

Post-colonial Counter-memory in *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi*: (Re)membering the Demonized Hero and Subverting the Colonial Discourse

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Abstract: This paper examines how Kenyan novelist and playwright Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o and Zimbabwean playwright Micere Githae-Mugo have embarked on a dramatic counter-discursive project through their play *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* (1976). The researchers argue that the play was intended to subvert the many colonial historical accounts about the figure of Kimathi and the Mau Mau revolutionary anticolonial movement. Drawing upon post-colonial criticism, this paper demonstrates how the playwrights use the heroic fictional character of Kimathi to counteract several historical and fictional colonial and contemporary postcolonial accounts about this controversial freedom fighter. Then, the paper goes on to examine the role of Ian Henderson (the British colonial police officer who participated in the manhunt for Kimathi and succeeded in capturing him in 1957) as a fictional character in the play. While many studies have demonstrated that *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* re-writes the colonial history about Kimathi and the Mau Mau movement in Kenya, which was maintained by Ian Henderson and many other colonial writers, to the best of the researchers’ knowledge; previous studies have not presented a comparative examination of both figures of Henderson, i.e., the historical figure and the fictional one. Here, the researchers explain how through the inclusion of the character of Henderson as the antagonist of the play, the dramatists subvert Henderson’s actual written accounts about Kimathi and the Kenyan national movement.

Keywords: counter-memory, Ian Henderson, Micere Githae-Mugo, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, Post-colonial Drama, *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi*

1. Introduction

According to Edward Said (1994), literary histories are among the ways that authors can use to break with the discourse of hegemonic historical narratives to “restore the imprisoned nation to itself” (215). He sees that literary stories of the past represent the formidable “power to narrate or to block other narratives from forming and emerging” (Said 1994: xii). Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’ o and Micere Githae-Mugo’s historical play *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* (1976) (henceforth referred to as *The Trial*), interrogates and ultimately invalidates the hegemonic narratives of colonial history in Kenya. The play, in the Saidian sense, empowers its writers to counter-narrate the version of history which was maintained by the colonizer who used to block all other forms of narratives from forming and emerging in colonial Kenya.

In this paper, the researchers examine how Ngũgĩ and Mugo embarked on a dramatic counter-discursive project. The researchers argue that the play was intended to subvert the many colonial and neo-colonial historical and literary

accounts about the figure of Kimathi, the famous Kenyan freedom fighter, and the Mau Mau revolutionary anticolonial movement. Relying on post-colonial criticism and Foucauldian theory of counter-memory, the researchers specifically examine the role of Ian Henderson as a character in the play. Here, the researchers explain how through the inclusion of the character of Shaw Henderson as the antagonist of the play, the dramatists subvert Ian Henderson's (1958) actual written accounts about Kimathi and the Kenyan national movement.

1.1 *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi*: An overview

The Trial consists of two narrative plots: the first traces the capture, imprisonment and subsequent trial of Kimathi wa Wachiuri; the second unfolds the transformation of two young Kenyans from childhood to adulthood in a symbolic "rite of passage" in which they are initiated into the national cause of liberation from colonialism (and neo-colonialism). Structurally, the play is composed of three movements (rather than acts) that sustain the dramatic action. The first movement of the play is preceded by an opening scene that is set in a courtroom where Dedan Kimathi is charged by the colonial judge for possessing an unlicensed revolver which is regarded as a criminal act under the emergency regulations. However, the courtroom trial only frames the real trials of the play, the four temptations facing Kimathi while imprisoned in his cell before the final courtroom trial begins.

In the first movement, we become aware of some of the colonial practices in colonized Kenya. In the first scene, the singing peasants and the flashback of Black people's history foreground the colonial injustices which will ensue in the play. Soon, the flashback is followed by a scene that is set in a Mau Mau Village where we see panicked people running hurriedly¹. Waiting, the white police officer orders his African soldiers to shoot at the "bloody [Mau Mau] terrorists" (Ngũgĩ and Mugo 1976: 6). The soldiers march the villagers to the "screening ground" where they will be seen by a hooded collaborator who identifies some of them to be taken by the imperial police force. After this scene of humiliation, an unnamed woman, a major character in *The Trial* makes her debut in the play. She pretends to be a poor woman who is carrying her basket to the market. She hides a gun (that she intends to smuggle to the detained Dedan Kimathi) inside a loaf of bread. She cunningly dissuades a police officer from breaking the loaf into two. On her way to find the fruit seller outside Kimathi's prison, Woman meets a boy and a girl. The boy is chasing the girl because she had stolen some money from him when they were working together as porters in Nairobi. Woman rebukes Boy for fighting like that when screeners and army jeeps are all over the town of Nyeri. Girl manages to escape. Woman offers Boy the money he was fighting for. Boy, the hungry orphan thanks her for giving him the money which he uses to buy himself some food. Then he unfolds his miserable life story. Woman tells Boy that she knows what his suffering was like. In return to her beneficence, Boy offers his services to Woman. Reluctantly, Woman accepts his offer to help her and assigns him to the task of carrying the loaf of bread (the gun) to a man who is selling oranges outside the courtroom. Boy accepts the task and embarks on his national duty towards Dedan, the "man of miracles".

