

Matigari: An African Novel as Oral Narrative Performance

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The examination of *Matigari*'s pre-composition history, the role of the Gikuyu oral literary tradition in its conception, its mode of characterization, its structural and compositional organization, the kinds of linguistic and stylistic formulas that it employs, as well as the details of its temporal, geographical, and philosophical setting all point to the fact that the novel was meticulously written to conform to the characteristics of the traditional African oral epic narrative performance. Indeed, the following analysis shows that *Matigari* possesses the generic traits shared by many cultural epics from classical times to our days.

Pre-Composition History

Ngugi wa Thiong'o, one of Africa's leading writers, has recently attracted much critical attention because of his historic decision to switch from English to his native Gikuyu as his language of creative writing. In his recent books of essays (*Decolonizing the Mind* and *Moving the Center*), Ngugi convincingly argues that the use of foreign languages by African writers not only unwittingly promotes the underdevelopment of African indigenous language literatures, but also paradoxically perpetuates the negative inscription of the African image, characteristic of colonial literature, for the consumption of African youths. Ngugi further argues that, aside from alienating its primary audience, African literature in foreign languages is inaccessible to the vast majority of the African population. It is to initiate the creation of an accessible literature with a positive self-image for African readers that Ngugi has decided to follow the example of the less famous African writers who create in African languages. But as Ngugi reveals in *Detained* (1981:8-9), it turned out to be much easier to make this logical decision than to put it into practice. The

writing of his first Gikuyu novel *Caitaani Mutharabaini (Devil on the Cross)* confronted him with several practical problems that he had not previously considered. Even though Ngugi faced the challenges of this new mode of writing with determination and a wealth of experience from producing successful novels, the outcome of the experiment in terms of audience reception was still unknown.

Fortunately, however, the enterprise proved successful beyond his wildest imagination. During the first year of its publication alone, *Caitaani Mutharabaini* was reprinted three times; even illiterate peasants and workers bought the novel and had it read to them in their homes. Some listened to public readings in drinking bars, others heard it inside buses and taxis while in transit, and many more gathered to hear it read during lunch breaks. After witnessing this unique “appropriation of the novel into the oral tradition” through the process of a “group reception of art” that “used to be the norm” in Africa (1986:82-85), Ngugi most naturally created his second Gikuyu novel, *Matigari*, primarily for oral reception, a fact that explains why the prefatory notes to the novel are addressed “TO THE READER/ LISTENER” (1987:ix).

Writings composed to be read to listeners are not new, of course, but they seem to be the option preferred by writers who wish to propagate religious or political ideologies in an environment where the majority cannot read or write, as was the case in Biblical times and is currently the situation in Africa. Ngugi believes that since the ruling political and intellectual elites of Kenya have compromised themselves by collaborating with foreign neocolonial forces to undermine Kenyan independence, the only groups capable of reinstating true independence are those constituting the illiterate majority population of peasants and workers. It is to open a dialogue with these hitherto neglected classes of literature consumers that Ngugi purposely composed *Matigari* in Gikuyu for oral reception.

Gikuyu Oral Literary Tradition

One of the primary distinctions between the literatures of Africa and the Western world is the centrality of the role of the oral tradition in the former and its progressive deemphasis in the latter. Consequently, the concern over the character of the relationship between the written and oral traditions within the works of African writers has been a permanent feature

of literary criticism. Emmanuel Obiechina, for instance, remarked that African writers' borrowing from the oral tradition did not constitute "a literary fad or an attempt to exoticize West African literature" (1975:26). In fact, Bernth Lindfors believed that the best works emerging from Africa were those that artfully blended elements of the oral and written traditions, and it was in this tendency that he located Amos Tutuola's originality (1978:32, 59). The same awareness had led Chinweizu and Madubuike to prescribe a return to oral traditions as the primary source of inspiration for African writers (1980:146, 290, 291). Ngugi himself in *Homecoming* had designated the blend resulting from the mixture of the oral and written traditions as *orature* (1972:76).

More recent studies show that orature is today the most dominant trend in African literature.¹ *Matigari* is an illustration of how this trend has been taken to its most logical development by Ngugi. Whereas earlier classical instances of orature such as Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, Soyinka's "Death and the King's Horseman," and Okot p'Bitek's *Song of Lawino* had negotiated the contours of their genres on terms dictated predominantly by the Western literary tradition, *Matigari* defines its own artistic nature on terms dictated primarily by the Gikuyu oral tradition. Thus, in *Matigari* oral tradition does not serve, as in the past, but rather is served by the Western novelistic tradition.

Since traditional novelistic criticism has not provided tools for the analysis of a work like *Matigari*, we must turn to the scholarship in oral tradition, where critics have recognized the so-called "gray areas" (Foley 1988:164) in which orality and literacy interact to produce texts that exhibit what Walter Ong calls the "'literate orality' of the secondary oral culture" (1982:160). Ong distinguishes the primary oral culture, in which orality is not a choice, from the literate culture that aspires to create a secondary—in other words literate—orality. Orally derived texts have distinctive characteristics that set them apart from works such as the Western novel, whose history is almost synonymous with the history of writing and literacy in the West. The characteristics exhibited by *Matigari*, on the other hand, show the greatest affinity to the most developed genre of oral narrative in Africa—the oral epic.

Any initial doubts concerning the existence of the epic genre in Africa have since been conclusively laid to rest, and insightful scholarship

¹ See espec. Jones 1989, Sienraert et al. 1991, and Balogun 1991:111-29.

by Isidore Okpewho (1979), John William Johnson (1986), and a host of others has continued to elaborate on both the peculiarly African as well as the universal traits of the African epic.² In the rest of this chapter, therefore, *Matigari* will be analyzed from the perspective of the most essential characteristics of the epic as elaborated by Albert B. Lord in *The Singer of Tales* (1960) and subsequently refined by scholars like Walter J. Ong, John Miles Foley (1990, 1991, 1995), Johnson, and Okpewho.

Epic Characterization

I. The Epic Hero

Matigari, the main character whose name provides the title for the narration, is the epic hero par excellence, a fact made more than evident by his physical, ethical, and moral traits, his relationship with fellow human beings, nature and the supernatural, as well as by the character of his inscrutable destiny. The birth, childhood, and teenage years of Matigari are not presented; he comes into the tale as a man of indeterminate age who has the mysterious capacity to look old, complete with wrinkles, one minute, and young and fresh the next. On several occasions, he mystifies onlookers by visibly changing before their very eyes from old age to youthfulness, or vice versa:

“Age crept back on his face; the wrinkles seemed to have increased and deepened. How everything had changed. What was this world coming to?” (1987:29).

“The courage of truth had once again transformed him. It seemed to have wiped age off his face, making him look extremely youthful” (31).

“Matigari felt sad.... Age seized him. His pace slackened, and he merely dragged his feet along” (41).

² Another question that has been satisfactorily resolved by Okpewho (1979:65-66; 154-60), Johnson (1986:30-38), and others was the erroneous claim by earlier scholars who had insisted that epics must necessarily be composed in verse. The study of African epics is steadily growing, and a valuable, copious, and well organized bibliography was published in Westley 1991.

"His eyes shone brightly. All the creases on his face had gone, and youth had once again returned to him" (43).

His physical size is also a matter of mystery. At one time, he is reported to be "a tiny, ordinary-looking man" (75), at another, he is described as "a tall, well-built, elderly man" (111), and still at other times it is said of him that "The man is a giant" (76, 159). He also seems to be situated in a timeless existence, measuring his age in centuries of African historical experiences and in terms that seem to make him coeval with Africa itself. In what we can only describe as an epic understatement of time duration, he remarks: "I have seen many things over the years. Just consider, I was there at the time of the Portuguese, and at the time of the Arabs, and at the time of the British" (45).

Matigari also has supernatural personal traits that link him with such African, European, and other cultural epic heroes as Sunjara, Ozidi, Beowulf, and Odysseus. His voice, for instance, sounds like thunder (80, 124); his snoring is "like the roar of a lion in the wilderness" (137); his look penetrates one's soul (123); he communicates with animals (143); he has a superhuman capacity to sustain hunger (12, etc.); he fears no man but rather strikes fear into others (31, 114-15); he accurately foretells the future, as is the case with the prediction that John Boy will not live in his house as long as he, Matigari, is alive (124, etc.).

