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Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o’s Short Stories and the Irreversibility of Postcolonial Tension

**Abstract:** **​​**The characters and communities in Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o’s “The Mubenzi Tribesman”, “The Village Priest”, and “A Meeting in the Dark” from *Secret Lives and Other Stories* significantly represent the tension between pre-colonial Kenyan values and Western, colonialist values that constitutes postcolonial reality. He portrays the gap that arises with colonialism’s imposition of new culture, religion, education, language, racist ideals, values, and societal structures (both internally, to the individual, and community-wide). This project will investigate this gap, while specifically bringing attention to the irreversibility of the tension. Literary explorations of relevant postcolonial issues have provided useful accounts of these issues’ effects, but have contained an absence in the elaboration on irreversibility. Some scholars and ideas have encouraged a decolonial attitude that looks towards the past and tries to recreate an old, pre-colonial culture. Frantz Fanon, in *The Wretched of the Earth*, criticizes this mindset and argues that there is no pure, pre-colonial culture to work towards because of the transformative nature of colonialism. While we can and should keep our history in mind, we cannot abandon our present realities in which post-independence oppression and effects of colonialism are harming previously colonized nations. The aim of this project is to discuss the surrounding ideas of pre-colonial and colonial tension, to explain how Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o’s short stories depict the destruction and deep alteration of traditional values and cultural systems, and to ultimately articulate how applying Fanon’s critical framework to these concepts illuminates their irreversibility.

Established firmly in the Kenyan and African postcolonial literature scene are Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o’s works, and specifically relevant to this project, his collection of short stories titled *Secret Lives and Other Stories.* These stories explore a range of individual and communal issues where the colonialist influence and pre-colonial traditions collide. With themes of religion, elitism, corruption, education, racism, and more, they provide clear insight into the colonial or postcolonial identity in which European and Kenyan values clash, override each other, and tangle together.

This project will hone in on “The Mubenzi Tribesman”, the final story in the collection, in which a man in post-colonial Kenya navigates returning from prison after an unfortunate fall from his elite, Western-influenced standing. Waruhiu, the main character, started out with a university education, to the deep admiration and pride of his fellow village members, and came back from college with a wife, Ruth. Ruth is portrayed as an imitation of white woman, a city girl, and the kind of black woman who has been raised with Western values and exemplifies those values. She epitomizes what other black women want to be more like, the closest to white they can be while still being forcefully positioned under the “Black” category. Waruhiu and Ruth build a life together, trying to assimilate back into the village after experiencing Western education. Ruth’s upbringing and lifestyle are difficult to reconcile with the lifestyle and customs of the village, so the couple moves to a more elite neighborhood that embodies the values the colonizers left behind. Hardship accompanies this transition and Waruhiu feels compelled to leave his community behind. His desperation to fulfill his wife’s expectation of luxury leads him to steal money from his company and be sent to prison. So, while he is consumed with the shame of having let down his village in multiple ways, his one hope is to be back in Ruth’s arms when released. Unfortunately, he finds his wife has moved onto another man and rejecting Waruhiu, leaves him alone in the bitter struggle of being a failed elite with a conflicting postcolonial identity. This story is crucial to understanding the intense pushes to be more Western and to follow the path the colonizers set out for Africans that colonized people reckon with, and the shame, betrayal, pride, pressure, and hardship that accompany these experiences. The timing and setting of this story is significant as it places itself directly in the framework of postcolonial theory this project will utilize. I will also be drawing from “A Meeting in the Dark” and “The Village Priest” to highlight important examples of colonialism’s tension, particularly in terms of religion.

In order to situate this in context, Kenya became a British colony in 1920 and finally gained political independence in 1963. During colonization, European settlers forcefully occupied the region, taking land from the indigenous people and disrupting their community lifestyle, access to resources, and cultural development, while harmfully imposing Western religion (Christianity), education, language, and values onto them. They intentionally portrayed Africans as uncivilized, savage, and less than human, stripping the native people of their history and dignity. Within this is the important concept of the inferiority complex that was produced, which will be discussed in greater detail. During the 1950s and early 60s, the Mau Mau group conducted violent uprisings against colonial rule which led to a declared emergency in the country. After independence, Kenyan politicians and elites have continued and maintained the unjust economic hierarchies and power imbalances. Corruption remains an ongoing problem as the country attempts to navigate a postcolonial political atmosphere. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o is an important Kenyan figure and prominent intellectual, academic, and writer in this postcolonial discussion. For decades, he has used literature to express his views on colonialism and decolonization, sometimes in controversial ways. An important instance of this was his intentional decision to stop writing in English, the colonizer’s language, and to publish first in Kikuyu, his tribal language. He famously even had to undergo exile because of his criticisms of the Kenyan government.

