

Twenty-first century ‘corporonialism’: Corporate politics and globalisation in Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o’s *Wizard of the Crow*

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In *Globalectics: Theory and the Politics of Knowing*, celebrated Kenyan writer Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o observes:

The universal interdependence in the reign of industrial capital that they [Marx and Engels] talked about in 1848 has become globalization, the global reign of financial capital. The cheap prices of the factory-produced commodities they saw as the heavy artillery that battered all national walls has been replaced by financial capital that has come to break all national barriers in its movement across the globe. (Ngũgĩ *Globalectics* 46)

Ngũgĩ’s conception of global capital as a national battering ram finds its productive outlet in his most recent work, *Wizard of the Crow* (2006). At the heart of this ‘satirical magical realist’ (McLaren)¹ novel—rampant with mystery, inexplicable phenomena and extraordinary feats of magic—lies, I argue, a searing critique of privatisation policies and the influence of international financial institutions in eroding the national sovereignty of African states. This agenda is present at the novel’s opening, although Ngũgĩ does not draw attention to it until significantly later in the narrative.

Wizard of the Crow opens with a series of rumours. These rumours posit causes for a mysterious illness suffered by the despotic Ruler of Aburĩria, the fictional African state in the novel. As Robert L. Colson has astutely observed, these rumours serve to destabilise the

¹ Joseph McLaren usefully outlines the term ‘satirical magical realism’ in relation to Ngũgĩ’s *Wizard of the Crow* as ‘refer[ring] to the use of this literary style for the primary purpose of mockery, ridicule, and humor, rather than its use in the portrayal of characters and events simply in terms that stretch the boundaries of so-called normative reality’ (McLaren 151). McLaren goes on to suggest in his excellent discussion of the intersections between globalisation and the political approach to satirical magical realism in the novel that ‘[a]lthough presented in the satirical mode, the global dimensions of the novel suggest the “real” problematic relationships between international capital institutions and African regimes’ (McLaren 151).

Ruler's authority by offering multiple subversive ways of reading against the dominant narrative. It is not until book four of six that the reader discovers the true cause of the malady that has brought the Ruler, and therefore Aburñria, to its knees: this has been, in fact, a rejection letter from the Global Bank (*Wizard* 486) denying a funding request for a nation-building program.

The circumstances surrounding this exchange are, in keeping with Ngũgĩ's satirical magical realism, quite unusual. The Ruler's symptom is that he has lost the power of speech and has 'started puffing up like a balloon, his whole body becoming more and more inflated, without losing the proportion of parts' (*Wizard* 469) in a pseudo-medical act of 'Self-Induced Expansion' (or 'SIE'), leaving him bobbing helplessly on the ceiling—and the nation-building project for which he seeks funding is the so-called 'Marching to Heaven' project, described as a 'Modern House of Babel' (*Wizard* 17) and envisaged as a tower stretching vertically to Heaven such that: 'the Ruler could call on God daily to say good morning or good evening or simply how was your day today, God?' (*Wizard* 16).

Most would agree with the Global Bank that this particular building project may not represent a valid contribution to the national infrastructure. However, this significant episode highlights the potent criticism of privatisation and the influence deployed by financial institutions in swaying the politics of indebted countries that I contend is at the heart of Ngũgĩ's novel. With reference to Achille Mbembe's significant study *On the Postcolony* and the work of sociologist Zygmunt Bauman on liquid modernity, I will argue that Ngũgĩ's novel presents a critique of neoliberal deregulation policies in African states in late modernity as influenced by these disturbingly *neo-colonial* relationships—relationships defined not only by wealthy western states such as the United States as a new world power, but also, and increasingly, with international companies and corporations. For '[n]eo-colonialism,' as Ngũgĩ explains in *Globalectics*, 'is not simply a continuation of the colonial, but it carries the sense of the continuities of colonial structures in changed political forms' (*Globalectics* 50–51). My analysis will centre on the themes and symbolism that support this reading, moving through to representations of commoditisation in the novel, and finally the hopeful alternative that Ngũgĩ offers as antidote to privatisation pressures.

