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## **The *NGURARIO* or Marriage in Fiction and Real Life**

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**Abstract:** This paper analyses the *NGURARIO* or marriage ceremony in fiction and real life. We will study Ngugi's *I Will Marry When I Want*, a subversive book and Manthia Diawara's documentary film *Who Is Afraid of Ngugi?* The first text is the English version of *Ngaahika Ndeenda*, a play in kikuyu, critical of the regime and performed by peasants and workers. The film is showing how Ngugi was crowned on his return in 2002 to Kenya despite the tragedy that results in his return. The two texts include the performance of the *Ngurario*, the final step in a marriage ceremony. The film echoes cultural pessimism raised by the play.

### **Introduction**

*I will Marry When I Want* is a play in three acts: the first act introduces the main characters and the major topic. The second one contains two scenes dealing in detail with marriage, religious issues and the decisive moment of the Christian *Ngurario*. The third and last act also includes two scenes. The first one shows a conflict about the pregnancy of Gathoni, the daughter of Kiguunda, one of the major protagonists. The last scene discusses the family bankruptcy due to a bank loan.

This paper analyses the *NGURARIO* or marriage ceremony from fiction and real life perspectives through Ngugi's *I Will Marry When I Want* a subversive book and Manthia Diawara's documentary film *Who Is Afraid of Ngugi?* The first text is the English version of *Ngaahika Ndeenda*, a play in Kikuyu, critical of the regime and performed by peasants and workers. The film shows how Ngugi was crowned on his return in 2002 to Kenya despite the tragedy that marked his homecoming. The play, as well as the movie, includes the performance of the

*NGURARIO*, the final stage in a marriage ceremony. The film also addresses cultural pessimism raised by the play.

Curiously enough, this play led Ngugi to jail. The question which comes to our mind is: what does the play contain that he has not stated in his previous books? Corruption, unemployment, landlessness, the impact of foreign culture, religions, and marriage are the issues at stake in his books. But we can notice that Ngugi is obsessed by marriage affairs.

According to Jurgen Ernst Muller, the media are not isolated. The use of intermediality<sup>i</sup> will help us understand the social nature of these literary texts as they address what is hidden behind textual discourse. In other terms, what marriage plays out is deeply rooted in political issues.

The equilibrium or the downfall of a character is set in motion by the success or failure of the running of his family life. Individual and collective destructive forces are entrenched in people's ability of managing their marital status. A dysfunctional family and its "Dis-membering" can affect, in many ways, the stability of society. Likewise, sex and marriage are intertwined with power. As a result, they deserve serious scrutiny. This justifies the attention we are going to devote to the *Ngurario*.

We will look at the ways in which the film addresses this pivotal shift from cultural pessimism to factual optimism. More importantly, we will also pinpoint how fiction and real life can merge; and how Ngugi's Marxist cultural contradiction is unveiled as the film is performed in English. Ngugi discovered that 'a work could not have an ideological effect except in performance which is defined as 'the text in the moment of its actualization.'" How does the play deal with marriage? The pessimism deriving from the use of cultural codes is superseded by the optimism resulting from the author's performance.

## **I / Understanding Marriage**

Marriage should be understood from a general perspective to a particular one. *The Encyclopedia Britannica* confirms the social nature of marriage also called matrimony or wedlock by defining it as



A legally and socially sanctioned union between one or more husbands and one or more wives that accords status to their offspring and is regulated by laws, rule, customs, beliefs, and attitudes that prescribe the rights and duties of the partners. The universality of marriage within different societies and cultures is attributed to the many basic social and personal functions it performs, such as procreation and provision for sexual gratification and regulation, care of children and their education and socialization, regulation of line of descent, division of labor between the sexes, economic production and consumption and provision for satisfaction of personal needs for affection, status and companionship....

