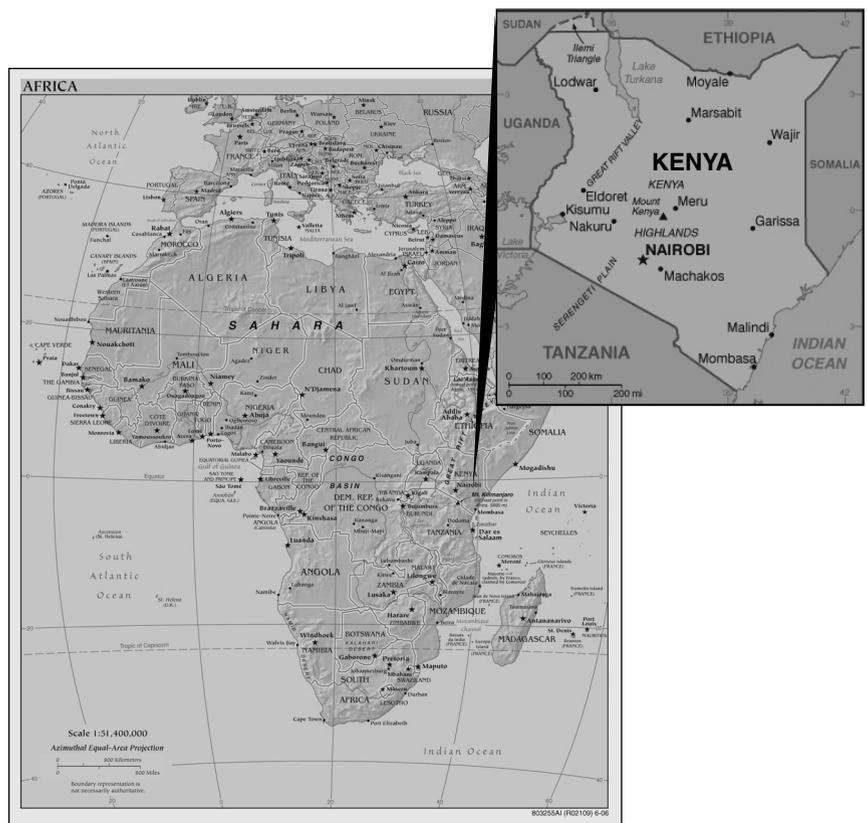


## CHAPTER 6

# Conflicts in Rituals and Politics in Kenya

Linda J. Rice



Maps reprinted from *The World Factbook 2007* by the Central Intelligence Agency, <http://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook>.

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“Following the tribal custom, I had to pass through several stages of initiation along with my age-group.... Although men do not witness the physical operation on the girls, they are not ignorant of its details, as the young initiates of both sexes talk freely to each other about it afterwards.”

—JOMO KENYATTA, FORMER PRIME MINISTER AND PRESIDENT OF KENYA (DOLF, 1961, P. 42)

This chapter focuses on two novels, *The River Between* (1965) and *Weep Not, Child* (1964), by native Kenyan writer Ngugi wa Thiong’o. The novels explore the ritual of female circumcision as a rite of passage, the clash between indigenous tribal customs and teachings by Christian missionaries, and the conflicts of land and labor that resulted from British colonialism. Through its presentation of themes, connections, discussion questions, and Cross-Curricular Activities, this chapter is designed to deepen students’ understanding of the two featured novels and Kenya’s past and present. The Cross-Curricular Activities for this unit involve students in analyzing literary passages then turning them into poetry and then exploring the culture and rituals of Kenya through research and creative means of expression to include slide shows, artifacts, music selections, video clips, and authentic Kenyan foods. The Making-A-Difference Project engages students in investigative reporting to examine the World Free Press Institute, an agency geared to improve and support free press and the USAID Program which, besides giving money, also seeks volunteers to help in the areas of health care, natural resources management, and basic education. The overview on page 121 illustrates how the Novel Guides in this chapter and their corresponding activities align with standards for the English language arts (International Reading Association [IRA] and National Council of Teachers of English [NCTE], 1996) and curriculum standards for the social studies (National Council for the Social Studies [NCSS], 1994).

## **Social and Historical Context**

The Kenyan ritual of female circumcision, sometimes known as female genital mutilation (FGM), provides the focal point for a clash in cultures in *The River Between* (wa Thiong’o, 1965) the first of two novels discussed in this chapter. Ngugi addresses the issue by presenting two perspectives, one viewing the ritual as a life-giving tradition of the tribe and another viewing the practice as a matter of miseducation that the Christian missionaries and converts are trying

## Novels, Activities, and Curricular Standards for English Language Arts and Social Studies

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### NOVELS

- *The River Between* (1965) by Ngugi wa Thiong'o
- *Weep Not, Child* (1964) by Ngugi wa Thiong'o

### CROSS-CURRICULAR ACTIVITIES

- Passage Analysis and Poetry
- Exploring the Culture and Rituals of Kenya

### MAKING-A-DIFFERENCE PROJECT

Investigative Report of the World Free Press Institute and USAID Program

### STANDARDS FOR THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS

#5 Students employ a wide range of strategies as they write and use different writing process elements appropriately to communicate for a variety of purposes.

#7 Students conduct research on issues and interests by generating ideas and questions, and by posing problems.

#8 Students use a variety of technological and informational resources to gather and synthesize information and to create and communicate knowledge.

Adapted from IRA and NCTE. (1996). *Standards for the English Language Arts*. Newark, DE: International Reading Association; Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English.