Matigari is credited with performing miracles. The stones that are hurled at him by children, for instance, are miraculously deflected (73) and he "seemed to be protected by some magic power, for the bullets [shot at him by soldiers] did not hit him.... It was as if on reaching him they turned into water" (173). He escapes prison, a mental hospital, and a burning house, and he outwits the combined team of the police and the army who are hunting and shooting to kill him (80, 161-69). He traverses the whole country, making mysterious appearances to different people at different times and places, and all in one day (67-113). The mysterious torrential rains, which start to fall at the very moment he is about to be captured by his enemies and which aid his mysterious disappearance, vividly recall the frequent protective interventions by the gods on behalf of the heroes in such epics as *Mwindo*, *Gilgamesh*, and the *Iliad*.³ Indeed, Matigari with his mystery and power reminds us more of the demi-gods like Gilgamesh and

³ See Okpewho 1979:105-34.

Achilles than of ordinary mortals who are merely favored by the gods such as Sunjara and Hektor.

Not only does Matigari communicate with animals, and not only are natural elements such as torrential rains and fire⁴ friendly to him, but nature as a whole sympathizes with him and seems to exist solely to reflect his mood. Each of the three days constituting the temporal setting of the tale is a perfect mirror of Matigari's changing states of mind. The sun shines even though the heat is oppressive on the first day of his hope-filled (sunny) return to liberate his people from the oppressive heat of imperialist exploitation (2, 5). On the second day, when uncertainties pervade Matigari's mind regarding the possibility of finding truth and justice as the guiding principles of rightful governance in the society, the weather too is ambivalent: "There was no sunshine. There was no rain. It was neither warm nor cold. A dull day" (71, 89, 101). On the third day events rush dramatically to a conclusion with the epic chase of the hero by the combined forces of secret service men, the police, and the army, who are depicted as modern-day monsters, and who corner him into a house bombarded with the awesome power of their united guns. That house burns in a mighty conflagration, but Matigari nonetheless escapes only to be chased like a hunted fox by an army of government forces on horseback and accompanied by police dogs. On this third climactic day, the weather is portentous: "The sun was blazing, hotter than the hottest coals, and scorched them mercilessly. The grass withered and wilted in the heat" (137). With a prophetic perceptiveness, the female character Guthera remarks: "This kind of heat harbours ill" (*idem*). Indeed, the conflagration that subsequently devours the house and the bloody events of the climactic day have been foreshadowed on the first day by nature: "The sun had set by now, but it had left behind a blood-red glow in the evening sky, lighting up the house, the gate and the road on which they stood" (47-48).

Matigari, who thinks of the origin of social evils in cosmic terms ("What curse has befallen us that we should now be fighting one another?" 18, 53), is depicted as a returned hero after a long absence. The length of his absence, which engenders in him a naivete and ignorance of contemporary reality, elicits sympathetic wonder and admiration in his followers (29, 143) and a satirical comparison with the American legendary

⁴ Such as the conflagration that engulfed John Boy's house, in which Matigari is trapped and from which he escapes.

character Rip Van Winkle by his enemies (118). However, his name, Matigari ma Njiruungi, which identifies him as a veteran of the Mau Mau patriotic army that waged the ten-year guerilla war (1952-62) that finally compelled the British colonial administration to grant independence to Kenya, invites a more respectable comparison with the heroes of return epics such as Odysseus. Just as the ancient Greek hero, for instance, comes back to set his house in order, so Matigari returns, consumed with righteous indignation against those who have wrongfully appropriated what he calls his home. His home, we soon discover, is a symbol for the Kenyan nation, which he believes has been usurped and vandalized by inimical neocolonial forces comparable in greed and selfishness both to Penelope's suitors and to the pretender king who had cheated Sunjara out of his royal inheritance. The mission of Matigari, as the symbolic embodiment of the Kenyan people, is to regain his kingdom, which has been lost to the ethics of greed and avarice, and to restore it to its traditional philosophy of communal sharing: "How can I return home alone?... What makes a home?... We shall all gather, go home together, light the fire together and build our home together. Those who eat alone, die alone" (6).

Matigari is the archetypal legendary national epic hero who is "cast as a deliverer of his people" (Okpewho 1979:126). He comes into the tale with an already established patriotic history, for his name indicates that he is the embodiment of all "the patriots who survived the bullets" of the Mau Mau war of independence and who had remained in the forests and mountains "to keep the fire of freedom burning" (20, 23, 37). It is in this capacity as the representative symbol of the patriotic fathers of the nation that Matigari claims kinship with all the people of Kenya, all of whom he calls "my parents, my wives, my children" (6). Except for the Kenyan compradoreal elites, Matigari's antagonists who are depicted as monsters, his claims are also universally acknowledged especially by the children and the workers, whose leader rhetorically asks: "And whose family do you think we all are?" (23). Muriuki on his part firmly proclaims: "Yes. We are the children of Matigari ma Njiruungi. We are the children of the patriots who survived the war" (139, 144-45).

Matigari's identification with the worker is total. He asserts that "there is no job that these hands of mine have not done for the settler" (143). As the symbolic embodiment of all those who exploit the labor of workers, the settler is the antithesis of Matigari. As a figurative embodiment of the worker, Matigari variously represents himself as a

farmer, factory hand, driver, tailor, soldier (patriot), and builder (21-22, 38, 60, 74, 143). Most often he identifies himself not just with Kenyan peasants and workers and women alone, but also with peasants and workers and women everywhere. Once, he muses to himself: “For how long shall my children continue wandering, homeless, naked and hungry, over this earth? And who shall wipe away the tears from the faces of all the women dispossessed on this earth?” (88).

Matigari is thus not only a national hero, but also a class hero who has come to set aright “this world” that “is upside down” (150). “The human race,” Matigari asserts, “has the same roots.... It’s only that they have been dispersed by time and space into different camps” (146). The very first sentence of the novel, in fact, suggests the universal dimension of Matigari’s mission as a class hero by presenting him in the image of an armed warrior who for many years has looked “across many hills and valleys, in the four corners of the globe” (3).⁵ The Mau Mau patriot, who identifies the interest of the Kenyan nation with the interest of the dispossessed majority, is thus also the symbolic representative of the patriots of all nations. Rather than be diminished into the confines of a mere national hero, Matigari overrides the narrowness of ethnic chauvinism, the all-time bane of the world and to whose growth most national epic heroes have often blatantly contributed. In this way, Matigari is perhaps better classified with Beowulf than with Odysseus, and with Christ than with David.⁶

Matigari is aware of his role as a modern political hero; hence he consciously tries to distance himself from the usual agonistic tradition of national epics by burying his weapons. However, his attempt to substitute the weapons of peace—logical reasoning and persuasion—for the weapons

⁵ Matigari himself says: “I have wandered for far too many years in far too many places over the earth” (44).

⁶ Although a nationalistic ethos suffuses the narration of *Beowulf*, a fundamental difference still exists between its motivations and that of the *Odyssey* or the *Iliad*. While the Greek epics display the quest for personal and national glorification and aggrandizement, *Beowulf* is conceived as a journey to rescue an endangered kindred kingdom from a hitherto unconquerable monster. Thus, there is a degree of altruism that is present in one but lacking in the other. Similarly, while David fights for his nation, Christ fights for all humankind. This difference exists apart from the justice or the universal implication of David’s cause.

of war—brute force and firearms—fails, and he is compelled to revise his strategy (63, 160). To the extent that he makes this revision, he rejects the philosophy of non-resistance and of turning the other cheek, thus distancing himself in this respect from Christ. While he pursued his initial theory of peaceful change, he often appeared a naive ideologue and was frequently ridiculed and labeled a drunkard or a lunatic.⁷ On the other hand, whenever he displayed agonistic traits, he was perceived in the popular imagination as an authentic hero, such as when he confronted the two policemen who brutalized Guthera, or when he outwitted the combined forces of the army, the police, and the secret service agents and destroyed John Boy's house even as he escaped the shower of bullets aimed at him. Matigari then is a character who both reaffirms and revises our traditional concept of the hero.

