

The River Between Study Guide

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Plot Summary

The River Between is the story of an African village and their quest to survive an influx of outside influence. The story opens with a description of the lore describing the area of two ridges, Kamenon and Makuyu, and the river, Honia, that runs between them. The river is strong, even in the dry seasons, and the name means "cure." The legends of a magician, a seer and a warrior are ingrained in the children of the tribes that live there and those who live there are largely untouched by the outside.

Waiyaki is a special young man from the time of childhood. When he encounters two young boys fighting, he is able to put a stop to the fight though he is the youngest of the three. These three boys, Waiyaki, Kamau and Kinuthia are all destined to study at the Sierana Mission school and all will become teachers. Before Waiyaki is sent to the school by his father, Chege, father and son take a walk to a sacred grove where Chege reveals the fact that Waiyaki is destined to become the savior of their people. Waiyaki is skeptical that he could be that person, but advances to an important role in the development of his people. However, another member of the tribe who also knows the legend of a savior is Kabonyi. Kabonyi is jealous of Waiyaki's success with the people and wants that respected position for himself or his own son, Kamau.

Meanwhile, a man named Joshua has come to believe Christianity is the truth rather than the traditional lore of the tribe and begins to collect a small band of followers, though Christianity is scorned by the majority of the tribe. Then one of Joshua's daughter, Muthoni, runs away from home because her father refuses to allow her to be circumcised - an important ritual of the tribe. Muthoni dies following the illness, and her death creates a greater division between those who believe in Christianity and those who believe the white man's ways are wrong and choose to follow the tradition of the tribe.

Waiyaki comes to believe that education is the key to survival for his people and moves toward that end, establishing schools and coming to be a respected teacher among the tribe. Meanwhile, Waiyaki and Nyambura fall in love, though they remain apart because Joshua would never allow Nyambura to marry a pagan. Jealousy that Waiyaki is so beloved by the people and that he holds Nyambura's heart prompts Kamau to begin spreading rumors and Waiyaki is soon being accused of selling the tribe out to the white man's ways. As the story comes to a conclusion, Waiyaki realizes that unity of the tribe - not education - is the key to survival, and vows to encourage the tribe in that direction, but when he is brought in front of the members of the tribe, he can't hold their attention against those who speak against him.



Chapters One through Five

Chapters One through Five Summary

The story opens with a description of the lore describing the area of two ridges, Kameno and Makuyu, and the river, Honia, that runs between them. The river is strong, even in the dry seasons, and the name means "cure." The legends of a magician, a seer and a warrior are ingrained in the children of the tribes that live there and those who live there are largely untouched by the outside.

Chapter two begins with two young boys fighting. The boys are Kamau, son of a man named Kabonyi from Makuyu, and Kinuthia, a boy who lives with his uncle two ridges from Kamau. Kinuthia's father had died and now the two boys are fighting, first with sticks and then with their bare hands, apparently because Kamau said that Kinuthia's father had died poor and Kinuthia had accused Kamau's father of being a convert to the ways of the white man. Kamau is obviously winning the fight when another boy, Waiyaki, arrives on the scene and breaks up the fight. He is younger than the other boys but is well respected.

He is the son of Chege who is also a well-respected leader. Chege lost two wives to a famine and has one remaining wife along with several daughters and only one son, Waiyaki. When Waiyaki arrives home, his father calls him to the "man hut" and tells him that he is not to forget a special event set for the following day, the day of his "second birth."

Chapter three describes the ritual in which Waiyaki sits between the thighs of his mother as she mimics the pains of labor and a midwife cuts a sinew of a goat meant to represent the umbilical cord. Waiyaki says that for a moment he fears he is unable to open his eyes, then he begins to cry - not the usual reaction of a boy who undergoes the ritual. He says that day he follows his mother as a small child would do.

In chapter four, Chege tells Waiyaki that his mother is to care for the herd the following day and that the two of them will go into the hills. There they see an antelope and Chege says that the animal runs only from men, not woman, and explains that there was a time women ruled the world. When all women were pregnant, men united and overthrew them, but during their reign the women had provided inadequate care for their "goats," and the antelope are those "goats." Chege says the antelope know women are not to be feared. From this story, Waiyaki understands why his mother "owns nothing."

Waiyaki and Chege stand on a ridge and watch the sunrise, and in chapter five, Chege begins to tell Waiyaki about Gikuyu and Mumbi, the "father and mother" of the tribe, and of Mugo wa Kibiro, a seer who prophesied that there would be "butterflies" that created disharmony in the country, and that those butterflies were really white people. Chege says that Mugo was ignored and became bitter; though before he stopped talking, he dictated that they must learn what they can of the ways of the white men in order to beat



them. Waiyaki trembles with fear when his father tells him that they are descendants of Mugo and that Waiyaki is the last of the line. Chege then tells Waiyaki that he must go to the Mission and learn all he can about the white men but must never succumb to the vice of the white missionaries. When the time comes, Waiyaki goes quietly to the Siriana Mission where he is joined by many young boys, including Kamau and Kinuthia. The three will study under the Reverend Livingstone.

Chapters One through Five Analysis

The legends of the ridges and of the people who live on those ridges is complex, as are the legends and lore of most cultures. In this case, the people also believe that a specific place is sacred, there having been a tree that grew from the spot where this character stood. Another predicts the coming of the white people as being an invasion of "butterflies," apparently because of the clothing worn. There are some who believe Chege to be a descendant of a seer, and Chege himself doesn't address the rumor until he tells his son, Waiyaki that the story is true and that Waiyaki is to be an important leader for their people.

