneration as a national leader, *A Grain of Wheat* critiques the Kenyan postcolonial government and Kenyatta's directive for the people to forget the nation's history while seeking to unite the country and becoming its sole voice. While Ngũgĩ valorizes the efforts of the Mau Mau in paving the way for the nation's autonomy from British colonialism, *A Grain of Wheat* also sympathizes with the experiences of the loyalist characters such as Karanja. After all, nearly every character in the novel is implicated in betraying the Kenyan nation. The novel's exploration of these different subjectivities, such as Mau Mau veterans, betrayers, loyalists and even white settlers, points to Ngũgĩ's vision that the nation can only move forward by reckoning with its messy history of intra-familial conflict, and with the masses being put forth as the subjects of such change, rather than Kenyatta's administration leading the charge. For Ngũgĩ, social change is only possible when all subjects of decolonization, including both ex-Mau Mau and loyalists, are able to re-examine their shared but divisive history to chart a new path for the nation.

Chapter Two: Patterns of Resistance: The Double-Edged History of the Nation in *Petals of Blood*

Petals of Blood (1977), Ngũgĩ's fourth novel, was published a decade after *A Grain of Wheat*, and fourteen years after Kenya's independence. It was also the same year Ngũgĩ would be imprisoned without trial by the order of Kenya's then vice president, Daniel arap Moi. The reason: his subversive involvement with the Kamĩĩĩthũ Community Education and Cultural Centre, a rural open-air community theatre where Ngũgĩ directed plays spoken in Gĩkũyũ, such as *Ngaahika Ndeenda*, or *I Will Marry When I Want* (1980), that harshly criticized the Kenyan government. Ngũgĩ details this experience as a prisoner in his memoir *Detained: A Writer's Prison Diary* (1981), where he speculates on one of the incidents that led to his detainment: "two gentlemen very highly placed in the government flew to Mombasa and demanded an urgent audience with Jomo Kenyatta. They each held a copy of *Petals of Blood* in one hand, and in the other, a copy of *Ngaahika Ndeenda*," where they then read aloud passages "out of context," and subsequently, argued for Ngũgĩ's detainment or "permanent silencing" (xvi). The Kenyatta administration chose the former, but by doing so, Ngũgĩ was deprived of his freedom and his interaction with the Kenyan public. In his polemical *Decolonising the Mind*, Ngũgĩ correlates his imprisonment with the neocolonial state's attempt to control the minds of the Kenyan public: "The whole point of a neo-colonial regime imprisoning a writer is, in addition to punishing him, to keep him away from the people, to cut off any and every contact and communication between him and the people" (64). After a year of silence from the government on whether or not he would be released from detainment, Ngũgĩ was adopted by Amnesty International as a prisoner of conscience, freed, and he subsequently fled Kenya, spending the next 20 years of his life in exile. However, Ngũgĩ would continue to write and publish his works in Gĩkũyũ, as part of his

desire to engage in a dialogue with the Kenyan public and develop the “foundations of a truly national literature and culture, a truly national sensibility” (85).

It is within this context of imprisonment and his turn to *Gĩkũyũ* that *Petals of Blood* is often heralded as a watershed moment in Ngũgĩ’s political and literary career—a culmination of his Marxist politics and literary vision that melds together political satire, detective mystery, Biblical parable, and social realism into an epic novel that thrusts the Kenyan masses onto the center stage of history. Like *A Grain of Wheat*, Ngũgĩ’s fourth novel is deeply concerned with the status of national unity after independence, and through the narration of multiple perspectives and lengthy flashbacks, it investigates the hollowed nature of national consciousness and the ghost of colonialism that continues to haunt Kenya’s present. But where *Petals of Blood* departs from *A Grain of Wheat* is its expanded perspective from the rural village, still reeling from the effects of colonialism, to the rapid and uneven urbanization of postcolonial modernity, which refocuses Kenya as a microcosm for the global struggle between capitalists and the liberation of workers. Fanon’s influence on Ngũgĩ is also more palpable in *Petals of Blood*, with the novel’s three main antagonists, Chui, Mzigo, and Kimeria, depicted as archetypes of the national bourgeoisie—partners in business, education, and public administration who have their grip around the working classes in Ilmorog, a town wrecked by industrialization, poverty, and corruption. For Fanon, the national bourgeoisie are the local elite who take over from the colonial authorities after the anticolonial struggle, and are the new administrators, businessmen, and investors of the nation’s economy. But instead of cultivating genuine national solidarity and developing new opportunities for the nation’s economic growth, the national bourgeoisie become “dismally, inanely, and cynically bourgeois,” replicating the colonial master’s disposition for tyranny, terror, and exploitation (Fanon 99). In its opening pages, the novel frames itself as a

murder mystery with the grisly killings of these characters by arson, and the four characters, Munira, Abdulla, Wanja, and Karega, are arrested in connection to their deaths. While in jail, Munira, a religious schoolteacher, writes a statement to the detective that encompasses the last twelve years of his stay in Ilmorog, detailing the town's dramatic changes in fortune that have intertwined his destiny with the other three.

The history of Ilmorog is arranged as “a kind of jigsaw puzzle” that the detective, Inspector Godfrey, must piece together to solve the murders of the town's national bourgeoisie (52). But as the narrative progresses, and the clues are assembled, what is portrayed is the ruthless swindling of Ilmorog's peasantry and the exploitation of its workers by the three murdered men. The form of the murder mystery is an elaborate set-up for Ngũgĩ's exploration of the changes that Kenya and Africa have experienced after colonialism and independence. Through the individual experiences of the protagonists, the narrative spotlights the failure of the postcolonial administration to live up to the promises of the Mau Mau's revolutionary principles of economic justice and land redistribution that motivated independence. The statement Munira drafts for the detective which expounds on the last twelve years of Ilmorog's development resonates with one of Jameson's claims in his essay on national allegory, “where the telling of the individual and the individual experience cannot but ultimately involve the whole laborious telling of the experience of the collectivity itself” (85-6). However, Ngũgĩ is not just interested in weaving together a history of Kenya's past and the pitfalls of national consciousness, but in charting out how this national history can be leveraged to imagine a new future for Kenya that can mobilize the masses against the corrupt neocolonial government. Ngũgĩ achieves this by not taking a romantic view of Kenya's history rooted in its precolonial traditions, but by acknowledging how national traditions and histories are always fictions invented and reinvented

in the present moment of political struggle. As Anderson argues, the nation is an “imagined community,” and it must invent its own history and tradition to give the nation its powerful, fraternal resonance in the present moment and into the nation’s “limitless future” (12). Similar to the betrayal motif in *A Grain of Wheat* which marked the collective’s repression of national trauma by commemorating Mugo as a Mau Mau hero, the past in *Petals of Blood* is a site of political intervention in the nation’s present that allows for a new imagining of the future. Through the interwoven trajectories of Munira, Abdulla, Wanja, and Karega retold in flashbacks, *Petals of Blood* traces a history of resistance repeated by each generation, where the imagined community is transformed at each moment of political struggle.

