

The River Between



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF NGŪGĨ WA THIONG'O

Ngũgĩ Wa Thiong'o was born in British-controlled Kenya under the Christian name James Ngugi. His family are members of the Gikuyu (or Agikuyu; or Kikuyu) people, Kenya's largest ethnic tribe. Ngũgĩ's early life was dominated by ethnic Kenya's struggle against British colonialism. His family was integral to the Mau Mau freedom movement, which struggled to release Kenya from British control. As a result, British soldiers tortured his mother and murdered his deaf brother. A writer all his life, Ngũgĩ played a primary role in the development of English-language African literature. At 24 years old, he premiered a play that he authored for the African Writers Conference. At 26, he published his debut novel, *Weep Not Child*, which was the first English-language novel produced by an East African author. One year later, he published *The River Between*, in 1965. During this period, Ngũgĩ finished his Bachelor of Arts at Makerere University in Uganda and moved to England to earn his master's degree at Leeds. However, his studies were waylaid as he put all his energy into writing and publishing his seminal work, *A Grain of Wheat*, in 1967. At this time, Ngũgĩ's work and life became decidedly more political. He renounced the Christian religion as well as his Christian name, James, in favor of the Gikuyu name Wa Thiong'o. He left his graduate studies in England and returned to Kenya, where he worked as a university professor in Nairobi. Due to his political writing and Marxist views, the independent Kenyan government imprisoned him in 1977. After releasing him from prison, the government exiled Ngũgĩ and his family from Kenya. He spent the next decades writing novels and essays and teaching at various elite universities in Europe and America. Ngũgĩ briefly revisited East Africa in 2004, but he never moved back to his homeland.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The Gikuyu tribe dominated much of Kenya, maintaining an agrarian lifestyle and protecting their borders from all who threatened them (most notably Arabic slave traders), until the arrival of the British colonialists in the late 19th century. Around 1888, the first Gikuyu came into contact with British colonialists, who initially tried to conquer them through military might, causing a series of harsh conflicts in the lowlands. In many areas, Christian missionaries were sent first to evangelize to the Gikuyu and gain the trust of the local people through their peaceful, even generous ways. However, missionaries were always followed by soldiers and settlers, who together pushed the Gikuyu people off their fertile ancestral

lands or else took ownership, forcing the Gikuyu to work and pay tribute to the white settlers. Faced with numerous military uprisings, the British enlisted Masai warriors, the Gikuyu's tribal enemies, to help them slaughter Gikuyu resisters and their families. The Gikuyu's efforts to fight the British through military force were ultimately unsuccessful, and by 1920 they switched to political forms of resistance. The British ruled Kenya and the Gikuyu people until 1963, when they won their political freedom and became a new republic under the leadership of the Gikuyu politician Jomo Kenyatta.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

The River Between is Ngũgĩ's second major novel, building on the Gikuyu people's loss of their ancestral lands to the British that he explored in his debut novel, [Weep Not, Child](#). *The River Between*'s exploration of the tension between Christianity and Gikuyu tribal customs continues in Ngũgĩ's subsequent and most famous work, [A Grain of Wheat](#), which describes the final days of Kenya's fight for independence through the Christian narrative structure of Jesus Christ and Judas Iscariot. His later novel, *Devil on the Cross*, explores the corrupting influence of international culture and money on the Gikuyu way of life, expounding on *The River Between*'s thematic tension between tradition and progress. As one of the first English-language African authors, Ngũgĩ Wa Thiong'o played a primary role in making African literature and African voices available to Western audiences. His work and role in this development correlates closely with Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe, whose novel [Things Fall Apart](#) details the arrival of the British in Nigeria in the 1800s and the massive disruption that inflicted on the Nigerians' tribal lifestyle. Achebe's novel is widely considered to be one of the greatest pieces of African literature ever written.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *The River Between*
- **When Written:** 1963
- **Where Written:** Kampala, Uganda
- **When Published:** 1965
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Fictional Novel
- **Setting:** Kenya during the early decades of British colonialism
- **Climax:** Waiyaki chooses to remain true to Nyambura at the cost of being denounced by the tribe.
- **Antagonist:** Kabonyi

- **Point of View:** Third Person

EXTRA CREDIT

Late Publication. Although *The River Between* is Ngũgĩ's second published novel, he reportedly wrote it first, before he wrote [Weep Not, Child](#).



PLOT SUMMARY

In rural Kenya, two Gikuyu villages called **Makuyu** and **Kameno** sit on two ridges, divided by the **Honia river**. The villages are rivals and often antagonistic toward each other, but they are united by their dependence on the same river for water and agriculture.

Chege, an elder of Kameno, believes that his son, Waiyaki, is the prophesied savior who will rescue their people from the invading white colonialists. Although Waiyaki is still a boy, all can see from a young age that he is a natural leader with an unusual sense of power in his eyes. Chege believes that Waiyaki must understand the white people if he is to defeat them, so he sends his son to study at the school in the nearby town, Siriana, under a white missionary named Reverend Livingstone. Waiyaki's friends Kamau and Kinuthia accompany him, and they study there for several years.

Joshua, a Gikuyu Christian pastor from Makuyu, has two daughters, Nyambura and Muthoni. A devout Christian, Joshua strictly forbids his daughters to be **circumcised**, as is the custom of Gikuyu women, believing that it symbolizes the tribe's evil ways. However, although she loves Christianity, Muthoni decides that she wants to be circumcised so that she can be a "real woman" in the tradition of their Gikuyu ancestors. Although Joshua threatens to disown her, Muthoni defies him and gets circumcised (on the same day that Waiyaki is circumcised and thus becomes a man). Muthoni feels complete and no longer in conflict with her identity, but her circumcision wound grows infected. Waiyaki takes her to the mission hospital in Siriana, but she dies while she is there.

Muthoni's death deepens the divisions between the two villages. Makuyu, where Joshua lives, becomes devoted to the white people's Christianity, even as Kabonyi—Kamau's father and Joshua's disciple—abandons the faith and becomes a fierce opponent of it. Kameno becomes committed to protecting the tribe's traditions and purity from the white colonists' corruption. The mission school reacts by banning all children whose parents practice Gikuyu customs, which includes Kinuthia, Kamau, and Waiyaki. The villagers hear news that white settlers across the country are exiling Gikuyu people off of their lands or forcing them to work as serfs. They fear that the white people will disrupt their agrarian way of life.

Banned from the mission school, the three young men build their own school in Kameno to spread education to the Gikuyu

in the ridges. Although Kabonyi believes they must fight the encroaching white people with weapons, Waiyaki believes that only education can help them fight the white people and their new governments. He wants to unite Makuyu and Kameno under the cause of educating their children in order to fight together for their political freedom. The villagers and even people from surrounding ridges herald Waiyaki as their new leader and savior, naming him the Teacher.

However, Kabonyi envies Waiyaki's popularity and believes that he should be the tribe's savior instead. He starts sowing dissent against Waiyaki and scheming to destroy him. As part of this plan, Kabonyi forms the Kiama, a governing council meant to protect the tribe from Joshua and his white people's religion. Although Waiyaki wants to simply focus on education, the tribe elects him to the Kiama and forces him to take an oath that he will protect the tribe's purity and customs.

Although Kinuthia tries to warn Waiyaki that Kabonyi and Kamau conspire against him, Waiyaki is too absorbed in his own goals to pay any heed. However, he fails to call for unity between the Christians and the Kiama when he has the chance, because he is afraid that such a call would risk his popularity and influence among the villagers.

Waiyaki and Nyambura meet and fall in love with each other, even though such a relationship is forbidden both by Joshua, since Waiyaki works with the Kiama (though he is also a Christian, he is not devout) and by the Kiama, since Nyambura is uncircumcised and thus not a true woman of the tribe. Waiyaki asks Nyambura to marry him, and though she loves him, she refuses because she fears her father's wrath. However, Kamau and Kabonyi learn of Waiyaki's proposal and use it to turn the people against Waiyaki, since he has broken the Kiama's oath of purity. In the end, Waiyaki tries to call for unity and education so that together their people can resist the white colonialists and vie for their political freedom. However, Kabonyi challenges Waiyaki, claims that he himself is the tribe's savior, and reveals Waiyaki's love for Nyambura. The tribe demands that Waiyaki denounce his love for Nyambura for the sake of the oath. When he refuses, they turn on him and give him and Nyambura over to the Kiama for judgment and punishment.

The villagers are ultimately ashamed that they so readily sacrificed their own savior. The hills return to silence and to sleep, unable to rise against the white colonialists who invade, take lands, and demand taxes.



CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Waiyaki – The protagonist of the story, Waiyaki is a young Gikuyu man from **Kameno**. Waiyaki's father, Chege, believes that Waiyaki—a natural-born leader—is the prophesied savior

who will rescue the Gikuyu from the white colonialists. Because of this belief, Chege sends Waiyaki to Siriana to study with the white missionaries and learn the white people's knowledge to use it against them, though he cautions him not to become corrupted by their culture and vices. But after Siriana bans all Gikuyu children with "pagan" parents, Waiyaki and his friends Kinuthia and Kamau build a school in Kameno, determined to bring education to the Gikuyu children. This sparks a widespread education movement, and Waiyaki quickly becomes the most influential leader in the ridges despite being so young. The tribe calls him "Teacher" and thinks of him as their savior—the one who will lead them to victory against the white colonialists. Waiyaki sees that, more than education, the villages need to reconcile their differences. The people of **Makuyu** and Kameno (Christians and non-Christians, respectively) must unite to fight for their political freedom. However, Waiyaki misses his chance to call for unity because he is afraid of risking his popularity. At the same time, his rival, Kabonyi, tricks Waiyaki into taking an oath of purity to never break tribal custom. When Waiyaki falls in love with Nyambura, the daughter of the anti-tribal Christian preacher named Joshua, Kabonyi accuses Waiyaki of trying to marry an **uncircumcised** Christian woman and thus betraying the tribe. The tribe demands that Waiyaki renounce his love for Nyambura. When he will not, they take him away for judgment. The education movement in the ridges fail since the people have destroyed their savior, and the Gikuyu people fall prey to the white colonizers.

Nyambura – Nyambura is Joshua's older daughter and Waiyaki's love interest. Although she is older, Nyambura lacks her younger sister Muthoni's courage or resolve. She disagrees with Muthoni's plan to defy Joshua and be **circumcised** but maintains her love for her sister. After Muthoni's death, Nyambura is overcome by loneliness and longs for a partner. She remembers Waiyaki's kindness to Muthoni in her final days and realizes that she wants to be with Waiyaki, though she struggles to call it love. Nyambura comes to believe that Christ alone will not be enough for her—she must have Waiyaki, her "black messiah," or she will never feel complete. However, when Waiyaki asks Nyambura to marry him, she refuses because she is afraid of her father, who would never approve, and she does not want to disobey him. Over time, Nyambura realizes that though she loves Christianity, she hates Joshua's militant practice of it. She ultimately chooses to defy her father in order to be with Waiyaki, causing Joshua to disown her just as he did to Muthoni (he didn't approve of her choice to undergo the tribal custom of female circumcision). However, because Nyambura is uncircumcised and a Christian, the tribe views Waiyaki's love for her as a betrayal of his oath of purity. In the final meeting, Kamau and his followers capture Nyambura and present her before the crowd, challenging Waiyaki to denounce his love for her before all the tribe. When Waiyaki cannot, the crowd sees it as a great betrayal and turns on them both,

leaving them to the Kiama, who will decide their fate.

Kabonyi – Kabonyi is an elder from **Makuyu** and Kamau's father. Kabonyi begins the story as a devout Christian and one of Joshua's followers. However, he leaves the religion after Joshua disowns Muthoni for undergoing the tribal custom of **circumcision** and then callously upholds this decision even after she dies of an infection. Disturbed by Joshua's behavior, Kabonyi wants to protect the tribe from the corrupting influence of the white colonialists, but he is jealous of Waiyaki's influence and the way the villagers love him—Kabonyi believes that *he* should have their love instead. Furthermore, Kabonyi is the only person other than Chege who knows the old prophecies of a savior. He suspects that Waiyaki may be that savior, which infuriates him. Whereas Waiyaki believes education will save their tribe, Kabonyi believes they must fight with violence and preserve their traditional way of life. Kabonyi grows to hate Waiyaki so much that he wants to kill Waiyaki and works to undermine his influence and authority amongst the people. He creates the Kiama to defend tribal customs and oppose Christianity, and he forces all members, including Waiyaki, to take an oath of purity never to break tribal custom. He then accuses Waiyaki of breaking custom by wanting to marry Nyambura, an uncircumcised Christian. After slandering Waiyaki, Kabonyi claims that he is the tribe's true savior. However, when Kabonyi turns the people against Waiyaki and defeats him, the ridges fall into silence, implying that Kabonyi cannot actually lead the people or defend them from the white colonialists.

Muthoni – Muthoni is Joshua's younger daughter and Nyambura's younger sister. Although Muthoni is a Christian and cherishes the Christian God, she feels as if she cannot be a real woman unless she is **circumcised** like the traditional women of their tribe. Within the tribe, circumcision for both men and women represents one's entrance into adulthood as a Gikuyu and their commitment to tribal tradition and identity. Joshua, however, views circumcision as a sinful "pagan" rite, proof of the tribe's backward ways, and strictly forbids his daughters to be circumcised. Muthoni defies Joshua and leaves his household, moving in with her aunt in **Kameno** so that she can undergo this rite of passage and be circumcised with the other young women. After the ceremony, though she is in great pain, Muthoni tells Nyambura that she finally feels whole, having integrated her Christian faith with her Gikuyu customs. However, Muthoni's circumcision wound does not heal properly and becomes infected. She grows ill, and though Waiyaki takes her to the mission hospital in Siriana, she dies of her infection. Before she dies, though, she tells Waiyaki that she is happy—that she sees Jesus and feels like a real woman, signifying that she has merged her Christian identity and tribal identity and thus proving that unity *can* exist between Christians and Gikuyu tribalists. Muthoni's death leaves a great impression on everyone in **Makuyu** and Kameno. Waiyaki and

Nyambura are stunned by her bravery to rebel against Joshua, while Joshua and his followers grow more militaristic about opposing tribal rituals since Muthoni died during one. Muthoni's death is also what spurs Kabonyi to leave the church (because he blames Joshua for the situation) and begin his crusade to protect the tribe's purity.

Joshua – Joshua is Muthoni and Nyambura's father and a Gikuyu Christian pastor who lives in **Makuyu**. Joshua accepts everything that the white missionaries say and believes that they speak with the authority of God. As such, he rejects all elements of tribal culture and considers them evil pagan rites and the work of Satan. As the foremost Christian leader amongst the Gikuyu, Joshua militaristically governs his family and demands they abide by his Christian rules. He views female **circumcision** as the ultimate unforgivable sin and forbids his daughters from undergoing the procedure, even though it is the most important Gikuyu cultural tradition. Joshua hates that his wife, Miriamu, was circumcised before they married, and he often beats her for it in the present even though she can do nothing to change it. When Muthoni rebels and decides to be circumcised, Joshua disowns her as his daughter and acts as if she does not exist—he's even unmoved when he hears of her death. When Nyambura decides to be with Waiyaki, Joshua tries to forbid it, since Waiyaki was involved with the Kiama and is thus his mortal enemy, an agent of Satan. When Nyambura defies Joshua anyways, he disowns her as well. His stubborn opposition to Nyambura's happiness suggests that he is more preoccupied with wielding his authority over his family than their actual wellbeing. Although Waiyaki tries to warn Joshua that Kabonyi's followers are considering attacking Joshua's church, Joshua is blinded by his hatred for Waiyaki and will not listen.

Chege – Chege is Waiyaki's father and an elder from **Kameno**. Chege is old and wise, a seer, and one of the few people who knows of the ancient prophecy that a savior will rise from the hills and save their people. Because their family is part of an ancient line and because of his son's natural ability to lead, Chege believes that Waiyaki will be that savior. He sends his son to study with the missionaries in Siriana so that he may learn their secrets and use that knowledge to free the Gikuyu people from the colonists. Chege is dedicated to the tribe but recognizes that fighting in the old ways will no longer work—if the Gikuyu are to survive, they must learn the white people's methods and tools, contrasting with Kabonyi's belief that they must fight the white people with weapons and force their own people to follow only Gikuyu customs. Though he occasionally wonders if his son will fail, Chege dies of old age shortly after Waiyaki is **circumcised**, believing that now that his son is a man, he will be ready to step into his role as savior.