Union and culture, rights and obligations are the key words here. Marriage is a union between a man and a woman but it differs from one culture to another. It is an institution and an occasion of celebration of a culture. This justifies Ngugi's cultural pessimism because the European form of marriage is replacing African norms. Kwame Nkrumah, for instance, compares the festivities of death, birth and marriage in the Nzima society

Contrairement à la coutume du monde occidental, personne ne s'occupait de l'Etat-civil dans les régions reculées de la Côte de l'Or. Une naissance, un mariage, enterrement, ne se faisaient remarquer que parce qu'ils donnaient lieu à des manifestations. Selon la coutume des tribus, il suffisait qu'une mère se rappelât le nombre de fêtes nationales célébrées depuis la naissance de son enfant, pour déterminer son âge. » [...] Chez les Akans race à laquelle appartiennent les Nzimas, on honore plus le décès que la naissance et le mariage.

In « *I Will Marry When I Want* », the playwright focuses on anti-traditionalism debate, business and marriage issue, marriage and patriotism, marriage and money, marriage and poverty or richness, polygamy to help the reader understand what marriage is or should be for an African.

### **I/ Kiguunda's Family**

Marriage is tackled from specific angles in Ngugi's play. Kiguunda, one of the major characters, condemns women because of their gender. Through the character of Wangeci, women are also accused of looking down on the cultural heritage of the continent:

You women, you are always thinking of weddings p.21 [...] we take it out on our wives p.105 [...] Who wanted a church wedding, you an old woman, wanting to go through a humiliating ceremony And all because of looking down upon our culture. You saw fools going for foreign customs, And you followed in their footsteps p.109

The general accusation is replaced by the specific case of Wangeci. Her vision of marital life is stigmatized both as a wife and as a mother. She is anti-traditionalist as shown by the quotation above. The wife urges her husband to accept the Christian wedding ceremony. They had to borrow money to face the cost and the requirement of the Christian Ngurario (p.85) including the wedding cake, the Wedding dress, the Wedding picture, the Wedding column, the Wedding reception, the Wedding hymn and the Wedding ring. A modern church wedding therefore requires a lot of things and they cannot enter the holy church (p.84) without such a ceremony. A church marriage, thus described, is costly

Traditional laws and customs are opposed to the Christian religious' system and modernism in marriage. By saying 'I have properly married her, having paid all the bridewealth, according to our national ways (p.50), Kiguunda is showing his approval and obedience of African norms. This form of introspective affirmation unveils his unhappiness and his general state of mind.

Wangeci is the type of woman who considers marriage as a business as well. A reception atmosphere is created by Kigunnda, the farmer labourer and his wife Wangeci. They were getting ready to receive AHA Kioi wa Kanoru, a wealthy farmer and businessman. They were trying to guess the reason why this rich man has decided to pay them a visit. The husband was thinking that Kioi has planned to buy his one and half acres, a plot well situated in a dry flat plain based on the letter he received from Kioi's great friend Ikuua wa Nditika (p.30). The wife was thinking of a possible marriage between their daughter and John, the son of the rich man. The economic aspect is reinforced by the presence of the Title deed and the marital ideas are supportive of the quality of the visitors. The wife, paradoxically and implicitly, encourages the daughter to travel to Mombasa with John the son of the rich Kioi. This is what appears in her statement.

why don't you get yourself a husband who will buy you beds  
p.16 [...] love knows no fear p.21 [...] I don't much care for  
If Gratin marries into the Kioi family or not. All I care is for  
Ghatoni to marry a man. It is only that the wedding ceremony  
will cost a lot of money (p. 86)

As a result, he made Gathoni pregnant and kicks her away. This violent act goes against Wangeci's dream. The couple's desire of rebuilding their family in a modern way remained unfulfilled.

The mother's implicit approval was opposed to Kiguunda unambiguous refusal. His position concerning the union of his daughter Gathoni and the businessman's son John is unveiled when he said "when did kiois son marry you, I want you to take back this dress to him and all these other fineries. Shall I punish my own daughter and ruin her future" (p.62). Although he is concerned about the happiness of his daughter he is disturbed about making it a business. The father introduced the generation gap issue and turned it into a political conflict.