In this rewriting of national history, *Petals of Blood* confronts what Jameson argues is the “crisis of representation” of the postcolony, where the antagonist is no longer “an adversary who spoke another language and wore the visible trappings of colonial occupation,” but is now the nationalist leadership who once embodied the community’s hopes and dreams for independence (81). With the struggle for official independence over, the dilemma the postcolonial author faces is his “passion for change and social regeneration which has not yet found its agents” (81). In *Petals of Blood*, this crisis is illustrated by the national bourgeoisie’s propensity to manipulate the nation’s culture, history, and identity to pacify the masses and to continue governing the state “as a conveyor belt for capitalism” (Fanon 100). Kenyatta’s doctrine to “forgive and forget” the memory of the Mau Mau in *A Grain of Wheat* is discarded in *Petals of Blood*, where we see the Mau Mau oath resurrected as tea rituals forced upon Gikūyūs, including Munira and his wife, in order for the government to consolidate Gikūyū support behind Kenyatta, thereby sowing ethnic chauvinism amongst Kenyans. In *Petals of Blood*, the mandate to forget is reversed to a perverse commemoration so the masses can “plunge back into the past and drink in the epic that led to

independence”—the kind of commemoration which forgets the neocolonial government’s failure to live up to the dreams of the Mau Mau’s struggle (Fanon 126). But this manipulation of collective memory by the national bourgeoisie is juxtaposed against the novel’s interest in reframing Kenya’s history as a series of repeated struggles against outside forces which seek to control, exploit, and oppress Kenyans—from the precolonial dawn to the Mau Mau resistance under colonialism to the present workers’ liberation movements which have come to see the national leadership as neocolonial intermediaries for international capital. Following Fanon’s assertion that a genuine national literature doesn’t just arise from the distant memory of the precolonial past, but from leveraging this past towards the future that lies beyond “the people’s struggle against occupation,” Ngũgĩ’s *Petals of Blood* intends to become a piece of “combat literature” that portrays “a new reality in action” by investigating the failures of the national bourgeoisie and the possibility of a new national imagining which looks towards a utopic, socialist future (159). Through the motifs of ceremony, Ilmorog’s spiritual drink Theng’eta, fire, and the student strikes at Siriana, national allegory in *Petals of Blood* constructs a history of Kenya that is caught in a continuous tension between the national bourgeoisie’s attempt to manipulate this history for its own cynical ends and a communal visioning of national belonging.

1. “Long live Ilmorog. Long live KCO”: The National Bourgeoisie and The Angel of History

With this utopic imagining of the nation in mind, Simon Gikandi notes that *Petals of Blood*, as a novel that depicts the protagonists’ epic journey from the marginalized rural village to the urban city, is in search for a totality of its own historical and political situation. Drawing on Georg Lukács’s theory of the novel, Gikandi argues that the journey from Old Ilmorog to Nairobi, the nation’s capital, is driven by the protagonists’ and villagers’ desire for “a sensual place in which individual subjects can rise beyond their *angst* and alienation and reconstitute or

reimagine themselves as part of an organic body” (152; emphasis in original). However, these dreams for a unified and organic social body are transformed into a nightmare by the national bourgeoisie, where urban development driven by capitalist profits strikes back at Ilmorog with a vengeance. This ironic turn from the village’s initial dreams of modernity into neocolonial nightmare is retold in Munira’s statement, where he recounts the time before the murders of Chui, Mzigo, and Kimeria, when Ilmorog was a neglected village of farming peasants plagued by drought, the legacy of colonialism, and the trickle of its young men and women “to the cities of metallic promises” (149). As many critics have noted, Ilmorog’s drought is metaphorical for the foreclosed possibility of fertility and social regeneration under the uneven development of the neocolonial nation. But this drought is also marked by an ambivalence towards the precolonial traditions of the village, illustrated by the villagers’ complete reliance on the seasonal environment, along with their knowledge rooted in the folklore of Ndemi, the village’s mythical founder and patriarch, and the spiritual diviner, Mwathi wa Mugo. Through a series of unlikely coincidences, the school teacher Munira who is stationed at Ilmorog comes into contact with Abdulla, the town’s merchant and former Mau Mau insurgent; Wanja, a barmaid and prostitute from the city who has come to live with her grandmother, the defiant village elder Nyakinyua; and Karega, a discontented former student of Munira who sells produce and sheepskins to tourists by the roadside. Together, they rally the village to form a delegation to journey to Nairobi and petition their MP, Nderi wa Riera, to help save their village from decay.

However, on their way to Nairobi, they are confronted with the hypocrisy, greed, and egotism of Kenya’s leadership—the national bourgeoisie. Reverend Jerrod Brown, a respected Anglican involved with Kenya’s leadership, turns away the delegation when they request help after running low on food and after Abdulla’s adopted brother, Joseph, falls ill. They are also

rebuffed by Chui, Munira's former classmate who once led an anticolonial student's strike against their British headmaster, Fraudsham, at the prestigious secondary school Siriana. But, Chui eventually becomes Siriana's next headmaster, with Karega as a student describing him as a "black replica of Fraudsham" (205). The delegation then comes across Kimeria, a wealthy businessman who once betrayed Abdulla and Karega's brother, Nding'uri, during the Mau Mau uprising, and derails Wanja's life by impregnating and abandoning her when she was a child. The pasts of the four protagonists are interlinked through the betrayals of, disappointments in, and exploitation by the national bourgeoisie, with their interconnected struggles and traumas becoming the foundation for alternative national imaginings of an organic and holistic community as the modernity of Nairobi is seen to violently shatter the communal ties of Old Ilmorog. National allegory in *Petals of Blood* maps a picture of how the national bourgeoisie have failed the hopes and dreams of decolonization, and how they retroactively manipulate a romanticized, precolonial history of Kenya to validate their control over the nation. While Kenyatta's name is mostly elided in the novel's narrative, his presence as Kenya's president looms over *Petals of Blood*, with his reactivation of the Mau Mau oath depicted as the embodiment of the national bourgeoisie's corruption and manipulation of Kenya's memory of decolonization. But this corrupted resurrection of the Mau Mau oath is juxtaposed against the Theng'eta ceremony conducted by Nyakinyua, an alcoholic drink passed down from Ilmorog's precolonial traditions, where it functions as a symbol of communal resistance and utopic imagining against the forces of imperialism.

In his essay "Towards a National Culture," Ngũgĩ makes the case that "[c]ontrary to the myth and fiction of our conquerors, Africa was always in a turmoil of change, with empires rising and falling," and that "African traditional structures and cultures then were neither static or

uniform. There were as many cultures as there were peoples, although we can recognize broad affinities which would make us talk meaningful about African values or civilizations” (5).