The Second Movement of the play, also, begins with the trial scene. The white judge is named in this scene: Shaw Henderson. When the judge asks him whether he is guilty or not, Kimathi breaks his silence. He defies Henderson and considers the trial unlawful. Kimathi's anticolonial argument is interspersed with strong Marxist denouncement of colonial judicial system. The judge adjourns the court. Following this trial scene come the "trials" scenes in which Kimathi's determination and adherence to the cause are tried in his cell four times by different types of tempters. Kimathi is first visited by his capturer, Henderson who offers him the collaborationist option to save his life. However, Kimathi responds angrily telling Henderson that he cannot deceive him even in his many disguises. The two are involved in a sophisticated debate about imperialism. The second trial or temptation starts with a number of monologues by Kimathi which are interspersed with performances of pre-colonial Kenyan dances. The second visitation, by a triumvirate of bankers (British, Indian, and African), represents the temptation to trade real victory for a share in the spoils of colonialism. The debate between Kimathi and the bankers turns into another philosophical argument about capitalism and its impact upon the oppressed Africans. This encounter also concludes with Kimathi's resolute rejection of the offer of Banker's delegation.

Back to the parallel subplot, the scene shifts to the street. Girl who is tired of running all the time is determined to stop her running away from people. When the repenting boy enters the scene, she defiantly threatens him with a knife. He tries to tell her that he is sorry but she does not believe him. They wrestle together until they discover the hidden gun. Frightened Boy recalls Woman's past comment regarding his father's death as a result of the lack of socio-economic justice and consequently grows more courageous. Then the scene shifts to Kimathi's cell where we witness a third trial/temptation attempt. This time, another trio – Business Executive, Politician, and Priest, all African – who represent the ineffective process of nationalization or Africanization of the bourgeoisie, the political class, and the Church– visits Kimathi. Christ-like Kimathi harshly criticizes those harbingers of Neo-colonialism. After the third trial scene, the play takes us back to the street scene where Boy and Girl are still looking for the fruit seller and Woman. They decide to support the cause and rescue Kimathi by themselves. When the scene is back to Kimathi's cell where Shaw Henderson shows up in a final visitation after all attempts/tempts have failed to persuade him to plead guilty, the latter starts to torture him physically but with no avail.

The third and last movement of the play opens in the street in Nyeria the following day. Boy and Girl meet with Woman (disguised as a fruit-seller). She informs them about the plan to rescue Kimathi even at the cost of few lives. The two agree with much enthusiasm. The action in the third movement is remembered (maybe by Woman) in the form of a flashback. It takes us to a guerilla camp in Nyandarua forest. We learn that there is a court-cum-general meeting in the forest. Two British soldiers and an African K.A.R. soldier are brought before Kimathi to try them². Kimathi tells them that they are not fighting the British People but against "British Colonialism and imperialist rubbers of [their] land" (Ngũgĩ and Mugo

1976: 64). Then, he asks the British soldiers whether they denounce British imperialism or not. When they respond that they are the queen's soldiers and that they are "only obeying orders" (64), Kimathi orders his men to execute them. The African soldier is sentenced to death as well. Then, Kimathi delivers a long speech to his men. In this speech, he describes the military status of their movement and the many successes they have achieved so far. Another trial scene ensues. This time, Kimathi tries a group of collaborators (including his own brother). He discusses their case with his followers. In the end, Kimathi decides to spare their lives: "they'll not be killed today. But they'll be caned and kept without food for three days" (78). However, the collaborators manage to run away. Kimathi orders his men to follow them and shoot them on the spot.

Then, the scene shifts back to the colonial courtroom. Fearless Kimathi defies the judge and reminds the people attending his trial of the importance of continuing their revolutionary struggle against the forces of imperialism. The judge sentences him to be hung by the rope. Boy and Girl, who have been attending the trial, break the bread and simultaneously hold the gun and shout together: "Not dead". Then, there is "utter commotion as a struggle between opposing forces starts. A loud shot is heard. Sudden darkness falls, but only for a moment: for soon, the stage gives way to a mighty crowd of workers and peasants at the center of which are Boy and Girl, singing a thunderous freedom song" (Ngũgĩ and Mugo 1976: 84).

1.2 A survey of previous studies on the play

The Kenyan writer Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o is one of the most prolific writers in Africa³. His work includes novels, plays, short stories, autobiographies, and literary and critical essays. Consequently, the critical literature which addresses his works is very vast and diverse. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's fiction has received more critical attention than his drama has done. Those who studied his novels examined the themes and aspects that *The Trial* addressed as well⁴.

In fact, Ngũgĩ and Mugo's play was never excluded from the rich literature of criticism dealing with Ngũgĩ's literary world. Some critics argue that the play presents a "utopian possibility" or a utopian dream/fantasy. This appears obviously in the writings of Nicholas Brown (1999), Oliver Lovesey (2000), and Apollo Obonyo Amoko (2016). In the chapter titled "The Theatres of School Culture: Imagining the Nation in Ngũgĩ's Plays" which appears in his book *Postcolonialism in the Wake of the Nairobi Revolution: Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o and the Idea of African Literature*, Amoko (2016) contends that *The Trial* is an "elaborate fantasy embracing a radical politics never actually realized or anywhere in prospect" (Amoko 2016: 152). He reads *The Trial* as the romance of revolutionary Kenyan National identity –one that presents "what John Guillroy describes as 'imaginary politics'" (98). According to Amoko, the play "hinges more on a lamentation and call to arms than a celebration and remembrance of things past" (148). For him, such fantasies may be justified as "necessary fictions" in the face of an unlivable present (152). Dissatisfied with Ngũgĩ and Mugo's insistence on the truthfulness of the heroic national past presented in the play, Amoko wonders: "Does the complexity of the present-day struggle for justice in postcolonial Kenya not require

that the ghost of Kimathi be buried rather than revived and reified?" (Amoko 2016: 143). He concludes his study by asserting that the play can be understood as "a call to political struggle not predicated on claims to historical truth" (148).

