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\*in preparation

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Ngũgĩ  
wa Thiong'o

# Decolonising the Mind

The Politics  
of Language  
in African Literature

James Currey

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## *Dedication*

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This book is gratefully dedicated to all those who write in African languages, and to all those who over the years have maintained the dignity of the literature, culture, philosophy, and other treasures carried by African languages.

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# 1 The Language of African Literature

## I

The language of African literature cannot be discussed meaningfully outside the context of those social forces which have made it both an issue demanding our attention and a problem calling for a resolution.

On the one hand is imperialism in its colonial and neo-colonial phases continuously press-ganging the African hand to the plough to turn the soil over, and putting blinkers on him to make him view the path ahead only as determined for him by the master armed with the bible and the sword. In other words, imperialism continues to control the economy, politics, and cultures of Africa. But on the other, and pitted against it, are the ceaseless struggles of African people to liberate their economy, politics and culture from that Euro-American-based stranglehold to usher a new era of true communal self-regulation and self-determination. It is an ever-continuing struggle to seize back their creative initiative in history through a real control of all the means of communal self-definition in time and space. The choice of language and the use to which language is put is central to a people's definition of themselves in relation to their natural and social environment, indeed in relation to the entire universe. Hence language has always been at the heart of the two contending social forces in the Africa of the twentieth century.

The contention started a hundred years ago when in 1884 the capitalist powers of Europe sat in Berlin and carved an entire continent with a multiplicity of peoples, cultures, and languages into different colonies. It seems it is the fate of Africa to have her destiny always decided around conference tables in the metropolises of the western world: her submergence from self-governing communities into colonies was decided in Berlin; her more recent transition into neo-colonies along the same boundaries was negotiated around the same tables in London, Paris, Brussels and Lisbon. The Berlin-drawn

division under which Africa is still living was obviously economic and political, despite the claims of bible-wielding diplomats, but it was also cultural. Berlin in 1884 saw the division of Africa into the different languages of the European powers. African countries, as colonies and even today as neo-colonies, came to be defined and to define themselves in terms of the languages of Europe: English-speaking, French-speaking or Portuguese-speaking African countries.<sup>1</sup>

Unfortunately writers who should have been mapping paths out of that linguistic encirclement of their continent also came to be defined and to define themselves in terms of the languages of imperialist imposition. Even at their most radical and pro-African position in their sentiments and articulation of problems they still took it as axiomatic that the renaissance of African cultures lay in the languages of Europe.

I should know!

## II

In 1962 I was invited to that historic meeting of African writers at Makerere University College, Kampala, Uganda. The list of participants contained most of the names which have now become the subject of scholarly dissertations in universities all over the world. The title? 'A Conference of African Writers of English Expression'.<sup>2</sup>

I was then a student of *English* at Makerere, an overseas college of the University of London. The main attraction for me was the certain possibility of meeting Chinua Achebe. I had with me a rough typescript of a novel in progress, *Weep Not, Child*, and I wanted him to read it. In the previous year, 1961, I had completed *The River Between*, my first-ever attempt at a novel, and entered it for a writing competition organised by the East African Literature Bureau. I was keeping in step with the tradition of Peter Abrahams with his output of novels and autobiographies from *Path of Thunder* to *Tell Freedom* and followed by Chinua Achebe with his publication of *Things Fall Apart* in 1959. Or there were their counterparts in French colonies, the generation of Sédar Senghor and David Diop included in the 1947/48 Paris edition of *Anthologie de la nouvelle poésie nègre et malgache de langue française*. They all wrote in European languages as was the case with all the participants in that momentous encounter on Makerere hill in Kampala in 1962.



The title, 'A Conference of African Writers of English Expression', automatically excluded those who wrote in African languages. Now on 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, 'The Fig Tree (Mügumo)' in a student journal, *Penpoint*, and 'The Return' in a new journal, *Transition*. But neither Shabaan 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 Nigerian writer with several published titles in Yoruba, could possibly qualify.

The discussions on the novel, the short story, poetry, and drama were based on extracts from works in English and hence they excluded the main body of work in Swahili, Zulu, Yoruba, Arabic, Amharic and other African languages. Yet, despite this exclusion of writers and literature in African languages, no sooner were the introductory preliminaries over than this Conference of 'African Writers of English Expression' sat down to the first item on the agenda: 'What is African Literature?'

The debate which followed was animated: Was it literature about Africa or about the African experience? Was it literature written by Africans? What about a non-African who wrote about Africa: did his work qualify as African literature? What if an African set his work in Greenland: did that qualify as African literature? Or were African languages the criteria? OK: what about Arabic, was it not foreign to Africa? What about French and English, which had become African languages? What if an European wrote about Europe in an African language? If ... if ... if ... this or that, except the issue: the domination of our languages and cultures by those of imperialist Europe: in any case there was no Fagunwa or Shabaan Robert or any writer in African languages to bring the conference down from the realms of evasive abstractions. The question was never seriously asked: did what we wrote qualify as African literature? The whole area of literature and audience, and hence of language as a determinant of both the national and class audience, did not really figure: the debate was more about the subject matter and the racial origins and geographical habitation of the writer.

English, like French and Portuguese, was assumed to be the natural language of literary and even political mediation between African people in the same nation and between nations in Africa and other continents. In some instances these European languages were seen as having a capacity to unite African peoples against divisive tendencies

inherent in the multiplicity of African languages within the same geographic state. Thus Ezekiel Mphahlele later could write, in a letter to *Transition* number 11, that English and French have become the common language with which to present a nationalist front against white oppressors, and even 'where the whiteman has already retreated, as in the independent states, these two languages are still a unifying force'.<sup>3</sup> In the literary sphere they were often seen as coming to save African languages against themselves. Writing a foreword to Birago Diop's book *Contes d'Amadou Koumba* Sédar Senghor commends him for using French to rescue the spirit and style of old African fables and tales. 'However while rendering them into French he renews them with an art which, while it respects the genius of the French language, that language of gentleness and honesty, preserves at the same time all the virtues of the negro-african languages.'<sup>4</sup> English, French and Portuguese had come to our rescue and we accepted the unsolicited gift with gratitude. Thus in 1964, Chinua Achebe, in a speech entitled 'The African Writer and the English Language', said:

Is it right that a man should abandon his mother tongue for someone else's? It looks like a dreadful betrayal and produces a guilty feeling. But for me there is no other choice. I have been given the language and I intend to use it.<sup>5</sup>

See the paradox: the possibility of using mother-tongues provokes a tone of levity in phrases like 'a dreadful betrayal' and 'a guilty feeling'; but that of foreign languages produces a categorical positive embrace, what Achebe himself, ten years later, was to describe as this 'fatalistic logic of the unassailable position of English in our literature'.<sup>6</sup>

