

Christianity, culture, and conflict in the river between



**ASSIGN
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The River Between The novel by Ngugi Wa Thiong'o, The River Between, tells the story of two tribes that hold very different beliefs central to themselves. However, though they agree on very little, there are still people that believe in peace and unity. The clash between the two villages is over the traditional Gikuyu belief system and the Christianity brought by colonial white settlers. The search for Ngugi's opinion on Christian missions and Christianity can be seen through whom his protagonist and antagonists are and what they stand for.

Joshua is the character that epitomizes Christian beliefs as he is unwavering and uncompromisable about his faith. In an outspoken fashion he speaks against the ways of the tribe, which can give us insight into the negative feelings the Ngugi has towards Christianity being brought to the villages. In contrast we see the Chege, coming from Kameno, represents the Gikuyu tradition and is portrayed in a more positive light " Makuyu was now home of the Christians while Kameno remained the home of all that was beautiful in the tribe." (54) Chege is portrayed to be calm even when facing difficult times, where Joshua represents hatred and extremism. Chug is passionate about the Gikuyu beliefs, but Joshua is more radical and threatening. This shows how the characters and what they represent are distinguished from each other. However, there is a difference between Ngugi showing anti-Christian motives and anti-Christianity in the villages. He seems to describe the dangers that will take place with the merging of the two villages, which explains why Waiyaki was unable to bring unity to the two groups. Ngugi opposes Christianity to be in the village, seeing the devastating effects it can have on the people, but gives no indication that he is anti-Christianity, as

long as it is not imposed on his culture. This also leads to the belief that he does not approve of the civilizing missions which impose their religion on the areas that they colonize.

For the Kameno people, circumcision was central to their culture it was a long living, indigenous tradition that symbolized the right of passage of both boys and girls into adulthood. After all, for many of the young people in this culture, their circumcision was something that they looked forward to with dutiful excitement as we see displayed in Waiyaki, “ This would mark his final initiation into manhood. Then he would prove his courage, his manly spirit”. (14) The Kameno culture reflects the culture that Wanjiku grew up in, where circumcision was central to her culture. Reflecting on her childhood, she discussed how early on they were prepared for circumcision, and how her life was much better afterward. She grew being taught to fear authority, and have respect for her elders, as well as the system and traditions of her culture. Though some cultures may look at the strict rules of Wanjiku’s culture with fear, she loved her culture and was saddened by the current times. She also talks about how good her life was after circumcision, and the unity that she had within her age group. Her reflections of her culture and life are positive, and only turn negative when she sees the effects that colonialism had on her people. Circumcision is a traditional, indigenous rite that proves to be anti-colonial and is a form of resistance against British imperialism. It is also anti Christian, showing the person become a “ pagan” as they undergo the ritual. Ngugi shows how the traditions of circumcision are different from the christian principles: “ For Nyambura had learnt and knew that circumcision was sinful. It was a pagan rite from which she and

her sister had been saved. A daughter of God should never let even a thought of circumcision come to her mind.” (23) Ngugi states that he believes one cannot believe in circumcision and keeping the cultural traditions while also believing in Christianity and colonialism. He must have had a similar fear and hatred for the Christian missionaries as experienced by Wanjiku. The first time Wanjiku mentions the missionaries, she talks about how they told her people to forget their culture and change to the British-Christian culture. She also goes on to express how she blames the missionaries for destroying the traditional values of her people, and how there could be no unity between people anymore, as when people went to church they abandoned traditions.

However, Nyambura is the voice of unity on this issue. She believes that one can be circumcised and Christian “ Father and mother are circumcised. Are they not Christians? Circumcision did not prevent them from being Christians. I too have embraced the white man’s faith.” (26) The longing for unity is also expressed by Wanjiku, but in a different way with different goals in mind. She felt unity amongst the other woman whom had also been circumcised and with the woman in her riika. But, Nyambura longed for their to be unity amongst all groups, not just people in the same age group, and for there to be unity between those who believed in tradition and those who believed in Christianity. Through her experience of seeing people who went to Church abandoning the traditions of her people, she believed that there would be no unity anymore, and therefore looks at the situation with great sorrow. The way that Ngugi ends his book provokes a variety of responses in the reader. The responses are a result of how the reader felt about Waiyaki.

One who believed in what he stood for and believed that he was the protagonist would dislike the ending, knowing that his plan for unity was foiled and that his ending is unknown, though leaning towards a less than ideal resolve. But, someone who was not satisfied with the way the book was going and did not believe in what Waiyaki stood for or his leadership would enjoy the ending, seeing his plan fall apart. The future of this tribe is unknown, and the reader is able to come up with their own future for these people. However, for myself, the part of the ending that stands out the most is when we see how guilty and ashamed the people are when they think about what they did to Waiyaki. He was their teacher and they looked up to him with respect and expectations of their future. But, they did not believe in the movement the same way that Waiyaki did, which made them out to be blind followers.

Perhaps Ngugi is promoting a world where people think for themselves rather than follow a powerful leader blindly. People who join movements because they are passionate about them, and have the choice to follow a leader or not to. Ngugi seemed to believe in movements that could inspire change, but he knew that the movement had to be led by multiple passionate people, rather than one passionate leader. It also takes time for great movements to inspire change, and people cannot quickly force beliefs on to others and expect for anything to make a lasting difference.

Sometimes a movement is passed on to multiple leaders and it can take decades or centuries to bring about real change. With this belief, one can still view the ending of this book with hope, believing that maybe in the future the unity that Waiyaki wanted could be achieved. These different

theories that can be proposed about why Ngugi decided to end the book in this way is exactly what he wanted. With an open-ended ending, the story inspires conversations about the characters and their interactions, but also about the future of the tribe and how this can also relate to our own lives. It is evident that Ngugi wanted to inspire conversations and thoughts about what the ending of this story was intended to mean and what it can mean, and that makes his conclusion of this story effective towards his intentions.

Whether the reader agrees with the opinions that Ngugi expresses in his novel, all can conclusively agree that he is effective in starting conversations and awareness about these indigenous African cultures. The story gives insight into the lives of people living in these villages and the struggles that they faced when the colonial settlers came to their homes. It shows historical facts while encouraging conversations that are relevant to the present and the future. It's important for people from other cultures to be able to read this story, and see the reactions of the native people when they were being colonized. It shows us that not every village or person reacted to the settlers in the same way, meaning that every situation was different and cannot be generalized into meaning one thing. Ngugi opens his readers eyes to the past while also encouraging the exploration of digging into what it was like for the people who lived during this time.