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# Ngugi Wa Thiong'o and the Search for a Populist Landscape Aesthetic

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**ABSTRACT:** This essay examines how Ngugi wa Thiong'o, East Africa's most prominent writer, treats the landscape as a fundamental social phenomenon in two of his most important novels, *A Grain of Wheat* and *Petals of Blood*. Basing his ideas in an ecological theory of landscape aesthetics resembling one recently developed in America, Ngugi understands that ability to control and manipulate a landscape defines a society. Nostalgia for the landscape lost to colonialism and to the corrupting and alienating influences of international capitalism needs to be replaced by its progressive evaluation as it is reshaped by collective action for a new future. Alienation from, and loss of responsibility for, the land may be a major factor contributing to Africa's environmental problems. Ngugi's position casts doubt on professional land management's ultimate ability to influence the shape of the landscape in the face of the collective social will.

**KEYWORDS:** Ngugi wa Thiong'o, landscape aesthetics, development, Kenya

How does a given society perceive its environment? White (1967) attributed the West's environmental degradation to aspects of its Judaeo-Christian tradition and thereby made pursuit of comparative environmental ethics essential. Nonetheless, progress in comparative environmental ethics is, for want of insight, not easily achieved. One source of insight is the thought of the intellectual élite, among them serious novelists. This essay examines how Ngugi wa Thiong'o, East Africa's most prominent writer (Gaiownik, 1989), treats the landscape as a fundamental social phenomenon in two of his most important novels, *A Grain of Wheat* (1967, hereafter AGW) and *Petals of Blood* (1977, hereafter POB).

Ngugi uses the land as a projective symbol reflecting the emotional condition of his protagonists. The technique, recognized by his literary critics (see for example Jabbi, 1985; Ngara, 1985; Cook and Okemnimkpe, 1983; Killam, 1980; Muhoi, 1973; Sharma, 1988), arises from Ngugi's certainty that for the Gikuyu, his subjects, the land is the people, the central theme of society (Kenyatta, 1965, 22). Fixation with the land entails painstaking consideration of the landscape and this Ngugi provides through an apparently intuitively recognized landscape theory clearly resembling one recently developed in America. For Ngugi, a socialist, this theory is immoderately nostalgic. Ngugi's resolution of the dilemma between nostalgia for a lost landscape and the landscape's progressive potential suggests that many of Africa's environmental problems may arise from widespread alienation from the land. Incidentally, his approach questions the Western presumption that it is possible to manage a landscape separately from the society that depends on and shapes that landscape.

## THE ARTIST

Ngugi wa Thiong'o's literary works include numerous plays and short stories, several in his native Gikuyu, but he is best known in the West for a series of five novels, *The River Between* (1965), *Weep Not, Child* (1964), *A Grain of Wheat* (1967), *Petals of Blood* (1977), and *Devil on the Cross* (1983). These novels explore the situation of the Gikuyu from the late pre-colonial period through the early years of Kenyan nationhood. They are most obviously political novels reflecting Ngugi's growing realization of his mission, political agitation of his own society. Because he portrays the independent government of Kenya as, if anything, worse than the colonial government, he has suffered both detention and self-imposed exile; nonetheless, he remains immensely popular with the *wananchi* (the Kenyan masses). Since his theme, the search for personal and collective freedom and dignity, is universal, his works have been popular both in Africa and among Western intellectuals.

The two novels *A Grain of Wheat* and *Petals of Blood*, being narrative, realistic 'whodunits', are stylistically and thematically the most available to Western readers. They are pivotal in understanding Ngugi's journey from humanism to socialism, and as his longest statements, they deal thoroughly with land alienation "from the historical point of view and as a process which continues in the present," (Gaiownik, 1989, 357). *A Grain of Wheat*, set in the days immediately prior to *uhuru* (independence), investigates the betrayal of Kihika, a fictional Mau Mau hero. *Petals of Blood* probes arson and political murders at a house of prostitution in postcolonial New Ilmorog. Both novels are complex, intricate stories laced with allusions to western philosophy and literature and African folklore, rich in symbolism, and full of characters acting their roles in a pageant of flashbacks that makes time into a labyrinth. Both works

are major artistic achievements, and *Petals of Blood* attains, besides, a remarkable ideological synthesis and thereby considerable prominence in socialist literature (Ngara, 1985, 84).