Kamau – Kamau is Kabonyi's son as well as Waiyaki's friend and eventual rival. Kamau studies under the white missionaries in Siriana with Waiyaki and Kinuthia for several years. After

they are banned from the Siriana mission for having "pagan" parents, Kamau helps Waiyaki build and operate their new school for Gikuyu children in Kameno. However, Kamau grows jealous of Waiyaki's growing influence amongst the villagers, and he's even more jealous that Nyambura loves Waiyaki, since Kamau wants to marry Nyambura himself. When Kabonyi begins to hate Waiyaki because Waiyaki is more popular and influential than himself, Kamau follows suit and helps his father conspire against him. When Kabonyi tries to undermine Waiyaki in front of the tribe by claiming that his education corrupts the Gikuyu children with white culture, the people reject Kabonyi, and he is humiliated. Seeing his father's shame, Kamau blames Waiyaki for his father's suffering, even though Waiyaki never has any ill will toward Kabonyi. Kamau spies Waiyaki with Nyambura and leaving Joshua's church, and he gives this information to Kabonyi, who ultimately uses it to accuse Waiyaki of being a traitor and destroy his reputation, thus defeating him.

Kinuthia – Kinuthia is Waiyaki's devoted friend. When they are young, Kinuthia studies alongside Waiyaki and Kamau at the Siriana mission. After they are barred from the mission school, Kinuthia helps Waiyaki build and run his school in **Kameno**. Although Kinuthia wants to take action against the white people, he is extremely loyal to Waiyaki and supports him in his vision to bring education to the ridges. When Kabonyi and Kamau begin conspiring against Waiyaki, Kinuthia tries to warn Waiyaki of the danger. However, Waiyaki ultimately does not take Kinuthia's warning seriously enough. Kinuthia fails to protect Waiyaki and Nyambura from the tribe's zealotry or Kabonyi's scheme, and when Waiyaki is deposed, Kinuthia thinks he should flee for his life.

Miriamu – Miriamu is Joshua's wife and Nyambura and Muthoni's mother. Although Miriamu respects Joshua, she primarily fears him. He often beats her because she is **circumcised**, even though she was circumcised long before they were married, as all women in the tribe are. When Muthoni dies of an infection following her own circumcision, Miriamu grieves for her lost daughter and appreciates Waiyaki's care for her, contrasting with Joshua's callous dismissal of his daughter's death. However, although she respects Waiyaki, Miriamu begs Nyambura not to marry him, since defying the will of the tribe will cause yet more pain and trouble in their family from the other villager's in addition to Joshua's outrage.

Mugo – Mugo is a Gikuyu seer of generations past who prophesied about the arrival of the white people and the threat that they posed to the tribe. He also prophesied of a Gikuyu savior who would come down from the hills and save the tribe from the white people. Chege and Waiyaki are Mugo's direct descendants, which Chege believes must mean that Waiyaki is the prophesied savior.

Reverend Livingstone – Livingstone is a white Christian

missionary and the only named white character in the story. Livingstone believes he is “enlightened” compared to the earlier missionaries, because he does not try to force the Gikuyu people to abandon their tribal rituals—that is, other than female **circumcision**. Circumcision represents the core of Gikuyu identity, which Livingstone sees as opposed to Christian identity. Thus, Livingstone embodies the subtle methods of the colonialists throughout the story, as they quietly move in, steal land, and impose their own government on the Gikuyu tribespeople.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Waiyaki’s Mother – Waiyaki’s mother is Chege’s third (at least) wife. Although she appears very little in the story, she outlives Chege and warns Waiyaki that if he marries Nyambura, the tribe will see it as a great betrayal, and they will destroy him.

TERMS

Gikuyu – The Gikuyu, also known as the Kikuyu or the Agikuyu, are the largest ethnic tribe in Kenya. In the story, both **Makuyu** and **Kameno** are Gikuyu villages, but the Gikuyu tribe also exists all across the country. Gikuyu also refers to a person—the Gikuyu tribe believe that Gikuyu was the first man, the father of the Gikuyu tribe.

Kiama – The Kiama is a governing council that **Kabonyi** forms in **Kameno** in order to enforce the tribe’s demand for ideological purity.

Mumbi – The Gikuyu believe Mumbi was the first woman and the mother of the Gikuyu tribe.

Murungu – Murungu is the Gikuyu’s God-figure and creator.

slowly and quietly to accomplish their aims. In *The River Between*, Ngũgĩ Wa Thiong’o depicts a subtle, less overt style of colonialism and shows how it nonetheless oppresses the Kenyan people and threatens their way of life.

Some villagers distrust the newly arrived white people, suggesting that white colonialism poses a threat to the tribe’s independence and lifestyle. Tribal prophecy warns of the arrival of “people with clothes like butterflies,” alluding to the white people and their colorful clothing, who will threaten their way of life. This suggests that the white colonialists represent an existential, even apocalyptic threat within the tribe’s mythology. Chege, a village elder from Kameno, knows the prophecy and tries to warn the other villagers of the dangers of white colonization. His son, Waiyaki, and two of Waiyaki’s friends, Kamau and Kinuthia, discuss what the white people’s arrival means. Although Waiyaki initially does not fear them, Kamau sees them as “a plague in our midst,” suggesting that the white people will become a grave problem if left unchecked. Additionally, Kinuthia believes “the white man should [...] go back to wherever he came from and leave us to till our land in peace.” Kinuthia’s wish to be left alone to work the land suggests that he fears that the white colonists will threaten their tribal agricultural existence. This indicates that the white people are not simply unwelcome foreigners but an existential threat to the tribe and their culture.

Despite the great threat of colonialism, white people and their machinations remain unseen for the majority of the story, leading many of the villagers to ignore their presence, suggesting that these colonialists adopt a more subtle method than their militant predecessors. White people never appear in Makuyu or Kameno but run all of their operations from the nearby town of Siriana, which sits below the ridges where Makuyu and Kameno are located. Because the white people operate out of sight, Makuyu and Kameno and the other villages in the hills around them feel a false sense of security and choose to ignore Chege’s warnings and calls to fight the white people from the moment they set foot in Gikuyu territory. The only named white person in the story, a missionary named Livingstone who works in Siriana, reflects on this more subtle approach to colonization. He regards himself as “one of those missionaries who thought themselves enlightened,” because he allows the Kenyan people to observe most of their tribal customs rather than forcing them to abandon them and causing “tribal warfare and civil strife” as previous missionaries had. Although Livingstone’s goal is still to grow his influence among the tribes, he recognizes that a subtle approach will create less resistance and will to fight. Livingstone’s subtlety mirrors the way that the entire colonization process unfolds in this part of Kenya. Kamau recognizes that the missionaries arrived first and gained the tribal people’s trust, easing the path of the governors and soldiers who would come later. He says, “The men of God came



THEMES

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COLONIALISM

The River Between tells the story of Waiyaki, a young Gikuyu man (one of the largest indigenous tribes in Kenya) who struggles to unite two neighboring villages against white colonialists. However, although colonization presents the largest threat to the Gikuyu and fuels the story’s tension, the white settlers themselves are nearly invisible in the novel. They are often spoken of but rarely seen—in part because the two villages, **Makuyu** and **Kameno**, are isolated in the hills, but also because the colonialists work

peacefully. They were given a place. Now see what has happened. They have invited their brothers to come and take all the land. Our country is invaded.” Kamau’s description of the white colonialists’ plot confirms that the white people take an insidious approach to colonization, infiltrating the country peacefully and quietly, establishing their dominion before the tribespeople truly understand the existential threat they represent.

Ultimately, the white colonialists still oppress the tribes and threaten their way of life, demonstrating that even this subtle form of colonialism works toward an insidious end. Although the white colonialists do not immediately assert their authority, they gradually take steps to consolidate power and develop their control over the native people. In the beginning of the story, there are only rumors that the white people will build a government outpost near Makuyu; by the end of the story, the station has been built. From the outpost, the white governors force both villages to pay taxes to the hill station, even though the station does not provide any service to those villagers whatsoever. On surrounding ridges and in Siriana, white settlers take control of tribal lands and either force the Gikuyu out or keep them there to work the land and pay tribute, like serfs, to their new masters. In every instance, the Gikuyu lose power while the white colonialists grow their own power and dominion over the people and the land. Despite their subtle, less militaristic approach, the colonialists still take land and destroy the native people’s independence and freedom, demonstrating that their goals are just as insidious as those colonialists who conquer through military might.



CHRISTIANITY, TRIBAL CUSTOMS, AND IDENTITY

The River Between tells of two rival villages that struggle to unite rather than remain opposed. Chief among **Makuyu** and **Kameno**’s disagreements are how to respond to the white missionaries’ Christianity. The village of Kameno rejects Christianity and insists on “tribal purity,” fiercely defending traditional customs and identity. Meanwhile, the village of Makuyu embraces Christianity and spurns tribal tradition. However, two of the novel’s characters—a young man named Waiyaki and a young woman named Muthoni—oppose such notions of “purity” and struggle to combine Christianity and their tribal customs. Waiyaki and Muthoni’s struggle to reconcile Christianity with their tribal identity speaks to how difficult it can be for a person to honor different aspects of their cultural and religious identity simultaneously. However, the very fact that Waiyaki and Muthoni put in the effort to do just that suggests that the two forces can—and should—integrate and co-exist, rather than one eradicating the other.

Waiyaki and Muthoni find themselves caught between the competing influence of Christianity and the weight of their

ancestral customs, demonstrating the identity conflict that arises from the intersection of two differing ideological views. Many in Waiyaki’s village, Kameno, regard Christianity as the evil ideology of the white colonialists. They desire that he reject it outright in order to fully embrace their tribal traditions. At the same time, Muthoni’s father, Joshua, a Gikuyu Christian pastor and influential figure in the neighboring village of Makuyu, demands that she completely forsake her tribal identity and submit herself entirely to the white people’s religion. For both Waiyaki and Muthoni, their respective communities expect them to adhere to only one ideology and form their identity from that, rejecting the other entirely. However, although Waiyaki cherishes his tribal identity, he also finds himself drawn to Christianity and finds Christ’s suffering and crucifixion to be incredibly moving. At the same time, although Muthoni likes Christianity’s teachings of love and humility, she feels that the Christian identity is not enough for her on its own. She wants to be **circumcised** according to tribal custom like all the other Gikuyu women, so that she can feel like a “real woman” in the way of her ancestors—even though Joshua views such tribal practice as an unforgivable sin against God. Because of their discordant views, both Waiyaki and Muthoni feel a deep conflict of identity, sensing that neither Christianity nor tribal identity should be utterly rejected. Their struggle to balance the two forces demonstrates the difficulty for any person as they try to choose between competing ideologies or influences.

Although strict adherents to Christianity and devotees to tribal custom each believe the other is evil, both groups oppress others and commit their own evils, indicating that neither ideology is morally superior to the other. As a Christian pastor, Joshua believes he is doing God’s work and representing the moral life, yet he treats his family cruelly. He often beats his wife, Miriamu, because she is circumcised, which infuriates him, even though she was circumcised before they married, and she obviously can’t do anything to change it. Additionally, although Muthoni wants to be circumcised and participate in the cultural customs of their people, Joshua completely forbids her from doing so, oppressing her by limiting her personal agency. Likewise, Waiyaki’s rival, Kamau, and his father, Kabonyi, convince the people in Kameno that they must utterly oppose all elements of white culture and maintain the “purity” of the tribe. Although the tribespeople appreciate that Waiyaki works to give their children Western-style education, Kamau and Kabonyi use their own influence to convince the people that Waiyaki’s use of white people’s education threatens their tribal identity. Furthermore, when Waiyaki wants to marry Muthoni’s sister, Nyambura, the others forbid it, since Nyambura is Joshua’s daughter and is uncircumcised, which the tribe sees as a rejection of tribal customs. Waiyaki and Muthoni both feel oppressed by pressure to align solely with one ideological identity or the other, which notably comes from both groups. This suggests that neither European Christianity or African

tribal identity is morally superior to the other, but can both be oppressive and restrictive in their own ways.

Both Muthoni and Waiyaki choose to integrate Christianity into their tribal customs, suggesting that reconciling the two influences is better than abandoning one for the sake of the other. Muthoni decides to defy Joshua and become circumcised in order to participate in the ancestral customs of their people even though she maintains her Christian faith. Although her father disowns her, Muthoni says that, after being circumcised, she feels “complete,” like a “real woman, knowing all the ways of the hills and ridges.” That is, Muthoni embraces both her identity as a Christian and her identity as a tribal Gikuyu woman—“marrying the rituals of the tribe with Christ”—suggesting that integration of the two is better than committing oneself wholly to one ideology and rejecting the other. Similarly, Waiyaki holds fast to his Christian faith even while participating in the tribal rituals and working to defend the Gikuyu from the white colonialists. He reflects that Christianity is “not essentially bad” but must be rooted in tribal customs like circumcision. Where Joshua adheres so much to Christianity that he rejects all tribal customs, Waiyaki believes that such strictness leaves the Gikuyu people unrooted and disconnected from their past. Rather, Christianity’s “eternal [...] truth had to be reconciled to the traditions of the people.” Both Muthoni and Waiyaki make peace with the competing influences in their lives by integrating them. This ultimately suggests that, although Christianity may seem antithetical to one’s ancestral traditions, it does not need be. Rather, the religion should be adapted and integrated into one’s traditional beliefs, where it will benefit the people while still preserving that cultural identity.

Although Waiyaki and Muthoni both reconcile the competing forces in their lives, this decision ultimately leads to rejection by their peers who demand ideological “purity,” suggesting that integration may come at a heavy cost.



TRADITION VS. PROGRESS

The Gikuyu tribespeople in the ridges of Kenya live a traditional agrarian lifestyle and are isolated from the rest of the world. However, when white colonialists begin to spread across Kenya and even into the isolated hill-country, Waiyaki recognizes that the Gikuyu must be adapt themselves to this new threat or be overrun by it. Through Waiyaki’s mission to transform the villages, Ngũgĩ Wa Thiong’o suggests that the world is changing around the Gikuyu people whether they like it or not, and they must adapt themselves to the modern world by pursuing education, even if they long for the old ways.

The Gikuyu tribespeople lead a simple agricultural lifestyle—one that they would prefer to maintain. **Makuyu**, **Kameno**, and the other Gikuyu villages in the hills live a traditional agrarian lifestyle, cultivating crops and raising

livestock. Even as white settlers spread across the lowlands, the Gikuyu in the ridges believe that the world will never change for them—they will be protected by their seclusion: “The ridges were isolated. The people there led a life of their own, undisturbed by what happened outside or beyond.” Their remote location lends a sense of security that they will never have to change to adapt themselves to the outside world, suggesting that such isolation can lead to a sense of complacency. However, even in Kameno, some villagers sense that their world is about to change. Less land is available to cultivate—due to the spread of white settlers and relocation of various tribes, exiled from ancestral lands—and the livestock are failing. Recognizing that their environment is changing, children sing, “Land is gone / Cattle and sheep are not there / [...] Father, if you had many cattle and sheep / I would ask for a spear and shield”—the weapons that they use to war with other tribes, signifying their traditional lifestyle. This indicates that the children would prefer to maintain their traditional way of life and live as their ancestors did.

Waiyaki recognizes that with the arrival of white settlers, even the ridge tribes will soon be affected and must adapt by embracing education, which will allow them to operate in this new world. The white colonialists spread by establishing new administrative governments, which the Gikuyu are ill-equipped to handle without education. Early in the story, rumor spreads that the white settlers will build a government outpost near Makuyu, and the Gikuyu villages will have to start paying taxes to the white people. However, since no one in the tribe understands what taxes are, they pay little heed to the rumor, demonstrating the need for Western-style education so they can understand and defend themselves from the white colonialists’ schemes. Waiyaki thinks of education as “the white man’s magic,” the weapon that allows white people to organize and operate at massive scale, allowing them to take land or spread themselves into other people’s countries. Waiyaki hopes to protect his tribe and “give it the white man’s learning and his tools, so that in the end the tribe would be strong enough, wise enough, to chase away the settlers and the missionaries.” Although it is the white people’s tool, Waiyaki proclaims that education is the key to his tribe’s survival, the way for them to adapt to their changing world. Taking up Waiyaki’s call to education, children sing, “I do not want a shield / I do not want a spear / I want the shield and spear of learning,” signifying that education will be their new means of protecting themselves from the foreign colonialists now that the world has changed and their old weapons are no longer effective. They no longer fight other tribes but the threat of white colonialism.