As exemplified in colonial history, present-day nations, and Ngũgĩ’s pieces, I plan to investigate the gap between Western values and traditional pre-colonial ones. The culture in Kenya and other colonized countries was portrayed as the manifestation of evil, and as subhuman and inherently inferior to that of the Europeans. The customs of the native people, including their spirituality, forms of education, and communal lifestyles were deemed underdeveloped and uncivilized. The colonizers depicted themselves as saviors bringing hopeless savages to the light, penetrating the communities with Western education, values, language, racist ideology, religion, and economic and political structures. Consequentially, colonization became a transformational process in which the colonizer’s values were adopted and embedded in the ways the communities operated (and continue to operate). Individuals who have lived in this conflicting space of pre-colonial traditions and new Western values therefore face a tension between these two parts of their identity: the self that their ancestors and old culture intended for them, and the new self that the colonizers forced them to embody. Beyond the individual self, communities as a whole experience rivalry between the contrasting ideas, and the whole postcolonial nation attempts to reconcile their past with their present. Racist and colonialist ideas have intentionally elicited shame and self-hatred in the colonized towards their authentic culture, and so a conflict ensues as they leave behind their pre-colonial values and strive to reproduce the white man’s culture. An extension must be articulated here, however, because I especially aim to emphasize the irreversibility of this tension or conflict. Colonization enabled so many interconnected changes to take place, sending a violent ripple of physical, political, economic, and psychological transformation to the occupied regions. The colonizer’s language and thought are built into the structures of post-colonial nations, and the disruption of development set the country on a completely alternate path. As a result, this gap between values cannot be undone. The contrasts between pre-colonial spirituality and Western Christianity, or the completely different economic systems, for example, constructed this tension. As a postcolonial community occupies the space between the values, it must be realized that there is no way to turn backwards and reverse the tension that already defines postcolonial life.

It is imperative at this point to bring in research about Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o’s own decolonial or postcolonial theory that shows up in his works. David Cook and Michael Okenimkpe provide a detailed discussion of Ngũgĩ’s literature, ideas, career, criticism, and societal role in their book *Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o: An Exploration of His Writings*. Following from my discussion of colonial disruption, Cook and Okenimkpe explain Ngũgĩ’s view that “imperialism puts into disarray the entire fabric of the lives of its victims: in particular their culture, making them ashamed of their names, history, systems of belief, languages, lore, art, dance, song, sculpture, even the colour of their skin” (215). The attitude of the victims towards themselves is completely changed as “colonial indoctrination [penetrates] the entire sense and psyche of the African” (Cook and Okenimkpe 17). This aggressively targets the colonized’s ability to positively embrace their full humanity and express their culture. Tying in the concepts of self-hatred and inferiority, Cook and Okenimkpe articulate Ngũgĩ’s idea that “while the colour of beauty became white, the Western metropolitan language became the only language for describing that beauty” (228). There arose a clear distinction between the superior, worthier humans, and the beings who barely deserve the title of humanity. In the imposing of these ideas and the colonized people’s navigation of it, Ngũgĩ raises the point that even colonized intellectuals “have to clothe their knowledge in alien languages” (Cook and Okenimkpe 228-229). How can we reclaim our injured culture and communicate with our past if we are using the foreign language of the masters? Ngũgĩ developed his role in theory while in exile and in his discussion of gaining complete independence, where black is instead the color of beauty, he labels the third and final stage of full independence “psychological independence” (Cook and Okenimkpe 231, 16). In doing so, he leans towards the ideas of Frantz Fanon, a crucial figure in this project.