Let me first outline the specific conditions to which I refer in relation to the pressures placed upon African states in late modernity. The period of late or liquid modernity results everywhere in the rise of the corporate, often at the expense of the state. It is, as Zygmunt

Bauman suggests, ‘a civilisation of excess, redundancy, waste and waste disposal’ (Bauman 97). Specifically within an African context, factors such as the inheritance of colonial borders and ensuing interethnic conflicts, the burden of foreign debt, global land grabs, political uncertainty, increasing militarisation, the collapse of local agricultural economies and economic migration have frequently led to pressure to privatise previously public assets, services and infrastructure, contributing to what Mbembe has described as ‘the progressive dismantling of the state’ (Mbembe 78) in favour of privatised companies under the view that ‘an economic organization governed by the free play of market forces represents the most efficient way of securing the optimal allocation of resources’ (Mbembe 78). This has led, moreover, to what he describes as a ‘privatisation of [...] sovereignty’ (Mbembe 78).

The insidious influence of international companies wielding financial leverage to intervene in local politics is clearly displayed in the actions of the Global Bank in Ngũgĩ’s novel. A thinly veiled reference to organisations such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank in their role in perpetuating “‘Third World’ indebtedness’, the amusing conglomeration of the ‘Global Bank’ is consistently deified by the characters in the novel. Representatives of the Global Bank are referred to as ‘Bank missionaries’ (*Wizard* 136), reinforcing the neo-colonial aspect of the relationship, or ‘Bank diplomats’ (*Wizard* 498), as though it were a sovereign power in itself. The Aburĩrian ministry repeatedly discusses and anticipates what it will do ‘when’ the Global Bank releases the funds it is expecting, and even the populace come to believe that the visiting Global Bank representatives would ‘actually be bringing a lot of cash to give to the poor; after all, it was not called the Global Bank for nothing’ (*Wizard* 73). (Ngũgĩ’s embedded irony here is, of course, that such institutions are often said to siphon money away from social resourcing in their demands that international debts be repaid.)

Mbembe calls attention in *On the Postcolony* to the:

economic conditions attached to loans granted African countries by international financial institutions over the last ten, or more, years. First, it has not been sufficiently stressed, in this connection, that one major political event of the last quarter of the twentieth century was the crumbling of African states’ independence and sovereignty and the (surreptitious) placing of these states under the tutelage of international creditors. (Mbembe 73–74).

Ngũgĩ directly addresses this concern in *Wizard of the Crow*. The Global Bank, in denying the funding request from the Ruler, delivers a list of terms and conditions under which the organisation would lend the funds. It suggests, for example, that Aburiria should be reinvented as a democracy. The Ruler ensuingly introduces a puppet democracy (*Wizard* 704) in which the population votes for their chosen party, and the Ruler becomes the leader of that winning party by default. Although this generates no positive social change, the move nonetheless pleases the Global Bank and the Global Ministry of Finance sufficiently that they release the frozen funds.

Thus the Global Bank has become an insidious player in Aburirian politics. Ngũgĩ highlights the West's incursion into the politics of African states in the neo-colonial power relationship and the funding of certain governments or militias to achieve certain outcomes, ever contributing to what Mbembe has described as the 'emasculat[i]on' of the public state (Mbembe 74). Thus, as McLaren observes, Ngũgĩ 'shows that the West and global capital are implicated in the dilemmas of African leadership' (McLaren 152). In the novel the Ruler reminds the Global Bank and the American Ambassador of his previous feat in vanquishing Aburirian communism at the time of the Cold War. The envoy of the Bank gives this rejoinder:

