What Is My Nation: Visions of a New Global Order in Ngūgū wa Thiong'o's Wizard of the Crow

Gĩchîngirî Ndĩgĩrĩ

University of Tennessee at Knoxville, jndigiri@utk.edu

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What Is My Nation: 
Visions of a New Global Order in 
Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o’s Wizard of the Crow

Gichingiri Ndigirigi

Abstract

Jonathan Ree describes an ideal nation where each national subject can proclaim, “the nation is mine” (1998, p. 89). Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o’s Wizard of the Crow, depicts a state where the state and its ruler are co-extensive, the subjects exiles. In this paper, I argue that as an external exile, Ngũgĩ has become a global citizen. That global citizenship still exhibits a rooted cosmopolitanism. Ngũgĩ reclaims his nation vicariously through empowered women who resist the corruption of the nation by the excesses of patriarchal power and global capital. Internally exiled in their own country, the women lead the struggle to recover the nation from these forces. The paper closes with some reflections on the vested interests of the nation-state even in a utopic global order.

There is a striking similarity between the displacement Ngũgĩ suffered in the first two postcolonial Kenyan regimes of Jomo Kenyatta and Daniel Moi and the demonization and displacement of the dissident women of the fictional state of Aburĩria in Ngũgĩ’s Wizard of the Crow (2006, hereafter cited as Wizard). Vilified as an enemy of the state, Ngũgĩ was internally exiled when he was detained in 1978, and then he was driven into external exile in 1982. Silenced and objectified, the women are effectively exiled from their own bodies/families/communities and their own country. For Ngũgĩ, the exile was at first internal and then external;
for the women of Aburiria, the exile is internal, as they are denied full autonomy and citizenship rights in their own country. In *Wizard*, Ngũgĩ reclaims the home that exiled him and he confers the agency of reforming the nation-state to his fellow exiles: the women of Aburiria.

In this paper, I argue that following his external exilic displacement lasting 22 years, Ngũgĩ has become a global citizen. In *Wizard*, he works through the reality of that long exile by creating a fictional global world in which he locates the action of the novel and from which he is able to reflect on his real motherland, Kenya. While inhabiting a global space, Ngũgĩ seeks to recover an already hybrid nation for himself, illustrating a rooted cosmopolitanism—the national particularity of the global. In his view, the allegorical Aburirian nation has been corrupted by the excesses of patriarchal power working hand-in-hand with global capital. Even more than the oppression of the average citizen-subject, we are shown that the women of Aburiria suffer multiple layers of oppression: from the patriarchal order, the state, and the global order depicted in the novel. The paper probes the patriarchal discourse of the ruling elite that presents the oppression of the women as the natural order of things, showing that women more naturally emerge at the forefront of the struggle to recover the nation from the abuses of the patriarchal state elite and the overtly patriarchal global order. The paper then closes with some reflections on the necessity of the nation-state even in a globalizing world.

"I need life to write about life," proclaimed Ngũgĩ in *Detained* (p. 9). He was protesting the need for an author in the realist mode to stay connected with the subjects that inform his art. While in detention, Ngũgĩ felt disconnected from the people's lives. Exile made it worse, which accounted for the dearth of creative writing from Ngũgĩ following his external exile in 1982. A gap of 18 years separates *Matigari* (1986) and his new novel *Mūrogi wa Kagogo* (2004), now translated as *Wizard of the Crow* (2006). Recounting in *Moving the Centre* how coming to work in America after making London his home in exile was an uprooting experience, Ngũgĩ recollects throwing himself into writing, which for him

had always been my way of reconnecting myself to the landscape of my birth and upbringing. For a few weeks I completely shut out New Haven from my consciousness. I was back in Africa of the twenties and thirties. I lived its landscape, its rivers, its history and only after this imaginative return did I wake up to where I was—New Haven, Connecticut. (1993, p.156)

Recalling also how going to university in Uganda in the late 1950s was like an escape from the terror of the emergency years, and thus a form of exile, Ngũgĩ observes that "it was Makerere and Uganda which made me discover my sense of being a
Kenyan. I had established a home, a base, and a distance from which I could look back on my Kenyan experience and try to recapture its meaning in words” (1993, p. 165). In contrast, he later states that since 1982, “I have been a wanderer ... but there is a Kenya I always carry with me, a Kenya that nobody, not even Dictator Moi, can take from me. It is the Kenya of the working people of all nationalities . . . ” (1993, p. 174).