Indeed, Ngũgĩ’s points solidify the understanding of postcolonial consequences and tension that I am trying to foster, but some of his goals and hopes turn slightly away from my emphasis on the tension’s irreversibility. Cook and Okenimkpe articulate the pull to join in Ngũgĩ’s optimistic view that the colonized can unite and together form a cultural response to the new world (231). He does believe that the effects of colonialism will continue to be felt for a long time, but that Africans' trauma as severely oppressed and subjugated has equipped them with the ability to fight against injustice, discrimination, and oppression (Cook and Okenimkpe 229). This is true, and encourages post-colonial communities to believe in their own resilience. However, Cook and Okenimkpe go on to claim that “Ngũgĩ is fighting for a complete change from the old structures” and “a positive reversal in African affairs” that will then build a society where harmful hierarches and discrimination do not prevail (232, 230). While he is right that this kind of system is one we should strive towards and that learning from our past experiences is an important part of that, idealizing and attempting a reversal is an unsuccessful way to overcome established colonialist ways.

To highlight specific colonial issues that elicit a desire for reversal, but actually confirm the irreversibility of the tension, my discussion draws from papers that outline the impact of the gap between Western and pre-colonial values. Kizito Chinedu Nweke calls attention to religion in “Multiple Religious Belonging (MRB): Addressing the Tension between African Spiritualities and Christianity”, where he argues about the discrepancies in simultaneously practicing African spirituality and Christianity. In terms of their cultural beliefs, religions, and intellect, all areas of Africa were depicted as the same by the West, deeming the continent unworthy of distinguishing its very diverse range of communities and practices, the effects of which are still felt today. So, while emphasizing that African belief systems are unique and varying, unlike the West’s portrayal of them, Nweke breaks down an understanding of these spiritualities (78). He does so in terms of how a sense of spirituality underlies religious and cultural expression, how unifying and community-centered it is, and how religious meaningfulness and the concept of “God” was not newly introduced by the colonizers (Nweke 79-80). The communal bonding and expressive aspects of Africans’ practice especially oppose the West’s approach to religion, furthering a gap between them. However, Nweke depicts how they are tangled together in the “distinctive expressions of Christian religiosity by African people [...] in the styles of worship and church teachings” (79-80). This gap and entanglement of religion shows up constantly in Ngũgĩ’s short stories, such as in “The Village Priest” where a rivalry between the traditional rain-maker and Joshua, the new Black Christian priest (note the Biblical name), persists. Additionally, “A Meeting in the Dark” tells the story of John, an admired young man with a Western education who faces the shame of impregnating a woman, against the backdrop of his intimidating converted father’s stark Christianity and the fear of disappointing his village. Like with John’s ultimately tragic fear of sinning in his father’s eyes (according to colonialist definitions of sin), Nweke discusses Christianity’s unwillingness to accommodate other belief systems within it and its consequential suppression of traditional African culture (84). He also points out that many Africans have had to choose a side in the conflict between Christianity and their traditional belief systems (85). The choice to convert to Christianity lengthens the distance between themselves and where they came from—Joshua’s devotion to the European God and submission to the missionary’s rules exemplifies this. The colonizers’ determination to impose and convert the colonized without any room for adjustment makes it “difficult for the indigenous spiritualities and cultures to flow through Christianity and come out still African” (Nweke 85). This importantly articulates the tension and the extinguishing of pre-colonial belief systems, and my goal is to extend this argument to capture how colonized people do not have the option to reverse and go back to the purely African spiritualities.

Another post-colonial issue featured in Ngũgĩ’s stories is African governments’ mimicry of colonialist systems as an unsuccessful attempt to install the West’s version of democracy, which is explicitly discussed in Andrew Nyongesa’s “Colonialism and Mimicry: A Literary Lens into Governance in Africa”. Using African literature, Nyongesa investigates how African politicians are expected to strive towards what is considered a good, right Western structure, but instead they subject their own people to the West’s *harmful* systems that oppressed the Africans in the first place (12). Although not the main focus of his paper, he articulates Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o’s significant claim that “independence merely replaced white imperialists with Black ones” performing the same oppression and colonial tactics as the white colonizers (Nyongesa 12). Both Ngũgĩ and Frantz Fanon resonate with the idea that the West disrupted and changed Africa’s civilization and evolution “through deliberate cultural uprooting and displacement from ancestral land” (Nyongesa 12). The tension deepens as traditional values of kindness and concern for others are replaced by colonialist values of individual benefit and material wealth accumulation (Nyongesa 12-13). An irreversible gap has formed between the community-oriented governance of pre-colonial cultures and the capitalist, hierarchal governance of the West, and to fill this void, many colonized countries occupy a state of corruption and/or dictatorship (both of which, Kenya has fallen victim to before). Several of Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o’s stories, including “The Mubenzi Tribesman” depict the elitism that followed colonization in native Kenyan people, as well as the corrupt leadership of those trying to hang onto privileges and values they obtained from the colonizers. Nyongesa’s account of political mimicry usefully calls attention to the present issues previously colonized countries are facing and how much the gap between pre-colonial and colonialist values is growing. His ideas, however, necessitate a continued articulation that we cannot then return to the traditional ways of governing communities, and instead have to tackle the forms of oppression we are now victims of. Under the poor governance of postcolonial leaders, we cannot reverse the gap between precolonial leadership and Western systems, but we can recognize it as mimicry and fight against the colonial systems we have battled before.

