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HISTORY ON STAGE: A STUDY OF NGUGI WA THIONG'O AND MICERE GITHAE'
MUGO'S THE TRIAL OF DEDAN KIMATHI

Eziechiue Augustine Obiajulu

Abstract

History provides a lot of dramatic materials. The story of what had happened in the past in many nations could be imaginatively recreated and re-enacted on stage. This is the primary function of historical drama. In other words, a historical drama concerns itself essentially with the recreation of a past contained in written histories. Several of Africa's historical past have been imaginatively recreated on stage. The story of the struggle for the total liberation of the Kenyan people from foreign domination and oppression is a case in point. This historical past which has Dedan Kimathi as the central hero has become a very important play-text widely dramatized in Kenya today. This paper however, intends to examine the relationship between history and drama as well as the role of drama in the business of reconstructing a people's history, using *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* as illustrative text.

Introduction

History we know, is the study of past events, especially social, political and economic development of a country or nation. Historical literature on the other hand, is concerned with the imaginative recreation of a people's past. Through historical literature we learn more about those once powerful and despotic emperors and dictators like Nebuchadnezzar – the pompous Babylonian emperor, Julius Caesar – the Roman emperor, Adolph Hitler – the phenomenal incubator of the Second World War and Chaka – the African Field Marshal.

Similarly, the colonial and pre-colonial experiences of Africans in the past have all found a place in literary play-texts dramatized world over. Examples of plays that deal with the pre-colonial history are *Kurummi* by Ola Rotimi, the play on the same personality and events by Wale Ogunyemi, *The Ijaye War*; Ogunyemi's *Kiriji* about the events in another Yoruba Civil War which took place after the Ijaye War, from 1877 to 1886; and a play on an incident in sixteenth century Bini's history, *Imaguero* by Evinma Ogciriaixi. Examples of plays dealing with the colonial and pre-colonial history are, from Nigeria, *Ovonranwen Nogbaisi* by Ola Rotimi; from Ghana, *The Mightier Sword* by Martin Owusu and from Zambia, *The Lands of Kazembe*. There is also from Kenya, a very important play by Micere Mugo and Ngugi Wa Thiong'o *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* which is concerned with heroism of the Mau Mau freedom fighters of the title, and from Tanzania there is *Kinjeketile* by Ibrahim Hussein about the Maji Maji uprising in Tanganyika at the turn of the century. The focus of all these plays is on the struggle with the whites. Our primary concern in this paper however, is with *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi*.

Dedan Kimathi fought for the total liberation of the Kenyan people from foreign domination and oppression. He did not achieve this in his lifetime: the struggle continues and Kimathi is the legitimate hero of the revolution. Ngugi and his colleague Micere Githae Mugo have collaborated in writing a play with a number of specific purposes. As cited by Killam (G.D.) (1980) *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi*

is a 'song of praise' for the feats of leadership and resistance of the most brilliant of the generals of the independence struggle who, along with his brothers in arms, Koinalel and Me Kitilili, for example are neglected, often repudiated heroes, their deeds for the most part not known by the present generation of young Kenyans. (86)

The play is an attempt to restore the character of Kimathi to his legitimate place in the history of Kenya. Secondly, the play establishes the connection with the masses in the present struggle by

reasserting Kimathi's values. More than this, the play is a self-conscious assertion of the part that literature should play in the revolution. From the preface of the play we learn the following:

We agreed that the most important thing was for us to reconstruct imaginatively our history, envisioning the world of Mau Mau and Kimathi in terms of the peasants' and workers' struggle before and after constitutional independence. The play is not a reproduction of the farcial "trial" at Nyeri. It is rather an imaginative recreation and interpretation of the collective will of the Kenyan peasants and workers in their refusal to break under sixty years of colonial torture and ruthless oppression by the British ruling classes and their continued determination to resist exploitation, oppression and new forms of enslavement.(VI)

The action of the play takes place in a courtroom, on the street outside the courthouse, and in a jail cell. Charges against Kimathi are laid at the opening and become *Leitmotifs* in the play, reiterated at crucial moments as Kimathi is submitted to four trials in the main movement of the play. The dialogue between Kimathi and his accusers in the courtroom and the jail cells, is balanced by a sub-plot which describes the attempts of a Woman and later a Boy and Girl to rescue Kimathi from prison. The two plots merge at the play's close where, when final judgement is passed on Kimathi at the close of the formal trial, the rescue attempt is in a figurative sense effected and the spirit of Kimathi is released among the people.

