

**TOWARDS RECONCILIABLE RELIGIOUS IDENTITIES:  
PROBLEMS AND SOLUTIONS IN NGŪGĨ WA THIONG'O'S  
*THE RIVER BETWEEN***

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**Abstract:** Inspired by *The River Between*, this article situates Ngũgĩ's novel within the series of works dealing with the issue of identity. It argues that the strife between Kameno, the traditionalists' ridge, and Makuyu, the Christians' ridge, is based on the complex issue of religious identity. By analyzing the religious identity of each ridge, via a psychosocial theory analysis, I suggest that Ngũgĩ's realistic depiction is crucial to backing up the idea of a possible dialogue between Christianity and Gikuyu traditional religion, which stops the 'duelogue' and opens up new ways of living within a society where the members' religious beliefs strongly differ.

**Key words:** Religion, identity, Gikuyu traditional religion, Christianity, religious "duelogue", religious dialogue.

**Résumé :** Inspiré par *The River Between*, cet article situe le roman de Ngũgĩ dans la série des ouvrages traitant de la question de l'identité. Il met en exergue le conflit entre les traditionalistes de la crête de Kameno et les chrétiens de celle de Makuyu. Cette étude s'intéresse particulièrement à la question complexe de l'identité religieuse. En s'appuyant sur la théorie psychosociale, j'analyse respectivement l'identité religieuse des traditionalistes, des chrétiens, et des partisans d'une identité réformée. Ainsi, je suggère que la représentation réaliste de Ngũgĩ, qui s'inspire des données coloniales, est cruciale pour soutenir l'idée d'un dialogue possible entre le christianisme et la religion traditionnelle Gikuyu pour mettre fin au « duelogue » et ouvrir de nouvelles perspectives du vivre en commun au sein d'une société où les croyances religieuses des membres s'opposent fortement.

**Mots-clés :** religion, identité, religion traditionnelle Gikuyu, christianisme, « duelogue » religieux, dialogue religieux.

### Introduction

The problem of identity is still a recurrent and complex issue in literature. Considering the elements constituting the issues of African literature derived from the interaction between African people and other countries, one comes to understand that the problem of identity is not an old-fashion subject. It is the backbone of the elements which determine the objective of this work that focuses on Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's *The River Between*. This novel highlights the dilemma of the new generation to be free from Gikuyu and Christian religious hardliners as tensions grow between the two ridges, Kameno and Makuyu, after the arrival of

Christian missionaries. Disowned by the two ridges, Waiyaki, Nyambura and Muthoni abide by their own conscience to follow what they consider central to their identity as they try to reconcile the two groups to accept circumcision and freedom of religious belief.

This novel will be analysed from a psychosocial perspective, mainly in the light of what identity means for some specialists like Erikson (1968). According to the latter identity may be understood either as “a subjective sense of an invigorating sameness and continuity” (19); “a unity of personal and cultural identity rooted in an ancient people’s fate” (20); or “a process “located” in the core of the individual and yet also in the core of his communal culture, a process which establishes, in fact, the identity of those two identities” (22). He further states that identity is never static and unchangeable (24). Echoing this understanding of identity, Berger and Luckman (1971, p.35) conclude that identity is a social construction as each individual is influenced by daily multi-realities and that each reality is not experienced the same way. From this viewpoint, an individual’s identity is on an ongoing construction process.

From the multiplicity of identities produced by the religious clash between Christianity and Gikuyu traditional religion, religious dialogue seems to be the solution to appease the problem. Thus, basing our analysis on religious identity, we will investigate to know whether these questions – who are the characters? Themselves? Nobody? – will lead us to a religious “duelogue” or dialogue to determine which kind of religious identity suits the members of a divided society where it is difficult to assert one’s religious conviction.

## 1. The Gikuyu traditional identity

Aware of the fact that religion is very difficult to define (Koenig, 2009, p.284), scholars accept that it embraces the whole life of all human beings (Schuurman, 2011, pp.273-274) and pertains to the question of their existence or being (Mbiti, 1999, p.15). Interested in deciphering the link between religion and identity in the literary context, this part attempts to analyse the Gikuyu religious identity from its traditional perspective. From this point, the study calls into question the relationship between characters’ faith belonging and their identity: who they are and in what they believe in.