### CURRICULUM STANDARDS FOR THE SOCIAL STUDIES

#2c Time, Continuity, & Change: Learners identify and describe the influence of colonialism on farmers and the Mau Mau resistance.

#4c Individual Development & Identity: Learners describe ways family, religion, gender, education, and other cultural influences influence how people view various rituals of the Kikuyu.

#9b Global Connections: Learners explain conditions and motivations related to Kikuyu custom and Christianity that contribute to conflict, cooperation, and interdependence.

Adapted with the permission of the National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS). For the NCSS standards, see the publication *Expectations of Excellence: Curriculum Standards for Social Studies* (Washington, DC: National Council for the Social Studies, 1994). See also [www.socialstudies.org](http://www.socialstudies.org).

to eradicate. *The River Between* effectively shows the delicate balance involved in bridging, or eliminating, traditional practices with new ways of thinking; it also highlights the consequences of forcing change rather than letting it take root in people's thinking and evolve through time and education. Ngugi's novel neither promotes nor demonizes the ritual of female circumcision; rather, it

shows its devastating consequence—death—for one character, Muthoni, who chooses the rite even though her father, a Christian convert, condemns the practice. Chapter 2 of this book includes an extensive section exploring body modification that can be used to build a context to teach about female circumcision. Chapters 5 and 7 also explore the controversy surrounding FGM, so teachers who want to address the issue may want to pair Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *The River Between* with the novels featured in those chapters: Flora Nwapa's *Efuru* (1966/1978), Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood* (1979/2003), Cristina Kessler's *Our Secret*, *Siri Aang* (2004), and Rita Williams-Garcia's *No Laughter Here* (2004).

Because Kenyans connect the rite of circumcision with reducing promiscuity, girls who have not been circumcised are regarded as “impure” (p. 11) and considered to be “outcasts” (p. 8) (Jaldesa, Askew, Njue, & Wanjiru, 2005). According to the *Kenya Demographic and Health Survey, 1998* (Nyong'a, 1999), nearly 40% of Kenyan women have undergone some form of genital circumcision. In Kisii, a rural area southwest of Nairobi, that figure rises to 97% (Nyong'a, 1999). *National Geographic Today* reporter Kristin Whiting (2002) gives a detailed account of one such circumcision performed in Kisii in 2001. The story is available online and worth reading to see what actually happens during the ceremony and its aftermath, to include the reporter's standing outside “the hut where the cutting took place” and hearing the cries of pain that were “beyond disturbing” (¶ 18).

In December 2001, 36 years after the publication of *The River Between* (1965), President Daniel Arap Moi of Kenya outlawed female genital mutilation. The ban, however, is difficult to enforce, especially as “parents are circumcising their girls at a younger age to avoid government intervention and potential defiance from the girls themselves” (Whiting, 2002, ¶ 23). A number of grassroots African organizations and the Program for Appropriate Technology in Health (PATH), a nonprofit organization based in Seattle, Washington, USA, have collaborated with Kenyan mothers seeking to find new ways to help usher their daughters into womanhood. They have formed a new group called “Ntanira na Mugambo,” which loosely translates as “circumcision through words” (Mohamud, Ringheim, Bloodworth, & Gryboski, 2002, p. 74). This group supports the ban on circumcision and replaces it with “a new approach to initiation into womanhood that includes song, education, celebration, and a week of seclusion” (“Alternative Rituals,” 2005, ¶ 3). The group performed its first ceremony in 1996 and has been growing ever since.

The Mau Mau Revolt provides the backdrop of the second novel, *Weep Not, Child* (1964), discussed in this chapter. Still in its mode of colonial rule after World War I, Britain rewarded its war veterans by giving them plots of land in Kenya. The Mau Mau were a group of native Kenyans who banded together in

1947 with the intent of reclaiming the land that was taken from them (Anderson, 2005). Members of the Kikuyu tribe, believing they were destined to live in and rule their ancestral lands and determined to make this happen, formed the core of the resistance of the Mau Mau. Before the official beginning of the revolt, the Mau Mau made strikes against the “loyalists,” Kenyans loyal to colonialism (Martin, 2006, p. 5). After a five-year period of covert planning and organizing, the Mau Mau launched their insurgency in 1952 (Martin, 2006). The Kenyan government declared a state of emergency in 1953 when the Mau Mau made strikes against both loyalists and colonists through strategies of guerilla warfare (Anderson, 2005). Eventually, the revolt of the Mau Mau was subdued by the combined forces of the British army and the imperial Kenyan army. Only 15,000 of the initial 120,000 Mau Mau were left to continue the cause (Martin, 2006). The Mau Mau did not disintegrate completely for another 10 years when, in 1961, Jomo Kenyatta was released from prison. Kenyatta, along with other prominent leaders, had been arrested for allegedly organizing the Mau Mau (Maxon, 1997). Two years after Kenyatta’s release from prison with hard labor, he was elected Prime Minister of Kenya and supported reconciliation between native Kenyans and white settlers. Then, when Kenya became an independent republic in 1964, Kenyatta became president, serving from 1964 to 1978 (Maxon, 1997).