When Waiyaki's father tells him that he is to go to the Mission to learn the ways of the white missionaries in order to save his people, Waiyaki's immediate reaction is that he isn't capable. However, it's important to note that Waiyaki has always been a leader among his people. He has been noted as fearless for an encounter in which he interfered with a charging goat and was injured himself. Waiyaki says that he earned the respect of the boys of the tribe for that adventure, but that he didn't actually intend to do a heroic act but was merely acting impulsively.

It seems likely that Waiyaki's reaction to his "second birth" is a sign of his realization that this is more than just a symbolic ritual of his aging, but is a step out of his childhood and into the inescapable path toward adulthood. It also seems that Waiyaki is soon to realize that he is destined to play an important role in the lives of his people and that he senses this to some degree. Chege himself warned his people to guard against the ways of the whites but is ignored as his people say that the whites know nothing of the way of their land and would never come there. Chege apparently comes to realize the futility of forcing the issue and simply keeps quiet, though he has a secret he doesn't share with anyone. Though that secret isn't spelled out, it seems likely that it's the hope that Waiyaki will become the man who saves the village from the white man.



Chapters Six through Nine

Chapters Six through Nine Summary

Sisters Nyambura and Muthoni are at the Honia getting water when Muthoni breaks the news that she plans to be circumcised, though they both profess to be Christians and know that the missionaries who teach them say that circumcision of girls is a "pagan rite" that is to be avoided. Further, their father, Joshua, will never allow it. Muthoni argues that both her father and mother are Christians and that both were circumcised before their move to Christianity. Nyambura realizes that she hasn't given this subject as much thought as her younger sister apparently has. Nyambura tries to talk Muthoni out of taking this step, but Muthoni is adamant and Nyambura, loving her sister so fully, wants to help. Knowing that their parents will never agree, Nyambura suggests that Muthoni go to an aunt at Kameno when the time comes and Muthoni says she's already considered that possibility.

In chapter seven, the two girls arrive at their village to find other women headed to the river for water and young boys leaving the village with their small herds of cattle and goats. Nyambura's father is Joshua who is among the earliest of the converts to Christianity. When Joshua first became a Christian, he moved to the mission, fearing reprisals from his people. He eventually got past that fear though he knows some don't believe what he preaches and believe he has betrayed the Gikuyu people. Joshua truly believes the Biblical warnings that those who deny God will burn in Hell and that allows him to remain strong in his faith.

Josua's wife, Miriamu, has gone through the ritual of circumcision and he says that he wishes she hadn't but excuses the action by comparing it to things a person does while not an acting Christian. Miriamu, however, doesn't completely share his sentiments but doesn't argue - not because she feels strongly one way or the other but because she's learned the art of submission.

Chapter eight begins with a description of a typical Sunday for Joshua. He conducts "a long service" with the occasional help of Kabonyi and sometimes travels across the area, preaching other services. On a particular evening he is so tired that he and Miriamu go home before singing that happens outside the church. It's been months since the discussion at the river and when Nyambura realizes that Muthoni is missing Nyambura knows she's gone to their aunt. She waits some time before revealing this to her father, and he immediately sends word that if Muthoni returns home immediately, all will be forgiven; otherwise, she will be disinherited. Muthoni refuses to return home and chooses to remain with the aunt. Joshua takes it as a sign he was personally lax and allowed the Devil this foothold into this life and vows that he will never allow it to happen again.

In chapter nine, the tribe celebrates another good harvest but continue their sacrifices, knowing that a time of famine could easily follow. Chege believes that Joshua and his



followers will bring death and dissension to their people but holds to the hope that Waiyaki will be their savior. Chege worries while Waiyaki is away, but whenever Waiyaki returns home for holidays, Chege is reassured. Waiyaki looks forward to his own circumcision as a way to prove he is brave in the face of fear, but is somewhat more detached than most of the young men and women who spend days prior to the surgery dancing and singing. Waiyaki feels that the children who remained in the village know more about the dancing than he who has been away at school. One night Waiyaki encounters Muthoni and watches her dance with abandon, realizing that a person only has to give himself over to the rhythm and the dream, and that night Waiyaki dances frantically though he later reverts to his old reserve. After the dance, Waiyaki talks to Muthoni and asks why she chose this course of action. Muthoni says that both her parents were circumcised, and she feels circumcision is necessary in order to be "beautiful." She says her father would have denied her the opportunity, so she simply decided to come anyway.

Chapters Six through Nine Analysis

Nyambura seems quite content to follow the dictates of her parents and of the missionaries who say that female circumcision is not acceptable in the eyes of God, but Muthoni says that there is something missing from her life and seeks this as a way to fill that void. What's interesting here is that Muthoni, the younger of the two, is apparently feeling the growing pains of many young women in many cultures and in Muthoni's case, the most obvious rite of passage into adulthood is the circumcision. Though the rite would be different in other cultures, there seems little doubt that the reasoning is the same.

Joshua believes his people to be ignorant which seems to weigh heavily on him as he considers the "gods" worshiped by his people and considers the prophecies of their own "seer" to that of Isaiah who had told of the coming of Jesus. Joshua knows in his heart that the Christian way is the correct one. Now Joshua has set himself apart by having his hut a short distance from the others and by demanding that his family be above reproach, which means Muthoni's decision to participate in the circumcision rite is going to hit Joshua stronger than it would some fathers in his position. Another interesting point about Joshua is his lack of tolerance for those who refuse to see the Christian way. He says that those of Israel were punished for refusing to follow God and that he wishes he could strike his own people "with a stick."

