

Ngugi wa Thiong'o

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Black Hermit*

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*For
Bethuel Kurutu*

Preface

Drama in East Africa is mainly in the hands of the amateur. The European amateur has tended to produce plays of little appeal to Africans or, which is about the same thing, of little relevance to conditions and problems in East Africa. The African amateur was, and still is, to be found in schools and universities: here however he tends to produce plays with an eye on school certificate examinations. Thus in some schools an annual production of Shakespeare with African boys dressed in the costumes of Sixteenth century England, has become — like Speech Day — a ritual.

One of the few groups trying to break away from this dry convention is Makerere Students Dramatic Society. They have produced Wole Soyinka, Brecht, and in 1966 they set up a travelling company which toured many parts of Uganda and Kenya — playing in village-halls, in churches and in the open air.

They first came to life in 1961 when under Nathaniel Frothingham (then an American student-scholar in Shakespeare) and Peter Kinyanjui (who had taken part in many Shakespeare productions at Alliance High School in Kenya)

PREFACE

they produced *Macbeth* in a local setting. In 1962 Uganda became independent and the society wanted 'something original', a break with the past, for their own contribution to the Uhuru celebrations. *The Black Hermit*, first produced at the Uganda National Theatre in November 1962, was the child of that demand.

I thought then that tribalism was the biggest problem besetting the new East African countries. I, along with my fellow undergraduates, had much faith in the post-colonial governments. We thought they genuinely wanted to involve the masses in the work of reconstruction. After all, weren't the leaders themselves sons and daughters of peasants and workers? All the people had to do was to co-operate. All we had to do was to expose and root out the cantankerous effects of tribalism, racialism and religious factions.

I would like to thank many people — actors and producers — who helped this child to its feet. Bethual Kurutu, Peter Kinyanjui, Miss Gutzar Nensi, David Cook, and many others. I must especially mention Mrs. Kathy Sood, who, as the secretary to the production, several times went through the script with me. From the start to the eve of the dress rehearsal she and I were making alterations, all of which the over-worked actors took with an unusual patience.

James Ngugi

This play was first produced by The Makerere College Students Dramatic Society at the Uganda National Theatre in November, 1962, with the following cast:

<i>Remi</i>	John Agard (Uganda)
<i>Omange</i>	Goody Godo (Malawi)
<i>Thoni</i>	Rhoda Kayanja (Uganda)
<i>Nyobi</i>	Suzie Oomen (India)
<i>Jane</i>	Celia Powell (Britain)
<i>Pastor</i>	Peter Kinyanjui (Kenya)
<i>Leader</i>	Bethuel Kurutu (Kenya)
<i>1st Elder</i>	Herman Lupogo (Tanzania)
<i>2nd Elder</i>	John Monyo (Tanzania)
<i>1st Neighbour</i>	George Ong'ute (Kenya)
<i>2nd Neighbour</i>	Frieda Kase (Uganda)
<i>Woman</i>	Lydia Lubwama (Uganda)

Characters

<i>Remi</i>	A clerk with an oil company. Formerly a student-cum-politician.
<i>Omange</i>	His friend in the City.
<i>Tboni</i>	His wife.
<i>Nyobi</i>	His mother.
<i>Jane</i>	His white girl-friend in the City.
<i>Pastor</i>	} All from the village.
<i>Leader</i>	
<i>Elders</i>	
<i>1st Neighbour</i>	
<i>2nd Neighbour</i>	
<i>A woman</i>	
<i>A crowd</i>	

*The
Black Hermit*

ACT I

The Country

SCENE I

A hut in the country. Thoni kneels on the floor near the hearth, sorting out beans spread in a basin. Enter Nyobi, a middle-aged woman, carrying a water-barrel which she puts down in a corner.

NYOBI

Have you finished sorting out the beans?
Are they not yet ready to cook?

THONI

They are about ready, mother.

NYOBI

Aah,
You have again been crying
Letting the bitter water
Tear and wear your cheeks
To acquire a face like mine.

ACT I

THONI

(Turns head aside)

NYOBI

(To herself)

Of a truth,

This world is really bad

Not the same as the old

When sons still gave respect to parents,

Honouring claims of motherhood,

Harkening to the call of blood and soil.

Many letters have we now sent to him,

But no reply,

Not a word from him, a child I bore,

And like a plant in the field

Tended carefully,

Anxiously watching the sun, the wind and the rain,

That no malicious weather should come to harm him.

(To Thoni)

I, your mother in all ways but birth,

Am pained to see the gradual waste of your maidenhood.

THONI

Oh, mother.

NYOBI

Have you now,

In your heart alone,

Gone over what I told you?