Ngũgĩ’s essay takes up Fanon’s thesis in “On National Culture,” where Fanon argues that the colonized intellectual undergoes a dialectical process of first, reclaiming Africa’s past from its degradation by the colonist’s vision of history; subsequently, burying himself in the “mummified” customs of the precolonial period; and finally abandoning this romanticized vision of history by engaging in the people’s “armed or even political struggle against a merciless colonialism,” where tradition no longer is ossified in a mythic past, but is combative and “changes meaning” through decolonization (160). This framing of history, where the colony’s traditions and its account of itself is reinvented through the people’s struggle against colonialism, is the view that Ngũgĩ presents in *Petals of Blood*. However, the leaders of postcolonial Kenya are seen to resurrect an ossified and sterile vision of the postcolony’s past that forecloses any “new horizons” for the nation’s future (Fanon 167). For Fanon and Ngũgĩ, literature from the colony and postcolony is at its most impactful and transformative when it is at the combat phase, where the writings of the colonized intellectual engages the past “with the intention of opening up the future, of spurring [the people] into action and fostering hope” (Fanon 167). However, like the colonists in Ngũgĩ’s argument who paint an ahistorical vision of Africa’s past, the national bourgeoisie in *Petals of Blood* actively manipulate this history to legitimize their monopoly of the state by petrifying the nationalist ideals of the Mau Mau uprising, thus restricting the imagination and praxis of the people for an alternative national community. Although rarely directly mentioned in the novel, Kenyatta’s transformation from the emblem of the people’s aspirations for independence to a neocolonial leader is one of the great ironies of Kenya’s history that *Petals of Blood* contends with. By examining the hypocrisy of Kenyatta’s

administration of resurrecting the Mau Mau oath to shore up ethnic support while working closely with the British government and European corporations, Ngũgĩ contests the state's official history by reframing the past as a series of changes and revolutions that can offer an alternative vision of the national community.

Ngũgĩ's attempt at reinventing Kenya's history as a series of struggles built on top of one another, along with his sense of disillusionment at Kenyatta's romantic, ossified version of history, resonates with Benedict Anderson's argument in "The Angel of History." In Anderson's analysis, when a revolutionary nationalist movement replaces the previous dynastic realm, the "radical revolutionaries always, to some degree, inherit the state from the fallen regime" (159). Although Kenya's case is different from the revolutionary communist states that Anderson was analyzing in Vietnam, Democratic Kampuchea, and the People's Republic of China, what is familiar is how the new leadership of the nationalist state "inherit[s] the wiring of the old state," and in the case of Kenya, the colonial administrative and economic infrastructure left by Britain: "Like the complex electrical system in any large mansion when the owner has fled, the state awaits the new owner's hand at the switch to be very much its old brilliant self again" (160). Along with the fallen regime's material structure, Anderson notes, the new state inherits its symbolic legacy. Much like Britain's denial of its concentration camps and its erasure of records which implicated its colonial regime in the murders of thousands, even hundreds of thousands, of Gĩkũyũs during the Emergency, Kenyatta initially called for the collective forgetting of the Mau Mau uprising and the ruthless violence by the colonists and loyalists. However, when it became beneficial to resurrect the memory of the Mau Mau to rally ethnic support behind his administration, Kenyatta retroactively fashioned the uprising not as a cause for the people's national movement, but as a symbol of power and ethnic allegiance to enforce the state's official

nationalism that paradoxically appealed to ethnic chauvinism. Anderson evokes Walter Benjamin's Angel of History as a metaphor for how the state inherits the "piling wreckage" of the fallen regime, and this is reflected in how Kenyatta cunningly manipulates the memory of the Mau Mau to cover-up the administration's failure to fulfill the hopes and dreams of unity, land redistribution, and economic justice (162).

This manipulation of Kenya's cultural tradition, memory, and heritage is referenced in *Petals of Blood* by the KCO (Kiama-Kamwene Cultural Organization) tea ceremony organized by Ilmorog's MP, Nderi wa Riera. Despite Kenyatta's assertion to Kenyans in 1962 that the "Mau Mau was a disease which had been eradicated, and must never be remembered again," from 1969 through 1970, he would revive the Mau Mau oath as a "tea" ceremony to cement Gĩkũyũ support behind his administration when his tenure was threatened by rivaling politicians from different ethnic groups (Kenyatta 189; Branch 85). One of these politicians was Oginga Odinga, Kenya's first vice president and an ethnic Luo, who resigned from his position in 1966 when his socialist politics came into increasing conflict with Kenyatta's (Maloba 108). When Kenya gained its independence in 1963, the country transformed into a battleground of the Cold War, with Kenyatta as a conservative politician friendly to western influences and who sided with white settlers and the British government over the Mau Mau veterans' demands for land redistribution and reparations (Maloba 27). In contrast, Odinga sought support from the USSR and China, and was in the eyes of Kenyatta and the west "a threat because of the radical voices and groups in the KANU [Kenya African National Union] [that] had... coalesced around him[,] thereby signifying a potential ideological and operational alternative to the Kenyatta government" (Maloba 35). In this rancorous period, there were also riots responding to the assassinations (likely approved by Kenyatta) of other prominent politicians, such as the shooting

of communist leader and freedom fighter Pio Gama Pinto in 1965 and the presidentially ambitious Tom Mboya in 1969 (Branch 45-6; 75). It is within this backdrop of a discontented public and Odinga's courting of radicals, Mau Mau veterans, former squatters, and other economically disadvantaged groups that Kenyatta had to find a way to consolidate Gĩkũyũ support behind his administration while still remaining aligned with the west and Kenya's former imperialist occupiers.

By reviving the Mau Mau oath ceremony and forcing it onto Gĩkũyũs, Kenyatta managed to legitimize his faltering administration and redirect public unrest into inter-ethnic tensions. Around 300,000 people were bused to Gatundu, the town where Kenyatta lived, to take part in a ceremony that masqueraded as a gathering for tea, where they pledged their allegiance to Kenyatta's Gĩkũyũ government and to not vote for anyone from other ethnicities (Branch 85). Both the Mau Mau oath and Kenyatta's tea ritual called back to the Gĩkũyũ custom of conflict resolution, as well as "echoed the [Gĩkũyũ] circumcision ceremonies," a traditional but controversial practice applied to both males and females (Branch 85). Female circumcision, also known as female genital mutilation, was a flashpoint issue that motivated the first organization of Kenyan resistance to colonial authorities in the 1920s when missionaries tried banning the practice (Elkins 34). It is this historical memory of anticolonial resistance and fidelity to Gĩkũyũ customs that Kenyatta draws on by resurrecting the oath ceremony, which also retroactively reframes this history to align with his administrative aims and policies of the Kenyan state. However, when "[t]he naked political agendas at work caused resentment among existing opponents of the regime," the rituals were put to an end, covered-up, and denied by Kenyatta's administration (Branch 86). But public discontent continued, with Odinga and his supporters in Parliament arrested in October of 1969 after Kenyatta's bodyguards shot into a crowd of

protestors who threw stones at his motorcade at Kisumu, turning the government into a one-party state (Branch 88). Under Kenyatta, the memory of the Mau Mau oath is repeated, but now transformed into an instrument of the neocolonial state to divide and control the masses through ethnic chauvinism.

