Contentious Absolutism: The Public Sphere and the Imperative of Circumvention in Ngugi’s *Wizard of The Crow*

Senayon Samuel Olaoluwa
University of the Witwatersrand
Abstract

Among other things, the democratic virtues that the notion of the public sphere suggests compels us to regard it as a fecund ground for critical discourse, not least because of the flow of pluralism and alternative views that it allows, especially where theory is realized in practice. However, much as democratic espousal is crucial to the structures of the public sphere, it is not always the case that the expected room for alternative views is allowed. In a context of constrained opinions, that is, where the space allowed for democratic participation is considered inadequate and unsympathetic to public interests, John Guidry and Mark Sawyer (2003:273) remark that “marginalized groups use a variety of performative and subversive methods to uproot the public sphere from its exclusionary history as they imagine, on their own terms, democratic possibilities that did not previously exist”. They go further to identify this situation as “contentious pluralism”. The question, then, is what happens where the initially existing minimal democratic space has given way to tyranny and dictatorship? In this paper, this is what I term contentious absolutism. I examine Ngugi’s novel Wizard of the Crow (2006) with a view to exploring the dynamics of resistance and circumvention of the tyrannical and dictatorial domain that is encountered within the constructed public sphere of the novel. Setting off against the backdrop of state repression and domination at the centre of which is the Ruler of Aburiria, the paper engages the various strategies which subordinated subjectivities deploy as individuals, like the hero The Wizard of the Crow, and groups like the Movement for the Voice of the People. I argue that these individuals and groups do not only contest and circumvent the absolutism of state power, but ultimately force the establishment into accepting democratic terms, which the ethos of the public sphere demands. In the end, I argue that the novel aptly captures Africa’s recent history of struggle against tyranny and dictatorship, animating our memory on the rough, slow but sure transition to democratic dispensations in many African countries today, no matter how flawed the structures still are.
Among other things, the democratic virtues that the notion of the public sphere suggests compels us to regard it as a fecund ground for critical discourse, not least because of the flow of pluralism and alternative views that it allows, especially where theory is realized in practice. However, much as democratic espousal is crucial to the structures of the public sphere, it is not always the case that the expected room for alternative views is allowed. In a context of constrained opinions, that is, where the space allowed for democratic participation is considered inadequate and unsympathetic to public interests, John Guidry and Mark Sawyer (2003:273) remark that “marginalized groups use a variety of performative and subversive methods to uproot the public sphere from its exclusionary history as they imagine, on their own terms, democratic possibilities that did not previously exist”. They go further to identify this situation as “contentious pluralism”. The question, then, is what happens where the initially existing minimal democratic space has given way to tyranny and dictatorship? In this paper, this is what I term contentious absolutism.

Since the publication of Jurgen Habermas’ *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, the notion of the public sphere has received a lot of critical attention, an indication of the relevance of the concept to modern societies. But it is perhaps because of the multifarious interpretations that the notion of the public sphere allows that accounts for why it continues to enjoy sustained critical engagement. As well as this, the question of the public sphere and the cogency it seeks to demonstrate has been made possible in recent times also because of the transformation mediated by what has now been simplified to mean the time-space compression of globalization, a conceptual agenda that began to enjoy visible ascendancy understandably in the wake of the end of the Cold War. To that extent, the increasing spate of democratic patronage in most African countries speaks to what Saskia Sassen (2006:3) considers to be the second set of processes of globalization which, although largely constituted in national terms, have progressional aspirations towards achieving a consistency with global agendas. But it is the potential and the capacity to transform society, and indeed the lot of subaltern categories (Michael Warner 2002:56-7) that account for this global gravitation towards the agency of the public sphere.

