

The Cultural Resistance to Missionary Schools in Kenya: A Study of Ngugi Wa Thiong'o's *The River Between* and *A Grain Of Wheat*

by

Christophe Sékène Diouf

sekentopher@yahoo.fr

PhD Student, Human Sciences and Society Doctorate School

Laboratory LARAC (Culture and Art Research Laboratory)

Gaston Berger University, St.Louis, Senegal

Abstract

This article explores the problems of education which result in the establishment of Independent Schools in Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *The River Between* and *A Grain of Wheat*; and considers the diverse factors related to the daily lives of people in adoption of educative systems. The Independent Schools are initiatives of nationalists who are aware of the great influences missionaries' schools have on Kenyan children, and therefore they decided to found their own schools, designated to confront the oppressive and alienating education system imposed by British colonialism through missionary schools. Hence, their main objective was to put emphasis on the education of African youth as a way to urge them to participate in nation building activities. Hence, this paper highlights the role Independent Schools played in the struggle against cultural oppression, and underscores the place of the Independent Schools in contributing to the inclusion of a sense of identity consciousness, and how it paved the way for liberation.

Keywords: consciousness, education, Independent School, missionaries, nation, liberation, oppression.

Introduction

The River Between (1965) is mainly concerned with the religious conflicts between two different communities: the traditionalists and the converted to Christianity during the colonial period. In *A Grain of Wheat* (1967) Ngugi underscores the coming of independence, and the revolutionary struggle for the liberation of Kenyan people. Both novels evoke the dilemma of education in the lives of the masses. Indeed, education is still a major problem in many African nations as the continent continues to be confronted with difficulties in implementing efficient educative systems.

Despite the different policies of successive government and educative authorities, one can notice that many nations face undercurrent situations concerning education. This fact leads us to re-examine the Independent Schools in *The River Between* and *A Grain of Wheat* by Ngugi wa Thiong'o. Indeed, analyzing the educative systems inherited from colonial powers in the quasi-totality of African countries is of paramount importance in reviewing the particularities of Independent Schools.

In the globalizing world, it is necessary to raise questions, such as: are the implemented systems of education adapted to the realities of people? How can some systems be re-evaluated in accordance with the social, cultural, economic and political differences of countries? What effect has the curricula had on African identity? Thus, to better grasp the commitment of the Independent Schools in this review, our theoretical framework will be guided by authors like Frantz Fanon and Steve Biko who were at the forefront of the struggle against the cultural alienation of the African masses. In this approach, Ngugi's basic concept of decolonization of the African subject is at the core of this cultural resistance. And furthermore, this paper proposes to outline the positive aspects of Independent Schools in the domain of education in relationship to their importance in the struggle against psychological and cultural oppression. Currently, the Independent School conceptualization can represent a source of inspiration in order to adjust education to the realities of African people in regards to their function as a strategy of resistance to cultural oppression and a way to advocate an ideology of nationalist commitment to nation building.

Independent Schools: A Strategy of Resistance to Cultural Oppression

In Ngugi's novels: *The River Between* (1965) and *A Grain of Wheat* (1967) Independent Schools are created to resist the brainwashing system of education in colonized spaces. Given that colonizers use education to alienate people, the determinant actors installed new forms of schools which claimed their independences from missionary schools in their practice of excluding those who honored the customs of initiation of boys and girls in African culture.

In *The River Between*, with Siriana school, Joshua (the converted) and Livingstone (the missionary) refuse to welcome people who are attached to their cultures. Their projects are based on a process of indoctrination and an open opposition to African culture. And according to missionaries, the initiations rites were contradictory to the principles of their schools as the politics of the leaders of the colonial schools were based on a total assimilation of young people to European civilization, thus, representing a form of marginalization, a phenomenon that draws the attention to the threat of African culture in an era of globalization. Thus, in the Siriana school in *The River Between*, teaching and learning was focused on missionaries and converted people like Livingstone and Joshua rejecting rituals initiation, a practice they regarded as practices of paganism, stating:

The children of those who defied the laws of the Church and continued with their tribal customs would have leave Siriana. And no child of a pagan would again be allowed into school unless the child was a refugee. Even then the child would have to renounce circumcision. Waiyaki knew that to be the end of him. He had hoped he would finish his final year, for he loved learning (69).