The First Movement conveys the tensions surrounding Kimathi's incarceration in Nyeri and dramatizes the woman's attempt to mount an escape plan for Kimathi. The Movement is mostly given over to the woman's story of Kimathi's life, as boy, as teacher and as legendary leader of his people. Throughout the Three Movements witnesses are brought forward to accuse and tempt Kimathi in a series of trials. "Trials" according to Killam (1980)

is used here in the ambiguous sense of referring not only to the process of accusation and examination within the formal processes of the law and the informal process of torture to which Kimathi must endure in pursuing his revolutionary objective - the difficult battle against great odds, dissension and even betrayal within his ranks, the prospects of a long, hard, soul-wearing struggle. (89)

Kimathi's first accuser appears in the Second Movement. He typifies the white settler whose speech in denouncing Kimathi as a "mad bushwog" provides an abbreviated history of the colonial period and the paternalism which informed it:

I had cattle and sheep - by the thousands;
Where are they now?
I had acres of maize and wheat;
Where are they now?
I had a wife and daughter;
Where are they now?
Killed Burnt Maimed
by this lunatic and his pack of bandits.
Which innocent investor can sleep these days?
Beer and Whisky are stale and bitter.
Look at me. I am no idler.
I may not be a Delamere or a Grogan
But I am a worker
I came to this country as a soldier
A simple soldier
Fighting against banks, mortgages, the Colonial office, the whole lot on my back.
You think it was easy?
And when I thought I would sit down and enjoy the fruit of my labour

You struck.
I had perfect relationships with my boys
They were happy on my farm
I gave them posho, built them a school, a dispensary
... gave them everything they needed
They loved me
Yea, at Olkalan they talked of my farm with awe: loyal, meek, submissive.
Then that devil, Field Marshal, came
Milk Clerk, oath Clerk, Murderer!
Poisoned simple minds
Led astray their God-fearing souls
with his black Mumbo Jumbo
My wife, my daughter, my property.
Now, now, you'll die (28-9)

His hysteria stands juxtaposed to the calm of the judge prosecutor who doubles as Shaw Henderson, the Special Branch Policeman who tracked Kimathi down in the forest and arrested him. The four trial scenes which comprise the Second Movement move the action through historical time from the emergency period to the present and dramatize the confrontation between the people – the peasants and workers – symbolized by Kimathi, the Woman and the Boy and Girl, on the one hand, and the capitalist – bourgeois epitomized by Shaw Henderson, the Bank Manager, the Business Executive and the Priest. And while the scenes advance the various aspects of the debate between accommodation and betrayal, the various parts of the argument are subsumed into the fundamental question of humanity posed in the paradoxical exchange between the Judge and Kimathi.

Judge: There is no liberty without law and order.

Kimathi: There is no order and law without liberty (27)

The law which will try Kimathi is a foreign law, one in which he had no hand in the making, a law compounded of two parts, the first of which has in the past and will continue into the present to "protect the man of property, the man of wealth, the foreign exploiter", the other half of which, serving the needs of finance capitalism, "silences the poor, the hungry, our people". Kimathi repudiates the form of justice he will experience:

I despise your laws and your courts.

What have they done for our people?

What?

Protected the oppressor, Licenced
the murderers

of the people: our people,
whipped when they did not pick
your tea leaves

your coffee beans

Imprisoned when they refused to "ayah"
your babies

and "boy" your houses and gardens
Murdered when they didn't rickshaw
Your ladies and your gentlemen.

I recognize only one law, one court:

the court and law of those who
fight against exploitation,

The toilers armed to say

We demand our freedom

That is the eternal law of
the oppressed,

of the humiliated, of the

injured, the insulted! (26-7)

Kimathi is now submitted to a number of examinations and temptations by Henderson, a realist who acts out of self-interest and who can adjust with cynical ease to new accommodations. But he projects the white settler's point of view and interest as these stand the time frame suggested by the play. "Nations live by strength and self-interest", he says to Kimathi and any action which serves those ends are cannibal. Henderson offers Kimathi his life for a confession of guilt which would effectively destroy the revolution. But Kimathi's mission has been "to protect the struggle from betrayal opportunism, and regional chauvinism" and he repudiates Henderson's offer, eventually driving him to a rage which causes him to inflict torture on Kimathi.

Kimathi is now tempted in turn by the Banker, Business Executive and Priest, each the hiring of international finance capitalism and each an agent of betrayal, opportunism and regional chauvinism. The exchange between the Banker, for example reveals that new forms of exploitation create familiar kinds of oppression. Appealing to Kimathi to recant, the Banker advances justification for a continuance of the status quo:

Banker: Listen. We are now prepared to settle for a black man's government.

In partnership only...

Kimathi: Only?

Banker: Confess, Repent, Plead guilty co-operate - like the surrendered generals.

Tell your people to come out of the Forest. We need stability. There never can be progress without stability. Then we can finance big Hotels... International hotels... Seaside resorts... Night clubs... Casinos... Tarmac roads... Oil and refineries and pipelines... Then tourists from U.S.A, Germany, France, Switzerland, Japan, will flock in. Investment, my friend, development, prosperity, happiness.