## AN ECOLOGICAL THEORY OF LANDSCAPE AESTHETICS

*A Grain of Wheat* and *Petals of Blood* embrace an ecological theory of landscape aesthetics that comprises both natural and cultural components while avoiding qualities of beauty and loveliness, or 'taste', as defining criteria. Ngugi's predicament, however, differs from that of Western theorists. Ngugi faces the problem of reconciling his society to landscapes transformed by imperialism and neoimperialism. Landscape theorists, particularly Americans, have sought to justify management, or active intervention in landscape deterioration, through an aesthetic free of individual and culturally sensitive standards of beauty. Without such an aesthetic perspective, landscape conservation is too easily dismissed as an individual response to offended personal taste, a taste which commands little public support. A broad aesthetic conceptualization can muster the consensus necessary to successful public action (Hiss, 1990, 126-223).

Appleton (1990, 21-2) defines the landscape as "the environment visually perceived", and the aesthetic as the pleasure in this perception. Pleasure is derived from appreciation of the two types of symbols contained in the landscape. One is natural, possibly genetic, "an intrinsic part of the survival behaviour of the species" (Appleton, 1990, 8). The other is cultural, one whose meaning must be learned for it to be understood and appreciated. The 'natural' symbol is "prospect and refuge" (Appleton, 1975, 69-75), in which satisfaction derives from the landscape's ability to meet the need to see without being seen. Response is intrinsic: prospect/refuge is not required in fact; rather, its mere symbol, for example light and dark, provokes an aesthetic response.

Subsequent theoreticians have accepted Appleton's biophysical bases for aesthetics but have emphasized the cultural symbols of identity, stability and control. Culturally, "...we do not so much discover aesthetically compelling properties in the environment ... as ascribe them to it on the basis of our individual and cultural beliefs, values and needs" (Costonis, 1982, 401). Groups protect their identity and stability by exercising control over landscapes, and landscapes symbolical of identity, stability and control are aesthetic (Bourassa, 1988, 250). Again, all that is required is the symbol, rather than the fact, of identity, stability and control. Locational patterns develop through the reciprocity of human impulses and natural agents, while aesthetics arise from these locational patterns consequent on the viewer's particular position and the landscape's relative size, scale, and physical diversity. The resulting landscape "promotes a sense of place and a sense of purpose within us not only as individuals but as societal groups" (Rodiek, 1988, 36). Landscape is, conse-

quently, heritage to be shared with future generations as a cultural resource. It contains the material symbols of culture. People, as a result, inherit a responsibility to maintain control over their landscapes, thus making the future a serious part of their lives and thinking.

The ecological theory of landscape aesthetics recognizes several contrasts: cultural symbols and natural symbols; prospect and refuge; cultural identity and stability versus control and the ability to manipulate. How a society blends these contrasts results in a landscape unique in time, space and culture. The freedom to control and manipulate, recognized by Bourassa (1988), but fully articulated by Rodiek (1988), is critical; it is this that creates responsibility and requires that the future be taken seriously. Ultimately, landscapes deserve serious attention. They are conserved not because they are beautiful or pretty and quaint but because they contain the symbols that define civilization. To destroy a landscape is to destroy society and to control the landscape is to control society.

#### THE LANDSCAPE LOST

Ngugi embraces and adroitly uses an ecological theory of landscape aesthetics in his narratives. He avoids sublime description, and when he does use it, as in describing a moonlit Rift Valley, it is to tell the reader what a character did not see (AGW, 67). His characters perform in a magnificent setting, blind to the grandeur of the props. Rejecting romanticism, Ngugi's concern is the ordinary landscape of the *wananchi* which he introduces in the opening pages of *A Grain of Wheat* with the anti-hero and protagonist, Mugo.

The landscape's prominence at the novel's opening suggests its conspicuous role in the drama and its first appearance anticipates the changes Ngugi will diagram in words, the evolution of both landscape and ideology. Traditionally, the Gikuyu dispersed themselves in clans along their numerous ridges. Facing violent rebellion, the British gathered these dispersed rural people into centralized villages, the more easily to protect them from the rebels in the forest – and to prevent their support of the rebels. Colonial “new” Thabai, the focus of *A Grain of Wheat*, is such a village:

When built, it had combined a number of ridges ... And even in 1963, it had not changed much from the date in 1955 when the grass thatched roofs, and mudwalls hastily collected together, while the whiteman's sword hung dangerously above people's necks ... Some huts had crumbled; a few had been pulled down. The village maintained an unbroken orderliness; from a distance it appeared a huge mass of grass from which smoke rose to the sky as from a burnt sacrifice. (AGW, 3).