Indeed, being aware of the power of the Siriana school, Waiyaki and his people have understood that “The most potent weapon in the hand of the oppressor is the mind of the oppressed” (Biko 1972: 92). Hence, according to South African activist Steve Biko, it is through psychology that the oppressors succeed in imposing their powers to the dominated. In other words, Biko shed a light to the ways White dominators managed to have control of the mind of the Black community during the Apartheid era in South Africa. Beyond this, he appeals the oppressed to bear in mind the necessity to decolonize their consciousness. As such, similarly, in *The River Between*, a new school is opened within this framework as Marioshoni is built in Kamenjo, as an environment of traditionalists in an attempt to challenge colonialism and restore the lost values inherited from the Siriana school, a resistance that is above all, cultural.

Such a resistance is in opposition to efforts to assimilation people via colonial schooling. Thus, the main concern of Ngugi is the struggle against “the cultural violence it inflicted on the consciousness of the colonized” (Chidi 1995: 161). And in response to the dominators plan to push people to give up their customs, Waiyaki and his followers call for “the starting of the people’s own schools” (106). As a result, Waiyaki becomes the cornerstone of the rupture from Siriana, and for this young teacher, it is necessary to face alienation: “And then many more schools had to be build. More teachers had to be employed” (108).

In the same order of analysis regarding colonial education and the colonized, Frantz Fanon states that the power of dominators resides first in their capacities to reduce the people into obedience, and that it is through a process of alienation that education paves the way to colonialism. In his demonstration, Fanon describes that school was used as a tool of subjugation. In this respect, Potholm (1976: 4) quotes Fanon in these terms: “Fanon’s work demonstrate that even more terrible than the colonization of a country is the colonization of the mind”. And this is the reason why, in Marioshoni, the people re-think the education of their children.

An education related to the lives of people is the origin of the foundation of “the famous Marioshoni school” (105) in *The River Between*. This Independent School proclaims its autonomy from Siriana (the missionary school) and sets up a new system of education that efficiently changes perspectives. It strives for the development of an education adapted to the social, economic and religious realities of the Gikuyu. No matter how the colonial administration decides to maintain its policies of assimilation, the Independent Schools react in favor of the masses.

They choose to redefine the educative system in order to satisfy the needs of the people. This perspective can be considered as a step towards “new forms of education that were “adapted” to local contexts” (Gamble 2009: 776). And such a measure is within the framework of the consolidation of the community destroyed by colonial rule. In Marioshoni, Waiyaki is invested with the mission of rehabilitating the rights of boys and girls who have been barred from Siriana, and thus a way to offer them an education that is appropriate to their lives as African people rooted in their culture and customs which functions as a strategy for cultural liberation, and an empowerment unit of African identity.

Indeed, it is worth knowing that the objectives of the founding people of the Independent Schools are not to reject all the European education, but the deconstruction of the stereotypes attributed to their traditions. And in Ngugi’s case, his primary education was in a Gikuyu Independent School (1948-1955) which gave him an awareness “of colonialism as an oppressive force” and a pride in peasant culture, which itself provided an informal education in “songs, stories, proverbs, riddles” (Sicherman 1995: 12). Hence, in this resistance, those who attend these schools like Ngugi were literate in their cultural values, and therefore, they have the opportunity to learn the language of the colonizer without being uprooted or alienated. And for the founding peers of the school, the children could “get the white man’s education” (94) and “learn all the wisdom and all the secrets of the white man” (137), because it was a step forward to liberation as they gave priority to the rehabilitation of what constitutes the bond of people’s lives, their cultures and customs to create a strong organization to combine the positive aspects of education with their yearnings, hence:

The school was neat. And people saw everything in it, the outcome of their own efforts, the symbol of their defiance of foreign ways /.../ The parents saw this as the fruits of their labour, their patience and sweat. Their children could speak a foreign language, could actually read and write. And this had been done in spite of Siriana’s stern action in refusing to admit the children of those who would not abandon the ancient rites (105).

The Independent Schools like Marioshoni in *The River Between*, become a starting point in the struggle against assimilation that promoted the respect of cultures and customs, departing from missionary education to consolidate the unity of the social group to unsure environments where educated young boys and girls can freely celebrate they cultural values. In contrast, in the European schools or precisely the missionary schools indoctrination reached a point that the European authorities forbid circumcised girls and boys to continue education: “Siriana’s stern action in refusing to admit the children of those who would not abandon the ancient rites” (105), in this regard, the solution was the development of Independent Schools throughout the country in order to put to an end, this psychological domination.