Identity is a long-life project construction that is related to individuals’ histories (Erikson, 1950, 1968; see also Cooper, Behrens, & Trinh, 2009). This implies that studying the Gikuyu traditional identity is about taking into account the history of the Gikuyu society in terms of culture and belief. The latter is, in the eyes of the first missionaries and the newly Christian converts, nothing but a heathenistic way of living that merits no respectful consideration (Ngũgĩ, 1965). The death of Muthoni, the Makuyu reverend’s daughter, when undergoing clitoridectomy confirmed, according to the new converts, “the barbarity of Gikuyu customs” (Ngũgĩ, 1965, p.55). This conviction is shared amongst the Christians that the Gikuyu religion is a religion of mercilessness which testifies to the extremely cruel and uncivilized identity of these people. This

understanding can make one consider the Gikuyu people as what Erikson characterizes as a society having an “almost total prevalence of negative identity elements” (Erikson, 1968, pp.297–298).

But, the Christians’ prejudices on the traditionalists prove that this society is “being denied the bases for a collective identity formation and with it that reservoir of collective integrity from which the individual must derive his stature as a social being” (Erikson, 1950, p.154). Therefore, it is genuinely important to specify that the Gikuyu people are known to be specific in the way they manifest their religious identity. Unlike Christians who are convinced that a true believer is but a follower of Jesus Christ, they abide by their God through the recommendations of Gikuyu and Mumbi, father and mother of the tribe. Backing up the idea of the existence of a multiplicity of religious identities, Gikuyu traditionalists connect their religious faith to Ngai or Murungu and what resembles much to what Steve Biko refers to as the religions of African peoples:

we did not believe that religion could be featured as a separate part of our existence on earth. It was manifested in our lives. We thanked God through our ancestor before one drank beer, married, worked, etc. We would obviously find it artificial to create special occasions for worship. Neither did we see it logical to have a particular building on which all worship would be conducted. We believed that God was always in communication with us and therefore merited attention everywhere and anywhere

(Biko, 1972, p.45).

This way of propitiating God which is particularly attributed to those whom Christian and Muslims call heathens does not oppose what can be considered to be the root elements which determine the religious identity of the Gikuyu people. This Gikuyu religious identity is, in the eye of a member of the tribe, a sacred and eulogized fact deep-rooting, legitimizing and legalizing the self-conviction belonging to the group which deep-seats its pillars on the feeling that the members of the community not only share the same geographic, linguistic, cultural community, but also are faithful to the ancient rites of the tribe and worship nothing but the Gikuyu God, who resembles what P. W. Schmidt (a German scholar), Raffael Pettazzoni (an Italian historian of religion), and Andrew Lang (a British anthropologist) respectively call the ‘highest being’, the ‘idealized God of heaven’, and the ‘familiar father deity’ (Delebecque, 1989, p.571).

In *TRB*, it is clearly testified that the Gikuyu people believe that Murungu is the God who gives credit to the importance of their existence. Their religious identity, as in the Christian religion, depends on the first word uttered by the supreme deity, Ngai, to the father and mother of the tribe, Gikuyu and Mumbi. The permission to dwell in the Gikuyu land is a decree from Murungu who, echoing the Christian God who said to Adam and Eve: “therefore the LORD sent him forth from the Garden of Eden to till the ground from whence he was taken” (Genesis, 3, 23), “had told to Gikuyu and Mumbi: this land I give to you, O man and woman. It is yours to rule and till you and your posterity” (Ngũgĩ, 1965, p.2).

But, before Murungu dispatched them to their abode, Gikuyu and Mumbi were given instructions as how to multiply and grow into a nation. They were also told how to pray and worship God. Besides, they were given a code by which they and their offspring were to conduct themselves daily. Gikuyu was then commanded to take his wife, Mumbi to the land allocated to him by Murungu and build his homestead near a "blessed and sacred place. ... where... grew up [a] tree" (Ngũgĩ, 1965, p.18). The father and mother [of the tribe] had nine daughters who bore more children. The children spread all over the country. Some came to the ridges to keep and guard the ancient rites...' (*Ibid.*).