In *Petals of Blood*, Kenyatta's tea ceremony is depicted as a traumatic event inflicted upon Gĩkũyũs forced to take the oath at Gatundu, with Munira and his wife's actual experience of the ceremony elided from his flashback—as if the memory of the corrupted Mau Mau ritual is too traumatic for him to recall. The tea ceremony is first mentioned by two messengers from Nderi wa Riera, the MP, to Ilmorog, called Fat Stomach and Insect by the villagers, to announce the KCO, “which would bring unity between the rich and the poor and bring cultural harmony to all the regions” (101). The villagers are also told they are going to have tea and celebrations at Kenyatta's estate, “Just like 1952, [Fat Stomach] hinted and talked vaguely but with suggestive variation of voice, of a new cultural movement” (102). The reason for this new cultural organization, they insist, is because the other Kenyan “tribe[s]” threaten the property and autonomy of Ilmorog (102). Although the villagers, led by Nyakinyua, reject the invitation, Munira and his wife receive a personal invitation from his boss, Mzigo, to have tea at Gatundu. Initially thrilled to have been invited to have tea with Kenyatta, they are horrified when they arrive and see crowds of people ordered into lines to partake in the Gĩkũyũ oath of unity, with many beaten for refusing to take part. Dazed while being bused back home with other teachers forced to participate, Munira reflects on the silence “of a people conscious of having been taken in: of having participated in a rite that jarred with time and place and persons and people's post-Uhuru expectations! How could they as teachers face their children and tell them Kenya was one?” (110). Munira's indignation at having been “taken in” by Kenyatta's revival of the Gĩkũyũ

oath reverberates with Fanon's claim that the national leader "endeavors to lull [the people] to sleep" by making them "remember the colonial period," a romanticized vision of history which obscures the leadership's cynical power plays in the present moment (114). Afterward, Munira visits his father, Waweru Ezekiel, who once preached against the Mau Mau oath during the Emergency to tell him what happened. However, he is shocked by Waweru's admission that he has voluntarily taken Kenyatta's oath (114). The Gĩkũyũ/Mau Mau oath in this respect is an ambivalent cultural practice, the memory of which is not only imbued with a historical power from its repetition of the past, but is used by the Kenyatta administration to sow ethnic discontent and change the past for the national bourgeoisie's political benefit in the present.

Although Kenyatta's name is only alluded to in connection with the resurrection of the Gĩkũyũ/Mau Mau oath, in the novel the KCO, led by Chui, Mzigo, Kimeria, and Nderi wa Riera, is the main ideological apparatus of the state in manipulating the nation's history and engineering the commodification of its culture. According to Nderi, the mastermind behind the tea drinking ceremonies and who had "sold the idea" to Kenyatta, the purpose of the KCO was to fulfill the vision that "Africa could only be respected when it had its own Rockefellers, its Hughes, Fords, Krupps, Mitsubishis," and that it would "serve the interests of the wealthy locals and their foreign partners to create similar economic gains" (215; 223). A major component of KCO's mission to expand the national bourgeoisie's wealth and their connections to foreign companies is to fetishize Kenya's national culture. Tourism is one of the biggest investments of KCO, which according to Fanon, is an industry that appeals to the "Western bourgeoisies who happen to be tourists enamored of exoticism, hunting, and casinos" (101) For Fanon, this fetishism of local products and customs is symptomatic of the national bourgeoisie's "incapability to evaluate issues on the basis of the nation as a whole... assum[ing] the role of manager for companies of

the West and turn[ing] its country virtually into a bordello for Europe” (101-2). This can be seen when Ilmorog’s delegation to Nairobi turns to Chui’s estate for help when they run low on food and Joseph starts running a fever. As Munira approaches Chui’s compound, hoping that their camaraderie from their time at Siriana and their shared expulsions from their strike will be enough to save the delegation, he hears “a group singing a few native cultural songs,” including the “sections of songs normally sung at circumcision” (180). Munira notes that a few voices speak in Swahili and English, and that it “was a truly culturally integrated party” (181). Losing his courage to interrupt the “social gathering of so many top representatives of the various communities” while reduced to rags from the delegation’s arduous journey, Munira reflects how “only the other day, hardly six months ago, ordinary working people were being given an oath to protect: what? The singing voices?” (181). At Chui’s party, the customs and traditions of Kenya are uprooted from their communal connections in the rural context, and transformed by the KCO to further establish the power of the neocolonial regime. Later on, tourism will again be one of the driving forces behind the manipulation of Ilmorog’s traditions by the national bourgeoisie.

2. Theng’eta: Communal Memory, Commodification, and Resistance

In contrast to its appropriation by the KCO, the motif of the oathing ritual and its associated memory with the Mau Mau uprising is also revived by the protagonists and the peasant dwellers of Ilmorog, who consume the alcoholic drink Theng’eta administered by Nyakinyua, Wanja’s grandmother and village elder, after a successful journey to Nairobi and a plentiful harvest season after years of drought. In this context, Theng’eta functions as a cultural object which cultivates communal memory, reconciliation, and belonging as the protagonists begin to untangle their shared histories with one another. Theng’eta is also a symbol of social regeneration, which, like the Mau Mau oath of unity, harkens back to the Gikũyũ circumcision

ceremonies which signal a “rebirth” of its initiates into a new world of adulthood (or in the context of the Mau Mau uprising, a rebirth into a national community). When urbanization begins to encroach on Ilmorog, Theng’eta is turned from a sacred object of cultural heritage into a commodity, with Abdulla and Wanja running a successful brewery and bar together as New Ilmorog begins to develop. Even though Nyakinyua remarks on her deathbed to Wanja that the traditional Theng’eta was “[n]ot this concoction you and Abdulla are cheating people with,” their Theng’eta bar and brewery helps attract outsiders and stimulates the economy of their developing village (385). But as Abdulla describes Theng’eta when Ilmorog becomes fully industrialized and Theng’eta tea factories are now under the directives of Chui, Mzigo, and Kimeria: “It... almost made us. But it ruined us” (337). Although this disappearance of the history and traditions Old Ilmorog is looked on with sadness by characters such as Karega, its fading also means that a space has been opened to imagine a new community that isn’t tethered to the romanticism of Kenya’s precolonial era. Theng’eta takes on a variety of symbolic meanings, with its ambiguities culminating in the novel’s climatic struggle between the exploitative national bourgeoisie and the revolting workers united under the Ilmorog Theng’eta Breweries Union.

