

Individual and Community in Timothy Wangusa's *Upon This Mountain*

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Timothy Wangusa's novel *Upon This Mountain*, the first volume of a projected trilogy, is a Ugandan bildungsroman written in the post-Amin period and set during the years 1935-50.¹ The hero, Mwambu, moves through childhood and adolescence toward adulthood, and toward his eventual role as a member of a tiny, just-emerging elite in a country as yet hardly aware of its colonial, dependent status. Mwambu's development, difficult enough because of the conflicting demands of indigenous and British cultures, is further complicated when he is seduced by the wife of his cousin Kuloba, who is serving in World War II; only Kuloba's providential return three weeks later prevents the resulting pregnancy from becoming scandalous. Mwambu's ensuing guilt inhibits a normal relationship with Nambozo, the girl to whom he is attracted. Along with Kuloba's absence fighting in the white man's war and his wife's seduction of Mwambu, Nambozo's affair with the school chaplain exemplifies the colonial, and hence political, cast of some personal relationships. With indigenous and colonial value systems in unstable coexistence, opportunities for betrayal and guilt abound.

Mwambu's attempt to define himself as an adult is frustrated by the specific circumstances of Uganda ca. 1950. As he faces the final crises of the novel, he expresses his ambition in the troubled language of Macbeth: "I dare do all that may become a man; / Who dares do more is none."² Both Macbeth's and Mwambu's morally shaped definitions of manhood are stunted by powerfully unsympathetic and dominant outside forces—respectively, Lady Macbeth and British colonialism. But whereas Lady Macbeth's dominance is personal, that of colonialism is impersonal; and whereas the basic values of Scottish society can be restored following the defeat of a pair of evil leaders, the values of Mwambu's culture are irremediably altered by a force that incorporates some necessary good in its evil.

I am concerned in this paper with three related topics: first, the contrastive terms of the title, "individual" and "community"; second, the issue of mental decolonization; and third, the central theme of manhood. The topics are related because in the late colonial period the achievement of manhood depended upon finding a balance between the demands of community and of individuality, and because some degree of mental decolonization is essential in achieving such balance.

In Mwambu's ancestral culture, "individual" and "community" are complementary terms, with "community" taking precedence. In contrast, the heavily Christian

¹ Biographical and other background information derives from an interview conducted in Kampala on 3 June 1991, forthcoming in *World Literature Written in English*.

² Timothy Wangusa, *Upon This Mountain* (Oxford: Heinemann, 1989) 108; *Macbeth*, 1.7.46-47. Further references to *Upon This Mountain* will be made parenthetically in the text.

colonial culture focuses squarely on the individual. The parish priest tells schoolchildren preparing for baptism "just to love the moulder [God] completely and then to do anything" they please (39). When he baptizes Mwambu "Abraham," after a Jewish hero renowned for suppressing his individual paternal feelings and submitting to a single higher authority, we see that Wangusa chooses names carefully. Mwambu's birth name identifies him with a legendary hero famed for killing a monster—an individual notable for his role in the community. There are "many Mwambus . . . in this world" (10-11), but only one Abraham. In Mwambu's world, the natural impulse toward individualism is strictly regulated by social mechanisms based on the multiple authority of the community. Mwambu's refusal of one such mechanism, the circumcision rite, challenges communal norms in favor of a specifically Western individualism.

In baptizing Mwambu "Abraham," Rev. Matamali imposes on him an identity unrecognizable to his parents: the identity of a colonial scholarship boy who will conduct his intellectual life in a stilted second language while speaking his mother tongue during the visits home that are just that—visits. Mwambu is a common type of hero of postcolonial fiction, which is itself an amalgam of several cultures. Mwambu's people "have lived through an experience which was half colonial, and yet truly traditional," an experience out of which East African writers "have produced a literature which . . . not only deeply concerns the individual, but also draws out from the communal heritage."³ In these circumstances, the issue of mental colonization is unavoidable. Any African child in the 1930s and 1940s who went to a missionary school was ipso facto caught up in a dilemma: to succeed, he had to become a Christian, abjuring the religious and ritual heart of his community—the very community that placed its hopes in him.⁴

Incapable of offering his son a model, Mwambu's father, Masaaba, remains based in his traditional culture. Even in that culture, he hasn't climbed beyond a certain point on Mount Masaaba—he's named for the legendary hero of the mountain—and he can't offer Mwambu any directions on the uncharted path to the figurative mountain, Makerere College. In climbing toward Makerere, Mwambu displeases those who sit on both of the stools between which he falls—traditional African culture and Western Christian culture—and ends up ostracized by both elements.