Although some tribe members resist education as an artifact of white society, Waiyaki demonstrates that tribespeople can embrace education and learning without living like white people themselves or abandoning all of their cultural heritage. Although he firmly opposes the white colonialists, Waiyaki’s

father, Chege, sends his son to learn from the white missionaries, counseling him that he must “learn all the wisdom and the secrets of the white man. But do not follow his vices.” Chege’s advice suggests that Waiyaki and all of the tribespeople can learn from the white people’s knowledge without abandoning their tribal values or acting like white people themselves. After studying with the missionaries, Waiyaki returns to Kameno and begins building schools for the tribe’s children to learn in. He carries Chege’s advice with him and, with his tribe’s help, builds their school buildings as thatched huts in the tradition of their tribe rather than as European-styled rectangular buildings. Waiyaki reflects, “Few wanted to live the white man’s way, but all wanted this thing, this magic [education]. This work of building together was a tribute to the tribe’s way of cooperation.” Rather than imitate the white people and their methods, Waiyaki takes their concept of education but conducts it in ways that suit tribal tradition, thus proving that tribal people can adopt concepts like education without losing their cultural heritage.

Waiyaki’s leadership in developing education for his tribe ultimately suggests that, although tribal people may want to simply live as they have always lived, the world is quickly changing around them. However, embracing education and adapting themselves does not require them to abandon their traditional values or heritage.



UNITY AND DIVISION

Waiyaki feels convinced that the petty divisions and feuds between **Kameno** and **Makuyu** must end, since neither village is strong or large enough

to resist the white colonialists on their own. Although educating children is critically important, Waiyaki also feels that two villages must unite and face their common enemy together to strive for their “political freedom.” Waiyaki’s quest to unite Makuyu and Kameno against the white people suggests that a people under threat can only survive and defend themselves if they overcome their personal feuds, though this is a very difficult thing to accomplish.

Faced with the growing threat of colonialism, Waiyaki believes the two villages must resolve their differences and unite to fight for their own freedom, demonstrating the need for unity against a common enemy. Makuyu and Kameno sit atop two hills divided by a **river**, which symbolizes their division. Although they are closely linked, the villages are divided by long-standing rivalries, the most recent of which stems from Makuyu embracing the white people’s Christianity while Kameno rejects it in favor of tribal beliefs. At times, the animosity grows so intense that Kabonyi, an elder from Kameno, talks of taking his followers and setting fire to the Gikuyu Christians’ houses in Makuyu, indicating that the villages are beset by dangerous levels of infighting and resentment. Although Kabonyi believes the tribes can simply

fight the white people with their shields and spears, Waiyaki has studied alongside white missionaries and knows that the Gikuyu will never prevail if they are divided. Rather, Waiyaki believes that Makuyu and Kameno must resolve their differences and unite—by focusing on their children’s education—so that, with the force of both villages, they can organize and fight for their “political freedom” and protect themselves from white encroachment. As a respected teacher and leader among the hills, Waiyaki counsels his followers that “a house divided against itself [cannot] stand,” implying that the Gikuyu will never stop the colonialists so long as they continue fighting amongst themselves.

Although Waiyaki knows he must use his influence in the villages to encourage unity, fear delays him before he is undermined by rivals seeking their own power, demonstrating the difficulty of uniting two groups, even against a common enemy. At the peak of his influence among the villages, Waiyaki has the opportunity to call for unity but fails to, distracted by his own feeling of importance and fear of challenging such long-standing resentment between groups, which may threaten his position of influence. This suggests that a leader can only make such a call by overcoming their fear and ego and accepting the risks. When Waiyaki does summon the courage to call for unity at the end of the novel, the Gikuyu people initially listen to him. However, his rivals, Kabonyi and Kamau—who are jealous of Waiyaki’s influence—manage to turn the entire meeting against Waiyaki by charging him of desiring to marry an **uncircumcised** woman, Nyambura, which violates an oath of tribal purity that Waiyaki once took. Although the tribespeople just heard Waiyaki’s call for unity, Kabonyi convinces the people that Waiyaki is a traitor to the tribe for wanting to marry an uncircumcised woman, which is a mark of white Christianity. The brief possibility of unity between Makuyu and Kameno quickly crumbles. Kabonyi and Kamau effectively undermine Waiyaki’s influence amongst the tribe and destroy his call for unity, all because they are jealous of his leadership, indicating that personal petty rivalries can thwart a people’s ability to unify themselves against a greater enemy.

Waiyaki’s defeat ends any hope of unity between the villages, and the novel’s ending implies that Makuyu and Kameno are ultimately left powerless before the white people because of their own divisions. After Kabonyi accuses Waiyaki of being a traitor for loving Nyambura, the tribe turns against Waiyaki and takes him away to face some unknown punishment. They completely ignore his call for unity, and everyone returns to their respective villages. The story ends with Waiyaki’s fate left unknown. However, the narrative notes that the ridges and the Gikuyu people, which were “awakening” to fight the white colonialists, return to silence, “hidden in darkness.” This implies that the tribe “sleeps” as it had before, allowing the colonialists to continue stealing land, reaping taxes, and installing their own government in the ridges, unchallenged. The novel’s tragic

ending reinforces the need for unity amongst a people fighting against a common enemy. Waiyaki's failure to establish unity, both due to his own fear and the pretty rivalries of others, allows the colonialists to succeed in their efforts, suggesting that the alternative to unity is ultimately defeat, the loss of a people's agency, independence, and culture.



SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



CIRCUMCISION

In the novel, circumcision represents one's adherence to Gikuyu traditions and cultural identity. Every Gikuyu man and woman is circumcised, a rite of passage that ushers them into adulthood and affirms them as a true member of the tribe. Waiyaki recognizes circumcision as their tribe's most important rite; beyond being a personal source of meaning and identity, circumcision also provides the tribe's "social cohesion" and connects the tribespeople to each other and to their ancestors throughout history. In other words, one cannot be truly Gikuyu without being circumcised. Muthoni speaks to this when she explains that she wants to be circumcised so that she can be "a real woman, knowing all the ways of the hills and ridges." To Muthoni, circumcision is a marker of adulthood, but it imbues her with a certain knowledge of the Gikuyu way of life.

However, circumcision also represents the difficulty some characters have in embracing both the white missionaries' Christianity and their own Gikuyu traditions. Joshua, the Gikuyu Christian pastor, and Livingstone, a white missionary, both forbid their followers from practicing circumcision, which they see as a sinful "pagan" ritual. But in outlawing circumcision, these men symbolically spurn the Gikuyu people's own cultural identity. Although Joshua's youngest daughter, Muthoni, is devoted to the Christian faith, she feels that she cannot be a real woman unless she is circumcised like the Gikuyu woman of old. Her simultaneous desire to be circumcised and desire to maintain her Christian faith symbolizes her conflicted identity. Ultimately, Muthoni defies Joshua and leaves their family to participate in the tradition—even though her father disowns her for it—which speaks to how important a sense of personal and shared cultural identity is for the Gikuyu people. Indeed, after completing the procedure, Muthoni feels like a "true woman of the tribe." Tragically, though, Muthoni's surgical site becomes infected and she grows sicker and sicker. Before she dies, Muthoni sees a vision of Jesus and announces that she feels like a true Gikuyu woman, signifying that she managed to successfully embrace both her Christian faith and tribal identity. However, her death signifies that such resolution may

come at a severe cost, especially when one is caught between such fierce ideological opposition.

On the other hand, when Waiyaki wants to marry Nyambura, a Christian, the tribe forbids it because she is uncircumcised and thus not committed to their tribal identity. Moreover, when the Kiama is considering violence against Joshua's followers, they decide they will circumcise the Christians "by force," signifying that they will demand allegiance to the tribe through violence.

It is important to note that female circumcision, which is prominent in the story, is now commonly called "female genital mutilation" and regarded as a human rights abuse. However, the story only uses it as an important cultural custom that women voluntarily undergo. Within the narrative, female circumcision is only significant as a symbol, not as an ethical dilemma.



THE HONIA RIVER

The Honia river represents the ideological division between the neighboring villages **Makuyu** and **Kameno**. The river flows between both villages, dividing the ridges and keeping the people physically separated from each other. This separation reflects their deeper ideological division—Kameno advocates for tribalism while Makuyu embraces the white people's Christianity. In fact, the river itself is where some of these core cultural and religious differences play out: it is where the tribalists perform their **circumcisions** and the Christians perform their baptisms.

However, despite the division that the river represents, it also symbolizes how the two villages are linked and even interdependent on one another. Both Makuyu and Kameno depend on the river for sustenance—watering their crops and animals—so if the river dries up, both villages will die out. Because the river is so central to the villages' livelihood, it also plays an important social role in both societies, as it's the primary meeting place for both. The river also takes on a spiritual significance for both villages, which use the river as a ceremonial site. In other words, the river reflects the common ground that people from both villages share, since they are all Gikuyu people. Just as Makuyu and Kameno are interlinked by their dependence on the river for agriculture and spiritual practice, their fates before the white people are interlinked as well. Either both villages stand against the colonists or both will be overrun, leading Waiyaki to recognize that the two villages must symbolically cross the river—overcome their ideological divisions—and "reconcile [their] antagonisms."



KAMENO

Kameno, one of the two Gikuyu villages where the novel is set, represents the Gikuyu's traditional tribal identity. Most notably, Kameno is the home of the Kiama,

a governing council that enforces the tribe's demand for ideological purity. It was also home to Mugo and Chege—two men who, in their lifetimes, warned of the white people's threat to Gikuyu culture. After being kicked out of a school run by white missionaries for having “pagan” parents, Waiyaki builds his first school in Kameno, signifying that it is a school for Gikuyu children and not a school that will aim to replace Gikuyu beliefs with Christian ones. And when Muthoni wants to be **circumcised** and embrace her tribal identity, she moves to Kameno to put her plan into action, further cementing it as a symbol of the Gikuyu's traditional tribal identity.



MAKUYU

Makuyu, one of the two Gikuyu villages where the novel is set, represents the white people's

Christianity as well as the way that they use religion as a means to quietly further their colonial efforts. Joshua and Kabonyi, both originally from Makuyu, are among the first villagers to convert to Christianity and submit themselves to the white missionaries' authority, and Joshua even establishes a Christian church in the village. Although white people never enter the villages, Joshua's church becomes the locus of white authority and influence in the ridges, particularly since Joshua is so loyal to the white missionary's authority. While the Kiama and loyal tribespeople practice their traditional rites in **Kameno**, Joshua and his followers spurn those traditions in favor of Christian holidays like Christmas. Rather than practice tribal traditions like **circumcision**, the ultimate mark of Gikuyu tribal identity, Joshua and his people in Makuyu spurn such traditions as sinful “pagan” rites and substitute with Christian practices such as baptism, even though they have less history and thus less meaning for the Gikuyu people.

Given that Makuyu is a symbol of the white people's Christianity, it's particularly significant that the white colonialists build their first government outpost in the ridges behind Makuyu. This speaks to the way that the colonialists use Christianity as a front for their colonial efforts both to hide their true intentions and to gain the local people's trust.



QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Penguin edition of *The River Between* published in 2015.

Chapter 1 Quotes

●● The ridges were isolated. The people there led a life of their own, undisturbed by what happened outside or beyond. Men and women had nothing to fear. The [white people] would never come here. They would be lost in the hills and the ridges and the valleys.

Related Characters: Waiyaki

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols:  

Page Number: 3

Explanation and Analysis

Because they are tucked away in the hill country, the Gikuyu people in Kameno and Makuyu believe themselves to be invulnerable to and unaffected by the changes rapidly unfolding in the rest of the country. This passage establishes how the villagers' isolation leads to a false sense of safety from the encroaching white colonialists, which in turn explains why they do not recognize the severity of the threat the colonialists pose to the Gikuyu people's way of life until it is too late. The narrative often describes the ridges as “sleeping,” implying that because of their isolation, villages like Makuyu and Kameno are lulled into believing that they will never need to change—they can maintain their traditional agrarian lifestyle forever.

Throughout the novel, Waiyaki attempts to awaken the people and lead them toward education, which he believes will allow them to operate and protect themselves in the colonialists' world. But to do this, Waiyaki must overcome the villagers' sense of isolation and security—their propensity to “sleep.” However, as noted here, such isolation makes people naively fearless, indicating that they will struggle to adjust their outlooks and recognize that the colonialists pose an existential threat to their traditional way of life.

Chapter 3 Quotes

●● [Waiyaki's] eyes were large and rather liquid; sad and contemplative. But whenever he looked at someone, they seemed to burn bright. A light came from them, a light that appeared to pierce your body, seeing something beyond you, into your heart. Not a man knew what language the eyes spoke. Only, if the boy gazed at you, you had to obey.

Related Characters: Joshua, Kabonyi, Waiyaki

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 10

Explanation and Analysis

Although Waiyaki is young at this point in the novel, his eyes hold an undeniable power, which makes him a natural

leader. Waiyaki's eyes represent his personality, particularly in the way that others find him so compelling and easy to follow. His eyes are also "sad and contemplative," suggesting that he is incredibly sincere and motivates people through that sincerity. This is an important distinction from the way that Kabonyi or Joshua seek to lead. Where both older men seek authoritative power and enjoy wielding that unbridled power against others—through the authority of the church or the Kiama—Waiyaki leads by commanding people's respect and affection, and the people find themselves naturally drawn to his sincerity. This passage emphasizes that Waiyaki is the most natural fit to lead and the closest thing to an authentic savior out of all the characters. However, the fact that Waiyaki seems like the ideal leader—and perhaps the tribe's only real chance at survival—makes his ultimate failure to reconcile the tribe and look beyond his own selfish desires (like his relationship with Nyambura) particularly tragic.

Chapter 4 Quotes

☞☞ The ridges slept on. Kameno and Makuyu were no longer antagonistic. They had merged into one area of beautiful land, which is what, perhaps, they were meant to be.

Related Characters: Chege, Waiyaki

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols:  

Page Number: 16

Explanation and Analysis

When Waiyaki is still a boy, Chege takes him to a scared hilltop and shows him how Kameno and Makuyu look from a different vantage point. Although the two villages are normally situated on opposite ridges, separated by a valley, from this new angle they appear unified, as if both are sitting on the same ridge. This new perspective represents the villages' possibility for unity, providing Waiyaki with his first glimpse of the future he must work to create. Waiyaki sees the ridges as "one area of beautiful land," indicating that he sees no value in Makuyu and Kameno's division and longs to see them reconciled. However, in the present moment, he also sees that "the ridges slept on"—they have not awakened to their true potential, or even to the need to fight together against the white colonialists. This suggests that the villagers' spirits must be stirred to action before the villages have any hope of reconciling their differences and fighting together as a unified people against the white

colonists.

Chapter 5 Quotes

☞☞ "Arise. Heed the prophecy. Go to the Mission place. Learn all the wisdom and the secrets of the white man. But do not follow his vices. Be true to your people and the ancient rites."

Related Characters: Chege (speaker), Kabonyi, Waiyaki

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 20

Explanation and Analysis

After telling Waiyaki that he will be their people's savior, Chege sends Waiyaki to study in Siriana with the white missionaries so that he can learn what makes the white people so powerful. Chege's warning to his son reveals that he understands that the Gikuyu cannot fight the white people through old means—that is, with shields and spears. His mission for Waiyaki suggests that, if their people are to survive, they will need to use the white people's power, which is education, against them. Chege thus sets himself apart from people like Kabonyi, who simply desire to return to the past, fight the colonialists with weapons, and live the traditional life they have always lived. By contrast, Chege's statement implies that the Gikuyu must integrate their own cultural identity with the advanced tools (namely, education) that the colonialists bring. Although Chege dies early in the story, his mindset contributes to Waiyaki's own belief that they should integrate the white people's world and the Gikuyu's world together. However, Chege tells Waiyaki not to forget his own cultural identity, implying that he does not understand how much Waiyaki will struggle to connect with his own culture after being removed from it for several years.

Chapter 6 Quotes

☞☞ "Father and Mother are circumcised. Are they not Christians? Circumcision did not prevent them from being Christians. I too have embraced the white man's faith. However, I know it is beautiful, oh so beautiful to be initiated into womanhood. You learn the ways of the tribe. Yes, the white man's God does not quite satisfy me. I want, I need something more."

Related Characters: Muthoni (speaker), Miriamu, Joshua, Nyambura

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 25

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Muthoni tells Nyambura that she wishes to be circumcised as tribal women traditionally are, even though it goes against Joshua's strict Christian teachings. Muthoni longs to connect her two worlds, the two opposing ideological forces in her life. Although her family is Christian and she genuinely appreciates Christianity, her sentiment that the Christian God is not enough for her suggests that she desires the historical and cultural grounding that comes from participating in tribal rituals and taking on the tribal identity that circumcision symbolizes. Furthermore, this implies that Christianity provides something altogether different than their tribal identity does, suggesting that one cannot simply be replaced by the other. Muthoni is the first and boldest character to integrate her Christian faith with tribal history and customs, thus forming a hybrid identity. However, the resistance she faces from her staunchly Christian family and even from her beloved sister demonstrates how difficult it can be form one's identity from two different, even opposing, forces.