For Ngũgĩ then, writing was a way of reconnecting to the land of his birth. He lays claims to an inviolable subject, Kenya—its landscape, its people and their aspirations that despite the pain of separation, remains a representable subject. The emotional, spatial, and temporal distance from the subject of representation helps to define Kenya for the writer and also helps to define the writer’s Kenyanness to himself. But as he spent 22 years in external exile before his return to Kenya in 2004, we are bound to wonder, then, whether there was still an inviolable subject, Kenya, that was available for Ngũgĩ to recover. Salman Rushdie describes a comparable situation when he argues that exiled or immigrant writers are always “haunted by some sense of loss, some urge to reclaim, to look back” at the country from which one has emigrated (1991, p. 10). But, he says,

if we do look back, we must do so in the knowledge—which gives rise to profound uncertainties—that our physical alienation from India almost inevitably means that we will not be capable of reclaiming, precisely the thing that was lost; that we will, in short, create fictions, not actual cities or villages, but invisible ones, imaginary homelands, Indias of the mind. (1991, p.l 0)

And thus, denied access to the homeland, Ngũgĩ creates a Kenya of the mind. Fictionalized as Aburiria, the country is part Moi’s Kenya, Amin’s Uganda, Bokassa’s Central African Republic, Mobutu’s Zaire, Mugabe’s Zimbabwe, Kamuzu Banda’s Malawi, Abacha’s Nigeria, Sadam’s Iraq, Pinochet’s Chile, and so on. As Simon Gikandi observes, Wizard “aspires to the status of a global allegory but it depends on a knowable Kenyan referent” (e-mail, May 15, 2005). Illustrating the national particularity of the global, the novel succeeds as a global allegory by systematically underscribing its Kenyanness and overwriting an all-too-easy rhetoric of global transcendence to paraphrase Apollo Amoko writing in a different context (2002, p. 8). The adoption of a larger postcolonial world as its canvas solves the problem of Ngũgĩ’s loss of an accessible home. Writing from external exile, Ngũgĩ adopts the whole world as his home and thus comments on issues on a global scale. By rewriting his legendary “strong women characters” in this novel, Ngũgĩ places the recovery of women’s rights at the forefront of the struggle for the rehabilitation of the nation, enabling the exiles to return home. Attention now turns to how women
resist and reshape patriarchal power in Aburíria and in the process reclaim the nation in resistance to the new global order.

Feminist theory holds that women have traditionally occupied an exilic space within the nation. According to the discourse of the patriarchal state elite in *Wizard*, by moving to the forefront of the national resistance in the novel, the women of Aburíria have acted unnaturally. In the novel, the women reject the construction of Marching to Heaven, a tower meant to immortalize the Lord Ruler of Aburíria, insisting that building the tower with borrowed funds is a case of misplaced priorities. In a public ritual insult the women moon the president and the dignitaries assembled to celebrate the planned tower. Thinking about it later, the Ruler indicates that before his climactic public humiliation, he

would have sworn he thoroughly understood women through and through. How many men, ... had he humiliated by ordering them to send him their wives, daughters or girlfriends? ... he was always surprised by how quickly they yielded to his amorous gropings as an act of personal honor and recognition ... [how] flattered [they were] to be of service to power ... Why were these women acting out of character? How could they be oblivious of his might? ... Yet no matter how hard he considered the matter, he remained unsure of what to do or where or with whom to start the vengeance like that which he had shown Racheal. Unable to act, his torturous thoughts always returned to the treacherous drama at Eldares in which the women shamed the nation before the eyes of foreign dignitaries and worse still, in front of the Global Bank missionaries. (2006, p. 235)

The Ruler's understanding of women is reducible to the sex that they gratify him with under duress at the urging of a patriarchal order. Sexual objectification, submissiveness, and docility are qualities the Ruler says he can understand in women. Ironically, even his much-vaunted might is unable to break the spirit of his wife Racheal, whose resistance to the excesses of despotic power leads to her incarceration in a space where time is supposed to have been stopped by the Ruler. But her spirit of resistance inspires the women of Aburíria, and they invoke her name before the climactic shaming ritual. Because the Ruler is co-extensive with the nation, by mooning him, the women are therefore shaming the nation. Conceivably, he could have lived with the humiliation had it not emasculated him before the Global Bank missionaries.