## ***The River Between (1965) and Weep Not, Child (1964)*** **by Ngugi wa Thiong’o**

### **About the Author**

Ngugi wa Thiong’o, named James Thiong’o Ngugi by his parents, was born in 1938 in Limuru, Kenya, as the fifth child of the third of his father’s four wives (Liukkonen, 2000). His father had been a peasant farmer who was reduced to a squatter after the British Imperial Act of 1915 (Liukkonen, 2000). Raised in British-ruled Kenya, Ngugi saw firsthand the collisions of European and traditional African cultures. As a child, Ngugi attended a mission school and then moved to an independent Gikuyu school during the Mau Mau Revolt (Sicherman, 1990). Some of Ngugi’s family members were involved in the revolt against colonial rule, and during that time his stepbrother was killed and his mother was tortured (Liukkonen, 2000). For safety and increased opportunity during the insurgency, Ngugi attended high school (1955–1959) and college (1959–1964) in Uganda (“Biography,” 2006).

At the time Kenya gained its independence from Britain in 1963, Ngugi was still a devoted Christian and deeply committed to the notion that education

changes things. Following his first publication in 1962, a play entitled *The Black Hermit*, Ngugi wa Thiong'o published his first two novels, *Weep Not, Child* (1964) and *The River Between* (1965). After earning his Bachelor of Arts in English and working as a journalist for Nairobi's *Daily Nation*, Ngugi went to Leeds, England, to pursue a degree in literature (Liukkonen, 2000). He then returned to Kenya from 1967 to 1969 to teach at the University College in Nairobi (Liukkonen, 2000). In the 1970s, Ngugi rejected Christianity, changed his original name (James) due to its colonial ties, and began to write in his native Gikuyu (Liukkonen, 2000). The political nature of his writings led to his arrest and imprisonment by the Kenyan government in 1977–1978 (Reboussin, 2003). Upon his release, he left the country in self-imposed exile, living in London for a while and then teaching at Yale University in New Haven, Connecticut, USA, for several years before becoming a professor at New York University in New York City, New York, USA, in 1993 (Reboussin, 2003).

### **Summary (*The River Between*)**

*The River Between* (1965) tells the story of two communities, Kameno and Makuya, that are separated by the Honia River and represent different beliefs and cultures. Key characters who live in Kameno are Chege, who is said to have magical powers and is a highly respected elder, and his son, Waiyaki. Although Chege sees the presence of Christian missionaries as a threat to the native culture, he sends his son to Siriana for a white man's education so that he will be able to learn their ways and ultimately protect his tribe from them. In contrast to Chege, two other elders, Joshua and Kaboyni, abandon the tribe, convert to Christianity, and settle in Makuya. Joshua has two daughters, Muthoni and Nyambura, whom he forbids to partake in female circumcision as a rite of passage. Muthoni desperately wants to be circumcised, although she is a Christian. Nyambura is fearful for her sister because of her father's strictness, and Muthoni sneaks away to her aunt's house so that she can be part of the rites with the other girls and boys her age.

The night before the circumcision, the adolescents gather near the Honia River and dance. Chege's son, Waiyaki, sees Muthoni and asks why she chose to rebel against her father. She answers that she wants to become a woman of the tribe, and Waiyaki is completely taken by her. The two are circumcised the following day, and while Waiyaki heals, Muthoni becomes ill and dies a few days later. From this point, tensions mount as the groups living on each ridge community blame one another for Muthoni's death.

Loyalties are divided and jealousies surge as Nyambura feels guilt over her sister's death but finds herself in love with Waiyaki and thus torn between being a part of the tribe and honoring her father. Kabonyi leaves Joshua in pref-

erence of the ways of the tribe, and both Waiyaki and Kabonyi's son, Kamau, fall in love with Nyambura. Waiyaki desires for the two ridges to accept each other's views and stop their fighting. In the end, Waiyaki comes to the river where people from both ridges are waiting for him. The elders, the Kiama, bring out Nyambura who is deemed impure because she is uncircumcised and instruct Waiyaki to refuse her in order to keep the tribe pure. He embraces his love for her instead, and the novel ends with the Kiama agreeing on a trial to decide their fate, the implication being that they will be put to death.

### **Summary (*Weep Not, Child*)**

*Weep Not, Child* (1964) tells the story of a young boy named Njorge and his family during the Mau Mau revolt. While Njorge himself focuses on earning a good education and is not involved in the insurgency against colonial rule, his family becomes irreversibly intertwined in the dispute. Njorge is in love with Mwhaki, the daughter of a rich African farmer, Jacobo. Mr. Howlands, a British settler, serves as the district officer and appoints Jacobo to the position of chief over the workers. Njorge's father, Ngotho, and Mwhaki's father, Jacobo, clash throughout the novel, as Jacobo finds opportunities for advancement under colonial rule and Ngotho stands up for his sons, who are part of the Mau Mau. One of Ngotho's sons kills Jacobo, and this breaks Njorge's heart as he knows it may push Mwhaki away from him forever. Another of Ngotho's sons kills Mr. Howlands. The book ends as Njorge, in despair of how peace will ever return, decides to hang himself from a tree one night. As he is adjusting the rope in the darkness, he hears a voice and realizes his mother is frantically searching for him. Torn between relief and defeat, Njorge comes down from the tree and walks home with his mother as a voice inside his head tells him he is a coward.

## **Making Connections**

Because it is so important to connect literature with students' lives, the following questions are included to prompt students to take inventory on what they know in conjunction with the themes of Ngugi's writing and the culture and history of Kenya. Making these connections between text-to-self, text-to-text, and text-to-world (Keene & Zimmermann, 1997) causes students to bridge their personal existence with the world around them, a key aim of this book. Figure 6.1 shows a sample journal response to a text-to-self question for this Novel Guide created by university student Ann Cugliari.