Chapter 7 Quotes

☛☛ Joshua was such a staunch man of God and such a firm believer in the Old Testament, that he would never refrain from punishing a sin, even if this meant beating his wife. He did not mind as long as he was executing God's justice.

Related Characters: Kabonyi, Miriamu, Joshua

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 30

Explanation and Analysis

This passage establishes that Joshua considers female circumcision to be the "unforgivable sin." Although Miriamu was circumcised before they were married, Joshua often beats her for it, supposedly as punishment for her sin. This action reveals that Joshua is a cynical, ruthless figure with little compassion for his wife or children. Moreover, Joshua's desire to "punish sin" by beating his wife reveals

that he desires power. The white people's Christianity is not simply a way to follow God but a way for Joshua to justify and exercise authority over other people. With this, the novel implicitly condemns the white people's religious practice, exposing the hypocrisy of a religion that claims love but encourages brutality. Ironically, this thirst for power over others makes Joshua a very similar character to his nemesis, Kabonyi. Although the two men violently oppose each other—Kabonyi advocates tribalism, while Joshua advocates Christianity—both men are fundamentally concerned with accruing and wielding power over others. Their respective zeal for their own positions and their demand that others be ideologically pure seem more rooted in their desire to rule than in a true conviction of their own beliefs.

Chapter 8 Quotes

☛☛ [Miriamu's] faith and belief in God were coupled with her fear of Joshua. But that was religion and it was the way things were ordered. However, one could tell by her eyes that this was a religion learned and accepted; inside, the true Gikuyu woman was sleeping.

Related Characters: Muthoni, Joshua, Miriamu

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 33

Explanation and Analysis

Although Miriamu obeys her husband, Joshua, and even loves him in a way, her devotion to Christianity arises more from her fear of him than her personal convictions. This suggests that, were her husband not so forceful and fearsome, Miriamu might not consider herself a Christian at all. The observation that the "true Gikuyu woman" lays dormant inside Miriamu tragically reveals that her Christian identity, reinforced by Joshua's violence, represses her true identity. Just as Muthoni felt the need to honor her tribal heritage and become a real Gikuyu woman through circumcision, some part of Miriamu remains loyal to the Gikuyu woman she is and the tribe she belongs to. This suggests that, despite Joshua's wishes, simply replacing one's tribal identity with a new Christian identity does not work. One cannot eradicate their tribe's ancient history and ancestry and replace it with a religion that, for the Gikuyu, is new to their land and thus has no historical grounding. With this, the novel seems to suggest that, at best, Christianity

must be integrated into the long-held, deeply rooted Gikuyu tribal identity rather than suppress, eliminate, or replace it.

Chapter 9 Quotes

☛☛ That night, a feeling that [Waiyaki] was lacking something, that he yearned for something beyond him, came in low waves of sadness that would not let him sleep.

Related Characters: Waiyaki

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 43

Explanation and Analysis

At this point in the novel, Waiyaki is proceeding well with his studies and his mission to serve the Gikuyu people, but he nevertheless finds himself longing for something else. As the novel unfolds, he will soon realize that what he's really longing for is a companion. Waiyaki's life thus far has been all about his community; everything he says and does orients around his position as a leader and potential savior of his people. This longing for love and companionship not only reflects the difficult loneliness of leadership but also reinforces that Waiyaki, prophesized savior or not, is indeed only human. Although he may be the tribe's savior, a selfless leader, and servant of the people, Waiyaki still has his own personal needs and desires. However, these personal desires ultimately become his undoing, as Waiyaki ultimately elevates his personal desire for love above his obligation to lead and save his people.

Chapter 10 Quotes

☛☛ The knife produced a thin sharp pain as it cut through the flesh. The surgeon had done his work. Blood trickled freely on to the ground, sinking into the soil. Henceforth a religious bond linked Waiyaki to the earth, as if his blood was an offering.

Related Characters: Muthoni, Waiyaki

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 44

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Waiyaki undergoes circumcision, which

symbolically makes him a true man of the tribe. Waiyaki's newfound bond to the earth and blood offering to the soil reveals an essential element of Gikuyu tribal identity—they are closely tied to the land they live on. This also provides a new angle on the white colonialists' impact on the Gikuyu: whereas the colonialists seem to see land as something to take from others and to utilize and profit from, the Gikuyu see the earth they dwell on as an integral part of their tribal identity. Thus, when the white colonialists invade and exile the Gikuyu off of their ancestral lands (as the story reports they do), they are not only stealing the tribespeople's livelihoods, but an essential part their identity. Without their ancestral lands, which their people have lived on and taken sustenance from for generations, the Gikuyu will struggle even more to maintain their sense of who they are as a people, especially as white settlers continue to disrupt their way of life.

Chapter 11 Quotes

☛☛ Circumcision had to be rooted out if there was to be any hope of salvation for these people.

Related Characters: Reverend Livingstone

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 54

Explanation and Analysis

Although Livingstone considers himself an “enlightened” missionary because does not attempt to force the Gikuyu to abandon their cultural traditions, this passage suggests that he is not so “enlightened” after all. He sees circumcision, especially female circumcision, as the ultimate evil which must be eradicated. In the narrative, circumcision symbolizes one's adherence to tribal customs and serves as a marker of Gikuyu identity. It operates as the central custom, the way that one signifies their allegiance to the tribe, their place in its history, and their commitment to preserving the tribe's culture and lifestyle. Thus, although Livingstone considers himself “enlightened,” the single custom he determines to take away from the Gikuyu is also the most important custom in the way they form their identity. As much as Livingstone may claim to let the Gikuyu keep their traditions and beliefs, his campaign against circumcision is effectively against Gikuyu tribal identity itself. His belief that they can only achieve salvation if circumcision is “rooted out” suggests, then, that the Gikuyu

can only be saved if they cease being Gikuyu people altogether and abandon themselves to the white colonialists' way of thinking and living.

Chapter 13 Quotes

☝☝ “Take Siriana Mission for example, the men of God came peacefully. They were given a place. No see what has happened. They have invited their brothers to come and take all the land. Our country is invaded. This Government Post behind Makuyu is a plague in our midst.”

Related Characters: Kinuthia (speaker), Kamau, Waiyaki

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 62

Explanation and Analysis

After the missionaries ban any students who belong to non-Christian families, Kinuthia, Waiyaki, and Kamau discuss the growing threat of white colonialism and the missionaries' apparent role in it. Although several characters truly appreciate Christianity and vouch for its good elements, the religion is clearly also a colonial weapon. It's a tool that the white missionaries can use to earn the native people's trust before white settlers and soldiers arrive to take control of the land. This cynical use of Christian religion demonstrates that it can be a destructive force, but it also suggests that the colonialists take a subtle approach to invading and conquering the tribal people. Rather than marching in and starting a war, the colonialists surreptitiously use religion to quietly establish their presence without appearing to be a legitimate threat. The story's depiction of Christianity is thus complicated, even conflicted. For some people, like Waiyaki and Muthoni, it has beautiful and emotionally stirring elements that need not be abandoned. On the other hand, it is clearly a colonial tool, a weaponized set of beliefs that sows division among the tribespeople and seduces them into believing that the newly arrived white missionaries mean them no harm.

Chapter 14 Quotes

☝☝ Schools grew up like mushrooms. Often a school was nothing more than a shed hurriedly thatched with grass. And there they stood, symbols of people's thirst for the white man's secret magic and power. Few wanted to live the white man's way, but all wanted this thing, this magic.

Related Characters: Muthoni, Waiyaki

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 66

Explanation and Analysis

Here, Waiyaki leads the surrounding villages in establishing schools across the ridges, introducing Western education to the Gikuyu people. The people's hunger for education suggests that they understand that education—which makes things such as administration and technological progress possible—is the source of the white people's power. It is the tool that allows the white people to be so prolific and expand and invade at such a steady rate. Since the world is changing, the Gikuyu need new tools to adapt and thrive in their new environment. However, despite desiring the white people's education, the tribe's lack of desire to “live the white man's way” suggests that the villagers do not want to fully abandon their Gikuyu identity or traditions. Rather, they desire to integrate what is good and useful from the white people's world and what is good and useful from their own. This desire validates Waiyaki and Muthoni's individual attempts to integrate the two opposing ideological forces to create a hybrid identity of the two. Importantly, it suggests that such integration is possible, even ideal, even though it ultimately fails to take root among the villages.

☝☝ Circumcision was an important ritual to the tribe. It kept people together, bound the tribe. It was at the core of the social structure, and a something that gave meaning to a man's life. End the custom and the spiritual basis of the tribe's cohesion and integration would be no more.

Related Characters: Reverend Livingstone, Waiyaki

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 66

Explanation and Analysis

Even as the tribe embraces education as their new quest, Waiyaki observes that circumcision must be maintained. Waiyaki's reflection clearly lays out the symbolic importance of circumcision as the root of the tribe's identity. It also suggests that such a root is extremely important as other aspects of the tribe's way of life changes around them. Because the villages are embracing education and beginning to let go of their agrarian lifestyle, maintaining such a cultural touchstone as circumcision is particularly important. Waiyaki's reflection suggests that circumcision will help the Gikuyu to remember who they are, their place in history, and their ancestry. The act of being circumcised, then, represents each person's commitment to maintaining that tribal identity and remembering their history, preserving it for future generations. Circumcision's role in maintaining the tribe's "cohesion" makes Reverend Livingstone's goal of abolishing the practice even darker. If Livingstone and the other Christians succeed in their goal of eradicating circumcision, they do not simply do away with one tradition. They destroy the anchor that keeps the Gikuyu grounded in their identity and history amidst a rapidly changing world.

Chapter 15 Quotes

●● Nyambura was not circumcised. But this was not a crime. Something passed between them as two human beings, untainted with religion, social conventions, or any tradition.

Related Characters: Nyambura, Waiyaki

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols:  

Page Number: 74

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Waiyaki and Nyambura are meeting secretly at night by the river. Waiyaki realizes that because Nyambura is a Christian, she is not circumcised like Gikuyu women are in Kameno. Waiyaki promptly decides that Nyambura's uncircumcision should not matter, but this comes shortly after he reflects on how important circumcision is to the tribe's social cohesion. Because circumcision is the mark of tribal purity and aligns one with the tribe and against the Christians, Nyambura's lack necessarily means she belongs to the opposing group. Waiyaki's disregard and conviction that they are "two

human beings" suggests, then, that the conflict between the two groups ultimately should not matter. Although both the tribalists and the Christians demand ideological purity, Waiyaki and Nyambura's relationship defies both groups. Their status as two human beings who desire love implies that that is all the commonality they truly need. Their relationship then acts as a counterstatement to the division between the Christians and the tribalists. It not only proves that unity and reconciliation between the two groups is possible, but it also suggests that the petty divisions that split the villages could be overcome if everyone simply realized that they have enough commonality as human beings.

Chapter 17 Quotes

●● As the spiritual head of the hills, [Joshua] enforced the Church's morality with new energy. All the tribe's customs were bad. That was final. There could never be a compromise.

Related Characters: Muthoni, Joshua

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 82

Explanation and Analysis

After Muthoni rebels and undergoes circumcision, Joshua disowns her. When she dies of an infection following the procedure, Joshua becomes even more vigorous and declares that the tribe's every tradition is evil. Because the tribe's customs, especially circumcision, form the backbone of the Gikuyu people's cultural identity, Joshua's rejection of the customs is effectively a rejection of Gikuyu identity altogether. Since he practices Christianity exactly as the white missionaries give it to him, Joshua's rejection of his own Gikuyu identity further implies that he wants to take on the white people's identity instead. This represents an ultimate betrayal of his home and people, and it also suggests another way in which the colonialists weaponize Christianity to help them conquer and colonize native peoples. Not only does Christianity help the colonialists win the people's trust by veiling their actual motivations, it also encourages those native people to abandon their own cultural identity in favor of a white European identity. This will naturally make people like Joshua subservient to the white people, since they are the masters of that identity and thus his identity. The white people give Joshua's life shape and meaning, and so they consequently have full control of

him.

Chapter 18 Quotes

☞☞ Father, if you had many cattle and sheep
I would ask for a spear and a shield,
But now—
I do not want a spear
I do not want a shield
I want the spear and shield of learning.

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 90

Explanation and Analysis

The Gikuyu schoolchildren sing this song to their parents during a meeting to discuss education in the ridges. The song's lyrics pointedly suggest that, even though the Gikuyu may want to preserve their traditional, agrarian way of life, they no longer can sustain it. The world is changing and their livelihoods are failing, so they must adapt. The imagery of "learning" being the people's new shields and spears suggests that education, which allows the colonialists to build and expand and administrate, will also be the best weapons for the Gikuyu to defend themselves and maintain their agency against the white people. Because the white people now assault them with administrative governments, taxes, and laws, the Gikuyu children must learn to navigate in such an unfamiliar world if their people will survive. This song thus represents a fundamental shift in Gikuyu life and the world they operate in. The landscape and lifestyle that their ancestors have sustained for thousands of years is gone. Whether they want to or not, the Gikuyu must embrace education and progress, or the white people will subjugate them. Education is thus not a preference but a necessary tool for survival.

Chapter 19 Quotes

☞☞ Day by day [Nyambura] became weary of Joshua's brand of religion. Was she too becoming a rebel? No. She would not do what her sister had done. She knew [...] that she had to have a God who would give her a fullness of life, a God who would still her restless soul; so she clung to Christ because He had died on the Tree, love for all the people blazing out from His sad eyes.

Related Characters: Waiyaki, Muthoni, Joshua, Nyambura

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 99

Explanation and Analysis

Here, Nyambura reflects on her need for something other than Joshua's form of Christianity. Although Nyambura later reflects that she needs Waiyaki in her life in addition to Christianity, this reflection demonstrates that, just as Muthoni felt the tribal identity offered her something she couldn't find in Christianity, Christianity offers Nyambura something she cannot find in their tribal identity. Nyambura's sense suggests that tribal identity on its own lacks Christianity's same sense of love and compassion—though Joshua's particular brand of Christianity lacks those qualities as well. The sense of peace she finds in the Christian God and the grounding sense of identity that Muthoni found in her tribal identity suggests that the integration of both ideologies can help a person feel more whole and fulfilled. One's need for warmth and compassion and their need to locate themselves in a historical tradition can both be fulfilled. Rather than favoring either Christianity or tribal identity over the other, the novel treats both with equal measure, arguing that the two ideological forces need not negate each other. They can be brought together and intertwined, and the best aspects can be taken from both. However, Muthoni's death and Waiyaki and Nyambura's peril suggests that such integration is a difficult, costly thing to achieve.

Chapter 20 Quotes

☞☞ Many teachers came from all over the ridge to see him, and many elders and children came to him with various problems. But in spite of all this Waiyaki was losing that contact with people that can only come through taking part together in a ritual. He was becoming too obsessed with the schools and the widening rift and divisions.

Related Characters: Nyambura, Joshua, Waiyaki

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 110

Explanation and Analysis

The more that Waiyaki invests himself in education and building schools, the less he participates in the tribe's rituals

and traditions, which he realizes is beginning to weaken his connection with the people. Although the novel primarily argues for thoughtfully integrating competing ideologies rather than strictly committing to one and rejecting the other, Waiyaki's sense that he is losing his connection to his own people provides a counterargument to integration. Even though Waiyaki lives in Kameno and is more closely aligned with the non-Christian tribalists, both his work and his lack of animosity toward the Christians weaken his devotion to the tribe. Although this allows Waiyaki to have compassion toward people like Joshua or love someone like Nyambura, his lost connection implies that there is a tangible cost to toeing the line between two ideologies rather than wholly committing to one of them. Furthermore, Waiyaki's lost connection with his own people makes it more difficult for him to lead them toward unity and encourage them in education. His integrationist attitude ironically makes it more difficult, in a way, for him to lead the tribe toward reconciliation.

Chapter 22 Quotes

☝☝ "You must not [marry Nyambura]. Fear the voice of the Kiama. It is the voice of the people. When the breath of that people turns against you, it is the greatest curse you can ever get."

Related Characters: Waiyaki's Mother (speaker), Nyambura, Waiyaki

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 119-120

Explanation and Analysis

Although Waiyaki and Nyambura love each other and want to marry, Waiyaki's mother warns him not to, since Nyambura is uncircumcised and the tribe would view the union as a great betrayal. Waiyaki's mother's warning to "fear the voice of the Kiama" is particularly dark, suggesting that the Kiama, in the name of protecting the tribe's purity, has become as oppressive as Joshua's oppressive version of Christianity has. The Kiama and the will of the people exert a controlling force over Waiyaki and Nyambura's life, preventing them from living in the way they desire, even though there is nothing intrinsically wrong about their desire to marry. This is grimly ironic, particularly because the Kiama was established to protect the tribe from the white colonialists' corrupting influence. The tribe fears the

colonialists because they threaten the tribespeople's freedom. However, as a protective measure against the colonialists, the Kiama actually seems to destroy personal freedom in much the same way. The Kiama's power, even though it does the will of the people, thus provides a warning against any group demanding ideological purity and unflinching devotion, even if it is publicly popular. Any such absolutist regime will inevitably destroy people's freedom and ability to make their own choices as individuals.