There is, therefore, a sense in which the espousal of the public sphere chimes with the ideals of democracy. In this case, there is usually an attempt to consider the dialect of the state and the
Again, usually the state in this case constitutes the bourgeois category which more often than not attempts to present what it considers to be rational explanations for the nature or condition of things and situations in the context of the public sphere. According to Warner (2002:114-5), “in the dominant tradition of the public sphere, address to a public is ideologized as rational-critical dialogue. The circulation of public discourse is consistently imagined, both in folk theory and in sophisticated political philosophy, as dialogue or discussion among already co-present interlocutors”. However, in spite of the binary which associates the state with power and the public with an initial absence of power, the contention for public dignity with relation to the agitation for the rights to meaningful living also presupposes that the public constitutes a kind of counter formation to the agenda of the state. This possibility of “a critical opposition to the state” (Warner 117) by the public in itself foregrounds the assumption about the paradox that inheres in the understanding of the word public as constituting various categories once the national category is elided. Along this line of argument, when a category is addressed as “the public, the others are assumed not to matter” (Warner 66). However, the potential tyranny of the public is our concern in this paper as the focus is on the notion of the public as constituting “a totality” (Warner 65) within the national space of Aburiria. This kind of ground clearing enables us to navigate the world of the novel against the background of how the totality of the national public stands in contrast to the aspiration of the state herein represented by the oppressive order for which the Ruler and his coteries of cabinet ministers and other similarly placed state officials stand. In the analytical domain that this binary is situated, the scenario that emerges is one that turns the idea of the specificity of the public on its head. For, by virtue of the privilege that political power invests in the state, or which the state avariciously arrogates to itself, the public has become consigned to immateriality. For that matter, the manner of domination that one encounters in the Wizard of the Crow does not subscribe to the notion of the public or “counter-publics as constituting a minority category as in the case of gay, lesbian, etc. (Warner 57-58), but rather illustrates how the minoritarian acquisition of power by the state can turn it into the dominating group while the majority of the totality of the national public becomes the subordinated group. The marginalization of the public, even in the most repressed of circumstances, however, does not preclude the resistance of the repressed categories. As Fredrick Douglass argues “the whole history of the progress of the human liberty shows that all concessions yet made to her august claims have been born of earnest struggle” (cited in Guidry and Sawyer 2003:273).
The democratic suggestion of the notion of the public sphere then compels one to examine how Ngugi’s *Wizard of the Crow* foregrounds the desirability of the public sphere that is functional and provides the transformative dispensation that subaltern categories seek. To be sure, until recently, the memory of the public sphere in a number of African countries was that of repression. The image and understanding of the state were those that brooked no opposition, let alone allow for alternative views. However, this remark must be made in qualified terms precisely because in a number of African countries where dictatorship—either of military or civilian category—has taken place, the tyrannical leaders of these countries were also known to have enjoyed the support of the West. This was the more so while the Cold War lasted.¹

As hinted earlier, and in view of the continual struggle between the public and the state in an attempt to claim a more conducive atmosphere of existential fulfillment, the space that an already existing democratic practice provides within the context of the nation-state is more analogous to the notion of “contentious pluralism” which Guidry and Sawyer espouse. Where, however, this minimal space is not in existence, the struggle for the utilization of the public sphere becomes a struggle against the absolutism of power.

Guidry and Sawyer argue further that it is within the context of democracy that marginalized people engage in the politics of claiming space in the public sphere in spite of the attempts on the part of elite groups to determine and constrain the definition of legitimacy in the public arena (273). I however argue that even where this democratic space is unavailable, subordinated publics can also invent for themselves an idea and performance of reclamation of the public sphere. As individuals and groups, they engage the state in dialogues in oppositional terms. Such dialogues ultimately lead to a process of delegitimizing of the opinion of the state which may have been previously constructed in absolute terms. One other thing within the context of *Wizard of the Crow* is that it speaks to the fundamentals of the public sphere, as the ambiguity of the term “public” also refers to the notion of the responsibility and services which the state must provide to the citizens. Admittedly, this is contrary to what obtains in developed economies where this

¹In a yet to be published paper on *Wizard of the Crow*, I have paid more attention to the making and sustenance of tyranny in postcolonial Africa during the Cold War and the role of the West.
kind of understanding of the public is fast yielding to obsolescence as a result of the aggressive incursion of market structures which displace the state and appear to be stripping it of its public responsibility as the private domain regains ascendancy (Janet Newman 2007:27-28).