The process of decolonizing the mind, if it is achievable at all, takes a long time. In 1967, only five years after Ugandan independence, Okot p'Bitek declared that East African secondary and university education "reflects cultural slavery."⁵ Despite the overthrow of the Eurocentric literature curriculum at both Makerere and the University of Nairobi in the late sixties, "Western aesthetic values and critical norms and categories" continued to be applied "wholesale . . . to African

³ David Rubadiri, "The Development of Writing in East Africa," in *Perspectives on African Literature: Selections from the Proceedings of the Conference on African Literature Held at the University of Ife 1968*, ed. Christopher Heywood (London: Heinemann, 1968) 146.

⁴ Cf. Ngugi wa Thiong'o, *Matigari*, trans. Wangui wa Goro (Oxford: Heinemann, 1989), for an acid comment on the meaning of "individualism" in modern society—"the freedom of everyone to follow his own whims without worrying about the others" (48-49).

⁵ Okot p'Bitek, "We Must Preserve Our Culture," *Makererean* 6.51 (5 Aug. 1967): 3.

verbal arts.⁶ To correct such inconsistencies, Ngugi has suggested, writers can be "surgeons of the heart and souls of a community."⁷ How can such cultural surgeons—new authority figures, of course—be trained?⁸

Difficult but not impossible, this task requires the writer to select from the ancestral and colonial pasts those elements that can be integrated in postcolonial social and intellectual culture. In *Upon This Mountain* Wangusa aspires to perform Ngugi-style postcolonial surgery, cutting out the effects of colonial disease to restore communal health. His intention appears plainly in the opening chapters, which depict the milieu that initially shapes the child. Weaning, the first step toward manhood, is seen as a communal activity. The novel opens with Mwambu napping beside his mother, "before them . . . the exalted, *everlasting* mountain" and the "*perennial* Manafa River"; the child perceives his "tendermost mother *as before*" and clammers into her "*eversure* lap" to suckle. Against these emblems of timeless tradition comes "the rebuff" of weaning; change is a part of the very tradition that the child has perceived as seamless and unchanging. But the kind of change experienced by the adolescent Mwambu, change induced by colonialism, represents an unprecedented rupture.

Establishing African culture as the point of departure, Wangusa names his central character after the hero of a folktale that implies an ideal balance of moral, physical, and intellectual strength—a balance that has been affected by colonialism. The villagers now highlight physical strength while permitting the colonizer to claim moral and intellectual strength as his preserve. It is the regional chief, the colonial surrogate, who makes judicial decisions, his allies the missionaries who lay claim to spiritual as well as to intellectual strength. Purely local justice is reduced to beatings (29).

Pushed by his father toward a Western education that will make him "a big man" (13), Mwambu at first perceives little apparent conflict between European and indigenous values. His primary education, conducted in "the language of his people" (19), permits both sets of values to coexist, deferring the thorny questions of syncretism, assimilation, or outright resistance. The apparently benign Christianity of the primary school appeals to a spiritual need that the local culture does not satisfy. On this level, the missionaries unite Christianity imaginatively with African tradition (7, 16-17) in a syncretism that befits an author who has said he was "intrigued" by the Norwegian theologian Ole Christian Hallesby's assertion "that he became a Christian so that he might be a man."⁹ Insisting on the individual conscience as "the life-preserving and life-protecting function of the soul,"

⁶ Pio Zirimu, "Questioning the Makerere Modes of Criticism: One Man's Irritations," *Dhana* 3.2 (1973): 50, 48.

⁷ Ngugi wa Thiong'o, *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language and Culture in African Literature* (London: James Currey 1986) ix.

⁸ See Austin Bukkenya's *The People's Bachelor* (Nairobi: East African Publishing House, 1972) 29—a novel widely if erroneously supposed to be set at Makerere (Bukkenya, interview, 23 June 1991, Nairobi). In it, Bukkenya (Wangusa's contemporary) highlights the difficulty encountered by what he calls the "half-caste" generation in their attempt to hold up their experiences to fresh and curative scrutiny in the European language of their education.