Kimathi: And my people?

Banker: Who are your people?

Kimathi: The oppressed of the land... all those whose labour power has transformed this land. For it is not true that it was your money that built this country. It was our sweat. It was our hands. Where do our people come in in your partnership for progress?

Banker: Toilers they will always be. Even in America, England, France, Germany, Switzerland, Sweden, Japan... all the civilized world. There are servants and masters... sellers of labour and buyers of labour. Masters and servants.

Indian: True! True! Even in holy religion... there are workers...

Brahmins and untouchables.

Kimathi: The religion of enslavement! Like colonialism which makes the colonized sweat and bleed while master comes to harvest.

Banker: Racialism... No colour Bar...

No. This may have been necessary in the 1930s. But now with more and more educated black people (points at the African who nods) there's obviously no need for colour discrimination.

We have grown wiser.

Indian: True! True!

Kimathi: Money... for a sell-out

of our people... NEVER. (39-40)

The Business Executive, the next tempter, reveals the same paucity of vision for the future, the same cynical self-interest as he expounds "capital partnership in capital progress" for independent Kenya. But for Kimathi, the partnership, based on the acquisition of capital property, implies selling his people into a second slavery:

Partnership in Progress, Towards what end?

What will you do to the widows, orphans, the labouring millions? New masters, we labour for you, pick coffee and tea for you. Is that why poor men died and continue to die in the forest? General Kugo, Haimunge, Materjagwo... and many brave sons are still locked in there... Stanley Mathenge.(47)

The cant and hypocrisy of the fourth tempter, the priest, is denounced with scathing accuracy by Kimathi. As Killam (1980) puts it:

He is the spiritual ally of the exploitation foisted on the masses by colonialism and capitalism over the historical span. Kimathi outwits him at his own dialectical game. The priest seeks to divert the people from contemplating their impoverished condition with spiritual abstractions.

Referring to passages marked by Kimathi in his own Bible:

So I returned, and considered all the oppressions that are done under the sun; and behold the tears of such as were oppressed, and they had no comforter; and on the side of their oppressors there was power; but they had no comforter. Why? (48)

The priest asserts that the struggle is not an earthly struggle but a spiritual one, "God and Satan locked in an immortal struggle for the domination of our soul" and enjoins Kimathi to give his soul to Jesus: "Jesus will never betray you". For Kimathi this represents betrayal:

Betrayal. Betrayal. Prophets. Secs. Strange. I have always been suspicious of those who would preach cold peace in the face of violence. Turn the other cheek. Don't struggle against those that clothe themselves as butterflies. Collaborators.

Priest: Surrender your heart, Dedan. Let Jesus speak to you today.

Kimathi: (Continuing his speech as it were): I have spoken with the God of my ancestors in dreams and on the mountain and not once did he counsel me to barter for my soul. (49)

The scenes with the four accusers – tempters according to Killam "give the authors the opportunity to display people". Kimathi withstands their suits with a resolve as firm as their betrayals are blatant. Kimathi's long speech in the penultimate scene of the play, a scene which sums up the experiences of the guerilla fighters in the emergency period, provides lessons for future struggles. The treachery of Wambararia, Kimathi's brother, symbolizes the potential for betrayal in all popular revolutionary movements. And Kimathi's agony over the soul recognizes the need that:

We shall continue to suffer
Until that day
We can recognize our own
Our true kinsman
When we can correctly
Identify our enemies
What is this superstition about
Kindred blood even when it
Turns sour and treacherous
To our long cherished cause? (73-4)

and a further need to:

... learn from our past strength
past weaknesses
From past defeats
And past victories.
Also clear a few farms to grow grain
Here in the forest
Where we have even made friends
with birds and snakes and animals.
So that they even warn us
About enemies approaching
Here we must plant seeds for a future society
Here in the forest armed in body, mind and soul
We must kill the lie
That black people never invented anything

Lay for ever to rest that inferiority complex
Implanted in our minds by centuries of oppression.
Rise, Rise workers and peasants of Kenya
Our victory is the victory of the working people
The victory of all those in the world who to-day fight and struggle for total liberation.
Long live Kenya People's Defence Council! (68)

Although in the play *Kimathi* is in the dock, but the overall effect the play achieves as Killam observes:

is to put the various witnesses – the Shaw Henderson generation of settlers, the new bourgeois capitalistic exploiters, the hypocritic churchmen etc on trial for crimes against humanity and the nation itself and on trial against future achievements.

The play ends with an exhortation to the working classes and peasants to become a revolutionary force.

Conclusion

It is clear from this paper that history and drama are closely related. Through the play, *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi*, the authors have been able to dramatize the historical experiences of the Kenyan people. The play "truly depicts the masses (symbolized by Kimathi) in the only historically correct perspective; positively, heroically and as the true makers of history".

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