From Murungu's recommendations, the Gikuyu people identify themselves with the land and find the dogmatic view of worshipping their God through all that belongs to the land, a manner which consolidates their religious identity. This is evidence enough that the Gikuyu people is aware of the necessity to stick to this recommendation as a condition without which their 'Gikuyuness' will be questionable. In their life, some behaviours, activities and rites of passage - from rebirth to circumcision -, give them the opportunity to prove to themselves, to the members of the tribe the gradual expression and conviction of their faith to the tenant of "the mountain of he-who-shines-in-Holiness" (Ngũgĩ, 1965, p.17).

What testifies to the religiousness of a person, in the Gikuyu religion, is the respect displayed towards seers, ancestors and spirits, and rites of passage. This is part of what Erikson (1968) names the "social group history", religiosity. In *TRB*, Ngũgĩ skilfully underscores this fact.

Like Mugo wa Kibiro, Chege, Waiyaki's father, is a seer. Protection of the tribe is one of his main concerns. He is an active member of the society and is still interested in the affairs of his people's living conditions. He is believed to wield great authority, having special power to influence the course of events or to control the well-being of his living relatives. On top of that, he is a peace maker, a link that fosters communication between the living and the dead, through sacrifices and prayers. For this reason, "the other elders feared and respected him. For he knew, more than any other person, the ways of the land and the hidden things of the tribe. He knew the meaning of every ritual and every sign" (Ngũgĩ, 1965, p.7). The attitude of the elders strengthens the belief that the Gikuyu people have a religion and consolidate their religious identity through the above-mentioned attitude vis-à-vis the seers: "a sense of membership and belongingness" (Loewenthal, 2000) to the Agikuyu land.

Another important aspect in the displaying of one's religious identity, in the Gikuyu tribe, is related to the fact of propitiating spirits. Since the spirit continues in some measures to be kin and be active participants in the life of the community, the attitudes toward this force vary from love, respect and trust mingled with particular feelings of admiration to total fear. The spirit of the dead is often thought to help the living, but, often, they are thought to harm if they are not appeased. In *TRB*, Waiyaki's attitude regarding spirits is that of reverence, and expectation of help and guidance as he wants "to feel at one with the whole creation, with the spirits of his sister and father" (Ngũgĩ, 1965, p.73). It is believed

that ancestral spirits are anthropocentric conceptions similar to other supernatural beings: that is, spirits have the qualities of personality and aptitude of man, to which supernatural might is added. For this reason, ceremonies are held to soothe them. Even the spirits are sometimes invoked to take part assist in some rites of passage. This is all the truer that the ceremony of the second birth is a way of appeasing the spirits of the dead and the living (Ngũgĩ, 1965, p.11). This rite of passage is then a way of demanding permission to the spirits to accept the change of status of the candidate to the other one with success and obedience to Murungu's will. This event guarantees the candidate the occasion to confirm the sworn idea of the elders to perpetuate and keep intact the religious rites which are amongst the pillars of the Gikuyu religious identity.

During these ceremonies, be it second birth ceremony, circumcision, death ritual, etc., the spirits are given respect through sacrifices to help the concerned individual profit from the divine favour. Thus, each rite of passage undergone by a member of the tribe is a degree which is added to the so far acquired religious identity. This means that in the Gikuyu belief every step towards the state of wisdom is a sacred progression which convinces more and more people of the sense of responsibility for a member of the tribe and of his great badge of consideration which guarantees the passage from one status to another.

Specifically, in this novel, circumcision is a way of worshipping God, as are other rites of passage. The severed part is a sacrifice to spirit beings. The operation certifies the subjects' readiness for marriage and adulthood and testifies to his or her ability to withstand pain. Circumcision symbolizes a person's assumption of adult responsibilities – both social and cultural – and the individual's acceptance as a full member of the tribe (Kenya, 1938, p.134).