An overview of written work in a postcolonial context would be incomplete without calling attention to Frantz Fanon. His accounts of the psychological effects of racist colonialism go hand in hand with Ngũgĩ’s ideas and literature, and successfully explain why and how the gapor tension in values persists. Fanon’s book *Black Skin, White Masks* offers a detailed investigation of the inferiority complex prevalent in Black colonized people, and how this completely affects their perception of their existence. The gap between pre-colonial and Western values is elongated as colonized people strive towards the latter more, and the reason they do so lies in the “internalization” of inferiority he articulates (Fanon). The pre-colonial identity and culture of the colonized African is treated as the manifestation of primitive evil, and the colonizers introduce a new “ego ideal”—the white, European, educated, Christian man (Fanon). Fanon’s nuanced approach allows him to claim that some humans’ freedom is inherently limited—the white man, the colonist, has created a system where Black men are subjugated and treated as a threatening, savage disease, with not just physical, cultural, and economic devastation resulting from this, but also self-alienation. The depiction of colonized people as naturally lesser becomes internalized as an inherent characteristic, and both sides are convinced that the inferiority of one race to another is internal and a natural difference that can never be changed. Fanon emphasizes the “self-contempt” and shame that arises as a result of this, where Black people are constantly reminded of their inevitable failure to reach this highest order of humanity, by their physical appearance, and so they rely on white culture, education, language, and values to bring them closer to earning respected human existence. This pull towards white values shows up strongly in Ngũgĩ’s depiction of the admiration many villagers had, for example, towards characters who possessed a Western education and aligned more with the colonizer’s priorities. Tension forms too when the Black man tries to prove his intelligence to the white man who aggressively dismisses it, attempting to reclaim his pre-colonial dignity while struggling to leave the position of inferiority he’s been forced into (Fanon). Frantz Fanon’s exploration of the negative self-perception that colonized individuals suffer from emphasizes how deeply embedded colonialist structures and values are—there is a trauma within this experience that cannot be undone. His theories align well with my project and Ngũgĩ’s views, and are exemplified throughout the short stories, but it is specifically his ideas in *The Wretched of the Earth* that will provide the critical lens for the argument.

While these discussions thoughtfully examine colonialism and what issues we should focus on when reclaiming our history and identity, a problem arises when the irreversibility of the central tension is not explicitly emphasized. The conversations leave space for the possibility of returning to pre-colonial culture, beliefs, and ways of life, and sometimes encourage it. They provide solid examples of the deeply rooted change and tension that exists, but do not go on to reinforce that this is why it is irreversible. There is a yearning hope to completely undo the colonizers’ harm, to resolve the tension by reversing history, which understandably arises in an individual who is locked in a colonized, subjugated position. However, we cannot actually work backwards to a society that is in the past—no matter how ideal that would be or how determined we are to decolonize. The only path possible is forward, and while this can involve harnessing our pre-colonial values or honoring our roots instead of feeling ashamed of them, we cannot reverse the process and place ourselves back into those untouched communities. In thinking critically about colonization, we have to accept that it happened to us, absolutely wrongfully, but that a resulting transformation occurred which we cannot now prevent. The control we do have in our hands is to prevent further damage, to combat the colonial ties still dictating how we live and the corruption and harmful politics of our current leaders. Because the colonialists denied the colonized our right to our history and our right to tell our own stories, it is true that we must not forget our ancestors and those who were harmed, those who fought for our independence. Still, while honoring those who were violated in the process of colonization, we can collectively look forward and define ourselves with the complex layers that inevitably make up our present identity.

