



MUKOMA WA NGUGI: WHAT *DECOLONIZING THE MIND* MEANS TODAY

"THE WORK OF LINGUISTIC DECOLONIZATION CANNOT BE DONE BY WRITERS ALONE"

March 23, 2018 By Mukoma Wa Ngugi

“I wanted to meet Chinua Achebe, the young Nigerian novelist whose two novels, *Things Fall Apart* and *No Longer at Ease*, seem to herald the birth of a new society in which writers, freed from the burden of political protests and jibes at a disintegrating

colonialism, can cast an unsentimental eye at human relationship in all its delicate and sometimes harsh intricacies” my father, then going by the name James Ngugi, wrote after the African Writes of English Expression conference in 1962.[1]

But when he revisited that same conference in his book *Decolonizing the Mind* 26 years later, his tone was markedly different. Noting the exclusionary nature of the conference boldly stated in its title, he wrote, “Now looking back from the self-questioning heights of 1986, I can see this contained absurd anomalies. I, a student, could qualify for the meeting on the basis of only two published short stories . . . But neither Shaban Robert, then the greatest living East African poet with several works of poetry and prose to his credit in Kiswahili, nor Chief Fagunwa, the great writer with several published titles in Yoruba, could possibly qualify.”[2] The 1962 Conference had come to represent a major contradiction: European languages had become the default vehicles for African literature. The term “African literature” meant African literature in English, French or Portuguese. Those writing in African languages had to justify their use of their mother tongues.

To be clear, the language question did not begin with my father. Immediately following the conference, literary critic Obi Wali had raised the questions that Ngugi would later revisit. In his essay “The Dead End of African Literature,”[3] Wali argued that African literature in Western languages would become “a minor appendage in the main stream of European Literature. He noted that in Nigeria, only “one percent” of the population could be able to read Wole Soyinka’s *Dance of the Forest*. To address the diversity and multiplicity of African languages, he called for translation. He mused, “one wonders what would have happened to English literature for instance, if writers like Spenser, Shakespeare, Donne, and Milton, had neglected English, and written in French or Latin simply because these classical languages were the cosmopolitan languages of their times.”

On the other side of the question were writers like Chinua Achebe (who went on to help the young Ngugi publish his first novel, *Weep Not Child* through the Heinemann African Writers Series in 1964). Achebe, writing in reply to Obi Wali, argued that

English allowed for communicating across the different African languages while also reaching wider audiences in the West; that it was the language of power; that English could be Africanized so that it carried the African experience.

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South African writers and intellectuals writing in African languages were getting translated into English as early as the late 1800s and early 1900s. Thomas Mofolo’s *Moeti oa Bochabela* was published in 1907 and later translated into English as *Traveler to the East* in 1934; *Chaka* was written in 1909 but published in 1925. And if we take into account writing in Amharic, Arabic or Hausa, African literature in African languages, or in non-European languages stretches back to the 1200’s.[4]

In other words, the language debate and writing in African languages had been going on for a long time. What, then, did *Decolonizing the Mind*, bring to the table? For one it tied language and culture to the material work of both colonization and decolonization. “The bullet was the means of the physical subjugation. Language was the means of the spiritual subjugation” Ngugi wrote. It also examined the close

relationship between language and culture. For him “language carries, and culture carries, particularly through orature and literature, the entire body of values by which we come to perceive ourselves and our place in our world.”

Written in the 1980s at the height of the cold war and during Moi dictatorship, the book also captured the contradictions of neocolonialism throughout Africa and the global south. Inherited colonial inequalities were becoming more entrenched, the security apparatus more brutal, and economies were pried open by Western countries, leaving the most vulnerable without access to health care or education. *Decolonizing the Mind* also demonstrated the way western cultural and linguistic superiority were emphasized while African cultures and languages were debased.

The concept of decolonizing the mind also applies to other areas of our lives away from immediately recognizable power relationship between the colonizer and colonized, or oppression and avenues of resistance. Writing for the African Journal of Reproductive Health, Nombuso Dlamini et al. ask the question: “What Does a Decolonizing/Decentralizing Methodology in Examining Sexual Lives Entail?” [5] In the essay, the authors examine their experiences researching “the state of, and teach about, sexual health and HIV/AIDS in Edo State.” *Decolonizing the Mind* became useful as a conceptual tool through which to understand the ways in which power imbalances were practiced as culturally encoded automated reflexes. According to Health, Nombuso Dlamini et al, “to decolonize one’s mind is a life-long process, as well, systems of domination and subordination are not necessarily easy to identify when situated within unofficial cultures, that is, in interpersonal politics (within the negotiation of relation of power by individuals in interaction.”