Although many critics have viewed the play as a projection of an unlivable utopian possibility, a few scholars looked at how the playwrights relate to their contemporary political conditions. Though set in colonial Kenya in the late 1950s, Kimathi's story consists of an indictment of the economic, religious, and political elite who governed post-colonial Kenya in the 1970s. Brown (1999) discusses the Marxist ideology which governs the whole structure of the play. Analyzing the concluding song in *The Trial* linguistically, Brown argues that while on the surface level the song appeals to national unity, to Independence as the 'defeat' of the colonial power, to the rustic values of the hoe and the matchet, [it essentially] constitutes an appeal to contemporary proletarian class-consciousness, to the defeat of the national bourgeoisie, and to a militant peasantry. (Brown 1999: 60)

Commenting on the political factors behind the emergence of this play and the Kamiriithu project⁵, Brown argues that the play and the whole project took place in a brief window when radical political change seemed possible. This ambitious project ended when Daniel Arap Moi's regime consolidated power and Kenya became a state governed by a single political party with its own paramilitary. Brown wonders when – and where – such a window will open again (72).

In a more recent study, "Staging Resistance Matters! Deconstructing Structures of Power and Oppression in Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o and Micere Githae-Mugo's *the Trial of Dedan Kimathi* and Dario Fo's *Accidental Death of an Anarchist*", Natasha Vashisht (2021) critically interprets Dario Fo, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o and Micere Githae-Mugo's theatre as representative of radical theatres of resistance and cultural intervention in their searing reinterpretation of Kenyan and Italian cultural discourse (Vashisht 2021: 1).

The Marxist essence of the play was also discussed by G. Odera Outa (2001). Outa declares that Ngũgĩ's Dedan Kimathi, in *The Trial*, is perhaps one of the most ideologically charged, even one of the most intellectually overplayed characters in the entire corpus of modern African drama (351). The Kimathi of the play, says Outa, "proffers and spews out" sophisticated Marxist education which is meant to "represent an articulate and enlightened comment on the problems and visitations of living in a jaundiced neo-colonial African country such as Kenya" (353). It is so obvious according to Outa that Kimathi "becomes the undisguised mouthpiece of Ngũgĩ and Micere, who use him to articulate their Marxist vision of society much to the chagrin and discomfort of the [governing] powers" (353). Indeed, the fictional encounter between Kimathi and Henderson in *The Trial* (which will be studied below) is meant to show how the socialist content of the play operates as a political denouncement of what the playwrights view as neocolonialism.

In fact, most of the studies which discuss *The Trial*'s political message do not really examine the intended role that the character of Dedan Kimathi plays in the play. Instead, they only focus on the character of Kimathi as a "real" historical

figure. To the contrary of this view, the researchers would suggest that this character should be viewed as an allegorical figure, one that was employed by the playwrights to covertly subvert the corrupt contemporary political leader in Kenya: Jomo Kenyatta. In fact, the whole play could be read in light of what Fredric Jameson (1986) refers to as a “national allegory” that engages a national past experience in the re-evaluation of contemporary socio-economic and political practices, and in the imagination of a different future. The discussion of Kimathi’s allegorical role in the play is predicated on our understanding of allegory as an effective literary rhetorical device that involves characters and events that stand for an abstract idea or an event. The function of allegory is to add multiple layers of signification to literary works and fictional characters. In this sense, allegory makes stories and characters multidimensional, so that they refer to something larger in meaning and temporal scope than what they literally stand for and represent. These allegories can be seen as repositories of writers’ own moral and political messages: how they view their socio-political milieus and how they wish them to be. According to this understanding, it can be argued that Ngũgĩ and Mugo’s attempt was meant to transcend the codes of realism and instead make the character of Kimathi a symbol of the nation’s awakening on all levels.

Unlike Brown and Amoko, there were other critics who had examined the play and emphasized its function as a counter-discourse historical narrative. Critics like E. A. Magel (1983), Simon Gikandi (2000), Oyeniyi Okunoye (2001), and Gichingiri Ndigirigi (2007) were inclined to transform the special and temporal individuality of the characters of the play into collective symbols. For instance, in his essay “Dramatizing Postcoloniality: Nationalism and the Rewriting of History in Ngũgĩ and Mugo’s *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi*,” Okunoye (2001) draws our attention to some strategies of historical reconstruction in the play. He identifies history as a major site for identity-formation in the postcolonial world and sees the play as providing a paradigm for the African historical play. He pays particular attention to the fact that “the play is rooted in the counter-discourse which authorizes revisionist histories in the postcolonial world” (Okunoye 2001: 225). He contends that the creation of *The Trial* is motivated by the “desire of the playwrights to interrogate misconceptions and distortions in official Kenyan history, which marginalizes the popular struggle that culminated in the nation’s independence” (225). Okunoye’s primary argument in this essay is that the writing of the play enables the playwrights to celebrate Dedan Kimathi as a national hero who personifies the collective aspirations of the Kenyan people but is demonized in earlier versions of their history.

In his essay “Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o’s Postnation: The Cultural Geographies of Colonial, Neocolonial, and Postnational Space,” Lovesey (2002) asserts the active interaction between the performed play and its audience. In the section on “the neocolonial nation,” Lovesey maintains that in *The Trial*, “Kimathi dreams in prison of the unification of Kenya’s ethnic nationalities, and [here] not only colonial authorities but also the postcolonial audience are on trial” (Lovesey 2002: 147). He also argues that the reaction of the play’s audience, which was parodied by the trial’s audience on stage, was not composed and passive. Rather, the running

performances on the National Theatre witnessed a very interactive participation of the audience. Lovesey tells us that every night of the play's brief run, the audience "broke the conceptual fourth wall separating audience and actors and they sang and danced inside and outside the theatre" (149-150). This remarkable involvement of the audience in the performance of the play constituted, in the state's view, a challenge to its control of national space. The punishment for violating the state's control of space, concludes Lovesey, was Ngũgĩ's imprisonment and exile (150).