As in all epic tales, Matigari has a set of formidable antagonists to confront. These antagonists naturally come from the camp of the bourgeoisie, whose interests are challenged by Matigari's championship of the proletariat cause. Matigari, in fact, is thrust into an unequal battle because the bourgeoisie constitute the powers-that-be and possess an awesome arsenal of coercive instruments ranging from the dictatorial monopoly of the media and super-efficient secret agents, to the control of school and university curricula, and on to the robotized minds of college professors, news media personnel, civil service executives, priests, judges, the police, and the army—a typical example of a contemporary African police state.

II. The Ogres

Just like the hero himself, Matigari's antagonists are represented in the magnifying mirror of the language of epic narrative. The duo, Mr. Williams and John Boy, are not merely the multinational representative and the local partner, respectively, of the Anglo-American Leather and Plastic Works, but a double-headed monster that has existed from colonial times in an eternal pact of peasant and worker exploitation. No sooner are the heads of these monsters chopped off than they immediately sprout new replacements. For instance, just when Matigari thinks that he has at last

⁷ See 17, 31-32, 39, 43, 44-45, 51, 61, 86, 123, 131-34, 158.

won the epic battle of the Mau Mau war that has lasted several years and ranged over uncountable forest and mountain battlefields with John Boy and Settler Williams, and emerges from the forest to celebrate this victory—just at that moment, Matigari discovers that the hydra-headed duo have been effectively replaced by John Boy Jr. and Mr. Williams Jr. To his chagrin, Matigari discovers that the new double-headed monster is even more formidable than the one he has recently dispatched.

It is not surprising, therefore, that Matigari and others speak of his antagonists in the language of myths and legends, calling them the “ogres currently running the country” (56). The chief ogre is the president—a disembodied omnipresent essence who ruthlessly eliminates all opposition to his dictatorship, using secret agents and informers like Giceru who trail their targets with remorseless efficiency. The ogres behave true to character in being absolutely and brutally inhuman in all their actions, whether at the individual or the official level. A typical example is the terror unleashed on the prostitute Guthera by two policemen whose sexual advances she has persistently rebuffed. The slaughter of protesting students, the banning of dreams, and the institution of a brand of terror called “instant justice” by the Minister of Truth and Justice are other instances.

More will be said below about Matigari’s antagonists when we discuss the theme of the ogres; meanwhile, what we have then in Matigari at the level of characterization is the transformation of a class war into the eternal battle of good and evil that is played out on an epic arena by larger-than-life characters. This epic enhancement both vivifies and immortalizes the otherwise mundane theme and characters. But after all, this is what all heroic narratives do: transform the ordinary into the extraordinary by the sheer force of art. The only difference in the case of Matigari is that the table has been turned on the traditional heroes and heroines of such epics. Members of the powers-that-be who used to be the favorites of the heroic songs are in this case the villains, because *Matigari* is a modern political tale whose purpose is to sanctify the battle of the social underclass for social justice by glorifying one of their leaders. Instead of “an aristocratic poem, concerned with kings and kingship,” as Raffel says of *Beowulf* (1963:x), we have a proletarian heroic narrative.

Epic Compositional Structure

I. *The Opening Formula and the Triad*

With a tripartite and episodic structure and as a multigenetic work with a framing principle of composition that formulaically links themes, *Matigari* can be seen as an ideal example of an oral epic narrative. The author's prefatory note, to which we have earlier drawn attention, should be recalled here for another reason, since it reveals Ngugi's fastidiousness in adhering to the details of the oral narrative composition. Such notes replicate the usual warm-up ritual that traditional storytellers engage in before commencing their tales, a ritual that ends up quite appropriately with the usual opening formula:

So say yes, and I'll tell you a story!
Once upon a time, in a country with no name....

However, unlike the traditional African bard who believed in the historicity of his legendary tales (Johnson 1986:45) and thus never had to worry about the institution of a libel case, Ngugi as a modern writer has to avoid legal entanglement by using another formula, this time one that belongs to the disclaimer tradition in written literature. Hence Ngugi insists that his story as well as its characters, actions, and temporal and geographical setting are all imaginary. The adroit combination of two opening formulas that belong to two different narrative traditions—oral and written—is a clear signal of Ngugi's intention to create an original modern epic. Among its other functions, then, and aside from the obvious aesthetic pleasure of its brilliant stylistic combination of diverse modes, the opening prefatory note is meant to indicate at least two things: one, that *Matigari* is an updated modern tale that remains faithful to the performative formulas characterizing African and other cultural traditional epics; and two, that it is a tale composed for oral reading.

The triad or trinity, a beloved folkloric and Biblical compositional and configurational device (Kelber 1983:66), is a prominent feature of *Matigari*, whose tripartite structural divisions are formulaically framed alike. The same sentence, cast in the form of a question with slight variations in diction, emphasis, and placement, is repeatedly used to conclude each of the three parts into which Ngugi's narration is divided.

Part one, for instance, ends thus: “Still the question remained: Who was Matigari ma Njiruungi?” (66). Part two closes with the same question: “But who was Matigari ma Njiruungi?” (127). The final third part adds a little elaboration: “Who was Matigari ma Njiruungi? Was he dead, or was he alive?” (174). The final chapter and conclusion of *Matigari*, which is three quarters of a page long, is virtually an epilogue showing the protagonist’s apotheosized disciple, Miriuki, transformed into the new Matigari ma Njiruungi (175). The formulaic sentence-question that ends each part of the tale also serves to reinforce the aura of mystery that perpetually surrounds the legendary Matigari. The mystery itself is a consciously repeated artistic motif designed to heighten interest in and elevate the mythic significance of Matigari as an epic hero.

II. Multiformity as Multigeneric Character

Virtually every critic who has written on *Matigari* has remarked on its multiformic or multigeneric character, what Katherine Williams refers to as “Ngugi’s use of mixed genres” (1991:61). A central characteristic of the epic in general is its multiformism. In Albert Lord’s usage, multiformity refers to the variations that exist within the transmission of a given epic song (and its constituent parts) as rendered in performance by the same or different bards. The variations appear as differences in the realization of a poetic line or lines, or changes in a poetic theme or motif with reference to content, details, or manner of composition (1960:99-123; esp. 101, 119-23). The sense in which I use the term multiform throughout this essay, on the other hand, is as a synonym of “multigenre,” that is, the quality or habit of an epic to incorporate other genres. The South Slavic “singer of tales” (oral epic poet), for instance, combines the music of the *gusle* with the recitation of measured lines (poetry) to constitute a song in performance. Furthermore, his narrative song is a collation of different “themes” as varied as the summoning of assembly, writing and dispatching a letter, ornamental description, catalogue, journey or the quest, and rescue.

In an epic tradition like that of Africa where there is as much emphasis on the bard’s tale as on its performance (Okpewho 1979:52-62), the epic exhibits even greater capacity for incorporating more genres. Thus, the African “singer of tales” is not only a musician-raconteur like the South Slavic *guslar*, but, according to Okpewho, “a musician-dancer-

raconteur" who speaks expressively with his body in performance (55-56). It also needs to be noted that the tale itself, which Albert Lord considers as the paramount element of the epic (1960:68), is often a mixture of factual history, myth, legend, anecdote, and other narrative genres.

Given all this, it is only to be expected that a knowledgeable and experimentalist artist like Ngugi, while writing an African epic in a postmodernist era, would maximally exploit the multiformic character of the genre to aesthetic advantage. Elsewhere I have discussed how Ngugi utilizes the epic multiformic principle as the basis of creating a new form of the novel;⁸ here we would merely identify the various genres that have been harmoniously woven into the structural fabric of *Matigari*. First of all, there are different kinds of narratives. The factual history of the Mau Mau patriotic war of Kenyan independence constitutes the foundation of the *Matigari* tale. The mythologizing of factual history is the common practice of oral tradition in which some factual "events take on 'cosmic' significance" (Keck 1978:117); thus, it is natural that from the Mau Mau history has sprung the legend of the invincible patriot, who has not only remained in the mountains to keep the metaphoric fire of independence burning, but would return to restore true independence if it is threatened. This legend is merged with the Christian myth of Christ's second coming, all of which is dexterously fused in Ngugi's tale of Matigari. Also integrated into this tale are other narratives such as the legend of Rip Van Winkle, the anecdote concerning the sexual promiscuity and religious hypocrisy of the wife of the Minister for Truth and Justice. Proverbs and parables abound, and there are aphorisms and riddles as well.