Theng’eta is presented as an artifact that attests to the ancient history of Old Ilmorog and its continuation into the present. When consumed by the protagonists after their harvest and circumcision ceremony, the drink functions as a national allegory, inducing a spiritual hallucination and bridging their private lives into a collective realization of their entwined destinies. When the Ilmorog delegation returns from their journey to Nairobi with charity relief, their drought coincidentally comes to an end. The sunlight from the heavens encourages life on Earth, both biological and social, to grow and regenerate, with the harvest season inspiring

“stirrings of a new birth, an unknown power riding wings of fear and people” (239). When the harvest surpasses everyone’s expectations for a plentiful season, the elders of the village plan a circumcision ceremony which harkens to Ilmorog’s precolonial traditions. Nyakinyua, as the oral carrier of Theng’eta’s mythos and its creation, describes Theng’eta’s spiritual capabilities and communal resonance:

Squeeze Theng’eta into it and you get your spirit. Theng’eta. It is a dream. It is a wish. It gives you sight, and for those favoured by God it can make them cross the river of time and talk with their ancestors. It has given seers their tongues; poets and Gichandi players their words; and it has made barren women mothers of many children. Only you must take it with faith and purity in your hearts (251).

Here, Theng’eta is a motif of regeneration, the ceremony a national allegory for the rejuvenation of Karega and Wanja’s libidos through their sexual relationship after the tea ceremony and the social restoration of Ilmorog. Along with Theng’eta’s restoration of private and public connection, the ceremony also allows the protagonists to grasp the entanglements of their pasts, and to understand the economic disparity between the rural and urban. For Karega, Theng’eta allows him to connect with Abdulla through their shared history of the Mau Mau, with Karega’s brother, Nding’uri, having fought with Abdulla before being betrayed by Kimeria and executed by the colonists. As Nyakinyua tells the protagonists, Ilmorog’s previous generations drank Theng’eta to commemorate special events in the village until “[i]t was outlawed by the colonialists” (244). The return of Theng’eta means that the memories of anticolonial resistance have also resurfaced in the present.

Gikandi describes the Theng’eta ceremony and the revival of its precolonial memories as a “belated attempt to detour colonialism and postcoloniality” by the protagonists and the

Ilmorogians; it is “a romantic symbol of the African past, a past when the people of Ilmorog existed in a harmonious relationship with nature,” but is “now recuperated as a signifier of doubt and uncertainty, of the separation between signs and signifiers, of the dream of utopia and the corrupted narrative of decolonization” (141). Because Theng’eta is a hallucinogen, the feelings of communal belonging, historical memory, and social regeneration it inspires for the protagonists are also illusory, but a powerful illusion employed by both the national bourgeoisie and by the workers in their resistance against them. When Old Ilmorog is devastated by the ascendancy of urban development and industrialization, with Wanja and Abdulla’s ownership of their brewery taken over by Chui, Mzigo, and Kimeria, Theng’eta and its appeal to Kenya’s precolonial heritage is leveraged by the national bourgeoisie to incapacitate the working classes, akin to Marx’s postulate that religion is the “opium of the people.” No longer a “spirit” or a “dream,” Theng’eta as a popular commodity and tourist attraction in Ilmorog is a “[d]eadly lotus” (321). Now mass produced in factories, Theng’eta varies from “pure gin for export to cheap but potent drinks for workers and the unemployed” (333). In Fanon’s terms, Theng’eta is transformed into an instrument of the national bourgeoisie’s “cult for local products,” reflecting their impotence to “invent new outlets,” and ensuring that “[i]ndependence does not bring about a change in direction” for the postcolonial nation (100). In New Ilmorog, Theng’eta is uprooted from its precolonial world through its commodification by the national bourgeoisie, the history of which is manipulated and rewritten as a branding strategy for tourism. Its embodiment of a history of resistance from when it was outlawed by colonists to when Nyakinyua revives it from the delegation’s return from the city is strategically forgotten.

This cultural transformation of Theng’eta is symptomatic of a wider metamorphosis that has reshaped Ilmorog and its precolonial history. As Gikandi argues, the radical break of

postcolonial modernity that has deracinated Ilmorog has entailed a complete fracturing of meaning, both of signs and signifiers, and a grasp of one's position within a socio-historical totality. Ironically, the narrative voice of the communal "we" and "our" observes the damage that capitalism and urbanization has brought on the environs and people of Ilmorog:

There were several Ilmorogs. One was the residential area of the farm managers, County Council officials, public service officers, the managers of Barclays, Standard and African Economic Banks, and other servants of state and money power. This was called Cape Town. The other – called New Jerusalem – was a shanty town of migrant and floating workers, the unemployed, the prostitutes and small traders in tin and scrap metal (333).

With Theng'eta's dislocation from its pastoral world, the romanticized narrative of Africa's precolonial past has also collapsed, as it is now rewritten for the benefit of the national bourgeoisie to attract tourists from Europe, and to keep the factory workers sedated on Theng'eta. The deaths of the last remaining generations of Old Ilmorog such as Nyakinyua signal that the symbolic universe of the precolonial past has been entirely eclipsed by the development of New Ilmorog.

However, Karega manages to revive the spirit of resistance inspired by the Theng'eta ceremony to organize the workers against their exploitation. While Karega recognizes the inability of the pastoral's precolonial world to offer an alternative to urban and industrial development, his hallucinatory experience on the night of the Theng'eta ceremony induces him to reconnect with a repetition of resistance throughout Kenyan history, epitomized by his brother's sacrifice for the Mau Mau rebellion. After being fired from his teaching position by Munira, Karega embarks on a journey across the country and begins to take part in the labor movement, and eventually comes back to Ilmorog to organize the Theng'eta factory workers.

When he begins working in the Theng'eta factory, Karega notices "how the workers were disunited: in their talk he could see that they were proud of their linguistic enclaves and clans and regions and tended to see any emergent leadership in terms of it would help or hinder the allocation of jobs to people of their own clan and language groups" (361). However, when Karega begins disseminating pamphlets among the workers which espoused that the "machine and the New Road were the children of the workers, for it was their sweat the built the road, the factory, and it was they who sustained the whole complex by their energy and consumption," he begins to rally the workers to his socialist call to unionize (361). The romanticized past imbued in Theng'eta, which is commodified by the national bourgeoisie, is supplanted by Karega's cultivation of a new national consciousness that unites workers around Theng'eta and their labor. As the Theng'eta factory workers unionize and go on strike, "even the barmaids wanted their own union. The women dancers formed themselves into a Tourist dancers' Union, and demanded more money for their art. The agricultural workers followed suit" (362). By the end of the novel, the strikes planned by Karega domino into a widespread phenomenon across Kenya, and the novel's depiction of political resistance across Kenyan history, from the precolonial world to the Mau Mau, is reborn again in the present. While still jailed for "being a communist at heart," Karega is told by Akinyi, a factory worker, that "[t]here are rumors about a return to the forests and the mountains" (409). The past isn't dead or foreclosed, but is repeated in the present. While Theng'eta is no longer a spiritual drink administered by Nyakinyua, its symbolic ambivalence marks it as a site of political struggle where history, identity, and community are continually invented and reinvented.