What this paper adds here to the literature which hinted at the role of the play as a counter-discursive literary text or performance is the more thorough examination of how the play responds critically to one specific text about Kimathi and his anticolonial movement, namely Ian Henderson's (1958) book *Man Hunt in Kenya*. Although several studies have sparsely mentioned this aspect, to the best of the researchers' knowledge, none has actually approached it sufficiently. The present study will utilize the close reading method and apply Foucault's conceptualization of counter-memory in discussing how *The Trial* was involved in the process of rewriting this colonial text. But before we talk about how the play responds to Henderson's book, let us see how it is engaged in a counter-memory mission against colonial discourse in general.

2. Discussion

2.1 *The Trial* as an application of counter-memory and counter-discourse

Postcolonial drama, which recalls certain historical figures and/or specific historical moments from the pre-colonial and colonial past of the post-colonial locales for which they are created normally, constitute remarkable domains of counter-memory. This type of drama achieves what Michel Foucault (2003) refers to as "the insurrection of a subjugated knowledge" as it provides a mode of (re)membering against the grain (Foucault 2003: 7). This drama resists oblivion and empowers representatives of the suppressed other with a unique capability of counter-remembering (or counter-historical narrating) that releases their long-suppressed voices. According to Foucault, "subjugated Knowledges" are forms of experiences and remembering that are pushed to the margins, disqualified, and rendered unworthy of epistemic respect by prevailing and hegemonic discourses. The historical experiences and memories of the colonial and post-colonial subjects are the best embodiments of the concept of "subjugated Knowledges." In his genealogical approach to history, Foucault suggests that critical genealogies contribute "to desubjugate historical knowledges, to set them free" (Foucault 2003: 10). Postcolonial drama, like other genres of postcolonial literature, presents dynamic critical genealogies that facilitate the production of powerful counter-histories as they narrate those experiences and memories which endured being unspoken and suppressed within the frames of colonial official history (Khawaldeh, Bani-Khair and Al-Khawaldeh 2017: 72).

To use Foucault's terminology, *The Trial* as a piece of postcolonial drama – as a representative of counter-history – breaks the continuity of imperial glory. It "reveals that the light – the famous dazzling effect of power – [It] is not something

that petrifies, solidifies, and immobilizes the entire social body, and thus keeps it in order; it is in fact a divisive light that illuminates one side of the social body but leaves the other side in shadow or cast it into darkness” (Foucault 2003: 70). In this sense, *The Trial*, as an example of postcolonial drama, becomes an effectual domain of counter-discursivity. Here, the peoples, the oppressed who once lived in the dark side and were forced by the colonial discourse of Ian Henderson and other pro-colonial accounts to remain in the shadows of imperialism and colonialism are now given the chance to outcry “from within the shadows the discourse of those who have no glory, or of those who have lost it and who now find themselves, perhaps for a time – but probably for a long time – in darkness and silence” (Foucault 2003: 70).

In her essay "Post-colonial Literatures and Counter-discourse", Helen Tiffin (1995) describes how postcolonial literary counter-discursive rewriting becomes a pressing demand and an urgent desire for postcolonial writers:

Processes of artistic and literary decolonisation have involved a radical dis/mantling of European codes and a post-colonial subversion and appropriation of the dominant European discourses. This has frequently been accompanied by the demand for an entirely new or wholly recovered ‘reality’, free of all colonial taint. Given the nature of the relationship between coloniser and colonised, with its pandemic brutalities and its cultural denigration, such a demand is desirable and inevitable (95).

Tiffin's description corresponds with what the present study finds in *The Trials*. The play is a conscious attempt to create that "entirely new" and "wholly recovered reality" of Dedan Kimathi, whose denigrated history was reconstructed in both colonial and post-colonial historiography including Ian Henderson's racist historical accounts.

The Trial writes back to the colonial propaganda about the Kenyan liberation movement and its leader Dedan Kimathi. According to Oyeniyi Okunoye (2001), the play has set a paradigm for the African historical play (Okunoye 2001: 225). It responds to much of the official historiography pertaining to the rise and defeat of the Mau Mau movement in Kenya in which the freedom fighter Dedan Kimathi was demonized, depicted as a barbarous and fierce brute, and popularized as an atavistic misfit. To apply Foucauldian genealogy on the role played by the play, it can be argued that Ngũgĩ and Mugo's work resides in challenging the established practices of remembering and forgetting by excavating subjugated bodies of experience and memories, bringing to the fore the perspectives that culturally hegemonic practices have foreclosed (Foucault 2003: 9).

Chidi Amuta (1989) asserts that the “imperialist interests through their domination of vital media outlets in Kenya have insisted on a colonialist supremacist view of Kenyan history,” and that the ruling Kenyan African National Union had also been “de-emphasising the role of the masses and the popular struggle that culminated in Kenyan independence” (Amuta 1989: 157). According to Ingrid Björkman and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (1989): “[t]he British coined the name

‘Mau Mau’ for the Kenyan freedom movement which was also Africa's first freedom movement and described it as a rash, atavistic, mass murdering movement, rooted in barbarism and superstition” (Björkman and wa Thiong’o 1989: 24). Several supremacist Official colonialist texts covering the Mau Mau Rebellion emerged during the 1950s and 1960⁶. J. C. Carothers (1954), for instance, diagnoses the movement’s violence as a “development of the anxious conflictual situation in people who, from contact with alien culture, had lost the supportive and constraining influence of their own culture, yet had not lost their ‘magic’ modes of thinking” (Carothers 1954: 15).