For the girl, circumcision meant that she is able to bear children. Suffering on her bed, Muthoni, Joshua's daughter, hardly articulates the following statement: "I want to be a woman" (Ngũgĩ, 1965, p.50). Muthoni struggles to gain her Gikuyu religious faith, to be fully accepted as a member of the Kameno ridge where dwell Chege and his people whom their unfailing participation to all activities of worship gives evidence in their religious identity strength. Waiyaki himself understands another meaning different from the cutting of the flesh. "Circumcision of women was not important as a physical operation. It was what it did inside a person" (Ngũgĩ, 1965, p.43). This is to say that for both boys and girls, initiation into man/womanhood – through circumcision or clitoridectomy – marks their admission into full membership of the Gikuyu society and is thus momentous occasions both socially and individually (Kenya, 1938, p.134). Through circumcision, the period of initiation and instruction that accompanies it, an individual becomes a full participant in society as a whole, beyond the scope of the village and their families. Their responsibilities, therefore, are not just extended to their family group, but to the Gikuyu nation according to which any member of the Agikuyu land must abide by the worshipping of Murungu, the propitiation of spirits (ancestors), the displaying of respect towards the seers (priests), and the fact of being involved in all that make the tribe be a united one.

## 2. The question of a Christian identity

Contrary to the Gikuyu traditionalists' religious identity, Christians' fully depends upon the doctrines of the Bible and the teaching of Jesus. *The Heidelberg Catechist* clarifies that in displaying his/her religious identity, a Christian must answer the following: "I with body and soul, both in life and death, am not my own, but belong unto my faithful Saviour Jesus Christ" (*The Heidelberg Catechist*). This answer emphasizes the belief in God, Jesus, the Holy Spirit and due respect to priests and reverends (men of God). So, it is through an identity rooted in Christ *extra nos* will the believer be able to find its true religion.

In *TRB*, the question of the uncontaminated Christian identity in the Gikuyu land is a hot debate between Kameno and Makuyu. Ngũgĩ focuses on religion during pre-colonial and colonial periods in the Gikuyu society to realistically delineate the importance of religion in the episodes which plunge Africa in perpetual religious tensions. In this passage our aim is to determine what makes the Christian religion of the Makuyu ridge merit such a particular attention. Here, this question of a Christian religious identity can be analysed through different aspects, but our work is to highlight it on the point of conversion and praxis.

In *TRB*, Livingstone, a European missionary, finds it necessary to save the Gikuyu people by bathing the inhabitants living in "darkness and blind superstition" (Ngũgĩ, 1965, p.89) with the light of the divine truth, by which they can become co-heirs with them of the Kingdom of God and their fellow men. Through Jesus, the expiatory victim, God announced this love, some centuries before, as a supreme redemption act. For Christians, the world will not be saved until the day all people on earth, without bloodshed, will obey the law of love passed by the Christ who declared: "This is my commandment, that ye love one another as I have loved you" (John, 15, 12). The love being talked about by Jesus is extended to wishing one's fellow man to be amongst the saved.

Obviously, according to Jesus's doctrines, one cannot be amongst the saved without being converted to Christianity. In *Chambers Twenty Century Dictionary*, conversion is a religious concept that "refers to change in the religious conviction, moral and spiritual fervour, from a state of unbelief, weak or lukewarm faith to an ardent religious life" (1972, p.284). Conversion, therefore, usually implies a change from one religious state to another religious state:

The change could be a permanent one, or it could last only a period of time. Conversion could take place within the same religious system to which an individual or a group already belongs or professes, or it could involve a change away from a religion to which one was previously affiliated to another one altogether.

(Eziju, 1989, p.110)

Another scholar, Humphrey Fisher, identifies a three-phase stage of "adhesion", "mixing", and then "full conversion", in the process of conversion from a non-prophetic to a prophetic religion (Ikenga-Metuh, 1986, p.xiii). Applying Fisher's conclusions to what is noticed in *TRB*, our analysis easily

clarifies the problem of the religious identity, of either those who change their religious identity from the Gikuyu religion or those who deny the Christian way of living in favour of the traditional religion or mix up the two religions.