Chapter 24 Quotes

☝☝ No! It 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 her spirit and violated love. If the faith of Joshua and Livingstone came to separate, why, it was not good. [...] She wanted the other. The other that held together, the other that united.

Related Characters: Reverend Livingstone, Joshua, Waiyaki, Nyambura

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 131

Explanation and Analysis

Here, Nyambura decides that if Joshua's form of Christianity should keep her and Waiyaki apart, then it cannot be the real Christianity. This decision compels Nyambura to finally forsake her father and his version of religion so that she can be with Waiyaki and practice her Christian faith in a way that seems right to her.

Beyond being a critical moment in Nyambura's development, her decision also provides a useful method to determine whether any ideology is worth remaining loyal to. Nyambura believes that Joshua and Reverend Livingstone's Christianity cannot be right because it divides people rather than unites them, suggesting that any such ideology that causes division rather than healing reconciliation is destructive and misguided. Although this standard delegitimizes Joshua's devout Christianity, it also delegitimizes the Kiama and its commitment to tribal purity. Just as Joshua's Christian faith prevents Nyambura from acting on her love for Waiyaki, so too does the Kiama's oath of tribal purity prevent Waiyaki from acting on his feelings and marrying Nyambura. This suggests, then, that the Kiama and Joshua's Christianity are indeed equally misguided and destructive.

Chapter 25 Quotes

☝☝ For Waiyaki knew that not all the ways of the white man were bad. Even his religion was not essentially bad. Some good, some truth, shone through it. But the religion, the faith, needed washing, cleaning away all the dirt, leaving only the eternal. And that eternal was that the truth had to be reconciled to the traditions of the people.

Related Characters: Waiyaki

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 137

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Waiyaki briefly wonders if he betrayed the tribe by bringing education, as the Kiama charges, but he quickly decides that not all of the white people's ideas are inherently evil. Although the Kiama wants the tribe and the world around it to remain exactly as it has always been, Waiyaki's reflection suggests that change may actually be a good thing. His belief that "not all the ways of the white man were bad" implies that, although colonialism and stealing land is obviously bad, there are benefits to be reaped from two different cultures meeting each other. Although the story never seeks to justify or excuse white colonialism, it does suggest that there could be positive side effects of such an unjust practice. Just as aspects of white culture can be useful for the Gikuyu (like education), aspects of Gikuyu culture can presumably be beneficial for the white people as well. Waiyaki's belief suggests that, far from ideological purity, the cultural pluralism and the exchange of ideas is more beneficial for a society, introducing it to new tools and new ideas that may help them improve themselves and progress. Although colonialism is unjust, the interaction of two wildly different cultures may, in a way, be healthy for both.

Chapter 26 Quotes

☝☝ The land was now silent. The two ridges lay side by side, hidden in the darkness. And Honia river went on flowing between them, down through the valley of life, its beat rising above the sark stillness, reaching into the heart of the people of Makuyu and Kamenno.

Related Characters: Waiyaki

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols:   

Page Number: 148

Explanation and Analysis

At the very end of the story, after the Kiama successfully turns the people against Waiyaki and defeats him, the land falls back into silence. Although not stated explicitly, this ending implies that the white colonialists eventually conquer and subjugate the Gikuyu people. Throughout the story, the ridges are described as either sleeping, representing their inactivity, or awakening, signifying that the people are ready to act against the colonialists and fight for their political freedom. That the ridges are now hidden in silence and darkness suggests, then, that Makuyu and Kamenno have returned to sleep. Without Waiyaki to lead and teach them, the people are unable to organize themselves, unite together, and ultimately resist the colonialists.

Notably, the only sound is of the Honia river flowing between the two villages. Throughout the story, the river represents Kamenno and Makuyu's ideological division. Now that Waiyaki is defeated, there is no sound except for the river, signifying that the only thing the villages share is their animosity toward each other. Divided as they are, they cannot stand against the colonialists.



SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

CHAPTER 1

In Kenya, two ridges sit side by side, facing each other. A village called **Kameno** sits on one ridge, and **Makuyu** sits on the other. They face each other like rivals. The **Honia river** flows in the valley between them, offering life and sustenance to both villages. People from each village meet at the river to draw water and let their livestock drink, and the river unites them all. The ridges and valleys beyond Kameno and Makuyu rest quietly, as if they are asleep.

Long ago, the ancestors, Gikuyu and Mumbi, blessed the ridges and the Gikuyu lands. Both **Kameno** and **Makuyu** claim to be particularly favored by Gikuyu and Mumbi. Kameno's claim appears stronger, since many heroes rose from its people over the years, including a seer named Mugo who prophesied that "people with clothes like butterflies" would invade their land. But the Gikuyu of the ridges do not heed Mugo's words. They live isolated lives, separate and safe from the outside world. They do not care what happens to people elsewhere. The leaders that arose from Kameno and traveled elsewhere are no longer welcome in the ridges when they return.

The river separating the villages symbolizes the ideological division between them. At the same time, the river unites them and provides sustenance to both, making it the commonality that holds them together.



The Gikuyu people believe that Gikuyu and Mumbi were the first people, much like Adam and Eve in Christianity. The "clothes like butterflies" in Mugo's prophecy represent the white colonialists with their colorful clothing. The ridges' isolation and the villagers' disinterest in the rest of the world suggests that they are very insular people. This sets the stage for their struggle against the colonialists, who constantly push further into the Gikuyu's land, forcing them to reckon with the outside world.



CHAPTER 2

On a small plain, two boys fight each other. Kamau, Kabonyi's son from **Makuyu**, wrestles with Kinuthia, an orphan who lives with his uncle. They fight with sticks and wrestle in the dirt. Kamau gains the upper hand, pinning Kinuthia and pushing his face roughly into the ground as they exchange insults and threats. A younger boy, Waiyaki, Chege's only son, runs up to them and tells them to stop fighting. Not long before, they all swore to be comrades. Kamau tries to resist, but Waiyaki is a natural leader with a powerful look in his eyes, even though he is not confident. Grudgingly, Kamau stops and lets Kinuthia get up.

Waiyaki's ability to command Kamau, even though he is younger, foreshadows his natural capacity as a leader as an adult. The tension between Kamau and Waiyaki in this scene foreshadows their coming rivalry. Additionally, Kinuthia and Kamau's fight points to the impending division within the tribe, and Waiyaki's attempt to stop them fighting foreshadows his future aim to unify and reconcile the villagers to each other.



Waiyaki's father, Chege, is a renowned elder from **Kameno**. He is a widower, after the latest famine killed his wife and one of his daughters, though he still has one wife remaining. Chege is wise, and many villagers believe he is a seer, Mugo's successor. For years, Chege warns the other villagers of the growing threat of the white people who are flourishing in the lowlands and spreading their railroad across the countryside. However, the villagers do not heed his warning, believing they are safe in the ridges. The white missionaries already moved into a nearby town, Siriana, and Joshua and Kabonyi, both from **Makuyu**, converted to the new religion. Still, no one in Kameno worries.

Fearing that they will be lost in the forest once darkness falls, Kamau, Kinuthia, and Waiyaki gather their cattle and head for their homes. Waiyaki arrives at Chege's hut as night falls. When Chege hears that Waiyaki took his cattle all the way out to the plain, he frets that that is too far from the village for his son to wander. Waiyaki realizes that his father fears for his safety and feels pride and appreciation toward his father for his concern.

The villagers' ignorance of Chege's warning hints at the thematic tension between tradition and progress. Although Chege understands that his people must react and meet this new threat, the isolationist villagers want to simply ignore the problem and carry on with their traditional agrarian lifestyle. Joshua and Kabonyi's conversion foreshadows the conflict between European Christianity and Gikuyu tribal identity.



This interaction and Waiyaki's pride over Chege's concern establish that father and son love each other. This is necessary, since Waiyaki will often reflect that he does not understand his father and even feels uneasy around him. However, that is not because he does not care for him or respect him.



CHAPTER 3

When they are young, Waiyaki and his friends sometimes pretend they are the tribal giants of old—ancestral mythic figures who cleared the forests on the ridges for cultivation. When Waiyaki's friends tell him that he cannot play the giant since he is not **circumcised** and has not been "reborn," Waiyaki uses the "half-imploring, half-commanding" power of his eyes to convince them that he is such a giant. At first the older boys laugh at him, but Waiyaki is so convincing that they soon follow him. Waiyaki realizes he has the power to lead and "do daring things." He goes home and tells his mother that he "must be born again."

Waiyaki and the village perform the ceremony of his second birth, which will prepare him for circumcision. Although he wants to feel excited, he instead feels dejected and cries during the ceremony, which unsettles the others. However, the ceremony concludes and Waiyaki feels a "glow of pride," knowing that he is "ready for initiation"; he will soon become a man.

The young boys' insistence on circumcision reveals how central circumcision is to their tribal identity. Throughout the story, circumcision for both men and women symbolizes adherence to traditional Gikuyu customs and identity—one cannot be a proper Gikuyu adult without being circumcised. Waiyaki's ability to command with his eyes suggests that part of his power lies in his sincerity, which others cannot help but respect.



Waiyaki's unease and sense of dejection during his circumcision foreshadows his feeling that the traditional Gikuyu life and identity is not enough for him, and that he must integrate it with Christianity and the white people's concept of education.



CHAPTER 4

A few weeks after Waiyaki's "second birth," Chege tells him to leave the cattle with his mother; they are going into the hills together. Waiyaki does not know what it means but knows that something significant will happen. Chege takes Waiyaki across several hills and tells him about how the women used to rule the Gikuyu people until the men overthrew them for their harsh treatment.

*Ngũgĩ Wa Thiong'o often features women as the strongest characters in his stories, including in *The River Between*, seemingly as a nod to the Gikuyu belief in their matriarchal origins. This journey takes place right after Waiyaki's "second birth," indicating that he will learn something new about himself.*



Waiyaki and Chege climb up to a sacred hilltop with an ancient tree, “the tree of Murungu.” Waiyaki feels small in its presence. He turns toward **Makuyu** and **Kameno** and sees that, from this vantage, the ridges no longer look separate and “antagonistic.” Rather, they appear as one unified piece of land, at peace “as they were meant to be.”

Murungu is the creator and God figure in Gikuyu cosmology. Waiyaki’s vision of the ridges as one piece of land foreshadows his desire to unify Makuyu and Kameno and reconcile their differences.



CHAPTER 5

On the sacred hilltop, Chege tells Waiyaki of Murungu, who created Gikuyu and Mumbi as the “father and mother of our tribe.” After them came Mugo the seer, who had visions of many butterflies arriving and “disrupting the peace and ordered life of the country.” Chege explains that although the villagers rejected Mugo, Mugo left and returned, disguised as someone else, and resettled in **Kameno**. Mugo is Chege’s and Waiyaki’s forefather—they are Mugo’s “offspring.” Mugo died on the very hill they now stand on.

Mugo’s prophecy that the butterflies, representing the white colonialists, would disrupt their “peace and ordered life” suggests that the arrival of white settlers will thwart the Gikuyu people’s ability to maintain their traditional lifestyle. This suggests that the villagers will have to adapt to the new environment created by the white invaders.



Chege sees fear in Waiyaki’s eyes but he continues to explain that the people in the ridges rejected his own warnings about the missionaries in Siriana, just as they rejected Mugo’s prophecy of the butterflies. Mugo also prophesied that a savior would come from their family, which can only be Waiyaki, since he is the last of their lineage. However, that savior cannot defeat the white people through war but must learn their secrets and use them to lead his own people to victory. Chege is old, and he is the only person who knows this prophecy other than, perhaps, Kabonyi. However, the prophecy will eventually come to pass. They must wait and bide their time.

Chege’s insight that Waiyaki must fight the white people with their own knowledge, rather than with weapons, suggests that he understands their world is changing and their old methods of dealing with problems will no longer work.



Waiyaki and Chege return to the village. Chege’s belief that Waiyaki will be their savior weighs heavily on Waiyaki, since he is still only a boy. He feels that weight transforming him into a man. Eventually Chege quietly sends Waiyaki away to study with the missionaries in Siriana and learn their ways. Kamau and Kinuthia join him, and together they study for several years under a missionary named Reverend Livingstone. Waiyaki’s influence grows among the missionaries as well, and they see him as a future leader for their church in Kenya.

Livingstone is the only named white character in the story, and he plays a marginal role. Although the colonialists represent the primary existential threat, they are mostly invisible, suggesting that these particular colonialists take a quiet, subtle approach to establishing themselves in Gikuyu territory and slowly wresting control away from the native people.



CHAPTER 6

Joshua’s daughters, Nyambura and Muthoni, sit by the **river** and fill their water barrels. Nyambura thinks about how the villagers use the cold water to numb their bodies for **circumcision**. The thought makes her feel guilty, since Joshua, a Christian preacher, views female circumcision as a mark of “pagan” tribalism. However, as they are filling their barrels, Muthoni tells Nyambura she wants to be circumcised like the women of their tribe.

Joshua’s firm opposition to female circumcision establishes the practice as a symbol of adherence to tribal customs and identity, especially in opposition to Christianity and the white missionaries’ values. Muthoni’s wish to be circumcised, despite being a Christian, implies that she wants to integrate her Christian identity with her Gikuyu identity.



Muthoni's wish to be **circumcised** upsets Nyambura, since it goes against the missionaries' teachings. Muthoni insists that although she does not want to abandon their religion, she does not feel that she can be a true woman without being circumcised like their tribe's women have for countless generations. Muthoni begs Nyambura not to tell Joshua about this. She is planning to go to their aunt in **Kameno**, who will be able to organize her circumcision for her. Nyambura pities her sister and worries for her but knows that her mind is already made up. She feels "powerless[]" to help. As they return to **Makuyu** and hike up the hill, Muthoni's water barrel slips from her grip and rolls back toward the **river**. Nyambura thinks it is a "bad omen."

Muthoni's sense that she cannot be a real woman unless she is circumcised demonstrates the importance of maintaining a grounded cultural identity. Because Christianity is so new to the Gikuyu people, it does not seem to have the tradition or history to provide Muthoni with a complete sense of identity. Her desire to be circumcised and maintain her Christian faith suggests that two seemingly oppositional ideologies can be integrated together to form a hybrid identity—although this may be incredibly difficult.



CHAPTER 7

All of the buildings in **Makuyu** are traditional thatched huts except for Joshua's house, which is tin-roofed and rectangular, a symbol of the outside world's encroachment into the ridges. Joshua carries on Livingstone's work in the ridges, evangelizing to the Gikuyu people. When he first went to the missionaries, Joshua feared that his fellow tribesmen would attack him for his betrayal. But the more time he spent with the white people, the more he realized the backwardness of his own culture. The missionaries declare that Murungu, the Gikuyu God, is the "prince of darkness."

Joshua represents the worst effect of a new ideology like Christianity on a tribal people, as he embraces it so completely that he rejects his own cultural identity. Joshua's zealotry and belief that all Gikuyu customs are evil implies that Christianity, in this form, can be a destructive force, wiping away ancestral traditions that have existed for thousands of years. Notably, Joshua's devotion to white people's Christianity makes him subservient to the white missionaries, ultimately aiding them in their colonialist pursuits, suggesting that the religion can also be a colonialist tool.



Though Joshua once feared hell, now, because Christ made him a "new creature," he does not fear hell, Chege, or any of the vengeful tribesmen. When he returned to **Makuyu** to spread Christianity, many people initially converted. However, they soon went back to drinking, tribal dancing, and **circumcision**. Now, Joshua's preaching grows more wrathful by the day, and he "observes the word to the letter" in his own home, seeing himself as a Christian example for all Makuyu's people to look up to.

Joshua takes an oppositional stance against his fellow tribesmen, which sets up the idea that his daughters (especially Muthoni) feel torn between their Christian faith and Gikuyu culture. Joshua's obsession with strict morality and making his family a perfect example to others suggests that Joshua is preoccupied with appearances, influence, and power.



Since the year had an unusually good harvest, the tribespeople sacrifice to Murungu. Joshua's followers prepare for Christmas while everyone else prepares for the initiation rites and **circumcision** ceremonies. Joshua views female circumcision as the "unforgivable sin" and laments that his own wife, Miriamu was circumcised before they were married. He often beats her for it, believing that he is "punishing a sin" and "executing God's justice."