Traditional houses have been thrown together non-traditionally as a result of foreign, imperial imposition. In a village of “unbroken orderliness from a distance”, some huts have already tumbled and a few have been torn down. The

landscape is already a contradiction portending destruction and rebuilding of society. This mass of huts commences Ngugi's ideological journey from an individualistic humanism to a collective Marxism, and the smoke rising up to the sky "as from a burnt sacrifice" warns of the human sacrifices necessary to the transformation.

Ngugi's initial humanism engulfs individuals in a love of land, grants them self-identity and calls them forth to action. When she speaks of the land, Mumbi's voice "trembles with passion", she feels the unity of her fiancé's workshop, Thabai, earth, and heaven (AGW, 78). She rides on strange waves, fights hunger and thirst, and struggles with demons to bring glad tidings to her people. Her excitement leads to the simple, fateful question, "Do you think it will always be like this, I mean the land?" (AGW, 79). Stories of "how the land was taken from the black people", harden Kihika, the warrior-hero, against "these people, long before he had even encountered a white face", and leads him to rebellion, the forest, and the betrayal and death on which Ngugi's story turns (AGW, 83).

The passion for landscape and the sorrow felt for its loss gives Ngugi a powerful opportunity to contrast, sometimes comically, Gikuyu and British landscape ideals. Mumbi's father's home, in all its chaotic glory, is remembered fondly:

His home consisted of three huts and two granaries where crops were stored after harvests. A bush – a dense mass of creepers, brambles, thorn trees, nettles and other stinging plants – formed a natural hedge around the home. Old Thabai, in fact, was a village of such grass-thatched huts thinly scattered along the ridge. The hedges were hardly ever trimmed; wild animals used to make their lairs there. (AGW, 75).

The British willed to impose their "order" on the Gikuyu jumble and the epitome of contrast is the garden of District Officer John Thompson:

A neatly trimmed hedge of cider shrub surrounded the Thompson's bungalow. At the entrance, green creepers coiled on a wood stand, massed into an arch at the top and then fell to the hedge at the sides. The hedge enclosed gardens of flowers: flame lilies, morning glory, sunflowers, bougainvillea. However, it was the gardens of roses that stood out in colour above the others. (AGW, 36).

Elsewhere an African contemplates another such garden: "A well finished application of sweat, art and craftsmanship over a number of years, so much energy and brains wasted on beautifying trees" (POB, 146). The "primordial trees", according to Thompson, awe the "primitive minds", and their "darkness and mystery" have led Africans "inside to magic and ritual" (AGW, 55). The primitive unkept landscape created primitive people so that by taming the wildness, the British tame the primitive man. Altering the landscape, in other words, asserts social control and advances imperialism. Thompson's garden is more than a focus for his private contemplation: it is a refuge from Africa and an

inspiration for his imperialism. In *Weep Not, Child*, the owner of another such garden sums it up well:

Mr. Howlands always felt a certain amount of victory whenever he walked through it all. He alone was responsible for taming this unoccupied wildness. (31)

From and through these sanctuaries, the British imposed “civilization” on Gikuyuland, creating a land of “paths in the neatly hedged fields—a result of land consolidation” and new villages of “huts, grass, lives crammed together” (AGW, 118). The approach of *uhuru* raises expectations that the landscape of the conqueror, as symbolized by Thompson’s garden, will again be replaced with the landscape of the ancestors as symbolized by Mumbi’s father’s farm.

Nearing the conclusion of *A Grain of Wheat*, as the *uhuru* celebration approaches, rain, supposedly a symbol of hope, rebirth, and renewal, dominates the story and reinforces the expectations of the *wananchi*. Often brooding, oppressive, and sometimes torrential, Ngugi’s water metaphors in *A Grain of Wheat* provoke uncertain critical interpretation (Jabbi, 1985), possibly because few of Ngugi’s critics recognize that rain in the wrong amounts and at the wrong time in East Africa can be as destructive as no rain at all. This characteristic Ngugi finds it necessary to explain later:

When a good crop was expected it was known through a rhythmic balanced alternation of rain and sunshine. A bad crop was preceded by sporadic rains or by a continuous heavy downpour which suddenly gave way to sunshine for the rest of the season. (POB, 33).

Nonetheless, the majority of the characters share the renewal interpretation of the rains, accepting its rejuvenating powers and the promise it provides. They rejoice:

Murangu on high never slept: he always let his tears fall to this, our land, from Agu and Agu. As we the children used to sing:

Ngai has given Gikuyu a beautiful country,  
Never without food or water or grazing fields.  
It is good so Gikuyu should praise Ngai all the time,  
For he has been ever so generous to them. (AGW, 178).

