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# Capitalistic Christians and Educated Elites: Fanonian Theory and Neo-Colonialism in Ngugi Wa Thiong'o's *A Grain of Wheat*

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Capitalistic Christians and Educated Elites: Fanonian Theory and Neo-Colonialism in  
Ngugi Wa Thiong'o's *A Grain of Wheat*

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Ngugi Wa Thiong'o's novel *A Grain of Wheat*, published in 1967, exposes the ways in which British institutions and practices continue to plague post-colonial Kenya. This novel addresses the condition of post-colonial Kenya as native Kenyans struggle to form a new national identity and government. This novel exposes the corruption of the Christian Church and the cultural imperialism perpetuated by missionaries as they impose European practices and abolish Kenyan cultural values. Ngugi's work reflects the influence of Marxist thought and the impact of writers such as Frantz Fanon whose neo-colonialist theory explains many of the phenomena present in post-colonial Kenya. In particular, Fanon notes that post-colonial nations retain the institutions of the former colonizing nation and therefore are still subject to colonial structures even after gaining independence. The result is that classism endures and the separation between the bourgeoisie and the lower classes continues.

While Ngugi presents a critique of Christianity in this text, he does so through the character of Kihika, a man who kills missionaries he considers oppressors yet who considers himself to be a Christian. Kihika uses biblical stories and rhetoric to encourage people to rebel and resist imperialism. In this way, Ngugi explores the use of Christian rhetoric and principles by missionaries to further cultural imperialism and the co-opting of that same rhetoric by Mau Mau rebels to motivate resistance to British colonial power. In light of Fanon's observations about enduring colonial institutions, one could interpret the Christian religion as a remnant of British colonial power which continues to control and oppress the Kenyan people after decolonization. However, by emphasizing Kihika's religious background and use of scripture to justify the Mau Mau rebellion, Ngugi maintains a distinction between colonial, capitalistic Christianity and Kihika's communal, compassionate Christianity.

In *A Grain of Wheat*, Ngugi adapts Fanon's philosophy about neo-colonialism and the enduring institutions of colonial governments. On one hand, Ngugi depicts characters who are simply the new bourgeoisie who continue to imitate Britain and who betray their Kenyan national heritage and values. However, at the same time, Ngugi revises Fanon's theory because he depicts a character, Kihika, who rejects Christianity as practiced by the missionaries, but not Christianity as a whole. Through the positive portrayal of Kihika's actions, Ngugi demonstrates how Christian teachings should inspire people to fight injustice and colonial oppression. This paper will discuss the connections between Fanon's and Ngugi's theories about post-colonial nations and set that discussion within the historical context of the Kenyan independence movement. This paper will then analyze the ways in which Ngugi critiques capitalism, collaborationism, and colonial Christianity while still maintaining hope that the true principles of the Christian faith can encourage social justice and resistance to oppression. Ngugi uses the character of Kihika to represent the way in which Christian principles are incompatible with colonialism. In this way, Ngugi diverges from Fanon because he asserts that it is possible for an institution imposed by the British colonial power, the institution of Christianity, to inspire resistance to imperial government.

In *The Wretched of the Earth*, Frantz Fanon discusses the process of decolonization and the difficulties associated with it. Although post-colonial nations are independent from former colonizing nations, they cannot escape the influence of years of colonial rule. Fanon argues that colonized people have been indoctrinated to believe in their own inferiority and to respect and imitate the culture and customs of the colonizing nation. Fanon explains, "Every colonized people—in other words, every people in whose soul an inferiority complex has been created by the death and burial of its local cultural originality—finds itself face to face with the language of

the civilizing nation; that is, with the culture of the mother country. The colonized is elevated above his jungle status in proportion to his adoption of the mother country's cultural standards" (*Black Skin* 18). Fanon wrote *Black Skin, White Masks* as a response to the condition of the natives of Algeria which was then a French colony. He notes that as people learn to speak French and adopt French customs, they begin to adopt white masks. Concerning someone who chooses to adopt French customs and abandon his heritage, Fanon writes, "He becomes whiter as he renounces his blackness, his jungle" (*Black Skin* 18). As native people give up their heritage and adopt the customs of the colonizing power, they reduce the distance between themselves and the colonial power and reinforce the idea that the customs of the "civilizing" nation are superior to that of their own.

Fanon argues that the structures established by former colonial powers continue to exist in post-colonial nations. Neo-colonialism describes the ways in which colonizing powers cease to exert political control and domination but continue to influence a former colony through economic and social factors. One way in which this occurs is through the mimicry of the colonizer by the formerly colonized people. Fanon explains this phenomenon by linking it with the respect which it is natural for someone to feel towards a culture which represents learning, civilization, and economic prosperity. Fanon uses the example of a black man who visits France and begins to mimic French culture because "to him the country represents the Tabernacle; he changes not only because it is from France that he received his knowledge of Montesquieu, Rousseau, and Voltaire, but also because France gave him his physicians, his department heads, his innumerable little functionaries" (*Black Skin* 23). Upon returning home the travel attempts to maintain those habits acquired in France and, "above all, he adopts a critical attitude towards his compatriots" who continue to follow traditional customs (*Black Skin* 24).

One of the difficulties associated with newly independent nations is that they continue to respect and imitate the customs of the former colonial power because, in the mind of the formerly colonized individual, that nation still represents the height of learning, technology, civilization, and economic power. Fanon explains that his goal in writing *Black Skin, White Masks* is not to prove to the white man that the black man is his equal. Fanon considers the reality of equality to be a simple argument which can be easily proven and established. Instead of engaging in that debate, Fanon explains “My purpose is quite different: What I want to do is help the black man free himself of the arsenal of complexes that has been developed by the colonial environment” (*Black Skin* 30). Even after the official end of colonialism, the impact of years of oppression and subjugation continues to leave a mark on a people group. For years they hear that they are inferior to the superior, civilizing, colonial power, and those false ideas do not easily dissipate. As a result, people continue to imitate the culture of the former colonizing power.