What is more, *Wizard of the Crow*, there is a sense in which we encounter a constellation of both the anachronism of feudal public sphere structures, and those of modernity foregrounded by technology, print and the mass media. In other words, rather than having a modern structure of the public sphere which may be said to have evolved from the antiquity of feudalism, the comportment of the state in spite of being a product of modernity prefers to embody both the old and the modern. Perhaps one explanation for this seeming absurdity is made possible when we appropriate what Sassen calls “an analytics of capabilities and tipping points [which] keeps us from having to posit that ascendance of a new order necessarily means the end of the old order.”

Beyond this ceremonious explication on the Aburirian state, however, the anachronism of the feudal agora is accounted for by the personalization of public/property by the Ruler. In fact, there is no distinction between the Ruler and the state of Aburiria (136). It then explains why the Ruler’s birthday celebration is, for instance, a national event which decides how the days and months in any given year within the Aburirian nation should run (12). There is even a magical dimension to it: “The birthday celebrations would always start at the seventh hour of the seventh day of the seventh month, seventh being the Ruler’s sacred number” (12). This has been the situation since the second Ruler of Aburiria assumes the mantle of leadership on the heels of the mysterious death of the first ruler. He has since the time of his ascension run the nation like a private property, knowing that he enjoys the support of the capitalist West so long as the Cold War lasts, and his support for the West remains uncompromised. To eliminate the opposition party together with its leadership and membership on the instruction of the capitalist West, all he had to do then was to brand the opposition party friends of the communist East and enemies of the state (233-4). Of course by so doing he forecloses the vibrancy and functionality that the public sphere radiates within a democratic context. And because of the unprecedented ruthlessness with which the opposition was crushed to pave way for an autocracy, it would take many years before any credible and formidable oppositional structure could be put in place (234). The celebration of the Ruler’s birthday and the manner in which it overshadows all other
concerns foregrounds a public sphere where the word of the Ruler as well as that of his cabinet passes as the articulation of the bourgeois rationality which ordinarily cannot be challenged. Again, having been turned into a yearly ritual, the state has taken for granted the compliance of the public at such functions especially with respect to the significance the address of the state holds.

The particular occasion that ignites the oppositional structure of the public sphere as a contested space is that of the Ruler’s birthday edition where there is the unveiling of the Marching to Heaven project, an event at which the praises of the Ruler are sung almost without an end by his cabinet ministers. But more importantly, Marching to Heaven is a project aimed at building a structure that will literally lead to heaven for the Ruler (19). Part of the explanation for this project, Machokali, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, explains, is to make the Ruler closest to God as this would further enhance his privilege of being able to receive blessings from God and share them as favour to the citizens (249). Prior to this day, words have gone round that the citizens should gather at the stadium for the celebration, as it will double as an occasion during which the Ruler will demonstrate his generosity by multiplying his birthday cake, which the entire nation has prepared, in order to feed multitudes (12). But as things turn out, there is no indication to the effect of living to this promise as in spite of the unusual presence of kwashiorkor patients, who hope to be given food, it is only the Ruler and his cabinet ministers who are having all the fun and gratifications: from parched throats of the citizens, to the absence of shelter, as against the luxury of the shade of the Ruler and the ministers, to the cool water they have and the other things they are munching(12-13). At this point, it is already clear that here is a theater of exclusion. The citizens have been cast as the other and what should come from the public service to cater for the citizens comes all exclusively to the Ruler, whose comportment can appropriately be compared to a feudal dispensation. Primarily, owing to the absence of opposition in the one-party state of Aburiria, what we encounter foregrounds Habermas’ account of the feudal period in Europe where, to put it in the words of Luke Goode (2005:4), “aristocracy and nobility play out the symbolic dramas of majesty and highness before their subjects”. For, in spite of their exclusion from the benefits and pleasures of the occasion, the citizens at a point find consolation in analyzing the “majesty” of the Ruler and others on the privileged platform of the occasion as
they begin to debate and argue about what each of the them wear, the way they eat, walk, etc (13).

