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Body politics in *The Wizard of the Crow*, Ngugi wa Thiong'o

The link between the body and politics goes back to Roman and Medieval times. As Ernst Kantorowicz showed in his study of the Double Body of the King¹, the image of a royal body, at once natural and limited by death and mystical and eternal, emerged and was commonly used in Tudor law. The image of the people, of the nation as a body, whose members or limbs each have a part to play, is also a recurring image throughout political philosophy. In his last novel, *The Wizard of the Crow*², Ngugi uses this image of the body, whether of power or of the people, to depict the functioning of a fictitious African dictatorship: Aburiria.

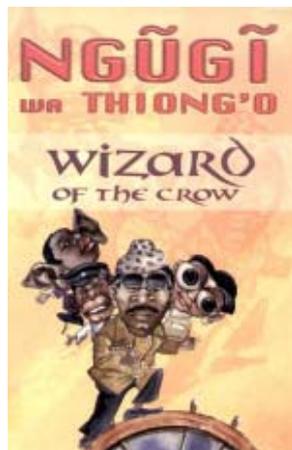
Power and body are often linked in Africa. A “big” man’s bulging pouch is often a sign of his economical or political power.³ ‘Kula’, the Kiswahili word for ‘eating’, is often linked to political behaviour,⁴ whether in the sense of redistribution of wealth or on the contrary of its monopolization by a greedy few. In his last satirical novel, the image of the body is used recurrently, enabling criticism but also humour to play out.

The body of power...

Set in the Republic of Aburiria, *The Wizard of the Crow* deals with the megalomaniac project of its Ruler to build a new House of Babel that would reach the very gates of heaven, while the Movement for the Voice of the People, led by one of the major characters, Nyawira, tries to bring democracy back to their corrupted land. The description made of the Ruler throughout the book cannot but remind us of the sentence allegedly pronounced by Louis XIV: “*L’Etat, c’est moi.*”⁵ This “*irrevocable identity*” (p. 161) is repeated *ad libitum*, and as we will see is also at

the source of one of the funniest parts of the book. His Minister Sikiokuu, correcting himself after having mentioned the enemies of the State, reassures his master that “*You and the country are one and the same*” (p. 136). This identity is reinforced by the very physical effects the Ruler’s apparently benign actions have on the country. Indeed, if, as a common feature in dictatorships, “*his signature on paper, or a word from his mouth could bring about the immediate cessation of life*” (p. 233), when he throws his club at a cameraman during an interview, “*simultaneously, every television screen in the country split into seven pieces*” (p. 25). The Ruler’s reign is also brought to a near-cosmic level, with this rhetorical question at the opening of the book: “*Had not this man’s reign begun before the world began and would end only after the world has ended?*” (p. 6). All those elements contribute to depict a Ruler whose body is that of his country and whose powers are infinite.

However, this description of the Ruler’s body and of his power, while serving to describe and thereby criticize



the arbitrariness of dictatorial power, also lays the foundation for comical development. When the Wizard of the Crow enigmatically states “*The Country is pregnant, what it will give birth to, nobody knows*” (p. 513), the Ruler’s body starts to inflate and will finally give birth. His grotesquely inflated body, which could be seen as an image of his greed, also becomes incredibly light, “*puffing up like a balloon*” (p. 469). The Ruler turns this physical deformity into an advantage, having his office decorated and painted so as to appear as “*a righteous deity looking down from the sky in judgement over a sinful earth*” (p. 667). Thus, the bodily features of the Ruler are at once used as comical devices, in a highly satirical novel, but also more subtly as a way to ridicule an over-bloated and completely artificial power, clinging onto his power by empty rhetoric and artifices.

The images of the body are not only used to describe the head of the State, but also in the description of his limbs, Ministers and advisers. Two of the most important characters of the book are the Ministers Machokali and Sikiokuu. Machokali, Minister of Foreign Affairs, was an ordinary MP until he decided to have his eyes enlarged to the size of electric bulbs, “*so that they would be able to spot the enemies of the Ruler no matter how far their hiding places*” (p. 13). Sikiokuu, Minister in charge of spying over the citizenry, has ears « *larger than a rabbit’s and always primed to detect danger at any time and from any direction*” (p. 14).

Those members of the government are therefore depicted as so many limbs of the body-nation headed by the Ruler. These very graphic descriptions, along with telling and transparent names⁶, enable the reader to capture at once the caricatured nature of those characters.

They also complete the bodily image used to describe political power and its dysfunctions. First, the limbs, in a healthy body, should work together in harmony for the well-being of the whole body. However, here, they are at war with each other: “*It had long been known that the two (Machokali and Sikiokuu) were always in a mortal struggle to establish which organ was more powerful: the Eye or the Ear of the Ruler*” (p. 14). Secondly, these limbs plot against each other by multiplying endlessly. Machokali, leaving for a trip abroad, asks Tajirika, the chairman of Marching to Heaven, to be his “*eyes and ears*” (p. 261). Sikiokuu’s ally is called Kaniiri (small nose in Kikuyu) and is characterized by his big nose and talents for sniffing out information. Tajirika suggests that the Ruler might need “*an eye to keep an eye on all the other eyes*” (p. 706). This fragmentation and multiplication of organs, that resemble cancer, hinder the orderly functioning of the State.