The fact is that all of us who opted for European languages – the conference participants and the generation that followed them – accepted that fatalistic logic to a greater or lesser degree. We were guided by it and the only question which preoccupied us was how best to make the borrowed tongues carry the weight of our African experience by, for instance, making them 'prey' on African proverbs and other peculiarities of African speech and folklore. For this task, Achebe (*Things Fall Apart; Arrow of God*), Amos Tutuola (*The Palm-wine Drinkard; My life in the Bush of Ghosts*), and Gabriel Okara (*The Voice*) were often held as providing the three alternative models. The lengths to which we were prepared to go in our mission of enriching foreign languages by injecting Senghorian 'black blood' into their rusty joints, is best exemplified by Gabriel Okara in an article reprinted in *Transition*:



As a writer who believes in the utilization of African ideas, African philosophy and African folklore and imagery to the fullest extent possible, I am of the opinion the only way to use them effectively is to translate them almost literally from the African language native to the writer into whatever European language he is using as medium of expression. I have endeavoured in my words to keep as close as possible to the vernacular expressions. For, from a word, a group of words, a sentence and even a name in any African language, one can glean the social norms, attitudes and values of a people.

In order to capture the vivid images of African speech, I had to eschew the habit of expressing my thoughts first in English. It was difficult at first, but I had to learn. I had to study each Ijaw expression I used and to discover the probable situation in which it was used in order to bring out the nearest meaning in English. I found it a fascinating exercise.<sup>7</sup>

Why, we may ask, should an African writer, or any writer, become so obsessed by taking from his mother-tongue to enrich other tongues? Why should he see it as his particular mission? We never asked ourselves: how can we enrich our languages? How can we 'prey' on the rich humanist and democratic heritage in the struggles of other peoples in other times and other places to enrich our own? Why not have Balzac, Tolstoy, Sholokov, Brecht, Lu Hsun, Pablo Neruda, H. C. Anderson, Kim Chi Ha, Marx, Lenin, Albert Einstein, Galileo, Aeschylus, Aristotle and Plato in African languages? And why not create literary monuments in our own languages? Why in other words should Okara not sweat it out to create in Ijaw, which he acknowledges to have depths of philosophy and a wide range of ideas and experiences? What was our responsibility to the struggles of African peoples? No, these questions were not asked. What seemed to worry us more was this: after all the literary gymnastics of preying on our languages to add life and vigour to English and other foreign languages, would the result be accepted as good English or good French? Will the owner of the language criticise our usage? Here we were more assertive of our rights! Chinua Achebe wrote:

I feel that the English language will be able to carry the weight of my African experience. But it will have to be a new English, still in full communion with its ancestral home but altered to suit new African surroundings.<sup>8</sup>

Gabriel Okara's position on this was representative of our generation:

Some may regard this way of writing English as a desecration of the language. This is of course not true. Living languages grow like living things, and English is far from a dead language. There are American, West Indian, Australian, Canadian and New Zealand versions of English. All of them add life and vigour to the language while reflecting their own respective cultures. Why shouldn't there be a Nigerian or West African English which we can use to express our own ideas, thinking and philosophy in our own way?<sup>9</sup>

How did we arrive at this acceptance of 'the fatalistic logic of the unassailable position of English in our literature', in our culture and in our politics? What was the route from the Berlin of 1884 via the Makerere of 1962 to what is still the prevailing and dominant logic a hundred years later? How did we, as African writers, come to be so feeble towards the claims of our languages on us and so aggressive in our claims on other languages, particularly the languages of our colonization?

Berlin of 1884 was effected through the sword and the bullet. But the night of the sword and the bullet was followed by the morning of the chalk and the blackboard. The physical violence of the battlefield was followed by the psychological violence of the classroom. But where the former was visibly brutal, the latter was visibly gentle, a process best described in Cheikh Hamidou Kane's novel *Ambiguous Adventure* where he talks of the methods of the colonial phase of imperialism as consisting of knowing how to kill with efficiency and to heal with the same art.

On the Black Continent, one began to understand that their real power resided not at all in the cannons of the first morning but in what followed the cannons. Therefore behind the cannons was the new school. The new school had the nature of both the cannon and the magnet. From the cannon it took the efficiency of a fighting weapon. But better than the cannon it made the conquest permanent. The cannon forces the body and the school fascinates the soul.<sup>10</sup>

In my view language was the most important vehicle through which that power fascinated and held the soul prisoner. The bullet was the means of the physical subjugation. Language was the means of the spiritual subjugation. Let me illustrate this by drawing upon experiences in my own education, particularly in language and literature.



## III

I was born into a large peasant family: father, four wives and about twenty-eight children. I also belonged, as we all did in those days, to a wider extended family and to the community as a whole.

We spoke Gikūyū as we worked in the fields. We spoke Gikūyū in and outside the home. I can vividly recall those evenings of story-telling around the fireside. It was mostly the grown-ups telling the children but everybody was interested and involved. We children would re-tell the stories the following day to other children who worked in the fields picking the pyrethrum flowers, tea-leaves or coffee beans of our European and African landlords.

The stories, with mostly animals as the main characters, were all told in Gikūyū. Hare, being small, weak but full of innovative wit and cunning, was our hero. We identified with him as he struggled against the brutes of prey like lion, leopard, hyena. His victories were our victories and we learnt that the apparently weak can outwit the strong. We followed the animals in their struggle against hostile nature – drought, rain, sun, wind – a confrontation often forcing them to search for forms of co-operation. But we were also interested in their struggles amongst themselves, and particularly between the beasts and the victims of prey. These twin struggles, against nature and other animals, reflected real-life struggles in the human world.

Not that we neglected stories with human beings as the main characters. There were two types of characters in such human-centred narratives: the species of truly human beings with qualities of courage, kindness, mercy, hatred of evil, concern for others; and a man-eat-man two-mouthed species with qualities of greed, selfishness, individualism and hatred of what was good for the larger co-operative community. Co-operation as the ultimate good in a community was a constant theme. It could unite human beings with animals against ogres and beasts of prey, as in the story of how dove, after being fed with castor-oil seeds, was sent to fetch a smith working far away from home and whose pregnant wife was being threatened by these man-eating two-mouthed ogres.

There were good and bad story-tellers. A good one could tell the same story over and over again, and it would always be fresh to us, the listeners. He or she could tell a story told by someone else and make it more alive and dramatic. The differences really were in the use of words and images and the inflexion of voices to effect different tones.

We therefore learnt to value words for their meaning and nuances. Language was not a mere string of words. It had a suggestive power well beyond the immediate and lexical meaning. Our appreciation of the suggestive magical power of language was reinforced by the games we played with words through riddles, proverbs, transpositions of syllables, or through nonsensical but musically arranged words.<sup>11</sup> So we learnt the music of our language on top of the content. The language, through images and symbols, gave us a view of the world, but it had a beauty of its own. The home and the field were then our pre-primary school but what is important, for this discussion, is that the language of our evening teach-ins, and the language of our immediate and wider community, and the language of our work in the fields were one.