Waiyaki seems enamored with the idea that Muthoni has rebelled against authority, though Waiyaki can't imagine doing so himself. An interesting point here is that Muthoni's rebellion attracts him and could be an indication that Waiyaki himself will embrace the opportunity to rebel against the authority that requires specific things of him. This rebellion could make him more open to the ways of the white missionaries than he might otherwise have been. It should also be noted that Waiyaki is uncomfortable with the talk that goes on in the days leading up to the surgery. He says that there are some things that are not to be spoken of in the presence of others, and those social taboos come down completely in the days leading up to the circumcisions.

Another interesting point of their conversation is that after Muthoni leaves Waiyaki, Waiyaki feels a longing for something he can't define. This isn't explained and it's left to the reader to determine the significance of this longing.



Chapters Ten through Fourteen

Chapters Ten through Fourteen Summary

Waiyaki is circumcised and he notes that his blood drops onto the ground, forever linking him with the land. Chege is complimented on Waiyaki's reaction with people seeming proud that the boy's time with the white missionaries hasn't made him soft. The boys and girls recover in separate hospital huts, and the education continues with the young men being given specific instruction into the ways of life. Then comes word that Muthoni isn't doing well, that her wound isn't healing. Waiyaki goes to visit her and is appalled at how quickly the young girl is fading away, though her spirit remains bright. When she continues to get worse, the people believe that Joshua's disobedience to the gods has caused it and that he could have corrected the situation with a ritual sacrifice. Waiyaki eventually goes to Joshua's village and tells Nyambura. When Waiyaki suggests that Muthoni be taken to the mission hospital, Nyambura tells her mother of the situation and both women spend time with Muthoni before several young men carry her away on a stretcher.

In chapter eleven, Waiyaki returns to the village with the news that Muthoni died just a few hours after reaching the hospital. He says that she had talked about the fact that she remained both a Christian and, through the circumcision, beautiful among the women of the tribe. Waiyaki goes to his own hut and that night, sleepless, asks "why," though he doesn't know who he is asking. When Joshua hears, he remains unmoved, at least outwardly, which makes Miriamu cry even harder.

Chege, now growing old, worries that the death of Muthoni will be the beginning of the trouble between the people of the two villages and worries that he made the wrong choice by sending Waiyaki to the mission school but finds that he has trouble talking to his son now. Chege seems to realize that Muthoni's death has affected Waiyaki. Meanwhile, those at the Mission, including Livingstone who is now very old, take Muthoni's death to mean that the ritual must be rooted out. Livingstone has remained among the people for twenty-five years, has a fair control of the language and has refused to take stern steps to eliminate the ritual, believing that time and patience would pay off. But he has seen the actions of the dancers just prior to the surgeries and that prompted stronger steps. Now he knows he must fight harder. Then he learns from a woman who believes that his policy of patience is wrong that Muthoni is Joshua's daughter.

In chapter twelve, Chege falls ill and is unable to leave his hut; the illness prompts Waiyaki to remain in the village rather than to return to the Mission School. Waiyaki notes that other girls have died as a result of the circumcision, but that none of those deaths had prompted this level of "ill-will" among the people. Waiyaki predicts that the harder line taken by Livingstone will cause a split among Joshua's followers. It occurs soon with Joshua's fellow preacher, Kabonyi, being the first to leave. Kabonyi takes some with him and those who remain with Joshua gather around to comfort each other.



The changes at the Mission School are swift and unforgiving. While Waiyaki is traveling one day in search of a specific bush he hopes will ease his father, he learns that only children of families who renounce circumcision will be allowed to attend the Mission School. Waiyaki is bitter about the stance because it means he cannot conclude his final year of education. When he arrives home, his mother is crying and elders are emerging from his father's hut.

In chapter thirteen, Waiyaki is a teacher in his village as are the two young boys who had fought about their fathers so many years ago, Kinuthia and Kamau. Waiyaki listens to the two talk, Kinuthia passionate in his argument that the white men should be driven out of their land and Kamau, though agreeing with the argument, seeming much less passionate. Waiyaki notes that some, including Kamau's father, Kabonyi, are pressing for the formation of a "Kiama" to bring the people of all the region's ridges together. Waiyaki, a natural leader, hopes he won't be given a place in this group, wishing instead to focus on educating the boys of his village. Chapter fourteen focuses on Waiyaki's reasons for beginning his school, known as Marioshoni. He is lost following his father's death and can't return to the Mission School, a situation many families are in who refuse to deny the rite of circumcision. Waiyaki senses a longing among his people and begins one of many schools, all an apparent effort to capture some of the "magic" of the white man without conforming to his ways. Waiyaki is proud of his role in this awakening of his people but longs for something more.

Chapters Ten through Fourteen Analysis

Waiyaki's surgery is not without pain, which is described in vivid detail.

When Waiyaki suggests that Muthoni be taken to the hospital, the aunt refuses outright, and it's Nyambura who pleads the case until the aunt agrees. The attitudes at this point are interesting—those who resist the way of Christianity use it as a way of pointing out the error of Joshua's decisions. It's already been pointed out that the people talk about Joshua's actions, accusing him of partaking in beer though no one has actually seen this happen. This seems very typical of those who choose the path of Christianity in any culture with those opposed to the teachings saying that any bad incident is a punishment.

In the years following the day Chege tells Waiyaki that his duty is to learn the ways of the white man, Waiyaki admits that the events of that day take on a dreamlike quality that seem something less than real. But as it becomes clear that Chege is dying, Waiyaki finds that the day becomes vivid again in his mind, and he seeks desperately to see into this father's thoughts and see what the future holds for these people without the leadership of Chege. His inability to do either seems to frighten him.