There was a time when slavery was good. It did its work, and when it finished creating capital, it withered and died a natural death. Colonialism was good. It spread industrial culture of shared resources and markets. But to revive colonialism now would be an error. There was a time when the cold war dictated our every calculation in domestic and international relations. It is over. We are in the post-cold war era, and our calculations are affected by the laws and needs of globalization. The history of capital can be summed up in one phrase: *in search of freedom*. Freedom to expand, and now it has a chance at the entire globe for its theatre. (*Wizard* 580, original emphasis)

Although the Bank's emissary positions 'slavery', 'colonialism', 'the cold war' and free trade agreements as equally *positive* rungs on a ladder of progress, Ngũgĩ's novel—which everywhere highlights the uneasy compromises that attend to such developmental discourses—clearly positions these as equally *negative* effects of a totalising and linear world-view tainted by Eurocentrism—a Eurocentrism that sees itself as the end goal to which all other cultural traditions must aspire.

Privatisation in the novel goes hand-in-hand with excessive commoditisation. This finds its metaphor in a cluster of trees that produce US dollars (549), with which the Ruler hopes to replace his reliance upon the Global Bank. However, the money growing on these trees is devoured by ‘pests, white pests’ (*Wizard* 551)—a visual metaphor for global land grabs in which western nations and corporations consume the local resources of African countries.

The perpetrator-victims of excessive commoditisation in the novel come to bear two mouths as westernised ‘ogres’—one in the usual place, and one at the backs of their heads that they are forced to conceal at all times with garments that are, tellingly, ‘a special gift from the Global Bank [...] a fashion in the West’ (*Wizard* 736). These ‘ogres’ have become unnatural through their insatiable greed and their adoption of the imported individualistic values through neo-colonial channels. Commoditisation and fetish is posited as antithetical to communality, such as in Minister Sikiokuu’s surreptitious selling of his father’s property behind the old man’s back in order to fund his new westernised lifestyle (*Wizard* 14), and successive characters’ ‘jettisoning’ (*Wizard* 14) of the names given to them by their parents at birth in favour of new names paired with their purchasable identities.

The natural corollary of commoditisation is waste. This is, as Bauman has observed, also the by-product of globalisation in late modernity, resulting in both ‘human waste’ and ‘wasted humans’ (Bauman 6). This is neatly displayed in the novel’s protagonist Kamĩĩ who, even though he is educated and experienced, finds himself a ‘waste product’ unable to secure employment in the competitive and nepotistic job market of Aburĩria. The metaphor of his conversion into a ‘wasted human’ is displayed in his body’s literally becoming trash, picked over by the garbage collectors as it sits in a mound of rubbish, where ‘children and dogs fought over signs of meat on white bones’ (*Wizard* 38)—the struggle over the ‘meat on white bones’ again damning the appropriation of neo-colonial structures in a postcolonial context.

Ngũgĩ’s critique of privatisation in the novel culminates in the suggestion that the Ruler should succumb to international sway and turn his country into a ‘corporony’, a neologism between ‘corporation’ and ‘colony’. This occurs in a relatively brief scene in a vast novel of over 750 pages, but one that I argue sets the direction for Ngũgĩ’s anti-privatisation project in the novel. The new governmental advisor Tajirika calls for ‘the privatization of Aburĩria’ (*Wizard* 746), declaring that:

The Global Bank and the Global Ministry of Finance are clearly looking to privatize countries, nations, and states. They argue that the modern world was created by private capital. The subcontinent of India, for instance, was owned by the British East India Company, Indonesia by the Dutch East India Company, our neighbors by the British East Africa Company, and the Congo Free State by a one-man corporation. [...] What private capital did then it can do again: own and reshape the Third World in the image of the West without the slightest blot, blemish, or blotch. [...] The world will no longer be composed of the outmoded twentieth-century divisions of East, West, and a directionless Third. The world will become one corporate globe divided into the incorporating and the incorporated. We should volunteer Aburĩria to be the first to be wholly managed by private capital, to become the first voluntary corporate colony, a corporony, the first in the new global order. (*Wizard* 746)

This speech portends the direction of Aburĩria and other states, with the idea of a ‘corporate globe’ posited as a means of consolidating the Ruler’s own private revenue and power, intensifying the disparity between his own privileged position and that of his more economically—and politically—vulnerable citizens. By the conclusion of the novel the characters ‘live in a corporate globe under imperial corporonialism, as proudly claimed by the new ogres’ (*Wizard* 760).