3. History on Fire: Trauma and Revolution

Interlaced with the KCO's tea ritual and the Theng'eta drink in *Petals of Blood* is the motif of fire, which provides another ambivalent imagining of the nation's history that is constructed and appropriated by the national bourgeoisie and the resisting masses. Through their entwined destinies, Munira and Wanja provide oppositional meanings behind the symbolism of fire: on one hand, fire signifies a return of a traumatic national history and an internalized sexual and class-conscious guilt, and embodies a binary opposition between the perpetrator and the victim. On the other hand, like the motif of betrayal in *A Grain of Wheat*, fire allows new imaginings of the nation that is paradoxically born out of intercommunity strife and trauma. Françoise Albrecht claims that the symbolism of fire in the novel is "an ambivalent image: sometimes [it] destroys, sometimes it illuminates and purifies" (89). Furthermore, she argues that, with the repetition of fire throughout, the symbol soaks in a "multiplicity of associations... like the motifs of a musical theme with variation" (91). At one level, the fire set by Munira is what ends the lives of Chui, Mzigo, and Kimeria and destroys Wanja's brothel, the latter an allegory for what Karega describes as the prostitution of the entire nation by the national bourgeoisie. As Albrecht argues, fire in this context becomes a symbol for purity and revolution against neocolonialism. But this fire for revolutionary vengeance also has its counterpart in Wanja's traumatic history, when she witnessed as a child the immolation of her aunt. As we find out, Wanja's aunt was connected with the Mau Mau rebellion through her husband, one of the "hard-core" insurgents, and Wanja is told that her aunt helped smuggle ammunition to fighters hiding in the forests. This trauma is a motif that continually haunts Wanja. When she is in the hospital after the fire that kills Ilmorog's national bourgeoisie, she is heard crying out, "Fire... Fire... My mother's sister... my dear aunt... put out the fire, put out the fire!" (5). Fire and history are interwoven, with fire an ambivalent symbol of revolutionary justice, purification, and

idealism, on the one hand, juxtaposed against its traumatic and destructive power employed by loyalists, Mau Mau insurgents, revolutionary workers, and the official neocolonial state, on the other.

The symbol of fire spans the history of Ilmorog, and is shown to be repeated from the first struggles against colonialism to the Mau Mau uprising. The arrival of European imperialism is marked by foreign traders who “carried bamboo sticks that vomited fire and venom” at the people of Ilmorog; but this doesn’t stop Ilmorogians from using fire in their resistance against the first colonial settlers: “They set fire to the whole field” of a nearby colonist (82). Although fire is a uniting force among the people of Ilmorog in the colonial era, as they’re seen dancing and singing around the burned remains of the colonist’s bungalow, it is also violently divisive when experienced by Wanja during the Mau Mau uprising (81). Her aunt’s death by fire at the hands of her cousin’s husband reflects the wider sociopolitical division between Mau Mau supporters and colonial loyalists which tore apart Gĩkũyũ families, resonating with the bitter political divisions and the marital conflict between Mumbi and Gikonyo in *A Grain of Wheat*. When walking home with Munira, Wanja recalls her childhood during the State of Emergency, and how her cousin’s abusive husband became a Home Guard after she ran away to Nairobi. When her cousin returns home and rejects her husband’s plea for forgiveness and reunion, her hut is set on fire with her mother inside (76). For Wanja and her mother, it becomes immediately clear that it was the husband who had set her aunt on fire, but for her father, who is a loyalist, “It’s punishment from the Lord” (278). During Kenya’s State of Emergency, fire, like the motif of betrayal in *A Grain of Wheat*, represents the traumatic violence, division, and separation of families that is allegorized in Wanja’s family, with her father’s callous reaction to her mother’s sister’s death becoming “the beginning of their falling apart of which [Wanja] was later to

become a victim” (78). This memory of fire follows Wanja as a divisive motif from the past, a symbol for the division of kin during the Emergency now metamorphized to symbolize the struggle between the national bourgeoisie and the working classes.

However, this symbolism of fire encoded in the traumatic history of the nation is contrasted with its association with the purification, rebirth, and the characters’ hopes of a utopic future for Kenya. Karega, the leader of the workers’ rebellion, is described as having the “fire, the idealism, the glowing faith in the possibilities of heroism and devotion” in a new Kenya (54-5). Munira, as the arsonist who kills the national bourgeoisie, is also associated with this utopic dimension of fire. However, his rejection of Karega’s Marxism and his embrace of Christian fanaticism makes his politics more ambiguous. Like Wanja’s history, the fire set to the brothel is a repeated incident from Munira’s past, but had taken place on his father’s estate just before the Mau Mau rebellion. In a flashback, we learn that Munira comes from a privileged background because his father, Waweru Ezekiel, is a powerful landlord, Christian preacher, and loyalist who owns a myriad of profitable estates, including ones he would later buy from fleeing colonists when Kenya becomes independent. In this flashback, a young Munira observes the Christian workers on his father’s estate, who appeared “less stilted, were more free and seemed to praise and sing to the Lord with greater conviction and more holiness” than his father (18). Munira is also “awed by their total conviction and by their belief in a literal heaven to come,” sparking his belief in a Biblical apocalypse that will unmask the national bourgeoisie and pave the way for Christ’s Second Coming when he burns Wanja’s brothel (18). When Munira visits one of the workers’ meetings as a young man, he commits his first “sin” with “a bad woman,” a prostitute named Amina (18). Wishing to become “cleansed by the Lord,” Munira steals a matchbox and constructs an imitation of Amina’s house using sticks and cowdung, and then sets it on fire (18).

Watching the flames, Munira “felt truly purified by fire,” but when he leaves his quasi-sacrificial offering, the fire almost spreads to one his father’s barns (18). Although Waweru chalks up the fire to jealous neighbors, Munira feels guilty, sensing that his father really knows he was the culprit all along. From this incident, Munira’s guilt is caught between his fearful respect of Waweru and his sympathy for the devoted workers on his father’s estate, along with his intense sexuality and Christian puritanism instilled in him by his upbringing. This contradiction eventually leads Munira to set Wanja’s brothel on fire to both purify and punish the national bourgeoisie and Wanja.

The utopianism of Munira’s repeated arson, as Albrecht points out, represents his religious desire to accomplish the prophecy of the Book of Revelations, which he has opened when he is arrested by the police in the opening scene (96). The burning of Wanja’s brothel is an act of “divine vengeance” for Munira, who sets aflame the four corners of the house, an allusion to the Biblical “notion of universality.... Thus, it is a whole world that Munira wishes to destroy” (95). This destruction indeed brings about a rebirth, but not what Munira intended. When Wanja rejects his advances, he begins to see her as a “Jezebel” who is corrupting Karega, with his igniting of the brothel mirroring the jealous Home Guard who sets Wanja’s aunt on fire (394). But when Abdulla saves Wanja from the flames while the national bourgeoisie perish, she is depicted as a Phoenix who has experienced a rebirth and a new outlook on the future. No longer willing to be the prostitute for the elite classes, she conspires with Abdulla to murder Chui, Mzigo, and Kimeria, stabbing Kimeria as the brothel begins to burn down. Afterward, when Munira confesses to the police that he was responsible for the fire, Wanja “felt the stirrings of a new person... she had after all been baptized by fire” (401). Wanja’s pregnancy revealed at the

close of her arc reinforces her alignment with fire, an allegory of national rebirth through the strife and violence of the Emergency and the neocolonial regime.