In *TRB*, it is shown that the conversion of Joshua and some of his followers from the Gikuyu religion to Christianity is a full conversion-stage. The fact of avoiding to act like someone who is in the adhesion stage during which he stands “with one foot on either side of the fence adopting their new worship as useful supplement” (Ikenga-Metuh, 1986, p.xiii) to the old. Their religious identity deep-roots itself through their will and activities to spread the doctrine of the Bible and act as fervent religious actors. In expanding the religious doctrines of the Christian religion, Livingstone preaches Joshua and Kabonyi into being enthusiastic servitors of Jesus Christ (Ngũgĩ, 1965, p.29).

After his conversion, Joshua becomes a devoted actor across the way of Satan. He preaches and works for the expansion of the Christian faith for he is aware of the fact that the Bible has a message of faith to be taken seriously. You obey it to your good or neglect it to your risk (Ngũgĩ, 1965, p.85). He knows that Livingstone, Kabonyi and his followers adore the one and merciful God who will judge mankind on the last day (*Bible*). Joshua also believes in the message of the Bible to be practical and involving because it is not a simple book to be read and dropped in the cupboard of forgotten things; it is read merely to do what it says. One has to follow Jesus’s teachings or goes to hell (*Bible*). For all these reasons Joshua manifests a respectful attitude vis-à-vis the Bible and is at the service of God’s son, Jesus, for he knows that in addition to the reward awaiting him, his Christian identity must be fully displayed to make people know how respectful he is regarding God’s volition. He preaches vigorously about coming “to Jesus”, not to “hearken to [Satan’s] voice”, and “march with one heart to the New Jerusalem” (Ngũgĩ, 1965, p.85).

Joshua’s message testifies to his irrevocable decision to act as an apostle of Jesus. His sermon gives evidence that the basic aim of the Bible is to save people from Satan and the everlasting punishment. It is to warn people not to wander in the value of darkness where they are destined to be lost forever. The Bible is revealed to Jesus to save people and be a guidance tool for a better place in the world beyond. Thus, faithfulness to the words of God is part of the doctrines of Christianity and determines the religious identity of the Makuyu people. Faith can, then, be summed up in two points: it is the confidence on Jesus, by committing oneself deeply in the respect of the religious doctrines; it is also a commitment to action.

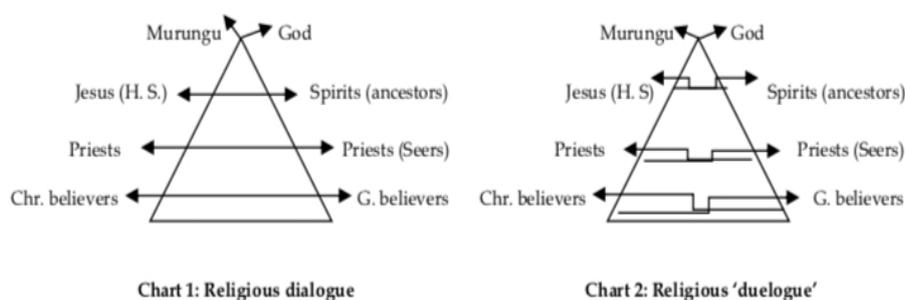
As a Christian family, Joshua’s “house had a strong Christian foundation and he wanted his daughters wax strong in faith and the ways of God. [This] proved to all [how] a Christian home should be [...]” (Ngũgĩ, 1965, p.30). The way Joshua runs his family is typical to what he considers to be the real way through which a true Christian house must be ran. His wife’s educative advice to their daughters is a great testimony of their will to build a Christian behaviour justifying their religious identity. Miriamu’s “injunction to her children was always: “obey your father’, [...] an expression of faith, of belief, of a way of life” (Ngũgĩ, 1965, p.85). This strictness in building a Christian family and feasting during Christmas

(Ngũgĩ, 1965, p.54) is part of the understanding that religious practice gives a poignant meaning to theory. It also helps foster the Makuyu ridge's religious identity and sense of belonging. Therefore, even if Christian believers go a long way to the church, these displayed efforts are not enough to guaranty the faithful religiousness of all the members of the Church and mainly Joshua's daughters (Muthoni and Nyambura).