The question of the performance of the Ngurario becomes the source of conflicting languages between the couple and Gathoni, their daughter. Unfortunately, Kiguunda's daughter and wife's desire to be rich through marriage collapsed. Gathoni did not recognize John's behaviour once he has made her pregnant. Likewise, the parents of the two families were talking entirely different languages. This family clash concludes the play in a pessimistic tone.

## **II/ Other Characters' Contribution**

Pessimism is reflected in other characters conception of marriage. Gicaamba Kiguunda's neighbor, a factory worker compared the traditional, religious marriage and draws the following conclusion.

there is no marriage which is not blessed, seeking the communal blessing, Is not the Ngurario ceremony the true blessings of all your family and the nation p.62 [...] A blessed marriage is when a human quality is attracted by another human quality, A blessed marriage is when two people accept to be two patriots. Defending their home and nation (p.64)

Gicaamba's wife Njooki, another important character, adopted a Manichean attitude by finding the dividing line between the poor and the Rich when he says; rich family marry from rich families The poor from the poor (p.33) and continues in these terms

**Njooki** thinks that:

Marriage is between a man and women, marriage is a covenant between two people, their flesh and soul becoming one, without money coming into it love pulled by love the price of love. Today it is not one human that marries another. But property marrying property, Money marrying money, This house marrying that House, Hearts being taken to the market p.63...My wedding for instance was very blessed though I didn't take it to the churches. The Ngurario ceremony was attended by the whole land' (p. 64)

Gicaamba added patriotism to the marriage issue and defines what the Ngurario really is:

There is no marriage which is not blessed.

How else would God have given you Gathoni?

Didn't you pay the bridewealth,

Seeking our people's communal blessings?

Isn't the Ngurario ceremony the true blessings

Of all your family and the nation?

The voice of the people is the voice of God.( p, 62)

We can identify two opposed groups: One for the national criteria and the other for the international norms transmitted by the churches.

Characters like Kioi, Samuel Ndugire a *nouveau riche* farmer and shopkeeper and Jezebel on (p. 48) have connected marriage and baptism as conditions to enter the Church and the key to stop living in sin. Karl Marx's conception according to which religion is the opium of the people subtly traverses the play as follows: 'Religion is the alcohol of the soul, Religion is the poison of

the mind, it is not God who has brought about our poverty, all of us were born equally naked' (p.61).

Marxism known as a material philosophy that sees progress in class struggle is concerned about the equal distribution of wealth and put workmen at the center of their reflection. In « *Who Is Afraid of Ngugi?* », we learn about Ngugi's attachment to this social class. Admittedly, his reading were helpful but more importantly he revealed that he was born surrounded by workmen tools and smelled their sweat in the train he rode on his way to Alliance School.

Jezebel Kioi's wife and Ikuua wanditika, hint the polygamous aspect or accent:

you must be baptized (p.48) Your words Mr Ikuu are very unbecoming... You have even refused to renew your marriage in church, All you would have been required to do is to throw away one wife. It does not matter if the knife falls on the eldest. And you are left with the youngest (p. 76)

While discussing the important concept of polygamy in a deftly way (p. 22), a controversial topic in African tradition and Muslim religion, as a multiple faceted system, Ngugi insists on the position of his father's home. Why is the number of wives limited to five, ranking them to the position of ministers? We are not supporting polygamy but if there are rules that govern its harmony why not discuss it openly and help those who are for it? Why has the abandonment of equidistant *Thingira* followed by the move into Njeri's house, the youngest wife contributed to his downfall? Ngugi's description of the disposition of his father's "*Thingira*" or home, before and after (Ngugi, *Dreams in a Time of War*, p. 90) the family's collapse is intended to show the origin of the father's ruin.

The title of the play contributed to shed light on our perception of the notion of marriage. "I will or I shall marry when I want" shows a certain independence of the speakers. This freedom of expression and action through marriage is paradoxically known only through three characters: the jobless Drunk, Gathoni and her father<sup>ii</sup> whose social status has changed at the end of the play; the lost of his title deed turned him into a drunkard. These three actors are the consciousness of the play. Kiguunda becomes drunk at the end of the play because of poverty, the drunk turns to be so because of unemployment. Drinking becomes a place of refuge for the two disappointed men. The drunk was the first to open the play with such an utterance. Kiguunda is the last to

close the book likewise when he lost everything. Between them stays Gathoni, who has become a barmaid or housemaid after being rejected by John. This topological frame of the book appraises the act of drinking as an object of relief, to rescue some victims of society.

