



Kenya in Translation: An Interview with Ngugi wa Thiong'o

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Kenya's recent political upheaval and news of brutal ethnic clashes need to be understood in terms of the country's political and cultural history. At a reading at the Center for the Art of Translation in San Francisco, author and activist Ngugi wa Thiong'o, one of the country's most important chroniclers of this history, discussed the relationship between language and oppression.

Ngugi wa Thiong'o was born in Kenya in 1934 into a Gikuyu farming family. The Mau Mau uprising against the British in the 1950s left a deep impression on him, and much of his writing deals with government corruption, oppression and inequality in society. In 1977, then vice-president Daniel arap Moi ordered Ngugi -- who was teaching at Nairobi University at the time -- arrested and imprisoned for his play *I Will Marry When I Want*, which he wrote in his native language of Gikuyu -- and which was sharply critical of neo-colonial Kenya. While in prison, Ngugi decided to forsake writing in English and write only in Gikuyu in an effort to revitalize indigenous languages. He wrote the first ever novel in Gikuyu, *Devil on the Cross*, on prison-issued toilet paper, the only paper available to him.

In 1978, following a campaign by Amnesty International, Ngugi was released from prison. Following his release, he was unable to regain his position at Nairobi University; with Moi elected president, he left Kenya in 1982, going into self-imposed exile in Britain and, later, the United States.

Ngugi argues that literature written by Africans in English is not African literature, and he has encouraged other African authors to write in their own languages to emphasize a non-colonial cultural expression. He describes his most recent novel, *Wizard of the Crow*, which he translated into English, as a "global epic from Africa." A satire set in the imaginary African nation of Aburiria, the novel is about a dictator -- known only as "the Ruler" -- who plans to build the tallest building in the world so he can live in the same neighborhood as God. Critics have compared its scope and quality to the work of Salman Rushdie and Gabriel García Márquez.

Following his appearance in San Francisco, AlterNet caught up with Ngugi, currently a professor of English and comparative literature at the University of California, Irvine and the head of its International Center for Writing and Translation.

Emily Wilson: Why were you put in prison? What did you do that was so threatening to the government?

Ngugi wa Thiong'o: The community discovered its own voice; how to talk about themselves, what they had done in history, the confidence they were getting about themselves. It awakened their consciousness. I don't think the government was so afraid of the language -- because if the language were praising what the government had done they would have been quite happy about it. They would not have felt the need to arrest me. But I think a repressive regime always fears people who are awakened -- particularly ordinary people. If they are awakened, I think governments all over the world feel uncomfortable about that; they want to be in control. (Laughs) They want to be the ones telling people: "This is what we have done in history" but when people begin to say, "No this is what *we* have done in history" it's a different thing.

EW: Why did you make the decision to write in your native language?

Ngugi wa Thiong'o: It was an act of resistance. In 1977 and the whole of '78 I was in a maximum-security prison. Why? Because I had combined with other people to work in a community theater in a language understood by the peasantry. We put on a play called *I Will Marry When I Want* and this was stopped by the government and I was arrested and put in prison. When I was there I was wondering why I was put in prison for working in an African language when I had not been put in prison for working in English. So really, in prison I started thinking more seriously about the relation between language and power. And that's when I made the decision not to write in English; "I'll be writing in Gikuyu." It was a way of saying "I'm going to write in the very language which had been the basis of my incarceration." It was a way of resisting that incarceration. But of course, what I did not realize was that my resistance had larger implications.

EW: What are the larger implications?

Ngugi wa Thiong'o: For me, being in prison writing in an African language was a way of saying: "Even if you put me in prison, I will keep on writing in the language which made you put me in prison." But when I came out of prison with a novel, *Devil on the Cross*, two things happened: One, it meant here I had an original novel in an African language [that] could be read by people who understood Gikuyu. But the same novel was now available in English, so it reached the same audience I was reaching before. It was a revelation for me, in a practical sense, that you could write in an African language and still reach an audience beyond that language through the art of translation. Through the act of translation we break out of linguistic confinement and reach many other communities.