In the novel, one of the reasons for the Global Bank's refusal to fund the construction of Marching to Heaven is the apparent instability caused
by the women of Aburíria taking “women’s liberation too literally and too far” by countering male violence with female violence (2006, p. 499). As the representatives of the bank observe heatedly, “Everything is upside down in your country. Your women are challenging the natural order of things, even setting up what they call people’s courts” (2006, p. 499). Both in the home and at the civic level, the women are challenging the prevailing patriarchal order. They are remapping the nation. In the masculinist wisdom of the Aburírían ruling class and clearly of the international patriarchal order represented by the Global Bank, that is unnatural.

Jonathan Ree has observed that “part of the meaning of nationality is the obliteration of local particularity in favor of national uniformity” (1998, p. 83), a position that accords with the modernist view that people make rational choices to form larger units for the social good. Ree describes an ideal-type situation when he argues that in a kind of democratic dispersal of monarchical hubris, each national subject can proclaim, “the nation is mine” (1998, p. 89). In Aburíria, there is no such chance. The state is the body of the monarch, and he seeks to tighten the link between nation and state through a well-oiled official nationalism that is spectacularly deployed and fails just as spectacularly. The national subject of Ree’s quotation could then ask, to paraphrase Kwame Anthony Appiah: “Is this [Aburíria] worth dying for?” (1998, p. 91). If it is not, what then is my nation? This question is especially pertinent for the nation’s women.

Cynthia Enloe has argued that “nationalism has typically sprung from masculinised memory, masculinised humiliation and masculinised hope” (as cited in Smith, 1998, p. 208). In turn, Anthony D. Smith observes that “there are times, at least, when the national struggle supersedes or subsumes all other struggles, including those of class and gender. This does not mean that ‘nationalism’ as a discourse is not oriented primarily to the needs of men and for this reason possesses a ‘masculine’ symbolic content” (1998, p. 208). In the novel, the nation is a male space.

Andrew Parker, Mary Ruso, Doris Summer, and Patricia Yaeger recognize the “deeply ingrained . . . depiction of the homeland as a female body whose violation by foreigners requires its citizens and allies to rush to its defense . . . . This trope of the nation-as-woman . . . depends for its representational efficacy on a particular image of woman as chaste, dutiful, daughterly or maternal” (1992, p. 6). Developing Anne McClintock’s argument, Parker and Ruso note that paradoxically, “no nationalism in the world has ever granted women and men the same privileged access to the resources of the nation-state” (1992, p. 6). Their claims to nationhood frequently dependent upon marriage to a male citizen, women have been “subsumed only symbolically into the national body politic” (1992, p. 6). Parker and Ruso also note how the notion of “the family as
the nation-in-miniature" seems to have disappeared from the modern nation-state (1992, p.16). But it is this very notion that Nyawîra, the heroine of the novel, recreates in Wizard, borrowing the idea of the nation as an imagined community and injecting the notion of the nation as a family that one joins voluntarily. She also deploys the trope of the nation-as-woman but overturns the masculinist ascriptions of the apolitical, docile, chaste, dutiful, daughterly, and maternal qualities that the patriarchal order tags on women. She stakes her claim to nationhood or national belonging by engaging in subversive politics, rebelling against parental authority, walking out of an unfulfilling marriage, “failing” to get children, and thus defining herself as an autonomous being. She brings an internationalist dimension to the Movement for the Voice of the People, the national underground movement that she comes to head. Nyawîra presides over an inclusive comradeship of men and women fighting to retake their country and nation from the grips of global capital. That remapping of the national also goes hand in hand with a destabilization of gender roles, with Nyawîra playing both male and female roles as circumstances demand. Likewise, in the ideal union that she and her mate create, Kamîtî is forced to take on female roles. For a time, the notion of man-the-provider is overturned and Kamîtî is the dependent. In the climactic scene where Kamîtî is forced to call on Nyawîra—the so-called enemy of the state—to give herself up, both men and women rise up and answer to her name, thus collectively taking responsibility for what state officials label her “treasonable activities.” And thus, woman comes to stand as the metaphor of the resistance and of the new nation that no longer “belongs” to the ruler. And the women’s strength, courage, fortitude, and patriotism comes to be defined by its rejection of the mortgaging of the nation to global capital. We are shown that while Aburîria’s men seek to compradorize the country for their own benefit, Nyawîra and her group nurture that territory, and guard it from becoming further indebted to global capital.

