

THE AFRICAN GRIOT

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REVIEW



NGUGI WA THIONG'O
(1938 – 2025)

Tribute Issue

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EDITORIAL

Honour others and you will also be honoured. That has become something of a mantra to me lately, and it is certainly apt for this special issue of the African Griot Review.

This edition is entirely dedicated to the life, work and legacy of Prof. Ngugi wa Thiong'o who joined the ancestral realm earlier this year. The Kenyan-born educator, author, playwright, poet and activist was African literature personified. His writings hit all the right notes – and ruffled more than a few feathers. In a career spanning six decades, he established a reputation as arguably East Africa's leading novelist and intellectual.

The contributors to this issue have certainly done Ngugi justice. This is not a collection of platitudes but deep exploration of Ngugi's world; a detailed analysis of the Man, the Myth and the Legend. This is, in fact, our most literary edition yet, and for a magazine called *The African Griot*, that's saying something! We even have an article in Ngugi's own language. Also included are some poems, artworks, quotes, and reviews. The contributors hail from various nations, which underlines Ngugi's impact, and I can't thank them enough for sharing their thoughts, memories, and talents with us. Some met him personally, others through his books and speeches. Seeing their different perspectives and is quite interesting, to say the least!

As always, we are happy to receive feedback from our readers, and we'll try to respond to as many e-mails as we possibly can.

We're also open to receiving content from you, pertaining to arts and culture in Africa and her Diaspora. You may send in **articles, poems, artwork, photographs, short stories** or **press releases** addressed to The Editor.

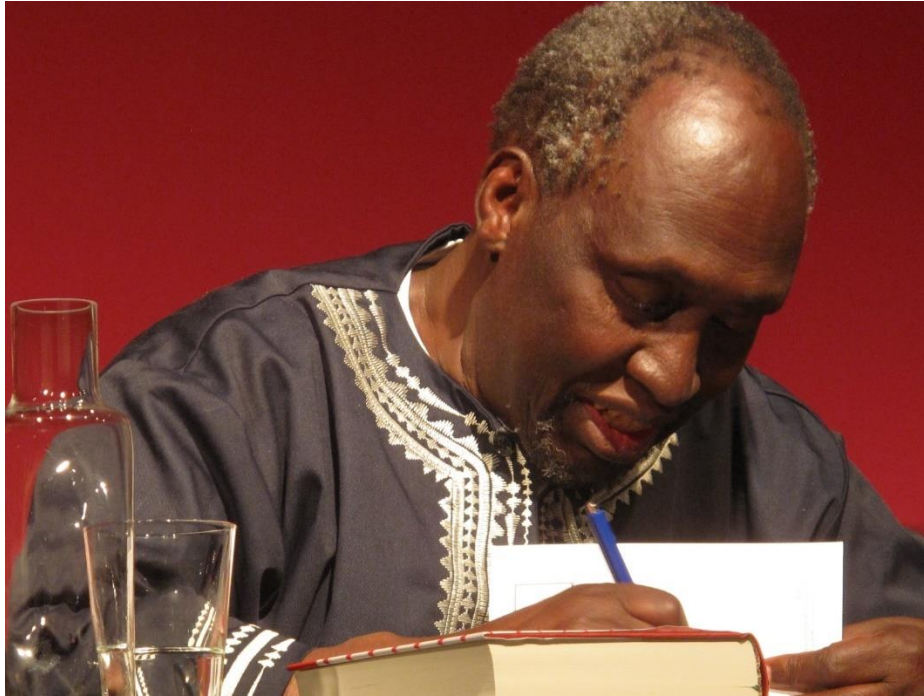
- *Alexander Nderitu*,
Editor-in-Chief



Alexander Nderitu

ARTICLES

Ngũgĩ's Enduring Flame and Rekindling Reading in Southern Africa by Chikumbutso Ndaferankhande (Malawi)



The late Prof. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o in Germany in 2012 (Photo: Esekreis)

The air was thick with grief, a palpable weight that settled across the literary world. Internationally acclaimed literary godfather Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o had just passed away. As I sat to write this think-piece, condolences and celebrations of a life well lived to the full poured in from every corner of the globe. This write-up is a humble reflection of an incredibly endowed penman who lived among us. To call Ngũgĩ merely an African literature Hercules would be an understatement. He was a global literary colossus whose wit catapulted him to immortality.

Born in colonial Kenya, Ngũgĩ rose not just to challenge systems, but to awaken nations. Ngũgĩ wore many hats. A creative writing god, distinguished professor, cultural provocateur, decoloniality oracle, social justice crusader, among others. Many believe his genius did not receive the full recognition it deserved. In 2010, some literary enthusiasts had placed strong odds on Ngũgĩ winning the Nobel Prize in Literature, so much so that excited journalists camped outside his home, to witness the historic moment, according to the *Financial Times*.

However, his daughter called to inform him that the committee had settled for another writer from Peru, **Mario Vargas Llosa**. It was some of the journalists who broke down in tears. 'I was the one consoling them,' Ngũgĩ recalled.

My countryman and literary co-conspirator **Shadreck Chikoti** says: 'I remember Ngũgĩ. I also remember all the great things we, as a continent and as a world, failed to do for him. The hope of a global literary prize, honoring him as one of Kenya's great treasures, and more. And as we have committed his earthly vessel to the ancestors, let us ask that we be granted forgiveness...'

Others, however, think otherwise. **Ato Quayson** avers that Ngũgĩ's later works, beginning with *Petals of Blood*, shifted from the nuanced emotional explorations of his early novels like *A Grain of Wheat* to a more didactic and overtly political style, rooted in socialist realism and Fanonian Marxism. These later novels, often written in Gikũyũ, presented clear-cut heroes and villains, aiming

to rouse readers against oppression and the Kenyan political elite. Quayson adds that this is further supported by the observation that the Nobel Prize has historically not been awarded to satirists, a category into which Ngũgĩ's later works, such as *Wizard of the Crow*, often fall.

Apart from sharing a birthdate with him, January 5, Ngũgĩ's profound convictions truly awed me when I attended the Pan-African Writers Association (PAWA) Conference at the University of Ibadan, Nigeria, in June 2022. The conference, themed 'Literature Since Makerere 1962: The African Writers' Pan-African Agenda For Peace, Security and Cultural Development', drew its preamble from the seminal 1962 African Writers Conference at Makerere University in Uganda. This Makerere historic gathering, despite its official title 'Conference of African Writers of English Expression,' ironically highlighted the very dilemma Ngũgĩ would champion throughout his life: the question of language in African literature.

From the 2022 Ibadan conference, I learnt that Ngũgĩ, sixty years prior, as a student at Makerere then, powerfully articulated the enduring legacy of colonialism on the African writer's language choice. He noted the irony of the conference defining African literature while excluding a vast portion of the population who did not write in English. His later words in books he wrote three decades apart, *Decolonising the Mind* in 1986 and *Secure the Base* in 2016, ring true: 'The bullet was the means of the physical subjugation. Language was the means of the spiritual subjugation... each language, no matter how small, carries its memory of the world.' This conviction led him to reject Christianity and the first name, James Ngũgĩ, citing doing away with colonial relics, resolving to write in his mother tongue, Gikuyu, a language which, he said, 'my mother, my peasant mother' could understand. It was a bold move since by then, books in local languages had no guaranteed markets. The decision, announced in 1977, also did not sit well with the then political establishment that became frightened with the power of Ngũgĩ's writing in Gikuyu that, on the very last day of the year, he would be detained.

In his prison diary, he wrote thus: '...sometime in December 1977, two gentlemen, highly placed in the government flew to Mombasa and demanded an urgent audience with Jomo Kenyatta. Each held a copy of *Petals*

of Blood in one hand, and in the other, a copy of *Ngaahika Ndeenda* (a play in Gikuyu).' Such seeming radical decisions also courted controversy from fellow writers. His Kenyan compatriot, **Binyavanga Wainaina**, made gentle fun of Ngũgĩ puritanism in his 2011 memoir, *One Day I Will Write About This Place*. Zimbabwean writer, **Dambudzo Marechera**, whose decision to write was inspired by Ngũgĩ, clashed bitterly with him over the question of writing in English.

In the twilight of his life, Ngũgĩ's legacy was marred by allegations of domestic abuse. In a context in which towering literary figures are often treated as moral authorities, and Ngũgĩ surely was, an obituary would be incomplete without acknowledging this, even just as a footnote. For an honest assessment, we must hold these contradictions in balance, even as we celebrate the rich corpus of work that Ngũgĩ has left to us.

Ngũgĩ's unwavering persuasions had a profound impact on my academic journey. Two years after that Ibadan conference, I joined Rhodes University in South Africa, through the Canon Collins Trust, to pursue a second Masters Degree, Master of Education by full thesis. My study, *Empowering Young Voices: Ngũgĩ's Decoloniality & Pedagogy in Student-Authored Climate Fiction in Malawi's Secondary Schools*, stands firmly on the ancestral academic heritage of Paulo Freire and Ngũgĩ.

In Southern Africa, the fight for a just society has extended far beyond the dismantling of oppressive political regimes; it necessitated a profound decolonization of the mind itself. Ngũgĩ's insistent call to reject intellectual servitude and reclaim African narratives finds powerful resonance in the philosophical manifesto for Black Consciousness penned by **Steve Biko** in South Africa, *I Write What I Like*. Both figures, independently yet synchronously, articulated an urgent need for the oppressed to shed the psychological shackles of colonialism, urging self-definition and a radical re-evaluation of worth. Ngũgĩ's emphasis on indigenous languages was not merely linguistic preference but a strategic act of cultural liberation, a re-rooting of identity that mirrored Biko's assertion that 'Black Consciousness is an attitude of mind and a way of life.' Ngũgĩ's legacy is particularly crucial today, as Southern Africa faces new complexities. I agree with Nigerian writer **Babafemi Ojudu** that the least we can do to respect this literary doyen's legacy is to rekindle the reading culture, which

seems to be on a downward spiral across Africa. When bookshelves are bare and stories remain untold, we risk raising generations that may never know the magic of plunging oneself into an enriching, engaging novel like **Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's** *Half of a Yellow Sun*. This lack of engagement with literature hinders the development of critical thinking, empathy, and resilience – qualities essential for citizens to challenge injustice, understand diverse perspectives, and actively participate in building equitable societies.

The robust reading culture that once nurtured generations is fading fast. Government agencies no longer flood classrooms with stories, and literature is sidelined in favour of standardized tests and rote memorization. While the digital age offers wonders, screens have replaced pages, and passive scrolling has replaced immersive reading. We are raising generations who may never fully develop into 'whole humans,' 'thinkers,' or 'global citizens' without the transformative power of books.

I concur with Ojudu that we must act to honor Ngũgĩ and his contemporaries' vision and strengthen our region. Let us collectively reinvest in school libraries, every child in Southern Africa deserves access to books that speak to their culture and introduce them to others. This is particularly vital in nations like Malawi, where cultural centers are dilapidated and arts associations operate without funding, hindering access to crucial literary resources.

'I remember Ngũgĩ. I also remember all the great things we, as a continent and as a world, failed to do for him.'

We must take deliberate steps to celebrate African authors, letting our children know their stories matter, encouraging them to gulp from old wineskins of oldies **Jack Mapanje, Chinua Achebe, Ngũgĩ, David Lubadiri, Tsitsi Dangaremba, Ayi Kwei Armah** to millennials **Mubanga Kalimamukwento, Rémy Ngamije, Trevor Noah, Karen Jennings** among others.

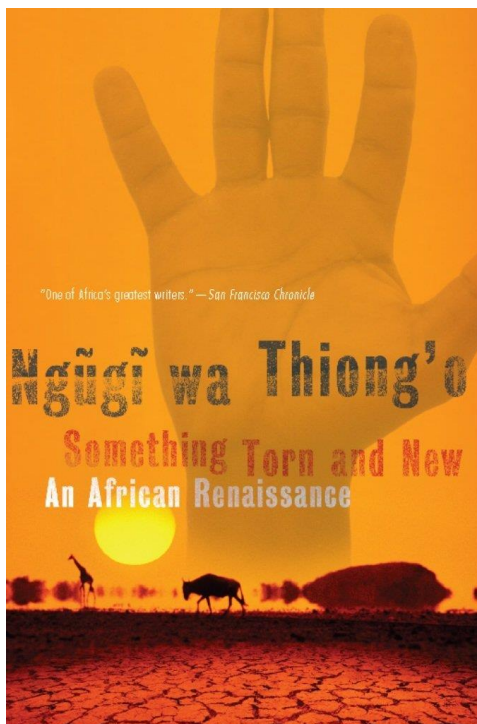
Let each of us encourage family reading. A mere 15-minute story at bedtime can plant the seed of a lifelong love of literature. Such simple acts can bridge generational gaps and foster a shared appreciation for storytelling. And we may do with using digital tools wisely: E-books, audiobooks, and reading apps can be powerful allies in rebuilding a reading culture, if used intentionally. Leveraging technology responsibly can expand access to literature across vast and sometimes underserved areas of Southern Africa. This is the least we can do in paying respect to our departed literary elders. And we, the bridging Generation X, will properly pass the baton to Generations Z and Alpha to combine youthful zest and high-tech savvy with the wisdom of the elders. 🐘



Chikumbutso is the immediate past President of the Malawi Writers Union (MAWU), a national writers' body that promotes creative writing in Malawi. MAWU is an affiliate of the Pan African Writers Association (PAWA) that is housed in Accra, Ghana. He holds a Bachelor of Arts Journalism (University of Malawi) and a Masters of Intellectual Property (Africa University, Zimbabwe). He won the 2024 Canon Collins Scholars & Alumni Essay contest with the literary think-piece *Scribes of Freedom* published in September, 2024 in South Africa's leading weekly, *Mail & Guardian*. He is an award-winning novelist (2018 NALA Award) for the manuscript, *Chronicles of an Inmate*. He also won the MAWU/FCB Short Story awards in 2008 and 2016. He has been published in a continental anthology, *Voices That Sing Behind the Veil*, published by Digibooks and PAWA, launched in Accra, Ghana and Ibadan, Nigeria.