**Figure 6.1. Student Journal Response to a Making Connections Text-to-Self Question**

**Text-to-Self: “What do I think about colonialism?”**

I do not agree whole-heartedly about colonialism, even though that is how the United States of America was created and established. The reason for this being that in order for colonization to occur is that the indigenous people are to be conquered and killed, or conquered and converted, or conquered and pushed out of their homes. This then creates the colony to be of the superior race, religion, and belief which is called to be cultural arrogance. The entire country of the United States of America is founded on stolen land (with stolen labor when you pull into the accounts of the chattel slavery) and cultural arrogance. The entire continent of Africa was divided up like a pie by seven European countries for colonization during the “Scramble for Africa” with no consideration for the indigenous people of the entire continent. So while I don’t particularly agree with colonialism because of the injustices that go with it, I do realize that it was influential in creating this place I live, the republic of the United States where I have the freedom to believe what I want and voice my opinions.

**Making Connections Questions for *The River Between* (1965) and *Weep Not, Child* (1964)**

	<b>Ngugi wa Thiong’o’s <i>Weep Not, Child</i> (1964)</b>	<b>Ngugi wa Thiong’o’s <i>The River Between</i> (1965)</b>
<b>Text-to-Self</b>	What do I believe about the connection between education and a better life? Do I think that cultures can blend peacefully, even if they have different beliefs? If so, how would this work? If not, what are the barriers? What do I know about the Mau Mau war? What do I think about colonialism?	Where have I seen clashes between people with different belief systems or faiths? When have I clashed with my family over our views on some issue or tradition? What do I know about the history and culture of Kenya?
<b>Text-to-Text</b>	What books have I read or films have I viewed that have to do with white minorities ruling over black majorities? What books have I read or films have I viewed that showed someone ruling unjustly over someone of the same race?	What books have I read or films have I viewed that have to do with Kenya, its people, conflicts, and culture? In literature and film, where have I seen clashes between people with different belief systems or faiths?
<b>Text-to-World</b>	Where are Peace Corps volunteers, the United Nations, missionaries, or other social servants working to better peoples’ lives in the world through education today, and how are they doing this? What remnants of colonialism exist in modern Kenya?	Where and to what degree is “female circumcision,” or “female genital mutilation,” practiced in the world today, and is any progress being made to stop this? What is it like to be or work with a missionary today, and what are examples of missionaries peacefully coexisting with native people?

## Critical Exploration of Themes

This section includes a discussion of four themes that are applicable to both *The River Between* (1965) and *Weep Not, Child* (1964). The themes examine the power of religion and education to transform individuals and divide communities; the interplay of freedom, choice, happiness, and fulfillment; the connection between wisdom and open-mindedness, and the responsibility of those in power to govern justly. Each theme is supported by specific examples from Ngugi's novels.

### Religious Conversion and Education Can Be Both Transformative and Divisive

While *The River Between* (1965) and *Weep Not, Child* (1964) demonstrate the transformative power of religious conversion and education, both also show how these can cause great divisions among tribes and even within families. In *The River Between* the river serves as a symbolic divider between the people living on the two ridges, one ridge representing the traditions of the tribe, the other ridge representing the influence of "the white man" and Christianity. Chege sends his son to the white man's school, Siriana, to learn all that the white man has to teach, but his purposes are to use this knowledge to conquer the white man and preserve the traditions of the tribe. Once friends of Chege, Joshua, and Kabonyi convert to Christianity, they support its traditions over those of the tribe, including the elimination of female circumcision as a rite of passage.

While Joshua's religious conversion is connected with a better education and free choice of marriage partners for his daughters, Muthoni and Nyambura, Joshua rules his home with a heavy, often violent hand that is inconsistent with a Christ-like love or servanthood. While Nyambura highly reveres her father and his stand against female circumcision, Muthoni rebels against him and chooses to escape to the other side of the river and take part in the ritual, believing that it would make her a real woman and true member of the tribe. Upon finding out that Muthoni has escaped to be circumcised, Joshua disowns his daughter. Several days after the ritual, however, Muthoni dies, causing an even greater division between the two ridges. Ngugi wa Thiong'o effectively complicates and connects the issue of female circumcision, tribal practices, and education, as evidenced in the following quote from *The River Between* (1965):

Circumcision of women was not important as a physical operation. It was what it did inside a person. It could not be stopped overnight. Patience, and above all, education, were needed. If the white man's religion made you abandon a custom and then did not give you something else of equal value, you became lost. An attempt at resolution of the conflict would only kill you, as it did Muthoni. (p. 142)

*Weep Not, Child* (1964) also shows the duality of education's ability to transform and divide. In this story, young Njorge yearns for an education more than anything. No one in Njorge's family has ever attended school, and when he is presented with the opportunity from his mother, Nyokabi, he feels very honored. Njorge understands that he is to attend school in order to learn and educate the rest of his family. While attending school, Njorge learns to read and write and interacts with Mwhiki, the daughter of the town's most wealthy black farmer. Njorge enjoys both his education and the opportunity to interact with a higher class of people, something that becomes a conflict because Njorge's father and Mwhiki's father are at odds over a workers strike. Although Njorge keeps his focus on his schooling, his brothers, Boro and Kamau, become deeply involved in the jungle movement, the Mau Mau revolt. Njorge sees education as the key he needs to help him save his country, but his attendance at Siriana Secondary School also removes him from the death and destruction that await him in his war-torn village. Njorge is beaten in an interrogation about his family, and he later learns that his father admitted to killing Mwhiki's father. This news severs the bond between Mwhiki and Njorge, as Mwhiki is no longer interested in making a life with Njorge and decides it is her duty to stand up for the people of Kenya and not lose hope while Njorge has lost all hope and wishes to give up his fight and leave the country.