Performance, constituted from music, songs, dialogues, and mimicry, is an intrinsic part of the multiformic fabric of Matigari's tale that moves with well managed dramatic intensity and excitement, both of which progressively heighten audience interest. Songs, whether recalling the past heroism of the Mau Mau patriots or spontaneously composed to celebrate Matigari's present legendary exploits, often become the center of intense drama, particularly when they are combined with vivacious dialogues of excited and expressive crowds such as are witnessed in the second part of the novel. Here, Matigari's so-called miracles undergo incremental exaggeration as they are retold, in fact reenacted, by one excited and gullible group for another. The more intense drama, however, is associated

⁸ See Balogun 1993:185-96.

with actions like the kind witnessed in the several confrontations between Matigari and the agents of the government. All of these actions lead to the dramatic build-up of the epic chase that culminates in the conflagration of John Boy's house, and the subsequent massive mob action and the arsons that follow.

Diverse other elements also become integral parts of the multiform constitution of Matigari's epic tale. Description, such as that of the hero's weapons, is strategically placed as a framing device at the beginning and end of the tale. When the descriptions are of persons, they promote the stereotyping of individuals, a traditional habit of oral narratives in preferring the flat to the rounded character (Kelber 1983:68-69, 71; Johnson 1986:6). Guthera's beauty, for instance, is hyperbolically emphasized to elevate her above ordinary women (27-28). Matigari's description serves the same purpose of stereotypical idealization, indeed reification, for each description adds to the legend of his mystery of being both young and old, a dwarf and a giant, an ordinary and a superhuman being, a reality and a dream.

At least fourteen radio broadcasts strategically punctuate the tale. These broadcasts both provide the parallel story of the actions of Matigari's antagonists (the powers-that-be) and supply satirical details to deflate them and transform them from flesh-and-blood, round characters into the stereotypes of villainous robots and ogres. There is etiology, such as the explanation of the origin of rain (53), and there is ritual and sacrifice (52-54, 57). And as the novel's critics are quick to point out, there are also borrowings from Hollywood films and from the traditions of the realistic novel.⁹

III. Prefabricated Formulary and Thematic Units

Critical opinions are unanimous in acknowledging oral narratives, especially the epic, as plotless in a literary sense, although this quality, as Walter Ong warns, should not be negatively apprehended since it was a virtue in pre-writing narration (1982:144). The epic prefers an "essential structural looseness of narrative composition" (Okpewho 1979:160) because the oral poet composes with what Ong, echoing Lord, calls "prefabricated"

⁹ Crehan 1993:123; Gikandi 1991:163-64, and 1992:139.

formulary parts (23) or, as Eric A. Havelock has claimed, simply because preliterate thought tends to be primarily episodic in structure (qtd. in Foley 1988:96). The so-called prefabricated units of composition employed by the epic bard are either phraseological or thematic in nature. Attention will be focused below on the phraseological; meanwhile, we will examine the thematic prefabs with respect to the tale about Matigari.

Although *Matigari* has a unified plot, which is compactly packed in three parts and three days of intense dramatic actions, close scrutiny easily reveals that it has actually been put together from an array of thematic prefabs. Themes, defined by Lord as “the group of ideas regularly used in telling a tale in the formulaic style of traditional song” (1960:68), operate in three distinct groups in *Matigari*. The first group is associated with Matigari, the epic hero; its members are often formulaically introduced or concluded. The second group of themes converges around Matigari’s antagonists, the ogres. There is a third group of themes that are not as singularly focused but are more diffusely linked with natural objects, animals, and human functions. Both the second and third groups, like the first, are often formulaically structured.

IV. Heroic Themes and Phraseology

We commenced our discussion of the compositional structure of *Matigari* by observing the fact that each of its three parts is formulaically framed with the question: “Who is Matigari?” This question highlights one of the most central and persistent themes of Ngugi’s narrative: the identity of Matigari. That Ngugi nowhere provides a conclusive answer to this question, which appears not only as a formula to close sectional divisions (66, 127, 174) but also at numerous points throughout the narration, constitutes one of the tale’s most forceful artistic devices. In fact, on it depends not only the story’s ability to retain interest, but more significantly, its capacity to sustain the characterization of Matigari as a superhuman hero. The device is thus one of the secrets to the mythologization of history discussed above, for the explanation that Matigari is a Mau Mau patriot who has recently returned from the mountains does not resolve the mystery of his superhuman attributes. Indeed, the closer the tale moves toward its end, the more the mystery and the questions surrounding Matigari’s identity multiply (158; cf. 170):

They all shared the same hope: that a miracle should take place.

But at the same time all wondered: who really was Matigari ma Njiruungi? A patriot? Angel Gabriel? Jesus Christ? Was he a human being or a spirit? A true or false prophet? A saviour or simply a lunatic? Was Matigari a man or was he a woman? A child or an adult? Or was he only an idea, an image, in people's minds? Who Was He? (158; See also 170).

None of the details in this barrage of questions is frivolous because each of them has been motivated by the individual images of Matigari multiply grounded in the text. We have seen, for example, how his appearance mysteriously and repeatedly changes from youthfulness to old age, how he is alternately vulnerable and invulnerable, how he is capable and incapable of performing miracles, how he has the dual capacity to be both a national hero and an international class hero. And as for the reality of the character, the already cited author's prefatory note had warned us that his story's actions, characters, and setting are all imaginary and are located in the country, time, and space of the reader's choosing; in other words, all this is the "never-never-land" of the fairy tale of "Once upon a time..." (ix).

One unit from the other group of themes associated with the personality of Matigari concerns his image as the returned, long-absent hero who had stayed away in the mountains and whose patriotic intention is captured in the unchanging formula "to keep the fire of freedom burning" (20, 23). The quest theme, another example of the group, depicts Matigari as a wanderer who has forever restlessly been roaming the world in search of "truth and justice"—another repeated formula (89, 92; also 3, 5, 15, 44, 85, 71-114). The quest pattern is closely linked with another theme about Matigari's miraculous escapes and mysterious appearances especially during the period of his quest (71-114). Both units are announced formulaically: "He went to many market-places in search of truth and justice. People stood in groups talking..." (71); "He went to shopping centres. Everywhere, shopkeepers and their customers crowded..." (72); "He visited many eating places. People were so absorbed..." (74); "He went to the crossroads. Women returning from the river..." (75); "He went to the law courts. Those awaiting trial..." (80); "He travelled on foot. He rode on donkey carts. He got lifts on bicycles. He travelled in matatus, buses and lorries. He travelled by train...." (84-85); "Matigari came up to them and stood on the

veranda" (73); "Just then Matigari stopped on the other side of the road and greeted them..." (77); "Matigari just arrived, only to find a man speaking and pointing a finger in his direction" (82). Although the formulary nature of the language of Matigari is a subject that will be discussed with greater scrutiny in a separate section below, the above examples should be noted as evidence of the fastidious care Ngugi took regarding the details of the composition and style of his novel. But even more important here than his general conscientiousness as an artist is the indication that Ngugi intentionally composed his tale using the "prefabricated" units of theme and phraseology in the precise manner of the oral poet.

Five other elements in the group of themes surrounding Matigari will now be summarized for the sake of brevity. One of these themes, which are also formulaically presented, concerns Matigari's habit of absentmindedly reaching for his weapons in moments of danger, only to remember that he has buried them and "girded himself with the belt of peace" (17, 30, 47). Another is the central theme of Matigari's struggle to repossess his "house" (which we have earlier identified as a symbol for the Kenyan nation) and return it to communal governance by dispossessing the exploiters like John Boy and Mr. Williams who had appropriated and ruthlessly ruled it with the ethics of selfish individualism (63, 124, 138, 144, 157, etc.). Closely associated with this pattern is the theme of fear, against which Matigari has made it his mission to do battle because "too much fear breeds misery in the land" (76-77, 87, 90-92, 112, 170-71).