Similarly, F. D. Corfield (1960) posits that the eruption of violence by the Mau Mau was caused by the incomplete modernization of the Gikuyu tribe (Corfield 1960: 7). The rapid transition from primitiveness to modernity, says Corfield, has produced a “schizophrenic tendency in the African mind—the extraordinary facility to live two separate lives with one foot in this century and the other in witchcraft and savagery” (9). This colonial outlook regarding the Kenyan freedom movement is conspicuously expressed by “His Excellency” Sir Patrick Renison, the governor and commander-in-chief of the Colony and Protectorate of Kenya who endorsed Carothers’ colonial government-sponsored historical project (Corfield 1960: 7). While Renison reluctantly concedes that Africans might have had some legitimate complaints against certain practices of British rule in Kenya, he believes that there was “no justification for Mau Mau, which was wholly evil in its conception” (7). The outbreak of Mau Mau, says Renison, was because of “the deliberate exploration of these grievances by its organizers for their own” (8).

Interestingly, *The Trial* also writes back to the historical and literary accounts maintained by post-independence Kenyan writers and historians who view the Mau Mau movement and its leader in a negative way not much different from the one advocated by the colonial administration in Kenya, especially the view propagated in Henderson’s humiliating book. As the playwrights make it clear in their literary manifesto in the preface to *The Trial*, they were disappointed at the failure of Kenyan intellectuals in celebrating their national heroes:

Our historians, our political scientists, and even some of our literary figures, were too busy spewing out, elaborating and trying to document the same colonial myths which had it that Kenyan people traditionally wandered aimlessly from place to place engaging in purposeless warfare; that the people readily accommodated themselves to the British forces of occupation! For whose benefit were these intellectuals writing? Unashamedly, some were outright defenders of Imperialism and lauded the pronouncements of colonial governors, basking in the sunshine of their pax-Anglo-Africana Commonwealths (Ngũgĩ and Mugo 1976: II)

Examples of the texts that the playwrights responded to include Godwin Wachira’s novel *Ordeal in the Forest* (1968), Wamweya’s novel *Freedom Struggle* (1968), and Kenneth Watene’s play *Dedan Kimathi* (1974). According to Peter Simatei (1999), in these literary works there is a “tendency to portray the Mau Mau war as a mere internecine feud among the Kikuyu and in so doing deny its nationalist and liberative impulse” (Simatei 1999: 154). Similar writings appeared

in the first half of the 1970s as well: Kiboi Murithi's autobiography *War in the Forest* (1971), and Meja Mwangi's novels *Carcass for Hounds* (1974) and *Taste of Death* (1975) – just to name a few. In *Carcass for Hounds*, for instance, Mwangi's portrayal of General Haraka, the Kimathi-like figure is “totally negative, focusing as it were on Haraka's deterioration into a blood-thirsty psychopath who is finally wasted away into a “living carcass” by gangrene which he obtains through a bullet wound” (Simatei 1999: 155). Writers such as Mwangi and Murithi represented what the playwrights regarded as outright defenders of Imperialism whom *The Trial* denounced and warned against.

The following section discusses how *The Trial* serves as a postcolonial counter-memory dramatic text that is engaged in the task of exposing and eroding the dominant colonial and neo-colonial discourse about the history of one of Kenya's important anticolonial freedom fighters. More specifically, we shall see how, through juxtaposing the historical figures of Kimathi and Henderson in the play, the playwrights refute all racist allegations levelled by Henderson's biographical work against Kimathi and his Kenyan people in which accuses them of recidivism during the years of anticolonial resistance.

2.2 *The Trial* as a counter-discursive dramatization of Ian Henderson's colonial narrative

Ian Henderson's notorious 1958 autobiography *Man Hunt in Kenya* (also published under the title *The Hunt for Kimathi*) engendered the basis of most of the post-independence debate about Kimathi and the Mau Mau. His description of the Mau Mau also established the movement as an unprecedented example of primitivism:

They had been forced to adopt a way of life which even the most primitive of pastoral African tribes could not match. The Masai bushraen, the Wanderobo hunters, and other primitive African tribesmen, who had gained a reputation for their skill in tracking and hunting, were beginners by comparison with the forest terrorists still at large in 1956. It was odd that people of this calibre should become the main arm of the security forces. It was odd that the elimination of the last die-hard remnants of Mau Mau should depend, not on the arts of modern warfare, or upon the ingenuity and strength of civilised man, but upon an abnormal and primitive skill practised by an abnormal and primitive people (Henderson 1958: 154).

And in another earlier passage from Henderson's book, we read:

Their city clothes had long since disappeared, to be replaced by jackets and trousers of animal skin, which they would not take off for a year at a time.... some Mau Mau travelled on their toes, others ran on their heels or the sides of their feet so that they would not leave a recognisable trail (16).

The Trial subverts all of these racist and imperial accusations regarding the recidivism and atavistic violence of the Mau Mau movement. Here, the

forest from whence the Mau Mau rebels launch their attacks at the colonizer is paralleled by what the playwrights call “the Jungle of colonialism” – the sheer representation of imperialist cannibalism (Ngũgĩ and Mugo 1976: 35). Confronting Judge Henderson in one of the court scenes, Kimathi reverses the colonial accusations by showing how cannibalistic the colonizers are when they suck the colonized people’s labor and leave them in abject poverty: “The jungle of colonialism? Of exploitation? For it is there that you’ll find creatures of prey feeding on the blood and bodies of those who toil: those who make the earth yield. Us. Those who make factories roar ... Those who wait and groan for a better day tomorrow” (26). It is obvious that the reference to colonialism as the domain of cannibalism is mingled with a similar detestation of capitalism as another manifestation of colonial cannibalism.