### 3. Syncretism: a solution to the problem of religious identity

In the colonial context, as it is described in the novel, religious identity necessarily unfolds the relationship between the Gikuyu religious identity and the Christian identity. Thus, far from limiting itself to the questioning of the genuineness of each of these different elements, this passage fully focuses on the permeability of identity "boundaries" (Coulmas, 2019, p.67) by addressing the issue of religion blending for a newly adopted Christian identity.

Of the two religions, the traditional Gikuyu religion and Christianity, none seems to suit the new generation of the colonial Agikuyu land to handle the conflicting situation. Their understanding of religion, of what determines their religiousness is very complex and cannot be fully comprehended by the inhabitants of the two ridges, Kameno and Makuyu, who identify themselves with the practices which back up either the recommendation of Murungu for traditionalists or Jesus for Christians. As represented in *TRB*, the two religions' members give different responses where some religious identities are derived. Section 1 and 2, which represent the first two kind of religious identity we have underpinned in this work, are the descriptions of the respective hierarchical representations of the Gikuyu traditional religion and Christianity. But chart 1 and 2 are the descriptions of the different attempts to mix traditional religion and the revealed religion, Christianity<sup>1</sup>.



It is known that when the Christian message is proclaimed in a non-Christian context, there is always some types of synthesis between the message and the culture. In *TRB*, people give their answers to this problem in accordance with their conviction and their faithfulness to what they think to be best for themselves and their community. In this context, the two religious identities may

<sup>1</sup> In the charts above, H.S stands for Holy Spirit, Chr. Believers for Christian believers, and G. believers for Gikuyu believers.

dialogue or clash. When Livingstone first set foot in the Agikuyu land, he was convinced that dialoguing with the indigenous people was the best way which could guarantee the success of his project. He was aware of the necessity to combine the two ridges' forces and religious convictions to correct the dirty imprint of his predecessors in the Agikuyu land (Ngũgĩ, 1965, p.56). Later, Livingstone rejects the Gikuyu customs since he finds Kameno people's way of dealing with "religion" as savage and being in Tylor's words: "the most rudimentary form of religion which may get or bear that name" (Reddy, 1994, 36). Avoiding to make the same mistake by focusing his work only on the propagation of the good news, Livingstone is consistent in accepting rites and traditions while they do not conflict with divine laws (Ngũgĩ, 1965, p.56). Strategic as he is, Livingstone aims to approach the indigenous population in order to spread the doctrine of the Bible. For him, the missionary is an apostle of Jesus Christ. It is then his task as a faithful Christian to light the torch for those sitting on the shadow of death and open the gate of heaven to those who rush to their destruction. Later, he realises that it is a mistake to attend the home-grown people's religious practices.

Therefore, the "duelogue", which is presented as troublesome and counter-productive, in chart 2, can be read in the relationship between Livingstone and the defenders of the Gikuyu nation's traditions and belief systems. After having witnessed a ritual ceremony of the Gikuyu tribe, Livingstone changes his mind about how to attract people to be converted to Christianity. "Livingstone is frustrated by the prospect of failure for the larger civilizing mission" (Amoko, 2010, p.40). Thus, in his eyes, the doctrine of the Bible cannot go hand in hand with such "satanic practices." "But when he saw that this policy of letting things happen gradually had not the expected result, he began to preach against the custom vigorously" (Ngũgĩ, 1965, p.56). He becomes convinced that it is a great charity for him, the Head of the Siriana missionary church, to help the local population withdraw from their traditional religion in favour profit of the true faith of Jesus, Christianity.