Waiyaki is quickly becoming an important influence among his people, though he is still very young. What's interesting at this point is that the people also believe him to be very young, but refute that one so young can't be important to the tribe by pointing out his ancestry. Another point is that some worry, at least occasionally, that Waiyaki is different

because of the time he spent with the white missionaries. When those people wonder about that, Waiyaki's ancestry is used to explain his difference.



Chapters Fifteen through Eighteen

Chapters Fifteen through Eighteen Summary

Waiyaki is uneasy with his role. He remembers clearly his father's instructions that he is not to allow himself to be "contaminated" by the instructions he receives at the white man's Mission School, and Waiyaki wonders if, by sharing the education he received, he is now contaminating other young men in the village. On a particular night he is unable to sleep and has a vision in which his life becomes, for an instant, a white blur that then fades somewhat to allow him to see a woman, though not clearly. He rises, dresses and goes looking for Kamau, hoping to find a man with whom he can talk about his hopes for the education of the young boys of the village and his fears. On the way, he encounters Nyambura.

Nyambura has been desolate without her sister, having no close friends and little comfort. She wonders if Muthoni's death is punishment but can't come to admit that her sister sinned. Though Nyambura continues to obey her father in word, she associates him with the death of her sister and best friend, and finds her only solace in the river. Nyambura remembers that Waiyaki had told her that Muthoni had sent a message back. The message was to tell Nyambura that "I see Jesus," and Nyambura now thinks of that message and of Waiyaki's kindness to her sister.

As they part, Waiyaki invites her to see the school the following afternoon after classes have dismissed, and she agrees but in chapter sixteen, she doesn't show up. Waiyaki is at first angry, having looked forward to her visit all day but then realizes he wouldn't have wanted to have been seen talking to her the night before, and she might fear her father's wrath, so forgives her. This presents a dilemma because Waiyaki feels that his entire life is being watched, and he chafes under the constraints.

Waiyaki is dealing with the dislike of Kabonyi who feels Waiyaki is too young to have important roles in the tribe and seems jealous of Waiyaki's role with the school. When Waiyaki suggests something regarding the school, Kabonyi - who has taken on a leadership role among the people after his split from Joshua and the death of Chege - objects. Now Waiyaki learns that a Kiama is to be organized and that he's to take the role of clerk, though Kabonyi is objecting and has told everyone that Waiyaki was seen in his village the previous night, though he doesn't mention Nyambura.

In chapter seventeen, Waiyaki goes to a church service and realizes why Joshua's followers remain faithful after hearing the man's strong, commanding voice. Waiyaki isn't certain why he chose to listen to a sermon but knows he will be labeled a traitor to the traditions of his tribe if he's seen there. He encounters Kamau and admits to him that he was checking out the church. Just then, Nyambura passes, though Waiyaki denies having seen her. She waits for him some distance away and they talk only briefly; she says she'll come to the school if she ever gets the chance and he aching to say that he loves her but not daring to do so. Nyambura returns home and cooks a meal. When her



mother comes home from church, Nyambura says that she still doesn't feel well, following through her story of having had a stomach ache that prevented her attendance at church.

Waiyaki holds a meeting of all the parents of the area. Most want to know how their children are doing in school but some simply want to meet "the Teacher," as Waiyaki has come to be known. He is kind and generous with both his time and attention which earns him praise from many, though Kabonyi is angry. When Waiyaki speaks, he tells the parents of his plans to build more schools, hire teachers and of the need for supplies such as pencils and paper for the student. Then Kabonyi begins to speak and says the correct attitude is to drive out the white men and return fully to the old ways. For a moment there's a murmuring among the people who believe this could be the easier course of action. Then Waiyaki begins to speak again, this time saying that he is "their son" and he awaits their instruction, but that the only way to regain their former dignity is to seek knowledge and wisdom. When he's finished speaking, the other elders support him and no one else speaks against his suggestions. Then Kabonyi stands and feigns a weakness in his legs. Kamau walks with him toward home, and Kabonyi berates Kamau for not "supplanting" Waiyaki in the hearts and minds of the people. Kamau himself is also angry and has come to hate Waiyaki.

Over the coming months, Waiyaki is beset by the need to build more schools and to provide the knowledge sought by the youngsters to the point that he doesn't see anything else, including Kabonyi's hatred or the smothering need of the people who depend on Waiyaki. It's much later that Waiyaki realizes that he's forgotten his original plan that includes reconciliation with Joshua's followers.

Chapters Fifteen through Eighteen Analysis

An interesting point between Nyambura and Waiyaki as they meet on the evening Waiyaki is feeling so out of place is that both are longing for something and only Nyambura can name that longing as the need for friendship. In Waiyaki's case, he knows only that he wants something and fears that his entire life will be spent enduring this yearning for something he can't even name. Nyambura wants to talk to Waiyaki about Muthoni, seeing Waiyaki as one of the only people who knew her sister and could talk to Nyambura about Muthoni's death, but Nyambura sees Waiyaki as something of a snob who never stops to talk to her when they happen to meet. She feels that he may also fear her father because of Joshua's strong stand on Christianity and circumcision, but it seems more likely that Waiyaki is simply shy around this young woman.

Waiyaki was told by Chege that there is one other person who knows of the prophecy that a young man would be the person to save the people and that person is Kabonyi, which accounts for much of Kabonyi's hostilities toward Waiyaki. However, Kabonyi has a son - Kamau - who is older than Waiyaki and who is also a teacher, having been educated at the Mission School along with Waiyaki. The jealousy is therefore even deeper because Kabonyi wants his own son to be that chosen one who garners the respect of all in the region.