The structure of the main plot is predicated upon an imagined encounter between Kimathi and his capturer, Henderson. Ian Henderson is employed by the playwrights as a major character who becomes the touchstone via which the supposedly “true” character of Kimathi is proved. Gathering from the stage directions, Ian Henderson (referred to as Shaw Henderson in the play) assumes several roles in Ngũgĩ and Mugo’s drama: a judge, a prosecutor, a tempter, a torturer, and an executioner. The presence of Henderson, the colonial historian as a fictional character in *The Trial*, permeates throughout the movements of the play. Shaw Henderson acts as a multi-faceted main character whose function is to represent the antagonist of Ngũgĩ and Mugo’s drama.

In all of the encounters between Shaw Henderson and Dedan Kimathi in *The Trial*, the latter gains the upper hand over the former and appears as a very intelligent and wise anti-colonial leader who exposes the true nature of colonialism. For instance, Kimathi presents a very pungent criticism of the colonial judicial system, which could also be read as a direct response to Ian Henderson’s historical narrative, which imposes a very confining colonial conceptualization of the man and his movement:

KIMATHI. By what right dare you, a colonial judge, sit in judgement over me?

JUDGE. Kimathi, I may remind you that we are in a court of law.

KIMATHI. An imperialist court of law.

JUDGE. I may remind you that you are charged with a most serious crime. It carries a death sentence.

KIMATHI. Death. . . . To a criminal judge, in a criminal court, set up by criminal law: the law of oppression. I have no words.

JUDGE. Perhaps you don’t understand. Maybe your long stay in the Forest has . . . I mean. . . we are here to deal fairly with you, to see that justice is done. Even handed justice.

KIMATHI. I will not plead to a law in which we had no part in the making (Ngũgĩ and Mugo 1976: 25).

For Kimathi, the law of the colonizer is not the law of justice because this law is, actually, composed of two laws or justices: “One law and one justice protects the man

of property, the man of wealth, the foreign exploiter. Another law, another justice, silences the poor, the hungry, our people” (25-6). In this way, the playwrights produce what Foucault calls “the insurrection of the subjugated knowledges” (Foucault 2003:9). In fact, putting such sophisticated and highly-intellectual words in the mouth of Kimathi, who might not have been as eloquent as he appears to be throughout the play, reflects how representatives of the postcolonial Kenyan intelligentsia were in a dire need for such a historical figure to convey the insurrection of their subjugated knowledges in the form of counter memories. By creating a highly intellectual figure in the play, the writers seek to achieve what Ngũgĩ usually refers to as “decolonizing the mind”. In this regard, Lovesey (2015) tells us that writing on the eve of and just after the declaration of Kenya’s independence on December 12, 1963, Ngũgĩ asserts the need to repudiate the psychological inferiority inculcated by colonialism, as much as the need for political freedom and perhaps more importantly economic prosperity (51). According to Ngũgĩ “the worst colonialism was a colonialism of the mind, a colonialism that undermined one’s dignity and confidence” (Lovesey 2015: 51).

In another example in the play, i.e., the first trial/temptation scene, Shaw Henderson visits Kimathi as “a friend of the Africans” to convince him to plead guilty. However, Kimathi tells him that he cannot deceive him even in his many disguises. The two are involved in a sophisticated debate about imperialism. In this debate, Kimathi produces a very mature philosophical argument against colonialism that is meant to counteract the established accounts about Kimathi’s irrationalism. Here, Ian Henderson’s racist baboonish images, which were meant to despise Kimathi, are counteracted by Ngũgĩ and Mugo’s portrayal of the rebellious colonized African as “Balaam’s Ass”. This is obvious in Kimathi’s response to Shaw Henderson’s questions through which he seeks to make Kimathi relent and plead guilty. The Henderson of *The Trial*, reminds Kimathi of their shared childhood: “Don’t you remember how we used to play together as children, on the slopes of Mount Kenya? Remember the day we played Horse and Rider? We fill[he laughs.]” (Ngũgĩ and Mugo 1976: 34).

While Ian Henderson reports in his book that throughout his troubled youth, Kimathi terrorized his own family and relatives by committing a chain of petty crimes, the playwrights present a Kimathi who is proud of his “anti-colonial” childhood. In response to Show Henderson’s aforementioned reminiscing questions, Kimathi’s boastful outcry transfixes the colonial advocate:

You mean I threw you off! And you went sniffing and crying to your mother... There must be horses and riders, must there? Well, let me be Balaam’s ass then. [*chuckles*]: Yes, the one who rejected his rider... when the hunted has truly learnt to hunt his hunter, then the hunting game will be no more ... this is a new era. This is a new war. We have bled for you. We have fought your wars for you... This time we shall bleed for our soil, our freedom, until you let go (Ngũgĩ and Mugo 1976: 34).

The horse and rider metaphor in this remembrance of an incident related to the childhood of both Kimathi and Henderson implies that the colonial struggle

between the two had begun as early as the prisoner and his capturer were kids. In so doing, the playwrights rewrite what Ian Henderson wrote regarding the mischievous childhood of Dedan Kimathi, the bad boy and would-be terrorist. In Henderson's book, we read that, even as a child, Kimathi was destructive, treacherous, and megalomaniac:

Kimathi did not try to win the leadership of his clan or tribe by minding his manners. Long before his grandmother made her gesture [blessing her grandson and prophesying his future greatness] he had been saddled with a reputation for delinquency. When barely out of the toddling stage he was nicknamed 'Njangu' (rough and treacherous) by his playmates. (Henderson 1958: 18).