A key area in which former colonizers continue to impact post-colonial nations is through the perpetuation of class systems. Rather than being abolished by the revolutionary forces which reshape the nation, classism continues in the educated upper class citizens who rise to power in the post-colonial government. With the departure of the colonial government, these educated elites fill the power void. Fanon explains, “During the period of decolonization, certain colonized intellectuals have begun a dialogue with the bourgeoisie of the colonialist country...During the period of liberation, the colonialist bourgeoisie looks feverishly for contacts with the elite and it is with these elite that the familiar dialogue concerning values is carried on” (*Wretched* 44). As the colonialist power realizes it is impossible to continue its imperialistic rule of a country, it focuses instead on instilling its own culture and values in the new leaders of the country, the educated elites, and the colonized intellectuals (*Wretched* 44). At the same time, the colonialist

power ignores the peasants or working classes and “the indigenous population is discerned only as an indistinct mass” (*Wretched* 44). The colonialist power’s primary concern is instilling its own values in the rising leaders, the educated elites. Fanon notes that colonized natives “in order to assimilate and experience the oppressor’s culture” must cease to critically consider or evaluate the structures established by the colonizer (*Wretched* 49). The colonized native must adopt “the forms of thought of the colonialist bourgeoisie” if he is to be accepted in the colonialist system (*Wretched* 49). In this way, colonialism produces an elite group of natives who imitate the customs of the colonial power and who cease to question the system of which they are a part.

In the process of decolonization, the native upper classes and educated elites gain positions of power in the new government but continue to imitate the culture and practices of the former colonizing nation. As Eunice Sahle explains, the “educated elite from the upper strata of this structure is the social force that inherits state power at independence” (Sahle 47). However, these new leaders simply imitate the practices of the former colonial power. Sahle notes that Fanon “pays close attention to how the social class structure that emerges out of colonialism limits the transformative potential of decolonization processes in African and elsewhere” (47). The change from colonial to independent nation does not actually improve the condition of the peasants or working classes. These groups continue to be dispossessed and marginalized by the educated elites.

A good example of the relationship between colonial powers and the upper classes of native society is the practice of indirect rule by the British Empire. In order to maintain its imperial power, the British government purposefully worked with the “traditional elites” of native societies as part of “one of the principal strategies of imperial authority, the use of indirect rule” (Peers 63). In an effort to gain the loyalty of the upper classes of the indigenous population, the

colonial government allowed local leaders or rulers to continue in their positions of authority. Native leaders became administrators for the British colonial government. The strategy of indirect rule not only reflects concerns about gaining the loyalty of the native elites, it also demonstrates the limited number of British officials actually on the ground (Peers 64). Because of their leadership positions, indigenous administrators were distinct from the lower classes of society and closely connected to the British Empire. Following in Fanon's footsteps, Ngugi acknowledges that the bourgeoisie, the elite black society tried to imitate British culture but was never fully accepted. He explains, "The intellectuals, the elite, the middle classes also found themselves not quite accepted in the world of the conquerors" (*Homecoming* 10). During British imperialism, the elites tried to imitate British society but they were never accepted as equals.

In *Homecoming*, a collection of essays from 1973 Ngugi reflects on the condition of decolonized African nations. He notes that the class system and the marginalization of the poor does not cease under a new regime. Instead, he argues that a new African bourgeoisie simply replaced the British bourgeoisie. In the introduction to *Homecoming*, Ngugi explains, "The sad truth is that instead of breaking from an economic system whose lifeblood is the wholesale exploitation of our continent and the murder of our people, most of our countries have adopted the same system. There has been little attempt at breaking with our inherited colonial past—our inherited economic and other institutions, apart from blackanizing the personnel running them" (xvi). Ngugi's critical observations about the structure of post-colonial Kenya parallel Fanon's arguments that colonized people imitate the customs of their previous oppressors and perpetuate the same institutions that existed in a colonial environment. Post-colonial theorist Neil Lazarus describes the independence of African nations as a "liberation for the bankers and lawyers and big landowners and...intellectuals, not for the people at large" (12).

Ngugi recognizes the way in which independence simply benefits the upper classes or elites of Kenyan society and in *A Grain of Wheat* he exposes that situation through the depiction of collaborationist and conformist figures such as Karanja and a corrupt elected official. Ngugi focuses his story on the plight of the rural poor in a small village and exposes the corruption of those involved in the new government. Because of the nature of Ngugi's work, Lazarus argues that compared to other postcolonial writers such as Chinua Achebe, Ngugi shows "the greatest sensitivity to and awareness of the plight of the peasantry and the laboring classes" through focusing "not on the activity of urban elites but on local, rural responses to colonialism in Kenya" (21). By addressing the condition of the rural peasant, Ngugi exposes the ways in which the upper class elites have marginalized the poor and continued the oppressive system established under colonial rule.

Another way in which Ngugi resists neo-colonialism and the influence of Britain is by choosing to write in his native language, Gikuyu. Ngugi wrote *A Grain of Wheat* in English but as he began to encounter resistance to his writing about neo-colonialism he began to question using English as his medium. After he wrote a play in Gikuyu which dealt with the plight of the poor, landless people and this play was shut down by the Kenyan authorities, Ngugi realized that he could write about the ills of colonialism but once he began to speak about the evils of neo-colonialism he was silenced by the authorities. Ngugi realized that the people who needed to hear his message the most were the impoverished and uneducated people who could not read English but could understand texts in their own language, Gikuyu. After Ngugi's play was shut down, he was arrested and imprisoned for almost a year and "it was this bitter experience that led Ngugi to resolve to do all his future creative writing in his mother tongue so he could continue to communicate with his target audience—the proletariat who were at the mercy of a parasitic

bourgeoisie and a corrupt avaricious ruling class” (Sandors and Lindfors xii). His decision to write in Gikuyu demonstrates how Ngugi’s primary concern is the condition of the lower class and marginalized individuals who continue to hold second-class citizen status even after their nation becomes independent.

In order to properly evaluate Ngugi’s works it is important to understand Ngugi’s view of literature and the goals he wishes to attain through writing. In a 1966 interview with John Nagenda and Robert Serumaga, Ngugi explains, “I believe in the socialist vision. I believe that a writer must write not only to entertain people, but also to change society for the better. And as far as I am concerned, only if you are working towards a socialist vision, can you be working for the better” (23). The interviewers asked Ngugi, “What is your message” and “What would you like society to become?” Ngugi replied, “I would like to see a socialist East Africa. I would say that as far as I am concerned there is no question of art for art’s sake. I’m concerned with the social and political problems as they are in Africa now—I want to see a change in Africa now” (24). Ngugi’s primary goal with art is to effect social change and he does not value art which fails to inspire reform or address social ills. Because Ngugi does not value art merely for its own sake, his readers do him a great disservice if they do not acknowledge his goals and analyze the political elements in his writing. As Nicole Sieben explains, Ngugi “does not distinguish between his art and his politics” and believes literature is a tool to liberate the mind, empowering people to resist neocolonialism (27). Sieben calls Ngugi as a “revolutionary who uses literature as weapons to challenge colonial European imperialism in Africa and his Kenyan homeland” (27). Because Ngugi’s writings have political purposes, it would be inappropriate to divorce his texts from their historical context or political significance.