The contrast between the tribespeople's harvest sacrifices and Joshua's Christmas preparations reinforces the division between the two groups. It's significant that Joshua beats Miriamu for something she has no control over, suggesting that he is both ruthlessly cruel and infatuated with his own power. Furthermore, that he justifies his violence as a sort of divine justice shows that Christianity—and religion in general—can be a destructive force.



Kameno's people are restless and blame Joshua for the white people's intrusion into their hills. There is rumor that the white people will build an outpost near **Makuyu** and establish their own government, forcing the villages to pay taxes. However, most villagers do not understand what government or taxes are, so they ignore the rumors. Joshua understands what this means, having learned from the missionaries, but he welcomes it. He believes the country's ills are due to the "blindness of the people" and asks God to rain down judgment on them in the form of fire or a flood. Sometimes he thinks about beating the people into submission with a stick, forcing them to their knees. He decides to be patient and pray instead.

The villagers do not understand concepts like taxes or external government (since they have no parallel concepts of their own) and thus do not recognize the threat in time. Some characters in the novel (like Chege, for instance) argue that the Gikuyu people need a Western education so they can more easily recognize and resist the white colonialists and their efforts to dominate and administrate over the Gikuyu people. Joshua's unpopular hope that the white people will take control again suggests that his Christianity makes him subservient to the colonialists, while his fantasies of beating the tribespeople into submission suggests he craves his own power.



CHAPTER 8

On Sundays, Joshua preaches at his church in **Makuyu**, aided by Kabonyi. One Sunday, after a particularly long service, Nyambura returns home and realizes that Muthoni is absent. By evening she still has not returned, and Nyambura fears that Muthoni is carrying out her plan. Joshua goes to bed early, but Miriamu, still awake, wonders where Muthoni is. Miriamu obeys Christianity's tenets out of her fear of Joshua, though she loves him in her own way. Nevertheless, "the true Gikuyu woman" lays dormant inside her. Joshua suddenly rises and realizes that Muthoni is missing so late at night. He becomes furious at Miriamu and demands that she find her daughter.

"The true Gikuyu woman" that sits dormant inside Miriamu suggests that the strict Christianity that Joshua imposes on his family represses Miriamu's true cultural identity. This not only demonstrates that Christianity can act as a destructive force, it also gives the reader some insight as to why Muthoni chooses to leave their family. Rather than have her Gikuyu identity repressed and stolen from her like Miriamu, Muthoni wants to embrace both her tribal identity and her Christian faith.



As Joshua rages at Miriamu, who cannot find Muthoni, Nyambura finally admits that Muthoni has gone to their aunt in **Kameno** to be **circumcised**. Joshua seizes Nyambura, enraged, and she is terrified of her father. Eventually he lets her go, looking like a defeated predator. He tells Nyambura to go to Kameno, find Muthoni, and tell her that she must return at once or else Joshua will disown her. Nyambura leaves and returns the following day to tell Joshua that Muthoni refuses to come back. Joshua promptly disowns Muthoni and considers her a disgrace to their Christian family. He decides that even if his daughter should "go back to Egypt," he will press on to "the new Jerusalem."

The chilling image of Joshua as a defeated predator again suggests that he is obsessed with his own power. By defying Joshua's orders, Muthoni challenges the power he holds over the whole family and shows that it is merely a façade. Joshua's reflection on Egypt and Jerusalem refer to the Exodus in the Bible, when Hebrew slaves left Egypt behind in order to find their promised holy land. This suggests that Joshua believes he is making his way toward an enlightened spiritual state.



CHAPTER 9

The harvests are strong, and the villagers sacrifice to Murungu. The old men, such as Chege, remember that strong harvests often precede famines, like the one that left him a widower. He thinks about those days, when Joshua and Kabonyi converted to Christianity and Chege severed his relationship with them. He resents that the Christians teach against the beautiful rites of the tribe, especially **circumcision**. He believes that Waiyaki is strong enough to learn from the missionaries without falling into their "cult." However, Chege wonders if his son, the prophesied "black messiah," might someday fail his destiny.

Chege's fear that Waiyaki may someday fail foreshadows the story's ending, where Waiyaki does indeed fail to unify the tribe or lead them against the white people. Chege's resentment that Christians teach against the tribe's beautiful traditions implies that he does not oppose the religion itself but merely the way some use it to destroy their tribal identity.



Waiyaki will be **circumcised** in a few days and become a man. Chege knows that, when this happens, he will be able to trust that Waiyaki will do the work that Mugo started; Waiyaki will defeat the white people by using their own knowledge against them. However, Waiyaki himself feels disconnected from his village and their rites after the years he spent in Siriana. Though he remembers Chege's vision for him, that vision seems more an "old man's dream" than a reality now. Although he does not want to be like the white people, some of their ideas have taken root in his mind. He will undergo initiation and circumcision, but he does not feel he can fully abandon himself to the tribe's beliefs any longer.

On the eve of initiation, **Kameno** holds a tribal dance. Word of Muthoni's rebellion against Joshua has spread across the ridges. Waiyaki cannot imagine rebelling against his family in such a way. He longs to know why she did what she did. The dance begins and all the villagers dance around the fire. For this single night, they can say anything that would otherwise breach their "strong social code"—they can sing about sex, though they are not allowed to act on their words. As he dances, Waiyaki wonders what Livingstone would say about such a scene.

Although Waiyaki feels reservation at first, he sees Muthoni dancing beautifully and allows himself to be swept up in the spirit of the dance. He dances madly and blows a horn and shouts and sings. Soon, he and Muthoni are in the center of the circle, dancing face to face. For a moment, he loses himself in her gaze, but when he briefly looks away the moment passes.

Waiyaki leaves the dance feeling strangely and finds Muthoni at the edge of the forest. He self-consciously asks her why she rebelled, and Muthoni explains that she wants to be a Christian, but she also wants to be a Gikuyu women in the way of their tribe. They part, and for the rest of the night, Waiyaki is troubled by a vague that something is missing from his life.

Waiyaki's creeping feeling of disconnect reveals how important Gikuyu customs and traditions are, since they reinforce the group's sense of community and identity. Likewise, Waiyaki's sense that some of the white people's ideas have taken root in his mind demonstrates how difficult it can be to sit between two cultures and two opposing ideological forces. This establishes Waiyaki's need to integrate the two forces rather than exclude one for the sake of the other.



Waiyaki's inability to imagine himself rebelling like Muthoni did suggests that one's social group—be it their family or their tribe—can exert a powerful force over their personal decisions. At the same time, although Waiyaki is the protagonist of the story, Muthoni's boldness to defy her father and integrate the two aspects of her life arguably makes her the bravest character in the story.



Waiyaki's initial reservation demonstrates the effect that living away from the tribe has had on him—without being immersed in the culture, he finds it difficult to maintain his connection to it. However, he does briefly lose himself in the dance, which suggests that his Gikuyu identity still exists within him, it is just not as easy for him to access as it once was.



Muthoni's desire to integrate Christianity with her tribal identity suggests that the two ideological forces do not necessarily need to oppose each other. However, she can only integrate the two at great personal cost, demonstrating how difficult, even painful, it can be to exist between two worlds.



CHAPTER 10

The next morning, Waiyaki sits naked on the **riverbank** with the other initiates. “The surgeon” makes the **circumcision** cut, and Waiyaki feels a sharp pain. He watches his blood trickle onto the soil, an “offering” to the earth. The people around him celebrate, but as Waiyaki feels his own pain, he wonders what Muthoni feels. Images of childhood, of Chege, and of Livingstone pass through his mind in a discordant blur. He spends the next several days in the village hospital, recovering with the other male initiates who are all in immense pain as their bodies battle infection. Eventually, they all heal.

Chege speaks with another elder, proud of Waiyaki for enduring **circumcision** and proving that his time amongst the white people has not weakened him. The elder tells him that all the women except Muthoni have also recovered. Muthoni’s wound appears infected and will not heal. Chege is angry at Joshua’s religion—if he still practiced as the tribe does, he could sacrifice to Murungu and heal his daughter. As they part, Chege is proud of Waiyaki but fearful for his country.

Waiyaki visits Muthoni, who only grows sicker. He admires her courage, but a part of him wonders if she was wrong to defy her father. Muthoni wishes to see Nyambura, though Joshua forbids it. However, when Waiyaki speaks to Nyambura about her sister, Nyambura immediately begins visiting Muthoni in secret. Nyambura is bitter about Muthoni’s choice, but Muthoni declares that she is finally a woman and warns Nyambura that someday she will have to make her own choice. When Muthoni becomes delirious, Waiyaki and some helpers carry her to the hospital in Siriana. Nyambura tells Miriamu that her daughter is terribly ill.

CHAPTER 11

Muthoni dies in Siriana. Waiyaki returns to **Kameno** to inform Nyambura and Miriamu. Before she died, Muthoni had told Waiyaki to tell Nyambura that she “see[s] Jesus” and has become “a woman, beautiful in the tribe.” Waiyaki dwells on those words and walks listlessly, overcome with sadness. All day and night, he finds himself asking, “why?” though he does not know what exactly he is questioning.

When Joshua hears of his daughter’s death, he shows no emotion and resolves to stay firm on his “journey to the new Jerusalem.” Chege sees Muthoni’s death as proof that the white religion causes division and death. He fears for the unity of the ridges and the survival of his people, but he will no longer speak. He also fears for Waiyaki and wonders if Siriana corrupted him, but he remains silent.

Waiyaki’s blood falling on the soil as an offering represents his attachment to the land, to the river, and to his tribal identity and its agrarian lifestyle. At the same time, flashing images of Chege and Livingstone—representatives of the tribal life and white Christianity, respectively—reflect Waiyaki’s conflicted nature. He identifies with the Gikuyu tribe, but he also seems to feel the heavy influence of Livingstone and his Christian religion.



Muthoni’s illness represents the potential cost of forming one’s identity between two different worlds. Chege’s fear for his country foreshadows not only the ending of the story, but the ultimate fate of the Gikuyu, who are subjugated by the white colonialists.



Joshua’s refusal to allow Nyambura to visit Muthoni suggests he care more about his own power and pride than he does about his daughter’s comfort and wellbeing. Muthoni’s declaration that she is finally a woman suggests that, by combining Christianity and Gikuyu tribal customs, she has resolved her conflicted identity. Although it cost her family relationships, Muthoni feels at peace with herself, having reconciled the two opposing influences over her life.



Muthoni’s last words for Nyambura again suggest that she has resolved her identity conflict and feels complete, honoring both her Christian religion and her Gikuyu tribal identity. However, her death represents the steep cost of transgressing one’s community.



Muthoni’s death deepens the divide between those who advocate for Christianity and those who uphold Gikuyu’s tribalism, and each group interprets her death in their own way.



In Siriana, Livingstone sees Muthoni's death as confirmation of "the barbarity of Gikuyu customs." Though Livingstone had arrived in Kenya as a bold young man "fired by a dream of heroism" and evangelization, he is now old, fat, and weary. Livingstone considers himself an "enlightened" missionary, as he takes a less militaristic approach to evangelizing the tribespeople than his predecessors. He prefers to let the Gikuyu keep their customs and thus prevent the strife and war that comes from stripping a people of their own culture. However, Livingstone regards female **circumcision** as a singular exception, an unarguable evil that must be "rooted out." To Livingstone, Muthoni's death confirms that he must fight the practice with all his power—"The war was now on."

As an "enlightened" missionary, Livingstone represents the far more subtle method of colonialism present in the novel. While Ngũgĩ Wa Thiong'o's other novels depict militaristic colonialists, this story's depiction of colonialism suggests that the white people also quietly infiltrated some parts of the country, often under the guise of religion. This passage also shows that Livingstone is far less "enlightened" than he'd like to think—although he claims to let the Gikuyu keep their customs, he opposes what is quite possibly the most important Gikuyu custom and marker of Gikuyu identity for women. In advocating against female circumcision, Livingstone does strip the people—at least the women—of their culture.



CHAPTER 12

The elders in **Makuyu** fear that Chege is dying. The white people are building an outpost next to Makuyu, from which they will levy taxes. The elders distrust Waiyaki and wonder if his time in Siriana corrupted him. Joshua now explicitly bans any Christians from having any connection to **circumcision**, and his new ferocity emboldens his followers and grows their influence.

Muthoni's death marks a turning point in the story where divisions between groups—Makuyu and Kameno, Christians and non-Christians—deepen, and the need for reconciliation becomes much clearer.



Rather than return to the mission school in Siriana, Waiyaki remains in **Kameno** to look after Chege. He recalls the day they stood together on the sacred hill, and Waiyaki is struck by the newfound clarity of that memory. He feels that he understood his father more that day than ever before or ever since, and he shares Chege's desire for the ridges to reconcile. However, he wonders if the missionaries only came to divide Kameno and **Makuyu** against each other.

Although Waiyaki embraces some aspects of Christianity, his sense that the missionaries only came to divide the people suggests that the colonialists use Christianity as a weapon—an insidious tool that weakens the native people by creating division and setting them against each other.



Waiyaki fears that the hatred Muthoni's death aroused will break the villages apart. Within days, Waiyaki hears that Kabonyi has defected from Joshua and taken many followers with him. In response, the mission in Siriana bans any children of "pagan" parents from attending the school, and Waiyaki sadly realizes that his time at the mission is over. Returning home one day, Waiyaki finds his mother standing outside their hut weeping. He senses that Chege is dead.

Waiyaki's fear once again demonstrates the need for reconciliation between Makuyu and Kameno, and between the Christians and non-Christians. Because the colonialists represent an existential threat to the tribe's way of life, the possibility of worsened divisions between the villages becomes more dire, since they will be easier to conquer if the tribespeople are turned against each other.



CHAPTER 13

Months later, Waiyaki stands in the doorway of his office in the school that he, Kinuthia, and Kamau run for the children in the ridges. The thatched building leaks, the walls rot, and the “education-thirsty children” shiver inside. The three teachers discuss the white people’s ongoing “conquest” of the ridges. Gikuyu in neighboring lands have already been forced off their land or kept to work it as serfs, paying tribute to “their new masters.” Kinuthia says they must act. Many people in the ridges feel that Chege was right—they “slept” for too long and did not fight when they had the chance. Waiyaki likes and trusts Kinuthia, but he distrusts Kamau, who appears cunning and deceitful.

Kinuthia points out that the missionaries in Siriana came peacefully so the Gikuyu would offer them land to build on, but they only paved the way for more white people to invade and take control. He calls the outpost next to **Makuyu** a “plague.” Waiyaki listens with admiration. He thinks to himself that education will provide the Gikuyu with the means to fight back. Kamau raises the possibility of forming a Kiama to “preserve the purity” of the tribe—Kabonyi developed the idea. Waiyaki worries that if a Kiama forms, the villagers will make him a leader in it. He decides they should end their meeting and send the children home for the afternoon. Tomorrow, the children can help them repair the building.

CHAPTER 14

Waiyaki’s new school, Marioshoni, develops quickly and soon has a considerable reputation across the ridges. In the wake of Muthoni’s death, the split with Siriana, and Chege’s death, Waiyaki takes spreading education in the ridges as his personal “mission.” The people respond eagerly, and “the ridges [are] beginning to awake.” All across Gikuyu country, “schools [grow] up like mushrooms” as the people see the value of white people’s education, even if they do not want to become white people themselves. In the midst of this, **circumcision** becomes even more important, as it’s a way to bind the tribe together and maintain their purity and identity. Parents and children both enthusiastically embrace education for the sake of preserving their way of life.

Where the colonialists were once a vague potential threat, their exiling Gikuyu from their ancestral lands confirms that they pose a very real danger. However, the fact that the ridges “slept,” or failed to act, for so long demonstrates the effectiveness of this subtler form of colonialism. Because the white people worked slowly and quietly, the Gikuyu did not realize what a threat they were until it was too late.



Kinuthia’s observation confirms that the white colonialists use Christianity as a tool to gain the trust of native people before exploiting them. Waiyaki’s desire for education and Kamau’s desire for a Kiama (a governing body) are at odds with each other: Waiyaki desires to integrate the white people’s knowledge with the Gikuyu culture; Kamau desires to eradicate any aspect of the white people to preserve the tribe’s purity.



Waiyaki’s spread of education, while still honoring the circumcision tradition, demonstrates how one may integrate two opposing ideologies. By taking only what is useful from the white people—their approach to education—Waiyaki helps to strengthen his people without destroying their long-held cultural identity. The parents and children’s mutual embrace of education suggests that the best way for them to preserve their lifestyle and cultural identity is to progress and adapt to their changing world.



At the same time, deepening divisions between villages worry Waiyaki. Some people want to maintain the old ways, while Joshua and his followers become more firmly allied with the white people and hostile to the rest of the tribe. **Makuyu** becomes the Christians' village, while **Kameno** becomes the tribespeople's village. In the middle of it all, Waiyaki's influence grows and the people look to him as a leader. He is both proud and afraid of his role, and he senses that someday he will need to heal his people's divisions and reconcile them.