However, amidst the long sycophantic speeches made to unveil the Marching to Heaven project, the first challenge to the “majesty” and “highness” of the Ruler is launched. For, the presentation about Marching to Heaven by Machokali fails to receive the applause of the citizens apart from the ministers, members of the parliament and officials of the Ruler’s Party. This is why asked by Minister Machokali to come forward and join in the praise of Marching to Heaven, no one among the citizens apart from the ministers and others whose loyalty lies with the state raise their hands. So when an old man among the citizens eventually raises his hand to speak, it is so much relief to Machokali and his cohorts. However, capitalizing upon the reverential accord of age and his likely vulnerability to senility, the old man, like a mad man insulated from punishment by virtue of his psychiatric condition, fires straight into the heart of the matter. And since the Ruler is the centre of attraction, he addresses his personality by engaging in a malapropism which, rather than sing praises of the Ruler, exposes his misdemeanors and puts him in his place. His difficulty in pronouncing Swahili words also gives greater insulation to the old man as he speaks of the Ruler:

But when the old man began to speak it was clear that he had difficulty in pronouncing Swahili words for the Ruler, *Mtukufu Rais*, calling out instead, *Mtukutu Rahisi*. Horrified at the Ruler’s being called a Cheap Excellency, one of the policemen quickly whispered in the old man’s ear that the phrase was *Mtukufu Rais* or *Rais Mtukufu*, which confused him even more. Coughing and clearing his throat to still himself, he called out into the microphone, *Rahisi Mkundu*. Oh, no, it is not Cheap Arsehole, the other policeman whispered in the other ear, no, no it is His Holy Mightiness, *Mtukufu Mtakatifu*, which did not help matters because the old man now said, with what the old man thought was confidence, *Mkundu Takatifu*. At the mention of “His Holy Arsehole,” the multitude broke out in hilarious laughter, made the old man forget what he had wanted to say, and he stuck religiously to the phrase *Rahisi Mkundu*, which made Machokali quickly signal that he be removed from the microphone. The old man did not understand why he was not being allowed to speak, and, as he was led back into the crowd, he let out a stream of *Rahisi Mkundu*, holy
arseholes he thought might work, gesturing toward the Ruler as if begging for his intervention. (17-18)

Although apparently an individual intervention in interrogating the domination of the narrative of the public sphere by the state, the fact that the old man’s unintended comments can elicit hilarious laughter from the multitude, shows that by virtue of their interaction they are able to identify with the old man as he interrogates the overestimation of the majesty of the Ruler on this occasion of unveiling the idea of Marching to Heaven. But the fact that in the end the celebration of the Ruler’s birthday, unlike the previous editions, cannot be brought to a successful ceremonial end is an indication that the mere debates that are associated with the public sphere within the context of the feudal order (Goode 4), and which the Ruler has continued to sustain, can no longer stand. For hardly has the Ruler stood up to express his gratitude to supposed well wishers for the gift of Marching to Heaven when a scary alarm is raised about snakes (22). The scared crowd in no time begins to push towards the platform, and to worsen matters, the police chief fires a shot into the air which subsequently elicits a race of survival from the citizens. In the end, “after a few minutes, only the Ruler and his entourage of ministers, soldiers, and policemen were left in the park” (22). Investigations will show later that the snake scare, that is, the scattering of plastic snakes all over the park where the birthday is celebrated, is the handiwork of the Movement for the Voice of the People, an organization that has taken it upon itself to challenge the bastardization of the public sphere by the state and to sensitize the rest of the people to the dangers of being silent in the face of the oppression which the state is meting out to them. Above all, the movement is committed to frustrating the efforts of the state in its attempt to mortgage public welfare for constructing a tower, which, apart from its suggestion of impossibility and perpetuation of a tyrannical dynasty, promises nothing apart from greater debt for the nation and poverty as the state looks forward to obtaining a loan from the Global Bank to execute the project.

From the stage on, the battle for the soul of the public sphere, either in its feudalistic configuration, or in its modern transformative outlook, has begun. The Ruler as well as his cabinet may have benefitted from the long years of lull from the opposition, but with the Movement for the Voice of the People, the absolutism of the articulation of the state can no
longer go without being challenged. Indeed, the challenge which the movement and all other oppositional interventions pose to the state from this point on accentuates the assertion of one of the many themes of the public sphere; that is, the exemplification of progress of enlightened reason which pronounces freedom on “human subjectivity from the constraints of authoritarian traditions” (Andrej Pinter 2004:220). This is why when investigations later reveal that the movement is headed by a woman, for instance, the Ruler finds it difficult to accept the extent to which his powers have been undermined as opposition to his reign mounts (262).