⁹ Ole Christian Hallesby, *Why I Am a Christian*, trans. Clarence J. Carlsen (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1930) 59. Hallesby defines "becom[ing] a man" in terms of an individual's private awareness (59-60).

Hallesby describes the "steady downpour of reproaches from my conscience"¹⁰ that followed his own decision to "become a man." Drenched by a similar downpour, the adolescent Mwambu loses his moorings in his own community, in which one becomes a man by "undergo[ing] the ordeal of the knife."¹¹

Mwambu's secondary schooling, conducted in English, reflects the colonial "policy of ruthless westernization accomplished through the medium of education."¹² Elgosec, Mwambu's secondary school, exemplifies two contradictory aspects of Western education. On the one hand, the students' main task is to commit enormous quantities of material to memory, a method calculated to suppress independent thought. On the other hand, a minority of teachers invite students to interrogate their texts, a method with the potential to call into question everything that supports rote memorization and hence to challenge the colonial state. One can see why colonial schools emphasized memorization rather than interrogation.

At Elgosec, the ordeal of passage to adulthood and Makerere consists of memorizing Keats, Shakespeare, and the rest of standard-issue British culture. Willingly undergoing this mental torture, Mwambu comes perilously close to abandoning his tradition in favor of a European-style individualism that will be further reinforced at Makerere.¹³ If the New African Man is to "reach the top of the mountain" (11), becoming a true national leader, he will need to unlearn much of what the well-meaning expatriates teach at Elgosec and Makerere.

During a climbing expedition with his schoolmates, the aspiring Mwambu succeeds in reaching the top of Mt. Masaaba (Mt. Elgon);¹⁴ but instead of the expected exaltation, he experiences deflation caused by his inability to speak his heart to Nambozo, his girlfriend. As he falls asleep just short of the top (78), he hazily conflates "Masaaba's Mountain" with two Old Testament mountains—that upon which Abraham prepared to sacrifice Isaac; and Mt. Sinai, where God spoke out of the burning bush to Moses. Thus Mwambu associates himself with two biblical figures: his namesake, Abraham, whose covenant with God is marked by ritual circumcision (Gen. 17.11); and Moses, who leads his people out of slavery. By having Mwambu recall the passage in Exodus (3.12) that gives the novel its title, Wangusa prepares him to be the hero of the unwritten remainder of the trilogy, in which he may lead his people out of colonial slavery. Mwambu's confusion—he has himself circumcised medically but not ritually—puts into doubt his future creation of an innovative manhood enabling replication of Moses' heroism in a new land.

¹⁰ Hallesby 63,71.

¹¹ Wangusa, interview, 3 June 1991.

¹² Hugh Dinwiddy, "The Use of English in East Africa: Colonial Perspectives and African Comment" (mimeographed paper, 1979). Dinwiddy is quoting the unnamed first Director of Education in Uganda, writing in 1926.

¹³ For a discussion of "the drive for individualism" at Makerere in the 1950s, see Chris L. Wanjala, "The Growth of a Literary Tradition in East Africa," *Journal of Eastern African Research & Development* 11 (1981): 122-23; Pio Zirimu, "Questioning the Makerere Modes of Criticism," *passim*; and Rubadiri, "The Development of Writing in East Africa" 147.

¹⁴ Wangusa's use of "Elgonton" as a place name and "Elgosec" as the name of the secondary school makes it clear that he intends Mt. Elgon, on the Uganda / Kenya border.

For Mwambu rejects the means through which his birth culture expresses the passage to manhood: complex ceremonies of circumcision consisting of a month-long series of tests of strength that culminate in a severe test of physical courage. In his Christian context, he finds his passage to manhood marked by moral, not physical, pain; the setting is not his father's courtyard but the alien world of Western education. Wangusa signals the difference between these worlds early in the book through the Parents' Day speech of the headmaster of Namwombe Primary School: the "true manhood of the future," says the headmaster, is "the manhood of the brain" (22). Mwambu's father, Masaaba, has received an indigenous education that, given Masaaba's hot temper, is not entirely adequate for his own culture, let alone for that culture as affected by colonialism. His temper ignites a quarrel that reverberates throughout the novel and that indirectly contributes to Mwambu's recoil from ritual circumcision; thus the manly Masaaba unwittingly helps to promote his son's departure from traditional masculinity. Although Masaaba expects Mwambu to "read all the books and finish them at Makerere" (23), vaguely surmising the need for colonial tools to defeat colonial ends, he cannot possibly forecast the societal wrenching that will result from Mwambu's admission to Namwombe Primary School and to Christianity.