As mentioned earlier, Fanon's and Ngugi's philosophies about colonialism converge at some points, in particular when they recognize the ways in which the structure of government continues to privilege the bourgeoisie in decolonized nations. Sandors and Lindfors note that Ngugi's novels reflect the influence of Marx, Engels, Lenin and Fanon. They argue that reading these theorists deeply influenced Ngugi's thinking and shaped Ngugi's next two novels, both of which are "set in contemporary times in Kenya." These novels "contained radical ideas about the plight of peasants and workers trapped in a neocolonial society that, on the eve of independence and even afterward, continued to oppress them" (Sandors and Lindfors xi-xii). Similarly, some scholars have argued that Frantz Fanon "defined anti-colonial nationalism" and discussed the concept of neocolonialism at great length (Kolhe and Tagad 224). Kolhe and Tagad note that Fanon "asserts the rights of colonized peoples to make their own self-definitions, rather than be defined by the colonizers" (224). Kolhe and Tagad argue that Ngugi is a perfect disciple of Fanon because his "prime focus is on ordinary people, not their leaders" and he is "following Fanon's concept of nationalism" when he seeks to "give voice to the people's collective identity and history (225).

In 1979 interview with Amooti Wa Irumbua, Ngugi explains how Frantz Fanon's theories on neocolonialism shaped the formation of his political philosophy. While writing *A Grain of Wheat*, Ngugi was studying and interacting with Fanon's theories. Ngugi recalls reading Fanon's work, *The Wretched of the Earth* and describes it as a "very important eye-opener for me and for other African students at Leeds. I think this was the only Fanon book I read at that time, but I read quite a lot of Caribbean literature at the same time [as] writing *A Grain of Wheat*" (Ngugi; Amooti 105). One can easily see the influence of Fanonian thought in *A Grain of Wheat*. In particular, Ngugi's depiction of characters who embody the characteristics of the collaborationist

bourgeoisie that Fanon describes his work, reflects the influence of Fanon in bringing this situation to Ngugi's attention.

While the influence of Fanon on Ngugi's writing becomes clear in the depiction of the black bourgeoisie and the collaborationist figures who appear in *A Grain of Wheat*, Ngugi does diverge from Fanon's work at some points. In the same 1979 interview, Ngugi explains that studying Marx and Engels helped to "reveal the serious weaknesses and limitations of Fanon, especially in his own petit bourgeois idealism that led him into a mechanical overemphasis on psychology and violence and his inability to see the significance of the rising and growing African proletariat" (Ngugi; Amooti 105). Ngugi differs from Fanon because he believes that Fanon does not properly recognize the importance of the proletariat as the instrument of political change. Ngugi believes that change will take place from the lower levels of society and through an uprising against those elites, including intellectuals, who have adopted European customs and deserted their own people. In *A Grain of Wheat*, Ngugi simultaneously condemns the actions of the upper class elites while praising the actions of those individuals from the proletariat who resist colonialism. Interestingly enough, the model example of the proletariat rebel is the character Kihika, who critiques missionaries but still retains his own Christian faith. Through the character of Kihika, Ngugi diverges from Fanon by focusing on the potential impact of a member of the proletariat and one who still clings to a colonial institution and religion.

In order to understand properly the context in which Fanon and Ngugi wrote, one must situate this discussion in the history of British imperialism in Africa and Kenya specifically. Britain justified its imperial endeavors by linking them with promoting the economic growth of the empire while simultaneously improving the moral and spiritual culture of the colonized nation. Britain could benefit from the natural resources of the colonized nation while sending

missionaries to convert the people and ensure their spiritual well-being. In this way, the goals of colonization and Christianity became conflated and missionaries became empire builders. In fact, some estimates hold that approximately 10,000 British missionaries were serving overseas by the end of the nineteenth century (Peers 59).

The missionaries viewed themselves as conveying light, truth, and civilization to the dark reaches of Africa. They believed that they had a divine mandate to convert native people and eradicate their culture in the name of Christianity. The conversion efforts of missionaries were used to justify imperialism and political oppression and control. The British conceived of themselves as on a civilizing mission where they would be the caretakers of inferior people, teaching the natives their advanced ways of technology, governance, economics, and religion. This paternalistic attitude was enough to self-justify the imperialism of the British government and its reach into Kenya. The combined motivations of economic exploitation and religious conversion led to the British occupation of Kenya beginning in 1888. As Ngugi explains, “Toward the end of the nineteenth century, the British launched a two-pronged attack by the clergy and the soldier to colonise Kenya” (*Homecoming* 132).

Religious motivations undergirded a sense of moral superiority over the native people. The missionaries while still “professing Christian brotherhood, regarded the African Christians as inferior beings” (Narang 124). Even after conversion, African Christians occupied a second-class status among their European counterparts. The missionaries considered their own religion and customs to be superior to native ideas and practices, and they often imposed their own culture onto the Kenyans. Conversion meant rejecting Kenyan culture as a whole, not simply refraining from previous religious practices.

Missionaries sought, sometimes forcibly, to convert the native people, and abolish certain practices which were central to the Kenyan culture. In particular, they tried to eradicate female circumcision and the communal ownership of land. While contemporary readers will likely consider clitoridectomy to be a form of genital mutilation which should be eliminated, it is important to understand the significance of clitoridectomy in the Kenyan culture. It was considered to be a rite of passage, without which a girl could not become a woman. In this way, a converted Christian woman was unable to participate fully in her community because she had refused circumcision by becoming a Christian. The subsequent ostracizing of these women would lead others to critique missionaries for imposing Christianity upon the Kenyan people. Loflin explains, “Female circumcision was (and continues to be) one of the crucial conflicts between Christians and traditionalists: to Christians it is barbaric, but without it, a woman cannot be initiated into her clan” (266).