Ngũgĩ’s stories serve as perfect examples of the tension the project is investigating here, the conflicting identities that came out of colonialism, on an individual scale and a community-wide scale. By analyzing his protagonists and the plotlines they follow within their specific contexts, we can seal our understanding of the value gap and viably explain its irreversibility. While Ngũgĩ himself may have contrasting ideas about this claim being drawn from his texts, his realistic scenarios and characters represent a sobering reality in post-colonial Kenya. The research on his pieces slightly misses this irreversibility that the stories embody, and research on the related postcolonial issues often assume a yearning for the pre-colonial culture. To address these problems and bring them together against the particular backdrop of Ngũgĩ’s pieces, the project calls on Frantz Fanon’s framework in “On National Culture” from *The Wretched of the Earth*, and collectively constructs my main argument: Through their internal and external turmoil, Ngũgĩ’s protagonists’ storylines articulate the gap between pre-colonial values and the new imposed ways of Western life, and the irreversibility of this conflict. The gray area they occupy and the communities’ identity shifts or struggles demonstrate Frantz Fanon’s emphasis on the irretrievable past by depicting the powerful pull towards the colonizer’s so-called superior religion, forms of leadership, and culture. This distance between pre-colonial values and Western values grows as the latter remains firmly planted in the way the nation operates, as does the tension when postcolonial individuals face the two contrasting sides of their new identity. The strength of this tension and its complicated evident consequences in Ngũgĩ’s depiction of postcolonial life solidify the idea that colonized communities cannot reverse the disruptive process of colonization. Instead, as Fanon’s ideas conclude, they can only liberate themselves in the present and move forward together.

In “On National Culture”, Frantz Fanon outlines the journey of “colonized intellectuals” who “place themselves in the context of history” instead of in present-day involvement (147). They do so because they are passionately trying to define and assert a national culture to prevent the loss of “their people’s oldest, inner essence” which is disappearing in the face of new colonial culture and identity (Fanon 148). To avoid the painful present in which their community is characterized by its oppression, self-contempt, and colonialism, Fanon claims, the intellectuals search deeper for an un-tainted “magnificent and shining era that redeems us” (148). According to him, these individuals undergo three stages: initial attempts to assimilate the colonizer’s culture and leave behind pre-colonial culture, then the rejection of Western ideals and a longing to return to a pure, uncolonized traditional culture, and finally the stage of “combat literature” in which they try to be revolutionary and resistant, becoming “the spokesperson of a new reality in action” (Fanon 157-158). His analysis of the second stage examines the issue my argument is emphasizing—yearning for an impossible, long-gone fantasy by idolizing the past. Fanon explains that the nation comes before the culture and the validation of this national existence is actually accomplished through first prioritizing liberating the community in its current reality (159). The colonized creatives or intellectuals who desire an establish of their nation’s truth and authentic culture must “recognize that national truth is first and foremost the national reality” (Fanon 161). The oppression and colonial impacts that are in effect today in their nations must be the focus of liberation, if a collective, action-involved move towards new, freer identities is to be made.

In other sections of *The Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon details his prescription of successful decolonization, warning that European hypocritical ideals used to deceive and subjugate will try to seep into the colonized’s liberation movements (12). Pal Ahluwalia touches on this in his investigation of Fanon’s ideas in “Decolonisation and national liberation” from *Politics and Post-Colonial Theory: African Inflections*, incorporating the interpretations of other thinkers. He summarizes Fanon’s insistence that the colonized people must completely dismantle colonial structures and “[forge] a new identity” (Ahluwalia 40). In support of Fanon’s aforementioned thoughts, Ahluwalia articulates that “it does not follow that there is the possibility of a simple return to some essentialised pre-colonial culture” and cites Neil Lazarus’s additional claim that “pre-colonial culture [...] is destroyed by colonialism” (41). This point aligns with the argument that colonialism threw a wrench into the colonized communities’ development and set them on a severely altering path. Ahluwalia reinforces Fanon’s analyses by stating that “there is no *pure* pre-colonial culture which survives; rather, colonialism transforms the culture” (41). His book solidifies my comprehension of Fanon’s theory and serves my application of this framework to Ngũgĩ’s characters and contexts. Their struggles exemplify the destruction of pre-colonial culture and paint a vivid understanding of how colonialism is a tangled, transformative process that leaves communities with no way back (but the possibility of a hopeful way *forward*).