R. Radhakrishnan notes that “the advent of the politics of nationalism signals the subordination if not the demise of women’s politics.” He raises an important question for our purposes: “Why does the politics of the ‘one’ typically overwhelm the politics of the “other”? Why could the two not be coordinated with an equal and dialogic relationship of mutual accountability?” (1992, p. 78). The simple answer is that as we have seen, national questions tend to be questions about men. By putting a woman at the head of the group seeking to liberate the nation from the compradorized state, the novel coordinates national politics and women’s politics in an equal and dialogic relationship of mutual accountability. Having made that connection, we can turn to the liberation of the nation from transnational capital.
Toward the end of *Wizard*, Titus Tajirika, the former governor of Aburiria's central bank, now Minister of Defence and one of the reigning president's favorite confidants enumerates a vision of corporonialism, the supposedly new global order that he sees taking shape. According to Tajirika, the Global Bank and the Global Ministry of Finance “are clearly looking to privatize countries, nations, and states.” Their argument, according to Tajirika, is that

The modern world was created by private capital. The subcontinent of India, for instance was owned by the British East India Company, Indonesia by the Dutch East India Company, our neighbors [Kenya, that is] by the British East African Company ... Corporate capital was aided by missionary societies. What private capital did then it can do again: own and reshape the Third World in the image of the West without the slightest blot, blemish, or blotch. NGOs will do what the missionary charities did in the past. The world will no longer be composed of the outmoded twentieth century divisions of East, West, and a directionless Third. The world will become one corporate globe divided into the incorporating and the incorporated. We should volunteer Aburiria to be the first wholly managed by private capital, to become the first voluntary corporate colony, a corporony, the first in the new global order. With the privatization of Aburiria, and with the NGOs relieving us of social services, the country becomes your real estate. You will be collecting land rent in addition to the commission fee for managing the corporonial army and police force. (2006, p.746)

Clearly taken with the idea, the Ruler praises Tajirika as a loyal crook. Thinking to himself that he is indeed lucky to have Tajirika as a counselor, the Ruler notes that Tajirika “had the common sense and realism of a crook so his counsel was nearly always to the point, but he was a cowardly crook who was once beaten by women and never retaliated and so was safe. Were it not for the cowardly strain in his character, he [Tajirika] would be very dangerous, the Ruler thought in passing.” The Ruler then asks Tajirika: “About this business of corporonialism, why can’t I incorporate instead of being incorporated? ... I don’t want to be a company employee”(2006, p. 747).

From this particular scene the anxieties caused to the rulers by the “unruly women” of Aburiria are evident. The scene captures the rulers' adoration of the West, imagined here as being without blot, blemish, or blotch, the Webster's dictionary definition for “white.” The ruling elite’s
amenability to global capital is also evident. Well-schooled in the art of misappropriating funds meant for the social good, Tajirika is relieved that in the corporony, the duty of providing the social services that define the modern state will revert to NGOs. Very tellingly, though, Tajirika singles out the army and the police, the coercive state apparatus in Aburíria, as the arms that the Ruler might be asked to manage on behalf of the corporony. In the novel, it is specifically those repressive functions of the state that the Lord/Ruler cherishes the most. His actions illustrate the monarchical power that Michel Foucault discusses in Part One of *Discipline and Punish* subtitled “Torture.” The Ruler takes savage delight in his ability to massacre his subjects for sport, demonstrating the asymmetry of power that, as Foucault shows, characterizes the relations between citizen subjects and the holders of monarchical, or if you will, despotic power (1977, p. 29). The more refined disciplinary practices that mark the evolution of punishment from the scaffold to the panopticon are not spectacular enough for the Lord/Ruler, who always yearns to make an example, a spectacle of disciplining his enemies. And since the Lord/Ruler is co-extensive with the country/state of Aburíria, his enemies are the enemies of the state. By shaming him, the women therefore shame the state. By defying him, they defy the state and its official nationalism.

