

Ngugi wa Thiong'o, *Petals of Blood*, Heinemann African Writers Series, 1977, £1.25 (pb)

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Kenya, alone among Britain's African colonies, achieved Independence after a violent struggle. The Mau Mau guerrillas took to the forests to recover the land lost to white settlers. And in a very real sense they won: the cost of putting down the Mau Mau was one of main considerations which persuaded Britain to give up her African colonies.

Many of the writers who have interpreted guerrilla war in Africa and elsewhere have argued that violence and war, especially guerrilla war, is essential for the full liberation of a colonial country. This is because, on the one hand, a guerrilla war makes the leadership dependent on the masses for their food and safety, while on the other, anyone who wants to profit at others' expense has plenty of opportunity in the civil war situation, and so is revealed as an opportunist. Uhuru is achieved by a purged leadership, but one that understands the hopes and feelings of the masses and has put their interests above its own hopes for material gain.

Following this argument one might expect politics in Kenya to have a clarity lacking in other countries. But in Kenya's case the guerrilla victory was incomplete. The 'liberated areas' were territorially insignificant and they declined as the struggle went on. The British were able to beat a strategic retreat. It was the cost, in terms of morale as well as money, rather than any loss of territory, that made them willing to do business with their exiled enemy, Jomo Kenyatta. There was no question of handing over power to a military leadership purged in the fighting: the military leaders were either killed or remained detained.

The war had identified Africans willing to work with the British, and these were rewarded in the boom period which followed the war with trading or transport licences. Meanwhile, the fighters and many of their families remained in detention, some almost up to Independence itself. Many had lost land, and their families had been reduced to poverty by the absence of their menfolk. They

were in no position to get credit when land purchase (rather than a simple division of land) became a key aspect of the million-acre schemes for distributing land previously farmed by white settlers. When the KANU political leaders, including Kenyatta, found a common interest with the collaborating land-owners and businessmen (themselves increasingly dependent on foreign companies) the fighters were almost totally excluded. Kenyatta even refused to erect a statue to Dedan Kimathi, the military leader betrayed to the British and hung in 1956. The final irony came in 1969, when oaths which had been used during Mau Mau to bind the people together to fight the British, were revived by a small group of men with property, ostensibly to protect the Kikuyu from an external threat, but in reality to bind rich and poor together to protect a system based on the property rights of the rich.

Most of this ground has been well covered by academic study—the Mau Mau by Rosberg and Nottingham, and Barnatt and Njama, the British withdrawal and the emergence of a class of privileged Kenyans in alliance with the multinational corporations by Colin Leys. But a novelist can analyse much that is outside the range of academic political science. A novel is a study of people, of how they think and act, and interpret life around them. Ngugi wa Thiong'o's novels are studies of the tensions created in individuals in modern Kenya by Western education which divided the educated few from the non-educated many, by Mau Mau, and by Independence. His latest novel, *Petals of Blood*, written between 1970 and 1975, has led to his detention by the Kenya government.

The novel explores the psychological damage inflicted on four individuals in the 12 years from 1963 to 1975. All four are strong characters, prepared to take a stand for what they believe is right. Outwardly their lives are failures: the school-teacher who turns to drink and to religious fanaticism in a remote village school, while his land-owning father and brothers work for banks and oil companies; the forest fighter reduced to poverty selling oranges by the roadside to tourists; the girl, top of her class in maths, who runs away from school to have a baby and ends up running a brothel; the boy expelled from Alliance High School for organising a strike who drifts around Kenya and ends up in prison as a suspected communist trade union leader. The story of present-day Kenya is told through the experiences of these four and their families, bringing into the open aspects that cannot be discussed in other forums, and in particular the meaning and mechanics of the oath-taking ceremonies of 1969,

and the reasons for the murder of Kariuki in 1975.

All four are superb character studies, whose strengths emerge as the book unfolds. By comparison the villains are unreal and exaggerated: symbols of the violence and double-dealing which oppress the four rather than studies of real people.

They live in a world turned upside down, where the fight to remove a white exploiter leads to his being replaced by a black exploiter several times worse; where families are torn apart by the discovery of how some have compromised while others stood firm and died for it; and where a ruthless logic of eating or being eaten is forced on a remote village. All these processes have an unquantifiable cost in terms of suffering and loss of integrity in individuals:

There was a hardness on her face that he could not now penetrate. He felt the needle-sharp ruthless truth of her statement: you eat or you are eaten. Had he not seen this since he was forced out of school? Had he not himself lived this truth in Mombasa, Nairobi, on the tea and sugar plantations? On the wheat and sugar estates and in the sugar mills? This was the society they were building since Independence, a society in which a black few, allied to other interests from Europe, would continue the colonial game of robbing others of their sweat, denying them the right to grow to full flowers in air and sunlight.

It is not surprising that Ngugi uses symbolism, much of it religious, in a novel of this kind: a journey to Bethlehem with a donkey, fire for purification, drink as a drug to prevent thought and action. The sense of impending doom is reminiscent of Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*. But within a plot thought through with obvious care, the reader is struck by the eye of the writer for detail in the descriptive passages of bars, dances, agricultural life, and the Kenyan countryside; by occasional paragraphs of dry ironic humour; and by the author's appreciation of the past as well as his awareness of its limitations as a guide for the future. The ideas and allusions come thick and fast, without seeming unduly contrived, many of them depending on an understanding of swahili or gikuyu.

Ngugi is writing for educated Kenyans, but his works adds a new dimension to the literature on development and underdevelopment in Kenya. The novel is sad, but, like an Old Testament prophecy, from within the disillusion and despair of the four main characters there is still hope. None of them ever quite gives up the struggle for a better Kenya. The starting point must be an interpretation of the past. In Kenya's case this must mean getting to grips with the way in which Independence followed Mau Mau. Ngugi's novels are a major contribution to this interpretation, and by trying to silence him the Kenya government is only giving greater force and influence to his ideas.