And then I went to school, a colonial school, and this harmony was broken. The language of my education was no longer the language of my culture. I first went to Kamaandura, missionary run, and then to another called Maanguuū run by nationalists grouped around the Gikūyū Independent and Karinga Schools Association. Our language of education was still Gikūyū. The very first time I was ever given an ovation for my writing was over a composition in Gikūyū. So for my first four years there was still harmony between the language of my formal education and that of the Limuru peasant community.

It was after the declaration of a state of emergency over Kenya in 1952 that all the schools run by patriotic nationalists were taken over by the colonial regime and were placed under District Education Boards chaired by Englishmen. English became the language of my formal education. In Kenya, English became more than a language: it was *the* language, and all the others had to bow before it in deference.

Thus one of the most humiliating experiences was to be caught speaking Gikūyū in the vicinity of the school. The culprit was given corporal punishment – three to five strokes of the cane on bare buttocks – or was made to carry a metal plate around the neck with inscriptions such as I AM STUPID or I AM A DONKEY. Sometimes the culprits were fined money they could hardly afford. And how did the teachers catch the culprits? A button was initially given to one pupil who was supposed to hand it over to whoever was caught speaking his mother tongue. Whoever had the button at the end of the day would sing who had given it to him and the ensuing process would bring out all the culprits of the day. Thus children were turned into witch-hunters and in the process were being taught the lucrative value of being a traitor to one's immediate community.



The attitude to English was the exact opposite: any achievement in spoken or written English was highly rewarded; prizes, prestige, applause; the ticket to higher realms. English became the measure of intelligence and ability in the arts, the sciences, and all the other branches of learning. English became *the* main determinant of a child's progress up the ladder of formal education.

As you may know, the colonial system of education in addition to its apartheid racial demarcation had the structure of a pyramid: a broad primary base, a narrowing secondary middle, and an even narrower university apex. Selections from primary into secondary were through an examination, in my time called Kenya African Preliminary Examination, in which one had to pass six subjects ranging from Maths to Nature Study and Kiswahili. All the papers were written in English. Nobody could pass the exam who failed the English language paper no matter how brilliantly he had done in the other subjects. I remember one boy in my class of 1954 who had distinctions in all subjects except English, which he had failed. He was made to fail the entire exam. He went on to become a turn boy in a bus company. I who had only passes but a credit in English got a place at the Alliance High School, one of the most elitist institutions for Africans in colonial Kenya. The requirements for a place at the University, Makerere University College, were broadly the same: nobody could go on to wear the undergraduate red gown, no matter how brilliantly they had performed in all the other subjects unless they had a credit – not even a simple pass! – in English. Thus the most coveted place in the pyramid and in the system was only available to the holder of an English language credit card. English was the official vehicle and the magic formula to colonial elitedom.

Literary education was now determined by the dominant language while also reinforcing that dominance. Orature (oral literature) in Kenyan languages stopped. In primary school I now read simplified Dickens and Stevenson alongside Rider Haggard. Jim Hawkins, Oliver Twist, Tom Brown – not Hare, Leopard and Lion – were now my daily companions in the world of imagination. In secondary school, Scott and G. B. Shaw vied with more Rider Haggard, John Buchan, Alan Paton, Captain W. E. Johns. At Makerere I read English: from Chaucer to T. S. Eliot with a touch of Graham Greene.

Thus language and literature were taking us further and further from ourselves to other selves, from our world to other worlds.

What was the colonial system doing to us Kenyan children? What were the consequences of, on the one hand, this systematic suppression

of our languages and the literature they carried, and on the other the elevation of English and the literature it carried? To answer those questions, let me first examine the relationship of language to human experience, human culture, and the human perception of reality.

## IV

Language, any language, has a dual character: it is both a means of communication and a carrier of culture. Take English. It is spoken in Britain and in Sweden and Denmark. But for Swedish and Danish people English is only a means of communication with non-Scandinavians. It is not a carrier of their culture. For the British, and particularly the English, it is additionally, and inseparably from its use as a tool of communication, a carrier of their culture and history. Or take Swahili in East and Central Africa. It is widely used as a means of communication across many nationalities. But it is not the carrier of a culture and history of many of those nationalities. However in parts of Kenya and Tanzania, and particularly in Zanzibar, Swahili is inseparably both a means of communication and a carrier of the culture of those people to whom it is a mother-tongue.

Language as communication has three aspects or elements. There is first what Karl Marx once called the language of real life,<sup>12</sup> the element basic to the whole notion of language, its origins and development: that is, the relations people enter into with one another in the labour process, the links they necessarily establish among themselves in the act of a people, a community of human beings, producing wealth or means of life like food, clothing, houses. A human community really starts its historical being as a community of co-operation in production through the division of labour; the simplest is between man, woman and child within a household; the more complex divisions are between branches of production such as those who are sole hunters, sole gatherers of fruits or sole workers in metal. Then there are the most complex divisions such as those in modern factories where a single product, say a shirt or a shoe, is the result of many hands and minds. Production is co-operation, is communication, is language, is expression of a relation between human beings and it is specifically human.

The second aspect of language as communication is speech and it imitates the language of real life, that is communication in production.



The verbal signposts both reflect and aid communication or the relations established between human beings in the production of their means of life. Language as a system of verbal signposts makes that production possible. The spoken word is to relations between human beings what the hand is to the relations between human beings and nature. The hand through tools mediates between human beings and nature and forms the language of real life: spoken words mediate between human beings and form the language of speech.

The third aspect is the written signs. The written word imitates the spoken. Where the first two aspects of language as communication through the hand and the spoken word historically evolved more or less simultaneously, the written aspect is a much later historical development. Writing is representation of sounds with visual symbols, from the simplest knot among shepherds to tell the number in a herd or the hieroglyphics among the Agikūyū gicaandi singers and poets of Kenya, to the most complicated and different letter and picture writing systems of the world today.

In most societies the written and the spoken languages are the same, in that they represent each other: what is on paper can be read to another person and be received as that language which the recipient has grown up speaking. In such a society there is broad harmony for a child between the three aspects of language as communication. His interaction with nature and with other men is expressed in written and spoken symbols or signs which are both a result of that double interaction and a reflection of it. The association of the child's sensibility is with the language of his experience of life.