Tribute to Professor Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o by Mamadou Abdou Babou (Senegal)

A novelist, poet, essayist, playwright, cultural and postcolonial theorist all rolled into, Ngugi wa Thiong'o will doubtless go down in history as one of the most profound and prolific writers to have ever hailed from Africa. The outpouring of tributes from far and wide since his passing over a week ago are a testament to the merit and humanity of a literary giant whose steadfast belief in the power of the pen to effect transformational change went a long way to putting Africa on the world's literary map. Ngugi was a writer of his time. Having an acute consciousness of the obnoxious ideology of race-based oppression with its attendant horrors (colonialism is a case in point) and the human toll of nefarious neo-colonial practices, Prof. Ngugi wa Thiong'o made it a point to debunk the hegemonic versions of history that painted a warped picture of Africa as a land of darkness, the inhabitants of which sought to be civilized. Little wonder that his early works (*A Grain of Wheat*, *The River Between* and *Petals of Blood*) bore the scars of a soul bruised by the multifaceted ravages of what the American philosopher of Indian extraction, Homi Bhabha, calls 'the sentence of history.' As Ngugi meltingly confessed in an interview: 'Memories of colonial violence still haunt me. So does the violence to my family.' He was a man of steel, no less.



During a career that spanned a little more than six decades, the Kenyan-born thinker ran through the gauntlet of arbitrary arrest and imprisonment, censorship, physical and moral torture, not to mention exile, without flinching. This for the sake of refusing to cave in to oppression. Interestingly, he was not exercised overmuch about the 'essential sadness of exile' which the late **Edward Said** describes as 'the unhealable rift forced between a human being and a place, between the self and its true home' (180). Although, as the Palestinian-born American literary critic posits, 'exile is a condition of terminal loss' (180), it didn't get on top of Prof. wa Thiong'o.

When asked in an interview if he felt a sense of alienation stemming from exile, he answered in no uncertain terms: 'No, not quite, but I have tried to counter that with the knowledge that exile has impacted history in strange and even fascinating ways.' Needless to say, the bulk of his fictional opus and non-fiction as well was authored during his decades-long exile.



Ngũgĩ in London in 2007 (Photo: David Mbiyu)

Dubbed East Africa's leading novelist, Ngugi never shied away from his role as an artist despite the odds having been stacked against him. He was deeply steeped in the consciousness of the redemptive value of art. In his estimation, the writer is duty-bound to, if not, help call time on human suffering, or at least, mitigate it. He adumbrated the tenets of intellectual practice as follows: 'We write about pain to help cope with pain - help end it, hopefully.'

We want to help humans fight to heal human wounds.' When he came to the glaring realization that post-independence African political leadership, not least the Kenyan ruling elite, were somewhat tarred with the same brush as their former colonial masters, Ngugi took to calling them out for their proclivity towards bribery, corruption, power abuse, or whatnot. Unsurprisingly, he served time at the fag-end of the 1970s - in 1977 to be exact - for *Ngaahika Ndeenda* which translates into English as *I Will Marry When I Want*. It was the first play written in the Gikuyu language in post-liberation Kenya. That episode represented a milestone in his literary career as he made the no-nonsense call to ditch English, and embrace Gikuyu as a pen language. His target was first and foremost the Kenyan downtrodden.

Understandably, English was not in his view a suitable medium to chronicle the socio-political concerns plaguing them. More to the point, Ngugi was of the mind that it would be misguided to perceive of language as a mere means of communication. Rather, it was a cultural carrier. And neglect of any language would for sure be conducive to its extinction. In one of his potent books, to wit *Something Torn and New: An African Renaissance*, he contends:

'Language is a communication system and carrier of culture by virtue of being simultaneously the means and carrier of memory...Language is the clarifying medium of memory or rather the two are intertwined. To starve or kill a language is to starve and kill a people's memory bank' (20).

Thus, he unremittingly made out a good case for linguistic self-affirmation in his signature book *Decolonizing the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature*. He prevailed upon powers that be in Africa and African intellectuals alike to uphold indigenous languages as a way of registering cultural authenticity.

'Memories of colonial violence still haunt me. So does the violence to my family.' - Ngugi

It was not for nothing that he called himself 'a linguistic warrior.' The link between language, memory and identity was never lost upon him. Students of literature like me and people who loved and admired him for what he brought to the party of African renaissance feel bad that he never won the much-coveted Nobel Prize in Literature, deserving though he was.

Still, we can find solace and succor in the fact that his jaw-dropping legacy of intellectual works, courage, stamina, selflessness, gravitas, strong love of Mother Africa will live on across the centuries. We learnt from his son **Mukoma wa Ngugi**, a writer in his own right, that Professor Ngugi was cremated in the States. That caught many folks, not least the Kenyan people, off guard, as cremation goes against the grain of African burial customs. They also put forward the argument that it felt odd that the 'G.O.A.T' (read the greatest of all time) was cremated since he lived and breathed for cultural authenticity. Anyway, what, to my mind, ultimately matters is that we remember him in spirit and keep him in our prayers.

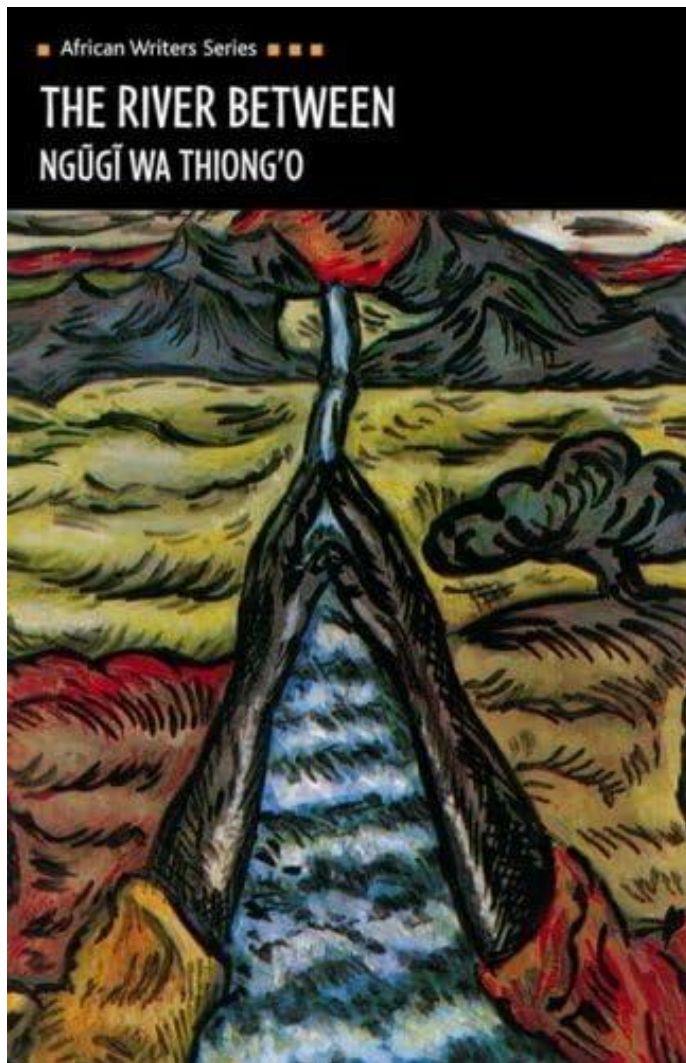
Go well, Prof. Ngugi wa Thiong'o.

You're part of those percipient thinkers who have shaped my worldview. I'll forever be in your debt. May your memory be a blessing. 🐘

Dr Mamadou Abdou Babou Ngom is an Associate Professor of Anglophone African Literature at the Cheikh Anta Diop University of Dakar in Senegal (West Africa). Her areas of academic interest are African literature in English, coloniality and decoloniality, gender studies, trauma fiction, migrant and diasporic literature, prison life writing, Halal fiction, critical feminist theory, literary theory, and psychoanalytic literature criticism.

Weep Not, Child: Of Ngũgĩ, Father's Day, Literature and Legacy by John Mwazemba (Kenya)

On May 28, 2025, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o died. Gone like a puff of smoke in a breeze. He was a great Kenyan writer who attained global acclaim. Some of his well-known novels include *Weep Not, Child* (1964), *The River Between* (1965) and *Petals of Blood* (1977). Writing recently in *The Guardian*, Nigerian writer **Helon Habila** noted that, 'Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o belonged to an age of prophets...'. And prophets are rare. As a species, we do not totally recover from the loss of such prophets.



In the physical realm, death is a brutal and total erasure. Into dust (and sometimes ashes). When the great philosopher David Hume learnt that he was dying at the age of 65, he wrote a short autobiography, *My Own Life*,

in a single day in April of 1776. I can imagine him sitting, a dark silhouette in the shadows, writing quickly as death lurked nearby, waiting patiently to harvest his soul. 'I now reckon upon a speedy dissolution,' he wrote. Dissolution. That's how death feels like. Like the way a substance dissolves in water and it disappears, not to be seen again.

On Father's Day, June 15, 2025, I thought about Ngũgĩ as a father of Kenyan literature and the literary legacy he has left behind. It made me think about the dwindling of the days—the end of promise and how the end begins. It reminded me of what I had read about the last days of the great writer and Nobel Laureate Gabriel García Márquez. In the book *A Farewell to Gabo...: A Son's Memoir*, his son (Rodrigo García) reflects about the end of life: 'I asked him what he thought about at night, after he turned out the lights,' as he got older. García answered, 'I think that things are almost over'. When he was eighty, his son again asked him 'what that was like?' His answer was heartbreaking: 'The view from eighty is astonishing, really. And the end is near.' His son asked him further, 'Are you afraid?' To which he answered, 'It makes me immensely sad.'

Coming to terms with the end of a father's life is hard. I thought about my own father who I couldn't celebrate on Father's Day as he passed away in 2007. One of the harshest lessons from Father's Day for sons and daughters everywhere is that they should learn to appreciate their parents while they are with them. Our parents are 'on loan' to us for a limited time.

I think of my father often, though I cannot now remember the sound of his laughter. There are times he comes to my mind unbidden—galloping into my world suddenly—startling me in a rush of memories. My father enjoyed the outdoors, and I still remember some walks with him as the air smelled of fresh-cut grass. His shoulders scrunched against the wind that sometimes blew the clouds gently, waving one hand in gesticulation as he talked, as if to dispel the evening. The sun would dip beyond the hills, bathing the bushes in shades of amber and gold, and I would not know that this peacefulness, this splendour, would not last. I didn't

The renowned neurosurgeon Dr Oliver Sacks, when he had only a few months to live after a cancer diagnosis, wrote that, 'There will be no one like us when we are gone, but then there is no one like anyone else, ever. When people die, they cannot be replaced. They leave holes that cannot be filled, for it is the fate—the genetic and neural fate—of every human being to be a unique individual, to find his own path, to live his own life, to die his own death'.

At Oliver's memorial service in New York in the fall of 2015, David Remnick, the editor of *The New Yorker*, said something about him that could apply to our own Ngũgĩ: 'In nearly all of Oliver's pieces,' Remnick said, 'there comes that moment, that epiphany, that shock, when the reader realizes that Oliver was just as strange, and just as wonderful, and just as elusive as the person he was writing about. And there came the moment, too, when we, his readers, realized: so are we— so are we'.

know it then, but such simple pleasures were with a man whose time was over.

'Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o belonged to an age of prophets...'

I sometimes think of his last moments in his dying hour, and I wonder if he thought of me (his only son) as he wrestled with death, which was leaping around him like a lunatic. I have played and replayed that final scene numerous times and I feel guilty that I was not with him. The last time I saw his face before the coffin was shut forever, he had a blank stare into the gleaming Taita sun. After that, whenever I see the faces of old men, I also see the absence of one.

Ngũgĩ found his own path, lived his own life and died his own death. However, great writers like Ngũgĩ are 'immortal' because their words live on. And like his characters, Ngũgĩ was just as strange, just as wonderful and just as elusive, somewhere just beyond our grasp. And so are we. So are we. 🐘



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***Ngugi - The Man, The Myth and The Legend* by Christine Akinyi (Kenya)**

I once found myself among a group of nine young people like myself, discussing the tenets of Ngugi's book *Decolonising the Mind*, a question had been posed to the gathering, whether we thought English was a measure of intelligence or not. My response stood out, not for being contrarian beyond expectations, but because I thought English as a language could possibly be both the yardstick for intelligence and also the rationale for perceiving its absence. It was also at around the same time when there was commentary particularly on X, associating a couple of well written passages in given contexts, some from African writers to AI. English that good could not be attributed to years of practice and trying to live up to the standards of a Eurocentric world, the plausible reason was Artificial intelligence coming to the aid of these writers amidst the pressures of creating in a rapidly, technologically advancing world. Citing these examples from Twitter, I argued that we Africans must have really mastered English more than its owners, if they were retreating to the position of sore losers, alleging that the aid of ChatGPT was so apparent in our prose. This only meant that we had surpassed the yardstick set for us as far as intelligence was concerned.

I return to this discussion as the literary world continues to mourn the loss of Ngugi wa Thiong'o, acknowledging his relevance, that his politics of decolonization had preceded him such that his name was tantamount to any act of decolonizing as a matter of fact.