In contrast to Ian Henderson's racist animal imagery depicting Kimathi, the boy and the man, Ngũgĩ and Mugo's biblical allegory of Balaam's ass consolidates the protagonist's positive feelings of pride and hope. In fact, Henderson's portrayal of the freedom fighters as psychotics who are inclined to regress from civilization to the "heart of darkness" are opposed by Kimathi's accusation of Shaw Henderson (and the colonizers) in *The Trial* as the "imperialist cannibal" which reverses given definitions of the concept of "the civilized". This of course contradicts Ian Henderson's most notorious passage about Kimathi in which he views him as someone who is degenerating to the status of an animal:

Yet he and his henchmen adapted themselves to the privations and reversion to an animal existence, Kimathi outstripped all the others. As he learnt more about the forest, he forgot more about civilisation. He chewed skins and bones like a hyena; his eyes flicked about like those of a nervous monkey; he would only drink water as a buck or a goat drinks, by lowering his head to it; he never washed, and his lice-ridden hair grew down his shoulders until it was long enough for him to swat horseflies. All the time, day and night, he was on the alert, and his powers of sight, hearing, and smell grew abnormally acute (Henderson 1958: 27).

Such denigrating descriptions by Henderson were meant to affirm that "Kimathi was hardly a political figure, but he was a criminal of the first rank" (239).

In other parts of his book, Ian Henderson presents for his readers a version of a timid Kimathi. This is an embodiment of the intended colonial narrative that attempted to instill in the minds of its colonial subjects the image of a coward Kimathi. For instance, in the accounts maintained by Ian Henderson we read:

He [Kimathi] had never been a brave man. Every terrorist who knew him well will confirm that he was one of the most timid of all those who entered the forest. Even when he was at the height of his power he ran no risks. But now he was cowardly in the extreme. This did not disturb his henchmen, however, for in their estimation "a leader appointed by Ngai," chosen from among thousands to lead them in the forest, and blessed by an old woman, did not have to be brave (28).

Unlike Ian Henderson's portrayal of a Kimathi as a hated coward terrorist among Kenyans, Ngũgĩ and Mugo dramatize their national hero throughout the play as a respectful and loved leader. Even the soldiers who are ordered to capture the Mau Mau rebels cannot deny the people's admiration of the freedom fighter. For instance, the first soldier counters Show Henderson's remarks about Kimathi in the play with a statement that proves fundamental to the playwrights' own image of Dedan Kimathi: "That's what Bwana Shaw Henderson says. But he doesn't know the people. They love him like anything, say what you will" (Ngũgĩ and Mugo 1976: 13).

Through Woman's positive descriptions of Kimathi (in *The Trial*), the playwrights draw a saint-like image that refutes the pathologized image of Kimathi and the Mau Mau normalized in Henderson's text and the texts that followed his perspective as a guiding prototype. When asked by Girl (in *The Trial*) about who really Dedan Kimathi is, Woman answers her that Kimathi is "leader of the landless. Leader of them that toil" (61). Driven by a nationalist desire to redeem the image of Dedan Kimathi from the stereotypical and demonic depictions of colonial and some post-colonial discourses, the playwrights let Woman idealistically draw the image of an admirable anticolonial leader. Reflecting the playwrights' attitude towards Kimathi, Woman reveals what is supposed to be Kimathi's true identity in front of the avid young questioners, Boy and Girl, who represent the new generation's willingness to see a national hero who is free from any colonial stains. Above all the positive descriptions of Kimathi, Woman suggests that although being "too human" can be read as Kimathi's tragic flaw, this can also be considered as a distinguished personal merit that elevates him above the imperial descriptions which portray him as a barbaric and inhumane terrorist.

Interestingly, the play concludes with the "People's Song and Dance" in which Kimathi, despite the death sentence, appears as a victorious nationalist whose example of nationalism is to be followed by all Kenyans. The song declares Kimathi's victory over his capturer, Shaw Henderson – the colonial judge and prosecutor. This is, of course, a microcosmic representation of the larger victory of Kenyans over the British colonial system. The playwrights' reliance on the ritualistic and traditional elements such as dancing and singing in the play is a clear indication of the effectiveness of what Diana Taylor (2003) refers to as the repertoire or "the embodied memory." According to Taylor, the repertoire "enacts embodied memory – performances, gestures, orality, movements, dance, singing – in short, all those acts usually thought of as ephemeral, non-reproducible knowledge" (Taylor 2003: 20). This new kind of knowledge produced by varied acts of performance normally counteracts Western modes of archiving about the indigenous people of the colonized and decolonized nations. As Taylor puts it, "written and archival constituting hegemonic power and the repertoire provide[s] the anti-hegemonic challenge" (22). Taylor also notes that performance offers a way of rethinking the canon and critical methodologies (27). It helps "free ourselves from the dominance of the text as the privileged or even sole object of analysis" (27). In fact, this performance within the play is a good example that illustrates how what Ngũgĩ (1986) has always referred to as "Orature," can substitute for the

established “written” imperial accounts about colonial subjects⁷. Through dancing and singing the song of struggle, the actors contribute in subverting both colonial historical accounts and pro-colonial Kenyan literary writings which represent the spirit of fear. Thus, *The Trial*, by reactivating the Kenyan orature and traditional repertoire, and through enacting the embodied memory of Kimathi; does provide a kind of anti-hegemonic challenge against the hegemonic power of Ian Henderson’s colonial text and similar colonial and neo-colonial accounts about the Kenyan national hero.