... and the power of the body

But this cancer is not the only illness ailing the body of power. Disease and bodily decay are also major images used in the book to describe what would be called in today’s language “a failed state.” The corruption of power is indeed embodied through human and organic corruption. During a ceremony introducing the Marching to Heaven project to members of the Global Bank, a demonstration takes place, during which women step out from the audience, lift their skirts and crouch, while chanting “*MARCHING TO HEAVEN IS A PILE OF SHIT!*” (p. 250) Following their intervention, “*the platform on which he (the Ruler) and the guests sat had began to sink (...) a liquid oozed from the platform (...) the smell was that of a mixture of urine and shit*” (p. 252). The words uttered

by the opponents thus became reality, embodying the very corruption of power. Further in the novel, this image is used again by the Wizard of the Crow: “*There is a foulness inundating our society and if we do not do something about it, we shall drown in it*” (p. 265). The Wizard, whose sense of smell is highly developed, can even smell corruption: when faced with the Ruler in his office, he is “*struck by the stench such as he had often detected in the streets of Eldares, except that now it seemed to be oozing out of the Ruler’s body*” (p. 489).

The power in place refuses to admit its own decaying nature, but in turn, likens the opposition leader to a disease: “*Nyawira is a disease (...) an infectious disease*” (p. 369) that needs to be eradicated. Similarly, illness is described in political terms by Tajirika: “*Diseases do not knock at the door and say, I’m so-and-so, please let me in; they force their way, more like a coup d’état*” (p. 337). This description is automatically understood by his interrogator as a threat: “*So you were thinking of a real coup d’état?*” (p. 338). These representations thus pervade the text, creating an image of power and of the political game that is easier to visualize for the reader, but that also enables to capture the very nature of decaying power. Words and images are turned into reality.

The final and most grotesque degeneration lies in the Ruler’s pregnancy and subsequent delivery. The description of his delivery is as follows: “*he found himself mired in the darkness of his filth, still slowly escaping through the roof, blasted by the force of his corruption. His only casualty was a forked tongue*” (p. 706). The Ruler has given birth to what he calls ‘Baby D’, baby democracy. This physical description of a change of political regime, albeit a fake one, enables Ngugi to indirectly criticize what clearly resembles Moi’s

decision to amend the Constitution in 1992, repealing the article making Kenya a one-party State. His “forked tongue” is clearly a physical indication of the hypocrisy of such a move.

The body versus the Voice

The body of power pervades the book through the “self-induced expansion” (p. 488) of the Ruler, the fragmentation and corruption of power. It is shown to the people when presentable, hidden when grotesque, but always described through its physical assets. The body of society on the other hand is characterized by its oneness and invisibility. Rather than a body, it is a voice.

The people are not made of individuals in the novel. Apart from a few prominent figures such as the Wizard of the Crow and Nyawira, they are mostly described as a homogeneous mass. The queuing phenomenon is a good example of this lack of distinction: the queues that plague the country are described as having “*no beginning and no end*” (p. 159), they started spontaneously, without a clear objective, but become a “*site of democracy*” (p. 199) for the opposition leaders. The women that disturb the ceremony seem to reproduce this phenomenon: “*It appeared as if the formations had no beginning and no end, or rather that it was one movement with the end and the beginning being the multitude*” (p. 250). Thus, the body of the people, in its opposition to dictatorship, is shown as whole and yet elusive, in stark contrast to the body of power, that is fragmented and ubiquitous.

The opposition movement fights to regain the voice of the people. In many parts of the book, opposition

is expressed through songs that ask for the right to speak: “*The people have spoken (...) Give me back the voice you took from me*” (p. 591), or that describe the state of the country: “*I do not sing in a house at war/ My song might become a cacophony/ And my voice gets lost in my throat*” (p. 308). This last example is striking because it captures the nature of the speech of power. With the Ministers fighting, policies from the government changing from one minute to the next, the voice of power is indeed a cacophony. Moreover, two characters within the sphere of power suffer at some point of a disease that makes them unable to speak.⁷

The body of the people, and more specifically of the opposition, is epitomized by its voice that as such cannot be caught or stopped by the power in place. The narration itself mimics this by retelling events through different angles, and more particularly by using rumours. The book thus opens on the five theories concerning the Ruler’s illness. One of the characters, Arigaigai Gatherer, nicknamed the “*Attorney General of storytelling*”, becomes the novel’s main storyteller, reporting on rumours, and even creating and spreading them. His narration is characterized by exaggeration. This figure, that gives life and depth to the story, is a good representation of the way the voice of the people, even if it is not recognised as a legitimate one and repressed by the power, pervades society and is able to overturn, or at least weaken the body of power. It is also the voice that closes the book, as if to remind us that history is also made of storytelling.

The image of the body in the *Wizard of the Crow* serves several purposes. It might be seen as a comical device that ridicules as it describes the body of dictatorial power. It is also educational in the sense that it gives a very visual image of power and power changes. Finally, it invites every reader to reflect on the way he or she sees politics and power.

Endnotes

- 1 Ernst Kantorowicz, *Les Deux Corps du Roi*, Gallimard, Paris, 1989.
- 2 Ngugi wa Thiong’o, *The Wizard of the Crow*, East African Educational Publishers, Nairobi, 2007. The references of all the quotations come from this edition.
- 3 For the role of the body in politics, see *Politique Africaine*, « Politiques du corps » (n°107, October 2007, Karthala, Paris).
- 4 See J-F. Bayart, *L’Etat en Afrique, la Politique du Ventre*, Fayart, Paris, 1989, p.10.
- 5 In English, “I am the State”.
- 6 In Kiswahili, Machokali means ‘sharp eyes’, and Sikiokuu ‘big ears’.
- 7 The description of Tajirika’s illness can be found on p. 143: “*And every time he looked at the mirror, he could say nothing save If! If only!*”; that of the Ruler is on p. 471 : “*The Ruler (...) seemed to have lost the power of speech.*”

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