



THE

THE PERFECT NINE

PERFECTION

NGŨGĨ WA THIONG'O

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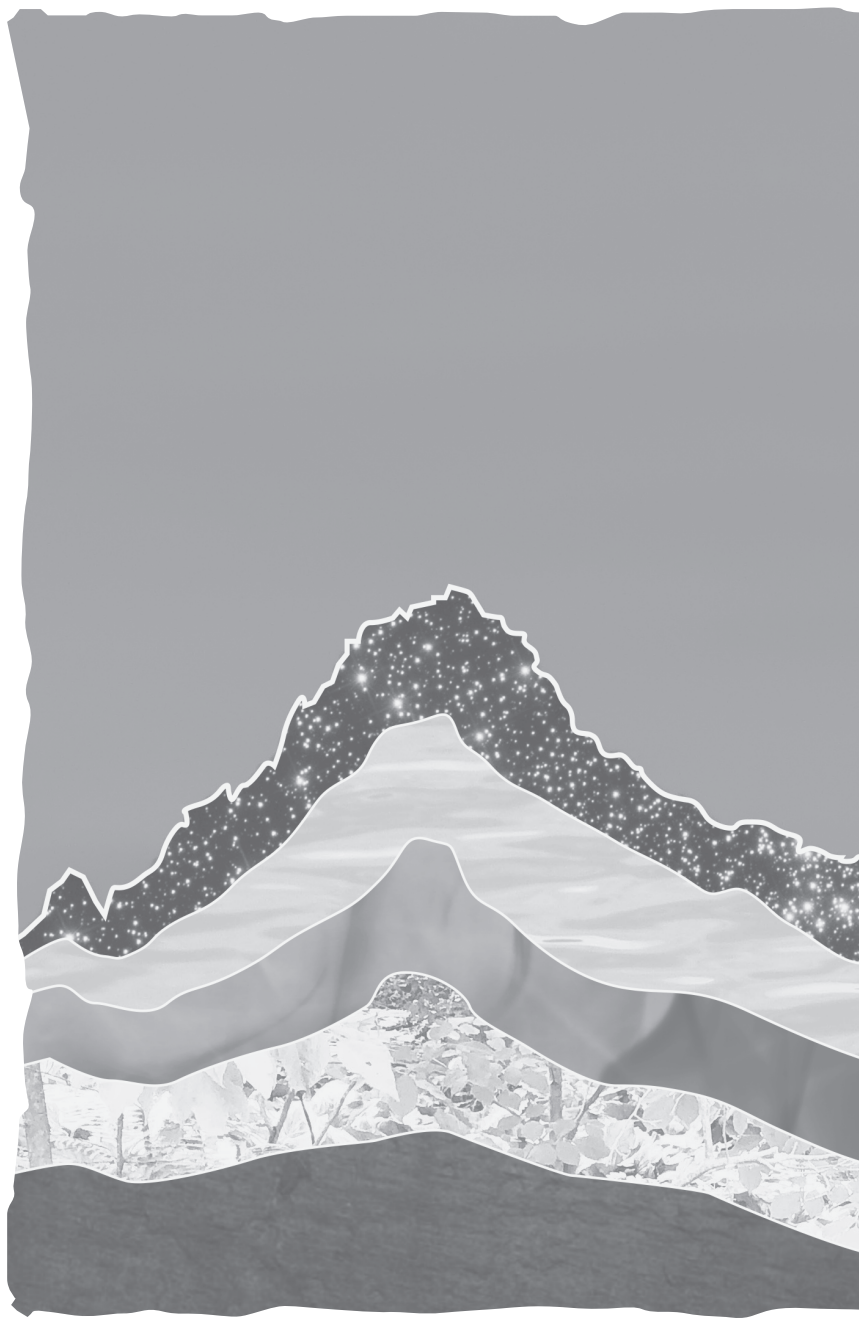
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The Perfect Nine