An integral part of the colonization process was the suppression and eradication of African culture and religious practices. Ngugi remembers, “the measure of your Christian love and charity was in preserving the outer signs and symbols of a European way of life, whether you dressed as Europeans said, whether you had acquired European good manners, liked European hymns and tunes” and most importantly “whether you had refused to have your daughter circumcised” (*Homecoming* 32). Ngugi rejects Christianity because it was imposed upon African people and eradicates their native identity. He claims, “Acceptance of the Christian Church meant the outright rejection of all African customs” (*Homecoming* 32). Ngugi’s greatest critique of the Church is how it serves the goals of capitalism and colonialism. He declares, “The Church became the greatest opponent of the African struggle for freedom” (*Homecoming* 33).

By eliminating initiation rites, missionaries undermined Kenyan culture and the essential connection to the land. Loflin notes, “Christianity detaches the individual from the landscape...through the loss of traditional initiation rites which would connect the individual to the clan and to the land” (Loflin 266). Furthermore, the missionaries often appropriated communal land for their own purposes, ignoring the cultural practices of the Kenyan people. Ngugi explains that, “Religion was something to blind the black races with while the white race stole people’s national property. You know the popular story among our people: the [white man] told people to shut their eyes in prayer, and when later they opened their eyes the land was taken” (*Homecoming* 33). The seizing of lands by colonial administrators, resulted in a destabilization of identity for Kenyan people whose lives were invested in the land which their religion indicated belonged to them. Loflin explains, “The Gikuyu see land as connecting them to God and to their ancestors, as well as to the village community. In the Gikuyu myth of creation, the land was given to them by God” (262). The Gikuyu people did not associate land with ownership or private property. Instead, the communal use of land held religious and cultural significance. Therefore, when in the 1940s, “one in every eight Kikuyu [or Gikuyu] was a tenant on a European-owned farm,” there was great discontent which prompted an uprising (Sahle 50). The “colonial land policies” which dispossessed people of their land “led to social dislocation and marginalization” for anyone who did not support the colonial administration (Sahle 50).

The Mau Mau rebellion from 1952-1959 arose directly in response to the loss of Kenyan land. Those individuals who suffered the loss of their ancestral, communal land sought to regain that land through rebelling against the British government. The dispossession of land was so significant that it was one of the primary grievances of those who resisted the colonial government. The movement termed itself the “Land and Freedom Army” (Sahle 50). Later, the

colonial government began to refer to the rebels as Mau Mau terrorists. Interestingly enough, the term Mau Mau does not actually exist in Gikuyu or Swahili (Narang 126). Harish Narang speculates about the possible origins of the word Mau Mau and two of his suggestions are likely plausible explanations. First, Mau Mau could be the result of the transposition of the Gikuyu words “uma uma” which are translated as “out, out.” Second, Narang suggests that Mau Mau could be derived from “Muma” the Gikuyu word for oath. He suspects that a journalist had heard of the oath taken by the freedom fighters and simply recorded it inaccurately as Mau Mau (126). Both of these explanations are connected to historical fact and provide some important information about the identity of the Mau Mau movement. Certainly the rebels did want to force “out” the British government and they did take oaths to demonstrate their loyalty to the cause. It is unclear why this term was first applied to describe the movement, but Narang offers some plausible explanations. In any case, the word Mau Mau does not actually exist in the Gikuyu language and was certainly not the name chosen by the rebels themselves. The title of “Land and Freedom Army” communicates well the goals of the rebels who sought to fight the forces of capitalism, eliminate colonial rule, and reestablish their communal ways of life.

The Mau Mau rebels were also critical and antagonistic towards Christianity because of its connection to colonialism and the loss of land. In *Homecoming*, Ngugi explains that the Mau Mau movement was essentially anti-Christian. He writes, “The basic objectives of Mau Mau revolutionaries were to drive out the Europeans, seize the government, and give back to the Kenya peasants their stolen lands and property. It is not surprising that it was anti-Europe and anti-Christian” (28). Not only were the rebels anti-Christian, they generally also held to their traditional belief systems and the petitioning of ancestral gods. Ngugi explains, “In the struggle for independence the peasants and often the urban workers invoked their ancestral gods for

strength to fight the foe. They adopted traditional rhythms, songs, and dances to the new needs of the struggle” (*Homecoming* 10). Ngugi recognizes that many rebels considered the fight against the colonial government to be a fight against Christianity. In addition, Ngugi offers his support for the Mau Mau movement, even when the actions of these rebels appear to be violent. He argues, “Violence in order to change an intolerable, unjust social order is not savagery: it purifies man. Violence to protect and preserve an unjust oppressive social order is criminal and diminishes man...Mau Mau violence was anti-injustice” (*Homecoming* 28-29). Despite his support for the Mau Mau movement and recognition that the rebels were anti-Christian, Ngugi depicts a heroic Christian freedom fighter in *A Grain of Wheat*. In this novel, the immortalized hero of the Mau Mau movement is Kihika, a man raised in missionary schools who rejects certain aspects of Christianity, but still retains his faith and employs Christian rhetoric to support the fight for independence.

Ngugi grew up attending missionary schools, much like his fictional character Kihika. His teachers said that the students privileged enough to receive an education were being trained to be the next generation of leaders for Kenya. By leaders, the teacher meant an elite, upper class who would support the colonial government and whose situation was superior to that of the working class. Ngugi reflects, “What we did not know was that we were being groomed to become a buffer state between the propertied white rulers and the harsh realities under which the African peasants and workers lived” (*Homecoming* 49). Ngugi notes that the effect of colonization was to “create an elite who took on the tongue and adopted the style of the conquerors. They hearkened to the voice of the missionary’s God, cried Hallelujah, and raised their eyes to Heaven” (*Homecoming* 10).

In a 1967 interview by Alan Marcuson, Ngugi discusses how he was indoctrinated as a child by well-meaning teachers who subtly insinuated that African children are less intelligent and that no African student could ever hope to be accepted at a prestigious university on the basis of personal merit (26). Ngugi explains in this interview that he used to be “deeply Christian” and “go to church at 5 o’clock in the morning” but that as he learned more he began “trying to remove the central Christian doctrine from the dress of Western culture and seeing how this might be grafted onto the central beliefs of our people” (27). Later in life, Ngugi turned his back on his Christian faith. He became disillusioned with Christianity when he was in college because of all the atrocities he had seen committed in the name of Christianity. In the Marcuson interview, Ngugi describes his transition to unbelief as Christianity “gradually lost its appeal to me as I began to see what it stood for” (28). As he learned what crimes and atrocities Christian committed in the name of their religion, Ngugi became disillusioned with Christianity and abandoned his childhood beliefs.