### **Freedom and Choice Do Not Guarantee Happiness and Fulfillment**

While freedom and choice are certainly integral to personal growth and a democratic society, they are not guarantees of happiness or fulfillment, as evidenced in Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *The River Between* (1965) and *Weep Not, Child* (1964). Daughters of a Christian convert who denounces the practice of female circumcision, Muthoni and Nyambura could both see themselves as free of that oppressive, life-endangering rite into womanhood. However, while Nyambura respects her father's views, Muthoni chooses to go behind his back, escape to the other side of the river, and be part of the ritual with the other girls and boys in Kameno. Her sister, Nyambura, knowing how her father will disapprove of Muthoni's actions, chooses to keep Nyambura's whereabouts a secret. Reflective of the severe health risks that accompany female circumcision, Muthoni experiences complications and infection and writhes in pain and delirium for several days before finally dying. Muthoni's intent was to become a real woman and true part of the tribe while still being a Christian; however, her choices collide with unsanitary conditions and result in tragedy. Nyambura, too, suffers the consequences of guilt for not intervening and telling her father the truth of Muthoni's whereabouts in time for him to remove his daughter from the ritual.

Waiyaki is circumcised the same day Muthoni is, though his comparatively simple circumcision heals without complications (chapter 2 of this book provides background information on Western and African practices of circumcision, which teachers may want to share with their students before studying this aspect of Ngugi's novel). The night before the ritual, Waiyaki and Muthoni dance together and clearly develop a passion for one another. Waiyaki grieves Muthoni's death and forges a bond with her sister, Nyambura. Waiyaki professes his love for Nyambura and proposes, but she refuses, even though she has feelings for him, to honor her father. The controlling father that he is, Joshua, upon hearing rumors of Waiyaki and his obedient daughter, forbids Nyambura from seeing Waiyaki again, threatening to disown her if she does. Waiyaki tries to protect Joshua's family by warning Joshua of rumors that a group of young men is headed over the slopes to attack them, but Joshua, caught up with different rumors, stubbornness, and his own authority, fails to see the good in Waiyaki's actions. Eventually Nyambura chooses to flee with Waiyaki, understanding this could be of great cost. The deaths of Waiyaki and Nyambura are implied in the end of the book, which Ngugi used to show that freedom and choice are not guarantees of happiness and fulfillment, though he also conveyed the importance of striving for unity and standing up for love.

In *Weep Not, Child* (1964), Njorge has freedoms that others do not by nature of being chosen by his family to attend school. Njorge is passionate about the opportunity to become educated and sees it as a way to better the lives of his family and even the nation. School also provides him with a forum to interact with Mwihaki, the daughter of the town's most wealthy farmer, Jacobo, who is eager to please "the white man" because doing so enables him to grow in wealth, power, and status. Despite the freedom and safety that school provides Njorge, his life ultimately turns toward hopelessness and a sense of despair so deep that the book closes with his thwarted suicide. Though Njorge himself is free and makes choices not to be a part of the violence surrounding the Mau Mau Revolt, the actions of others, particularly his family members, derail his pursuit of happiness and fulfillment.

### **Wisdom Is Less About Age Than Understanding**

In both *The River Between* (1965) and *Weep Not, Child* (1964), Ngugi wa Thiong'o invests young characters with wisdom while at the same time some of the older members of each related society appear foolish and preoccupied with selfish ambitions and power. In *The River Between*, it is Waiyaki who decides that the people on both ridges need to accept each other's ways and work toward a peaceful existence. Even though he is regarded by the people of Kameno as having a more powerful presence than his father, Chege, Waiyaki does not seek power as

much as he seeks to understand the Christians and their reasons for standing against female circumcision. Waiyaki pursues an education and is respected as “the Teacher” among the most prominent in his village. While Waiyaki seeks to please everyone in his tribe, he shows compassion for Nyambura when her sister dies and does not judge Nyambura for not being circumcised. All of Waiyaki’s energies after the death of Muthoni are directed toward unifying the people, even though in the end the efforts appear fruitless because others insist on seeing themselves as right instead of accepting one another’s ways and growing together through education.

In *Weep Not, Child* (1964), education and the young mind also unite to show wisdom. While Jacobo has his mind set on obtaining more property and authority over the peasant farmers, and Mr. Howlands easily agrees to allow Jacobo to imprison Ngotho—an action more about personal resentment than actual wrong—young Njorge pursues education as a way to gain the kind of understanding that he hopes will build a better Kenya. Likewise, Njorge’s schoolmate and love, Mwihaki, also sees education as the foundation for a more free and egalitarian society. Unlike her father, Mwihaki does not use her family’s wealth as license to look down on or exert control over other people. Even when her father is murdered, she stays the course of understanding and focuses on her duty to continue her education and serve her country. In an unfortunate contrast, Njorge lets despair overtake him, thus losing the maturity of wisdom and a vision for a better tomorrow.