*The Epic of Gĩkũyũ
and Mũmbi*

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o

*Translated from the Gĩkũyũ
original by the author*



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Contents

NOTES ON *THE PERFECT NINE*:

The Story of Gíkūyū and Mūmbi ix

1. PROLOGUE	1
2. SUPPLICATION FOR POWER TO THE TONGUE	13
3. THE PERFECT NINE	21
4. THE WIND AND THE OSTRICH	35
5. FEAST SONG AND DANCE	45
6. GÍKŪYŪ AND MŪMBI	55
7. TRIALS, FALLS, AND TRIUMPHS	73
8. MISSION TO THE MOUNTAIN OF THE MOON	85
9. THE JOURNEY	91
10. THE OGRE AND THE CURE-ALL HAIR	111
11. THE OGRE OF ENDLESS DARKNESS	121

12.	THE OGRE THAT FUMED FIRE AND FURY	129
13.	THE OGRE THAT SHAT WITHOUT STOPPING	137
14.	THE OGRES WITH BAGS THAT NEVER FILLED UP	143
15.	THE HYENA AND THE VULTURE	155
16.	OGRES IN WHITE MASKS	161
17.	THE HAIR THAT CURES ALL ILLNESSES	169
18.	BETROTHAL	175
19.	ADOPTION AND CLAN NAMES	181
20.	THE FIRST MARRIAGE	185
21.	WARIGIA	197
22.	WARIGIA AND THE LION	205
23.	CEMENTING RELATIONS BETWEEN IN-LAWS	217
24.	EPILOGUE: THE WILL OF GÍKŪYŪ AND MŪMBI	223
	<i>Acknowledgments</i>	228

Notes on

The Perfect Nine:

The Story of Gĩkũyũ and Mũmbi

THE GĨKŪYŪ ARE ONE OF SEVERAL PEOPLES that make up the Kenyan nation. All of the different peoples have their own language and their own myth of origins (in Gĩkũyũ, the “ũ” is pronounced like the “o” in “boat”; the “ĩ” is pronounced like the “a” in “take”).

The Gĩkũyũ people trace theirs to Gĩkũyũ (man) and Mũmbi (woman). God put the pair on the snow-capped Mount Kenya, from where they surveyed the lands around. They made their home in a place called Mũkũrũweinĩ. They had nine daughters, but they were actually ten, hence the Perfect Nine.

Legend has it that when the girls came of marrying age, Gĩkũyũ went back to the mountaintop and asked God to provide. On waking up one morning, the family found ten handsome young men outside their home in Mũkũrũweinĩ. The ten clans of the Gĩkũyũ people are named after the ten daughters.

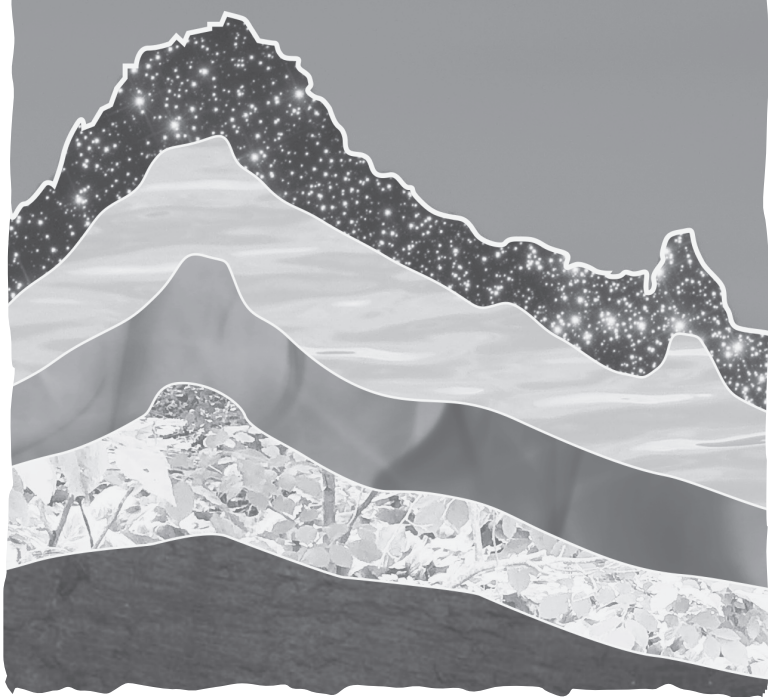
The epic *The Perfect Nine* is an interpretation of that myth starting from a question: where did the Ten Suitors come from? I imagined them as the last left standing after others failed tests of character and resolve.