Whereas in his earlier social realist works activated by Marxism Ngũgĩ attacked the explicit power of colonialism in Africa, in *Wizard of the Crow* he challenges the implicit modes of power deployed by powerful nations and international organisations holding sway over African politics in the new century. This is significant because, just as Ngũgĩ has explained that: ‘[i]t was fiction that first gave us a theory of the colonial situation’ (*Globalectics* 15), so too does his own novel assist us, in his words, to ‘better understand the forces underlying both globalization and globalism than [our] more conscious analyses of the same phenomena’ (*Globalectics* 19).

However, despite its bleak satire of predatory international politics in late modernity, the novel is nonetheless a deeply hopeful one, bespeaking a message of citizen resilience. Although the conclusion of the novel sees one Ruler toppled with another who threatens to be just as dangerous in his place, the working class characters in the novel contribute to a grassroots activism that sees the African state in the twenty-first century as being one that is

both globally active and locally produced. For as Dustin Crowley remarks in reference to the ‘glocal’ in Ngũgĩ’s works (a neologism between the ‘global’ and the ‘local’): ‘[a]s with the other ambiguities in Ngũgĩ’s literature, [...] the geographic imaginary of his narratives cannot simply be cast as a binary that privileges local resistance against large-scale domination’ (Crowley 14). Globalisation is displayed as a force open to both positive and negative interpretation, with Kamĩtĩ’s magical ability to fly in a ‘global black consciousness’ (McLaren 157) tour as a bird to other countries and his position as a ‘*postcolonial* witch doctor’ (*Wizard* 405, original emphasis) denying any strict binaries between local and global forms of knowledge production.

Moreover, local activism is offered as a *communal* solution to the individualising and consolidating tendencies of privatisation. The titular character of the Wizard of the Crow is in fact comprised of two people, male and female, giving collective representation to a singular identity. The rumours that open the story and destabilise the narrative are, as Colson has pointed out, shared and communal, in opposition to the singular dominant narrative put forward by the Ruler: ‘[r]umor, in this case, is not simply a contradiction of the official versions of stories foisted on the people, but instead is a vibrant discourse and site for debate as multiple versions are debated in the climate of a free exchange of ideas’ (Colson 140). Community is built into the very mechanics of the narrative in order to place pressure upon the totalising tendencies of a single voice (Colson, McLaren). Thus, the distinction Ngũgĩ forges is not one between local and global but, as I have argued, between privatising or commoditising tendencies versus the needs and values of the community.

As Bill Ashcroft has maintained in his study of ‘Post-colonial Utopianism’:

It is the function of imagining that forms the basis of the utopian in literature and the basis of the utopian in post-colonial resistance. Utopia is a vision of possibility that effects the transformation of social life. It is desire in the act of imagining, and imagination that can be at once oppositional and visionary, a state of affairs that explains the importance of the literary and other creative arts in post-colonial representation. (Ashcroft 30)

Whether or not Ngũgĩ’s proffered solution is open to charges of naivety, its utopian message of resistance remains clear. As one character declares: ‘we women are pregnant with the hope of a new lot. Therefore, don’t cry despair at those who sold the heritage; smile also with pride

Proceedings of the 38th AFSAAP Conference: 21st Century Tensions and Transformation in Africa, Deakin University, 28th-30th October, 2015 (Published February 2016)

at the achievements of those that struggle to rescue our heritage' (*Wizard* 681). In critiquing the privatising effects of globalisation and neo-colonialism upon African states, Ngũgĩ both challenges existing international politics and offers a modest—but, perhaps, deceptively radical—blueprint for social change.

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