Such an education had a great influence on the literary productions of Ngugi. Hence, he started to inquire about the relations between education and the lives of the masses precisely the workers and peasants, and according to him, an important feature of the education conveyed in the Independent Schools was to help the young Kenyan people be in conformity with the ways of living of the folk, a reality he celebrates in his essay, saying:

I first went to Kamaandura missionary run, and then to another called Manguuu run by nationalists grouped around the Gikuyu Independent and Karinga Association. Our language of education was still Gikuyu. The very first time I was given an ovation was over a composition in Gikuyu. So for my first four years there, was still harmony between my formal education and that of the Limuru peasant community (quoted in *Decolonising the Mind*, Ngugi 1986: 11).

A basic element strategy of resistance to cultural oppression in Manguuu school was to use the mother tongue as a means of literacy. The language is thus a key tool to fight against assimilation in the relationships between the oppressor and the oppressed, and thus, the role assigned to Manguo Independent school in *A Grain of Wheat*. Hence, Manguo is perceived as an appropriate Independent School that helps the children of Thabai link to their traditions. Through Kihika's brother, Kariuki, the narrator outlines the starting point of the Independent schools in Thaba, and similarly to Mariosioni in *The River Between*, and Manguo in *A Grain of Wheat*, they are among the first Independent Schools with a Gikuyu perspective, thus Ngugi, writes: "Kariuki attended school at Manguo, one of the earliest Gikuyu Independent Schools in the country. He loved books and in the evening read by the light from the wood fire" (75).

As one of the first Independent Schools set up in Thabai, Manguo introduces the basic teachings of valuing initiation with an aim to restore the image of the customs stereotyped by some missionaries. This strategy of resistance is a step towards liberation and a way to ensure the survival of the inherited customs and traditions of the people of Thabai as they reinforce their allegiance to the Independent Schools. Thus, it is essential to uphold the creation of such schools in order to teach the young generation faithfulness and respect for their social and cultural realities. Ngugi, thus reports with pride that:

In the educational field, people had developed their own schools under the Kikuyu Independence Schools Movement and Karing'a's Schools Association. This educational movement culminated in the building by the people themselves of the first ever institute of higher learning in the country under the name Githunguri African Teachers' College, led by Mbiyu wa Koinange, a Columbia University graduate (Ngugi 1998: 47).

Furthermore, the Manguo and Marioshoni schools were in the fight against the oppressive regime, and this, in a project to dismantle the enterprise of mental subjugation, to stop “the domination of the mental universe of the colonized” (Ngugi 1986: 16). A deconstruction centered on the retransmission of the importance of the customs of initiation in the organization of the community as teachers emphasize the place of cultural ceremonies in the unity and the survival of the people. A case in point is the powerful strategy deployed to preserve people’s beliefs, hence:

The theme of the revolt against European education is based on a historical event. Ngugi said concerning the Gikuyu Independent School of the twenties and thirties that: They were schools that belonged to people who rebelled against the missionary schools because they wanted an education that belongs to the people (Larson 1974: 182-183). (my own translation)

According to the founders of the Independent Schools, a country which is politically sovereign without being culturally liberated can’t be developed. The cultural field is of great importance to settle policies of development. In this perspective, a cultural resistance appears through the Independent Schools, which enable people to express their belongings without any fear or constraint. And no matter how opposed the colonial authorities were to the opening of the Independent schools, Marioshoni would still educate the youth:

Marioshoni, as Waiyaki’s school was called, was a well-known in the country. Already it had a history. It was the first people’ own school to be built since the break with Siriana. It had been Waiyaki’s idea and even now he could not understand fully how his idea had borne fruit so quickly (78).

In collaboration with the guardians of the traditions, i.e. the Kiama (the Council of the Ancients), Waiyaki recommends the development of Independent Schools in the different areas of Kenya. Thus, a manifest fact of the resistance to alienation via the involvement of parents as they joined hands with the Kiama and sent their children to the Independent Schools, with reports of:

And mothers and fathers waited, expecting their children to come home full of learning and wisdom. Parents would feel proud, very proud, when a son came in the evening with a tear-washed face (79).