From my personal reflections, what comes fast to the fore are the two ridges of Makuyu and Kamenno, the river Honia as an intermediary between them, Christianity spreading slowly in Siriana, memorable Gikuyu proverbs alluding to preservation of culture; *Kagutui ka mucii gatibakagwo ageni*: "The oilskin of the house is not for rubbing into the skin of strangers". I remember reading these in his novel, *The River Between*, which had been selected among other African books to be part of the coursework in Kenyan secondary schools and were examinable. **Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie**, in an interview with *Vogue*, said she doesn't always trust what she remembers because memory self-selects just as much as it fades, and bearing

this in mind, I've observed that which is collectively celebrated and that which is pushed to the periphery, as far as Ngugi's legacy is concerned.

Ngugi the Man

Born James Ngugi, he spat out that foreign name together with propriety and dropped English as a medium of fiction in preference of Gikuyu. He wrote *Ngaahika Ndeenda (I Will Marry When I Want)*, *Caिताani Mutharaba-Ini (Devil on the Cross)* and Murogi wa Kagogo (*Wizard of The Crow*) among others, living by his politics of decolonising and repairing the psyche that was battled in the classroom where English was superior and Gikuyu ethnic.

This was the man who was a liberator with his pen but fell short of living up to his ideals on the family front, a man unable to keep his demons at bay, allegedly harming the very sanctity he revered in his works; family, woman, language. To speak of Ngugi is to acknowledge his refusal, a refusal to forget the atrocities of the violent regime of his days, a refusal to acquiesce and look aside when the government assailed his people. His imprisonment, detaining and life in exile, are not decorations to his person, but rather declarations of who he was and his politics.

Ngugi the Myth

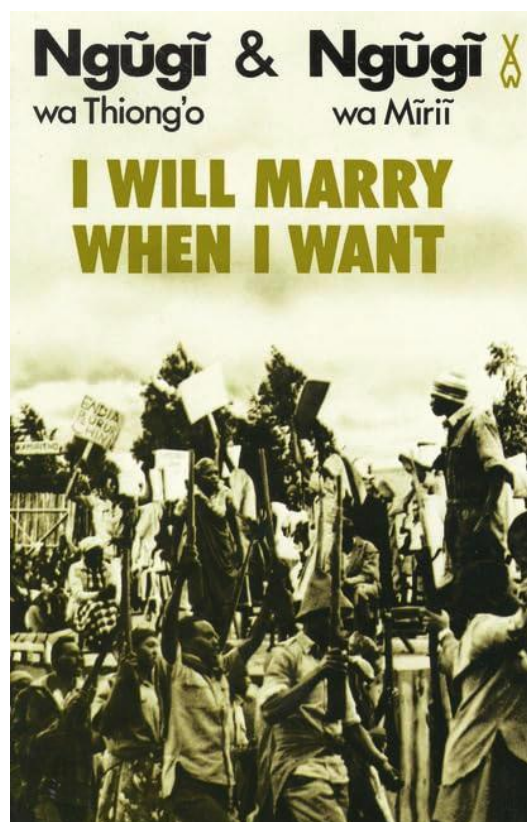
And yet he became more than man, he became a reference; footnotes and citations, associated with stature and influence, a professor of English and Comparative Literature at the University of Irvine, California. Ngugi the almost Nobel laureate, year after year, his name considered but never crowned nor conferred. In the myth, he is both the one who was aggrieved and the one who never needed the prize to begin with. He became our conscience, our yardstick and lens, his thoughts published far and wide. Living in exile even made him seem even more of an iconoclast, a prophet uncelebrated in his own land yet he remained obstinate, resolute and grounded in his devotion to the work and all it demanded of him.

He became the embodiment for decolonial resistance, often quoted for his Marxist and revolutionary writing, and now posthumously immortalised in travelling theatres, his lectures and moving tributes from his readers, peers and fans alike.

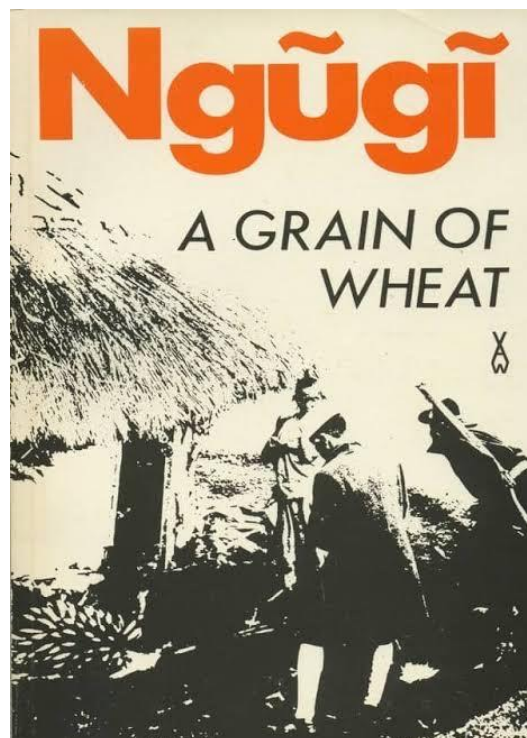
Ngugi the Legend

He was a legend, still is. He put Gikuyu on the global literary map, going as far as delivering his acceptance speech for the **Catalonia International Prize** in his mother tongue. His devotion to literature and the arts didn't stop with him; it became a legacy. His children, **Nducu, Mukoma, Wanjiku** and the rest carry the torch, each holding their own as writers.

In the play *Ngaabika Ndeenda*, which he co-wrote alongside **Ngugi wa Mirii**, he centred the Kenyan peasantry, highlighting their grievances in a then pre-independent Kenya. He has now joined the contingent of literary ancestors, guardians of sentient wisdom across time: **Gustave Flaubert, Bessie Head, Natalia Ginzburg, Mariama Ba, Carol Shields, Toni Morrison** and **Chinua Achebe**.



In our small gathering of nine, we consequently discussed his other novel *A Grain of Wheat*, partly out of obligation and partly because he couldn't be ignored; even those who had never read him, knew certain things about him, he was ours. Ngugi preserved Kenyan history. He wrote of Waringas, Nyamburas, Waiyakis and Cheges who were just as good enough as the characters in Hogwarts, the eerie pages of R.L Stine or the labyrinthine world of Narnia.



With the news of his death came despair, owing to the apparent loss and the absence it would indubitably declare. The rest of us hearken close to one another now, knowing that our stories matter and should be told because he showed us how to, with temerity, with brilliance and with aplomb. 🐘

*Christine is a writer who is fascinated by oddities and nuance. She grapples with these in her writing and is also drawn to read authors who portray similar and adjacent themes. Her short story, *Estranged*, was published by Ibua Journal and her essay on protests, is set to be out in print in Qwani 03. As a journalist, she formerly wrote for the People Daily and recently did a feature for the Star Newspaper after a long hiatus spent freelancing.*

***Do We Understand Our Inheritance?* by Gai Manoh James (South Sudan)**

I compare upcoming African writers to a child who has been left a great fortune whose management they hardly understand. Professor Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o and his pioneering associates, like **Chinua Achebe**, have left us a fortune of African storytelling, and we are to carry forward their legacy. But to do this, we need to understand what it is we have been left with—and how to manage it.

Already, the assumptions underlying our conversation around African literature are that there exists a continuity, formal as well as thematic, between indigenous African storytelling traditions and the literary output now branded as 'African storytelling' in the global literary marketplace. And this continuity is credited to the pioneers of contemporary African literature, of whom the late professor was a part.

Our literary forefathers were confronting a necessary battle, which was to reclaim African identity from the distortions of Western narratives. The colonial imagination had painted a picture that Africans were primitive savages, that their culture and traditions did not matter, and that their gods were merely stones and wood. I would like to divide this battle into two distinct forms: **(1) the struggle to set straight the distorted content of African literature, and (2) the struggle over the medium or form of African storytelling.**

Chinua Achebe tried to undo the former. He famously argued that 'until the lions have their own historians, the history of the hunt will always glorify the hunter.' His argument was one of content and perspective: that African stories matter, and must come from Africans themselves.

The late Professor Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, on the other hand, tried to undo the latter: namely, the argument of form and medium in which African stories were told. Professor Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o believed that true decolonization required a rejection of European languages in favor of indigenous African ones. To this end, he began writing his works in Kikuyu, his native language. Now we are to inherit this legacy and make sense of it before we take it any further. We need to ask

ourselves: what exactly is 'African storytelling,' and can it truly be independent of European literature, in both content and form?

To speak plainly, much of what is celebrated today as 'African storytelling,' including canonical works such as Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, follows the structures and aesthetic principles adopted from European literary models. The distinction here is that this is not an indictment of thematic content, cultural authenticity, or authorial intention, but instead a formal critique on narrative architecture, progression, and epistemological framing.

The contemporary African novel - and by extension, most modern African literary forms - relies on devices formalized through Western literary history: **Aristotelian plot structure, Freytag's pyramid, character-driven arcs, psychological interiority, and linear temporality.** These are structural devices typical of the development of the European novel from the 18th century onwards, shaped by Enlightenment rationalism and the Romantic valorization of the individual subject. They carry with them a particular ontology of time (chronological, cause-effect, goal-oriented), space (realist, internally consistent), and subjectivity (introspective, morally conflicted, developing).

Arguably, all famous novels by African writers - including those written by Professor Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o - follow these European writing models. They are not typical of precolonial African methods of storytelling. Indigenous African storytelling traditions - whether in the form of epic performance, praise poetry, moral tales, clan histories, or proverbial narratives—functioned according to an entirely different aesthetic logic. African forms are non-linear, episodic, and cyclical. Temporality is layered and recursive, emphasizing continuity over closure. Characters are often archetypal rather than psychologically individuated. The goal of the narrative is not emotional catharsis or epiphany but moral instruction, social cohesion, or ritual enactment. Performance elements such as call-and-response, music, gesture, and spatial dynamics are not ancillary but central

to meaning-making. Moreover, **traditional African narratives typically do not prioritize suspense, conflict-resolution arcs, or interior monologue.** Instead, they foreground relationality, collective memory, and the **wisdom encoded in metaphor, idiom, and proverbs.** Causality is often cosmological rather than empirical. The role of the storyteller is closer to that of a historian, ethicist, or priest than to that of a novelist or dramatist in the European sense.

Thus, the formal divergence between traditional African storytelling and modern African literature is profound - even in novels written in indigenous African languages, such as *The Devil on the Cross*, written in Kikuyu. What persists in modern African writing is thematic loyalty - concerns with colonial trauma, communal life, moral education, the tension between tradition and modernity - but the skeleton is Western.

Even contemporary African literary platforms such as magazines and journals that consciously seek to 'reclaim' indigenous modes of narration often do so within the frame of Western narrative expectation. Editors typically expect submissions to demonstrate narrative progression, psychological depth, and aesthetic novelty. Genre and formal experimentation - when it occurs - is still judged against modernist and postmodernist Western paradigms. This is not to suggest that African writers are merely imitating Western forms. Rather, it is to acknowledge that modern African literature is fundamentally a hybrid practice - stylistically and formally—as much a product of global literary modernity as of any local narrative inheritance.

To confuse African content with African form is a categorical error.

The call for 'authentic African storytelling,' including abandoning Western languages for indigenous ones as championed by Professor Ngugi wa Thiong'o, must therefore be met with skepticism - especially by us, the heirs of this great inheritance. To speak of African storytelling in any substantive sense requires us first to articulate the specific formal properties of indigenous narrative traditions - and to distinguish these clearly from the dominant forms of modern literature, which, regardless of content, remain structurally Eurocentric.

Furthermore, our obsession with liberating Africa has made African literature very sensitive to domestic criticism. Because we feel we are facing a common enemy - namely, the distorted colonial narrative of Africa - turning to ourselves and criticizing our own works comes across as betrayal. But this comes at the cost of African literature being a continual reaction to Western rhetoric, rather than the expression of art that it ought to be. Now that the pioneers have mostly succeeded in changing much of the African narrative, how far can we take their fight? Or better still, is it still worth it to fight further, or should we retreat from that reactionary vicious cycle and start building our art for ourselves?

I would finally argue that contemporary African storytelling, including the works of our forerunners, is a hybrid of African thematic content and Western formal devices. 

'The role of the storyteller is closer to that of a historian, ethicist, or priest than to that of a novelist or dramatist in the European sense.'

Gai Manoah is a South Sudanese writer and critic. His work has appeared in African Writer Magazine, The Kalabari Review and elsewhere. He won second place in the 2022 South Sudan Young Writers Award for his short story Forsaken. He loves maths, physics, reading and watching TV shows.

Mwandiki Njorua, no Wanarehe Ngenyano by Geoffrey Irūngũ (Kenya)

(Written in the Gikũyũ language that Prof. Ngũgi spoke)



*A scene from Ngugi wa Thiong'o's stage play, **Ngaahika Ndeenda** (Photo: Nairobi Performing Studio)*

Ona gũtuika Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o ndaaheirwo ngerenwa ya Nobel ya kĩaĩra, ũguo ti kuga atĩ ndarĩ kĩaathi kĩmwe na amwe manaheo na ningĩ ona agakorwo arĩ mbere ya angĩ manaheo. No ũndũ wa bata nĩ atĩ wandiki wake nĩ ũĩkaine wega waguo thĩ ng'ima, hatarĩ gũtarwo kana mũndũ nĩ egwĩtikania kana nĩ ekũregana na ũĩa andikĩte.