4. Siriana's Strikes: The Struggle for a National Education

In "Towards a National Culture," Ngũgĩ claims that one of the most important components of "re-structuring... our societies" in the postcolonial nation is the "development of a meaningful self-image," which can be practically achieved through the cultivation of a new educational system that facilitates innovative arts and literature (14). For Ngũgĩ, the colonial educational system "nurtured subservience, self-hatred, and mutual suspicion" among colonized students, which reflected the inherently racist structure of the colony that "encouraged a slave mentality, with a reverent awe of the achievements of Europe," and where "Europe was the centre of the universe" (14). Ngũgĩ raises the concern that the neocolonial government, despite removing "the more blatant racial aspects of our education," has still inherited and adopted the symbolic and material structures from the previous colonial regime (15). Ngũgĩ then calls for African literature and languages to be at the center of the postcolony's education, which he put into practice in his famous joint lecture "On the Abolition of the English Department" at Nairobi University, where he and other lecturers successfully argued for African literature and languages to supplant the colonial remnants of the university's English department in 1968 (145). This concern for education and the cultivation of an authentic national culture is pertinent in *Petals of Blood*, with the motif of the student strikes at the colonial and postcolonial secondary academy, Siriana, informing the novel's allegory of a repeated and ambivalent national history. Like the Gĩkũyũ oathing motif and the emblem of fire, the student strikes at Siriana occur across various junctures and generations, with the figure of Chui indicating the hollow status of Kenya's independence when the hopes and dreams of his first strike against the colonial headmaster,

Fraudsham, is dialectically reversed when he is appointed as the neocolonial headmaster who is even harsher than the previous occupant. But despite this twist, *Petals of Blood* depicts an active and persistent resistance against all forms of imperialist education in each subsequent generation, culminating in the combined praxis between the Theng'eta factory workers and Siriana students when they go on strike against the national bourgeoisie.

Siriana occupies a unique space in Ngũgĩ's oeuvre. The fictional colonial school first appears in his first novel *Weep Not, Child*, which the young protagonist, Njoroge, attends while his brothers join the Mau Mau uprising. Siriana is also modeled after the real Alliance High School, Kenya's premier secondary school which Ngũgĩ attended in the late 1950s under strikingly similar circumstances as Njoroge—with his older brother fighting in the forests during the State of Emergency (Sicherman 18; 20). Much like Alliance, Siriana is depicted as a rigorous missionary academy led at first by the benign British headmaster Ironmonger, and then by the strict and patronizing Fraudsham. In the novel, the first generation of students who attend Siriana are Munira and Chui. Charismatic and talented, Chui leads Siriana's students to go on strike when Fraudsham becomes the headmaster and enacts a new policy “to turn out [not] black Europeans but true Africans,” stripping away their previous rights under Ironmonger so that they “would not look down upon the innocence and simple ways of their ancestors” (34-5). In a flashback, Munira describes the strike as the students rebelling against the ossifying, Orientalist vision of “true Africans” that Fraudsham imposes on them, turning them into imaginary, colonial caricatures of their “innocent” and “simple” ancestors. This imposition of the colonial imagination deprives the students of their autonomy to define themselves and to shape their “self-image” that has also been influenced by European culture, which Fraudsham wishes to eradicate while paradoxically facilitating an English education. Even though Chui, Munira, and

five other students are expelled, and the strike collapses when Fraudsham calls in the riot police, Siriana's first strike and Chui are elevated into a legendary status for their resistance against Fraudsham, becoming ingrained in subsequent students' memories and a precursor to the Mau Mau uprising.

The spirit of Chui's resistance lives on in Karega's generation, as they inherit the memory of his failed strike when they repeat it again against Fraudsham, but now under the electrifying yet ambiguous political vision of "African Populism." Karega recalls this incident when the Ilmorog delegation reaches Nairobi, and are sheltered by a radical lawyer who turns out to have also attended Siriana a few years after Munira. Finding out their shared history through the academy, Karega reveals to the lawyer and Munira the ironic reversal of Chui, who was for them an anticolonial hero, but has now turned into a neocolonial headmaster. First, the students of Karega's generation boldly strike against Fraudsham when they observe how he treats his own dog, Lizzy, more like a human being than Siriana's African students, with Fraudsham ordering them to organize a human burial for her when she dies (203). As Fraudsham's "white and strong and invincible" façade begins to crumble when facing the students' defiance, they demand "to be taught African literature, African history, for we wanted to know ourselves better... We wanted an African headmaster and African teachers" (204). When Chui is mentioned during their strike, Karega reflects how "the name had been alive, a legend. We wanted him to come and lead the school" (204). But when Fraudsham resigns and Chui is appointed the next headmaster, the students are shocked when Chui enacts an even harsher policy than Fraudsham. Europe is pushed further into the center of their education, with Chui quoting Shakespeare just like Fraudsham, "[t]he new prefects... even more pampered than those of yesterday," and with "Chaucer, Shakespeare, Napoleon, Livingstone, Western conquerors, Western inventors and discoverers..."

drummed into our heads with even greater fury” (207). When the students go on a second strike against Chui, the riot squad is called again to quell the student rebellion, and Karega, like Munira and Chui before him, is expelled from Siriana. When asked by Munira, “what did you really want?”, Karega struggles for a coherent reply, admitting, “I don’t really know... We imagined new horizons... new beginnings... the right to define ourselves... a new image of self... all this more and more... but it was not clear... only that the phrase African populism seemed to sum it all!” (208).

This ideology of “African Populism,” as Karega calls it, is an attempt by the students to develop a new self-image that looks back on the history of Africa and identifies with African arts and literature. This redefinition of identity through “African Populism” and “Black Power” resonates with the second phase that the colonized intellectual experiences in Fanon’s “On National Culture,” with the students’ appeal to the entirety of African history and culture mirroring the colonized intellectual “who decides to combat [the] colonialist lies... on a continental scale. The past is revered. The culture which has been retrieved from the past to be displayed in all its splendor is not his national culture” (150). But for Fanon, this continental scope of the colonized intellectual’s second phase and of “emphasiz[ing] an African culture rather than a national culture leads the African intellectual into a dead end” (152). Karega also shares Fanon’s critique of the continental scope of the students’ strikes when referring to the ambiguity of what they “really want[ed],” and although the strike is able to crystalize a student movement strong enough to overthrow the colonial Fraudsham, it is seemingly powerless against the once revered Chui who is now a ruthless neocolonial headmaster. We are also told by Munira that Karega’s strike occurs a short time after Kenya’s independence, reflecting the new attitudes and radical politics emerging out of Kenya’s independence, with Siriana serving as microcosm

for post-independent Kenya. Chui is therefore an allegorical figure of Kenyatta transposed into the educational system. Once embodying the Mau Mau's anticolonial hopes and dreams, both Chui and Kenyatta turn out to be neocolonial intermediaries for imperialism.