But there is more to it: communication between human beings is also the basis and process of evolving culture. In doing similar kinds of things and actions over and over again under similar circumstances, similar even in their mutability, certain patterns, moves, rhythms, habits, attitudes, experiences and knowledge emerge. Those experiences are handed over to the next generation and become the inherited basis for their further actions on nature and on themselves. There is a gradual accumulation of values which in time become almost self-evident truths governing their conception of what is right and wrong, good and bad, beautiful and ugly, courageous and cowardly, generous and mean in their internal and external relations. Over a time this becomes a way of life distinguishable from other ways of life. They develop a distinctive culture and history. Culture embodies those moral, ethical and aesthetic values, the set of spiritual eyeglasses, through which they come to view themselves and their place in the

universe. Values are the basis of a people's identity, their sense of particularity as members of the human race. All this is carried by language. Language as culture is the collective memory bank of a people's experience in history. Culture is almost indistinguishable from the language that makes possible its genesis, growth, banking, articulation and indeed its transmission from one generation to the next.

Language as culture also has three important aspects. Culture is a product of the history which it in turn reflects. Culture in other words is a product and a reflection of human beings communicating with one another in the very struggle to create wealth and to control it. But culture does not merely reflect that history, or rather it does so by actually forming images or pictures of the world of nature and nurture. Thus the second aspect of language as culture is as an image-forming agent in the mind of a child. Our whole conception of ourselves as a people, individually and collectively, is based on those pictures and images which may or may not correctly correspond to the actual reality of the struggles with nature and nurture which produced them in the first place. But our capacity to confront the world creatively is dependent on how those images correspond or not to that reality, how they distort or clarify the reality of our struggles. Language as culture is thus mediating between me and my own self; between my own self and other selves; between me and nature. Language is mediating in my very being. And this brings us to the third aspect of language as culture. Culture transmits or imparts those images of the world and reality through the spoken and the written language, that is through a specific language. In other words, the capacity to speak, the capacity to order sounds in a manner that makes for mutual comprehension between human beings is universal. This is the universality of language, a quality specific to human beings. It corresponds to the universality of the struggle against nature and that between human beings. But the particularity of the sounds, the words, the word order into phrases and sentences, and the specific manner, or laws, of their ordering is what distinguishes one language from another. Thus a specific culture is not transmitted through language in its universality but in its particularity as the language of a specific community with a specific history. Written literature and orature are the main means by which a particular language transmits the images of the world contained in the culture it carries.

Language as communication and as culture are then products of each other. Communication creates culture: culture is a means of



communication. Language carries culture, and culture carries, particularly through orature and literature, the entire body of values by which we come to perceive ourselves and our place in the world. How people perceive themselves affects how they look at their culture, at their politics and at the social production of wealth, at their entire relationship to nature and to other beings. Language is thus inseparable from ourselves as a community of human beings with a specific form and character, a specific history, a specific relationship to the world.

## V

So what was the colonialist imposition of a foreign language doing to us children?

The real aim of colonialism was to control the people's wealth: what they produced, how they produced it, and how it was distributed; to control, in other words, the entire realm of the language of real life. Colonialism imposed its control of the social production of wealth through military conquest and subsequent political dictatorship. But its most important area of domination was the mental universe of the colonised, the control, through culture, of how people perceived themselves and their relationship to the world. Economic and political control can never be complete or effective without mental control. To control a people's culture is to control their tools of self-definition in relationship to others.

For colonialism this involved two aspects of the same process: the destruction or the deliberate undervaluing of a people's culture, their art, dances, religions, history, geography, education, orature and literature, and the conscious elevation of the language of the coloniser. The domination of a people's language by the languages of the colonising nations was crucial to the domination of the mental universe of the colonised.

Take language as communication. Imposing a foreign language, and suppressing the native languages as spoken and written, were already breaking the harmony previously existing between the African child and the three aspects of language. Since the new language as a means of communication was a product of and was reflecting the 'real language of life' elsewhere, it could never as spoken or written properly reflect or imitate the real life of that community. This may in part explain why technology always appears to us as slightly external, *their* product and

not *ours*. The word 'missile' used to hold an alien far-away sound until I recently learnt its equivalent in Gikūyū, *ngurukuhĩ*, and it made me apprehend it differently. Learning, for a colonial child, became a cerebral activity and not an emotionally felt experience.

But since the new, imposed languages could never completely break the native languages as spoken, their most effective area of domination was the third aspect of language as communication, the written. The language of an African child's formal education was foreign. The language of the books he read was foreign. The language of his conceptualisation was foreign. Thought, in him, took the visible form of a foreign language. So the written language of a child's upbringing in the school (even his spoken language within the school compound) became divorced from his spoken language at home. There was often not the slightest relationship between the child's written world, which was also the language of his schooling, and the world of his immediate environment in the family and the community. For a colonial child, the harmony existing between the three aspects of language as communication was irrevocably broken. This resulted in the disassociation of the sensibility of that child from his natural and social environment, what we might call colonial alienation. The alienation became reinforced in the teaching of history, geography, music, where bourgeois Europe was always the centre of the universe.

This disassociation, divorce, or alienation from the immediate environment becomes clearer when you look at colonial language as a carrier of culture.

Since culture is a product of the history of a people which it in turn reflects, the child was now being exposed exclusively to a culture that was a product of a world external to himself. He was being made to stand outside himself to look at himself. *Catching Them Young* is the title of a book on racism, class, sex, and politics in children's literature by Bob Dixon. 'Catching them young' as an aim was even more true of a colonial child. The images of this world and his place in it implanted in a child take years to eradicate, if they ever can be.

Since culture does not just reflect the world in images but actually, through those very images, conditions a child to see that world in a certain way, the colonial child was made to see the world and where he stands in it as seen and defined by or reflected in the culture of the language of imposition.

And since those images are mostly passed on through orature and literature it meant the child would now only see the world as seen in the literature of his language of adoption. From the point of view of



alienation, that is of seeing oneself from outside oneself as if one was another self, it does not matter that the imported literature carried the great humanist tradition of the best in Shakespeare, Goethe, Balzac, Tolstoy, Gorky, Brecht, Sholokhov, Dickens. The location of this great mirror of imagination was necessarily Europe and its history and culture and the rest of the universe was seen from that centre.

But obviously it was worse when the colonial child was exposed to images of his world as mirrored in the written languages of his coloniser. Where his own native languages were associated in his impressionable mind with low status, humiliation, corporal punishment, slow-footed intelligence and ability or downright stupidity, non-intelligibility and barbarism, this was reinforced by the world he met in the works of such geniuses of racism as a Rider Haggard or a Nicholas Monsarrat; not to mention the pronouncement of some of the giants of western intellectual and political establishment, such as Hume ('... the negro is naturally inferior to the whites ...'),<sup>13</sup> Thomas Jefferson ('... the blacks ... are inferior to the whites on the endowments of both body and mind ...'),<sup>14</sup> or Hegel with his Africa comparable to a land of childhood still enveloped in the dark mantle of the night as far as the development of self-conscious history was concerned. Hegel's statement that there was nothing harmonious with humanity to be found in the African character is representative of the racist images of Africans and Africa such a colonial child was bound to encounter in the literature of the colonial languages.<sup>15</sup> The results could be disastrous.