The successful disruption of the birthday celebration and that of the Marching to Heaven project is particularly symbolic because it marks the resumption of the suspended interrogation of the take of the state on various issues of public concerns. The disruption moreover provides the needed fillip for the movement and other members of the public to engage the state and, most importantly, take on the challenge of exercising their citizenship rights in an atmosphere overwhelmed by the dictatorship of the Ruler. The approach of the movement cannot however be said to amplify the position of, say, “critical international theory [which] is committed to the agency of human action [and] emancipation from constraints on human freedom generated by practices of economic and political exclusion” (Nayef Samhat and Rodger Payne 2003:273). This view is borne out by the observation that the movement and others in the novel are also simultaneously engaged with an oppositional struggle against the international community represented mostly by the Global Bank and the capitalist West. This is in spite of the fact that the West and the US especially at some point in the novel is portrayed as advocating the transformation of the Aburirian society to conform to the democratic ethos, the vortex of which the world seems to be caught at the moment. The movement’s contest of the public sphere, especially as dominated by the sentiments of the state, is against all odds, even when the agitation Ironically nudges the state of Aburiria towards a form of regime legitimacy that has and enjoy some kind of international endorsement. It is on account of this struggle against the grain that, for instance, that the movement challenges the complacency of those who may choose to be passive in the face of the proposal for more loans in a country that is yet to recover from the burden of previous loans which it got from international financial institutions of the West in the past. Looking back at the complicity of the West in the authoritarian consolidation of the Aburirian
public sphere Nyawira, for instance, explains to Kamiti why she and others cannot just watch while the tyrannical order continues unabated:

The water I drink, the food I eat, the clothes I wear, the bed I sleep on, are all determined by politics, good or bad. Politics is about power and how it is used. Politics involves choosing sides in the struggle for power. (86-87)

Although the atmosphere in Aburiria does not allow for the kind of right that is articulated by Nyawira, her resolve and that of the movement confers on the movement the status of a civil society. From this angle, we can argue that the unwillingness of the autocracy notwithstanding, this movement has definitely forced itself upon the state for an interaction. More specifically, in responding to Nyawira’s *raison detre* for not wanting to stay aloof from politics, the existentialist concerns it raises are such that converge with the terrain that is mediated through the formation of civil societies. This is the “societal terrain between the state and the economy, the realm of free association where citizens can interact to pursue their shared interests, including political ones” (Peter Dahlgren 2006:271). Yet this terrain is particularly treacherous for the movement and all other citizens who intend to bring this bitter truth to the consciousness of the state. In view of the disruption of the birthday celebration and the bad omen it portends for Marching to Heaven (what with the uncertainty of how the world will receive this disruption, 25), the Ruler has gone on air to personally announce the proscription of the Movement for the Voice of the People (24-25). Invoking the memory of the success of proscribing the pro-East opposition party in those days, the Ruler makes an unambiguous warning on the consequences that await those who think they can use plastic snakes to scare his domain. For him, it is about time to disrupt, if not rewrite the biblical narratives of the Mosaic snake swallowing the Pharaonic snakes: “Today in Aburiria, it is the Pharaonic snakes that will swallow all of you who think that you are the new Moses” (25). However, a clear indication that the citizens are no longer ready to concede absolutism to the Ruler is evident in the dance and the philharmonic response that come in the wake of the Ruler’s tantrums during the nation-wide telecast. The self-estimation of the Ruler’s might strikes the citizens as the very reason to demonize him as they sing:

*The pot I made is broken*
Within the context of the public sphere in particular, the kind of response that is generated by the Ruler’s tantrum is significant in the way television broadcasts can be viewed. That is, much as the people who in their respective and disparate locations cannot be said to be accreted as in the gathering at the celebration of the Ruler’s birthday, they are able, nonetheless, to form and identify with one another on the basis of the national issue which touches them simultaneously. In the end, not only does the telecast of the Ruler illustrate a transition of the public sphere within the context of the novel, but also demonstrates the centrality of the television as an elemental constituent of the modern public sphere. And rather than redound to the invincibility of the Ruler’s view and his attempt to browbeat the citizens into underwriting his almightiness which he intends to articulate via the threat and proscription as in the past, the broadcast produces a contrary response. The response is that of pointing out the evil that the personality of the ruler signifies within the context of a postcolonial Aburiria where “freedom” or independence has meant no gain to the citizens. On this score, then, the response of the citizens with respect to their defiance as expressed in the dance and the lyrics gives cogency to the view that “Television’s atomized public need not necessarily be an amorphous mass…It is possible for such a public to be provocative, self-aware…now defensive under their gaze. This public is not condemned to silence” (Daniel Dayan 2001:745).

If the by proscribing the movement the intention of the Ruler is to keep the opposition under, then the television broadcast fails precisely because the determination and conviction behind organizing the opposition are beyond reversal. Those involved would rather be executed than give in, as Nyawira, an embodiment of that movement believes that “organization was the only way by which people could effect meaningful changes” (427). This must then be why as Machokali organizes a dinner for the delegation of the Global Bank at Paradise, one of the most patronized hotles by the wealthy of Aburiria, the movement has also taken it upon itself to be part of the dinner in a way that again challenges the state. Taking advantage of the usual presence of beggars around the hotel, and conscious of the effect that their activism will create, especially on the wider world, members of the movement disguise as disabled beggars until they are able to
shout their chants about their opposition to the Marching to Heaven project. Among other chants, they protested “Marching to Heaven is Led by Dangerous Snakes” (74). Of course, the mention of snakes reminds the authorities that the supposedly proscribed movement is very much active. They are eventually dispersed; but again they have been able to make their point clear: “Your Strings of Loans Are Chains of Slavery” (ibid.).

What is more, before dispersing, they also share plastic snakes as usual and leaflets that further articulate their opposition to the Marching to Heaven project and the Global Bank (128; 135). The use of leaflets is significant because in themselves they constitute part of the elements of the modern public sphere and are effective in mobilizing and sustaining the publics about issues that are of concern. Not only are the leaflets distributed throughout Aburiria, we are told they even find their ways to the “gates of the State House and inside the Parliament grounds” (135). Shielding the protest from the Global Bank is certainly no longer possible. Yet the publicity is further buoyed by the report of the print media, another vital element of the public sphere discourse. In *Eldares Times*, for instance, the emphasis is on the beggars who have drawn the ire of the state police; and Tajirika who shortly thereafter becomes the first Chairman of Marching to Heaven strongly feels that the publicity about the beggars is uncalled for (101). Whichever way we look at it, one thing is clear, and that is the movement is determined to contest the state view on the public sphere through its consistent interrogation of and protest against the state and the Global Bank that appear determined run Aburiria aground further by the proposed loan for Marching to Heaven. The next battle ground for this contest is the site where Marching to Heaven is to be formally dedicated.

The fact that a dedication plan is in the offing already shows that unless the opposition becomes the more aggressive the state will not mind going ahead with taking the loan. Although prior to this time the leaders of the movement have been declared wanted “dead or alive” (185), they are not deterred, as again they are able to catch the state unawares and sensitize the people gathered at the venue of the dedication to the dangers inherent in the project. Of course, this is contrary to the all-knowing view of the state especially as articulated by Machokali who by virtue of the dance performance of state-rented troupes does not mince words in stating that the loan is desirable even if it means putting the generation of their grandchildren in perpetual debts (248).
At the said dedication the aura created by the Ruler and his cabinet is that of an occasion where
the best thing is about to happen to Aburiria. The mission from the Global Bank is in full
attendance, just as there is a huge presence of important dignitaries drawn from local and
international circles. The rented troupes do their best to convey the almightiness of the Ruler and
express their unreserved support for Marching to Heaven; after all, by being closer to God the
Ruler will be able to provide more for the needs of the citizens. The take of the women’s troupe
is however different. The movement has succeeded in organizing them into a large group whose
performance is ostensibly meant to be the highlight of the occasion. However, the first sign that
theirs is an attempt to circumvent the public sphere which the occasion offers is evident in the
manner of their entrance to the platform. Compared to the previous troupes, their mood runs
against the grain of the festivity and vivaciousness that the state attempts to force on the people.
They successfully repel the infectiousness of this contrived mood of celebration and once again
advance reasons for the undesirability of Marching to Heaven and their opposition to
highhandedness of the Ruler, which extends the boundaries of the public sphere to include the
domestic sphere. This they do by their singing which is directed audaciously at the Ruler. Apart
from the staunch warning given to him, they are also able to confront the Global Bank in a direct
manner to convey their resistance: “MARCHING TO HEAVEN IS A PILE OF SHIT!
MARCHING TO HEAVEN IS A MOUNTAIN OF SHIT!” (250).