After his expulsion from Siriana, Karega takes a teaching position in Ilmorog under Munira, and comes to embody the last phase of Fanon's colonized intellectual who moves from revering Africa's past to the "combat phase" of motivating the collective into national action. Disappointed by Chui's transformation, as well as Kenyatta's post-independence politics, Karega comes under the guidance of the lawyer, and eventually works for him when the lawyer becomes a politician running for Kenyan Parliament. But Karega eventually finds him disappointing as well, telling Wanja and Munira that the lawyer "had too much faith in the very shrines created by what he called the monster [of capitalist-imperialism]" (342). Karega's disaffection from the enriching but ambiguous cause of African Populism, as well as the lawyer's brand of reform rather than revolution, leads him to participate in workers' unions across Kenya, entering the "combat phase" of the colonized intellectual. This is exemplified when Karega disseminates pamphlets in the Theng'eta factories to shed the workers' ethnic chauvinism and romanticism of the past, with their organization into a union signaling their education in a socialist-nationalist cause. As Ngũgĩ argues in "Towards a National Culture," a genuine education for the postcolony must involve "the peasants and workers," which collapses the "unhealthy gap between intellectual and practical labour" under neocolonial capitalism (17). Karega's leadership mirrors Ngũgĩ's call to create a socialist economic and political base "for a meaningful self-image [to be] increasingly... realized" (17). Joseph, Abdulla's adopted brother who also attends Siriana at the close of the novel, is depicted as following in the footsteps of Munira, Chui, and Karega by participating in yet another strike at the academy, which is shown to be operating in conjunction

with Karega's worker movements towards a concrete, socialist policy: "This time we were going to demand that the school should be run by a committee of students, staff and workers... But even now we are determined to put to an end the whole prefect system... And that all of our studies should related to the liberation of the people" (403).

National allegory in *Petals of Blood* depicts a history of resistance that is at once fragmented and continuous, taking shape through the dialectical transformations of Kenya's figures of nationalist hope and unity. Chui and Kenyatta, who were once figures of nationalism and of the people's anticolonial struggle, are shown to mutate into the imperialist intermediaries of international capital. However, what the novel wishes to explore through these reversals is how they can give birth to new collective enterprises for resistance, which Karega observes are the twists in history where "victory is defeat and defeat is victory" (283). Even Theng'eta and the Gĩkũyũ oathing ceremony, which embodied the romanticized pastoral world but are now transformed by the neocolonial government, are reappropriated at the end by Karega and the coordination of the factory worker and student movements towards a socialist imagining of the nation. This coordination of intellectuals, students, and workers, along with the return of revolutionary-militant activity in the forests encapsulates Ngũgĩ's vision of a national history that is repeated with variation, where the past is used to unlock new horizons of the future. With Ngũgĩ's emphasis on a socialist imagining of nation at the finish of *Petals of Blood*, Gikandi notes the final words spoken by Karega at the end of the novel, "Tomorrow... tomorrow," perhaps indicate "the presence of a political impasse... an unfulfilled dream" that replicates the ambivalence and ambiguity of his previous novels' endings (159). However, even if retrospectively speaking, the Marxism of the New Left and workers movements of the 70s might be at a political impasse, Ngũgĩ still offers a theory of history in *Petals of Blood* where failed

revolutionary movements can once again come alive and evolve into new historical contexts and political struggles.

Conclusion

Marx writes that “[t]he tradition of all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living” (595). For Ngũgĩ, the precolonial past of Africa, the specter of colonialism, and the failures of Kenyatta’s regime continue to haunt Kenyans, and it is for them that Ngũgĩ writes his novels. Peter Nazareth echoes something similar in his study on *A Grain of Wheat*, where he notes how the novel attempts to bridge the “wounded souls” of his characters to the historical totality of the nation, since the traumas of individuals are collectivized and understood through the social nightmare of Kenya’s State of Emergency and its decolonization struggle. As Nazareth asserts, Ngũgĩ deals with “very complex questions: not only does he want to show how Kenya has gained its independence but also he wants to find out what happened in the process to the souls of the people” (131). What Ngũgĩ depicts in his novels are a people physically and psychologically damaged by colonialism and neocolonialism, but he also shows how Kenyans attempt to understand their wounded souls by reflecting on their national experience, the site in which history and politics have overdetermined the identity, memory, and psychology of the people.

In *A Grain of Wheat* and *Petals of Blood*, personal and public identity, along with personal and public memory, are interconnected. For Ngũgĩ, memory is a process where the “wounded souls” of the postcolonial nation reconstruct their selfhood, which as Fanon notes, is the discovery of how individual experience is linked to the national collective (140). But memory can also be the site of manipulation and distortion, such as when Kenyatta resurrects of the Mau Mau oath of unity to retroactively rewrite history, and to enflame ethnic tensions by reverting to a chauvinistic definition of the nation. Under imperialism, whether during colonialism or Kenyatta’s postcolonial state, the memory of the past is used to torment the living

of the present. This is why Ngũgĩ emphasizes that “re-membering” Kenya is also the process by which the nation, like his novels, are invented and reinvented. Ngũgĩ’s mastery of the novel coincides with his rearranging and assembling of the various fragments and voices of the collective’s memory as they are confronted with the neocolonial reality of their situation. By exploring the wounded souls of a nation who have undergone independence and the failed promises of the postcolonial regime, Ngũgĩ examines the broken fragments of the nation, and through its fissures, reimagines what the nation could be if made whole again.

As this thesis has argued, this process of “re-membering” the nation is accomplished through Ngũgĩ’s employment of national allegory, where the maimed souls and bodies of individuals are mended through the linking of history and the collective. When national allegory is produced, a total map of meaning is presented which unfolds the changing space and history of the nation, which as Fredric Jameson notes, is a search to reunite with the older forms of communal life that have been uprooted by international capitalism. However, national allegory is also the site where Ngũgĩ imagines a continuous conflict between imperialism and the people throughout Kenyan history, and where the nation, like allegory itself, changes at every level of the text, or in Kenya’s case, in the heat of political struggle. Through Ngũgĩ’s evocation of social and historical change, the ambivalent politics of the nation is opened up. But rather than dispensing with the nation altogether, Ngũgĩ scrutinizes the fissures of the nation and the fragments of memory for sources of the nation’s popular and political power that can be utilized to imagine different modes of the nation, as opposed to its construction under the neocolonial state. As Jameson notes, the cure for the individual cannot be found through their own efforts to demystify the ideology surrounding them, but truth is realized through the social being: “in the Marxian system, collective unity—whether that of particular class, the proletariat, or of its ‘organ

of consciousness,' the revolutionary party—can achieve this transparency [of class determination]; the individual subject is always positioned within the social totality" (*The Political Unconscious* 283). By engaging with national allegory in his writing, Ngũgĩ is influenced by the utopic potential of the Kenyans to understand and change their historical moment.

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