In her paper read to the conference on the teaching of African literature in schools held in Nairobi in 1973, entitled 'Written Literature and Black Images',<sup>16</sup> the Kenyan writer and scholar Professor Mĩcere Mũgo related how a reading of the description of Gagool as an old African woman in Rider Haggard's *King Solomon's Mines* had for a long time made her feel mortal terror whenever she encountered old African women. In his autobiography *This Life* Sydney Poitier describes how, as a result of the literature he had read, he had come to associate Africa with snakes. So on arrival in Africa and being put up in a modern hotel in a modern city, he could not sleep because he kept on looking for snakes everywhere, even under the bed. These two have been able to pinpoint the origins of their fears. But for most others the negative image becomes internalised and it affects their cultural and even political choices in ordinary living.

Thus Léopold Sédar Senghor has said very clearly that although the colonial language had been forced upon him, if he had been given the

choice he would still have opted for French. He becomes lyrical in his subservience to French:

We express ourselves in French since French has a universal vocation and since our message is also addressed to French people and others. In our languages [i.e. African languages] the halo that surrounds the words is by nature merely that of sap and blood; French words send out thousands of rays like diamonds.<sup>17</sup>

Senghor has now been rewarded by being anointed to an honoured place in the French Academy – that institution for safe-guarding the purity of the French language.

In Malawi, Banda has erected his own monument by way of an institution, The Kamuzu Academy, designed to aid the brightest pupils of Malawi in their mastery of English.

It is a grammar school designed to produce boys and girls who will be sent to universities like Harvard, Chicago, Oxford, Cambridge and Edinburgh and be able to compete on equal terms with others elsewhere.

The President has instructed that Latin should occupy a central place in the curriculum. All teachers must have had at least some Latin in their academic background. Dr Banda has often said that no one can fully master English without knowledge of languages such as Latin and French...<sup>18</sup>

For good measure no Malawian is allowed to teach at the academy – none is good enough – and all the teaching staff has been recruited from Britain. A Malawian might lower the standards, or rather, the purity of the English language. Can you get a more telling example of hatred of what is national, and a servile worship of what is foreign even though dead?

In history books and popular commentaries on Africa, too much has been made of the supposed differences in the policies of the various colonial powers, the British indirect rule (or the pragmatism of the British in their lack of a cultural programme!) and the French and Portuguese conscious programme of cultural assimilation. These are a matter of detail and emphasis. The final effect was the same: Senghor's embrace of French as this language with a universal vocation is not so different from Chinua Achebe's gratitude in 1964 to English – 'those of us who have inherited the English language may not be in a position to appreciate the value of the inheritance'.<sup>19</sup> The assumptions behind the practice of those of us who have abandoned our mother-tongues and



adopted European ones as the creative vehicles of our imagination, are not different either.

Thus the 1962 conference of 'African Writers of English expression' was only recognising, with approval and pride of course, what through all the years of selective education and rigorous tutelage, we had already been led to accept: the 'fatalistic logic of the unassailable position of English in our literature'. The logic was embodied deep in imperialism; and it was imperialism and its effects that we did not examine at Makerere. It is the final triumph of a system of domination when the dominated start singing its virtues.

## VI

The twenty years that followed the Makerere conference gave the world a unique literature – novels, stories, poems, plays written by Africans in European languages – which soon consolidated itself into a tradition with companion studies and a scholarly industry.

Right from its conception it was the literature of the petty-bourgeoisie born of the colonial schools and universities. It could not be otherwise, given the linguistic medium of its message. Its rise and development reflected the gradual accession of this class to political and even economic dominance. But the petty-bourgeoisie in Africa was a large class with different strands in it. It ranged from that section which looked forward to a permanent alliance with imperialism in which it played the role of an intermediary between the bourgeoisie of the western metropolis and the people of the colonies – the section which in my book *Detained: A Writer's Prison Diary* I have described as the comprador bourgeoisie – to that section which saw the future in terms of a vigorous independent national economy in African capitalism or in some kind of socialism, what I shall here call the nationalistic or patriotic bourgeoisie. This literature by Africans in European languages was specifically that of the nationalistic bourgeoisie in its creators, its thematic concerns and its consumption.<sup>20</sup>

Internationally the literature helped this class, which in politics, business, and education, was assuming leadership of the countries newly emergent from colonialism, or of those struggling to so emerge, to explain Africa to the world: Africa had a past and a culture of dignity and human complexity.

Internally the literature gave this class a cohesive tradition and a common literary frame of references, which it otherwise lacked with its uneasy roots in the culture of the peasantry and in the culture of the metropolitan bourgeoisie. The literature added confidence to the class: the petty-bourgeoisie now had a past, a culture and a literature with which to confront the racist bigotry of Europe. This confidence – manifested in the tone of the writing, its sharp critique of European bourgeois civilisation, its implications, particularly in its negritude mould, that Africa had something new to give to the world – reflects the political ascendancy of the patriotic nationalistic section of the petty-bourgeoisie before and immediately after independence.

So initially this literature – in the post-war world of national democratic revolutionary and anti-colonial liberation in China and India, armed uprisings in Kenya and Algeria, the independence of Ghana and Nigeria with others impending – was part of that great anti-colonial and anti-imperialist upheaval in Asia, Africa, Latin America and Caribbean islands. It was inspired by the general political awakening; it drew its stamina and even form from the peasantry: their proverbs, fables, stories, riddles, and wise sayings. It was shot through and through with optimism. But later, when the comprador section assumed political ascendancy and strengthened rather than weakened the economic links with imperialism in what was clearly a neo-colonial arrangement, this literature became more and more critical, cynical, disillusioned, bitter and denunciatory in tone. It was almost unanimous in its portrayal, with varying degrees of detail, emphasis, and clarity of vision, of the post-independence betrayal of hope. But to whom was it directing its list of mistakes made, crimes and wrongs committed, complaints unheeded, or its call for a change of moral direction? The imperialist bourgeoisie? The petty-bourgeoisie in power? The military, itself part and parcel of that class? It sought another audience, principally the peasantry and the working class or what was generally conceived as the people. The search for new audience and new directions was reflected in the quest for simpler forms, in the adoption of a more direct tone, and often in a direct call for action. It was also reflected in the content. Instead of seeing Africa as one undifferentiated mass of historically wronged blackness, it now attempted some sort of class analysis and evaluation of neo-colonial societies. But this search was still within the confines of the languages of Europe whose use it now defended with less vigour and confidence. So its quest was hampered by the very language choice, and in its movement toward the people, it could only go up to that section of the



petty-bourgeoisie – the students, teachers, secretaries for instance – still in closest touch with the people. It settled there, marking time, caged within the linguistic fence of its colonial inheritance.