The rain and *uhuru* come together to culminate in a sort of rebirth of the landscape. But, is it rain that revives the landscape, or the new unity of the people, however fleeting and momentary?

In the afternoon, the sun appeared and brightened the sky. The mist which in the morning lingered in the air went. The earth smoked grey like freshly dropped cow-dung. The warming smoke spread and thinned upwards into the clear sky. (AGW, 215).

This brightening, new freshness of the earth brings with it hope, a rebirth, and an opportunity to right the order of things. But as *uhuru* is achieved and as the land flowers, Mugo, the alienated, helpless antihero and false hero of Mau Mau, confesses his sin in a singular act of true heroism, which is also, ironically, his ultimate act of despair: it is an act that strangely reunites but also reveals the false mythology of the struggle of *uhuru*.

The landscape in this false mythology of freedom is a contradiction that Ngugi leaves unresolved. The ideal, Mumbi's father's farm, rests in nostalgia for a world that is no longer. The hope of the *wananchi* is that, with the British departure, the old ways and the old world will effortlessly return. They face *uhuru* with a foreboding, exhausted by its expectation and with a sense of disappointment in its arrival. Wambui possibly feels the lethargy as much as any character:

Wambui sat on and watched the drizzle and grey mist for a few minutes. Darkness was creeping into the hut. Wambui was lost in a solid consciousness of a terrible anticlimax to her activities in the fight for freedom... Then she shook herself, trying to bring her thoughts to the present. I must light the fire. First I must sweep the room. How dirt can so quickly collect in a clean hut. But she did not rise to do anything. (AGW, 243).

Wambui is symbolic of the potential for action and at the same time the failure to act – action will bring about change for the collective good, failure to act will result in an endless cycle of despair. The cycle of rebirth and destruction has exhausted the participants but must continue in order to reach the ultimate landscape, the ultimate societal ideal.

The problem Ngugi presents but fails to resolve in *A Grain of Wheat* centres on nostalgia. The *wananchi* have lost their land to a foreign power and with it their ability to control and manipulate the landscape. Their identity has been shattered and with it their stability. The hope is that, with the departure of the foreign power, the landscape, like some ancestor of long-ago, will return and all will be right with the world. The hope and expectation romanticizes the past, and romanticism, of course, is anathema to socialism. Wambui recognizes that *uhuru* is a call to action, that the fire must be lighted and the room swept, but she fails to rise. The contradiction of nostalgia and a progressive social order is one that Ngugi must face squarely in *Petals of Blood*.

## THE LANDSCAPE CORRUPTED

*Petals of Blood*, a good murder mystery, is also an examination of human alienation in a Kenya swept by neoimperialism. In this novel, two themes are intertwined and co-mingled: the landscape as the savaged product of human alienation, and as the product of capitalist exploitation. Ngugi's attempt to



explain the former and contend with the latter, however, resolves the problem of nostalgia.

The savaged landscape of human despair is not a new theme, however, since it was introduced in *A Grain of Wheat*. Gikonyo, married to Mumbi, returns home from six years in detention only to discover that his wife has borne a collaborator's child. Intensely bitter, he drifts aimlessly through new Thabai and reflects, and his thoughts echo his alienation and disillusionment:

...one street led into another and dust trailed behind his heels. The very air choked him: Thabai was just another detention camp; could he ever get out of it? But go where? He followed the tarmac road which led him into Rung'ei. The Indian shops had been moved into a new center; the tall buildings were made of stones; electric lights and tarmac streets made the place appear as a slice of the big city. The sewage smelt, it had not been cleaned for a year. He went on and came to the African shops in Rung'ei; they were closed; tall grass and wild bush clambered around the walls of the rusty buildings and covered the ground that was once the market place... The African shops, as he learnt later, had been forced to shut as a collective punishment to the ridges. Blue smoke from a few huts was lost in the bright midday sun... Nothing in the new village now attracted him... Was there anywhere else to go? (AGW, 117-8).

Gikonyo has a clear vision of the future. This, the 'new Kenya', the land of the alienated, is the landscape of disorder, chaos, disgust, and the futility of smoke lost in the bright midday sun. The bush which has overtaken the African shops represents the suppression and decay of the whole of African society. Gikonyo feels trapped in this landscape, another detention camp.