Mabuku make marĩa andikĩte na Gikũyũ nĩ mamwe ma marĩa manini maharĩĩrĩro na rũthiomi rũu tondũ marĩa mangĩ moĩkaine megĩĩ mĩtugo na mĩkarĩre kana thimo cia rũĩrĩ rwa Agikũyũ. Mbere ya kũandika *Ngaahika Ndeenda* na *Caitani Mũtharabainĩ*, mabuku ma ng'ano ndaya (aingĩ macĩtaga nobo) kana mathako, ndiũũ kana kwarĩ mabuku ma muthemba ũcio tiga marĩa mathoomagwo cukuru (na maarĩ tũrũgano tũkuhĩ) na ningĩ ti andũ aingĩ manandika na nĩĩra iyo. Ona gũkorwo nĩndathoomete mabuku mangĩ mbere ma rũthiomi rwa Gikũyũ, ndathoomire ibuku rĩa rũgano rwa gũtungwo rũrĩhu rwa mbere rũĩ rũu rwa *Caitani Mũtharabainĩ*.

Rũgano ruo rwene nĩ rũonanagia ũĩa ũici mũnene watuikĩte wa gũkũngũrwo nginya gũkagĩa macindano ma ũici. Rũu ũici Kenya ũtũruga ũĩ ũndũ wa hingo ciothe tondũ ũkoragwo maribootiĩnĩ ma ũtũĩria o mwaka, ũkahiana ota ũcio wĩrĩtwo ũhoru waguo nĩ Ngũgĩ. Na ndiũũ rũgano rũngĩ rwa rũthiomi rũu rũheanĩte ndeto icio wega ũguo.

Mũheani ng'ano ũyũ aarĩ mwendi wa wĩyathi wa ma na ti wa bakũ ũĩa kĩrore kĩaĩrĩ kĩheane no andũ matiarĩ na thayũ wa ngoro, matiahotaga kwĩmathĩra, maarĩ na ng'aragu, mahinyĩrĩrĩro ni ũthũkũmũ wa kĩaĩrũ, na matiathuranaga kũringana na kĩhoto kana wagĩrĩru wa mũthurwo. Mau nĩ maũndũ meyonanĩtie ng'anoĩnĩ ta *Ngaahika Ndeenda* na mabukuĩnĩ make mangĩ ta *Decolonizing the Mind* na *Detained*. Gĩtũmi kĩa aikio korokoroinĩ thuutha wa gũthakwo kwa *Ngaahika Ndeenda* kũu Kamĩrĩĩthũ no gũkorwo kwarĩ mũno nĩ kuonania ciiko cia ũtongoria wa Jomo Kenyatta itatwanĩte na wĩyathi wa ma mũthakoinĩ ũcio na andũ makamamenya na makambĩrĩria gwĩtikia maigua wega na rũthiomi rwao.

Gũtwarithia na mbere kuonania ndeto icio kũu London ona arĩkia gũthamĩra kũu nĩ gwatangathire wega wendi wake bũrũri wa Kenya na marĩa mangĩ ma Aburika macenje magĩe na wĩyathi wa ma. Na nokĩo thirikaari ya Daniel Moi itakenagio nĩwe ona arĩ kũu Ngeretha na ikageria gwetha nĩĩra ya kũmũtigithia gũthĩĩ na mbere kũrũĩra ũgarũrũku ũthamakiĩnĩ. No wega nĩ atĩ Ngeretha ndietikanĩrie na wendo wa atongoria a Kenya hĩndĩ iyo.

Kũandika gwake na rũthiomi rwa Gikũyũ nĩ Ngũgĩ nĩ ũndũ warĩrĩrĩro ihinda iraihu na amwe makaũkenera o rĩrĩa angĩ maũmenereirie. Atũire oigaga atĩ nĩ ũkombo kũmenya thiomi ingĩ na mũndũ akarigwo nĩ rwao.

Akoigaga na agataaraga ona andũ mandike na thiomi cia kwao. Kũringana na athuthuria, thiomi citikoragwo irũgaima ũrĩa mahinda marathĩ. Ciikaraga ikiumagĩra njerũ na ingĩ igakua. Angĩkorwo mũndũ ekũigua arĩ raithi kũandika na Kĩngeretha nĩ arekwo andike tondũ angĩkorwo ndamenyerete kana ndoĩ Gĩkũyũ kana gĩkwao-rĩ aratindikĩrĩrio nĩkĩ? Nũ ũĩ mũthenya wa gũkua kwa rũthiomi rũna? Ona mbere ya Kĩngeretha kana Kĩbaranja gwakumĩtio Kũratini na gĩgikua. Mũndũ angihota nĩ andike na rũthiomi rwao rwa kindũire no angĩkorwo ndangĩhota-rĩ, nĩ amemerekie ndeto na rũrĩa ekũhota. Kĩrĩra kũngĩ kĩandikĩtwo na thiomi ng'eni. **Chinua Achebe** ooigire rũthiomi nĩ njĩra ya kũheana kĩrĩra. Ũguo nĩ ta kuga rũthiomi ti ruo kĩrĩra kiene. Rũgano rwĩkwandikwo rwĩrũgamĩrĩraga ruo rwene hatarĩ gũtarwo rũthiomi.

Na ũguo ti kũhũthia ng'ano cia Ngũgĩ. No kuga atĩ mwandiki nĩ andike na rũthiomi rũrĩa ekwenda, bata nĩ atũhe rũgano. Angĩhota nĩ ahũthĩre rũthiomi rwao tondũ nĩ rũgũtwarithia ũndũire na kĩrĩra kĩa na njĩra iyo. No njĩra to iyo tu ya gũkũria maũndũ mau. Andũ aingĩ matirutĩtwo thiomi ciao wega ningĩ mũkarĩre ya mataũniĩnĩ nĩ yaagarũire ũkindĩrĩku wa ũrutani wacio. Wakũhota kwandika na gĩkwao nĩ eke guo na ũgoro wataũrwo na thiomi ingĩ nĩ ũgũtũkinyĩra. Rũgano rũraihi rwakwa rũtarĩ rũcabe rwĩtagwo na Gĩthũngũ *Back Against the Wall* ndarwandikite na Gĩkũyũ kwanjĩrĩria no rwarĩ rũmwe rwa iria ciacindite macindano ma Aburika ma ibuku rĩa mbere (Island Prize) na maabangĩtwo nĩ Holland House Books ya Ngeretha, Karavan Press ya Bũrũri wa Africa ya Mũhuro na Karen Jennings wanakorwo mũtaratarainĩ mũraihi wa ngerenwa ya Booker. Ndarũtaũra na Gĩthũngũ – ta ũrĩa kwendekanaga – rwarĩ ota iria ingĩ ciandikĩtwo na rũthiomi rũu kuma kĩa njio harĩ macindano mau.

Harĩ wĩtikio wake wĩgĩ mĩbango wa mũkarĩre ya andũ, wa mwena wa ũmotho kana wa gĩkomuiciti, nguga nĩ wĩyonanĩtie biũ mabukuinĩ make maingĩ. No nĩ andũ aingĩ mũno me mwena ũcio mabukuinĩ mau gũkĩra ũrĩa kũrĩ mũtũrĩreinĩ kwoguo hakoneka ta aratindikĩrĩria wĩtikio ũcio harĩ mũthoomi. Na ti mũndũ wotho wĩ mwena wa ũrĩo wa ũteti kana wa mũbango wa mũkarĩre ũngĩtwo mũtunyani, mũici, mwĩki naaĩ, mũhinyĩrĩria wa arĩa angĩ kana mũregani na kĩhoto harĩ mĩgaĩre ya indo cia mũingĩ.

Ningĩ ũtonga wa bũrũri kana andũ kũmbe ti wotho ta wa acio maarĩ gĩcindanoinĩ kĩa ũici. Mũtongorerie wa komiuniciti naguo ndũkoretwo ũrĩ na umithio mũnene na mabũrũri kwanjia na Russia na China matiũrũmĩrĩre thikũ ici ta tene. Rũu China ihotete kũnyihia ũkĩa na njĩra nene mũno mĩaka iyo ihitũkite kuma icenjie mũbango wa ikonomĩ 1978 yetĩkĩra ũramati wa ũtonga nĩ andũ kũmbe ũrĩ bata gũkũria mũkarĩre.

Ingiuga kwarorwo maũndũ mothe, Ngũgĩ ararĩ mwandiki mwega mũno thĩ handũ yarũma no ndangĩkiaga tũũndũ twĩrĩ kana tũtatũ angĩunwo mũtĩ kana harehete ngenyano itwĩgĩ. 🐘

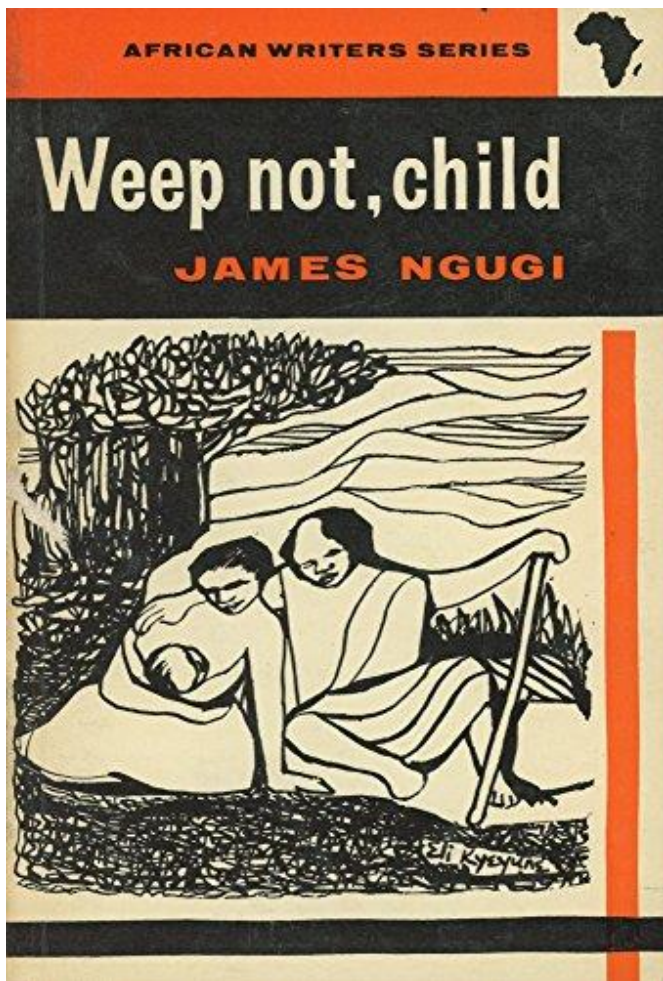


Geoffrey Irungu was born in Kenya in Mũrang'a County. He studied Philosophy, Political Science and Economics at the University of Nairobi and later got a Master of Arts in Communication Studies from the same institution. Since graduation, more than two decades ago, he has been in the profession of journalism. He worked for nearly twenty years for Nation Media Group, mostly as a business and economics journalist. In terms of literary writing, he was recently a long-listee in the Island Prize for his fictional manuscript *Back Against the Wall* – originally written in Gĩkũyũ language – in a competition targeting first-time authors of a novel and organised by Holland House Books of London, Karavan Press of South Africa and Karen Jennings, a long-listee of Booker Prize.

***With Ngugi Before and After Reading Him* by Peter Amuka (Kenya)**

I did not know that creative writers were living human beings until I read Ngugi's *Weep Not, Child*. We had been treated to abridged versions of European Literature some of which had been created before the birth of Jesus Christ. We completed form one and graduated to form two with the belief that all literary writers were dead in faraway Europe.

Miss Dingwell, a Canadian and one of our legion of foreign white English teachers then guided us through the novel. I remember her mention of poet William Blake and little about the Mau Mau Liberation War and some heavy stress on Boro's 'brutality'.



Shortly after the encounter with the novel, Miss Dingwell and our Biology teacher assigned me to take care of their cats while they were away on a one-month break. I capitalised on that opportunity to re-read her

copy of *Weep Not, Child*. I imagined I could one day grow up to be the writer of stories like Ngugi and felt he was really contextually close, as I enjoyed the prose and narrative. Later, I learnt that he was in the United Kingdom for further studies and, in my limited knowledge of university education, believed he was learning more of the English language. That must have been the period he was penning *A Grain of Wheat*. Fast forward to this novel that was prescribed for my Advanced Level Literature Class in 1969. Our Scottish teacher emphasized its likeness to Joseph Conrad's *Under Western Eyes* and pointed out that the time shifts in the plot and narration were superior to the simple flashbacks we were used to. Later, I read a journal review by David Cook and thought my teacher had picked the argument from there. My class of only five students argued and compared Ngugi's novel with the other set texts that included D.H Lawrence's *Sons and Lovers*, Nikos Kazantzaki's *Zorba the Greek* and Emily Bronte's *Wuthering Heights*.

After reading Conrad's text and comparing it with Ngugi's *A Grain of Wheat*, I adjudged the latter as technically superior in construction. I liked the content and historical contexts and easily read it many times with glee. Thus far, that is the one novel I keep reading as if it was written yesterday. I keep the first edition I bought in 1969 and haven't been able to try the modified version. My unreasonable, honest confession all the way to my dying day is that I fear the revised edition may spoil the joy of what I read in 1969.

I have shared the foregoing high school experiences in order to declare that I met Ngugi in his three seminal novels before meeting him physically in class at the University of Nairobi in 1973. I couldn't wait to meet Ngugi at the university as a student of literature. His resignation because Oginga Odinga was stopped from addressing University of Nairobi students was very disheartening to me. Glad that he got his job back after a stint at Northwestern University. I looked forward to meeting him in class in 1972. Sadly, Andrew Gurr told us that we could only meet him from our second year onwards. He said he was a very special member of the department, but didn't elaborate. We would understand later.