Today, we have decolonial/decolonization movements in campuses around the world (but most vocally in South Africa). Cornell University’s Carole Boyce Davies put it well when she said that *Decolonizing the Mind*

has always been a staple required or “go to” text for the discussion of the nexus between language and coloniality. It was for years one of the only texts, in the face of postcolonial theory, before this new wave of decolonial discourse to address the need for continuing to address what Biodun Jeyifo called “arrested decolonization.”[6]

In short it remains a book of our times. History moves on, theories of liberation march alongside it, but without our languages we will remain trapped within what literary critic Adam Beach calls the English metaphysical empire.

As a scholar and writer of African literature, it has been useful to me to compare my father’s colonial education and my own neocolonial education. He could write that in his community, “we spoke Gikuyu as we worked in the fields” and “in and outside the home” before the “harmony of language, culture and education was broken by colonial education.” My generation cannot make the same claim. Some of us, especially those who grew up in urban areas, cannot speak their mother tongues. When they visit their grandparents in the rural areas, they need someone to serve as translator. Many of our parents, having grown up under colonial rule, did not find any value in speaking in their mother tongues. They too, like the schools ran English only households, and speaking of mother tongues frowned upon.

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There was another similarity: like my father before me, I was caned if found speaking my mother tongue and forced to wear a sign with the words “I am an Ass” written on it. For my generation, how well you spoke English was not just a marker of intelligence but also class. If your English was “broken,” fellow students took to shaming you. To be called a “shrubber,” meaning that you confused L and R sounds, was social death, and it even affected your dating life. English was not just a language of communication, or a language that helped one climb out of poverty and into power and wealth, it was the language of the cultured.

In 2017 my wife, daughter and I visited my former primary school. By each classroom door I saw a list of 19 rules, with the second rule being “Vernacular Speaking is PROHIBITED.”

For my father’s generation and mine, what was supposed to enlighten only tightened our bond to the English metaphysical empire. In 2017, my father was conferred an honorary doctorate by Yale University alongside with the singer Stevie Wonder, Congressman John Lewis, and the native American language warrior Jessie Little Doe Baird. His conversations around language, identity and culture Baird remain the most memorable for me, meeting Stevie Wonder and the Congressman notwithstanding. They had so much in common that it was a wonder they had not met before. Or it wasn’t a wonder: They had been formed by the English metaphysical empire and found their way out through their respective languages. Now, they were engaged in a battle to decolonize minds and institutions.

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For my father, the work of liberating Africans out of the English metaphysical empire and neocolonialism had to be done in African languages. Pro-people and revolutionary literature could not contribute to decolonization if written in a formerly colonial language the people could not understand. And nowhere was the practice of this more evident than in his 1977 play, *Ngabiika Ndenda (I will Marry When I Want)*. Co-

authored in Gikuyu with Ngugi Wa Mirii, the play was staged at the Kamiriithu Cultural Center, right in the heart of Kamiriithu village. This was the village from which the nearby Bata shoe Company and tea plantations drew their labor. It was a village of exploited and peasant workers. And it was they who helped in fleshing out the play, who acted in it and comprised the majority of the audience. The play itself was a dramatization of their exploitation and resistance.

But practicing the politics of language came with a personal price. The play was promptly banned by the Kenyatta government and led to my father being detained without trial for one year. I was six, and today I can never be sure whether I really witnessed his arrest, or if the subsequent conversations amongst my family members and his recollection of the arrest in *Detained* made an imagined memory feel real. In a 2001 poem titled, “Recipe: How to Become an Immigrant and an Exile” I captured his arrest this way:

Silent duels. And so when the police with guns and big black coats
came for my father, it must have been a dream I dreamt. That
night—pills with no water but morning tea still found a newspaper
damp with dew[7]

In 1982, my father attempted to resurrect the Kamirithu Theater. The then Moi government banned the play, burned the compound to the ground, and forced him into political exile. The government would not give passports to my older siblings or allow them to find meaningful jobs. Once in the 1980s, we held a Christmas party that got raided by the police. Everyone in attendance lost their jobs shortly afterwards. The work of decolonization is as personal as it is political.

