



LAND CONFLICT IN POSTCOLONIAL AFRICA IN THE NOVELS OF NGUGI WA THIONG'O

Marie-Jeanne NGELEMA Digumefe

PhD in English Literature Scholar

(University of Kisangani)

M.A in English Literature

PGD in Letters and English Civilization

B.A in Letters and English Civilization

Ed.PGD in English and African Cultures

Ed.B. in English and African Cultures

1. Introduction

Our ancestors lost their own land because of the ignorance, poverty, unawareness and ill-treatment. The white men came to colonize our grand fathers, to preach them God meanwhile exploiting African land. When our ancestors noticed that there was no place to feed their animals, no place to cultivate, then they started claiming through songs and how their children were going to survive in the future. The loss of land, therefore, is the sign of the broken axis of given people.

The text asserts it as follows:

Weep Not, Child is a novel loss. It moves through many losses, beginning with the loss of land. But land here is more than just the earth or soil, for farming and harvest. It is also the compact with an ancestral deity. It is a foundation place in the long narrative of people from the cosmos to their place on earth. The land is in fact the myth of the people-the promised contract, what anchors them on earth and in heaven (Ben Okri in W.N.Ch: Introduction)

2. Definition of Land Conflict

A conflict, as defined by sociologists, is a social fact in which at least two parties are involved and whose origins are differences either in interests or in the social position of the parties (Imbusch 1999).

A land conflict is defined as a social fact in which at least two parties are involved, the root of which are different interests over the property rights to land: the right to use the land, to manage the land, to generate an income from the land, to exclude others from the land, to transfer it and the right to compensation for it. A land conflict can be understood as a misuse, restriction or dispute over property rights to land (Wehrmann 2005).

3. Land Conflict in *Weep not, Child*

The majority of the disputes and tensions that arise in *Weep Not, Child* have to do with land ownership. Because white settlers like Mr. Howlands came to Kenya and took possession of farms belonging to black families, it's obvious they don't have a true right to the land. Unfortunately, though, this doesn't mean they don't benefit from their newly acquired property. In keeping with this, Ngotho correctly believes that land ownership leads to power, since having a farm is the only form of stability in a country that is at odds with itself. Mr. Howlands, for his part, recognizes this connection between land ownership and power—so much so, in fact, that his conception of what it means to have a farm is wrapped up in notions of dominion and authority, as if by claiming a plot of earth he can assert his will and subjugate not only the people who work for him, but the land itself.

This stands in stark contrast to Ngotho's ideas about land ownership, since he approaches the matter with a spiritual kind of reverence, understanding the instrumental role the earth has played in shaping his culture. As such, Ngũgĩ presents readers with two ways of looking at land ownership, ultimately demonstrating that Mr. Howlands's notion of using the earth for his own benefit is a power-hungry and exploitative way to engage with nature.

Ngũgĩ emphasizes the importance of land ownership early in *Weep Not, Child*. "Any man who had land was considered rich," he writes. "If a man had plenty of money, many motor cars, but no land, he could never be counted as rich. A man who went with tattered clothes but had at least an acre of red earth was better off than the man with money."

This is no doubt because the Kenyan government is in such turmoil that only the ability to produce one's own wealth is valuable. Indeed, people like Jacobo plant pyrethrum (a plant that makes insecticide and medicine), thereby creating a source of riches that they can sell on their own instead of working for low wages on someone else's farm.

The problem, of course, is that many Kenyans are unable to do this because white people like Mr. Howlands moved onto their land while they were absent during World War I. “We came home worn-out but very ready for whatever the British might give us as a reward,” Ngotho says, telling his family about what it was like to return after the war. “But, more than this, we wanted to go back to the soil and court it to yield, to create, not to destroy. But N’go! The land was gone. My father and many others had been moved from our ancestral lands. He died lonely, a poor man waiting for the white man to go. [...]

The white man did not go and he died a Muhoi on this very land.” Not only have Ngotho and his family been dispossessed of their land, they’re also forced to work on the very soil to which they are entitled. When Ngotho says that his father “died a Muhoi” on his own land, he means that the old man was essentially a serf, someone working for a place to live. By outlining this injustice early in the novel, Ngugi shows readers why Ngotho is so insistent upon reclaiming his land. After all, it belongs to him and his family.