The landscape of despair is concealed beneath the hopes and expectations of the *wananchi*. But, it is recognizable; a kind of rough, red lacerated, "bumpy, battered land ... sickly crops just recovering from recent drought, one more scourge which had afflicted the country...", filled with "...anxious faces of mothers dry and cracked ... scattered on the strips of shamba" (AGW, 9). It does not beckon nostalgia and it is to come into full flower in *Petals of Blood*.

In *Petals of Blood* an alienated *wananchi* have totally lost control of their land. The landscape itself is now corrupted and unproductive as if man, alienated from his labour, his fellow man, and himself, is now alienated from nature too. The landscape is eroded, raw, vicious and most often seen as vindictive or at best capricious and unpredictable. It yields little:

Did you have a good gathano harvest in your place? Here it was poor and we don't know if the grains of maize and beans can last us to the end of the njahi rains. That is, if the rains come... (POB, 8).

And this failure to earn from the land destroys the fibre of society:

The land seemed not to yield much and there was no virgin soil to escape to as in those days before colonialism. His sons had gone away to European farms and the big towns... So Njuguna, like the other peasants in all the huts scattered about Ilmorog

Country, had to be contented with small acreage, poor implements and with his own small family labor. (POB, 9).

If rain sets the mood of expectancy in *A Grain of Wheat*, then the road provides that mood in *Petals of Blood*. In *A Grain of Wheat*, the railroad provides the imagery of colonial power, an iron thing devouring forests and linking African villages to a larger world. The railway station becomes a focal point for leisure, "...a meeting place for the young..." where on Sunday "...people just went there to meet one another, to talk, to gossip, to laugh..." (71). Indeed, poverty-and-drought-stricken and depopulated, Ilmorog, the center of action in *Petals of Blood*, is linked by natural roads to global events in the course of human history:

Ilmorog plains themselves are a part of the Great Rift that formed a natural highway joining Kenya ... to the legendary waters of the River Jordan in Palestine. For centuries, and even up to this day, the God of Africa and the Gods of other lands have wrestled for the mastery of man's soul and for the control of the results of man's holy sweat... (POB, 68).

However, the road of greater concern to the characters is something more mundane and inglorious:

The road had once been a railway line joining Ilmorog to Ruwa-ini. The line had carried wood and charcoal and wattle barks from Ilmorog forests to feed the machines and men of Ruwa-ini. It had eaten the forests, and after accomplishing the task, the two rails were removed and the ground became a road – a kind of a road – that now gave no evidence of its former exploiting glory. (POB, 11).

Poverty and drought finally stir the people of Ilmorog down this road and to action. Aroused by Abdulla, a maimed Mau Mau hero, the villagers are reminded that the ground on which they trod had been hallowed by those who had fought and died for Kenya and that they owe it to these ancestors to seek a better life, if not for themselves, at least for their children. En masse, the villagers take to the road, journeying to Nairobi to beseech their political representatives to take some action to assist Ilmorog. Their effort gains them little besides humiliation and insult, but upon returning from the journey, the rain finally comes to renew the endless cycle of life. Below the surface, however, is a new expectancy of a threatened future, one created by the journey itself:

...brooding not too far below their tranquil existence was their consciousness of the journey and the experiences which spoke of another less sure, more troubled world which could, any time, descend upon them, breaking asunder their rain filled sun-warmed calm... (POB, 197).

And so it comes to pass:

...we did not then know that within a year the journey, like a God who cannot let his generosity be forgotten, would send its emissaries from the past, to transform Ilmorog

and change our lives utterly, Ilmorog and us utterly changed. (POB, 242).

The emissaries that come to Ilmorog are the forces of international capitalism and their local thugs and rascals. They bring the full fury of development creating a totally false, commoditized and commercialized landscape. Capitalism transforms the landscape to one of decay and decadence where alienated people feed on each other.

This was the society they were building...in which a black few, allied to other forces 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.... (POB, 294).

Plots are carved from various farms to make a shopping centre and as shops are planned, people are required to apply for building permits. A mobile van from the African Economic Bank arrives to explain to the peasants and herdsmen how they can acquire loans. The loans sour and eventually town ownership is concentrated in the hands of the wealthy while the *wananchi* become debtors and servants in their own home. The new Ilmorog degenerates into a dehumanized landscape of:

...neon-lights; of bars, lodgings, groceries, permanent sales and bottled Theng'eta; of robberies, strikes; lockouts, murders and attempted murders; of prowling prostitution in cheap night clubs; of police stations, police raids, police cells... (POB, 190).

The landscape is chaos where all sense of identity, stability and control, the fundamentals of aesthetics, are hopelessly lost.