But if by reversing the intended mission of their dance, the women have caused the state an
embarrassment, there is even a greater and more disconcerting embarrassment which their
intervention on the detention of the Ruler’s wife causes. For the Ruler has banished his wife,
Rachel, to a solitary confinement for daring to advise him against promiscuous extra-marital
affairs, especially with girls young enough to be his children (7-8). Reckoning that this violates
Rachel’s right, the women in their performance also get at the Ruler, deploring his domestic
violence against Rachel while calling at the same time for her release:

They stood absolutely still, facing the platform, their fingers pointing to the Ruler, and
with one voice they shouted: Set Rachel free! Set Rachel free! Their chant was
deafening, and those on the platform seemed dazed by their audacity. (250)
Although the Ruler considers the women’s intervention an intrusion “in his private business” (262), it is important to remark on how this situation goes to show within certain contexts that the line between the public sphere and the private sphere is thin and for that matter snaps when and where necessary. This is more so when the role and comportment of the personae involved have the capacity of impacting on the public sphere as in the case of the Ruler. The women’s intervention can thus be appropriately read as illustrative of a counter-public performance. Elaborating on the complementarity of the public sphere and the private sphere, especially within the context of gender, and how a counterpublic performance can be ingrained, Michael Warner has the following to say:

It is often thought, especially by outsiders, that the public display of private matters is a debased narcissism, a collapse of decorum, expressivity gone amok, the erosion of any distinction between the public and private. But in a counterpublic setting, such display often has the aim of transformation. Styles of embodiment are learned and cultivated, and the effects of shame and disgust that surround them can be tested, in some cases revalued. Visceral private meaning is not easy to alter by oneself, by a free act of will. It can only through exchanges that go beyond self-expression to the making of a collective scene of disclosure. (2002:62-63)

The transformative value of the intervention may not be immediately seen in the Ruler’s relation to Rachel thereafter, but it is certainly evident in how, Vinjinia, Tajirika’s wife is able to set herself free from the shackles of domestic violence (432-443). The transformation is in fact more evident at the national and international public sphere where the consistency of the movement’s protest eventually results in the Global Bank refusing to grant the loan to Aburiria for the project of Marching to Heaven. Clearly even when the Ruler and Machokali have chosen to travel to New York to press home their point about why they should be granted the loan, various activities back home by the movement make it impossible for them to make a good case about the support of the public for the project. In the Global Bank’s explanation for refusing to be favourably disposed to the application, the intervention of the movement is central. For using the women’s wing to checkmate domestic violence, the masculinist bias against this approach combines with the queuing maniac, which, instead of reinforcing the people’s support for Marching to Heaven,
foregrounds the extreme level of unemployment in Aburiria at home. In the end, the two incidents serve as bad publicity for the situation at home, and good reason by the Global Bank to turn down the application (499-500).