The fourth theme is the traditional epic theme of the death of the substitute. The workers' leader Kiriro actually dies in the place of Matigari, while Guthera, the former prostitute who mysteriously disappears with Matigari into the river, ridden with bullets, had earlier sacrificed her long-kept vow that even as a prostitute she would not accept the patronage of any police officer. She broke this vow in order to make possible the release of Matigari from prison, a release which popular gossip credited as a miracle wrought by Angel Gabriel. Matigari's release from prison by Guthera and his second release from the mental hospital by Muriuki constitute the fifth theme—the traditional epic theme of the rescue of the hero. In fact, Guthera's rescue of Matigari from prison is a reciprocation for Matigari's earlier dramatic rescue of Guthera from the terror of police dogs. Matigari has similarly rescued Muriuki from being beaten up by a bigger boy. Thus, there is a cycle of reciprocity among the heroes and heroine as far as the rescue theme is concerned. This cycle of reciprocity

evidently encodes one of Ngugi's artistic messages, for it shows that only with courage, unity, and reciprocity of sacrifice could the exploited class win their battle against their exploiters.

V. Themes of the Ogre and the Double

The theme of the double is one of the major traits associated with Matigari's antagonists, who are depicted primarily as ogres and against whom Matigari the hero has constantly to battle. The battle against the ogres, typified by the epic struggle between Matigari and Settler Williams, is made all the more formidable because the ogres have multiple lives. To begin with, their protectors, the police, patrol the streets always in a unit of two and accompanied by a dog. The evil of which the police are capable is typified by the manner in which they use a vicious police dog to terrorize Guthera because she refuses to yield to their sexual advances. Not only are these policemen appropriately called "beasts" (31), but they are actually depicted in an image that makes them the interchangeable double of their animal through the deft choice of words accorded to an outraged citizen who exaggeratedly reports the incident: "He stood tall and strong and told the *dog police*: I am Matigari ma Njiruunigi, and I warn you. Leave that woman alone!" (60; emphasis added). Even children know the police and speak of them using the imagery of corruption and of the double: "The police station? Are you joking? What police? The police and these bandits work together. They are as inseparable as these fingers on my hand..." (14).

To show the greater level of the monstrosity of the ogres whom these policemen protect, a two-layered imagery of the double is employed. At the first level, there is the unity of the foreign exploiter and local collaborator represented by Settler Williams and John Boy, Snr. These two are depicted as the architects of the exploitation of African peasants and workers during colonialism. Consequently, to end colonialism meant that Matigari the patriotic hero had to defeat their double-headed unity in exploitation. The task took Matigari several years before it was successfully accomplished. The thematic formula that repeatedly registers this eventual victory is impressively imagistic: "It was only yesterday that... Settler Williams fell... He was dead. I placed my left foot on his chest and raised his weapons high in the air, proclaiming victory!" (22, 38, 58, 98).

A second layer is added to the imagery of the double when Matigari discovers his victory over John Boy and Settler Williams to be illusory:

We spent *many years* hunting one another in every corner of the land. I first killed John Boy. *It was only yesterday that I finally got Williams and stepped on his chest, holding up the weapons in victory.* The battle won, I decided to come home and claim my house. ‘Our people! Would you believe it? Who do you think I met standing at the gate to my house? John Boy’s son, and Settler Williams’ son! So it was Boy, son of Boy, who inherited the keys to my house!...’ (58-59; emphasis added).

With the monstrosity of the double of economic unity multiplied by the double of the ogres’ biological continuation, Matigari the patriot finds the task of ridding his land of the double yoke of internal and external exploitation an insurmountable task. The awesomeness of his task is presented to him by a worker whom he meets in prison:

That *inseparable* pair have been oppressing us all the time. Every worker knows that Robert Williams and John Boy are like twins born out of the womb of the same *ogre*. And do you know something else? The whole police force is in the hands of these two. So are all the law courts. (65; emphasis added)

Although acknowledging the inseparability of the duo of “a servant and his boss,” “the imperialist and his servant” (78, 79), meaning John Boy and Mr. Williams, Matigari remains undaunted. The imagery of the double is in fact additionally segmented not only in respect to the multiplicity of the personages involved—which in the European imagination brings to mind the mythical hydra and Hercules—but also in respect to the forces behind the unholy duality. The doubles unite to achieve protection against the consequences of their double corruptions: moral and economic. The twofaced behavior of the wife of the Minister for Truth and Justice is another graphic instance of this duality. On one hand, she hypocritically preaches on the radio to the whole nation the virtues of ideal womanhood; on the other hand, she is shamelessly licentious. When at last she is caught in the act, her lies are boldly and firmly backed by the full force of the law (150, 153).

The black Mercedes Benz that always appears in isolated spots in the wilderness is another motif recurrent throughout the novel (6, 7, 9, 16, 141-153). The car is not only the symbol of superfluous elite luxury, but also of

corruption. It is, for instance, the moving venue for the satisfaction of the sexual appetite of the wife of the Minister for Truth and Justice. It is paradoxical, then, that in a moment of poetic justice, this same car would become available to Matigari to use in order to escape police chase and would also later become the instrument by which Matigari would reach and destroy the prized house of John Boy.

Parrotology, another name for robotic sycophancy to dictatorial powers, is a prominent theme deployed as a satirical vehicle in *Matigari*. At its most obnoxious level, parrotology is depicted as associated with the intellectuals and the news media personnel, all of who make the reign of the ogres possible. There is a “Permanent Professor of the History of Parrotology,” a “Ph.d in Parrotology,” an “Editor of the Daily Parrotology,” and *Songs of a Parrot* (117, 119). But the most pervasive robotism is that of the national radio which eternally and nauseatingly begins every one of its fourteen adulatory broadcasts about the President, its only subject of news, with the unvaried formula: “This is the Voice of Truth.”¹⁰

VI. Other Thematic Groups

Of the third category of themes—those unassociated directly with either the hero or the ogre—three will be mentioned here because of their formulaic and symbolic significance. We have discussed the first, relating to the weather, in reference to its enhancement of the mystery surrounding Matigari’s heroic character. The weather not only sympathizes with and reflects the moods of the hero as noted above; it also often foreshadows the future. Just before Matigari would for the first time lay eyes on the house that proves a symbolic point of contention between him and John Boy, the weather displays the following character: “A red cloud enveloped the sun, but the sun continued to peep from behind it, sending out darts of fire in every direction” (42). Evidently, these “darts of fire” are warnings of the “ball of fire” that would begin the conflagration of the same house toward the end of the story (166).

The theme of a riderless horse that appears, among other places, on the first and last passages of the novel in conjunction with other framing

¹⁰ See 7, 26, 70, 83, 132, 133, 134, 135, 136, 151, 154.

devices such as the weapon description, is presented in exactly the same repeated formulaic phrases: “A riderless horse galloped past him. It stopped, looked back at him for a while and then disappeared into the woods” (3, 175). The exact symbolic meaning of this formulaically expressed theme is not quite clear; one can only speculate about its import. The brief exchange of looks perhaps exemplifies the understanding and communication between animals and patriots in the woods that Matigari claimed to have existed during the patriotic war (143). Thus, the horse might just be bidding goodbye to Matigari, who is departing the forest and welcoming Muriuki who has come to replace him. On another level, the emphasis on the word “riderless” might suggest the overthrow of Settler Williams, who like others in his class delighted in the pastime of riding horses to engage in the game of spilling blood. Indeed, Matigari recalls Mr. Williams in precisely these terms in the first passage.

The mugumo tree, among whose roots Matigari buries his weapons at the beginning of the novel, and from where his successor, Muriuki, digs them up at the end of the novel, is a symbolic image carried over from Ngugi’s earlier works. On the first page of the present novel, the tree is parenthetically defined simply as “a fig tree” (3); however, earlier usages by Ngugi, especially in his novel *Weep Not, Child*, link the tree to Gikuyu creation myth. According to Lee Haring (1984), Ngugi’s allusion to this myth through the use of the mugumo tree in *Weep Not, Child* was meant to emphasize Gikuyu ownership rights to their lands that had been appropriated by white settlers like Mr. Williams. Mythology tells that it was on the land under the mugumo that the Gikuyu ancestors had founded the Gikuyu nation, and hence the tree is regarded with reverence in Gikuyu mythology. Although Haring sees the influence of Christianity in Ngotho’s definition of the mugumo as a tree of life (84), there is hardly any essential difference between that interpretation and the sacredness and reverence with which myths (Christian or non-Christian) treat lands of origin.