Kiguunda's family marital situation, the other actors' discussions and the title of the play made the different dimensions of the word « marriage » accessible to any reader. The playwright made his position clear by moving from the state of the writer to the position of actor in the film.

### **III/ From observation to action**

Is there a possibility to undo fiction and filmic reality? In this part, we are going to try to create a dialogue between the play and the film. The film has been an expressive tool for the representation of black experiences, resistance and affirmation like the movements of Negritude and Pan-Africanism while being influenced by Marxist, Psychoanalytic, poststructuralist theories and practices. John Akomfrah, Atelier Gorant, Sembene Ousmane are the precursors of filmmakers in modern Africa. According to Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, film as a modern genre is losing its benchmarks:

Films and also radio no longer need to present themselves as art. The truth that they are nothing but business is used as an ideology to legitimize the trash they intentionally produce. They call themselves industries, and published figures for their directors' incomes quell any doubts about the social necessity of their finished products<sup>iii</sup>

In other words, films no more stand as compass but turned deceptive. Manthia Diawara is the director of the Institute of African-American Affairs, professor at New York University in African studies, comparative literature and film. Can his film escape this context and orient us in the optic of juxtaposing fiction and real life? The film translates the possible realization of the impossible marriage in the play. A discussion about self celebration, rebirth or renaissance will conclude this part.

## **VI/ *Who Is Afraid of Ngugi?: The Content***

*Who Is Afraid of Ngugi?* reveals many characters, locations, ideas and situations similar to those of the content of Ngugi's books.

People's focus on Ngugi's use of *National* language is in my mind less important than his linguistic pedagogical skill and his capacity of communicating truths by means of performance. To the idea of Simon Gikandi<sup>iv</sup> according to which "the intellectual had taken culture to people and the people were teaching them the terms by which they understood and represent culture experiences and expressions," I will add that Ngugi turned the people into actors, artisans of their life by inviting each one to contribute to the social development of their community. Kenya National Theatre that he visited in the film was opened for the first time to his collaboration.

In the film, topics also recurrently vary from the common theme of colonial to Post-colonial ones. The film contains nine chapters including Ngugi's successive speeches at the airport and Nairobi University paralleling the situations wherein people listen to Matigari in the book, the presence of youth singers, interviews of his friends, his point of view about exile, chatting at a bar, visits to School children, workmen, hospital, actors, Mau Mau Veterans who talked about Jomo Kenyatta, Visit of a Theater, his search of truth, Christ, resurrection and the idea of the second liberation, etc. All these elements constitute the core of the film in addition to the situation which exposed very briefly his respect for Nature by showing him Kissing the Earth. We must add here the reading of excerpts from *Matigari*, *Devil on The Cross* in the film, the book signing event and an outstanding closing speech which answers the question: What is Art?

In addition to these elements there is the portrait of Matigari, an incident and its possible causes. Njeri is at the center of this terrible incident. It is known that they went twice to court to fix it but Ngugi refuses to pursuit the prosecution to undo fiction and reality and to show that the entire story of the book is a "true imagined" affair. The book *Matigari* displays Kenya's social, political systems and parties, it contains numerous oral stories, revolutionary ideas and characters, and Mau Mau fighters' biographies.

The opening ceremony displays a crowded arrival atmosphere as if either the stage director is losing control of the situation or he is under betrayal circumstances with the presence

of an “Invisible Hand” to borrow the term of the economist Adam Smith who puts forth with David Hume “not quite a theory of economics but a moral philosophy, a world theory.” Stathis Gougouris explains that Self-regulation is exemplified by Adam Smith’s classical metaphor of “the invisible hand” which is perhaps invisible but is nonetheless a hand. The closing ceremony is the *NGURARIO* marriage ceremony.