When I finally connected with him, he was the Chairman of the Department. Our small BA literature classes were held in his office. I don't remember a moment Ngugi referred to written notes in the classes. We discussed texts and issues rather than listen to lectures and readings. Literature and ideas were embedded in his blood and he made the subject a powerful tool for understanding, interpreting and steering society.

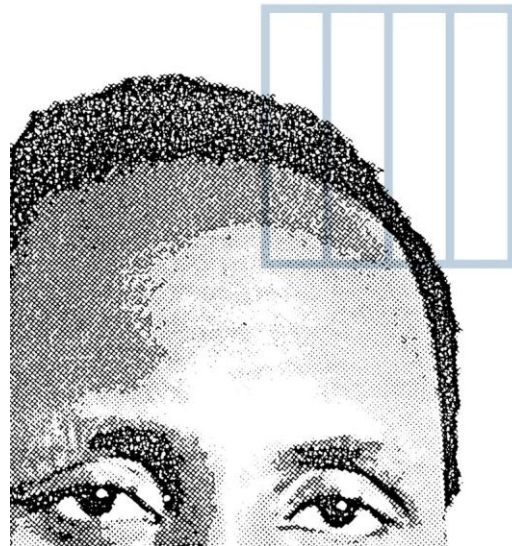
I remember the Caribbean and African-American literature courses and the passion with which he discussed Black histories the attendant racial injustices and the resulting struggles to right them in Africa, the Americas and beyond. CRL James' *The Black Jacobins* stood out for him as a celebration of the first black slave revolt that led to Haitian independence. George Lamming visited for a month to see us through VS Naipul's cynicism that he characterized as impotent 'castrated satire'. Ngugi was surprised that I chose Naipaul for my main paper on Caribbean Literature after Lamming had painted such a negative picture of his writing. I told him that my choice was influenced by his essay on Caribbean Literature in *Homecoming*.

Let me observe that Ngugi was a magnet and his stature and global reach attracted many writers to the department. I can't name all but recall **Taban, Okot p'Bitek, John Ruganda, Arthur Gakwandi, Micere Mugo, Abiola Irele and Lenrie Peters** are some of the significant literary personalities he attracted to the department with him. Ngugi was bigger than Kenya. Let me jump to my MA project in 1976. He stopped me from writing on Tolstoy in my final year even after seeing me though the rigour of coursework that included Russian to Soviet Literature and a very high grade. He told me Tolstoy was too far from Kenya and I should do something in/on Kenyan oral traditions. I said bluntly that I didn't want 'tribal' literature. His report: Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, Turgenev, Yeutushenko, Pushkin, Goncharov all wrote in their Russian 'tribal' language. Why not write in my own? I haven't done so but did something, reluctantly, in oral literature.

There were many public lecture series at the university, including the notable ones in the mid-seventies. Many lecturers took part but when Ngugi's turn came he acknowledged that there must have been state informers in the audience and he would address them without fear of highlighting certain truths. Some of us feared for him, what with the dreaded undercover police and the known torture suspects were subjected to. It was out of those lecture series that Ngugi penned essays for the collection titled *Writers in Politics*.

NGUGI WA THIONG'O *Writers in Politics*

A RE-ENGAGEMENT WITH ISSUES
OF LITERATURE & SOCIETY



Ngugi had many admirers and haters in the department of Literature the university and beyond. Being critical of government earned him the label of as Marxist and therefore anti- state. Some creative writers took it that criticism of their work or ideas was Marxist. Ngugi became a centre of power in his own right around which his supporters and haters gravitated.

Many work in the academy for fun and money. Ngugi was at the university to teach, research and have social impact beyond the classroom. He communicated with society beyond the University of Nairobi. He was liked and disliked in equal measure at the campus, but some administrators, students and even colleagues. His thinking transcended the literary text and connected it with the politics of Kenya in particular and the world in general. Any text that he taught in class or talked about in public was very heavily contextualized in the socio-political and socio-economic goings-on and the history behind them.

So shallow was some of the negative criticism of Ngugi that some of his detractors argued that to be Marxist was to dress casually and shun European suits. Within his own department were one or two lecturers who surprisingly argued that Marxists were people like him who did not write and appreciate poetry. I read Yetusheuko and Pushkin's poetry in Ngugi's MA classes.

Petals of Blood was published a little before his detention. By the time the novel was composed, Ngugi had decided to write as if the whole society was involved. One day, he asked me for a name that would be associated with greed in any indigenous Kenyan language. I gave him the name *Omuora nuod Omuonyi*. I only knew he was serious when I bought and read the novel and found the name there.

I also recall that he gave me a chapter to read quickly and tell him what I thought of it. I did and added one or two words but 1976 or thereabouts is too long ago for me to identify them. Many other confidantes contributed to the novel. Perhaps the most surprising of them all was the claim by a reader that one of the chapters of the novel was modelled on a Beethoven composition. I didn't manage to confirm with Ngugi but the individual said Ngugi himself was the source of her information. Surprisingly because I didn't know he tolerated classical European music.

Charles Mugane Njonjo, Kenya's once-powerful Attorney General, accompanied future president **Mwai Kibaki** at the launch of *Petals of Blood*. I attended and Ngugi autographed a copy that was borrowed and never

returned. Later, Njonjo remarked that government functionaries ought to read books before launching them because some carried subversive anti-state content! He was alluding to this novel that he read after the launch.



For me, his response was evidence of the socio-political impact of Ngugi's literary composition. I wrote a small article on this and shared with Ngugi but it was not published nor can I trace a copy.

Perhaps my closest and last memorable encounter with Ngugi occurred after his release from detention in 1978. The location was the Institute of African Studies at the University of Nairobi.

There, at the Institute, he must toe the lines of research drawn by him and other researchers, including me. Ngugi responded that he didn't want his job back to be a 'slave in a cage'.

The director was a rabid anti-Marxist and told him the institute had no space for leftist 'crap'. He rejected the conditions. I wish I were able to recall and retell the shouting and some of the mutual insults as I walked Ngugi out towards the main museum in whose compound the institute was based. Not long afterwards, he went into forced exile.



Peter Amuka retired from Moi University in 2022 as a Professor of Comparative Literature. He is currently an adjunct professor at Kibabii University and Bomet University College in Kenya. He published a narrative poem, *Blasphemy*, in an anthology titled *Where Broken Hearts Go*, in 2023. In 2021, he authored a novella titled *Wanjira and her Hitlers*. His essays, articles and short stories have appeared in various collections/anthologies/journals since 1976; notably *Busara*, *Egerton Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*, *African Philosophy as Cultural Inquiry* (ed. Masolo and Karp, 2000) and *Africa at the Beginning of the 21st Century* (ed. P.G Okoth, 2000).

'My argument has always been that we have to accept the reality of many languages in Africa...And when I talk about Africa, I am actually talking about more than Africa because the question of the relationship between marginalised languages and dominant languages is everywhere in the world. But I don't think we should worry about the many languages, even here in America, because what is important is for those languages to talk to each other. In the case of Africa, and in practical terms, this means developing literatures and knowledges in these languages (and) at the same time encouraging translations into the different languages. In other words...I see translation as playing a very important role in enabling cultures to dialogue with each other. In the case of Africa, for example, I envisage a story written, say, in Tigrinya being translated into Kiswahili, into Igbo, Yoruba, Zulu and so on.'

- Ngũgi wa Thiong'o, speaking on the subject of 'Moving the Centre: Language, Culture and Globalization'

POETRY

Ode to Ngũgĩ by Chifuniro E. Banda (Malawi)

Standards stood tall, but not in my learning
The badge I wore hid a world unexplored
With pride, I was never versed in his verse
A citizen without a nation; words without a universe.

A standard writer, it seems, must know his name
Read his works to claim a place in the literary frame
His skilful pen must echo the legends
Her mind must meet Ngũgĩ to lift her craft.

Now that his sun has set in the East
I'll drink his stained pages, the wisdom I skipped
To learn how his creative mind wandered
To shape the minds that craft and read.



Chifuniro Eliazar Banda is the author of the acclaimed books *DISTORTED – What They Did Not Say About Marriage* (2024) and *VIOLET; A Flower That Faded When I Needed It* (2025), both published by Montfort Media. His literary repertoire also includes compelling short stories and poems published in leading Malawian newspapers such as *The Nation* and *The Daily Times*.

Unlearning the “Master” ’s Tongue by Gboyega Ogundele (Nigeria)

They taught us silence in English,
A tongue polished like a colonial boot,
We spoke our names in whispers,
While spelling theirs with pride.

Chalk dust danced to foreign alphabets,
As grandmothers' proverbs faded in the sun,
The drumbeats dimmed beneath the radio,
And songs of soil were shamed as 'bush.'

But Ngũgĩ, rebel of the page,
Planted ink in mother earth,
He wrote Gĩkũyũ like a flame,
And set the master's grammar ablaze.

He said: to write is to return,
To speak is to resurrect,
He said: our minds were colonized,
But our voices are wild, unsold.

So we unlearn the colonial script,
We stitch our verses in ancestral thread,
We give children back their names,
And call the wind in mother's tongue.

No longer ghosts in foreign grammar,
We bloom where our languages rise,
Let the word return to the village,
Let the river teach the book.

Ngũgĩ walked ahead, unshackled,
Carrying stories carved in truth,
Now the mind sheds its yoke,
And the soul remembers how to speak.



Gboyega Ogundele is a Nigerian lawyer, writer, and literary thinker whose work explores the intersections of justice, memory, identity, and language. Deeply influenced by African literary giants such as Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, Chinua Achebe, and Wole Soyinka, his writing seeks to reclaim narrative space for African voices within both legal and creative contexts. He is passionate about the decolonization of thought, both in literature and in law.

***I Remember Ngũgĩ* by Maison Ole Nkurrenah (Kenya)**

I remember Ngũgĩ
Like a mirage, a feign dream
A grain of wheat that grew
Blossomed
to the Mũgũmo he became
Standing tall
Pure and true

From the freezing slopes of Ndeyia
Its muddy pathways
A rose grew from the red clay
Flourished
Amidst the thorns
To the golden highways
To the global stages

I remember Ngũgĩ
For in him I saw myself
Saw my raw Maasai-ness
Splendour
All our perfect imperfections
I saw me through him
For all his Gikũyũ-ness

Now he rests in power, forever
In the glory of all he built
All he wrote into fruition
Heavenly
With Achebe, Okigbo, Marechera
They who wrote Africa into being
With halos on their beautiful heads

I remember Ngũgĩ.



Maison Ole Nkurrenah is a poet and playwright with two published collections of poetry, *I Am Writing an Elegy by the River Siyiapei* and *Other Poems and Gbettorati: Poems from Majengo*. His stage play, *Errant Native*, was one of the winning entries of the 2024 Kenya International Theatre Festival. Maison holds a BSc. in Animal Science from South Eastern Kenya University among other certificates of training in communication, research and Leadership Development from notable institutions both locally and internationally.

The Pen of Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o by Ikechukwu Frank (Nigeria)

In the tongue of Gikuyu, he carved his name,
Defiant against the colonial flame.
Not in the Queen's but the people's voice,
Ngũgĩ stood tall, made a daring choice.

He dropped the English of empire's yoke,
And with native fire and truth he spoke.
From Weep Not, Child to Petals of Blood,
He stirred the hearts, unleashed a flood.

The chains of language he broke apart,
To free the mind, the soul, the heart.
A voice for Kenya, fierce and bold,
In stories whispered, screamed, and told.

They locked him up but not his pen—
In prison, he wrote for broken men.
Devil on the Cross birthed in cell,
A tale of power, greed, and hell.

Ngũgĩ, the mirror to our face,
Refusing silence in a colonized place.
He asked the questions no one dared,
Why were the liberators so unprepared?

In plays that stirred and books that burned,
The course of thought, of history turned.
Language, he taught, is not just sound,
It roots a people to their ground.

He bore the burden of exile's cost,
Yet never forgot what Kenya lost.
A prophet, teacher, scribe, and seer,
Ngũgĩ's word still echoes clear.

So rise, O youth, and read him loud,
Lift his name above the crowd.
For in his ink we find the key—
To Africa's mind, bold and free.

***Ikechukwu Frank** is a passionate minister, seasoned teacher of God's Word, and a devoted servant of Christ whose teaching ministry began in 1996. As a pastor and national staff member of the Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG), Ikechukwu Frank plays a vital role in church planting, pastoral oversight, and discipleship within his region. His passion is to see lives transformed, churches established, and communities impacted through the undiluted Word of God. He lives in Lagos, Nigeria, where he serves faithfully alongside his beloved wife and their four wonderful children.*

***The Keeper of African Tongues* by Jeff Chekwubechukwu (Nigeria)**

To Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o,
A man who refused to forget,
Who traded comfort in the colonial tongue
For truth in the mother's language.

You taught us that words are not neutral —
That every sentence carries a soul,
That language is the drumbeat of a people,
And silence in our own tongue is a kind of death.

When others bent under the weight of foreign syllables,
You stood —
Boldly, defiantly — with Gikuyu on your lips,
A warrior of words,
A keeper of memory.

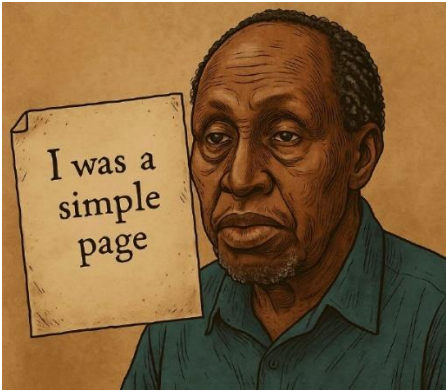
Through your pages, you planted seeds —
Of revival, of resistance, of return.
You reminded us that decolonisation begins not just in
the street,
But in the mind — in the very language we use to
dream.