“The Mubenzi Tribesman” involves several moments where Fanon’s ideas of the inferiority complex and white ego ideal are instantiated, as well as the distance between post-colonial individuals and their pre-colonial culture. Wahuriu is greatly revered by the rest of his village specifically because of his Western education, and when he is being sent off to college, the villagers claim that “[h]e will bring the whiteman’s wisdom”, as if European ideologies are the divine saviors that will undoubtedly benefit them (Thiong’o 139). Yes, the white man is leaving and Kenyans are now occupying positions of privilege, but the white man’s ideas and values remain, shaping the lives of the native people. The period when Waruhiu comes back from college is particularly interesting, because he has married a “true Negress” which elicits envy in other men and admiration from his community—descriptions like “it was [Ruth] who popularized straightened hair” and “[s]he looks like a whitewoman, people whispered in admiration” show the kind of Western-aligned woman his new wife was (Thiong’o 140). Waruhiu feels proud to have acquired such a lover, and his happiness is clearly defined by the public response to his proximity to whiteness. He explores an interesting point that it would have been a wrongful betrayal if he had married an actual white woman from a Western country, but that marrying a Black woman with European values and education was good, enviable, and met his “intellectual and social requirements” (Thiong’o 140). Fanon articulates how the colonized person strives towards this colonialist ego ideal and fits themself into whiter expectations, continuously comparing their success at embodying whiteness to that of their fellow colonized people. The envy and admiration rampant in the side characters’ responses to Waruhiu clarify this idea, illustrating the collective goal that post-colonial communities were trying to move towards. In this case, Ruth embodies the ego ideal of maintaining Kenyanness through where she comes from and the color of her skin, while still emulating whiteness in every other way possible.

In addition to appearance and mannerisms, colonialism transferred Western capitalist priorities of acquiring material wealth and financially succeeding independently. While the village in the story values the opportunity to have Western education, they also retain their traditional customs such as communal support and interaction, and living in mud huts with no electricity or modern entertainment. Fanon’s claim that colonization destroyed and transformed pre-colonial values is therefore depicted in how Waruhiu gradually abandons his traditional customs for his new, Western life. So, still within this period after college, him and Ruth try to settle into the village life despite her being used to the material comforts brought by colonizers who urbanized parts of the country, as well as new non-material values like individuality, instead of the mutual support of and living along side your larger community. Here we see the replacement of older values and the tension that arises when there is an attempt to reconcile the two, particularly when the couple decides to move out because of Ruth’s unhappiness with the village life. They move to a wealthier, elite neighborhood occupied by “the rich families that had early embraced Christianity and exploited the commercial possibilities of the new world” (Thiong’o 140). With this came expectations and standards of material possessions and a luxurious life—so Waruhiu bought a Mercedes car, for example. He was now part of "the Wabenzi tribesmen who had inherited power from their British forefathers" (Thiong’o 138). He loved his European-influenced wife but also loved his village community and had promised to never betray them, so he unsuccessfully attempted to maintain what he knew to be their customs while still trying to keep up his life with someone who wasn't used to that. This internal conflict and the growing expenses led him to “gradually [discontinue] support for his countless relatives” (Thiong’o 141). There is an evident tension between Waruhiu’s desperation to assimilate the Western lifestyle and his obligations to the pre-colonial traditions. He ultimately placed gaining the respect of and keeping up with Kenyan elites above maintaining his community’s culture, thus elongating the gap between the opposing ways of life. The harshness of elitism in Kenya is a prominent topic in Ngũgĩ’s stories and it exemplifies not only the pursuit of whiteness by colonized individuals, but also the harmful embedment of Western societal or economic systems. Just like Andrew Nyongesa's aforementioned examination of postcolonial mimicry shows (12), European ideals have seeped into and firmly settled into postcolonial life, as Fanon warned they would (12). In this story, such a situation turns Waruhiu into a criminal who ultimately has no one left and no status. The elites and Ruth specifically represent the complete erosion of purely pre-colonial values because they are raised within a Western context with their comforts and preferences directly following the colonizers’ values. Waruhiu’s physical, financial, and societal abandonment of his community and his refusal to ever go back to his village after his shameful crime depict how the “pure” colonial culture has been transformed, replaced, and does not exist as a destination post-colonial individuals can just return to (Fanon 148). The gap is not one that can simply be closed.