Livingstone's project differs much from that of Waiyaki. Having lost his father, Chege, the seer of the tribe, and his religious identity, Waiyaki is convinced that the two religions can be reconciled under education and mutual love. But, like Samba Diallo in Kane's *Ambiguous Adventure* (1963), Waiyaki is lost in the world created by colonial circumstances. His aim is to marry an uncircumcised girl, Nyambura, Joshua's daughter. As a member of the new generation, his dream is to make people aware of the necessity to build a new Gikuyu nation where Christians and non-Christians can live in peace. But the so-called saviour cannot save himself from the claws of the society he is to keep away from strife and warfare. This messianic project (Ogude, 1999, p.68) of using love and education as remedies against estrangement fails to respond to Muthoni's wish to get Makuyu and Kameno in good terms. On this basis, Oliver Lovesey states that "Ngũgĩ's apparent message of unity and reconciliation cannot be conveyed by a weak, internally divided leader, pulled between commitments to both traditional values and Western education." (2016, pp.150-51)

For her part, Muthoni's expectation is to make the division between the Kameno people – who identify themselves with the traditional religion – and the Makuyu people – who identify themselves with Christianity – fade away. Therefore, her father and his followers come into direct conflict with the defenders of the culture and religion of Kameno, because if Christian forms are given non-Christian meanings, the result is syncretism; and, according to them, in such syncretism the essential meanings of Christianity are lost (Hiebert, 1981, p.378). Resisting that restrictive belief, Muthoni holds “the Bible in one hand and [the] traditional religion in the other” (Steyne, 1989, p.16) and decides to join her aunt for initiation. She hopes to integrate the two contradictory faiths. So, like her father and mother whom circumcision “did not prevent [...] from being Christians”, Muthoni confesses that “the white man's God does not quite satisfy” and that she needs “something more”, the traditional religion (Ngũgĩ, 1965, p.26).

But beyond these considerations, one can say that Ngũgĩ's delineation of the character of his novel is a realistic depiction of the Kenyan society during the colonial period. Muthoni's rebellion against her father can be understood at three levels: she objects to the puritanism of her father who “wanted his daughter to wax strong in faith and the ways of God” (Ngũgĩ, 1965, p.30); she calls into question what Livingstone and his missionary counterparts preach and what they do; and she wants to affirm a new religious identity which belongs to the new generation. Muthoni tries to mingle the Christian faith and the traditional religion (Reddy, 1994, p.38). Her will to make the Christian priest and the seer dialogue, the ancestors (spirits) and Jesus be reconciled, and the Christian God (Jesus) and the Gikuyu God (Murungu) united in her, is an attempt to gather the Christian identity and the Gikuyu religious identity as one. This practice is not only the very essence of the Gikuyu culture that “has enormous educational, social moral and religious implications”, but also “the tribal symbol which identifies the age-groups” and the “spirit of collectivism and national solidarity” (Kenyatta, 1938, pp.134-135) of the Gikuyu people.

This awareness makes Waiyaki realize that “Circumcision of women was not important as a physical operation. It was what it did inside a person, [because] 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” (Ngũgĩ, 1965, p.142). Being conscious of the necessity for a Gikuyu woman to be circumcised and become a full member of the tribe, Muthoni protests against the fact of limiting herself to saying prayers to profit from an eternal rest in paradise – according to the Christian teachings (Nicholls, 2010, p.38). For her, a woman in the manner of the tribe is more than being a good Christian. Thus, pleading for religious reconciliation or “Religious hybridity” (Gikandi, 2000, p.61) via circumcision, Muthoni tells Waiyaki the following reconciliatory appeal: “I am a Christian, see, a Christian in the tribe. Look. I am a woman and will grow big and healthy in the tribe? Tell Nyambura I see Jesus. And I am a woman beautiful in the tribe” (Ngũgĩ, 1965, p.53). So, for her, “genital mutilation” is a way to reaffirm the “Kikuyu identity” (Gikandi, 2018, p.83). Her sister, Nyambura, is convinced that a new religious identity must be coined out of what the Bible has stated. For

her, the religious identity of the Makuyu people, as taught by her father, does not follow the doctrines of the Bible. This is nothing but a fallacious interpretation of Joshua and his followers. For Nyambura, Joshua's religion

could never be a religion of love. Never, never. The religion of love was in the heart. The other was Joshua's own religion, which ran counter to [my] spirit and violated love. If the faith of Joshua and Livingstone came to separate, why, it was not good. If it came to stand between a father and daughter so that her death did not move him, then it was inhuman.