Today, more and more younger African writers are taking up Ngugi’s call while taking advantage of the internet age. *Jalada Africa*, an online journal, best exemplifies the meeting between African literature, languages, the internet age, and the practical work of decolonizing. The Jalada Collective that produces the journal is composed of young writers such as Managing Editor Moses Kilolo, Treasurer Ndinda Kioko, the 2013

Caine Prize winner Okwiri Odour, Mehul Gohil, who was featured in the anthology *Africa 39*, and the poet Clifton Gachugua, whose first collection of poetry, *The Madman at Kilifi*, won the Sillerman First Book Prize for African Poets and was published by the University of Nebraska Press in 2014.

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Whereas my generation inherited the language anxieties of the Makerere generation, the work of the Jalada Collective points to a generation that is more confident, unencumbered by colonial and neocolonial aesthetics. The Makerere generation was composed of writers in their twenties and thirties who understood themselves as having a mission to contribute to decolonization; this generation sees itself as having the mission to create democratic spaces for African literature, languages, and through internet use, a Pan-African readership. They want African languages to speak to each other, and to non-African languages, through translation.

The 2015 *Jalada* language issue, which also included podcast interviews with some of the contributing authors, aimed to create a meeting ground where languages would meet as material entities through the literature—side by side—and also engage each other through translation. In their call for papers the collective announced that:

The anthology will be a celebration of language, featuring fiction, poetry, visual art and various essays on the very subject of language. Writers are asked to submit original works written in their own languages and provide an accompanying English translation. We also ask writers to feel free to treat language as a theme, where language can be a character, a topic in a story or even incorporate languages other than English as the theme in the story. Writers may also write in English or various Englishes.[8]

While in the end most of the writing featured was originally in English, there were conversations across various language borders—Lusophone, Francophone, English and African languages.

In the spring of 2016, Jalada published and facilitated the translation of a short story originally written in Gikuyu by Ngugi into over 60 languages—47 of them being African. This came with practical challenges. Moses Kilolo noted they had very few professional translators and had to work with a team of “younger writers who are not very experienced in translation [but who] are taking up the challenge as well, and consulting widely in order to learn and do it well.” And in terms of setting up publishing structures, they “[encouraged] other continent based magazines to join [them] in providing such platforms to these writers.”

To call for translation as an active agent in the growth of literary traditions also sends out a challenge to writers, scholars, and publishers who see African languages as being in the service of the more-useful English. Or conversely, those who understand translation as most desirable when coming from European languages into anemic African languages desperately in need of European linguistic and aesthetic transfusion. The Jalada collective then is challenging the idea of servicing English, and proving the feasibility of a democratization of linguistic and literary spaces. Translation amongst African languages, as opposed to English into African languages, has yet to be practiced and theorized into critical and popular acceptance. For Jalada, to make

Ngugi's *Itũka Rĩa Mũrũngarũ: Kana Kĩrĩa Gĩtũmaga Andũ Mathũ Marũngũ* (*The Upright Revolution: Or Why Humans Walk Upright*) the most translated African language story is to claim a piece of literary history yet to be written.

Jalada's translation initiative is also part of a larger language awakening. Capturing the shift from an English-only consensus to a multiple-languages debate, the 2015 Kwani literary festival titled, "Beyond the Map of English: Writers in conversation on Language" centered and celebrated the language debate. At that festival, the inaugural Mabati-Cornell Kiswahili Prizes for African Literature were awarded. I co-founded the Kiswahili prize with Lizzy Attree, the director of the Caine prize, in 2014, with the express goal of "recognizing writing in African languages and encouraging translation from, between and into African languages." The \$15,000 prize, divided amongst four winners, is awarded annually to the best unpublished manuscript or book published within two years of the award year across the categories of Fiction/Nonfiction/Graphic Novels. The winning prose entries are then published in Kiswahili by Mkuki na Nyota or East African Educational Publishers (EAEP), and the best poetry book will be translated and published in English by the African Poetry Book Fund.