By its performative power, not only did *The Trial* manage to free the Kenyan audience and readership from the dominance of Henderson’s text, but it also refined the distorted image of the freedom fighter in the minds of the majority of the new generations in Kenya. The long-term impact of the counter-memorial and counter-discursive project of *The Trial* has always been perceptible. Dedan Kimathi, who had been viewed with disdain by the Jomo Kenyatta regime and subsequent governments for several decades, and as a leader of bandits or terrorists by the British; has reclaimed his stature as an anticolonial revolutionary in the eyes of both Kenyan people and the government during president Mawa Kibaki’s presidency (December 2002 –April 2013). The Kenyan government erected a bronze statue of the “Freedom Fighter Dedan Kimathi” on graphite plinth, in central Nairobi. This monument was unveiled in 2006 – about 50 years after the execution of Kimathi, and 30 years after Ngũgĩ’s and Mugu’s reviving of this controversial historical figure in their remarkable theatrical performance of the play in 1976 (Khawaldeh et al. 2017: 77)⁸.

3. Conclusion

In the present paper, the researchers examined how Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o (in collaboration with Micere Githae-Mugo) had embarked on a dramatic counter-discursive project. We saw how *The Trial*, as a representative example of counter-memory post-colonial drama, achieved what Michel Foucault referred to as “the insurrection of a subjugated knowledge” as it provided a mode of (re)membering against the grain. The researchers demonstrated how the play was successfully created to subvert the many colonial historical accounts about the figure of Kimathi and the Mau Mau revolutionary anticolonial movement. The researchers examined the role of Ian Henderson as a character in the play. Here, the researchers applied the method of close reading to juxtapose specific excerpts from Henderson’s book, *Man Hunt in Kenya*, with certain quoted dialogues from *The Trial*. They reached the conclusion that through the inclusion of the character of Shaw Henderson as the antagonist of the play, the dramatists had successfully subverted Ian Henderson’s actual written accounts about Kimathi and the Kenyan national movement, and resisted all subsequent post-colonial (or neo-colonial) Kenyan literary texts that adopted Henderson’s worldview about Kimathi.

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Endnotes

- ¹The word “Mau Mau” had come into use to explain the existence of the Kenya Land and Freedom Army during the Emergency period in Kenyan colonial history from 1952 to 1962. The origin of the word is unclear. According to KarariNjama, it is related to several misconceptions: Firstly, a mispronunciation of “umauma” (out out), a Gikuyu reference to oust European rule. Secondly, misperception by European Journalists at the Naivasha Trial in 1950 of the expression, “Mumumumu” which means “whispered voices within an oath-taking hut.” Thirdly, a “secondary usage” invented after the term became popularized in Swahili, “MzunguArudiUingereza, Mura Africa Apotee Uhuru” – meaning “Let the European return to England and the African obtain freedom” (Barnett and Njama 1966: 51-54).
- ²The King's African Rifles (K.A.R) was a multi-battalion British colonial regiment formed in the various British possessions in East Africa from 1902 until independence in the 1960s. It had two major functions: military and internal security services within the East African colonies (Forces War Records 2020).
- ³Since 2010, Ngũgĩ has frequently been regarded as a likely candidate for the Nobel Prize in Literature.
- ⁴Examples of such studies that dealt with Ngũgĩ's novels include Caminero-Santangelo (1989), Kessler (1994), Sicherman (1995), Hooper (1998), McLaren (1998), Hubert (2001), Brown (2005), Amoko (2005), Uwasomba (2006), Nag (2013), Sithole (2014), Diouf (2014), Nicholls (2016), Mwetulundila (2016), Karpagam (2018), Samy et al. (2019), Shang (2020) and Koroma et al. (2020).
- ⁵As Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o tells us in his book *Decolonising the Mind*, his project – which was developed in the Kamiriithu Community Education and Cultural Centre, an open-air theater at Kamiriithu, in Limuru, Kenya – sought to create an autochthonous Kenyan theater, which would liberate the theatrical process from what the artist held to be “the general bourgeois education system,” by encouraging spontaneity and audience participation in the performances (56-9).
- ⁶Texts like C. T. Stoneham's *Mau Mau* (1953), J. C. Carothers' *The Psychology of the Mau Mau* (1954), Ione Leigh's *In the Shadow of the Mau Mau* (1954), P. Mitchell's *African Afterthoughts* (1954), F. D. Corfield's *The Origins and Growth of Mau Mau*, J.L. Brom's *Mau Mau* (1956) and D.H. Rawcliffe's *The Struggle for Kenya* (1956); represented what Apollo Amoko (2016) describes as “the degeneration of the Gikuyu into atavistic violence under the weight of a bewildering modernity” (127).
- ⁷In his book *Moving the Centre: The Struggle for Cultural Freedoms* (1986), Ngũgĩ clarifies the term “Orature”: “the oral tradition or orature... is the literature passed on from mouth to ear, from generation to generation. It consists of songs, poems, drama, proverbs, riddles, sayings and it is the richest and oldest of heritages” (18).
- ⁸In June 2013, the British government acknowledged for the first time that the elderly Kikuyu and other Kenyans had been subjected to torture and other horrific abuses at the hands of the colonial administration during the Mau Mau emergency. The British government expressed its “sincere regret” that these

abuses had taken place and urged that the process of healing for both nations begin. Compensatory payments of £2,600 were paid to each of 5,200 vetted Kenyan claimants. (Elkins 2013: para. 2). Additionally, on 12 September 2015, the British government unveiled a Mau Mau memorial statue in Nairobi's Uhuru Park that it funded “as a symbol of reconciliation between the British government, the Mau Mau, and all those who suffered”. (Associated Press).

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