The daughters, having grown up without brothers, had to depend on themselves. They had to acquire all the skills of survival: defend themselves, work the land, build and make things, including houses, clothes, weapons. Self-reliance was central to their character. Theirs was the union of mind, heart, and hands. They embodied wholesome beauty. The Perfect Nine would seem to be the original feminists.

I use the quest for the beautiful, as an ideal of living, as the motive force behind migrations of African peoples. The epic came to me one night as a revelation of ideals of quest, courage, perseverance, unity, family, and the sense of the divine, in human struggles with nature and nurture.

1

Prologue





I will tell the tale of Gíkūyū and Mūmbi
And their daughters, the Perfect Nine,
Matriarchs of the House of Mūmbi,
Founders of their nine clans,
Progenitors of a nation.

I will tell of their travels, and
The countless hardships they met on the way,
Tremor after tremor raging from the belly of the
earth,
Eruptions breaking the ground around them,
Making the ridges quake, the earth tremble, as

New hills heaved themselves out of the earth, and
Others burned, their flames flaring skyward,
And valleys formed deep and wide behind them.
When Gíkūyū and Mūmbi looked back, and
Saw a river of thick red mud moving toward them,

They climbed other ridges,
Any that seemed free of flames, but

Just as they sought to sit down
For a much needed rest,
They saw a big red rock,

Hurtling down toward them,
Forcing them back on their heels and down to the
plains.
Other fires flared up in front of them, and again
they were back on their feet, beating a hasty retreat,
Looking for any place that would offer respite.

They faced hazards big enough to shatter the hearts
of many.
Their bodies trembled, but their hearts remained
unshaken,
For Gíkūyū and Mūmbi had robed themselves with
hope
And fastened themselves with courage and moved
on.

And then they came to a mountain
Whose top touched the sky.
How they were able to climb it, they could not
fathom,
But they found themselves at the top,
Where now they stood, awed by

The summit, as white and massive as the moon,
Its coldness pushing them back as if
Commanding them to stop.
They exchanged fleeting glances, not knowing
Whether to advance or retreat.

Before them spread the chilling whiteness,
Threatening to freeze their hearts;
Behind them the sluggish red rivers of fire,
And the earth convulsing,
And the molten rock rolling down toward them.

They did not let hope die.
They did not ask, "Why us?"
Or indulge in blaming each other.
They held firm, and
Cast their eyes ahead to find the way.

Far beyond, they sighted another mountain
With a moon-white top, like this one,
As if the two mountains were born of one mother.
And they said, "Another Mountain of the Moon."
They saw yet other mountains,

Lying side by side like the folds of a cowhide in the
sun.

They cried out, “Look, the mountains of the cow-hides!”

There were others shaped like turtle beans.
And they named them the Njahī Bean Mountains.
Still others, the Mbirūirū—Blue-Black—Mountains.

The landscape was beautiful.
For a moment they were at a loss for words to
describe
The undulating plains that spread out before them,
or
The hills and valleys that hedged them in, or
The rivers that flowed through the green lilies and
reeds.

Countless animals of different shapes and colors
Bent low over the waters, drinking and lowing and
grunting and roaring in delight;
Others strutted about the banks or simply basked
in the sun.
Gīkūyū and Mūmbi turned to each other and murmured something.
They were captives to their wonder.