Ngũgĩ, son of the soil,
Your pen has become a compass,
Pointing generations back to their roots,
Their stories, their strength.
We honour you — not only as a writer,
But as a liberator of voices.

May your words never be forgotten.
May the tongues you helped reclaim
Sing freely, fiercely, forever.

Onuigbo Jeff Chekwubechukwu is a passionate storyteller, literary scholar, and educational consultant whose work bridges the worlds of literature, advocacy, and transformative education. With over a decade of experience in teaching and curriculum development, he is known for his sharp mind, cultural insight, and unwavering commitment to inclusive learning. As a literary scholar, Chekwubechukwu explores themes of African identity, postcolonial resistance, and cultural memory, drawing from both indigenous narratives and global literary traditions.

***The Simple Page* by Kingsley Kimathi (Kenya)**



I was a simple page
Blank and waiting,
When he first touched me
With hands that smelled of ink and revolution.
He was James, just James,
With dreams stitched into the seams
Of school uniforms worn thin at Makerere.

The pen shook at first.
His thoughts were bold,
But his fingers were cautious,
Unsure how deep the truth would cut.
He spilled on me
Not only ink,
But doubts, hopes,
And silent rage against the Empire.

I remember when he first named me worthy.
He wrote between my margins.
The rivers between,
And suddenly I wasn't just pulp.
I was purpose.

I soaked up stories,
Tasted Gikūyū syllables,
And wrapped myself around his defiance.
When they called him trouble,
I was rolled up,
Smuggled in shirt sleeves,
Read in whispers under lamps.
When they locked him up
For the play he dared to stage,
They gave him one hour of sun,
But I
I had him all the other hours.

He bled truths into me.
On scraps torn from toilet rolls,
And even then,
I knew I carried fire.
When exile called,
And London's rain met his breath,
I curled up in his coat pocket,
Holding on to home.

He wrote novels not in comfort,
But in yearning,
Each sentence is a bridge.
Back to the hills of Limuru.
Presidents came and went.
Some jailed him,
Others feared him,
But he kept writing
On me.

Generations passed.
Grandmothers recited to me by firesides,
Mothers tucked their children in at bedtime,
And sons found me again in classrooms.
That once tried to forget.

Still, he returned.
An old man now,
Wiser but just as fierce,
Still scribbling the world right,
Still calling out the theft of tongues.
And now,
He is gone
But I remain,
Edges browned with time,
Ink faded but intact,
Whispers of a warrior
Etched across my veins.

I am a simple page
But through him,
I became a librarian.
No fire could burn.
I HAVE KEPT THE PROMISE,
I LIVE THE MEMORY.

Kingsley Kimathi is a Kenyan law student and writer. He uses poetry and prose to reflect, resist, and reimagine.

Two poems by Yohanna Singfuri Daniel (Nigeria)

Petals of Blood

There are petals
Bright with promise,
Red with warning
Scattered over Africa's soil.

Ngũgĩ saw them.
Not flowers,
But spilled ink.
Spilled blood.

He traced their roots to land theft,
To classrooms where we forget ourselves,
To prisons with no names,
To markets filled with imported dreams.

Petals of blood, he called them.
Proof that progress can rot.
That roses can bite.
That justice grows slow in colonised gardens.

Now that he sleeps,
His pen rests beside the hoe.
His books are seedlings.
His name, a chant among griots.

And we the readers,
The rebels,
The writers must water
What he planted.

Weep Not, Child

Weep not, child
Though the blackboard still laughs
The language of conquest,
And your tongue stumbles on your grandmother's song.

Weep not
Though the library shelves tilt
With books that forget your name,
And the flag flutters in a borrowed tongue.

Ngũgĩ, griot of the gagged,
You showed us how to hold the pen
Like a panga
To cut through the thatch of forgetting.

You whispered in ink:
Our stories are not smoke.
They are drumbeats.
They are millet seeds.
They are bloodlines woven into folktales.

Weep not, child.
Even as the empire rebuilds its masks,
Your name is carved
On the wind
In the language of the hills.



***Yohanna Singfuri** is a poet and a classroom teacher and the secretary of the ANA Borno State chapter. He is an Ebedi International Writers Residency Fellow. He emerged as a Northeast Zonal winner and a finalist of TY Buratai Literary Initiative 2024. His books include 'The Northern Boy', 'Heaven's Gate and other poems', and 'The Trumpet'. His works have appeared in magazines which include Parousia Magazine, Fifth Chinua Achebe Poetry/Essay Anthology, The Markas, an anthology of literary works on BOKO HARAM, and others. He is a postgraduate Student in the University of Maiduguri, pursuing M.A. English (Language).*

***Weep Now, Child* by Stephen Adinoyi (Nigeria)**

Weep now, Child
No one will chide you
Your tears is a welcome sorrow
Cause you have the farthest tomorrow

Weep now, Child
Fiends have fouled your future
Yearnings for sweater days ruptured

Weep now, Child
For the insecure chicks
Deprived of a hen

Child, weep
Your delicious day thrownd into a dungeon
By menacing men in power
Now you are forced to cower
At their daylight subjugation
Will you ever taste redemption?

Hoping



Stephen Adinoyi is a writer of plays, poetry and prose. His poem, *Seoul*, won the first prize during the 2016 Korean/Nigerian Poetry Festival. His poem, *Divine Slavery*, won the first prize for the 2020 *Ibua Journal's* Poetry Competition. His short story, won the second prize of the same competition. He has published a novel: *Teen of Fifteen*. He is published in Journals like *ANA Review*, *Ake Review*, *Ebedi Review*, *Ibua Journal* and *Decolonial Passage*. His pidgin play: *I No Beta Pas My Nebor*, was staged in Abuja, in 2013 by SFEV. As a 2014 *Writer-in-Residency*, he has been a fellow of the *Ebedi International Writers' Residency* since 2014. He's the chairman of the *Association of Nigerian Authors, Kaduna*; and former *Chairman, Kaduna Writers League*.

***Of Your Departure and Digitized Uprisings* by Mailu Pascal (Kenya)**

Dandelions and other alien flowers
Sprout from the *Kamirithu* theatre
Rustic wood desperately holding on to
The slowly rotting stage....

The earth, rural and dry
Yearns for the remains of its son
Echoes of the resistance songs
And plays of yesteryears ringing
Faintly from across the misty vale

The songs and street drama persist,
Through another young yet tired generation
That weeps not, for though they are yet to
Receive the urn and its ashes,
Your voice and spirit prevail through the
New digitized uprising....
Unafraid of the new high priest
Or is it king?



***Pascal** is a Sociologist and development expert with a lot of interest in literature and creative writing. In the past, he wrote several short stories and poems, some of which were published online by Storymoja and the ITCH online magazine. He was the winner of the national poetry contest held by Storymoja during the 2011 Hay Festival International Writers' Festival.*

***What the Child Remembers* by Ókólí Stephen Nonso (Nigeria)**

There is always a road that bends away
from the sound of a mother's voice.

The school bell rings like a soft blade
cutting a future from borrowed air.

Your father's hands smelled of soil and sweat,
the gospel of hunger written on his back.

The land is never empty, only waiting,
only refusing to forget the dead who fed it.

When you ran through the tall grass,
the wind hid your fear in its mouth.

A book cracked open like a door,
inside, a promise nobody kept.

Rebellion was your brother's shadow
leaping over fences at dusk.

A man kneels to beg from the same ground
that once begged him to stay.
You said Weep Not, Child
but your name carried rain in its vowels.

A machete lies beside an old hoe,
two ways to dream of freedom.

And still, somewhere, a boy wakes early,
presses his palm to a silent page.



Ókólí (he/ him) is a Nigerian writer and first-year graduate student at the University of Alabama at Birmingham. His poetry has appeared in *Feral Journal*, *Ebedi Review*, *Ngiga Review*, *Brittle Paper*, *The Shallow Tales Review*, *African Writer*, *Adelaide Literary Magazine* (New York), *Olney Magazine*, *Tuck Magazine*, *Ofi Press*, among others. His short fiction is featured in *The Best of African Literary Magazine* and several national and international anthologies. He is the 2024 winner of the *Muse Journal Award for Best Literary Artist of the Year* and a joint winner of the May 2020 *Poets in Nigeria (PIN) 10-Day Poetry Challenge*. His other honors include first runner-up in the *Fresh Voice Foundation Poetry Contest* and third prize in the *Akuko Magazine Inaugural Prize for Poetry* (2021). In 2024, he was also shortlisted for the *Akachi Chukwuemeka Prize for Literature*. His poem *Transcript* will be exhibited at the University of California, Berkeley, in 2025. He is also the recipient of the 2025 *Achievement Scholarship Award* at the University of Alabama at Birmingham.

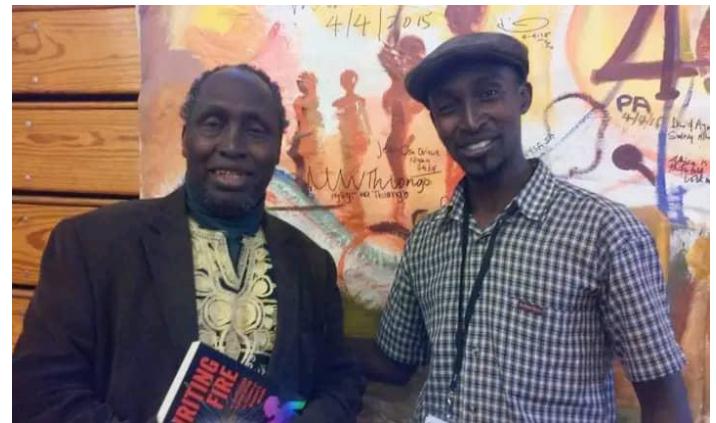
ARTWORKS

Immortalizing Mwalimu Ngugi Wa Thiong'o by Rolands Tibirusya (Uganda)

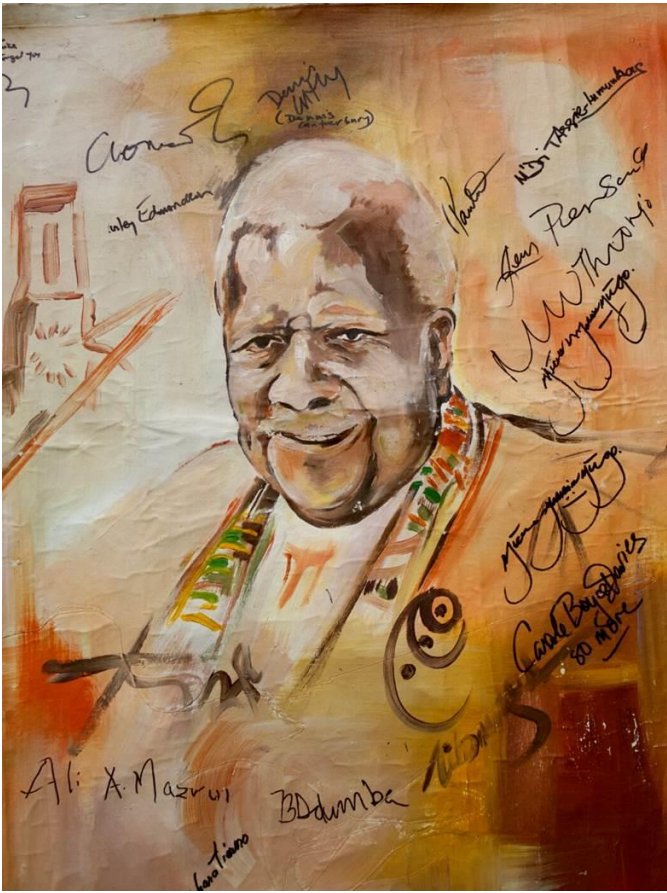
I had a rare opportunity to read about him and his books, to meet him in person and paint live while delivering his lectures. As an artist I further seeks to create -exhibit and paint more an artwork to celebrate his life and legacy.



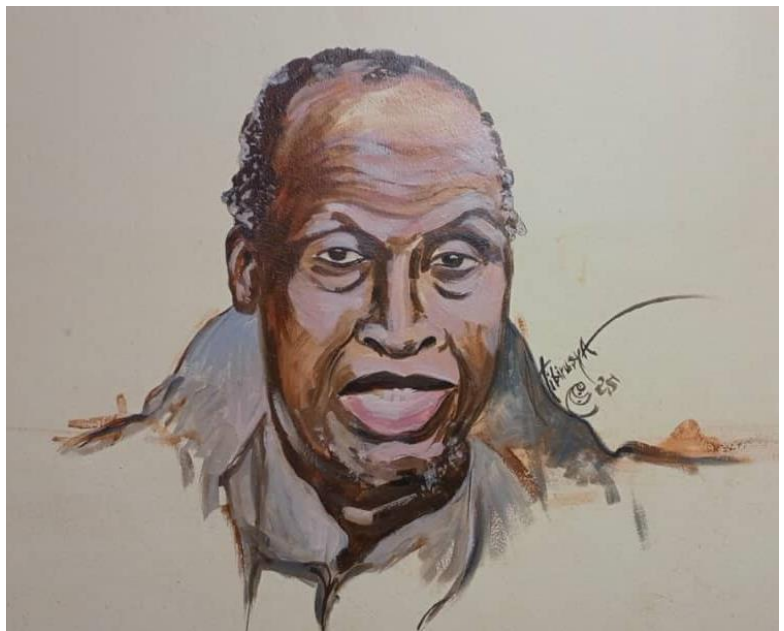
1. In 2013, Makerere University, Kampala, was celebrating 90 years of existence. I painted live a commemorative live canvas on Ngugi's public lecture as he was delivering a keynote speech on Mwalimu Julius Nyerere. He signed the painting.