In the indigenous culture words are associated with women (28), in the imported culture with power and religion. Christian baptism, a ceremony of words, means that "in Christ you're now a man" (41). While this muscular Christianity employs a masculine vocabulary suitable to the indigenous association of manliness with physicality, at the same time the missionaries discourage physical demonstrations of manliness. When the baptist tells Mwambu that as "Christ's faithful soldier" he will "*manfully* fight under his banner," Mwambu thinks of "*brandishing flaming spear in the wilderness . . . Sinking spear into Monster*" as if the metaphysical battle took place in one of the tales of physical courage that his mother tells him (40-41). Christian syncretism, absorbing some version of indigenous values, eventually triumphs not only for Mwambu but for many in his community.

With such conflicting messages, Mwambu's avoidance of ritual circumcision is not surprising. Returning to his village after his secret hospital circumcision, Mwambu is met by a group of men determined to circumcise him by force. On seeing the evidence of his hospital operation, his enraged but not very bright antagonist bellows: "Circumcise him again!" (115). While the others laugh and "the atmosphere clear[s] a little," Mwambu thinks back to his mother teasing him during weaning—"You a man!"—and he recognizes that in local terms he'll never be more than "*half a man*" (116).

Wangusa leaves his hero, much damaged, on the verge of adulthood if not a clearly defined manhood. Mwambu's insistence on acting out the morality that Rev. Graves professes but does not practice leads him to expose the chaplain's adultery with Nambozo. In the penultimate scene of the novel, he writes an accusatory letter to the headmaster, posts a copy on the school notice board, and silently leaves for home. The expatriate staff close ranks behind Graves in an act of mass hypocrisy, passing off Mwambu's accusation as the fruits of his "demonic imagination" (110). The headmaster sends Graves on home leave "to renew his mind and spirit" and makes Mwambu's graduation depend on his recanting (110).

Struggling to be faithful to a Christian moral spirit that his teachers betray, Mwambu discovers that "manhood is pain" (61) in a fashion quite different from what is meant in the indigenous culture.

At the end of the novel Mwambu walks over the hills to home "at a steady, *adult* pace, periodically shifting his bag from his masculine [right] arm to his feminine [left] one" (111; emphasis added)—a natural enough gesture suggesting both his capacity for balance and its antithesis, his failure to achieve manhood within his ancestral context. He has failed despite his fantasy of himself as "Mwambu the younger," a modern-day hero poised to "unmask this monster Graves, disguised in a white human shape"; he further imagines himself ready to "drive all the white-masked monsters from the land . . . applauded by all his people for ridding the land of monsters" and rewarded by the "virgin princess," with whom he will live "happy ever thereafter" (103). But his vision is a mere fairy tale, not a founding myth.

The legendary Mwambu and his heroic deed are associated in the novel with two related tales. In one, suggestive of cultural integration, the mythical Masaaba wins a bride from the other side of the mountain by submitting to the circumcision rite of her people, later bringing home both his bride and her people's ceremony (79). In the other tale, the mythical Masaaba's younger brother, Kundu, goes on an immense journey westward across Africa to become a pan-African "father of a prodigious people" (79). If Mwambu is to become a modern hero, Wangusa implies, he will have to forge the New African Man out of Abraham and Moses, out of Kundu, the mythical Masaaba, and the mythical Mwambu. It is by no means clear that he will succeed in this task. As the novel ends, we wonder with the night watchman at Elgosec: is he "Mwambu the long-dead ancestral warrior or a mere carrier of his name" (100)? If he becomes Mwambu *redivivus*, he will be able to balance individual and community to create an integrative African culture of the late twentieth century.¹⁵

¹⁵ This paper was presented in a slightly different version at the annual meeting of the African Studies Association in Seattle, November 1992. For advice on an earlier draft, I am indebted to members of the Westchester Women Writers group, in particular to Eileen Allman and Jayana Clerk.