There is an apparent congruity between the imagined world of the corporony and the real world that the people in the fictional Aburíria already inhabit. For all practical purposes, Aburíria lives at the mercy of the Global Bank, the International Ministry of Finance, and the West, represented in the novel by the meddlesome ambassadors of the United States and France. Pushed to reform the democratic space in Aburíria so as to enable the free flow of global capital, the Lord/Ruler decides “enough is enough; he must find a way to remind these Westerners that in Aburíria he was still the man, regardless of the loans for Marching to Heaven, and there was nothing these arrogant bastards could do about his slaughter of his own people (2006, p. 643). It is clear that the corporonial global order is alive and well, and that it is a patriarchal order that will not countenance the idea of women rising against their men. In that obviously patriarchal pecking order, the Ruler senses his own emasculation and thus the need to reassert his manhood, at least in Aburíria. But in that patriarchal order, he is less than a man due to his inability to put down the popular nationalism of which the women’s subversion of patriarchal and state power is but one dimension.
The envoy sent from Washington explains the logic of globalization in almost the same way as Tajirika:

We are now embarking on a new mission of forging a global order . . . . We are in the post-cold war era, and our calculations are affected by the laws and needs of globalization. The history of capital can be summed up in one phrase: in search of freedom. Freedom to expand, and now it has a chance at the entire globe for its theater. It needs a democratic space to move as its own logic demands . . . . We cannot build a global economy under the old politics of the cold war. What we are saying is this: many parties, one aim—a free and stable world where our money can move across borders without barriers erected by the misguided nationalism of the outmoded nation-state. The goal is to free up the resources and energies of the globe. All your countries and people will benefit. (2006, p. 580)

And thus, the only freedom that the West truly values is the freedom that enables global capital to move without restriction. But that movement clearly impoverishes the people of Aburiria, and the women are able to see that. The West's demand for freedom of [global capital's] movement is clearly inimical to the needs of the people of Aburiria. Both do not fight for the same freedom of movement. The real global order is already a corporonial global order that rewards the masculinized hopes of the likes of Tajirika and seeks to invalidate the nation-state. To exercise any freedom in their own country then, the women of Aburiria have to restage a popular nationalism at the expense of global capital. This nationalism opens the possibility for the retaking of the nation itself from the patriarchal state elite. For their efforts, the women inevitably encounter state violence.

Responding to concerns that the West is tired of the Ruler's bloody, cold war repressive measures to eradicate "communist" sympathizers, the envoy essentially indicates that the world [meaning the West] has moved into the post-Enlightenment age where public torture and execution are now viewed as atrocities. Directly addressing concerns about the Ruler's health and condition [he is reported to be pregnant], the Special Envoy brazenly recommends that it may be time for the ruler to step down. The omniscient narrator remarks that "If the envoy had been a citizen of Aburiria, he would have faced a firing squad on the spot" (2006, p. 582). The envoy's mistake is suggesting that the Ruler is too senile to rule, and alluding to his medical condition that has been associated with pregnancy, therefore equating this macho man to a woman.

In holding that the president is too senile to rule, the Special Envoy invokes
notions of change, progress, rationality, human rights, and freedom, decidedly Western markers of individual autonomy and progress. As a rider, the envoy invokes the right of the Ruler to keep the ultimate marker of Western individuality, his private property, which we all know is illegally acquired from the Aburírian state itself. The envoy also offers to arrange amnesty or relocation to a third state should the Ruler choose to relinquish his seat. In resisting the West, the Ruler recovers notions of sovereignty and African forms of governance, a peculiar form of African democracy where old age is equated with wisdom as in the olden days, but not with the moral responsibility that went with age, social and political positions. He deploys a retrospective traditionalism that demonizes all forms of opposition to his rule as a betrayal of “Africanness.” Aburíria oscillates between a fetishized “black way” of doing things—even as its leaders aspire for whiteness—and the conscious aspiration for the decadence of modernity with all the contradictions that the conjoining of nativism, modernity, and decadence conjures up.