However, despite his own disillusionment with Christianity, Ngugi does recognize the difference between the principles of Christianity and the distortion of that religion by its supposed adherents. Loflin discusses how Ngugi’s view on Christianity has evolved over the years, from rejecting Christianity to eventually accepting aspects of Christianity. Loflin analyzes the language and characters in *Petals of Blood* and *Devil on the Cross* and concludes that in the earlier novel, *Petals of Blood*, “Ngugi had rejected Christianity and accepted traditional wisdom only in so far as it described communal, socialist society” (274). By *Devil on the Cross*, Ngugi’s view had developed more thoroughly and he “uses both traditional Gikuyu culture and Christianity as elements of contemporary Kenyan culture and as sources for the rhetoric of his characters” (Loflin 274). Loflin believes that this synthesis of Kenyan culture and Christianity in

*Devil on the Cross*, indicates that Ngugi believes Christianity is only a threat if it challenges or undermines the communal and traditional structure of society. In a similar vein, Kamau-Goro argues that because so many people would have been familiar with biblical images, Ngugi uses Christianity and the Bible to “ensure that his putative audience would be in a position to follow his reconfiguration of Christianity and biblical themes to tell the Kenyan story” (9). Kamau-Goro concludes, “Contrary to the assumption that the contact between Christianity and local African cultures always resulted in conflict and alienation,” Ngugi’s early novels *The River Between*, and *Weep Not Child*, both written before his abandoning of Christianity, reveal a certain harmony between Gikuyu and Christian traditions (10). Therefore, even while critiquing how Christianity has been used to justify oppression, Ngugi recognizes that Christianity should not inevitably result in conflict, alienation or injustice. Ngugi’s strongest critique of Christianity seems to be that the British were able to use it justify imperialism and to instill passivity in those who may wish to resist injustice. Greenfield explains, “Ngugi does not advocate Christianity and condemns Christian teachings as lies designed to produce passive acquiescence in an unjust and destructive system” (40). The problem with Christianity lies in the fact that missionaries and those who claim to be Christians are guilty of perpetuating cultural imperialism and supporting the colonial government which is inherently exploitative and oppressive.

Ngugi acknowledges the crimes, intolerance and cultural imperialism perpetuated by the missionary movements, but he maintains that there is a distinction between Christianity properly understood and the religion of these missionaries or the efforts of colonization. On a political front the British government was guilty of imperialism and oppression, and on a religious front the missionaries were guilty of ethnocentrism, the abolition of significant cultural practices, and imposing a capitalistic system. The Empire co-opted Christian teachings to support the belief in

British superiority and to further the colonizing mission of the Empire under the guise of civilizing and converting native cultures. However, Ngugi recognizes that there is a “contradiction inherent in colonialism and its religious ally, the Christian Church” (*Homecoming* 31). Ngugi argues that the basic tenets of Christianity are love and equality between men, but those same Christian faith was “an integral part of that social force—colonialism—which in Kenya was built on the inequality and hatred between men and the consequent subjugation of the black race by the white race” (*Homecoming* 31).

While strongly opposing those forms of Christianity which perpetuate injustice, Ngugi promotes Christian principles which support the fight against oppression. Ngugi explains, “If the Church in the past has been the greatest cause of the misshaping of African souls and cultural alienation, it must, today, work for cultural integration” (*Homecoming* 35). He argues that Jesus “championed the cause of the Jewish masses against both the Pharisees...and the Roman colonialists.” He declares, “If Christ had lived in Kenya in 1952, or in South Africa or Rhodesia today, he would have been crucified as a Mau Mau terrorist, or a Communist” (*Homecoming* 34). The Mau Mau rebels actually fought to reverse the capitalistic practices of missionaries and were staunchly anti-Christian, but Ngugi conflates Christ’s teaching with the cause of the freedom fighters. By suggesting that Christ would be a rebel, Ngugi creates space for Christians to resist colonial oppression. If the founder of the faith is a Mau Mau terrorist, then surely the Christians, who claim to follow him, should also be fighting against the injustices of colonial government rather than remaining complicit within the oppressive system.

Ngugi undermines the binary distinction between Christianity and traditional religion and instead promotes a fusion of these two faith systems. Ngugi believes in a synthesis of the best of African culture and Christian values, such as justice and compassion, rather than the “joyless

drab and dry European middle class culture” (*Homecoming* 35). Ngugi believes that the Church, if it properly understands its mission and the character of Jesus, should be at the forefront of reform and be a “meaningful champion of the needs of all the workers and peasants in this country” (*Homecoming* 34). Even though Ngugi did reject Christianity and declare himself an atheist in his college years, he still sees the possibility of the Church as an agent of reform and social justice. Through the depiction of Kihika, Ngugi creates space for Christians who properly understand their faith and who fight against oppression.

Because Ngugi believed that the socialist writer had a responsibility to effect change through his writing, it is logical to conclude that he wrote *A Grain of Wheat* to further that goal. He does this in a number of ways by revealing the continued existence of colonial structures, depicting black bourgeois politicians who betray their people, and critiquing those aspects of Christianity which perpetuate cultural imperialism. In an interview in October 1964 with Aminu Abdullahi Ngugi explains that if he were to write another book he would place it during the Emergency because “the Kenyan Emergency or the Mau Mau war set in Kenya is a very important factor in the creation of the present individuals in Kenya. It was a very formative factor in nation building” (Ngugi; Abdullahi 11). Ngugi fulfills this prediction when he writes *A Grain of Wheat*, focusing on the condition of the peasants during the Emergency. He believes that the Emergency shapes the nation as people have to choose their loyalties—a dilemma which he presents in *A Grain of Wheat* through the characters of Kihika, Karanja, Gikonyo and the Member of Parliament in the newly independent Kenya. Kihika represents the revolutionary, Karanja, the collaborationist; Gikonyo, the working class; and the Member of Parliament represents the black bourgeoisie who continues the marginalization of the working class and peasants.