THONI

How can I,

A woman without strength or learning hear it?

SCENE I

I cannot now go to a third husband.
I cannot roll from hand to hand,
A public ball, or a common whore,
Making myself cheap before the world.
Rather than that,
I shall die and have the grave for a bed.

NYOBI

Don't let such thoughts trouble you,
Poison your rest and peace.

THONI

Yet I can't do without a husband,
Without a man to warm my bed,
A man to ask me for a meal in the evening,
A man to make me wash his clothes;
And a child of my own,
A child to call me mother,
To make me feel a new self.

NYOBI

I am an old woman.
These eyes have seen the rain come and go,
Have seen sunrise and sunset,
Seasons followed by many others,
Birth and death alternating.
All these have taught me,
The lot of women will never change.
For you and me, Anjiru, Njenc, Wihaki,
Independence has no meaning
Other than the one I knew yesterday:
I have tasted the pains of beating,

ACT I

The pangs of birth and death's blows.
One lesson only have I learnt:
A woman's joy is scolding her children.
It lies in seeing their smiles and cries,
Doing little things for them, the loved ones.
A woman without a child is not a woman.
But I've also learned that
To be kicked and humiliated follows this joy
When the children grow.
Why has my son kept silent for so many years?
What are my tears to him?
What are my prayers?

THONI

It's not you he hates,
It's my flesh and bed.

NYOBI

I hate to see your youth wearing away,
Falling into bits like a cloth long hung in the sun!
Go and get another husband.
The world will not wait for you.
I tell you take a man.
If he does not marry you,
He may at least give you a child.

THONI

Christ have mercy on me.
If this be a curse put upon me,
Remove it.
Why do men not rest in my hands?
Death took away my first husband.

SCENE I

Now the next, his brother, has left me.
The hut's gloom and loneliness
Has started eating into me.
Yet Christ,
Rid me of this thing,
This temptation harping on my weak flesh.
No, no, no.
I will not go with another,
But him I call my husband,
Even if I wait for twenty years and more,
I shall bear all.

NYOBI

Child.

THONI

Mother.

NYOBI

I fear for you.

THONI

Don't worry about me.
I am ashamed of my weakness.
Look now.
I'll not cry any more,
And when I feel grief come,
I'll go out and seek companions in the trees on the hills.
I'll watch little birds,
And lizards and insects.
Often at night,
I've walked about, alone,
Letting the moon and the stars speak to me.

ACT I

At times, darkness shelters me.

NYOBI

Wait!

A thought comes into my mind.

Remi was once a God-fearing child,

Obedient to me and his father,

Always desiring to do the right thing.

I shall go to the pastor.

He knows our son is lost,

Swallowed by the pleasures of the city,

And to him I will say:

Go to the city, oh prophet of God,

Tell Remi to come back to us.

(A voice is heard, outside the hut. They become excited)

Who is that?

THONI

It might be Remi.

NYOBI

My son!

THONI

I shall not speak to him.

NYOBI

Hm! He shall know what I think of him.

THONI

I shall turn my back to him.

(She stands with her back to the door. Enter an elder. Thoni and Nyobi are disappointed)

ELDER

Is it well with you women of the house?

SCENE I

NYOBI

It is well.

Will you not sit down?

(Thoni goes out)

ELDER

Thank you wife of Ngome,

May God guard his spirit.

He was a man, oh yes your husband was,

Before the white-man stole his heart

And turned him into a Christian.

The Gods themselves are jealous,

They only take away the choicest in the land,

Leaving the weak and the feeble.

NYOBI

My heart is still heavy with grief.

I long ago feared that someone had put a curse on this
house.

My first son, so big and strong,

Was taken from me, like that,

For no reason that a man could divine.

And not a year had passed

Since he brought us joy

By marrying a young girl,

The best in the land.

Our tears had hardly dried

Before my man follows.

And now, Remi,

The only man left to head this house,

Went and died to us in the city.

ACT I

ELDER

I came because of him.

NYOBI

Has he been found?

ELDER

We knew him once for a good son.

He acceded to our wishes

And married this woman,

A daughter of the tribe,

Instead of going to a white-skinned woman.

We were happy.

Remi was not the husband of Thoni, alone.

Remi was also the new husband to the tribe.

Through his big education,

He would have bound us together.

He should have formed a political party,

And led us to victory.

But we, like you, were puzzled.

Why did he go away from us?

Is that natural?

We, the ridge, the tribe, have waited.

We fear.

NYOBI

What?

ELDER

Shall I say it?

NYOBI

Speak quietly,

Or you tear my heart with false speculations.