### **Those Invested With Power and Authority Have a Responsibility to Govern Justly or Face Fierce Consequences**

Joshua in *The River Between* (1965) and Jacobo and Mr. Howlands in *Weep Not, Child* (1964) all demonstrate rigidity; harsh, judgmental attitudes or indiscriminate decision making; and abuses of power that ultimately result in their personal or familial demise. Joshua’s abusive and controlling tendencies with his wife and daughter create a sense of fear and intimidation rather than inspiring the kind of honor that stems naturally from love. Rather than Joshua demonstrating an open mind that is willing to listen and converse with his daughter Muthoni, his dogmatic ways cause Muthoni to seek the rite of circumcision in secret. A more approachable father might have been able to reason his daughter into making a better decision, but Joshua’s inflexible manner closes conversation and makes Muthoni’s desire all the more fervent, even though it proves to be fatal. Despite the fact that Joshua disowns Muthoni upon learning that she has escaped to participate in the rite of circumcision, which she believes makes her a real woman and true part of the tribe, he must feel some

sense of grief over the loss of his daughter. If he had been more moderate and approachable, the tragedy might not have occurred.

The trajectory of events that unfold after Muthoni's death draw in additional characters who choose to abuse their power and influence rather than strive toward unity. In the end, this leads to the implied death sentence of Waiyaki and Nyambura. Even as they are convicted of their wrongs, pride and stubbornness keep the people from changing their course of action for the good. This is reinforced with Ngugi wa Thiong'o's (1965) last line: "For [the elders and villagers] did not want to look at the Teacher [Waiyaki] and they did not want to read their guilt in one another's faces" (p. 152).

In *Weep Not, Child* (1964), Jacobo is the wealthiest farmer among the people. Instead of using his influence to provide a greater realm of opportunities for his fellow citizens, he becomes consumed with protecting his position and not allowing others to attain his status. He stands against the striking workers and harbors a personal resentment toward Ngotho, whom he convinces the district officer, Mr. Howlands, to arrest. Mr. Howlands removes Ngotho, whom he once very much admired as one of his best workers, for his alleged involvement in the workers strike. Mr. Howlands then appoints Jacobo to the position of chief to oversee his affairs. Jacobo is opportunistic and wields his power openly, though in fact he is more of a puppet enacting the violent will of the European colonists as represented in the character of Mr. Howlands. While Mr. Howlands sends his wife and son to England for safety, Njorge, son of Ngotho, cannot afford such a luxury. As it is rumored that Ngotho's brother, Boro, is involved with the jungle movement, Njorge is taken by police, questioned, and beaten to near-death. His other family members are tortured and interrogated in a similar fashion. In his own quest for justice, Boro kills Jacobo and Mr. Howlands.

## Teacher Talk

As can be derived from the exploration of themes present in Ngugi wa Thiong'o's novels, there are many points of discussion that emerge from *The River Between* (1965) and *Weep Not, Child* (1964). The following discussion questions use major literary theories to inspire different approaches to the novels. The questions are broad in nature to provide maximal room for analysis and interpretation. The theories may be viewed as critical lenses through which readers see the texts; different lenses bring about different focal points and subsequently influence interpretation, understanding, and, in essence, what readers read into, experience, or carry away from the text. Steven Lynn's *Texts and Contexts: Writing About Literature With Critical Theory* (2005) offers a primer on the major critical theories for which specific questions related to Ngugi's novels have been drawn.

## Using Literary Theory to Explore Ngugi wa Thiong'o's Novels

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	<b>wa Thiong'o's <i>Weep Not, Child</i> (1964) and <i>The River Between</i> (1965)</b>
<b>Formalism/New Criticism</b>	What literary devices and techniques work together to provide unity in <i>Weep Not, Child</i> and <i>The River Between</i> ? What are the major themes and how do they emerge in Ngugi's writing?
<b>Feminism/Gender Criticism</b>	How are women represented in Ngugi's novels? How are gender and power related in Ngugi's novels? In what issues in <i>Weep Not, Child</i> and <i>The River Between</i> does gender play a particularly vital role?
<b>Marxist/Economic Criticism</b>	What political and economic structures are at work in <i>Weep Not, Child</i> and <i>The River Between</i> ? Who, why, and how are the various characters and groups empowered and disenfranchised in Ngugi's novels?
<b>Reader Response Criticism</b>	What is your personal response to Ngugi's writing? What life experiences, beliefs, and preconceived notions entered into your reading and interpretation of <i>Weep Not, Child</i> and <i>The River Between</i> ?
<b>Deconstructive Criticism</b>	In what places does the text seem to fall apart or work against itself (i.e., do the opposite of what the words seem to say)? How is language used in contradictory ways in <i>Weep Not, Child</i> and <i>The River Between</i> ?
<b>Historical/Biographical Criticism</b>	How might Ngugi's life have influenced his writing? What was going on in Kenya and the world when Ngugi wrote <i>Weep Not, Child</i> and <i>The River Between</i> ?
<b>Freudian/Psychological Criticism</b>	What motivates Waiyaki's actions in <i>The River Between</i> ? What motivates Njorge's actions in <i>Weep Not, Child</i> ? Where do you see evidence of repression, projection, displacement, denial, or other coping mechanisms in Ngugi's writing?

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## Cross-Curricular Activities

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The Cross-Curricular Activities for this unit engage students in creative writing, literary analysis, and research. In particular, students will identify the most important passage from an assigned chapter of *The River Between* (1965) or *Weep Not, Child* (1964) and turn an aspect of the passage into a poem. Students will also conduct research exploring the culture and rituals of Kenya as a way to broaden their contextual understanding of that nation's uniqueness and the backdrop of Ngugi's writing.