Gikonyo's interaction with the MP represents the contrast between the traditional African ideals concerning property and the capitalistic ideas promoted by the British colonial government which are now perpetuated by the MP. Gikonyo, along with five other men, has been planning to buy the farm of Englishman Richard Burton. The six men plan to buy and jointly share this farm. By purchasing this land together, Gikonyo and the other men reverse the trend of capitalism and return to the more traditional, communal ownership of land. Gikonyo's attempt to return to native practices is cut short by the MP's betrayal of his trust. The MP, allegedly an advocate for the people, refuses to grant Gikonyo a loan and instead purchases the land for himself (*Grain* 169). He is a collaborator figure who conforms to European ideas of private property. This man is a good example of the bourgeoisie that Fanon describes in his work. By purchasing the land, this man continues to imitate the former oppressor and adopt British institutions.

The extent of the politician's crime takes on greater significance in light of Ngugi's view of capitalism. Ngugi considers capitalism to be anti-human and the opposite of African traditional communal culture. He explains, "We must break with capitalism, whose imperialistic stage—that of colonialism and neo-colonialism—has done so much harm to Africa and dwarfed our total creative spirit. Capitalism can only produce anti-human culture, or a culture that is only an expression of sectional, warring interests. African culture used to be the most communal when and where economic life and the means of production were communally organized and controlled" (*Homecoming* 12-13). Because private property is a western concept, when the MP chooses to purchase the farm land rather than allow Gikonyo and the other men to buy it to share amongst themselves, he is betraying not only Gikonyo, but his nation and the core of his civilization. The MP now imitates the culture and practices of his former oppressor, Britain.

The contrast between Gikonyo and the newly elected MP represents the difference between those who resist and those who conform to colonial practices. The MP may have participated in the resistance as a revolutionary, but in actuality he is subject to imperialistic thinking when he adopts colonial practices. When he purchases the land himself, he betrays his friendship with Gikonyo, but more significantly, he betrays his heritage and native beliefs about the importance of land. The Mau Mau rebels fought for the land, but in this situation the administrator of the new government buys the land for himself, taking it away from the peasants, and following in the footsteps of the imperial administrators.

The government has not changed in essence, only in appearance. Gikonyo realizes, “Internal self-government had not changed preferential treatment for Europeans and Asians” (*Grain* 59). As he walks through the city of Nairobi, Gikonyo sees that it was “never an African city. The Indians and Europeans controlled the commercial and social life of the city. The African only came there to sweep the streets, drive the buses, shop and then go home to the outskirts before nightfall” (*Grain* 61). Yet, Gikonyo has a “vision of African businessmen like himself taking over all these premises” (*Grain* 61). Gikonyo’s vision appears to be a realistic one given his dedication and hard work, but he realizes the futility of his hopes when he learns that the MP has purchased the land for himself. Gikonyo, a representative of the peasant or lower class, cannot alter his position or improve his condition. He continues to be the victim of marginalization by a new black government rather than a white colonial one. Gikonyo later explains that the people who are prospering in the decolonized nation are “those who did not take part in the [Mau Mau] Movement, the same who ran to the shelter of schools and universities and administration. And even some who were outright traitors and collaborators” (*Grain* 68). In this scene, Gikonyo realizes the truth of what Fanon observed and discussed; he recognizes that those

who “taste the fruits of independence” are the upper class elites who betrayed their country and mimicked the colonial power (*Grain* 68).

Just as Gikonyo and the MP represent the peasants and the bourgeoisie, Kihika and Karanja represent two sides of the Mau Mau rebellion. Narang explains, “Kihika represents the revolutionary youth who saw a basic unity in the struggle of the colonial world and who sacrificed everything for freedom. Karanja, on the other hand, represents the collaborationists who are basically cowards and who put self before society” (Narang 140). Kihika leads the people, spurs them on to battle, inspires many, and even in his death continues to fuel the cause. Early in the novel, the reader learns, “Kihika, a son of the land, was marked out as one of the heroes of deliverance” (*Grain* 14). Kihika is described with terms heavy with religious symbolism, linking him to the savior figure. He is the “terror of the whiteman” who can “move mountains and compel thunder from heaven,” characteristics which are associated with a deity (*Grain* 17). Even after his death, Kihika continues to inspire people because of his example. As they plan their Independence Day celebration they pledge “We cannot let Kihika’s name die. He will live in our memory, and history will carry his name to our children in years to come” (*Grain* 23).

In sharp contrast to the image of Kihika the rebel, Karanja fulfills the image of the collaborator who chooses to support the British government. Karanja wants to remain near his love, Mumbi, so he chooses to betray his people and become a collaborator for the colonial government. He renounces his oath and becomes a homeguard, to the shock and dismay of his friends (*Grain* 143). As a homeguard and later as chief, Karanja acts as a buffer between the peasants and the British colonial government. When he becomes the chief he becomes “more terrifying than the one before him” and leads “homeguards into the forest to hunt down the

Freedom Fighters” (*Grain* 147). Because he has so clearly betrayed his people, many people believe that Karanja is actually responsible for Kihika’s death. Because of this betrayal, Karanja fears the backlash he will experience after the British withdraw. While the British are still in power, Karanja’s years of service will serve him well. If they withdraw, however, Karanja will experience the hatred of his native people. Therefore, Karanja considers his good fortune to be directly connected to the continuance of colonial rule. Karanja values his position with the British so much that he would “rather endure...humiliation than lose the good name he had built up for himself among the white people. He lived on that name and the power it brought him” (*Grain* 36). Karanja is a clear example of the collaborationist who tries to gain the favor of his conquerors in order to achieve personal gain and power.

Karanja’s role as a collaborator becomes increasingly clear in his anxiety over the imminent departure of the white rulers. He has heard rumors that the British rulers will be returning to England but “what Karanja feared more than the rumours was their possible confirmation. As long as he did not know the truth, he could interpret the story in the only way that gave him hope: the coming of black rule would not mean, could never mean the end of white power” (*Grain* 38). In a rare moment of honesty and vulnerability, Karanja tells Mumbi why he is a homeguard. He says, “You don’t understand. Did you want us all to die in the Forest and in Detentoin so that the whiteman could live here on this land alone? The whiteman is strong. Don’t you ever forget that. I know, because I have tasted his power” (*Grain* 148). Karanja represents those individuals who became collaborators with the colonial power whether due to fear, respect, or awe of the Englishman’s power. Later, Karanja’s fears over the coming independence and new black government reflect the anxieties of those who supported the colonial power when it was in its strength.