To reinforce claims to Aburíria’s national sovereignty throughout history, the ruling president is having the national history rewritten to specifically show that Aburíria was never colonized. And thus, much like his own people who stage a popular nationalism in reaction to global capital, the Ruler recovers what Pheng Cheah has called elsewhere “a postcolonial national identity formation [that] is in part a response to neocolonial economic globalization” (1998, p. 310). As Cheah argues,

The uneven accumulation of capital and distribution of wealth and resources on a global scale exacerbates the unequal distribution of political power and economic resources within decolonized countries. At the same time, globalization is accompanied by the spread of a political culture that historically emerged in the West: human rights, women’s rights, equality, democratization, and so on. This intersection of cultural change and economic decline leads to resentment and resistance on the part of disadvantaged groups who may use . . . cultural resources to mobilize and organize opposition . . . even though a motivation and cause of opposition is economic and social disadvantage. Political elites may also draw on “tradition” or “intrinsic cultural values” to justify their actions and maintain hegemony, sometimes overemphasizing cultural issues such as religion, morality, cultural imperialism, and women’s appearance to divert attention from economic failures and social inequality. (1998, p. 310)
In the novel, the global order clearly exacerbates unequal distribution of political power and economic resources not only in the larger world, but within the “never-colonized”/ decolonizing/neocolonial/corporonial Aburlria. And even as the groups staging resistance within Aburlria borrow strategies of resistance from around the world, they do so with the full consciousness of the need to localize or particularize strategies of opposition to their national context. And within that national context, they have to be on the lookout for the state elite that attempts to mobilize the citizenry in the name of “tradition” that especially favors the rights of men and disempowers women.

In essence then, the situation in Aburlria exemplifies Cheah's idea of "national consciousness [being] formed through negative identification, induced by political-economic factors such as interstate relations within a neocolonial capitalist world economy" (1998, p. 300). As Cheah argues, “although contemporary globalization has complicated the nation-state form, it has not rendered it obsolete as a form of political organization” (1998, p. 291). In spite of the bravura of the Special Envoy in *Wizard*, we have to agree with Cheah that there is no world-state capable of ensuring an equitable international and economic order, *the unevenness of political and economic globalization makes the nation-state necessary as a political agent for defending the peoples of the South from the shortfalls of neocolonial capitalist global restructuring . . . . It is the defence against neocolonial globalization that makes national formation through negative identification both historically unavoidable and ethically imperative. (p. 300)

In the novel, the West is not concerned with the human rights of Aburlrians for the people's sake. The West is concerned with state suppression only in so far as that suppression ties up human capital that could be mobilized in the growth of Western capital. And thus, if the Aburlrian state had the interests of the citizen subjects at heart, it would transform itself into a popular nation-state. As Cheah argues, the state can resist capitulation to transnational forces only if it is transformed from a comprador regime into a popular national-state. This is why popular rearticulations of postcolonial national identity are ethically imperative and cannot be dismissed per se as statist ideologies that hinder the rise of the more equitable cosmopolitan consciousness, even though the exclusionary dimension of popular nationalism
In Wizard, popular nationalism is always being hijacked and manipulated by official nationalism, and the best example of this is the president's apparent concession of the rights of the people to a pluralistic society with many political parties. He launches Baby D[emocracy] that opens up the democratic space. But seeming to take the Special Envoy literally on his advice of "many parties, one aim," the Ruler remains in charge of all the parties and is thus automatically the presidential candidate of all the parties. The overall alignment of the state with global capital therefore does not change, and we are shown that Aburiria can only subscribe to the rhetoric of globalization at its own expense. That global order is not equitable; it does not safeguard the interests of Aburiria. And thus the women of Aburiria are consistently forced to say, "the nation is mine" even at the risk of state violence. In this, they challenge the men to join in rescuing the nation from the global political and economic order that makes them exiles in their own country.

Even though he was writing from the detached distance of external exile, Ngũgĩ still privileges the imagined homeland over the global. But as Appiah argues, "you can be cosmopolitan—celebrating the variety of human cultures; rooted—loyal to one local society (or a few) that you can count as home; liberal—convinced of the value of the individual; and patriotic—celebrating the institutions of the state (or states) within which you live" (1998, p. 106). The people of Aburiria seek to inject their state with institutions of which they can be proud; they are loyal to that home, but they also celebrate the variety of human cultures. Ngũgĩ celebrates that variety of human cultures, but he is loyal to Kenya, his home, and the other homelands that he has been forced to occupy in his long exile. He is a patriotic global citizen whose cosmopolitanism is rooted in a Kenya fictionalized as Aburiria. Contrary to the rhetoric of globalization voiced by the Special Envoy, neither the nation nor the nation-state is obsolete.

**Works Cited**