My practice then began encouraging other people. Writing in African languages became a topic of discussion in conferences, in schools, in classrooms; the issue is always being raised -- so it's no longer "in the closet," as it were. It's part of the discussion going on about the future of African literature. The same questions are there in Native American languages, they're there in native Canadian languages,

they're there is some marginalized European languages, like say, Irish. So what I thought was just an African problem or issue is actually a global phenomenon about relationships of power between languages and cultures.

EW: You say translation affects everyone's life. How is that so?

Ngugi wa Thiong'o: Translation can be invisible -- and it is very real. The Bible affects everybody's life who is a Christian, from the middle class in Europe to the peasant in Africa and Asia. The Bible has affected their lives, but in translation, since they do not read the Bible in the original Greek or Hebrew. Many people do not know that Jesus did not speak Latin or English or Hebrew; he spoke Aramaic. But nobody knows that language. So we're talking about the Bible itself being a translation of a translation of a translation. And, in reality, it has affected people's lives in history. People went to war as a result of it and even today, every Sunday, the Bible in translation is being read to thousands and thousands in Africa. It is an integral part of their functioning and the way they look at the world.

EW: How is translation a political act?

Ngugi wa Thiong'o: We think of politics in terms of power and who has the power. Politics is the end to which that power is put. And you think: who holds that power, what group? In terms of language, English is very dominant vis-à-vis African language. That in itself is a power relationship -- between languages and communities -- because the English language is a determinant of the ladder to achievement. A person who acquires English has access to all the things that that language makes possible. You get another person who operates only in an African language and there are many persons who operate only in African languages; he or she is excluded from all the goodies that come with English. And even in terms of justice, law codes, the legal system. A person who does not know English in Africa is excluded from that system because he can only operate through acts of translation. So what is translated from English and into English -- and in what quantities -- is a question of power.

EW: What do you think about what is happening in Kenya now?

Ngugi wa Thiong'o: It's very sad what is happening in Kenya right now. There are two things: There is the question of the elections and the allegations and counter-allegations of rigging and so on. Of course that's a huge problem. That's something that has to be solved politically, meaning you can recount the votes, you can share power -- some political solution. But another phenomenon developing in Kenya is ethnic cleansing -- and that's the thing that has made me very sad. Because some people will use the cover of the problems of rigged elections to do things that are unacceptable like ethnic cleansing and displacement of people. It's completely unacceptable.

I am hoping Kenyans will overcome this because we have to find our own unity. There is no way we can survive as a nation in the world without finding unity. But in Kenya, in Africa, there is the question of uneven development ... meaning some

centers, which are near towns or hubs gained more by way of having infrastructure.

The other problem is uneven social development. In each community you get a small elite and the majority is poor. So those two problems of uneven geographic development and uneven social development are something that has to be tackled and it's something I've been writing about in all my books all these years, because uneven geographic development also coincides with specific linguistic communities. So those who are there are not getting the goodies that those nearer the capitals are getting. Those problems have to be addressed by whatever government is in power.

EW: How do you feel artists and writers are addressing these problems?

Ngugi wa Thiong'o: What's good about writing is that when you write novels or fiction, people can see that the problems in one region are similar to problems in another region ... If a novel is written in a certain language with certain characters from a particular community and the story is very good or illuminating, then that work is translated into the language of another community -- then they begin to see through their language that the problems described there are the same as the problems they are having. They can identify with characters from another language group. We can appreciate each other's languages. And the question of being uncomfortable about our languages would go away.

EW: What is it like to be an African writer physically away from Kenya?

Ngugi wa Thiong'o: Any writer likes to be near the area which is the location of his work. Of course it's very, very important for me to feel Kenya, to feel, every day, this is where images come from. So to be taken away from that by political pressure or other means -- one is taken away from the area, which is the basis of inspiration -- is difficult. You get taken from an area where the language you are using, in my case Gikuyu language is spoken there and I'm having to operate in, say, New York, or in Irvine, writing in Gikuyu language in an environment which is not Gikuyu-speaking. So I'm writing for those people in Kenya, but in Irvine and in New York. I'm more trying to connect; I'm more listening to people. Whatever I get is very meaningful to me.

Emily Wilson is a freelance writer and teaches basic skills at City College of San Francisco.

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