Body politics in The Wizard of the Crow, Ngugi wa Thiong’o
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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 King*, 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*, 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. The Kiswahili word for ‘eating’, is often linked to political behaviour, 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.” This “irrevocable identity” is repeated ad libidum, 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 names, 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 E ye or the E ar 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
ailling 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 begin
to sink (...) a liquid oozed from the platform
(...) the smell was that of a mix ture 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 futility 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:
“D isees d o n o t k n o c k a t 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. He is 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
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
3 For the role of the body in politics, see Politique Africaine, « Politiques du corps » (n°107, October 2007, Karthala, Paris).
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: “A nd 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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