Makuyu and Kameno's separation by the ridges and the river reflects their ideological separation as well. Kameno becomes a symbol for tribal purity and preserving tradition, while Makuyu becomes the symbol of Christianity and rejecting one's cultural identity for a new, "modern" identity.



CHAPTER 15

Waiyaki lays awake at night, wishing that he had a companion to share his hopes and fears with. He realizes this is the unnamed longing he has felt for so long. Twice, he tried to share such feelings with his mother, but he could not. He thinks of love, of the white people's incursion into his country and the "disruption" it caused, and of Muthoni's courage and death—the result of such disruption. The shape of a woman hovers in his mind.

Waiyaki's need for a companion shows the conflict between his individual desires and his desire to serve his community. Much like Muthoni's longing to become a real woman led her to go against her Christian community, Waiyaki's longing for love will lead him to defy his community's expectations.



Waiyaki leaves his hut and walks out into the moonlight, yearning for someone to talk to. He feels burdened by his responsibility to serve the tribe and wishes he could be free of it. He thinks he will go to **Makuyu** to see Kamau, but when he makes his way down to the **Honia river** he finds Nyambura instead. Though he had seldom thought of her over the years, as soon as he meets her, he realizes that it was her shape lingering in his mind.

Waiyaki's wish to be free of his burdensome responsibility suggests that being a savior is a difficult and unenviable position. The conflict that his obligation to the community poses with his personal desires suggests that such a role requires one to set aside their individual needs for the sake of a greater good.



Nyambura knows that Joshua would be angry to see her standing with Waiyaki, but she has been lonely since Muthoni died. Though she obeys her father, she feels "cold" toward him and blames him for Muthoni's death. Even if what Muthoni did was not right, Nyambura cannot truly accuse her sister of sin. Whenever Nyambura thinks of her sister, she thinks of Waiyaki too, since he had been there at her death. However, Nyambura knows little of him and finds him strange and unapproachable, though this could simply be because Waiyaki fears Joshua.

Nyambura blames Joshua for Muthoni's death and cannot bring herself to condemn Muthoni, suggesting that she is beginning to break with Joshua's view of the world. However, she still admits that Muthoni defying their father may have been wrong, indicating that she still feels bound to her family and community.



Waiyaki and Nyambura realize they are both walking to **Makuyu**, so they walk together. Waiyaki privately reflects that Nyambura is not **circumcised**, though he thinks this should not be a crime—they are both human beings after all. As they part, Waiyaki longs to touch her but "control[s] himself." Instead, he invites her to visit his school tomorrow, and she accepts.

Nyambura's uncircumcision symbolically reflects that she does not adhere to Gikuyu tribal tradition and does not share that identity. Waiyaki's feeling that this should not be a crime suggests that he, too, is beginning to break with the rest of his tribe's worldview.



CHAPTER 16

The next day, after the children finish repairing the school, Waiyaki lets them go home early. He waits eagerly for Nyambura to arrive, but she never does, and he returns home disappointed. As he walks, Waiyaki reflects on the oncoming rains that will transform the surrounding brush into fertile forest and commence the tribe's spring rituals, full of singing and joyful times. It had always been this way, since Waiyaki was a child. Now, however, the rains do not come regularly—"the pattern of seasons was broken," the sun shines too often and burns the land, or the rains that do come wash away the soil. Waiyaki wonders if this disruption is also the white people's fault, or if it's a judgment on **Makuyu's** "blaspheming" people.

Standing outside his own hut, Waiyaki remembers Chege and reflects that he never truly understood his father. Did he honestly believe the prophecy that Waiyaki would save their people? He also thinks about Kabonyi, who was once a fierce Christian but now just as fiercely opposes them. Chege said that Kabonyi may be the only other person who knows the prophecy. Now, Kabonyi opposes Waiyaki at every opportunity.

As he sits inside, Waiyaki is angry at Nyambura for not coming to see him until he remembers how fearsome Joshua can be. He realizes he would not want Kabonyi to have seen him with Nyambura, and the thought irritates him—he feels like he is becoming a "slave to the tribe." His responsibility to serve his people weighs on him. Kinuthia visits and tells Waiyaki that the elders are making him the clerk of the Kiama. Kinuthia warns Waiyaki that Kabonyi is jealous of him and will make a dangerous rival. Also, Kamau claims to have seen Waiyaki and Nyambura walking together.

CHAPTER 17

In his church, Joshua preaches powerfully, seemingly unaffected by Muthoni's death. He declares that "all of the tribe's customs are bad" and that Christians cannot compromise on this belief in any way. Waiyaki sits in the audience, unsure of why he is there. He finds Joshua's words unsettling, since they imply that there is no middle ground between **Makuyu** and **Kameno**. He thinks of Chege's commitment to the tribe and wonders if he is betraying his father simply by being inside Joshua's church. As the congregation begins to sing, Waiyaki slips out. He feels the familiar longing and realizes, though he had not consciously meant to attend church, he was hoping to see Nyambura.

Waiyaki's fond memory of springs rains and the tribe's rituals demonstrates the beauty of tribal life and reminds readers of the simple, agrarian existence that the tribe and the Kiama want to preserve. The broken "pattern of the seasons" reflects how the white colonialists' arrival shatters their simple, predictable lifestyle. What was once consistent and dependable becomes unpredictable. For the first time, the future feels truly unknown.



Waiyaki's questions about Chege's beliefs suggests that Waiyaki himself has doubts about the prophecy. On another note, Kabonyi's swift change from being a Christian to utterly opposing them suggests that Kabonyi is a man of extremes.



Just as Joshua exerts an oppressive control over his family, Waiyaki's fear of Kabonyi and sense that he is a slave to the tribe suggests the tribe's identity and expectations can be just as oppressive. Both Christianity and tribal identity come with their own set of pressures and expectations, suggesting that neither is morally superior nor allows for more freedom than the other.



Joshua's emotionally charged preaching reflects his increasing animosity toward traditional Gikuyu culture. Even though Waiyaki disagrees with Joshua's words, the fact that he fears he is betraying Chege by being in a church at all suggests that any group demanding such strict adherence limits one's ability to move freely or think for themselves.



Now that he is in the Kiama, Waiyaki knows that the elders would view his sitting in Joshua's church as a betrayal. Waiyaki does not mind, for he knows that he would never truly betray his tribe. As he is walking away, Kamau meets him. Waiyaki admits that he stopped to listen to Joshua preach. Nyambura passes by in the distance and Kamau remarks that she is beautiful. Jealousy grows in Waiyaki's heart.

After Waiyaki leaves Kamau, he and Nyambura meet in the forest. She apologizes for not coming to the school, and Waiyaki can tell by the way she looks at him that she has come specifically to see him. He longs to take her hand and tell her that he loves her, but he cannot bring himself to. They part. Nyambura leaves feeling a "glow inside" herself, which she hides from her parents.

CHAPTER 18

Waiyaki's life becomes busier, and his reputation grows. The villagers call him "the Teacher." Soon, parents from all over the ridges will gather to hear him speak about education. Waiyaki intends to propose building more schools, though he will have to find teachers from Siriana or Nairobi. He also feels compelled to call for reconciliation between **Makuyu** and **Kameno**—between Joshua's followers and the rest of the tribe—though he knows this could threaten his popularity. He hopes his actions will impress Nyambura.

On the day of the meeting, people come from all over the country to see the school and hear Waiyaki speak. They are impressed by his students, who can read and write and speak a foreign language, all without the help of the white people. Waiyaki seems the "reincarnation of [the tribe's] former dignity and purity." Most people love him. Kabonyi hates him, as he is jealous of Waiyaki's success. Kabonyi views Waiyaki as an "upstart" and thinks he himself should lead his people and command their devotion, since he is older and more experienced. He would even be happier if Kamau led rather than Waiyaki. Kabonyi knows Mugo's prophecy and fears that Waiyaki may actually be their foretold savior.

Although the elders would not agree, Waiyaki's confidence that he would never betray his tribe even if he listens to Joshua preach suggests that one can listen to and learn from another ideology without turning their back on their own cultural identity.



Waiyaki and Nyambura's fledgling romance is illicit, since they belong to opposing groups. Their relationship thus represents the same integration—and hope for unity among the Gikuyu—that Muthoni achieved by maintaining her Christian faith while undergoing circumcision as a Gikuyu woman.



Waiyaki's fear that calling for reconciliation will threaten his influence and his hope that bravery will impress Nyambura both suggest that Waiyaki's service is tainted by his own personal feelings. Although he desires to help his tribe, that desire is modified by his own inclinations, which ultimately endangers his ambitions.



Waiyaki's students are educated and intelligent, despite having never left Kameno or spent time with the white missionaries. This proves Waiyaki's conviction that the Gikuyu can adopt the white people's knowledge and approach to education without taking on their culture or sacrificing Gikuyu traditions in the process. Kabonyi's jealousy of Waiyaki's popularity indicates that his rivalry is motivated more by personal pettiness than a desire to protect the tribe.



In the afternoon, Waiyaki opens the formal meeting, speaking some words himself and inviting the students to sing songs about how now that their agrarian lifestyle is disappearing, they want education so they can defend themselves. The children's singing moves the parents to tears, and they think their savior has arrived to awaken the people and lead them against the invaders. Kabonyi fumes. Though he meant to denounce Waiyaki for attending Joshua's church, he sees that the people love Waiyaki more and more. When the singing ends, Waiyaki speaks, outlining his plans for the schools, and the people listen.

Kabonyi rises to his feet to defy Waiyaki. He declares that teachers and education will not defeat the white people. They must rise and fight with weapons to drive the white people away. This is why Kabonyi created the Kiama—to protect the “purity of the tribe,” and he himself will lead the revolution. The older people listen to Kabonyi and consider the truth of his words, but the younger people side with Waiyaki. Waiyaki rises to speak and his voice comes out powerfully, like the ancestors. He explains that, because he is young, he will listen to the elders' advice. But the world will change, and the ridges must change with it, or they will be left behind. They must embrace learning. By the end of his speech, everyone supports Waiyaki even more.

Kabonyi tells Kamau to take him home. He has suffered a humiliating public defeat. As they walk, Kabonyi tells Kamau he wants to kill Waiyaki, and he rages at Kamau for not supplanting Waiyaki earlier. Kamau blames Waiyaki for his father's suffering.

Over the next weeks, schools continue appearing and hope rises throughout the ridges. The tribe puts all of its faith in Waiyaki, which he fails to see the danger in because he is too consumed by his passion for education. When the Kiama proposes an oath of “allegiance to the Purity and Togetherness of the Tribe,” Waiyaki takes it without considering the risks of such a foolhardy oath. He ignores Kabonyi and thinks only of education. Briefly, guiltily, he remembers that he forgot to call for reconciliation when he had the chance.

The children's songs suggest that, although the Gikuyu may wish to preserve their traditional agrarian lifestyle, they must nevertheless adapt to the changing world around them, and this largely means embracing education. Kabonyi's desire to return to the past thus seems futile in light of the changing world.



Kabonyi's insistence that he should lead his people and have their affection rather than Waiyaki again suggests that Kabonyi's campaign is fundamentally selfish, motivated by petty personal interests rather than a genuine desire to serve his people. The fact that the younger people side with Waiyaki speaks to the way that young people are often more open to change than their older counterparts.



Kamau's blaming Waiyaki for Kabonyi's personal humiliation suggests that Kamau is just as petty as his father, as both men attribute their own failures to someone else.



The noted dangers that Waiyaki cannot yet see foreshadow the trouble that being in a leadership position will cause him, particularly since he is always in the public eye. Waiyaki's brief guilt suggests that he know he has lost a critical opportunity to create unity.



CHAPTER 19

Joshua worries about Waiyaki's rising influence and the success of his schools. Many of his own followers are returning to their tribal customs, such as **circumcision** and taking multiple wives—Joshua does not understand why the latter is sinful, since it occurs in the Bible, but he accepts it as a “God-inspired assertion[] of the white man.” He builds two of his own schools to rival Waiyaki's. He then holds an evangelistic meeting in **Kameno** and makes a few converts, giving him a small foothold against his opponents in their own village, who represent the “forces of Satan.”

Waiyaki watches Joshua's meeting from the doorway of his own hut. He recognizes that it is a challenge against his own influence, yet Waiyaki appreciates aspects of Christianity, especially its focus on love and sacrifice. He missed his opportunity to call for reconciliation between **Kameno** and **Makuyu**, but he tells himself he will make that call next time he has the chance. However, he wonders if this hope for unity is a betrayal of his own tribe. If he is supposed to be a savior, what is he supposed to save his people from? Even without answers to these questions, Waiyaki sees himself as the one who will lead his people to education, “to the light.” All he wants to think about is education, and as such, he has already resigned from the Kiama and been replaced by Kamau.

Waiyaki briefly wonders if Nyambura would be at the Christian meeting but puts the thought out of his head. He walks down to the **river** and sees Nyambura off in the distance on the opposite side of the river. She looks unhappy.

Nyambura has been growing increasingly depressed. She is tired of Joshua's zealotry and Christian practice, but she still loves the Christian God and cannot simply abandon it or rebel as Muthoni had. But she knows that she longs for Waiyaki and the surety he represents to her, and she feels that Christ cannot satisfy her if Waiyaki is not part of her life. Waiyaki will be her “savior,” her “black messiah,” and give meaning to her life. Lately, rather than attend Joshua's church, she has been choosing to skip the gatherings and come pray at the **river**.

Joshua takes the missionary's teaching as God's divine will, even when it seems to contradict the Bible. This suggests that Joshua has more allegiance to the white missionaries than to Christianity itself, raising the possibility that Joshua's Christian practice is a poor representation of the religion as a whole.



Waiyaki's appreciation for Christianity's teachings on love and sacrifice, even though he belongs to the Kiama, suggests that there are positive aspects to both Christianity and Gikuyu tradition. Rather than exclude one for the sake of the other, the two can be integrated together, taking what is useful from both. Waiyaki's belief that he leads his people “to the light” suggest that he thinks of himself as a savior. However, his ignorance as to what he saves them from suggests that he dangerously lacks self-awareness and a clear vision of where he is going.



Waiyaki and Nyambura most often meet at the river, which points to the way that their relationship represents the intersection of the two villages and two opposing ideologies.



Nyambura's appreciation for Christianity is tempered by her need for Waiyaki, for a “black messiah.” Like Waiyaki and Muthoni, Nyambura thus refuses to strictly adhere to one cultural force or the other. This again suggests that an integrated middle ground can exist between two opposing ideologies, even though it may be difficult to remain there.



Waiyaki watches Nyambura kneel and pray in a little clearing, unaware of him. The sight reminds him of the sacred hill he stood on with Chege. It seems as if “holy light” radiates outward from Nyambura. When she hears him watching her and looks at him, Waiyaki is afraid she will be angry, but she asks him not to run. She crosses the **river** and stands with him. They speak about their shared love for the river and about Muthoni. Waiyaki recalls carrying her to Siriana and her last words for Nyambura: she has seen Jesus.

In a burst of emotion, Waiyaki takes Nyambura by the hand and tells her he loves her and asks her to marry him. They embrace and weep together. Nyambura longs to accept, but she is filled with fear and refuses instead. She tells him she loves him, but they cannot marry. Overcome with emotion, she flees, leaving Waiyaki alone and confused.

After Nyambura leaves, Kamau emerges from where he has been watching in the brush. He burns with hatred and jealousy—not only does Waiyaki best him in leadership but also in love. Kamau himself hopes to marry Nyambura. He wanted to tell her he loved her for a long time but never found the proper moment. He would have done so now, if Waiyaki had not appeared and declared his love first. He resolves to make Waiyaki suffer.

CHAPTER 20

Rejected by Nyambura, Waiyaki throws himself into his work and forwarding the cause of education. He goes to Siriana to find more teachers for his schools. The people’s spirit continues to rise, but Waiyaki does not have the foresight to see where it will lead. The Kiama’s power grows steadily, and all over the ridges, Kabonyi and his followers make people take their oath of tribal purity. Although Waiyaki is still committed to reconciliation, his failure to bring it up at the meeting now seems more serious. Joshua’s followers and Kabonyi’s followers each grow more committed to their own cause and hostile to each other.

One day after school, Kinuthia tells Waiyaki that people are accusing him of becoming one of Joshua’s followers. Though Kabonyi fuels the accusations, the villagers know that Waiyaki recently went to Siriana to talk to the missionaries, and rumor has it that Waiyaki will marry Nyambura, Joshua’s daughter, an **uncircumcised** woman. Waiyaki brushes off the threat, but Kinuthia tries to convince him that these rumors are dangerous. He warns that Waiyaki’s name and influence give him great power but can also be his ruin. When Waiyaki admits he asked Nyambura to marry him, Kinuthia seems crestfallen.