In the context of the struggle between Matigari and Settler Williams for ownership of the “house,” that is, the Kenyan nation, it is evident that the succinct but repeated allusion to the mugumo is a significant detail. It underscores Matigari’s claim to ownership of the house/land to which Mr. Williams (appropriately assigned the honorific “Settler Williams”) is in truth a stranger. It is not accidental that Matigari does not hide his weapons under just any tree, but carefully seeks out the mugumo: “Then suddenly he saw what he was looking for: a huge mugumo, a fig tree, right in the

middle of a cluster of other trees" (3). The emphasis on the tree's age through reference to its size is meant to underline its link with myth and ancestry. It should similarly be noted that not once does Matigari entertain fears concerning the safety of his weapons placed in the protective custody of the mugumo, a confidence that is fully justified when Matigari's broad directions lead Muriuki to the weapons as surely as if he had kept them there himself. Evidently, the ancestors had sanctified Matigari's cause, and hence the confident assurance of ultimate victory expressed in the song that Muriuki remembers as he stands—significantly—under the mugumo at the end of the novel.

VII. Framing Device, Digression, and Ring Composition

At least nine framed stories are narrated in *Matigari* in the ornamental, digressive manner of the traditional epic. The stories may be called ornamental because they do not belong to the main story line. Most frequently, the framed story is presented through the device of ring composition by which epic narrators neatly bracket off their ornamental narrative insertions. A typical example of the framed story in *Matigari* is the history of Guthera. In the characteristic epic formulary manner, this story is repeated almost word for word on two separate occasions (33-37 and 94-97). But for the necessity to adhere to the epic formulary use of prefabricated units, Guthera's story could have merely been paraphrased in a few sentences the second time it had to be told, but in fact it is recounted in exactly the same details and wording as happened during the first time it was narrated.

On each of the two instances, for instance, the story is recounted as an illustrative digression to an ongoing conversation. The first time, the conversation is interrupted with the following words that serve to introduce the tale: "First let me tell you a story..." (33). On the second occasion, the conversation is disturbed with the phrase: "Let me unload on you a burden which is weighing heavily on me" (94). The story begins every time with a version of the opening formula for the traditional tale: "Long ago, there was a virgin..." (33) and "Long ago, there was a young woman. She was the purest of maids..." (94). Also on each occasion, the story is told from the third-person point of view despite the fact that on the first of those occasions Guthera herself is the narrator of her own story. This device is

purposely employed because withholding information about the identity of the story's protagonist helps to sustain the interest of the audience. The story is followed each time by resumption of the initially interrupted conversation.

Like all the other stories presented through the device of ring composition, Guthera's story is a digression, but one that has relevance to the issue at hand. While Guthera narrates the story the first time to Matigari, her new friend and protector, in order to acquaint him with both her personal history and her present predicament, Matigari in turn dramatically retells it in the court as damning evidence of political corruption and class exploitation in Kenya. The phrase "the eleventh commandment" (37, 95) is formulaically repeated on each of the two occasions when Guthera's story is told. This phrase is her private ethical code that serves as a reminder of her decision never to provide her services as a prostitute to any policeman. She made this decision because of the treacherous role of the police in the death of her father, who was caught smuggling weapons to the Mau Mau patriots during the war of independence. The formula also reveals her disenchantment with organized religion.

As might be expected, Matigari's story provides the most elaborate example of a repeated use of ring composition. The story of the cause, character, and conclusion of his protracted battle with Settler Williams is retold on at least four different occasions (38, 57-59, 97-98, 113-14). The judicious spread of the placement of the repetition within the novel is noteworthy. Whether the story is elaborately narrated for emphasis as in the second occasion of its telling, or abbreviated in paraphrases employed to support an ongoing argument as in the three other examples, the story is vividly and dramatically presented, and it begins unfailingly with only slightly modified variations of the same formula:

It was now Matigari's turn to tell Guthera his story: how he had cleared the bush; how he had cultivated and sowed; and how later he had built a house. And all this time Settler Williams had strolled about with his hands in his pockets... (38).

Matigari began speaking, like a father to his children. "I lived on a farm stolen from me by Settler Williams. I cleared the bush, tilled the soil, sowed the seeds and tended the crop..." (57-58).

Let me tell you yet another riddle concerning him-who-sows and him-who-reaps-where-he-never-sowed. He-who-sows cleared the bush, cultivated the land, flattened it, sowed and tended the crop. He-who-reaps-where-he-never-sowed grabbed the land... (97).

My story is made up of you and me. I built house. I cultivated the land. I worked the industry. But Settler Williams, aided by his servant, John Boy, ended up with all the wealth... (113-14).

Beside showing the application of formulaically composed framed stories, the above examples also reveal Ngugi to be a painstaking, masterful craftsman who pays meticulous attention to the slightest details of his craft. Since this repeated story is placed at judicious distances apart, a less conscientious writer who is more concerned with the form than with the aesthetics of the form would have merely repeated the story each time word-for-word. Ngugi, on the other hand, carefully balanced the first and third person points of view, as well as varied the length, pace, emphasis, tone, and diction of the story at each instance of its repetition. Although discussion of the epic linguistic formulas of *Matigari* is reserved for the next section of this article, we cannot but note here the elaborate and intriguing application of the descriptive epithets “he-who-sowed” and “he-who-reaped-where-he-never-sowed.” Since these epithets are used as a naming device and are repeated throughout the novel by application to the same set of individuals, they can also be regarded as fixed epithets.

The device of ring composition is also used with the same careful craftsmanship to weave into the larger narrative fabric of *Matigari* the story of Muriuki’s mother’s brutal murder by arson (25), Muriuki’s dream (155), a worker’s story recounted in prison (59-61), the story of John Boy’s education (48-49, 102), the philosophical tale about the leopard and the hare (112), the tale about an archer and truth (62), the legend of Rip Van Winkle (118), and the myth about the Ogre (131).

Each of the ringed compositions analyzed or mentioned above momentarily diverts attention from the main plot of *Matigari*, but in doing so, it also provides a fresh insight or emphasis for a deeper understanding of the major plot. Consequently, each diversion is a creative digression that both diverts attention from but ends up advancing the main story. These are exactly the functions of ring composition in African oral epics.¹¹

¹¹ Cf. Okpewho 1979:194-201.

VIII. *Coincidences and Deus ex Machina*

While realistic fiction frowns on the intrusion of extraneous forces into the natural development of a novel's plot, oral narratives are inconceivable without such intrusions. Indeed, heroic characterization depends for its realization precisely on the intervention of the supernatural. *Matigari* amply demonstrates this characteristic. For instance, the careful detailing of the earlier appearances of the black Mercedes Benz in the wilderness is Ngugi's attempt to realistically motivate the appearance of this car at exactly that moment towards the end of the story when Matigari needs it for his attempted escape. In spite of this careful artistic labor, the availability of the car at that crucial turning point remains suspect. The paradox, however, is that Ngugi did not need to labor to clothe the appearance of the car in the apparel of normalcy or reality. Given the overwhelming details in the characterization of Matigari as a legendary hero, coincidences such as the mysterious appearance of the car become the expected, the normal, the realistic.

Matigari's mysterious escape through the window from the inferno of John Boy's house, his remaining unscratched by even a single bullet when the combined forces of the police and the army's sharp shooters target torrents of gunfire and explosives at him, the sudden intervention of a heavy rain at the nick of time to prevent the capture of Matigari and Guthera, their mysterious disappearance (indeed, apotheosis) at the end of the novel, and the transformation of the mere child Muriuki into Matigari—all these, and many more, are expected and normal interventions within the context of the mythologization of Matigari as the embodiment and contemporary evocation of Mau Mau history.

Epic Linguistic and Stylistic Formulas

That *Matigari* is a consciously wrought epic narrative is nowhere as evident as in the proliferation and artistic deployment of elements that traditionally characterize the language and the style of the epic tale. Abounding throughout *Matigari* are devices such as the fixed epithet, formulaic expressions, the catalog, progressive duplications, double or triple

repetitions, rhetorical questions, exclamatory statements, apostrophe, dialogue, parallelism, and rhythmic sentences and passages.