Chapters Nineteen through Twenty-Six

Chapters Nineteen through Twenty-Six Summary

Joshua becomes disheartened at the lack of faithful converts and holds a meeting in Waiyaki's village where several are converted and Waiyaki watches a bit of the service from the door of his hut. Waiyaki then goes for a walk near the river where he encounters Nyambura who is having doubts about her current path. Nyambura has come to believe that there must be a "marriage" of Christianity and tribal customs in order for her to find happiness, and she's come to associate that with Waiyaki. When he finds her, he impulsively asks her to marry him and for a moment she is tempted, but then tells him that she can't defy her father and that he would never approve the match, so turns him down. As Nyambura and Waiyaki leave in different directions, Kamau comes from his hiding place. He's seen the entire exchange and is furious, having decided that he was going to propose to Nyambura but now sees that she is obviously in love with Waiyaki even though she turned down his proposal.

In chapter twenty, Waiyaki throws himself into his work. At a ridge near Siriana, Waiyaki finds several young men who are about to complete their education at the Mission who agree to consider coming into some of the villages in need of teachers. Then one day Kinuthia comes to tell Waiyaki that there are rumors circulating about him, including that he's become one of Joshua's followers and that he and Nyambura are to marry. Waiyaki tells him that the rumors aren't true but admits that Nyambura turned down his proposal.

Kinuthia tells Waiyaki that he has been too busy to pay attention to the oath being administered by the Miami, and that the people of the tribe are taking this oath - which includes a promise to never betray their people - in the name of the Teacher, Waiyaki. Waiyaki, hearing this from his friend, now recalls an incident in which an elder had told Waiyaki how Waiyaki's ancestors were trustworthy and would never have betrayed the tribe. Waiyaki notes that he left that conversation with pride in his heart that his ancestors were so honorable but now realizes that there could have been a warning intended by the elder. While Waiyaki is considering this situation, the hut and all the possessions of a follower of Joshua are burned - an unheard of event in the village. There is an immediate outcry and accusations. It's here that Waiyaki realizes that the Miami has become very powerful among the villagers and Waiyaki should not have given up his position in that group.

In chapter twenty-one, Nyambura struggles with her love for Waiyaki and her respect for her father, though her relationship with her father is deteriorating rapidly. One day, Nyambura goes for a walk and her father accuses her of having been with Waiyaki, then warns her against allowing such a meeting to occur.

In chapter twenty-two, Waiyaki completes the arrangement for some additional teachers. One night, he is exhausted and admits he senses something bad is about to happen, but that it's not frightening so much as it's merely tiring. Then he has a vision in



which Nyambura is ripped apart by a crowd led by her father, Joshua. In the vision, Mithoni is swept away into darkness, proclaiming that she is now a woman. Waiyaki wakes, still calling out to Nyambura. Waiyaki spends a short time with his mother, who is now elderly, and she asks if it's true that he's going to marry Nyambura. The question makes Waiyaki angry, but he says only that he isn't without explaining. Then he's summoned by the Kiama and he reluctantly agrees to go.

In chapter twenty-three, Waiyaki is accused of having been in Joshua's church and of having been to Siriana. Kabonyi also says that Waiyaki touched the dead body of Muthoni and that he wasn't cleansed afterward - a taboo of the tribe. Waiyaki is then blatantly accused of planning to "sell out the tribe" to the white man. He is then asked about his plans to marry Nyambura, but Waiyaki refuses to discuss her. As Waiyaki leaves, Kabonyi says that Waiyaki didn't deny the charges and that he must no longer be trusted.

In chapter twenty-four, Waiyaki learns that the Kiama has declared that Waiyaki is no longer a teacher. Waiyaki says that the Kiama can't make the decision but that the school committee must, and Waiyaki believes that they won't do that. When Waiyaki learns that there is talk of an attack against Joshua, he goes to the church where there is a service underway and tells them that Kabonyi and his followers could be planning an attack. Joshua is immediately angry and accuses Waiyaki of trying to "entice" Nyambura away from the home of her parents as he did Muthoni.

When Waiyaki turns to leave the church, Nyambura calls out to him, prompting her father's further wrath. As Waiyaki is preparing to leave, Kamau is standing outside. Kamau is there to get Nyambura on the instruction of the Kiama, though his reason for doing so is not explained. As Waiyaki considers that running away from the village might be the best option, Nyambura comes toward him and Joshua immediately tells her that she is no longer his daughter. Waiyaki and Nyambura leave the church and go to a place near the river. He tells her that to remain beside him could mean death but she doesn't waver.

Nyambura spends the night at Waiyaki's hut and early the next morning Waiyaki goes to the sacred grove where he and his father had talked those many years earlier. There, Waiyaki struggles to understand what it is that he is supposed to do and knows that unity is the key to the survival of his people. With that thought, he returns to the village where Kinuthia knows that Nyambura has been taken by force from Waiyaki's hut but decides not to tell Waiyaki so that he can address the crowd that has assembled without worry over Nyambura's fate.

In chapter twenty-six, Waiyaki stands before the people and says that he's been wrongfully accused, that he went to the Mission to recruit teachers and returned to accusations. Waiyaki has the support of the people who, at one point, move forward as if to attack Kabonyi, but Waiyaki calls them back. Then Kabonyi says that he can prove that Waiyaki has acted as a traitor and says the proof is in the fact that Waiyaki plans to marry Nyambura. Kabonyi then challenges Waiyaki to "deny her," and it's soon obvious that Waiyaki can't do so. The two stand together and the people are initially outraged



but also recall their fondness and respect for the Teacher, and are relieved when it's decided that the punishment will be determined by the Kiama. The crowd quickly disperses without looking at the guilt on the faces of each other, leaving Waiyaki and Nyambura to their fate.