## Passage Analysis and Poetry

For this first activity, the teacher will assign each student (or each pair of students, if the teacher would like the activity to involve discussion and collaboration) a chapter from either book, *The River Between* (1965) or *Weep Not, Child* (1964), and ask students to identify the most important passage in that chapter. Students will have to make a case for why the passage they chose is the most significant, which requires discernment and critical thinking. Students should limit the passage to 100 words, use a word-processing program for presenting the passage, and attach the passage to the related essay. When students are allowed time to share their choices of the “most important passage” in class, this activity serves as an effective way to review the text while also hearing Ngugi’s writing style.

After students have selected and analyzed their choice of a most important passage, they are to write a poem as a way to think more deeply about and creatively interpret the passage. The poem should be extensive enough to show the development of the novel up to the point where the passage occurs, thus providing some history and context for the passage. Figure 6.2 features an excerpt from an essay written by university students Leah Francescani and Heather Warnecke about a passage from the last chapter of *Weep Not, Child* in which the students identified with the hopelessness and sadness of Njorge as he pondered suicide by hanging. While Leah and Heather’s reflections on the

### Figure 6.2. Student Passage Analysis for *Weep Not, Child* (wa Thiong’o, 1964)

The silver lining of this passage is simply that Njorge did not kill himself. While this seems like a small thing, it is really quite significant. The book may end, but Njorge’s story does not. Once someone hits rock bottom, the only way to go is up....

After reading this passage and finishing the book, I had many questions for Ngugi. One, why does Njorge consider himself a coward? Is it because he did not go through with the suicide or that he was considering it at all? Is he a coward for letting down his family and country or for letting down himself? “The voice” asks him why he “didn’t do it,” but I wonder, what is “it”? Is “it” the suicide? Or is “it” saving his people? In order to be at peace with the ending, I decided that “it” could be either of these things or even both.

Another question that plagued me was, did he not go through with the suicide because he did not really want to die or because his mother came and basically stopped him? ...the fact that he felt so guilty when his mothers came for him shows that he was not mentally prepared to end his life....

To me, the most important part of this passage is the very last line. After paragraphs of depression and despair, the last line makes me think that Njorge is going to begin climbing back up to his usual, positive self.... I was uplifted with hope when, at the end, Njorge ran ahead to hold the door of his mothers, because I felt like the country of Kenya had its savior back.

final chapter of *Weep Not, Child* show a great deal of reader optimism, they also reveal a sincere connection with the text as well as serious consideration of the possibilities that lie beyond it. This is further reflected in the students' poem that appears in Figure 6.3.

### Exploring the Culture and Rituals of Kenya

As a way to involve students in research and help increase their knowledge of the culture and rituals of Kenya, the teacher should have students investigate assigned topics and report their findings to the class. Table 6.1 offers a list of possible topics for students' exploration. Students' investigation may be reported in the form of one-minute vocabulary reports during which they offer a simple definition and explanation of their assigned term, supported by a picture or symbol and posted on the class bulletin board, or more extensively in research papers of 3–5 pages. Results could also be shared in a Microsoft PowerPoint presenta-

**Figure 6.3. Students' Poem to Accompany Passage Analysis of *Weep Not, Child* (wa Thiong'o, 1964)**

The Path of the Young One

"Education is for you" is what his mother said,  
My family depends on me, he knew in his head.  
Meeting Mwhaki and chatting each day,  
Becoming friends, enduring come what may.  
A strike of the workers and war in the lands,  
Fathers against fathers; friendship disbands.  
Tomorrow will be better is what the young boy said.  
Past hate, evil feelings, and unfounded fear must be shed.  
Brother in the forest fighting and killing for a cause,  
Do you know where he is, his oath, he broke the laws.  
The questions and beatings to pay for the dead,  
A father stood firm till his last breath.  
What to do now? Is he still the savior? Can he help them at all?  
Mwhaki and he should escape and leave, avoid his call.  
Tomorrow will be better the young girl now said.  
I will not leave with you. Let's have hope instead.  
Exasperated the young boy now sulks,  
This was not the same, not like the other talks.  
Going home disheartened he knows what he must do,  
In the darkness he goes to the tree to complete what must ensue.  
Njorge hears his mother call.  
He's a coward. Again his plans fall.  
Will tomorrow be better? Should hope remain?  
Will the young boy his calling regain?

**Table 6.1. Research Topics for Exploring Kenyan Culture and Ritual**

Bridewealth or bride price	Language (Swahili in particular)
Music and dance	Health epidemics (AIDS in particular)
Celebrations	Food (including recipes)
Dress (Kanga in particular)	Tribes (Kikuyu in particular)
Face paint	Rites of passage
Dreadlocks (symbol of transition)	▪ Birth
Oaths (Mau Mau in particular)	▪ Naming
Medicine men	▪ Circumcision
Diviners	▪ Marriage
Rainmakers	▪ Elderhood
Priests	▪ Death
Religion in Kenya today	

tion or through other forms that integrate visuals such as pictures and artifacts. Musical selections, video clips, and authentic Kenyan food dishes should also be encouraged to broaden students' exposure to Kenyan culture.