Thereafter, the only option left for the Ruler is to simulate a democratic atmosphere by calling for the formation of new political parties (703-4). Marching to Heaven is also jettisoned not only because the American and Western diplomatic missions advise against it, but substantially because it has become clear to both the Global Bank and the Ruler that unlike in the past when “strings of loans” wore down the progress of Aburiria because nobody/group could stand up to contest the explications of the state within the constrained public sphere, this time the Movement for the Voice of the People has taken it upon itself to force a dialogue, no matter how distianciated and risky, between the public and the state. This way the movement is able to contest issues within the public sphere and force the ruler to restore the dignity of debates and alternative views which provide a fecund ground for the institution of democracy. It is also interesting to note that the same medium which was part of what the state used in the past to constrain the healthy process of the public sphere will ironically become what provides the motivation for the movement to contest the narratives of the state and show that the state has failed to be sympathetic to the views of the public. As Nyawira recounts, “In the glow of overwhelming attendance, we planned to champion democracy and denounce dictatorship in broad daylight, and the promised presence of the Global Bank made things easier for us. How ironic! Democratic space guaranteed by the bank we opposed!” (246)

In the Ruler’s feigned and reluctant concession to a democratic space through the call for the formation of more political parties, a number of issues come up for discussion. I will however endeavour to dwell only on two in this paper. In the first place, it is essentially through the pressure mounted by the movement that the Ruler finally sees through the wall of sycophancy that bars him from a realistic view of things happening around him. Specifically, the epiphany of the bogusness of Marching to Heaven only dawns on him after realizing that Machokali may not have meant well after all when he broached the idea of Marching to Heaven as a birthday cake. Moreover, it stands to reason that that the mysterious pathological condition into which the Ruler slips, in spite of the many versions of the cause of the illness, could have been avoided if he had
not pursued with desperation the application for a loan projected for Marching to Heaven. It is the pursuit of the loan that eventually sees him passing through all manner of embarrassment in New York. For it is clearly evident in the novel that the Ruler’s SIE (self-induced expansion) (488), takes the better of him in New York and subsequently sees him through difficult times, including insinuations about his pregnancy because of the rejection of his application for the loan form the Global Bank. Of course, it is only after this realization that he begins to contemplate as a multi-party system state.

On a second plane, the activities of the Movement for the Voice of the People give cogency to the assertion that the conceptualization of “publics” should transcend the imaginary location of media audiences, as democracy consists in the interaction of citizens with power holders (Peter Dahlgren 2006:274). But as the situation shows in the Wizard of the Crow, the democratic space is only being forced into existence through the intervention of the movement. In other words, the absolutism of the state represented by the Ruler is checked only because even within the context of the absence of an institutional democratic space, the movement has chosen to be persistent in pointing to alternative ways by which things can be organized in keeping the interest of the public and the totality it invokes about Abuririria in view. Indeed, members of the movement have acted as subalterns whose continual agitation transcends the insularity of smaller and disparate groups, as they take the categories of the suffering people in Abuririria along. Thiers can therefore be limned as illustrating the Habermas’ “sluice-gate” paradigm in which “the public sphere awards primacy to social movements and campaigning organizations in forcing issues onto the public agenda that otherwise might not be there at all” (Jim McGuigan 2005:428). This much is justified in the various encounters and confrontations of the movement with the state, including their response to the sham of democracy which the Ruler is beginning to advocate. The view is borne out by the comportment of the people to refuse to be taken in by the forced confession of the Wizard of the Crow, which points to the desperation of the state to have Nyawira arrested (688). This ultimately accounts for why in looking back at the struggle in the days of the Ruler and the likely repression that the regime of Tajirika may want to institute after successfully assassinating the Ruler, Nyawira does not hesitate in reminding Kamiti, the Wizard of the Crow, how the struggle of the movement simultaneously instigated the exit of the Ruler: “To their joint military exercises we respond with joint political exercise with our people” (762).
This, then, becomes a salute to the various interventions of civil societies and other groups which in recent times in African postcolonial history have either directly or indirectly mediated the transition from dictatorship to democratic dispensations. Indeed, the values of their interventions in this paper lie less in the democratic space that results from their contest of the public sphere with the tyrannical holders of power than in their ability to launch and sustain the dialogue leading to democracy, even when the public sphere available to them was extremely constrained. Truly what obtains in most of these countries today are still as questionable as the institutional condition of the public sphere after the assassination of the Ruler of Aburiria, but the oppositional steps leading to the transformation are worth commending, anyway. *Wizard of the Crow* thus stands tall in the way it refreshes our memory concerning Africa’s recent postcolonial struggle towards the institution of democracy.

**Works Cited**