### ***V/ The Ngurario***

The «*Ngurario*» is a Kenyan term for marriage. Ngugi has loaded his play with an incontestable positive meaning by concluding the play with such a great event. Njeeri explained the meaning of the *Ngurario* for herself and her parents: It is a confirmation of her union with Ngugi, it is the sealed acceptance of her parents. The sober and festive stage is preceded by the dowry ritual, a prayer gathering both family members.

By marrying Njeeri in the film according to traditional *Ngurario* rules consisting of seeking the people's communal blessings and the national communion in a ceremony attended by the whole land as described earlier in the book, Ngugi renders possible what the Drunk, Gathoni and her father Kiguunda were unable to do. He creates optimism and revalorizes popular culture of songs, dress, food and manners. The film seems to be advertising African Popular culture by showing Singers, dancers, musicians, children, workers, Mau Mau guerillas, and African homeguards.

Ngugi wrote and might have performed his play ‘to achieve his aesthetic ambition to overcome the gap that separates his art and his politics’. Abiola’s insists on saying that there is an ‘invitation from some Kenyan workers to some Kenya intellectual, to redefine nature, culture and knowledge in the postcolony’

To the question of Abiola «why Ngugi’s plays have often gotten him in trouble with state authorities both in Kenya and Uganda?» His possible answer is that ‘Drama more than the novel, could be formalized to overcome the historical and social gap between intellectual and workers, between popular culture and the elite forms of artistic expression’

One may also wonder if this performance is a self-celebration? Ngugi's *Ngurario* is more likely a rebirth of the African heritage and renaissance. A dichotomy is painted through an impossible



marriage symbol of African-Europe relations in the play. Is *I will Marry When I want* raising another facet of unfeasible marriages? Ngugi is rather for a celebration and the rebirth of Africa. African Children become poets who are creating a possible better world. Ngugi's marriage symbolises the Resurrection that haunted the setting.

There is no doubt that the film is showing Ngugi's return to Kenya after 22 years of absence. It is also necessary to devote some lines to the understanding of the title '*Who is Afraid of Ngugi*'. The choice of such a title can be connected to the tragedy that occurred in the life of the wife-actor. Is the filmmaker thinking that those who attacked the wife are cowards? In such a context, one of the causes of the misfortune underlined by the filmmaker can shed light on the context of marriage. To what extent can the former wife be responsible for the tragedy? The question remains without answer in the film.

By means of performance, this film renders actual, vivid, real African people's way of celebrating a matrimonial union. The political issues hidden behind the textual discourse is also attached to the cause of the attack of the wife Njeeri at Norfolk Hotel before the Ngurario. Was this tragic incident intended to prevent the couple from getting married? This striking happy ending of the film would have been destroyed if the protagonists had not continued their events to celebrate the RE-surrection, the RE-naissance, the RE-birth.

### **Conclusion**

Ngugi's play resembles a dictionary covering the diverse dimensions of the « Ngurario » or marriage according to African and religious or modern norms. The actors' discussions were intended to display the literal and figurative meanings of the concept of marriage. It was important to underscore that the playwright was on stage in the film to show that marriage signifies the union between a Man and a Woman. We saw Ngugi in the roles of the writer and the actor as he narrated what he observes in society and performed himself what should be done. He joined words to actions. The impossible marriage of the play becomes feasible in real life in Africa. The seed of optimism and rebirth is sown.

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<sup>i</sup> Rodrigue Marcel Ateufack Dongmo, *L'intermédialité comme paradigme de l'écriture romanesque, pour une déconstruction des frontières intermédiatiques*, Editions universitaires européennes, décembre 2010

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<sup>ii</sup> Kiguunda singing : I shall marry when I want, While all padres are still alive, And I shall get married when I want, While are nuns still alive p.108

<sup>iii</sup> Max Horkeimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, op. cit. p. 95.

<sup>iv</sup> Simon Gikandi, *Ngugi Wa Thiong'o*, Cambridge University Press, 2000