Its greatest weakness still lay where it has always been, in the audience – the petty-bourgeoisie readership automatically assumed by the very choice of language. Because of its indeterminate economic position between the many contending classes, the petty-bourgeoisie develops a vacillating psychological make-up. Like a chameleon it takes on the colour of the main class with which it is in the closest touch and sympathy. It can be swept to activity by the masses at a time of revolutionary tide; or be driven to silence, fear, cynicism, withdrawal into self-contemplation, existential anguish, or to collaboration with the powers-that-be at times of reactionary tides. In African this class has always oscillated between the imperialist bourgeoisie and its comprador neo-colonial ruling elements on the one hand, and the peasantry and the working class (the masses) on the other. This very lack of identity in its social and psychological make-up as a class, was reflected in the very literature it produced: the crisis of identity was assumed in that very preoccupation with definition at the Makerere conference. In literature as in politics it spoke as if its identity or the crisis of its own identity was that of society as a whole. The literature it produced in European languages was given the identity of African literature as if there had never been literature in African languages. Yet by avoiding a real confrontation with the language issue, it was clearly wearing false robes of identity: it was a pretender to the throne of the mainstream of African literature. The practitioner of what Janheinz Jahn called neo-African literature tried to get out of the dilemma by over-insisting that European languages were really African languages or by trying to Africanise English or French usage while making sure it was still recognisable as English or French or Portuguese.

In the process this literature created, falsely and even absurdly, an English-speaking (or French or Portuguese) African peasantry and working class, a clear negation or falsification of the historical process and reality. This European-language-speaking peasantry and working class, existing only in novels and dramas, was at times invested with the vacillating mentality, the evasive self-contemplation, the existential anguished human condition, or the man-torn-between-two-worlds-facedness of the petty-bourgeoisie.

In fact, if it had been left entirely to this class, African languages would have ceased to exist – with independence!

## VII

But African languages refused to die. They would not simply go the way of Latin to become the fossils for linguistic archaeology to dig up, classify, and argue about the international conferences.

These languages, these national heritages of Africa, were kept alive by the peasantry. The peasantry saw no contradiction between speaking their own mother-tongues and belonging to a larger national or continental geography. They saw no necessary antagonistic contradiction between belonging to their immediate nationality, to their multinational state along the Berlin-drawn boundaries, and to Africa as a whole. These people happily spoke Wolof, Hausa, Yoruba, Ibo, Arabic, Amharic, Kiswahili, Gikūyū, Luo, Luhya, Shona, Ndebele, Kimbundu, Zulu or Lingala without this fact tearing the multinational states apart. During the anti-colonial struggle they showed an unlimited capacity to unite around whatever leader or party best and most consistently articulated an anti-imperialist position. If anything it was the petty-bourgeoisie, particularly the compradors, with their French and English and Portuguese, with their petty rivalries, their ethnic chauvinism, which encouraged these vertical divisions to the point of war at times. No, the peasantry had no complexes about their languages and the cultures they carried!

In fact when the peasantry and the working class were compelled by necessity or history to adopt the language of the master, they Africanised it without any of the respect for its ancestry shown by Senghor and Achebe, so totally as to have created new African languages, like Krio in Sierra Leone or Pidgin in Nigeria, that owed their identities to the syntax and rhythms of African languages. All these languages were kept alive in the daily speech, in the ceremonies, in political struggles, above all in the rich store of orature – proverbs, stories, poems, and riddles.

The peasantry and the urban working class threw up singers. These sang the old songs or composed new ones incorporating the new experiences in industries and urban life and in working-class struggle and organisations. These singers pushed the languages to new limits, renewing and reinvigorating them by coining new words and new expressions, and in generally expanding their capacity to incorporate new happenings in Africa and the world.

The peasantry and the working class threw up their own writers, or attracted to their ranks and concern intellectuals from among the



petty-bourgeoisie, who all wrote in African languages. It is these writers like Heruy Wäldä Sellassie, Germacaw Takla Hawaryat, Shabaan Robert, Abdullatif Abdalla, Ebrahim Hussein, Euphrase Kezilahabi, B. H. Vilakazi, Okot p'Bitek, A. C. Jordan, P. Mboya, D. O. Fagunwa, Mazisi Kunene and many others rightly celebrated in Albert Gérard's pioneering survey of literature in African languages from the tenth century to the present, called *African Language Literatures* (1981), who have given our languages a written literature. Thus the immortality of our languages in print has been ensured despite the internal and external pressures for their extinction. In Kenya I would like to single out Gakaara wa Wanjaũ, who was jailed by the British for the ten years between 1952 and 1962 because of his writing in Gikũyũ. His book, *Mwandiki wa Mau Mau Ithaamĩrioinĩ*, a diary he secretly kept while in political detention, was published by Heinemann Kenya and won the 1984 Noma Award. It is a powerful work, extending the range of the Gikũyũ language prose, and it is a crowning achievement to the work he started in 1946. He has worked in poverty, in the hardships of prison, in post-independence isolation when the English language held sway in Kenya's schools from nursery to University and in every walk of the national printed world, but he never broke his faith in the possibilities of Kenya's national languages. His inspiration came from the mass anti-colonial movement of Kenyan people, particularly the militant wing grouped around Mau Mau or the Kenya Land and Freedom Army, which in 1952 ushered in the era of modern guerrilla warfare in Africa. He is the clearest example of those writers thrown up by the mass political movements of an awakened peasantry and working class.

And finally from among the European-language-speaking African petty-bourgeoisie, there emerged a few who refused to join the chorus of those who had accepted the 'fatalistic logic' of the position of European languages in our literary being. It was one of these, Obi Wali, who pulled the carpet from under the literary feet of those who gathered at Makerere in 1962 by declaring in an article published in *Transition* (10, September 1963), 'that the whole uncritical acceptance of English and French as the inevitable medium for educated African writing is misdirected, and has no chance of advancing African literature and culture, and that until African writers accepted that any true African literature must be written in African languages, they would merely be pursuing a dead end.'

What we would like future conferences on African literature to devote time to, is the all-important problem of African writing in African languages, and all its implications for the development of a truly African sensibility.

Obi Wali had his predecessors. Indeed people like David Diop of Senegal had put the case against this use of colonial languages even more strongly.

The African creator, deprived of the use of his language and cut off from his people, might turn out to be only the representative of a literary trend (and that not necessarily the least gratuitous) of the conquering nation. His works, having become a perfect illustration of the assimilationist policy through imagination and style, will doubtless rouse the warm applause of a certain group of critics. In fact, these praises will go mostly to colonialism which, when it can no longer keep its subjects in slavery, transforms them into docile intellectuals patterned after Western literary fashions which besides, is another more subtle form of bastardization.<sup>22</sup>

David Diop quite correctly saw that the use of English and French was a matter of temporary historical necessity.