2. In New York, USA, in 2014, on an invitation to present a paper. I painted live and exhibited at the NYASA-Albany – New York African Studies Members' Conference. Prof Ngugi gracefully signed again.



3. *At the SARIT CENTER, NAIROBI in 2015. I exhibited Prof. Mazrui paintings, which Ngugi signed. Kenya was then celebrating 50 years of independence. Many African artists exhibited their artworks as part of the celebrations.*



4. In 2025, after receiving news about Prof. Ngugi's passing on, I painted mural on a wall, celebrating his legacy, in collaboration with CDEA.

REVIEWS

A Literary Giant Whose Name Has Been Engraved in a Boulder by James O. Obuchere (Kenya)



A scene from the play *I'll Marry When I Want*, performed at the Kenya National Theatre (Photo: NPAS)

Professor Ngugi wa Thiong'o, who breathed his last on 28th May, 2025 was, without doubt, a distinguished scholar and a real colossus.

In the literary world, the man from Bibirioni, Limuru, stood shoulder to shoulder with the likes of **Prof Chinua Achebe, Ezekiel Mphahlele, Ali Mazrui, Elechi Amadi** and other intellectuals who rose to prominence through the spill of their magical quills.

As one of the pioneer students of the prestigious Alliance High School and Makerere University, it's obvious that only a few could match Ngugi's intellectual brilliance.

His first novel, *Weep Not, Child*, went on to prove to the world his exceptional creativity. Written during Kenya's pre independence period, it's a novel that speaks of

those dark days of war and emergency declaration. Days that were characterized by gunshots, hope, fear, betrayals and disillusionment - prior to the blossoming of Kenya's sweet fruits of liberty.

His second novel *The River Between*, written during his student days at Makerere University College, dwells primarily on antagonism. This antagonism goes beyond the two ridges of Makuyu and Kamenno. It encompasses the wider scope of cultural and religious conflicts, where we witness a head on collision between ancient and modernity/tradition and Christianity.

In this novel, there's Muthoni - Joshua's daughter - who, against her father's wish, undergoes female genital mutilation (FGM) in order to prove the possibility of being a true African and a Christian at the same time. Unfortunately, in her quest to walk on two ways

simultaneously, she dies a painful death due to an operation gone wrong. This novel, which has been a high school set book on various occasions, has had a great impact on the young men and women who studied it, especially on matters love.

The romantic affair between Waiyaki and Nyambura (Muthoni's sister), and the cultural conflict that ensues in between, is very relatable.

Prof Ngugi wa Thiong'o was not just a novelist *per excellence*. He was a distinguished playwright, too.

His play, *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi*, co-authored with **Prof Micere Githae Mugo**, is a real smash dedicated to Kenya's freedom fighter - Kimathi wa Waciuri - who was captured and hanged by the colonialists during the Mau Mau guerrilla uprising.

In it, Ngugi and Micere Mugo were at pains to expose the trial of Dedan Kimathi as a farce of the imperial justice system.

They also sought to put the record straight, contradicting those historians who portrayed Kimathi and his ilk as terrorists rather than true heroes of the struggle.

His other play, *Ngahika Ndeenda (I'll Marry When I Want)*, co-authored with **Ngugi wa Mirii** that was staged at Limuru's Kamirithu theatre, landed him in hot soup due to its veiled criticism of the government of Mzee Jomo Kenyatta. In the wake of this play's performance, Ngugi found himself as a guest of the state at Kamiti Maximum Security Prison, where he was incarcerated without trial.

One of Prof Ngugi's characteristics that cut him above the rest lies in his staunch, relentless advocacy for indigenous languages and culture. As one who chose to write in his native Kikuyu language, Ngugi's mantra has always been embodied in this assertion:

'If you know all the languages of the world but you do not know your mother tongue, that's enslavement (of the mind). On the other hand, if you know your mother tongue, then add on all other languages of the world, then that's empowerment.'

This is a challenge and a wakeup call to those people who feel ashamed expressing themselves in their mother language, seeing it as inferior and a taint to their ego. Ngugi demonstrated that true intellectualism does not lie in being brainwashed as to see one's language and culture as inferior. Rather, intellectualism should provide one with an opportunity to promote the same.

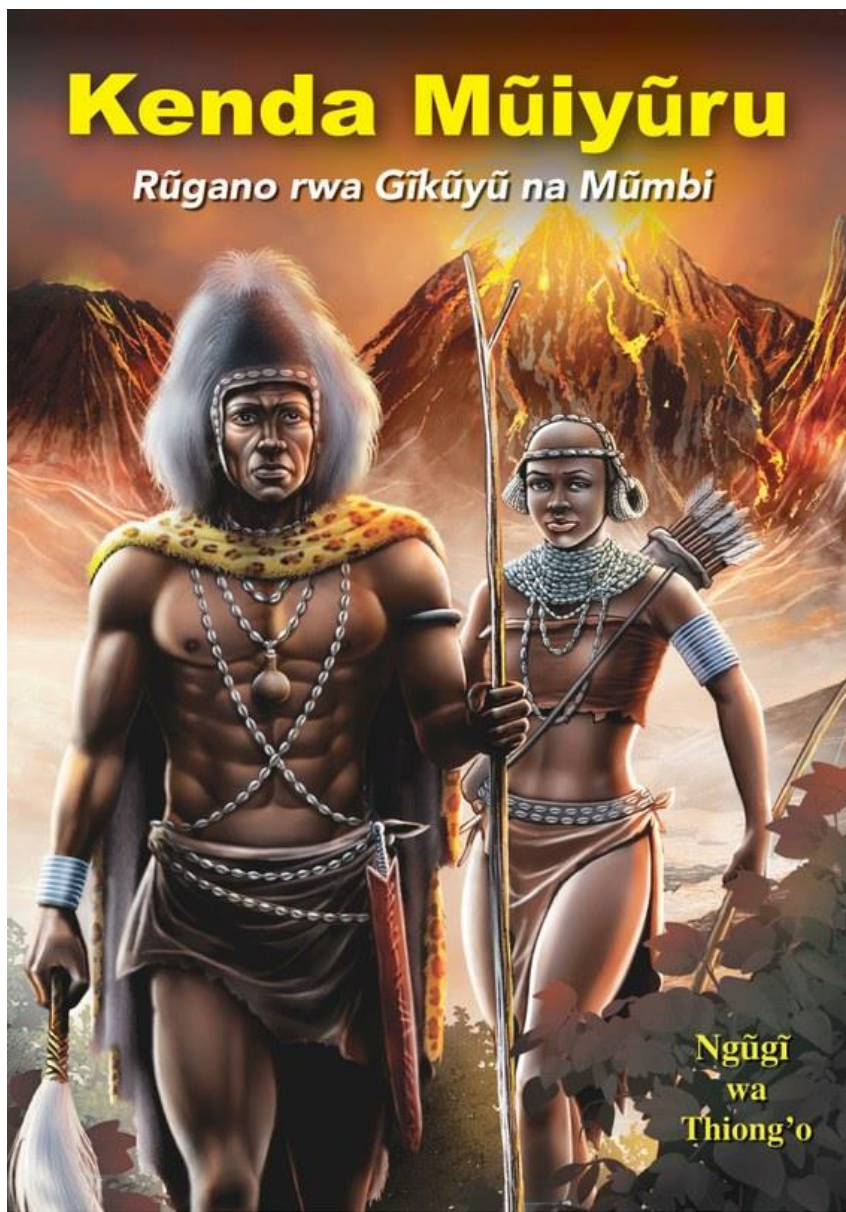
Having collided with the authorities due to the audacity of his pen, Ngugi found himself in self-exile in the USA, where he continued doing what he knew best - teaching and writing. But even his lengthy stay in the Diaspora did not, in any way, alienate him from his roots. From his motherland, he continued to draw inspiration for most of his works.

Reading Ngugi often gives one a rough mental picture of those places where his stories are set - whether it's the sprawling green landscape of Limuru, Molo's Ilmorog forest, Kamenno and Makuyu's River Honia, etc.

The versatility of Ngugi in the literary world can also be detected in his prowess as a short story writer. Stories such as *Wedding at The Cross*, *Mercedes Funeral* and *The Return* are not only entertaining, but relatable to an average reader. On the other hand, his *Detained* prison memoirs give us a glimpse of how life was within the four high walls of Kamiti Maximum Security Prison. Here, we learn about his fellow detainee, the late Joseph Martin Shikuku (the firebrand Butere legislator) who was always on a hunger strike that nearly took him to the grave.

Unarguably, Ngugi is among those few intellectuals who used their pen to promote their languages and culture. Thus, we have *Kenda Mwiyruru (The Perfect Nine)* - a book that tells about the origin of the Agikuyu people, Murogi Wagagogo (*Wizard Of The Crow*) and *Caitani Mutharabaini (Devil On The Cross)*.

'Prof Ngugi wa Thiong'o was not just a novelist *per excellence*. He was a distinguished playwright, too.'



With the death of Ngugi, the curtain now falls on one of Kenya's intellectual trailblazers who put our country squarely on the world map.

But we believe that despite his demise, his name has been engraved in a boulder. Through his literary works, his spirit continues to hover above our heads; and from the four corners of the world (or wherever his ashes were sprinkled), he continues to speak, inspiring generations.



James Obuchere is a poet, essayist, topical analyst and a short story writer. Writing under his Rhymestar pen name, James, who started off as an online writer, is now making inroads into the print world. He has contributed to various short stories, poetry anthologies and magazines. Some of his works currently form part of Kenya's junior secondary schools' study material.

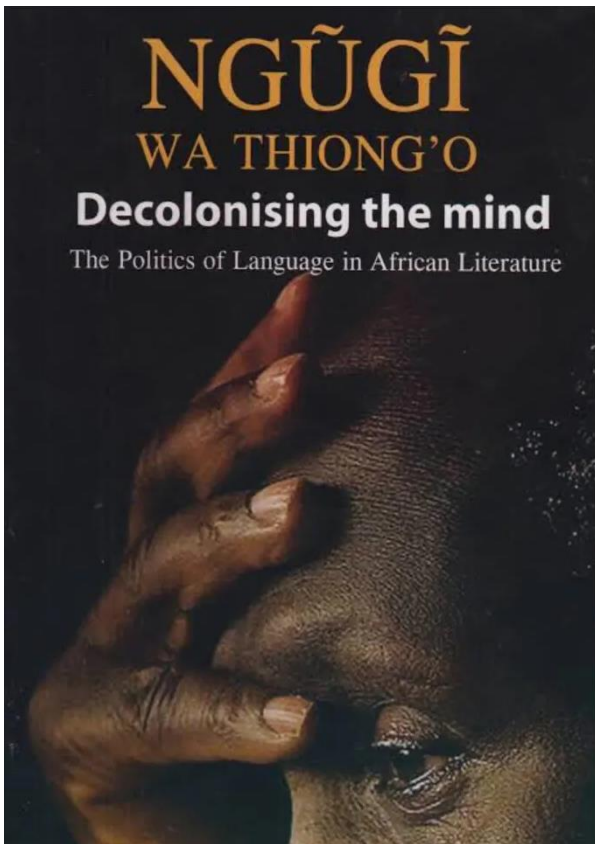
Kenda Muiyuru: Rugana Rwa Gikuyu na Mumbi by Ngugi wa Thiong'o is available at Kibanga Books at Kshs 1,450.00

Wizard of the Crow by Ngugi wa Thiong'o is available on Amazon.com at Kshs 2,320.00

The Trial of Dedan Kimathi by Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Micere Githae Mugo is available at Kibanga Books at Kshs 1,000

The River Between by Ngugi wa Thiong'o is available at bookduka.co.ke at Kshs 699.00

Reclaiming the African Voice — Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o and the Politics of Language by Jeff Chekwubechukwu (Nigeria)



Language is more than a vehicle of words; it is the fabric of culture, the echo of ancestry, and the lens through which people perceive the world. It holds the stories of a people, their humour, their metaphors, their pain, and their triumphs. This powerful understanding is at the heart of *Decolonising the Mind*, a groundbreaking work by the Kenyan writer and scholar Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, whose bold literary and political vision continues to stir a cultural and intellectual reawakening across the African continent.

Ngũgĩ asserts that language is not merely a tool for communication, but a carrier of culture, history, and identity. To lose one's language, he argues, is to lose one's cultural grounding — to become detached from the values, worldview, and collective memory of one's people. Language is how a people understand and

organize their lives; when it is stripped away or suppressed, the result is not just linguistic loss but spiritual and psychological dislocation.

Language as a Weapon of Colonial Control

In the colonial and postcolonial context of Africa, language became a powerful weapon. European imperialists understood that the most enduring form of control is not physical domination but mental submission. Colonial powers therefore systematically replaced indigenous African languages with European ones — English, French, Portuguese — not just to govern the body, but to capture and dominate the mind. Schools were established where African children were taught to think, dream, and express themselves in foreign tongues. Their native languages were forbidden, even punished, creating a deep sense of inferiority tied to their own cultural heritage.

In the colonial classroom, language policy was not neutral. It was a deliberate project of cultural erasure — a way of elevating the colonizer's worldview and suppressing African cosmologies and systems of knowledge. Through this process, many African students grew up unable to read or write in the languages they spoke at home. They were forced to articulate their dreams and fears in alien vocabularies, losing the subtlety and richness of their mother tongues.