At the same time, Ngotho’s motivation to win back his land isn’t a simple matter of justice and ownership. Rather, he wants to nurture the earth, using the “soil” “to create” instead of “destroy.” As such, readers see that he has a profound respect for the land, one that transcends selfish notions of proprietorship. This is why he works for Mr. Howlands. Simply put, he will take any opportunity to interact with the land that belonged to him and his ancestors, as he feels a responsibility to maintain this slice of earth. For example, when he walks alongside Mr. Howlands and surveys the grounds, he is acutely aware of his connection to the land. “For Ngotho felt responsible for whatever happened to this land. He owed it to the dead, the living, and the unborn of his line, to keep guard over this shamba,” Ngũgĩ notes. The bond Ngotho has with this farm goes beyond the superficial notion of ownership, especially because he feels indebted to “the unborn of his line,” who he hopes will benefit and prosper because of his commitment to the land.

Like Ngotho, Mr. Howlands also feels strongly touched about the farm. In fact, his connection to the land is rather surprising, considering that he didn’t grow up in Kenya and could most likely buy and operate a farm almost anywhere in the world. Nonetheless, he is devoted to what he sees as his corner of the earth. Rather unexpectedly, he even conceives of his connection to this land in spiritual terms. “There was only one god for him—and that was the farm he had created, the land he had tamed,” Ngũgĩ writes. Strangely enough, this kind of spiritual bond to the earth is similar to the way Ngotho approaches the notion of land ownership, especially considering the fact that Ngotho thinks about losing the farm as a “spiritual loss.”

However, there is a notable difference between the way these two men conceive of the earth. Whereas Ngotho sees the land as part of his cultural and familial heritage—part of a way of life that existed before him and will go on existing after he’s dead—Mr.

Howlands mistakenly thinks that he has “created” this farm. In other words, he thinks he has total dominion and control over something that in reality is much bigger and more significant than his temporary and arbitrary ownership. This, Ngugi insinuates, is a foolish and egocentric way of thinking, a worldview that springs from the false belief that land ownership means anything other than treating and maintaining the earth with respect.

4. Causes and Effects of Land Conflict in *Dreams in a Time of War*

The causes of land conflict was the black people who did not find the liberty in their land because of the white men settled in and they exploited the land and took the black men as the slaves in their own land. The black men became nomad people and they lost their own land because of people’s movements.

Here below the evidence from the book:

The loss of Land, therefore, is the sign of the broken axis of given people. Land comes to stand for language, dignity, selfhood, independence, and freedom. It is this mystical sense of the land that is at the symbolic heart of Weep Not, Child, that gives the novel its rootedness, it is poignancy, it is depth of feeling (W.N.Ch. Introduction)

Takashi Yamano and Klaus Deininger (2005) wrote:

“The second most common reason for conflicts is over inheritance, which exclusively occurs among relatives. In the past five years, it appears that there are more conflicts related to land sales. As the value of land increases due to population pressure, agricultural commercialization, and urbanization, it is expected that the land sales market will develop over time, however, if property rights are not clearly defined, there could be more cases of land conflicts related to land sales.”

In fact the land is the body of the ancestral deity. To lose it is to lose connection with the gods of people, to be unmoored and unhoused in time. Land here has profoundly different meanings to the colonist and to the colonized: to one it is a source of power, compared to the body of a woman- a haven, an escape from home, a new homeland, and an act of conquest (W.N.Ch).

Takashi Yamano and Klaus Deininger (2005) wrote, “Some underlying factors, such a population pressure, agricultural commercialization, and urbanization, have contributed to the increasing number of land conflicts, and the current land tenure systems in Africa may not be well-equipped to resolve such conflicts (Cotula, Toulmin, and Hesse, 2004; Van Donge, 1999).

5. Land Conflict in Dreams in a Time of War

Ngugi's whole family is characterised by the problem of land. When they knew that their land is no longer theirs, life becomes miserable in wa Thiong'o's family.

Everything started to fall when Ngugi's father returned from exile to find that his land bought under an oral agreement was later sold by the owner to a missionary who was in a perfect relationship with white settlers.

Eventually my father bought land in Limuru from Njamba Kibuku, He paid in goats under the traditional system of oral agreement in the presence of witnesses. Later, Njamba sold the same land to Lord Reverend Stanlay Kahahu. (DTW, 19)

The Oral agreement was not possible to prove. So, they lost the land and everything that belonged to them: bush, rivers, farms, etc. This lost affected the family life ever and ever. Ngugi wrote about it in the passage below:

I learned that our land was not quite our land; that our compound was part of property owned by an African landlord, Lord Reverend Stanley Kahahu, or Bwana Stanley as we called him. (DTW,11).

6. Conclusion

The fight for land's right and ownership are the main concern in the literature of Ngugi wa Thiong'o. It is quite real to say that the main source of inspiration for his writing is land. Land conflict made Ngugi a writer, he writes about land, his plays main themes are all around the land. Nobody can read Ngugi's fiction without reading about land. Land is the important theme in not only Kenyan literature but also in postcolonial African writings.

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