Surely in an Africa freed from oppression it will not occur to any writer to express, otherwise than in his rediscovered language, his feelings and the feelings of his people.<sup>23</sup>

The importance of Obi Wali's intervention was in tone and timing: it was published soon after the 1962 Makerere conference of African writers of English expression; it was polemical and aggressive, poured ridicule and scorn on the choice of English and French, while being unapologetic in its call for the use of African languages. Not surprisingly it was met with hostility and then silence. But twenty years of uninterrupted dominance of literature in European languages, the reactionary turn that political and economic events in Africa have taken, and the search for a revolutionary break with the neo-colonial status quo, all compel soul-searching among writers, raising once again the entire question of the language of African literature.



## VIII

The question is this: we as African writers have always complained about the neo-colonial economic and political relationship to Euro-America. Right. But by our continuing to write in foreign languages, paying homage to them, are we not on the cultural level continuing that neo-colonial slavish and cringing spirit? What is the difference between a politician who says Africa cannot do without imperialism and the writer who says Africa cannot do without European languages?

While we were busy haranguing the ruling circles in a language which automatically excluded the participation of the peasantry and the working class in the debate, imperialist culture and African reactionary forces had a field day: the Christian bible is available in unlimited quantities in even the tiniest African language. The comprador ruling cliques are also quite happy to have the peasantry and the working class all to themselves: distortions, dictatorial directives, decrees, museum-type fossils paraded as African culture, feudalistic ideologies, superstitions, lies, all these backward elements and more are communicated to the African masses in their own languages without any challenges from those with alternative visions of tomorrow who have deliberately cocooned themselves in English, French, and Portuguese. It is ironic that the most reactionary African politician, the one who believes in selling Africa to Europe, is often a master of African languages; that the most zealous of European missionaries who believed in rescuing Africa from itself, even from the paganism of its languages, were nevertheless masters of African languages, which they often reduced to writing. The European missionary believed too much in his mission of conquest not to communicate it in the languages most readily available to the people: the African writer believes too much in 'African literature' to write it in those ethnic, divisive and underdeveloped languages of the peasantry!

The added irony is that what they have produced, despite any claims to the contrary, is not African literature. The editors of the *Pelican Guides to English literature* in their latest volume were right to include a discussion of this literature as part of twentieth-century English literature, just as the French Academy was right to honour Senghor for his genuine and talented contribution to French literature and language. What we have created is another hybrid tradition, a tradition in transition, a minority tradition that can only be termed as Afro-

European literature; that is, the literature written by Africans in European languages.<sup>24</sup> It has produced many writers and works of genuine talent: Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, Ayi Kwei Armah, Sembene Ousmane, Agostino Neto, Sédar Senghor and many others. Who can deny their talent? The light in the products of their fertile imaginations has certainly illuminated important aspects of the African being in its continuous struggle against the political and economic consequences of Berlin and after. However we cannot have our cake and eat it! Their work belongs to an Afro-European literary tradition which is likely to last for as long as Africa is under this rule of European capital in a neo-colonial set-up. So Afro-European literature can be defined as literature written by Africans in European languages in the era of imperialism.

But some are coming round to the inescapable conclusion articulated by Obi Wali with such polemical vigour twenty years ago: African literature can only be written in African languages, that is, the languages of the African peasantry and working class, the major alliance of classes in each of our nationalities and the agency for the coming inevitable revolutionary break with neo-colonialism.

## IX

I started writing in Gikūyū language in 1977 after seventeen years of involvement in Afro-European literature, in my case Afro-English literature. It was then that I collaborated with Ngūgī wa Mĩrĩ in the drafting of the playscript, *Ngaabika Ndeenda* (the English translation was *I Will Marry When I Want*). I have since published a novel in Gikūyū, *Caitaani Mũtharabainĩ* (English translation: *Devil on the Cross*) and completed a musical drama, *Maitũ Njugĩra*, (English translation: *Mother Sing for Me*); three books for children, *Njamba Nene na Mbaathi i Mathagu*, *Bathitoora ya Njamba Nene*, *Njamba Nene na Cibũ King'ang'i*, as well as another novel manuscript: *Matigari Ma Njirũngi*. Wherever I have gone, particularly in Europe, I have been confronted with the question: why are you now writing in Gikūyū? Why do you now write in an African language? In some academic quarters I have been confronted with the rebuke, 'Why have you abandoned us?' It was almost as if, in choosing to write in Gikūyū, I was doing something abnormal. But Gikūyū is my mother tongue! The very fact that what common sense dictates in the literary practice



of other cultures is being questioned in an African writer is a measure of how far imperialism has distorted the view of African realities. It has turned reality upside down: the abnormal is viewed as normal and the normal is viewed as abnormal. Africa actually enriches Europe: but Africa is made to believe that it needs Europe to rescue it from poverty. Africa's natural and human resources continue to develop Europe and America: but Africa is made to feel grateful for aid from the same quarters that still sit on the back of the continent. Africa even produces intellectuals who now rationalise this upside-down way of looking at Africa.

I believe that my writing in Gikūyū language, a Kenyan language, an African language, is part and parcel of the anti-imperialist struggles of Kenyan and African peoples. In schools and universities our Kenyan languages – that is the languages of the many nationalities which make up Kenya – were associated with negative qualities of backwardness, underdevelopment, humiliation and punishment. We who went through that school system were meant to graduate with a hatred of the people and the culture and the values of the language of our daily humiliation and punishment. I do not want to see Kenyan children growing up in that imperialist-imposed tradition of contempt for the tools of communication developed by their communities and their history. I want them to transcend colonial alienation.

Colonial alienation takes two interlinked forms: an active (or passive) distancing of oneself from the reality around; and an active (or passive) identification with that which is most external to one's environment. It starts with a deliberate disassociation of the language of conceptualisation, of thinking, of formal education, of mental development, from the language of daily interaction in the home and in the community. It is like separating the mind from the body so that they are occupying two unrelated linguistic spheres in the same person. On a larger social scale it is like producing a society of bodiless heads and headless bodies.

So I would like to contribute towards the restoration of the harmony between all the aspects and divisions of language so as to restore the Kenyan child to his environment, understand it fully so as to be in a position to change it for his collective good. I would like to see Kenya peoples' mother-tongues (our national languages!) carry a literature reflecting not only the rhythms of a child's spoken expression, but also his struggle with nature and his social nature. With that harmony between himself, his language and his environment as his starting point, he can learn other languages and even enjoy the positive

humanistic, democratic and revolutionary elements in other people's literatures and cultures without any complexes about his own language, his own self, his environment. The all-Kenya national language (i.e. Kiswahili); the other national languages (i.e. the languages of the nationalities like Luo, Gikūyū, Maasai, Luhya, Kallenjin, Kamba, Mijikenda, Somali, Galla, Turkana, Arabic-speaking people, etc.); other African languages like Hausa, Wolof, Yoruba, Ibo, Zulu, Nyanja, Lingala, Kimbundu; and foreign languages – that is foreign to Africa – like English, French, German, Russian, Chinese, Japanese, Portuguese, Spanish will fall into their proper perspective in the lives of Kenyan children.