Waiyaki sees “holy light” as Nyambura prays, suggesting that such holiness or purity may exist both outside of the white people’s Christianity and outside of the Gikuyu tribal traditions. Her crossing the river symbolizes her crossing the ideological divide between Makuyu and Kameno so that she can be with Waiyaki.



Nyambura’s fear of Joshua keeps her from marrying Waiyaki even though she wants to. This is yet another example of how a group’s social expectations can limit the personal freedom and happiness of people in that group.



Once again, Kamau’s rivalry and hatred for Waiyaki is grounded in personal animosity and jealousy. This delegitimizes any claim Kamau makes of protecting the tribe’s purity, since his actions are obviously motivated by selfish pursuits.



The narrative’s continuous hints that threats mount against Waiyaki not only suggest that he is ignorant to what is happening around him, but also that people’s stirred passions can be powerful, even dangerous. The increasing divisions between Joshua and Kabonyi suggests that Waiyaki’s failure to call for reconciliation early on will have severe consequences.



Kabonyi’s accusation involves seemingly benign evidence—Waiyaki sat in church once, went to Siriana, and talks to Nyambura—yet carries severe ramifications. This demonstrates how a group demanding ideological purity can exert an excessive and even dangerous degree of control over a person’s behavior and decisions.



Weeks later, Waiyaki visits with an elder, one of Kabonyi's associates. The elder talks of Waiyaki's ancestors' devotion and how they would never betray their tribe. At first, Waiyaki takes this as a praise, but he later realizes it is an unspoken warning for him. At the end of the year, Waiyaki only partially participates in the tribe's rituals since he is so distracted by education. He realizes that, by neglecting to take part in the tribe's rituals, he is losing his connection with the people. One night, someone sets fire to one of Joshua's followers' huts. Such violence has never occurred before between villages. Waiyaki senses that the Kiama was involved.

Once again, Waiyaki's dwindling sense of connection with his tribe suggests that, although integrating two opposing influences may be beneficial, it also comes at cost. Although the tribe's emphasis on ideological purity is in some ways dangerous, it also makes its people incredibly cohesive. By living by his own judgment, Waiyaki preserves his own sense of identity but sacrifices the close connections he could have with the other tribespeople.



CHAPTER 21

In the weeks after Nyambura rejects Waiyaki's proposal, she grows despondent and increasingly irritable toward Joshua. She resents him and his religious fervor. She wants to rebel like Muthoni and marry Waiyaki but fears her father and lacks Muthoni's courage. Sensing this, Miriamu warns Nyambura not to cause their family trouble by being with Waiyaki. Nyambura goes to the **river** hoping to see Waiyaki but knowing she will not. The river no longer gives her the same sense of comfort. When she returns home, Joshua threatens that if she sees Waiyaki again, he will disown her. Nyambura feels that she has lost Waiyaki, and with him, her salvation. She asks God to kill her.

Nyambura's growing resentment toward Joshua and his Christian zeal indicates that she is growing closer to abandoning it altogether. Just as the Kiama exerts pressure on Waiyaki to conform, Miriamu's warning that Nyambura must not be with Waiyaki suggest that Christianity exerts pressure on Nyambura to conform and submit to its control. Once again, Joshua's threat to disown Nyambura suggests that he cares more about exercising his authority than caring for his daughter.



CHAPTER 22

Waiyaki makes a second trip to Siriana and returns, announcing that he recruited more teachers for their children. The people love him all the more and Kinuthia becomes completely devoted to him. Although Kinuthia sympathizes with the Kiama's thirst for action, something in Waiyaki's eyes and voice assures Kinuthia that he is the man to lead their tribe, not only to education, but to political freedom. However, Kinuthia does not know the full scope of Waiyaki's goals.

Although Kinuthia is loyal to Waiyaki, he does very little to protect Waiyaki from the Kiama. Rather, Kinuthia functions in the story to provide Waiyaki the self-awareness he does not naturally have. As Waiyaki blindly stumbles into Kabonyi's plans, Kinuthia helps both Waiyaki and the reader understand the threats mounting against Waiyaki.



Two days later, Waiyaki lies in bed, unable to sleep. He senses something evil on the horizon yet clings to his goal of education. He questions whether he is actually a savior and yearns to call for unity and reconciliation. He has a vision of fertility and life in the tribe, renewed by education. Nyambura stands in the center of it all as the embodiment of new life.

Waiyaki's vision mixes his desire to serve the tribe by providing education with his personal desire for Nyambura. This again suggests that his personal feelings taint his service and role as a savior and may even threaten them in the future.



As Waiyaki watches his vision, the elders and the children in the village begin pulling Nyambura apart into pieces, sacrificing her to the **river**. He realizes he himself is part of the crowd that is tearing at her. As the crowd throws Nyambura into the river, Waiyaki sees that it is Muthoni they have killed, not Nyambura. He sees Nyambura in the distance, but she will not let him touch her for fear of her father. Waiyaki is angry but remembers that he joined the crowd, “acceded to the ritual demands of the tribe,” and tore the body to pieces. He feels horror mixed with guilt that he failed to call for reconciliation in time.

Joshua’s Christmas celebration and the tribe’s next initiation rites will occur soon, on the same day. The Kiama now regards **uncircumcised** women as traitors, symbols of the white people’s influence. Waiyaki rises from his bed, since it is only early evening. As he steps out of his hut, his mother asks him if the rumors are true about him marrying Nyambura. He tells his mother he will not but immediately feels guilty for it. His mother begs him not to marry her. She tells Waiyaki he must “fear the voice of the Kiama” and be careful not to make an enemy of the tribe.

CHAPTER 23

In the middle of the night, Kamau summons Waiyaki for a mysterious meeting with the Kiama. At the meeting, Kabonyi accuses Waiyaki of betraying the tribe by visiting Joshua’s church, conspiring with the white missionaries in Siriana, and marrying Joshua’s daughter, Nyambura. Waiyaki insists that these are all false charges and that he has never spoken to Joshua. As the Kiama presses him, Waiyaki realizes that they are asking him to submit to their tribal purity, even if that destroys his vision for unity.

Waiyaki tries to convince the Kiama that the ridges need to be united, and that Christians and non-Christians can come together. The elders insist that Waiyaki is not willing to fight the white people. They want a political leader—someone who will take action. When Waiyaki will not answer the question of whether he loves Nyambura, the Kiama reminds him that he took an oath of purity, which forbids him from marrying such a woman. As Waiyaki leaves, the elders call him a “traitor.” Kabonyi tells the elders he has been right about Waiyaki all along. They reflect that Nyambura turned him against the tribe and decide that all Christians must be **circumcised** “by force.”

The crowd tearing Muthoni to pieces symbolizes how she was caught in an identity conflict between her Christian family and her Gikuyu tribal culture. The fact that the crowd kills her and throws her in the river suggests that she ultimately died as a result of the divisions between Makuyu and Kamenno, the Christians and non-Christians. Waiyaki’s participation in the killing suggests that, as a member of the tribe, he shares the blame for her death.



Waiyaki’s mother tells him to “fear” the Kiama, which again suggests that the tribe, in its demand of ideological purity and strict conformance, is an oppressive force rather than something that genuinely helps and supports the people. The Kiama’s insistence that uncircumcised women are traitors elevates circumcision from a traditional rite to an essential mark of devotion to the tribe.



The Kiama’s demand that Waiyaki submit to their standard echoes Joshua’s oppressive conduct toward his family and followers, strictly controlling their actions and beliefs. This suggests that, fundamentally, there is little difference between the Kiama and Joshua’s Christianity—both can become oppressive and controlling systems, and neither is morally superior.



The Kiama’s statement that they will circumcise the Christians “by force” reveals that they will turn to violence, even against their fellow villagers. This demonstrates the dangerous end of such groups that demand ideological purity and do not allow for integration or influence from outside the group. Where Muthoni and Waiyaki seek to integrate Christianity and Gikuyu tribal customs to create a peaceful, beneficial system, the Kiama seeks to rule through force.



CHAPTER 24

Days later, Kinuthia warns Waiyaki that the Kiama claims he is no longer the Teacher. They charge that he has broken his oath. Furthermore, Kabonyi now claims he himself is the savior foretold by ancient prophecy. Kinuthia thinks that the Kiama is going to attack Joshua tonight. Although he begs Waiyaki to flee for his life to Nairobi, Waiyaki decides he must go to **Makuyu** and warn Joshua of the coming violence. However, when he tries to do so, Joshua rejects him and blames him for Muthoni's death. Kamau and his followers see Waiyaki in Joshua's church and decide that he is the tribe's greatest enemy.

Nyambura sees Waiyaki in the church and her heart longs for him. She decides that Joshua and Livingstone's version of Christianity, which divides people and makes them enemies, is not the true Christianity and thus deserves no loyalty. She rises, claims that Waiyaki is telling the truth, and goes to him. She takes his hand and tells him she loves him in front of the whole church. Joshua is enraged, believing this to be Satan's work, and he renounces Nyambura as his daughter. Nyambura leaves with Waiyaki, and from the darkness they can hear Kamau and his followers calling Waiyaki a traitor.

With Nyambura beside him, Waiyaki feels his yearning subside. He thinks of taking her and fleeing to Nairobi but decides that he must stay and fulfill Chege's prophecy of being a savior. Waiyaki and Nyambura go to the **river** and then return to his hut, where they meet Kinuthia. They feel emboldened together, but Waiyaki knows he will soon have to choose between his tribe and his love. He tells Kinuthia about his journey to the sacred hill and about the prophecy, and Kinuthia feels a new, greater devotion to Waiyaki. Waiyaki decides he will return to that hill tomorrow, and then he will confront Kabonyi in front of all the people.

CHAPTER 25

Waiyaki stands on the sacred hill and feels very alone. He feels overwhelmed by forces he does not understand, forces moving all across the country, and he feels fearful. Waiyaki wonders if he should not have given up his position in the Kiama. He knows that not all of the white people's methods or religions are evil—some of it is good and useful. But it must be integrated with tribal culture; it cannot be allowed to wipe away the traditions of the tribe, or the tribe will have no grounding. Muthoni tried to reconcile Christianity and tribal culture and died in her attempt. But female **circumcision** is too culturally important to suddenly abandon. If Christianity is to exist in their tribe, it cannot destroy their customs unless it provides new customs and identity in their place.

Waiyaki's decision to warn Joshua of the coming violence suggests that, although his service to the tribe is impacted by his personal feelings, he still values other people as much as himself. Rather than flee to safety and live, Waiyaki chooses to warn Joshua of a looming threat, even though Joshua hates him. Kamau's decision that Waiyaki is the tribe's greatest enemy demonstrates how fickle public opinion can be, since the tribe formerly considered Waiyaki their savior.



Nyambura's belief that a religion that divides people cannot be the true religion suggests that Christianity, if rightly used, can be a unifying force rather than a dividing force. Nyambura's decision to be with Waiyaki indicates that she recognizes the benefit of integrating Christianity's beliefs and the Gikuyu tribal customs—she refuses to exclude one for the sake of the other.



Waiyaki and Nyambura feel bold now that they are together. This echoes Muthoni's feeling of wholeness after she was circumcised, suggesting that Waiyaki and Nyambura resolve their own identity conflicts by integrating their two ideological forces (through each other), making their own decisions rather than letting others dominate them, and embracing unity rather than division.



Waiyaki's reflection on Christianity and tribal traditions presents the story's ideal for integrating two such opposing ideologies. Waiyaki's belief that Christianity can offer beneficial aspects and that Gikuyu cultural traditions can keep the people grounded suggests that, by integrating the two influences, the tribe could be stronger than ever. However, this would require both Christians and the Kiama to give up their notions of ideological purity and claim to being "right."



Feeling no more confident than when he arrived, Waiyaki decides to leave. He worries for Nyambura, left in his hut, and wonders if Kabonyi's followers will try to take her. As he descends the hill, he looks to the other ridges and imagines working with their people. He suddenly feels the shame of a people who have been invaded and forced to serve foreign leaders. This sense of shame clarifies Waiyaki's thoughts. He decides that next chance he gets, he will call for education for the sake of unity, and unity for the sake of political freedom. But he worries the people will ask him to forsake Nyambura.

Kinuthia calls a meeting for Waiyaki at the river. People from all over attend, many still loyal to him as the Teacher. They cannot believe that Waiyaki would break his oath of purity and marry an **uncircumcised** woman. Kabonyi attends, determined to defeat Waiyaki. He burns with hatred for him and "identified this hatred with the wrath of the tribe against impurity and betrayal." Kabonyi is convinced that he will lead his people to victory, though he does not actually know what that victory is, or where he will lead them. He does not realize that his people want to move forward into the future rather than backward into the past and into isolation.

Miriamu and Kinuthia fear for Waiyaki and Nyambura. Although Kinuthia tried to protect her, men had come and stolen Nyambura from the hut—she is now in Kabonyi's possession. He knows that if the people turn against Waiyaki, his own life will be in danger as well. Waiyaki arrives and a hush falls over the crowd.

CHAPTER 26

Waiyaki feels that this is "the great hour of need." He thinks of the prophecies and decides that his tribe needs him; Kabonyi will only bring destruction if he leads. Waiyaki speaks and defends himself against the recent rumors, calling for more education. Then Kabonyi rises and describes how Christianity is the white people's weapon used to pacify the tribe while they take their lands. He insists that what the tribe needs is a leader who will take action—they don't need education.

Waiyaki stands again and speaks of the tribe's long history as well as their prophets and warriors. He argues that the tribe will never survive as long as it remains at odds with itself, divided between **Makuyu** and **Kameno**. Enraptured by his words, the crowd rises to kill Kabonyi where he stands, but Waiyaki stops them. He sits, marveling at his own ability to influence people. Kabonyi makes his rebuttal, but Waiyaki pays no attention, absorbed in his own power, until he hears Kabonyi mention the oath.

Waiyaki's sudden sense of shame reveals the emotional toll of colonialism. Not only do the Gikuyu lose their land to white invaders, but they must carry the shame of having lost it—having been conquered before they realized what was occurring. The shame that colonialism causes the Gikuyu to feel condemns such colonialist enterprise as unjust and exploitative. Waiyaki's renewed desire to call for unity implies that the Gikuyu people will not be able to fight the white people so long as they are divided.



Kabonyi's identification of his own hatred with the "wrath of the tribe" suggests that he projects his personal feelings onto the whole tribe. Although Kabonyi's vendetta against Waiyaki is based in petty jealousy, he interprets that as righteous anger against impurity. However, Kabonyi's ignorance to the fact that the villagers want to move forward into the future rather than follow him backward into the past suggests that he will not be able to effectively lead the tribe.



Kinuthia's fear for Waiyaki, Nyambura, and his own life suggests that the people may be stirred up to such violence that they would kill their own fellow villagers—the ultimate act of division and disunity.



Waiyaki's sense that his tribe needs him does not overshadow his desire to be with Nyambura ahead of serving and maintaining the peace. Although Waiyaki is true to himself by loving Nyambura, such action suggests that he is nearly as self-absorbed as Kabonyi.



Again, though Waiyaki seems right about the tribe's need for unity to fight for their political freedom, his self-absorption and interest in his own power reveals that he is too selfish to adequately lead and serve. Although he is supposed to act as the tribe's savior, he struggles to see beyond himself and thus fails.



Kabonyi declares that Waiyaki has broken the oath by seeking to marry Nyambura, Joshua's daughter, an **uncircumcised** woman. The crowd will not believe it, so Kabonyi presents Nyambura and challenges Waiyaki to deny her in front of all the people. The crowd warns Waiyaki not to break his oath. Waiyaki thinks that Nyambura, held by Kabonyi, looks like a sacrificial lamb. Waiyaki cannot deny her. The crowd turns against him, screaming about the oath. An elder announces that the Kiama will take Waiyaki and Nyambura away and punish them. The crowd agrees, feeling guilty for destroying their teacher and relieved of the responsibility of passing judgment.

The ridges fall silent, "hidden in the darkness." The **river** flows between **Kameno** and **Makuyu**, separating them. The rushing water is the only sound amidst the new stillness.

Waiyaki chooses to remain true to himself rather than bow to the demand for ideological purity. Ultimately, this reveals that Waiyaki is not a selfless leader and cannot be the tribe's savior. His inability to sacrifice his love for Nyambura tragically prevents him from reconciling the villages together or unifying the people to fight for their political freedom. This tragic ending demonstrates the danger of entrenched ideologies and the extreme difficulty of reconciling divided people.



The ridges, which had been awakening, now fall silent, suggesting that the people are powerless to stop the colonialists' spread across their land. Without unity, they are defeated.





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