## RESOLUTION

The socialist, Karega, is the one character to achieve something of a personal enlightenment. He asks the fateful questions, and accepting the implied answer, drives the logic to its full conclusion: "Must we have this world? Is there only one world? Then we must create another world, a new earth..." (POB, 294).

Karega's awakening is both existential and social. It is a private, personal realization demanding commitment and action: "...since the only thing he had now was his two hands, he would somehow sell its creative power to whoever would buy it..." (POB, 302). But at the same time it calls forth the *wananchi* to "...then join with all the other hands in ensuring that at least they had a fair share of what their thousand sets of fingers produced..." (POB, 302). And the awakening is compelling; the future depends on it:

... only then would the kingdom of man and woman really begin, they joying and loving creative labor... For a minute he was so carried on the waves of this vision and of the possibilities it opened up for all the Kenyan working and peasant masses that he forgot the woman beside him ... and he knew he was no longer alone. (POB, 344).

Karega's new awareness also resolves the problem of nostalgia, the hankering for a long gone world. Karega roughly equates the land with the ancestor, and thereby rests his call for collective action thoroughly in Gikuyu traditions of collective ownership:

Why anyway, should soil, which after all was what was Kenya, be owned by an individual? Kenya, the soil, was the people's common shamba, and there was no way it could be right for a few, a section, or a single nationality, to inherit for their sole use what was communal any more than it would be right for a few sons and daughters to own and monopolize their father or mother... (POB, 302).

The call, however, is also Marxist. Karega's vision coincides with his new ideology and this futuristic view rejects a romanticized, idealized past:

...we must not preserve our past as a museum: rather, we must study it critically, without illusions, and see what lessons we can draw from it in today's battlefield of the future and the present. But to worship it – no. Maybe I used to do it: but I don't want to continue worshipping in the temples of the past without tarmac roads, without electric cookers, a world dominated by slavery to nature. (POB, 323).

## DISCUSSION

In the West, sweeping structural changes following mass availability of the automobile have resulted in a considerable anxiety over the fate of landscapes that define ourselves, regionally and nationally. Preservation of structures, views and scenes on the basis of their beauty is a poor rationale. Beauty, it is commonly believed, is in the eye of the beholder, so that in egalitarian societies there is little to distinguish one scene from another, a situation compounded where land use decisions are based on maximum efficiency (Postman, 1993, 50). Over the past two decades, theorists, particularly in America, have attempted to confront the problem of the relativity of aesthetics by developing a concept for landscape evaluation that is ecological and therefore indifferent to beauty *per se* as an object of preservation. The result makes aesthetic virtues of the cultural identity, stability and control that a landscape can imply. The concept grants society much freedom and responsibility to determine the nature of the stage upon which it performs its drama, and it has considerably legitimized the idea, if not the specific targets, of landscape management.

In East Africa, imperialism and neoimperialism have also provoked a landscape crisis, which Ngugi wa Thiong'o analyses. Foreign political and economic power altered the symbols contained in the landscape, effectively disorienting the society they sought to control. Eventually commercializing the landscape, capitalism has taken from the *wananchi* the ability to control it and therefore their future. Society's freedom and sense of responsibility are reduced

and the *wananchi* are denied the sense of identity and stability landscape control suggests. This alienation from the land, rather than the economics of subsistence agriculture and excessive population growth alone, may explain much of the decline in Africa's environmental condition. The *wananchi* can hardly be expected to feel responsibility for things, including the land, over which they have little control.

Ngugi's analysis, however, illustrates two issues about which conservationists should feel considerable discomfort. Through Karega, Ngugi makes it clear that progressive societies cannot afford the luxury of nostalgia. Conservation based on a bittersweet longing for the things of the past is objectionable, incompatible with the interest of the masses. Conservation requires, instead, a critical assessment of the past and preservation of those things that satisfy human biological needs or contribute to cultural identity and stability.

Furthermore, Ngugi rejects, out-right, professionalism and the bureaucracy as a valid force in making conservation decisions, preferring instead the image of thousands of fingers working together to shape the course of human history, including its conservation ethic. Sick societies produce sick landscapes; the cure is to change society. It is futile to think that a landscape can be 'managed' apart from the society that created it. Ngugi's assessment is based on his realization that colonial and nationalist Kenya are not democratic; however, this is also a realization that pluralistic societies are forced to base conservation on professionalism, a form of élitism, and that they fail to develop a landscape aesthetic that is fundamentally populist.

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