The formulary epic principle is most evident in *Matigari*'s diction and syntax, especially in the earlier sections of the narrative. Thoughts, for instance, are strung together in "additive, rather than subordinative" and "aggregative rather than analytic" sentences, a syntactic pattern that Ong has perceptively identified as typifying the mode of oral traditional composition (1982:37-39). This paratactic or adding syntax, which Lord has also cited as the source of the predominance of parallelism in epic narratives (1960:54-57), exists in profusion in *Matigari*, as is evident in the following illustration that constitutes section 2 of part one of the novel (1987:5-6):

| | |
|---|----|
| He climbed up and down yet other hills and mountains; | 1 |
| crossed many other valleys and rivers; trekked through | 2 |
| many fields and plains: moving with determination | 3 |
| towards the heart of the country. The sun shone | 4 |
| brightly. He took off his coat, carried it over his | 5 |
| shoulder and strode on, the sun shining directly into | 6 |
| his face. But he still did not waver or look back. | 7 |
| Black-eyed Susans and other weeds clung to his clothes | 8 |
| as though welcoming him back to the fields. He was | 9 |
| sweating. So much heat! So much dust! What trials | 10 |
| one had to endure on this earthly journey! But there | 11 |
| was no arrival without the effort of moving feet. | 12 |
| He tried to visualise his home. In his mind's eye | 13 |
| he could see the hedges and the rich fields so clearly. | 14 |
| Just another climb, the final climb, and then he would | 15 |
| be home—his home on top of the hill! | 16 |
| His feet felt heavy. He decided to rest for a while. | 17 |
| He laid his coat on the ground and sat on it in the | 18 |
| shade, leaning back against the tree. He removed his | 19 |
| hat, placed it on his left knee and wiped his brow with | 20 |
| his right hand. His hair was a fine mixture of black | 21 |
| and grey. His brow had creased with fatigue. He yawned | 22 |
| drowsily. How could it be so oppressively hot so early? | 23 |
| He dozed off. His thoughts took flight. How can I | 24 |
| return home all alone? How can I cross the threshold | 25 |
| of my house all alone? What makes a home? It is the | 26 |
| men, women and children—the entire family. I must | 27 |
| rise up now and go to all the public places, blowing | 28 |
| the horn of patriotic service and the trumpet of | 29 |
| patriotic victory, and call up my people—my parents, | 30 |

| | |
|--|----|
| my wives, my children. We shall all gather, go home | 31 |
| together, light the fire together and build our home | 32 |
| together. Those who eat alone, die alone. Could I | 33 |
| have forgotten so soon the song we used to sing? | 34 |
| Great love I saw there, | 35 |
| Among the women and the children. | 36 |
| We shared even the single bean | 37 |
| That fell upon the ground. | 38 |
| He started and woke up. He put on his hat and picked | 39 |
| up his coat, which he once again carried over his right | 40 |
| shoulder. | 41 |
| An irresistible urge to go and just peep at his house | 42 |
| gnawed at him, but he fought against it. He had made up | 43 |
| his mind. He would first go in search of his people; at | 44 |
| least first find out where they lived, what they ate and | 45 |
| drank and what they wore. So many traps, oh so many | 46 |
| temptations, in the way of the traveller on this earth! | 47 |

Instead of a mixture of simple, complex, and compound sentences, the above passage, which I have numbered in lines to facilitate reference, consists primarily of a succession of simple sentences that begin with the third-person masculine personal pronoun either in the subjective form "he" or in the possessive "his." The passage consequently moves in rhythmic waves of predictable syntactic units; lines 17-23 are the most graphic in this respect. A similar example of the use of parallel and rhythmic sentences derived from the repetitive occurrence of the personal pronouns "his," "he," "me," and "we" is seen with greater variation in the following passage:

"He did not.... He quickened his pace.... His heart beat wildly. Let me hurry.... Let me tell them.... We shall all go home together. We shall enter the house together. We shall light the fire together..." (10).

As this passage shows, the rhythmic movement of the pages of *Matigari* is also a consequence of the frequent use of the device of parallelism, which is created by the repetitive deployment of a variety of linguistic arrangements.

In lines 1-4 of the numbered text quoted above, for instance, parallelism is built on the recurrence of the same pattern of verbal phrases centered on the four verbs "climbed," "crossed," "trekked," and "moving." A similar scheme is repeated with variation in lines 31-33, where there is

once again a four-unit verbal phrase repetition, each unit of which ends on a rhyme built on “gather” and “together.” In lines 39-40, another variation on the same pattern can be observed. Not only do the two sentences constituting the parallelism end on a near-rhyme (“woke up” and “picked up”), but each of the two sentences is internally balanced with the use of a coordinating conjunction: “started and woke” and “put on... and picked up....”

Repetition is the most common device used to produce rhythmic passages and parallelism in *Matigari*, as the passages quoted above amply demonstrate. The repetition often exceeds the traditional doubling as in the phrase “Oh, a long, long time ago” (15) and extends to a triple or quadruple multiplication like the following one: “They walked and walked and walked down the slope, but they were...” (41). The word “no” is the structural cornerstone of the following three parallel sentences: “No wind blew. No leaves rustled. No clothes fluttered anywhere” (40). When Guthera tries to seduce Matigari on the occasion of their very first meeting (28-29), the word “or” is used by Guthera eleven times, and in six out of those eleven times, it is the initial word of sentences cast as questions.

As the numbered passage quoted above shows, the linguistic structure of repetition in *Matigari* is varied. It can result from the use of the same unchanged linguistic unit, as in lines 13 and 16 where the phrase “his home” is repeated; or one element could be varied within the repeated unit, as in line 15 where one of the adjectives modifying the noun “climb” is changed: “another climb” and “the final climb.” The same pattern is at work in the phrase “blowing the horn of... and the trumpet of...” in lines 28-29, as well as in the relative clauses “where they lived, what they ate and drank and what they wore” in lines 45-46. The variation in the combination of article + noun + verb + adverb in lines 4-5 and 6 is similar: “the sun shone brightly” and “the sun shining directly....” The repetition in line 27 and 30-31 consists of two lists of nouns—“men, women and children” and “my parents, my wives, my children.”

The use of the list or what Lord calls a “catalogue” (1960:96) is a beloved device of epic poets. It is often quite elaborate in its enumeration of the class or classes of objects or actions being listed. Considering the length of the entire narrative, the catalogues in *Matigari* are impressive, even though they are nowhere as extensive as the catalogues of warriors, lords, and other characters assembled in council or engaged in battle or some other related activities in such epics as the ancient Greek *Odyssey* or

Iliad, the South Slavic *Wedding of Smailagić Mehō*, or the Malian *Sunjara*. Some of the catalogues in *Matigari* include the listing of the types of cars in the “vehicle cemetery” that has been converted into living quarters by abandoned children in Kenya (15). The enumeration of the menu at the “Mataha Hotel, Bar and Restaurant” is another (23). The commandments are all listed, plus Guthera’s own personal eleventh commandment (34-36). The list of Africa’s former colonial masters and of multinational companies is given (45, 50). A roll of those arrested and the reasons for their arrest is similarly supplied (54-54). The most elaborate catalogue enumerates the means of transportation that Matigari used and the places and persons he visited in his search for truth and justice throughout the land (84-100).

The repeated exclamatory statement, cast in the syntax of parallelism, also abounds in *Matigari*. Successive exclamatory sentences, two of them parallel, appear, for instance, in lines 10-11 of the passage quoted above: “So much heat! So much dust! What trials one had to endure on this earthly journey!” The religious allusion in this last exclamation also finds an echo in the final sentence of the passage, another exclamatory phrase: “So many traps, oh so many temptations in the way of the traveller on this earth!” (lines 46-47). This last sentence, like the first three, combines multiple characteristics; it is exclamatory, allusive, and internally constituted as parallelism with the help of repetition. Moreover, the strategic placement of allusive and rhythmic exclamatory sentences at the end of the first and last paragraphs of this brief second sectional division of part one of the novel gives the device of exclamation a formulary and unifying force as a frame. The brevity of this second sectional division is also characteristic of the whole novel, which moves with the fast rhythm of multiple short narrative waves.