They resumed gazing at the peaceful, green land
below.

Then they stretched forth their arms in grateful
reverence.

“We receive this with all our hearts, O Giver Supreme,” they said in unison.

“Thank you, Owner of the Ostrich Whiteness, for
this land, which

You have given us, our children, and our children’s
children.”

They scooped some of the moonwhite in their hands.

They scattered it on the earth around them.

They started facing north and chanted,

“Peace! Glory to thee, Giver Supreme. Peace!”

Then they turned to the south, and they said,

“Peace! Glory to thee, Giver Supreme. Peace!”

Then they turned to the east, the land of the rising
sun.

“Peace! Glory to thee, Giver Supreme. Peace!”

And last, the west, the land of the setting sun.

“Peace! Glory to thee, Giver Supreme. Peace.”

And suddenly they felt their souls stir and soar with
joy.

They recalled the other places they had journeyed
through,

Some of them with mountains and woodlands like
these,
Rivers like these, animals like these,
But their hearts had not been drawn to them.

And now all the beauty they had left behind
Has reappeared tenfold for them to reap.
More gratitude to the Giver Supreme welled up
inside,
And they broke into hymns of praise:

*Owner of Ostrich whiteness, we praise you
For this brightness that shines so,
This soil, these rivers, and the numerous hills,
And animals of varied shapes and color.*

*These flowers reflect your glory.
The plants and the animals and the birds
And the creatures that dwell in rivers and lakes—
All creation reflects your glory.*

*We listened and heard the voice.
It was you telling us that you have trusted us
With this beauty to tend it with care and love
Because this wonder manifests your glory.*

. . .

The forests and the mountains echoed with
The melodies and the words and the rhythms.
Voices from all things mingled in the air;
Birds hopped on branches with delight;
Monkeys hung from branches excitedly.

Gíkūyū and Mūmbi descended the mountain.
They did not stop to look back.
When fatigue finally caught up with them,
They lay on the ground and slept for nine months,
The big deep sleep of the beginning.

Chirping nyagathanga birds woke them.
In the mūkūrwe and mūkūyū trees,
The birds hopped up and down in their nests, letting
forth their rapturous song,
As if whistling advice to the man and woman that
They too should set up their own nest there, under
the trees.

They felt as if born again.
Mūmbi picked a leaf of the mūkūyū, the fig tree:
“Because you have woken up to a new life,
I, with this mūkūyū leaf, now rename you son of
mūkūyū,
Calling you Mūgíkūyū. . . .”

. . .

They stopped by a wild olive tree, a mūtamaiyũ.

Gíkũyũ picked some maiyũ leaves.

He sniffed at them and felt good.

“You are still the Mũmbi who molded my heart,

but

In the name of these leaves, I will also call you my

Mūtamaiyũ.”

They started playing with the names,

Trying different variations,

Different nicknames,

Till they ended with

“Husband! Wife!” they called out in unison.

They exchanged glances,

Their eyes sending out light,

Dwellers in a dreamland.

Then they turned to the earth:

“Peace! Glory be to thee, Giver Supreme. Peace!

They then turned to the mountain of ostrich whiteness and

Chanted gratitude to the Giver Supreme

For bringing them to Mūkũruweinĩ.

They sang more hymns of gratitude

For their safe deliverance under the Mūkūrūweinĩ
shrine.

*Owner of Ostrich Whiteness, we praise you
For this brightness around us,
This soil, these rivers and numerous hills,
And these animals of different kinds.*

Even I, teller of this tale, will first do the same:
Implore the Giver Supreme to bestow peace in my
heart, so that
I can render this tale of Gikūyũ and Mūmbi and
their Perfect Nine,
Exactly the way the wind whispered it to my soul,
when once
I stood on a hill watching swallows flying in the air.

2

Supplication for Power to the Tongue