Chapters Nineteen through Twenty-Six Analysis

While Joshua remains faithful, he is also feeling the same lack of accomplishment that Livingstone is seeing and is apparently feeling disheartened that he isn't making much of a difference in the lives of his people with regard to the number following Christian teachings. It must have been very difficult for Joshua when Kabonyi - who had been among the most faithful of his followers - returned to the pagan ways of the tribe, apparently leaving Joshua, his teachings and Christianity behind.

When Waiyaki's mother asks if he's going to marry Nyambura, Waiyaki only denies the accusation though he says that he wishes he could go to her to be comforted for the hurt he's feeling over the situation. He notes that he felt this same sense of need when he endured his second birth and that he again wishes he could reach for his mother, though she is elderly and frail.

It's only after the Kiama calls Waiyaki to account for himself that he realizes that he had no real concept of the oath or the long term impact of that oath. He'd taken the oath in an almost nonchalant manner and then also didn't realize the significance of the fact that many people were taking the oath because Waiyaki had taken it. There is a correlation between the following that Joshua has garnered and those who follow Waiyaki. While Joshua is preaching in the name of Christianity, his followers seem mesmerized by Joshua and one is left to wonder whether the followers would have taken the same interest had there been some other speaker. The same is true of Waiyaki and there are many who are caught up in the education who would likely not have been had there been a less charismatic speaker urging that course.

While in the sacred place, Waiyaki comes to some realizations, including the fact that changes - such as the elimination of the circumcision rite - must be gradual and that rituals of this nature must be replaced with something meaningful. Another important conclusion drawn by Waiyaki during this time of introspection is that there must be some melding of the religion of Joshua and the rituals of the people in order for either to survive. Meanwhile, Nyambura has come to a similar conclusion and believes that she no longer wants to be part of the fanatical religion being touted by Joshua.



Characters

Waiyaki

The only son of Chege and the boy who breaks up the fight between Kamau and Kinuthia. Waiyaki is a brave boy who commands respect from a very early age and from his natural actions and reactions to situations. It's noted that he has a scar on his forehead, the result of having interrupted the charge of a goat, and that he might have been killed had his own father not come to his rescue. His daring is lauded, though Waiyaki admits to himself that he wasn't really brave but had merely wanted to see what the result would be for his action. It seems that this self-doubt in his own actions remain an important part of his character.

Waiyaki meets Muthoni and is enamored with the fact that she rebelled against her father to follow her belief in the traditions of the tribe. It seems that Waiyaki might also rebel, but he soon settles into a role as teacher of his people, having been educated at the Mission and believing that the white man's education is the key to survival for his people. Waiyaki comes to understand that unity of the tribe is more important than education, though by then he has angered the people so there is a level of distrust. As the story comes to a close, Waiyaki realizes that his love for Nyambura is more important than being the beloved teacher of his people.

Kabonyi

A man of the tribe who also knows the legend as told by Chege to Waiyaki, though Kabonyi believes his son, Kamau, is the savior mentioned in the legend. Kabonyi is among the converts who follows Joshua, though he moves back to the traditions of the tribe when the Christians declare that no one can participate in the ritual of circumcision, forcing many to choose between the traditions and Christianity. Kabonyi then becomes a respected leader among the tribe once more, though he'd previously been distrusted for his role in the Christian movement that represented, to the tribe, the white man's efforts to infiltrate the tribe.

When Waiyaki becomes an important person in the village, Kabonyi is jealous, coveting that position for his own son, Kamau. Kabonyi and Kamau are behind the movement to discredit Waiyaki, though it seems that the motive is pure jealousy rather than any real concern for the people. It's the carefully gathered evidence of Kabonyi and Kamau that eventually leads to Waiyaki's downfall.

Chege

Father of Waiyaki and an elder in Kameno. Chege begins teaching his people that allowing the white man into the area is not good for the tribes, but he is ignored and eventually stops trying to make himself understood. Instead, he begins to trust that his



own son, Waiyaki, will be the medium through which the white man is driven out. Armed with the idea that only knowledge will enable this action, Chege makes the decision to send Waiyaki to the Mission to learn the ways of the whites, though he warns Waiyaki to remain strong and to avoid the white man's vices.

Kamau

The son of Kabonyi from Makuyu, he is tall for his age as a young boy. He later attends the Mission School with Waiyaki and becomes a teacher in the village where Waiyaki lives. Kamau is raised as a Christian, but his father breaks away from Christian faith. As an adult, Kamau comes to hate Waiyaki for his role with the people and is urged on in this hatred by his father.

Kinuthia

A young boy who lives with his uncle two ridges away from Kamau, Kinuthia is educated at the Mission and comes to be a teacher at the school started by Waiyaki. When Kinuthia is with Waiyaki, he is caught up in Waiyaki's plans and dreams and vows to remain by his friend no matter what happens. However, when Waiyaki is facing the anger of his people and it seems likely that his life is in danger, Kinuthia removes himself from the situation.

Nyambura

The older sister of Muthoni, Nyambura is a young girl who is the daughter of Christian convert, Joshua. Nyambura grows into a beautiful young woman, though she is deeply scarred by the death of her sister, Muthoni. Nyambura falls in love with Waiyaki though she, unlike Muthoni, can't bring herself to rebel against her father and declines Waiyaki's marriage proposal.

Muthoni

The younger sister of Nyambur, Muthoni comes to believe that she is a Christian but that there is something lacking from her life and that being circumcised will fill that void. In Muthoni's mind, the circumcision is necessary in order for her to be "beautiful" as the women of her tribe are beautiful. Muthoni leaves her home, defying her father, and participates in the ritual, but the wound doesn't heal and she dies.