Rhetorical questions, also often cast in the rhythmic movement of the parallel syntax, are as frequent as exclamatory sentences in *Matigari*. The uninterrupted succession of rhetorical questions in the passage quoted above in lines 23-26 and the conclusion of the two successive paragraphs ending on lines 23 and 34 in the same short text amply demonstrate the truth of this claim. Apart from adding to the rhythmic movement of thought, rhetorical questions often underscore the ideological question of social inequality whose rectification constitutes the essence of Matigari’s mission as a class hero. Early in the narrative, as Matigari observes two policemen, a tractor driver, and two men—all in a morally compromising act—he expresses his perplexity in two parallel rhetorical sentences: “So these five were busy

dividing among themselves the money they had taken from the children? So a handful of people still profited from the suffering of the majority, the sorrow of the many being the joy of the few?" (12). With even greater intensity and concentration, a barrage of rhythmic, rhetorical questions in section eleven of part two of *Matigari* (85-86) becomes the instrument for underscoring the necessity of raising the question of morality in the governance of human beings, particularly with reference to determining what constitutes the understanding of truth and justice.

The aphoristic beauty of much of the text of *Matigari* derives from the appropriateness with which its numerous proverbs are deployed to express thought. In the brief passage above, proverbs occur twice, each time as the conclusion of a paragraph: "But there was no arrival without the effort of moving feet" (lines 11-12) and "Those who live alone, die alone" (line 33). The internal parallelism ("live alone" and "die alone") of the second example is noteworthy as evidence of the concurrent application of multiple devices to accentuate the aesthetic quality of *Matigari* as a narration. The proverb is used in *Matigari* not as a trait that distinguishes characters, since it is employed by both the hero and the ogres, but as the common linguistic property of all the people of a given culture, both good and bad. The major difference is the purpose for which an individual employs a proverb. In the examples cited above, proverbs serve positive goals. In the first instance, the existential wisdom of a culture is summoned as a source of encouragement to an individual who is facing the difficulties of life. The second proverb promotes the traditional African cultural concept of community, the continued erosion of which Matigari as a cultural hero wishes to stem.

In the world of epic narration, where mystery is a necessary instrument in the mythologization of the hero, the device of personification has always been favored. Lines 8 and 9 of the passage above provide a typical example where "Black-eyed Susans and other weeds clung to his [Matigari's] clothes as though welcoming him back to the fields." Earlier we have discussed how nature sympathizes with and reflects Matigari's mood and also foreshadows future events.

As Lord pointed out for the South Slavic *guslar* (1960:42), chiastic syntax is another favored device of the oral bard who, much like our modern self-conscious artists, justifiably delighted in his or her mastery of the technicalities of using and arranging words for special effects. The sentence "Just another climb, the final climb, and then he would be

home—his home on top of the hill!” (lines 15-16; emphasis added) is an instance of the several uses of this device in *Matigari*. Also in section 7 of part one, Matigari speaks to his listeners, saying “But all the gains went to Settler Williams. What a world! A world in which the tailor wears rags, the tiller eats wild berries, the builder begs for shelter” (21; emphasis added). The chiasmus built on the words “home” and “world” in these two examples serves the purpose of emphasis. We have noted the fact that aesthetic beauty in *Matigari* is often enhanced by Ngugi’s preference for concurrent multiple application of artistic devices. The simultaneous deployment of repetition and parallelism in the two cited instances of chiasmus provides another typical example.

The most easily recognizable epic formula in *Matigari* is the noun-epithet phrase. Lines 29-30 of the passage we have been analyzing yield a classical illustration within the following formulaic expression: “blowing the horn of *patriotic service* and the trumpet of *patriotic victory*” (emphasis added). While the italicized phrases are occasional, most such combinations in *Matigari* belong to the category of the fixed or stock epithets because they repeatedly appear throughout the narrative in exactly the same or slightly varied combinations. For example, it is always “Settler Williams,” “His Excellency Ole Excellency,” “Minister for Truth and Justice,” “Giceru the informer” or the “Hooded Truth,” “Madam the Minister’s Wife,” “He-who-reaps-where-he-never-sowed,” and, of course, it is always “Matigari ma Njiruungi—The patriot who survived the bullets.”

It is evident from these examples that in most cases the epithetic phrases are deployed as instruments of satire to pejoratively identify or characterize Matigari’s antagonists. More than any other device, they underscore the agonistic or aggressive nature of the ideological debate in *Matigari*. The pejorative phrases actually mirror the negative political cliches of African politics that Ong has associated with the “residual formulary essentials of oral thought processes” (1982:38). Understandably, there are certain groups of readers who object on ideological grounds to the use of the pejorative epithets. However, those who object on aesthetic grounds to the profusion of the pejorative epithets would do well to remember that such profusion or redundancy of formulary application has been identified as a typical characteristic of the traditional oral epic.¹²

¹² See Ong 1982:39-41.

Epic Setting

The most obvious quality of setting as a geographical and temporal device in *Matigari* is its ambiguity. Ngugi wants this device, like all others in the narrative, to contribute to his mythologization of history; consequently, he provides conflicting signals that make the setting ambivalent. The prefatory note to which we have earlier referred indicates that the story has “no fixed time” and “no fixed space” and invites the reader/listener to locate the action of the story in a place and time of his or her choice. On the other hand, certain details of the story—especially the names of characters (Guthera, Muriuki, Ngaruro wa Kiro), the historical etymology of such names as Settler Williams and Matigari ma Njiruungi, and the names of trees such as the mugumo—are meant to locate the story decidedly in Kenya and to evoke the political history of that country. At the same time, Ngugi also consciously denies the story’s geographical and temporal specificities by locating them in mythic time and space, and by giving objects mythic dimensions. The hero is sometimes depicted as associated with the “four corners of the globe” (3, 44, 63). John Boy’s house of contention is said “to stretch out for miles, as if, like the plantation itself, it had no beginning and no end” (42). Not only does this kind of setting enhance the depiction of Matigari, as stated earlier, as both a Kenyan cultural hero and a universal class hero; it also creates the aura of mystery required to create the image of a larger-than-life character.

The social aspect of setting in *Matigari* is by contrast palpably real, not in the sense of being totally believable, but rather visible, identifiable. On one side are Matigari and his followers, and on the other side are located the hero’s antagonists, the ogres. In between and around both are the masses of the people, some of whom Ngugi has depicted as actively involved in the performative moments of the present story. Indeed, the most dramatic instances are precisely those occasions when the story as a performance has been taken over by its inscribed audience. One of these moments is particularly noteworthy. Part two of the novel tells the story of Matigari as it circulates with incremental exaggeration among the common folk, many of whom, while retelling the story with freshly added details, would warm up so enthusiastically to their narration that they would spontaneously burst out into song and dance. This section of the novel is rendered almost entirely in the lively conversations and debates by ordinary men and women

who at times take delight in using their participation as an occasion to pleasurable tease one another in the characteristic fashion of daily life. Highly typical of this section of the novel is the following conversation (77):

“Such wonders! I wish I had been there to see him and shake his hands, or sing him a song like the one the people of Trampville composed!

Show me the way to a man
Whose name is Matigari ma Njiruungi,
Who stamps his feet to the rhythm of bells.

And the bullets jingle.
And the bullets jingle.”

“You mean sing while holding him to your breasts,” one of them said slyly.
They laughed.
Just then Matigari stopped on the other side of the road and greeted them....

Another of the dramatic instances of performative takeover of events by the audience occurs after John Boy’s house has been set on fire. The event triggered the songs spontaneously composed by the people and the widespread arson that followed and that was the handiwork of Matigari’s followers, especially the children who live with Muriuki in the “vehicle cemetery.”

Conclusion

It is clear from the discussion above that *Matigari* has been executed both comprehensively and competently as an oral narrative performance. What is more, in *Matigari* oral narrative devices do not merely serve the exhibitionistic display of an expert knowledge of artistic technicalities, but a purposeful goal—that of making literary art perform its traditional functions of education and entertainment by returning it to its original mode: oral narrative performance. A flattering indication of Ngugi’s artistic success is the fact that barely four months after the publication of *Matigari*, its hero had so effectively entered Kenyan social consciousness that this phantom was mistaken for a living Kenyan and orders were issued by the government for his arrest (viii). Thus, if *Matigari* were “only” an

oral narrative performance, it would be a great work of art, but as stated earlier, it is also a successful literary multigenre.

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