(Ngũgĩ, 1965, p.134)

So, the religious identity as being lived by Joshua's followers is, according to her daughter, a misconception of the Good News. Testifying to this, Nyambura refers to Matthew, 11, 28 where we read: "Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest" (Ngũgĩ, 1965, p.134). This verse corroborates the idea according to which all suffering people such as her deceased sister, Muthoni, and Waiyaki, her lover, may find their rest in the religion of love where Kamenno and Makuyu can dwell in brotherhood. By condemning her father's "own religion" (Ngũgĩ, 1965, p.134) by describing his "disorientation" (Taylor, 1989, p.27), Nyambura focuses on "the most essential element of Christianity in Christ, most decisively his human aspect" (Kruger, 2008, p.325). This Christ teaching, she identifies herself with, is that which can be found in Isaiah, 11, 6-9:

The wolf also shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid; and the calf and the young lion and the fatling together; and a little child shall lead them. And the cow and the bear shall feed; their young ones shall lie down together: and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. And the sucking child shall play on the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put his hand on the cockatrice' den. They shall not hurt nor destroy in all my holy mountain: for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the LORD, as the waters cover the sea.

(Ngũgĩ, 1965, p.134)

The true Christian religion must be based on mutual love and respect, a dialogue between all members of the Gikuyu tribe. This dialogic relationship, which fails to be materialized in *TRB* on account of mutual misunderstandings, has been given credence when Pope John Paul II calls for dialogue with African Traditional Religions.

With regard to African Traditional Religion, a serene and prudent dialogue will be able, on the one hand, to protect [Christians] from negative influences which condition the way of life of many of them and, on the other, to foster the assimilation of positive values such as belief in a Supreme Being who is Eternal, Creator, Provident and Just Judge, values which are readily harmonised with the content of the faith.

(Paul II, 1995, pp.33)

This assertion proclaimed some years later after the publication of Ngũgĩ's novel testifies that the author of *TRB* was early aware of the fact that dialogue is an important aspect that can help Christians and non-Christians respect and listen to one another in full acceptance of each other's religious identity. This perspective backs up Hans Mol's assertion that "Identity on the personal level is the stable niche that man occupies in a potentially chaotic environment which he is prepared vigorously to defend" (1976, p.65), and on the social level it is as a "stable aggregate of basic and commonly held beliefs, patterns, and values (that) maintains itself over against the potential threat of its environment and its members" (Mol, 1976, p.65). As understood, Ngũgĩ's aesthetic pleads for the protection of Christian identity via the guarantee and the guarding of "religious freedom" (Coertzen, 2008, p.345) as religion seems to be "the principal criterion of (sic) demarcating identities" (Coulmas, 2019, p.89).

### Conclusion

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's *The River Between* presents different aspects of the Kenyan history and reveals a logical continuous struggle of the Kenyan society against the mutual misunderstanding between non-Christians and Christians. It delineates amongst other themes the impact of the Church on the promotion of the value system of the settler over that of the natives and the Kenyan people's aim to adopt syncretism as a unifying agent and a way to marry the two religious' identities. Exploring the complex quest of religious identity, this work ends with the dialogic relationship encouraging mutual respect for the propagation of interreligious dialogue which is the only choice to fight against any societal disintegration caused by religious strife. This paper results in concluding that the different dialoguing attempts include "personal dialogue of the heart", "the encounter between [two] religious groups", "societal dialogues on common issues", and "theological dialogue" (Vroom, 2008, p.313). Further, Muthoni's death and Waiyaki and Nyambura's difficult project achievement can be justified by Ngũgĩ's poetic justice. Moreover, the paper highlights that Ngũgĩ's aesthetic writing questions these challenging choices, in such a context, which cannot fully be carried out without harsh consequences, for the incompatibility between Kameno and Makuyu is greater than the will of a younger generation disarmed by their loneliness in the struggle against two antagonistic forces. From this standpoint, the paper proposes that to soothe a burning situation people must rise to fight against division so as to settle any impending conflict.

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