Joshua

An elder member of the tribe, Joshua becomes one of the most fervent Christian converts and is fanatical about the actions of his family, including his daughters, Muthoni and Nyambura. When Muthoni rebels and participates in the ritual circumcision,

Joshua immediately disowns her. He does the same when Nyambura stands beside Waiyaki.

Miriamu

The mother of Nyambura and Muthoni and wife of Joshua, Miriamu shows all the outward signs of obedience to her husband though she seems to think that he is sometimes wrong. Miriamu begins to cry when she is told that Muthoni has died, and when she sees Joshua remains apparently unmoved, cries harder.

Livingstone

The teacher at the Mission school, it's Livingstone who decides that the children of families that continue to participate in the circumcision ritual not be allowed to attend school. It's noted that Livingstone has dedicated twenty-five years to the mission work and that he takes this hard approach after coming to the conclusion that he is not making the difference he hoped to have made in the lives of the people.



Objects/Places

Kameno

One of the two ridges that "lay side by side" and the ridge where Waiyaki lives.

Makuyu

The second of the two ridges that "lay side by side."

Honia

The river between the ridges of Kameno and Makuyu; the name means "cure" and the river flows even during dry seasons.

The Hill South of Kameno

The location of the sacred grove is where Chege tells Waiyaki that he is the one who is to save the people.

The Thingira

The "man hut," specifically that of Chege, Waiyaki's father.

Siriana

The name of the Mission where Waiyaki and other children of the region go to study and where Muthoni is taken to the hospital.

Marioshoni

The name given to the school in Waiyaki's village where Waiyaki oversees the education of the boys of his village.

Njahi

The season of rains.



Kiama

A group formed to focus on the "purity" of the tribe of which Waiyaki is given an important role, though he later gives up his position.

The Base of the Makuyu Ridge

The place near the river that becomes a sacred place for Waiyaki and Nyambura.



Themes

Dedication to a Cause

Waiyaki is sent away to school at a nearby Mission and soon comes to believe that education is the answer to the problems facing his people. When he returns to his tribe, he promotes that idea and it's quickly adopted by the elders of the tribe who support Waiyaki in his effort to recruit teachers and build additional schools after the first one established in his village. Waiyaki admits to being sometimes tired and there's little doubt he's very sad after Nyambura's refusal of his proposal, but he never wavers in his dedication to this cause.

Joshua has a different cause and is equally zealous in his dedication. Joshua is among those who were the first converts to Christianity at the hands of the Missionaries. Joshua comes to believe that the white man's religion is the only correct course. Joshua dedicates himself to preaching the gospel to others and it's noted that he excels at it. When Joshua discovers that his daughter has disobeyed a command of her father and the church, he immediately disowns her. Though Joshua himself seems a hard man, this immediate reaction seems an example of the depth of his dedication. It's noted that both Joshua and a white missionary named Livingstone remain dedicated though each at times is discouraged.

Coming of Age

Waiyaki, Nyambura and Muthoni are all examples of the coming of age theme. In their own ways, each becomes a mature individual over the course of the story. Both Waiyaki and Nyambura age physically, though Muthoni dies young. All three come to realize that the peace they seek in their lives requires something more than what they are being told by the adults responsible for each of them.

Another example of the coming of age theme is seen in Chege's attitude regarding the white man. Chege, as a young man, tries convince others that the whites will come into the hills and will bring their ways with them. Those who don't ignore him simply say that the whites can't possibly survive in the hills because they don't understand how. As Chege ages, he comes to realize that he must take a different approach and eventually stops talking on the subject, though he has a secret - that his own son will be the man who saves the village from the white man's ways. Rather than touting that information, Chege - apparently showing his own "coming of age" attitude, says nothing and holds the secret as his own reassurance.

The Importance of Tradition

The importance of rituals and customs becomes a major issue in the story as the people who cling to the traditions of the tribe battle against those who seek new ways of seeing



their world. As a general statement, this becomes a battle of the tribe against the whites who are entering into the area that has been home to the tribe with no significant outside influence. While those teaching Christianity urge an end to specific rituals they term "pagan," others urge no contact at all with the white man. It takes some time before Waiyaki realizes that the real answer is something between the two extremes, but even he knows that it's impossible to take away an important ritual without providing something to take its place.

The rituals become ingrained in children very early as seen in the case of Muthoni. Though still just a child, Muthoni has been given conflicting information. Members of her tribe teach that ritual circumcision is necessary for a woman of the tribe, while her father teaches that it's wrong. Muthoni realizes long before Waiyaki that a combination is actually the answer. She never fails to acknowledge her Christianity as evidenced by her dying statement that she saw Jesus. However, she never stops believing that the circumcision - though ultimately costing her life - was necessary.



Style

Point of View

The story is written in third person and the majority is presented in the limited omniscient perspectives of Waiyaki and Nyambura. The story spends the majority of the time in Waiyaki's point of view though there are times when the reader leaves Waiyaki and sees the story unfold from Nyambura's perspective. The limit is not a problem and necessary information is provided merely as background. For example, the book opens with the lore of the region, which is largely just historical information though it later plays into the story line when Chege reveals that Waiyaki has a role in that traditional lore. For the majority of the book, the reader sees the village, the tribe and its problems from Waiyaki's perspective. There are, however, several chapters seen only from Nyambura's perspective. The first of these is when Nyambura and her sister, Muthoni, are going to the river for water. Waiyaki is not there and the only way for the reader to get this information is to leave Waiyaki's perspective, as the author has done.