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Scholar and writer Boubacar Boris Diop has started Ceytu, an imprint in Senegal dedicated to the translation of seminal works by Frantz Fanon, Aime Cesaire, and others into Wolof. In 2013, Chike Jeffers edited an anthology of philosophical texts originally written in seven African languages and then translated into English. And Wangui Wa Goro, who translated Ngugi's *Matigari* from Gikuyu into English in 1982, has also done a lot of work to make African literary translation viable and visible.

But the African language awakening of the post-post-Makerere writers still has a long way to go before it can claim a space of co-existence with African writing in European languages. When setting up the Mabati-Cornell Kiswahili Prize for African Literature, Dr. Lizzy Attree and I were immediately confronted by the absence of structures that are simply taken for granted when it comes to English writing, not just in Africa but worldwide. Most if not all colleges in the US, for example, have a literary journal for undergraduate and graduate students. English and other literary departments have well respected literary journals (not to speak of academic university presses). States and cities have their own regional prizes and often have state-sponsored cultural organizations that support writers. Writers residencies compete for prestige.

In Kiswahili, which has an estimated 100 million speakers, there are only a handful of literary journals. And prizes for Kiswahili literature are not more than five. For Gikuyu, my mother tongue spoken by close to 7 million people, I can name only one journal: *Mutiiri*, launched by my father in 2000 as a print journal, and now found online.[9] There are no literary prizes associated with the language. Publishers of literary texts in African languages outside of South Africa are few and far between. I do not know of a single journal that produces literary criticism in an African language. Or any residencies that encourage writing in African languages. The point is, for a population that will soon reach 1 billion people, spread over 55 countries, even 100 journals and literary prizes would still be pitifully inadequate.

The work of linguistic decolonization cannot be done by writers alone. Governments must change their policy towards the teaching of African languages and create economic opportunities in those languages—whether it's agricultural extension officers

trained in the languages of the communities they serve, or teachers trained in teaching African languages, or interpreters for national and international organizations, and so on. African languages have to move from being primarily social languages to vehicles of political, cultural, and economic growth.

We need literary criticism in African languages. And equally importantly, we have to decolonize African literary theory. Why should literary criticism continue to draw its primary conceptual oxygen from European literary theories? Why not use African literary theory to unlock the aesthetics of African literature? After all, our imaginations draw from our creolized cultures, and our cultures have and have had their own approaches to aesthetics. Literary analytical tools can be found in the cultures that produce African literature, but only if we first dig deep into African languages.

[1] Ngugi, J.T. "A Kenyan at the Conference." *Transition*, No. 5 (Jul. 30 – Aug. 29, 1962), p. 7

[2] Thiong'o, Ngugi Wa. *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature*. London: J. Currey, 1986.

[3] Wali, Obiajunwa. "A Reply to Critics from Obi Wali." *Transition*, No. 50 (Oct., 1975 – Mar., 1976), pp. 46-47.

[4] See Albert Gerard's *African Language Literature* who writes "What can be called the Golden age of Ge'ez literature began in 1270, when Yekuno Alma (1270 – 1285) mounted the throne and founded a new dynasty which over the next 250 years, managed to overcome the Muslim emirates and to strengthen Amhara supremacy... The reign of Amada Tyseyon (1314 – 1344) saw the emergence of original writing, both religious and secular (8).

[5] Dlamini, S. Nombuso, et al. "What does a decolonizing/decentralizing methodology in examining sexual lives entail?" *African Journal of Reproductive Health* 16.2 (2012): 55-70.

[6] Davies, Carole Boyce. "What Does Ngugi's Decolonising the Mind Mean to You as a Writer and/or Scholar?" Facebook, Facebook, 6 Aug. 2017, 12:23, www.facebook.com/mukomawangugi.

[7] Ngugi, Mukoma Wa. "Recipe: How to Become an Immigrant and an Exile." Tin House, Tin House, 31 Jan. 2017, tinhouse.com/recipe-how-to-become-an-immigrant-and-an-exile/.

[8] Jalada. "Submissions." *Jalada*. N.p., 15 Apr. 2015. Web. 01 Feb. 2016.

[9] <http://www.mutiiri.com/>

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"THE DOT SISTERS"

**OFF THE CLOCK: WHAT THE LIT HUB STAFF IS
DOING THIS WEEKEND**