The Lingering Shadows of Linguistic Imperialism

For Ngũgĩ, this issue is not simply educational; it is a deeply political and existential crisis. The continued dominance of European languages in African education, governance, literature, and media reinforces a form of mental colonization that persists long after the end of formal colonial rule. It creates a hierarchy of languages, in which African languages are considered incapable of expressing complex or intellectual thought. This not only marginalizes the languages themselves but also undermines the dignity and self-worth of those who

speak them.

Ngũgĩ saw this clearly when he noticed that the best African literature was being written and celebrated in English and French, while works in indigenous languages were sidelined or dismissed. African children were being raised to believe that meaningful thought and artistic excellence could only be achieved in the language of the former oppressor. Such thinking, Ngũgĩ argued, ensured the continuation of colonial structures in the minds of African people.

The Radical Call to ‘Decolonise the Mind’

In response, Ngũgĩ proposed the radical and necessary concept of ‘decolonising the mind.’ This, for him, meant much more than national independence — it meant a cultural and linguistic liberation that would enable Africans to reclaim their own voices and worldviews.

It called for a conscious rejection of linguistic dependency on colonial languages and a return to the richness and legitimacy of indigenous African languages. To decolonise the mind is not to wage war against English or French, but to re-center African languages in all spheres of life — literature, education, governance, and daily interaction. It is to affirm that African languages are capable of beauty, logic, science, philosophy, and art. It is to assert that Africans have the right to dream and create in the languages that best reflect their identities and histories.

Ngũgĩ’s own decision to stop writing in English and return to his native Gikuyu was not just a personal artistic choice — it was a bold political act. He demonstrated what it meant to live by one’s convictions, even at great personal and professional cost. In doing so, he challenged other African writers and intellectuals to re-examine the linguistic choices that shape their stories, their truths, and their sense of belonging.

A Legacy That Continues to Inspire

Decades after its publication, *Decolonising the Mind* continues to resonate with writers, educators, linguists, and cultural activists across Africa and the global South. In an era where globalisation often demands linguistic conformity, Ngũgĩ’s unwavering belief in linguistic plurality and cultural sovereignty stands as a beacon of resistance. His work reminds us that the preservation and elevation of African languages is not merely a sentimental project but a vital act of justice, self-determination, and intellectual integrity. His most famous statement captures this ethos with poetic clarity:

‘Language, any language, has a dual character: it is both a means of communication and a carrier of culture.’

To speak in one’s language is to think with the rhythms of one’s ancestors, to speak from a position of cultural authority, and to resist the erasure of memory. To write in it is to say, *‘My world matters. My people matter. Our stories deserve to be heard in our own voice.’*

Conclusion: Reclaiming Dignity Through Language

The project of reclaiming African languages is a project of reclaiming African dignity. It is about ensuring that future generations of Africans grow up with a sense of cultural confidence, knowing that their languages are not inferior but essential. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o’s courageous stance compels us to reimagine education, literature, and culture in ways that place African languages at the centre — not the periphery.

In reclaiming African languages, we do not merely restore words.

We restore dignity.

We restore memory.

We restore future.



Decolonising the Mind is available at Kibanga Bookstore, Nairobi, at Kshs 1,999

Revisiting Ngugi's 'Decolonising the Mind' by John Sibi-Okumu (Kenya)



Ngugi (centre) and his son Mukoma in conversation with JSO at the Storymoja Literary Festival, Kenya.

This is primarily to be a personal reflection on Ngugi's *Decolonising the Mind*. As it always helps to establish a genuine link between oneself and the focus of one's attention, let me declare, for fact-checking, that Ngugi wa Thiong'o was, initially, one of my lecturers as a first-year student of literature in English at the University of Nairobi, in 1973. More specifically, he was also my tutor for a dissection of DH Lawrence's *Sons and Lovers*. I would place Ngugi among those who led me, as an impressionable adolescent, to 'leftist' thinking. In that respect, I particularly recall the ideologically challenging introduction which he gave at our Taifa Hall to visiting American author, **John Updike**. Echoes of that challenge are to be found in the introduction to *Decolonising the Mind*:

'Imperialism, led by the USA, presents the struggling of the earth and all those calling for peace, democracy and socialism with the ultimatum: accept theft or death.'

After university, there were to be points of intersection in our lives right up to a shared phone conversation shortly before *Mwalimu*, or 'Sir' died. Almost all Ngugi's books in my home library were signed by the author.

I recorded a conversation with him for a TV interview programme (*The Summit*) which I presented. Mysteriously, it was not allowed to go on air. I interviewed him and his son **Mukoma** on the subject of Language and Identity for the Storymoja Literary Festival. He agreed to write the foreword for my *Collected Plays 2004-2014*. That was an enormous endorsement. Therefore, so much for an undeniable mixture of reverence and gratitude.

For the local tributes which followed Ngugi's death, I was asked to read a passage from *Decolonising the Mind*, as a member of a panel. The event was eventually canceled, owing to countrywide demonstrations. By way of preparation, I was obliged to revisit the book which I had last read about forty years earlier. I was reminded of the defiant Statement with which it began:

'This book, *Decolonising the Mind*, is my farewell to English as a vehicle for any of my writings. From now on, it is Gikuyu and Kiswahili all the way. However, I hope that through the age-old medium of translation, I shall be able to continue dialogue with all.'

So many years later, I would make bold to advance that 'the politics of language,' the subtitle of Ngugi's seminal book, have changed, significantly. To my mind, as Africans, we are called to question the efficacy of embracing our mother tongues as the prerequisite to embracing our personal identities.

At this point, some confessional self-revelation might be in order. Having been born and spent the first six years of my life in Kenya, I was transplanted, at the age of seven, to England, where I began my primary schooling: the explanation for English becoming the language of my greatest, linguistic immersion and proficiency. Fast forward to adulthood and to my marriage to a woman who does not share my mother tongue and to our children who speak neither of our mother tongues.

To return to my thesis. Given the constraints, in this context, of a limited word count, If I were to present an academic abstract on the subject, it could be summarized along the following lines. For one, I think that Ngugi's rallying call is laudable but ultimately untenable. Africa has too many languages for them all to be given equal validation by the state in terms of national dissemination. Those that are spoken fluently by two people or more should necessarily be deemed to exist. Thereafter, the continent will have to decide those that will be spoken at home as opposed to being taught in the classroom. In a word, if English, French, German and Spanish can be considered to be the go-to languages of Europe, then, by the same token, Kiswahili, Wolof, Zulu and Arabic should, compellingly, be the go-to languages of Africa. And certainly not all the two-thousand-plus, languages on offer.

Further, Ngugi made the following observation in *Decolonising the Mind*:

'The study of the African realities has for far too long been seen in terms of tribes. Whatever happens in Kenya, Uganda, Malawi is because of Tribe A versus Tribe B.'

In the intervening years the word 'tribe' has been dethroned in favour of the descriptions ethnic group, or community, or nation. And who would deny that all these terms provide the fuel for political division in just about every African country and that they are the

greatest obstacles to the universalist dream of one idyllic, global village. In Kenya, we have taken to talking about the distinct people of the mountain, of the lake and of the ocean. To what profitable end, I would ask? My final argument for a present-day review of Ngugi's 1980s appeal would be my attempt at a response to the question once posed by Saul Bellow, the Canadian American, Nobel Prize laureate in 1976, with regard to great, subtle and nuanced, world literature: *'Who is the Tolstoy of the Zulus? The Proust of the Papuans? I'd be happy to read them.'* I would concur with Ngugi that every language is valid and deserves preservation. However, a creative exponent need not invoke culture and rootedness for adopting any language as a tool for creativity, but rather mastery of that language. Being an intermittent student of it, **I would be delighted if I could master Ngugi's Gikuyu language or Kiswahili, for that matter, to write as well as he did when he made the Big Switch. Not because those languages are mine but because they are ours.**

Towards identity or arriving at a sense of self, I would urge an attachment less to ethnic tradition (the placement of huts in a village and so on) but more to an appreciation of our continent's shared history: to what makes us different but somewhat the same, as Africans, given our shared psychoses and neuroses from the days of slavery and colonisation which have given way to the pillage and plunder of neo-colonialism. We owe it to ourselves to be proud to be part of the whole of Africa and not just bits of Africa. At home and at school, let parents, guardians and teachers expose African children to novels, plays, poems and essays from our own, continental canon, the better to quote from our own, inspirational wisdom. This is not the forum for naming names, lest I be accused of partiality to my own. admittedly limited education, but only an invitation to discussion and debate. The dream of a United States of Africa should inspire us to work towards it still, even as we envisage a United States of the World. Ngugi's *Decolonising the Mind* sowed the seeds of rejection and rebellion. It remains for our young people to take the struggle forward.



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QUOTES

‘What separates Ngugi from his Nobel predecessor is his brave and polemical decision to write in his first language, Gikuyu.’ - Zoe Norridge, British researcher in 2010

‘There are those, also, who had to flee our country (Kenya) so that their artistic expression could thrive. Once again, today, it is with pleasure that we welcome two of them: Professor Ngugi wa Thiong’o and Professor Micere Mugo. These artistes and many more, are the vanguard of Kenya’s recent artistic resurgence. Both Ngugi and Micere no longer have to live abroad to be the best that they can be. And we hope that no other Kenyan need live abroad to be the best that they can be.’ – Kenyan President Uhuru Kenyatta speech during the Kenya National Theatre re-opening ceremony on 4th September 2015

‘Author, playwright, activist, and scholar, you have shown us the power of words to change the world. You have written in English and in your Kenyan language, Gikũyũ; you have worked in prison cells and in exile; and you have survived assassination attempts — all to bring attention to the plight of ordinary people in Kenya and around the world. Brave wordsmith, for breaking down barriers, for showing us the potential of literature to incite change and promote justice, for helping us decolonize our minds and open them to new ideas, we are privileged to award you this degree of Doctor of Letters.’ - Yale President Peter Salovey bestowing an honorary doctorate on Prof. Ngũgĩ during Yale University’s 316th Commencement

‘The fall of the Mũgumo of African Literature resounds with reverberating echoes. At University of Nairobi, he made a mark not only as the first African Chair of the Department of Literature, but also as the champion of the decolonization of Literature and its pedagogy through what is now known as the Nairobi Revolution. The foundation he laid continues to be seen in the curriculum, theatre practice and research trends in the department and beyond.’ - Prof. Miriam Maranga-Musonye (Chair, Dept of Literature @ UoN)

‘Ngũgĩ walked this earth with a fire in his bones, a pen in his hand, and Africa on his lips. Born into a land cracking under colonial weight, he answered history not with silence, but with story—fierce, unfaltering story. And in doing so, he became one of Africa’s indelible voices. One of her unwavering warriors...To quote Ngũgĩ’s own words, “A writer is a truth teller.” And Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o told the truth—about empire, about betrayal, about resistance, about language, and about love. Love for Kenya. Love for Africa. Love for justice.’ - Mĩcere Gĩthae Mũgo Foundation

‘He believed that the literature needs to be as much African as possible. He also lamented the political imprisonment Ngũgĩ endured as a result of his writing. “He was one of the African writers who paid the most unnecessary price for the pursuit of the natural occupation (as a writer).’ - Prof. Wole Soyinka

‘While I agreed with him that linguistic imperialism is a serious issue — one we must confront as part of the broader decolonization of our literature — I disagreed with the idea that writing in indigenous languages is a practical solution for most of us.’ - Chika Unigwe, Nigerian writer

‘(*A Grain of Wheat*) was a book that took me back to what the colonial struggle was like (and) he was one of those writers that introduced me to the fundamental role language plays in literature.’ - Michael Chiedoziem Chukwudera, director of Umuofia Arts and Books Festival

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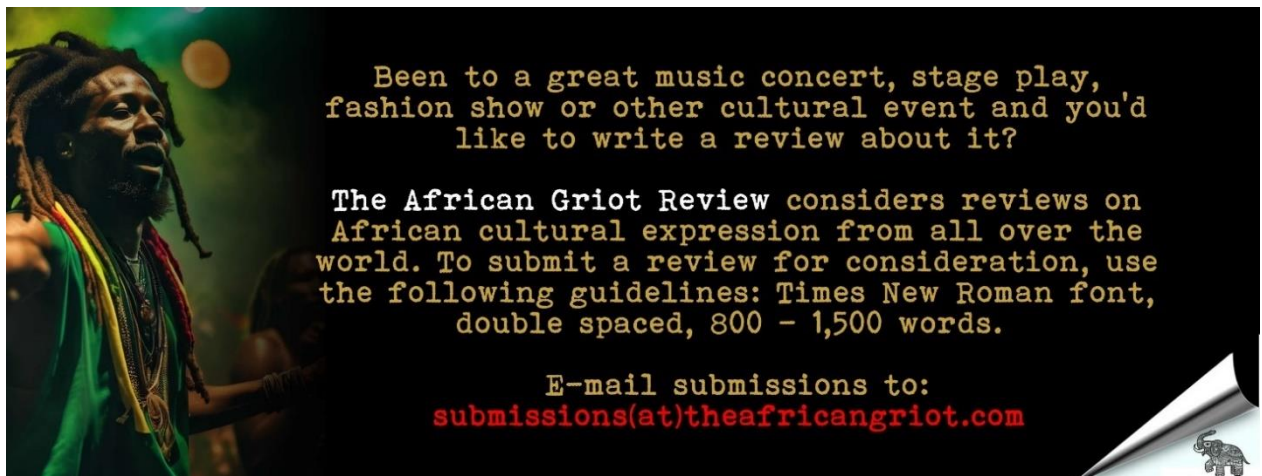
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