Overall, the tone of this book is largely critical of Christianity and the missionary efforts which are linked with colonialism. In the beginning of the book it is established that the origins of the Mau Mau movement can “be traced to the day the whiteman came to the country, clutching the book of God in both hands” (*Grain* 10). The natives built a temporary shelter for the missionary, but he then “imperceptibly acquired more land to meet the growing needs of his position” (*Grain* 11). The elders realize that “beyond the laughing face of the whiteman” was “a long line of other red strangers who carried, not the Bible, but the sword” (*Grain* 12). The missionaries are simply forerunners of the imperialist government and their acquisition of land foreshadows the widespread seizing of communal lands which resulted in the Mau Mau rebellion.

Upon conversion, the natives begin to desecrate holy places and clearly define themselves in opposition to their families and their culture. The missionary’s tongue was “coated with sugar” and “his humility was touching” and he won a few converts (*Grain* 10). The converts began “speaking a faith foreign to the ways of the land” and “they trod on sacred places to show that no harm could reach those protected by the hand of the Lord” (*Grain* 11).

Kihika complicates this portrayal of the Church because he is a rebel and heroic leader who also subscribes to certain Christian teachings. Those who survive him recall, “Kihika believed in prayer. He even read the Bible every day and took it with him wherever he went” (*Grain* 22). From a young age, Kihika would conceive of himself as “a saint, leading Kenyan people to freedom and power” (*Grain* 83). Kihika reads the story of Moses and repeated it to anyone who will listen to him (*Grain* 85). Kihika even underlines certain passages in red, such as Psalm 72: “He shall judge the poor of the people, he shall save the children of the needy, and shall break in pieces the oppressor” (*Grain* 22). There has been much debate among scholars

over the significance of Kihika underlining certain passages of the bible in red and others in black, but the key theme unifying these verses is the concept that God supports those who fight to end oppression and establish justice. Kihika's underlined passages reflect his true religious beliefs and those aspects of Christianity which he chooses to accept.

At the same time, Kihika further complicates the view of Christianity by rejecting aspects of the religion as evidenced by his condemnation and killing of missionaries. One of the first people to die at the hands of the rebels is Rev. Jackson (*Grain* 85; 194). Kihika feels distant from the church because of his different cultural practices and he even leaves his missionary school after an encounter with a teacher who cannot provide any biblical evidence to support his claim that female circumcision is wrong. Teacher Muniu declares unequivocally, "As Christians we are forbidden to carry on such practices" and attempts to support this scripturally but fails to do so (*Grain* 85). In the next class, Teacher Muniu prepares to punish Kihika for questioning him and Kihika runs away from school. He tells his father that he would "rather work on the land" than attend another missionary school (*Grain* 87). By returning to the land, Kihika returns to his roots and his native heritage. Later, Kihika explains, "Kenya belongs to black people... Whether the land was stolen from Gikuyu, Ukabi or Nandi, it does not belong to the whiteman. And even if it did, shouldn't everybody have a share in the common shamba, our Kenya? This soil belongs to Kenyan people. Nobody has the right to sell or buy it" (*Grain* 98). By leaving the missionary school and returning to the land and a communal view of property, Kihika takes a middle ground between the two cultures. The result is a hybrid religion which combines elements of religious upbringing and traditional practices. Kihika represents a middle ground between Christianity and traditional African beliefs. He resists capitalism and the abolition of certain cultural practices like clitoridectomy but he still invokes those aspects of Christianity which advance his position.

Kihika may be the most prominent figure to employ Christian rhetoric in the cause of independence but his work follows in the footsteps of Harry Thuku who the people consider to be God's prophet. Thuku was a "man with God's message" who proclaimed, "Go unto Pharaoh and say unto him; let my people go, let my people go. And people swore they would follow Harry through the desert. They would tighten their belts around the waist, ready to endure thirst and hunger, tears and blood until they set foot on Canaan's shore" (*Grain* 12). Equating Thuku with a Moses character places him within the context of the Christian faith. Many freedom fighters rejected Christianity because of its association with missionaries and colonialism, but Ngugi describes Thuku with language laden with Old Testament significance. The use of religious symbolism to describe Thuku's actions demonstrates how Christian ideals, properly understood, support the abolition of injustice. The association of Thuku with Moses is just one of the many examples of how different characters in this text relate to biblical models. The connection between biblical archetypes and characters in this story demonstrates the relationship between Christian principles and the actions of the Mau Mau rebels.

In addition to Thuku being linked to Moses, there are several characters in this story who have biblical parallels, a fact which further reveals the connection between Christian teaching and opposition to injustice. John Anonby explains that different characters in this work can be understood in terms of the biblical figures of Moses, Judas, and Jesus. Certain characters, such as Mugo, even evaluate themselves in terms of biblical figures (*Grain* 197). Mugo believes that he has a calling to lead his people just as Moses led Israel but in actuality Mugo is best described a Judas figure because he betrays Kihika and refuses to be a part of the Mau Mau movement (*Grain* 196-198). Similarly, Kihika's body hangs from a tree, paralleling Jesus' crucifixion and the biblical concept that someone hung on a tree is cursed, implying that Kihika is properly

interpreted as a savior figure. Anonby argues, “Kihika’s role as a deliverer of his people and his commitment to the goal of repossessing the Promised Land—symbolically fusing the narratives of Moses and Gideon—is given additional complexity by Ngugi’s depiction of Kihika’s capture and death” which links him to Jesus’s sacrifice (79).

Because Ngugi viewed writing as a confession and because of the similarities between his background and Kihika’s, it seems that Kihika’s actions are Ngugi’s confession, his view of how one should act in this situation. Ngugi explains, “Writing I take to be a kind of confession where the writer is almost confessing his own private reactions to various individuals, to various problems; you know the feeling of shame here, the feeling of inadequacy there, the love-hatred” (Ngugi; Abdullahi,15). Therefore, there is a likely a strong connection between Ngugi’s beliefs and Kihika’s actions. Ngugi creates Kihika as a model of negotiation between two religions and political philosophies, someone who takes the best from both worlds and creates a synthesized solution. Kihika’s use of religious language to promote rebellion reflects Ngugi’s view that Christianity, properly understood, supports rebellion and change. Because the Mau Mau movement was anti-Christian, to depict a leader of the movement as Christian appears at first glance to be contradictory. However, Ngugi presents in Kihika an edited Christianity, retaining the principles of peace, compassion, and justice, while erasing Christian objections to African cultural practices such as female circumcision.