“The Mubenzi Tribesman” touches slightly on the theme of post-colonial religious tension, but I will also briefly turn to the two other short stories to sufficiently discuss it. When Waruhiu is going off to college, the village priest says, “Take this Bible. It’s your spear and shield” (Thiong’o 139). The existence of a village priest already implies the invasion of colonial culture into this community, but the combination of a Christian symbol with what can be interpreted as a symbol of pre-colonial, traditional culture (weaponry) is particularly intriguing. In “A Meeting in the Dark”, suppression of traditional customs is shown by John’s Christian father who “had stopped his mother from telling him stories when he became a man of God”—oral storytelling was a key element of the indigenous culture. As Cook and Okenimkpe describe in their summary of the story, “tensions [were] created within John by uncompromising converts to the new religion” (158), referring to his father's rigid obsession with the Western definition of sin. The shame that Western religion imposed on John’s father ultimately leads to John killing the woman he impregnated, in a state of dreadful anxiety, desperation, and fear of disappointing his community. Even the obviously negative consequences aside, the colonizer’s values completely altered a household and increased the pain in multiple people’s lives as a result. Western religion had penetrated the father’s psyche and beliefs so firmly that he felt shame about his own life, blamed his wife, and elicited fear in his child (because John too, had been conceived out of wedlock). Fanon emphasizes how the white ideals disrupt the minds of the colonized and trickle on into continuous oppression and suppression. Here, John’s father’s is psychologically affected by Western religion, which then translates into his attempts to ensure his son is a good Christian, which deepens the tension.

Similarly, the rivalry in “The Village Priest” mimics the common conflict that followed the colonizers’ introduction of Christianity, and their oppressive methods of encouraging conversion. Pre-colonial structures weakened and colonial ones took over as “the country had already seen the rain-maker, the medicine-man, and magic workers being challenged by Christianity” (Thiong’o 23). This overwhelming change and lack of peaceful reconciliation between the two is further exemplified with the rain-maker’s opposition to the conversion and desperation to keep the old traditions and belief system: “You have brought division into this land in your service to the white strangers” (Thiong’o 25). Directly addressing the tension, he says these words to the new Black priest, Joshua, who conversely is trying to establish his authority and prove his legitimacy of his connection to God to a community who has been used to their spiritual leaders. It is important to note here not just the tension in the village, but Joshua’s internal tension when he worries that “[t]he new God belonged to the whiteman and could therefore listen to none but a man with a white skin” (Thiong’o 24). His insecurity displays how part of the colonialist conversion’s foundation is reinforcing the inferiority complex. By claiming that indigenous spirituality is uncivilized and wrong, and then claiming that Christianity is the right, powerful path that will save everyone (including the “unworthy” colonized people), colonialism draws people into the inferiority complex that leaves them hanging onto the white man’s ideals. Within Ngũgĩ’s fictional setting, we see the real effects of colonization’s cultural transformation and the detrimental internalization of inferiority, both of which Fanon emphasizes. The rain-maker in this story yearns to maintain a disappearing culture while Joshua grasps at Western validation, eliminating the possibility of a full return to a pure, past culture. Instead, the only positive way forward would be, drawing from Fanon, to forge a new identity within these complex layers that liberates people from the white man’s imposition and even then, it is difficult to promise that colonialist hues wouldn’t linger.

Calling for a reversal of the complicated, bloody history of colonialism is an optimistic hope that would definitely bring about a more ideal, egalitarian world in which racist and imperialist ideologies wouldn’t taint our ancestors’ cultures. But, as Frantz Fanon’s framework has outlined, this is not possible and is not an effective way to approach decolonization. Even if colonization had not occurred, there is no way to undo the historical process of cultural change, and no way to work backwards towards values that have since been destroyed and transformed. Fanon claims that we are doing a disservice to our people if our focus is not on their present reality and current oppression. The nature of this reality’s postcolonial tension is represented in depth in Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o’s short story collection, *Secret Lives and Other Stories*. His characters experience the conflict between their old traditions and the new values colonialists have physically and psychologically forced into their lives. By applying Frantz Fanon to this literature, we can pinpoint the tense issues—including Western culture, education, religion, leadership, and racist ego ideals—their ongoing effects, and the growth of communities further away from a pre-colonial past. While written discussions of these issues accurately depict the conflicts and consequences, they leave a gap when they don’t discuss how irreversible these tensions and resulting alienations are, with regards to pre-colonial values and the colonizer’s values. In navigating postcolonial identity, we must turn our eyes, pens, and fists not towards a path that cannot be retraced, but forward to a future that takes history into account without reaching directly for it.

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