Education: Commitment to Nationalism

In the above mentioned novels, education conveyed through the Independent Schools emphasizes the notion of commitment to the national causes in addition to the resistance to alienation as people were convinced that the schools can promote commitment for the development of the nation; and this action, succeed in building up an ideology that gave priority to the principles of nationalism.

In *A Grain of Wheat*, the character of Gatu embodies ideal of commitment to nationalism and the recovering of lost lands, and as such, he is well-known for his militant actions for the sake of his people's lands. Thus, in the locality of Nyeri, he determinately takes part in the Movement that calls for a revolution whose consequences will be the accession to national sovereignty and a return of lands to the people, hence:

He had joined the Movement early in his life and was active in the fever for Independent schools in Nyeri. His faith lay in the Movement; only through it could he see any prospect of Independence and the return of the lost lands (107).

The revolutionary ideas also integrated the educative system of the Independent Schools as the conception of the nationalists to infuse people with pride and a sense of patriotism was put in motion, and thus, the citizens kept defending their nation as the courage and bravery of the Mau-Mau freedom fighters was transmitted to the school children. The Independent Schools sought to settle a strong education rooted in the deeds of the freedom fighters, and consequently, there were conflicts between the leaders of the Independent Schools and the colonial powers that imposed forces to close the schools. But, the dominated masses strove to protect their interests through education. Hence, Ngugi stresses the history of Kenya to show the basic role played by the independent schools. Indeed, in Kenya, nationalists found their own schools to teach programs aimed at educating competent African managers who are aware of the interests of their societies and capable of defending it. And in short, the schools contributed significantly to the sensitization of young people who attended them by constructing a counter-discourse of colonialist intentions (Kane 2006: 201). (my own translation)

In the light of this quotation, we can argue that in Kenya, the Independent Schools have participated in the rise of nationalist ideas among the generation who have led the country towards independence. Indeed, exploring the system of these Independent Schools, we can note that the land question which is at the beginning and the end of the revolution is evoked in the teachings of these schools.

In the history of Kenya, this situation has given birth to separatist movements which contest European education and start setting up new models of education: "Independent Schools are created, financed and managed by the villages of the two associations: Kikuyu Independent Association, Karing'a Educational Association" (Bardolph: 1991: 12). (my own translation).

In Kenya, the foundation of the Independent Schools goes hand in hand with the organization of a strong cultural movement. Thus, the schools prepared themselves financially, and to demonstrate their total independence from the missionary schools, members of the Kikuyu Association joined people of the Karing’ a, and in this alliance, they sought to collect all the necessary financial means indispensable for their efficiency. Hence, they use their resources to subsidize the Independent Schools as they refuse to be financially dependent on the colonial authorities in a totally autonomous fashion. Such a choice was also present in other sections of society. For example, the Independent African Church Movement in Kenya, grew in response to the colonial presence to become a vital part of the political history of the country; especially when there were few other expressions of African response to colonial presence (Ndeda 2005: 49-50). And undoubtedly, the church and the independent schools underscored the “the emergence in Kenya of the Independent Schools Movement” (Cook and Okenimkpe 1997: 21) as they stood firm against the progressive alienation that originated from colonialism and missionary education.

Ngugi, in his co-production play with Micere quotes Dedan Kimathi, one of the nationalists who sustain the founding of Independent Schools in Kenya, saying:

Put more effort in education:
This earth will form our black boards
We must know our history
Especially the deeds of those
Who rape of our beautiful Kenya
We have always stood firmly
Against oppression and exploitation
(Ngugi and Micere 1976: 67).

Conclusion

In the final analysis, Ngugi’s *The River Between* and *A Grain of Wheat* emphasize the importance of Independent Schools as a form of resistance to cultural oppression, assimilation and alienation. Hence, this work reveals that these schools strengthened the struggle for liberation through the nationalist ideas and teaching, as they were a guide to the restoration of African culture, identity and justice within Kenyan society.

Indeed, the novels show that the Independent Schools culturally and politically played a considerable role in the people’s fight against all the mental shackles used to maintain there subjugation, domination and exploitation. Hence, Independent Schools have been assigned a key mission: educate the youth so they will understand their responsibilities towards the country. And in Africa today, perhaps we can propose an education opened to international standards but with a curriculum that considers the social, economic, religious and political ideals of each nation.

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