Setting

The story is set in Africa in a region inhabited only by a native tribe. The time is not clear and there are no details that set a definite date. The book was published in 1965, and it seems reasonable that the story is set in that time period. The region is described in some detail, including the role the river Honia plays in the lives of some of the people and the way the geography of the two ridges physically divides the people with one ridge clinging to the traditions of the tribe while the other begins to turn toward Christianity. The descriptions are clear and believable, as are some of the customs and people.

Language and Meaning

The story is laced with symbolism and the story line greatly resembles the story of Jesus' crucifixion. The lore of the region as told by Chege is that there will be a savior and that sets the stage for a series of similarities between this story and the story of Jesus Christ. When Waiyaki, who some believed to be the savior, finds himself weary of the ongoing strife and dreading the battle he knows is imminent, he goes alone to a quiet place to seek guidance, and there comes to some conclusions. Then he returns to face an angry crowd. Kinuthia plays the role of Peter, Jesus' disciple, in this story, having vowed to stand by his friend and then fearing that if Waiyaki doesn't return to face the charges, he'll be attacked. When it's evident that Waiyaki isn't going to escape the punishment, Kinuthia slips into the crowd to avoid recognition as Waiyaki's friend. Finally, there are the people who are given the opportunity to set Waiyaki free but who turn his fate over to an elite group of elders who do not have the best interests of the people at heart.



The overall tone is one of hopelessness because the end - that Waiyaki will ultimately fail - seems obvious from the beginning. There are few words that will be unfamiliar to most readers.

Structure

The book is divided into twenty-six chapters ranging in length from four pages to more than ten. The chapters generally end at a semi-critical point, urging the reader on to the next chapter. Many of the chapters then begin an entirely new scene. For example, chapter twelve ends with Waiyaki's realization that his father has died and chapter thirteen begins with water dripping off the roof of the school Waiyaki has founded. There are gaps such as this throughout the book. Though they are sometimes disconcerting, it's generally a simple matter to catch up with the action and to keep track of what's happening, though it's somewhat difficult to determine how much time has passed in many cases.

Quotes

"Go to the Mission place. Learn all the wisdom and all the secrets of the white man. But do not follow his vices. Be true to your people and the ancient rites." Chapter 5, Page 20

"Many boys from the hills and beyond, from Kiambu and Murang, came there for a portion of the white man's magic." Chapter 5, Page 21

"His house had a strong Christian foundation and he wanted his daughters to wax strong in faith and the ways of God. Would this not prove to all what a Christian home should be like?" Chapter 7, Page 30

"He felt like going out with a stick, punishing these people, forcing them to their knees. Was this not what was done to those children of Israel who turned away from God, who would not hearken to his voice?" Chapter 7, Page 32

"Anything cursed here on earth would also be cursed in heaven. Let that be a warning to those who rebelled against their parents and the laws of God." Chapter 11, Page 54

"Makuyu and Kameno still antagonized each other. Makuyu was now the home of the Christians while Kameno remained the home of all that was beautiful in the tribe. Who would ever bring them together?" Chapter 11, Page 54

"And there they stood, symbols of people's thirst for the white man's secret magic and power. Few wanted to live the white man's way, but all wanted this thing, this magic." - On the schools springing up in the villages, Chapter 14, Page 68

"Muthoni had died on the high altar of this disruption. She had died with courage, probably still trying to resolve the conflict within herself in an attempt to reach the light. Since her death everything had gone from bad to worse and probably conflicting calls and loyalties strove within the hearts of many." Chapter 15, Page 72

"In the past few years things were changing; the pattern of seasons was broken. It no longer rained regularly. The sun seemed to shine for months and the grass dried. And when it fell, the rainwater carried away the soil. The soil no longer answered the call and prayers of the people. Perhaps it had to do with the white men and the blaspheming men of Makuyu." Chapter 16, Page 80

"People knew that their Teacher had taken such an oath. And he had been one of the leaders of the Kiama, at least before he resigned. Nobody could break this oath. Nobody who had taken it would ever betray the tribe." Chapter 20, Page 109

"Kamau saw in Waiyaki the hawk that always snatched his piece of meat when he himself was about to eat it. How would he ever rise or succeed as long as Waiyaki was in the way?" Chapter 23, Page 124



"Waiyaki had awakened them to new visions, new desires, new aspirations. He had restored to them their dignity as a tribe and he had given them the white man's education when the missionaries had wanted to deny them that wisdom." Chapter 25, Page 143



Topics for Discussion

In the initial scene, Waiyaki breaks up a fight between two boys. Describe that scene in detail. What is the significance of that scene later in the story?

How does Waiyaki come to attend the Mission school? Against what does his father warn Waiyaki? Does Waiyaki successfully adhere to his father's advice? What things about Waiyaki could have been different without this experience?

Why does Muthoni run away? Why does Nyambura remain with her parents? What is the significance of the circumcision ritual for the people of the tribe? What does Waiyaki come to realize about the Missionaries' attempts to eliminate the ritual? Do you believe he is correct? Why or why not?

How does Waiyaki become aware of Nyambura? How do the two manage to meet over the coming months? Why are they kept apart? Have the two made wise choices with regard to their love for each other?

How does Waiyaki come to be known as the "Teacher?" Who is jealous of that position and why? Describe Waiyaki's vision for education.

What is it that Waiyaki wants to say to Joshua when Waiyaki goes to the church service? What is his intention? Is it well received? Describe the situation that prompts the actions and reactions of both Waiyaki and Joshua in their encounter in the church.

Who is Chege? What is the story he tells Waiyaki? Where are they when Chege tells the story? Who else knows the story? Why is this important? What is Waiyaki's attitude about the story?