Some scholars question whether Kihika’s faith is genuine and suggest that instead he simply uses religious language to motivate people. Narang argues that Kihika rejects the Christian faith and simply uses religion to motivate people. He believes that Kihika is a shrewd leader who employs religious language and examples to motivate people but who does not actually believe in the Christian faith. Narang claims, “Kihika is an ideal freedom fighter, who,

realizing that Christianity had come to have a hold on the minds of many and that the priests were using it as a weapon to damn the freedom struggle, uses the same religious sentiment to arouse the people into action” (137). Narang suggests that Kihika resists the colonizing efforts of the missionary and the soldier because he does not succumb to religious indoctrination; he only uses religious terminology to motivate people (132). However, Narang does not sufficiently account for Kihika’s bible which shows extensive wear and signs of use. Kihika’s deep involvement with the word indicates a greater level of commitment to Christian teaching than merely co-opting the rhetoric to incite rebellion. Furthermore, Narang’s view does not take into account Ngugi’s view of Christianity and belief that the logical conclusion of Christianity would be resistance to colonialism. If Ngugi believes that Jesus would have been a Mau Mau freedom fighter, then it is not a stretch to claim that Kihika is a Christian and a freedom fighter.

In contrast to Narang’s claim, John Anonby heavily relies upon Ngugi’s view of Jesus as a freedom fighter. Anonby argues that Ngugi uses Kihika as an example of his own Christian faith. Anonby argues that Ngugi represents a “contextualized liberation theology” a branch of Christian faith which emphasizes the importance of social justice (75). Anonby suggests that Ngugi’s positive understanding of Christianity shapes his depiction of Kihika as a Mau Mau terrorist who grounded his actions in biblical teaching. In a similar vein, Mathuray argues that Ngugi tries to separate Christianity from its ally, colonialism through the portrayal of Kihika as a Christian rebel. Mathuray claims, “The language the forest fighters used involved a liberal rephrasing of Christian symbols, Biblical narratives, and Church hymns—a discourse turned against itself” (42). While some scholars will argue that Ngugi’s work is profoundly Christian, Mathuray argues that instead the rebels use Christianity against its ally, colonialism (45). Noting how other scholars have almost exclusively analyzed the nature of “colonial Christianity,”

Mathuray decides to study the other symbols and metaphors within *A Grain of Wheat* and the role of Gikuyu prophecy and history. Mathuray argues that leaders fused “the content of Gikuyu prophetic and Christian eschatological narratives” (53). Mathuray concludes that “Kihika also represents the synthesis in Ngugi’s attempt to specify the appropriate Christian messianic narrative for the anti-colonial struggle” (42).

Mathuray comes closest to the mark when he recognizes that the religion of this novel is not Christianity but instead a synthesis of Christianity and native religious elements. Mathuray is right to note that this novel continually references different aspects of Gikuyu traditional belief, such as the story of the first man and woman which is retold in the lives of Gikonyo and his wife Mumbi. However, an important aspect which Mathuray does not address is that even Kihika’s religion is a Christianity purged of objectionable elements. When he underlines different passages of scripture, Kihika chooses which parts of the Christian faith he would like to adopt and follow. It would be quite incongruous if Kihika was to underline Romans 13:1: “All authority comes from God.” Kihika avoids those passages in the Bible which instruct people to submit to their governing authorities because they do not support his objectives and goals. In this way, Kihika represents a cleansed version of Christianity with the objectionable values expunged from the text.

Kihika’s unique brand of Christianity allows him to murder missionaries and condemn their conversion efforts. He retains aspects of native Gikuyu practices and intermingles these values and beliefs with Christian principles and examples. He has the freedom to maintain those aspects of Gikuyu culture which were condemned by Christians, such as the issue of female circumcision was so important that Kihika left the missionary school. He certainly retains some aspects of Christian theology but he rejects those teachings which do not support his values and

goals. In this way, Kihika represents a fusion of Gikuyu traditional practices and the Christian faith.

Instead of completely rejecting or adopting Christianity, Kihika represents the appropriation of the positive aspects of Christianity while maintaining a core connection to African customs. Ngugi's greatest critique of the Church was its alliance with colonialism and capitalism, and its influence in eradicating African traditions and identity. Because Kihika breaks away from mainstream religion, kills missionaries, and promote female circumcision, he clearly separates himself from what Ngugi perceives as the errors of the Church, while still appropriating biblical doctrines such as love, peace, and justice as support for his rebellion against colonial authority. Rather than falling into the simplistic binaries of Christian faith and traditional practices, Kihika represents a synthesis of both these worlds. He adopts those principles of Christianity which support resisting oppression and injustice while still maintaining a connection to African culture and traditional practices such as female circumcision. This synthesis is what is necessary for Ngugi's envisioned Marxist society characterized by equality and justice rather than the classism which he observes in post-colonial Kenyan society. Kihika embodies the synthesis of Christianity with aspects of African culture and represents the reforms Ngugi would support.

In *A Grain of Wheat*, Ngugi interacts with Fanon's theory about the struggles of decolonization, including the educated elite's mimicry of the former colonial power and the continued oppression of the lower classes in an independent nation. Ngugi exposes the condition of the peasant who experiences oppression at the hands of Christian Church and missionary endeavors as well as at the hand of the newly elected government officials. Through the contrast between various characters, Ngugi addresses the issues of collaboration and the allure of colonial

power. Amidst this criticism of Christianity and colonialism, Ngugi offers hope for redemption through the figure of Kihika who separates Christian principles from their incongruous connection to colonialism. Kihika's synthesis of Christian teaching with traditional customs and his support for the existence of communal land allows him to navigate the boundaries between these two worldviews and support the fight against colonial Britain. While Kihika's work is short-lived and he dies a martyr before the success of independence his legacy lives on and endures. Unlike Fanon, who fully rejects the cultural practices imposed by colonial governments, Ngugi recognizes the value of Christian teaching and uses Kihika to represent the appropriate role of Christianity as an agent of social justice and resistance in oppressive systems.

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