## **Making-A-Difference Project: An Investigative Report of the World Free Press Institute and USAID Program**

In closing out this unit of study, students should work in groups of four or five to research the World Free Press Institute (WFPI) and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) programs. To avoid overlap in report content, the teacher should require students to specify their particular focus of research after having an opportunity to conduct a preliminary investigation of the various facets of work conducted by the WFPI and USAID. Students may share their findings in an essay, speech, or Microsoft PowerPoint presentation, so long as the emphasis is on reporting how these agencies make a difference for the nation and citizens of Kenya. Information about WFPI is based on the belief that "Democracy cannot function without a free and informed media" (WFPI, 2004c, ¶ 1).

From this conviction the WFPI has established its mission "to improve, support, and strengthen a free press in its role as an opponent of tyranny around the world" (WFPI, 2004a, ¶ 1). With headquarters in Nairobi, Kenya, the East Africa Media Support Program is a joint initiative between the Network for the Defense of Independent Media in Africa (NDIMA) and WFPI (WFPI, 2004a, ¶ 2). The collaborative efforts of NDIMA and WFPI are aimed at assisting "the

region's independent media" in combating a range of problems from "government repression, lack of professional training, and a lack of solidarity among journalists" (WFPI, 2004a, ¶ 2). Specifically, these efforts include the following (WFPI, 2004a):

- Assistance in empowering and networking East African journalists
- Creation of training materials specific to East African media managers' needs
- Providing temporary food and shelter to journalists expelled by their countries
- Providing computers to local journalism organizations
- Providing communication to outside organizations on media repression
- Hosting the annual East Africa Free Press Assembly, that brings together leading journalists from countries throughout the region. (¶ 3)

Major providers of funding for the World Free Press Institute and its Nairobi-based support program include the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) as well as the American-based Ford Foundation and Upjohn Foundation (WFPI, 2004d). Private individuals who share a commitment to the free exchange of ideas and information may also contribute financially to help WFPI counter "repressive governments around the world [that are] continuing their attacks on free and independent media" (WFPI, 2004b, ¶ 1). As a class project, students should learn about and educate others on the ways in which WFPI works for democracy, with a culminating activity being collecting donations to send to the WFPI. Such a collection could take place in a school cafeteria where students set up a table with a slideshow on a laptop computer or a tri-fold display about WFPI and ask peers and teachers to leave their change in support of the organization. Providing handouts or bookmarks with information about WFPI would also be nice touches. Alternately, students could present such information at a school open house.

Students around the globe will also benefit from knowing what kinds of foreign aid support Kenya, in particular USAID, which is the world's leading donor to Kenya. According to USAID (2005), "Overall development assistance to Kenya totals about \$700 million per year. The United States and the United Kingdom are Kenya's first and second largest bilateral donors, respectively" (¶ 9), and other supportive countries include The Netherlands, Denmark, Sweden, Germany, and Canada. Beyond the numerical data, students should especially look at the aims associated with the financial aid. USAID's primary website, [www.usaid.gov](http://www.usaid.gov), offers specific details of U.S. foreign assistance for countries around the globe, including links to the Department of State's Fiscal Year Congressional Budget Justification for each. This site offers an education on aid from the U.S. people, including USAID's history, which dates back to the Marshall Plan for the reconstruction of Europe after World War II (USAID,

2006a). Following the Truman Administration's Point Four Program, President John F. Kennedy in 1961 "signed the Foreign Assistance Act into law and created by executive order USAID. Since that time, USAID has been the primary U.S. agency to extend assistance to countries recovering from disaster, trying to escape poverty, and engaging in democratic reforms" (USAID, 2006a, ¶ 2–3).

In fiscal year 2006, USAID gave Kenya over \$36 million in aid directed toward health issues, natural resources management, democracy and governance, increasing rural household incomes, and basic education (USAID, 2005). This aid package funded five specific objectives outlined in the USAID Program Elements for Kenya in 2006:

1. Improving the balance of power among institutions of governance;
2. Promoting sustainable use of natural resources;
3. Improving rural incomes by increasing agricultural and rural enterprise opportunities;
4. Improving health conditions;
5. Providing education support for children of marginalized populations. (USAID, 2005, ¶ 6)

Students should also investigate two particular programs that are a part of USAID—the Colours of Life campaign, which is helping to market goods made by women living in the poorest suburbs of Nairobi (USAID, 2006b), and Volunteers for Prosperity, a program launched by President and Laura Bush in 2003 that enlists the aid of doctors, nurses, teachers, engineers, economists, computer specialists, and others to work on development initiatives (USAID, 2003). By exposing students to special programs such as Colours of Life and Volunteers for Prosperity, teachers can plant seeds within their students of future service with a global vision.

## Conclusion

Through his writing, Ngugi effectively presents readers with complex themes that help them recognize problems associated with religious conversion, particularly as they can affect tribes and families. He also leads the reader to question issues of freedom and choice by showing that these are not guarantees of happiness and fulfillment. Additionally, Ngugi creates complex characters who prompt readers to consider what it means to have wisdom and to govern justly or face fierce consequences. While Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *The River Between* (1965) and *Weep Not, Child* (1964) depict conflicts in rituals and politics that were prevalent in Kenya when the novels were written in the 1960s, those who study

Kenya today realize that although the Mau Mau Rebellion is history, female circumcision continues to be widely practiced and thus remains a serious concern. Kenya's 2006 profile from USAID highlights other current problems facing the nation to include crumbling infrastructure, delivery of social services, environmental exploitation, poverty, prevalence of HIV/AIDS, child mortality, and school drop-out rates. That information combined with the study of Ngugi's novels and the range of activities presented in this chapter help students gain a better understanding of Kenya past and present.

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