Chinua Achebe once decried the tendency of African intellectuals to escape into abstract universalism in the words that apply even more to the issue of the language of African literature:

Africa has had such a fate in the world that the very adjective *African* can call up hideous fears of rejection. Better then to cut all the links with this homeland, this liability, and become in one giant leap the universal man. Indeed I understand this anxiety. *But running away from oneself seems to me a very inadequate way of dealing with an anxiety* [italics mine]. And if writers should opt for such escapism, who is to meet the challenge?<sup>25</sup>

Who indeed?

We African writers are bound by our calling to do for our languages what Spencer, Milton and Shakespeare did for English; what Pushkin and Tolstoy did for Russian; indeed what all writers in world history have done for their languages by meeting the challenge of creating a literature in them, which process later opens the languages for philosophy, science, technology and all the other areas of human creative endeavours.

But writing in our languages per se – although a necessary first step in the correct direction – will not itself bring about the renaissance in African cultures if that literature does not carry the content of our people's anti-imperialist struggles to liberate their productive forces from foreign control; the content of the need for unity among the workers and peasants of all the nationalities in their struggle to control the wealth they produce and to free it from internal and external parasites.

In other words writers in African languages should reconnect themselves to the revolutionary traditions of an organised peasantry and working class in Africa in their struggle to defeat imperialism and



create a higher system of democracy and socialism in alliance with all the other peoples of the world. Unity in that struggle would ensure unity in our multi-lingual diversity. It would also reveal the real links that bind the people of Africa to the peoples of Asia, South America, Europe, Australia and New Zealand, Canada and the U.S.A.

But it is precisely when writers open out African languages to the real links in the struggles of peasants and workers that they will meet their biggest challenge. For to the comprador-ruling regimes, their real enemy is an awakened peasantry and working class. A writer who tries to communicate the message of revolutionary unity and hope in the languages of the people becomes a subversive character. It is then that writing in African languages becomes a subversive or treasonable offence with such a writer facing possibilities of prison, exile or even death. For him there are no 'national' accolades, no new year honours, only abuse and slander and innumerable lies from the mouths of the armed power of a ruling minority – ruling, that is, on behalf of U.S.-led imperialism – and who see in democracy a real threat. A democratic participation of the people in the shaping of their own lives or in discussing their own lives in languages that allow for mutual comprehension is seen as being dangerous to the good government of a country and its institutions. African languages addressing themselves to the lives of the people become the enemy of a neo-colonial state.

## Notes

- 1 'European languages became so important to the Africans that they defined their own identities partly by reference to those languages. Africans began to describe each other in terms of being either Francophone or English-speaking Africans. The continent itself was thought of in terms of French-speaking states, English-speaking states and Arabic-speaking states.'

Ali A. Mazrui, *Africa's International Relations*, London: 1977, p. 92.

Arabic does not quite fall into that category. Instead of Arabic-speaking states as an example, Mazrui should have put Portuguese-speaking states. Arabic is now an African language unless we want to write off all the indigenous populations of North Africa, Egypt, Sudan as not being Africans.

And as usual with Mazrui his often apt and insightful descriptions, observations, and comparisons of the contemporary African realities as affected by Europe are, unfortunately, often tinged with approval or a sense of irreversible inevitability.

- 2 The conference was organized by the anti-Communist Paris-based but American-inspired and financed Society for Cultural Freedom which was later discovered actually to have been financed by CIA. It shows how certain directions in our cultural, political, and economic choices can be masterminded from the metropolitan centres of imperialism.
- 3 This is an argument often espoused by colonial spokesmen. Compare Mphahlele's comment with that of Geoffrey Moorhouse in *Manchester Guardian Weekly*, 15

July 1964, as quoted by Ali A. Mazrui and Michael Tidy in their work *Nationalism and New States in Africa*, London: 1984.

'On both sides of Africa, moreover, in Ghana and Nigeria, in Uganda and in Kenya, the spread of education has led to an increased demand for English at primary level. *The remarkable thing is that English has not been rejected as a symbol of Colonialism; it has rather been adopted as a politically neutral language beyond the reproaches of tribalism.* It is also a more attractive proposition in Africa than in either India or Malaysia because comparatively few Africans are completely literate in the vernacular tongues and even in the languages of regional communication, Hausa and Swahili, which are spoken by millions, and only read and written by thousands.' (My italics)

Is Moorehouse telling us that the English language is politically neutral vis-à-vis Africa's confrontation with neo-colonialism? Is he telling us that by 1964 there were more Africans literate in European languages than in African languages? That Africans could not, even if that was the case, be literate in their own national languages or in the regional languages? Really is Mr Moorehouse tongue-tying the African?

- 4 The English title is *Tales of Amadou Koumba*, published by Oxford University Press. The translation of this particular passage from the *Présence Africaine*, Paris edition of the book was done for me by Dr Bachir Diagne in Bayreuth.
- 5 The paper is now in Achebe's collection of essays *Morning Yet on Creation Day*, London: 1975.
- 6 In the introduction to *Morning Yet on Creation Day* Achebe obviously takes a slightly more critical stance from his 1964 position. The phrase is apt for a whole generation of us African writers.
- 7 *Transition* No. 10, September 1963, reprinted from *Dialogue*, Paris.
- 8 Chinua Achebe 'The African Writer and the English Language', in *Morning Yet on Creation Day*.
- 9 Gabriel Okara, *Transition* No. 10, September 1963.
- 10 Cheikh Hamidou Kane *L'aventure Ambiguë*. (English translation: *Ambiguous Adventure*). This passage was translated for me by Bachir Diagne.
- 11 Example from a tongue twister: 'Kaana ka Nikoora kooona kooora kooora: na ko kooora kooona kaana ka Nikoora kooora kooora.' I'm indebted to Wangui wa Goro for this example. 'Nichola's child saw a baby frog and ran away: and when the baby frog saw Nichola's child it also ran away.' A Gikūyū speaking child has to get the correct tone and length of vowel and pauses to get it right. Otherwise it becomes a jumble of *k*'s and *r*'s and *na*'s.
- 12 'The production of ideas, of conceptions, of consciousness, is at first directly interwoven with the material activity and the material intercourse of men, the language of real life. Conceiving, thinking, the mental intercourse of men, appear at this stage as the direct efflux of their material behaviour. The same applies to mental production as expressed in the language of politics, laws, morality, religion, metaphysics, etc., of a people. Men are the producers of their conceptions, ideas etc. – real, active men, as they are conditioned by a definite development of their productive forces and of the intercourse corresponding to these, up to its furthest form.' Marx and Engels, *German Ideology*, the first part published under the title, *Fuerbach: Opposition of the Materialist and Idealist Outlooks*, London: 1973, p. 8.
- 13 Quoted in Eric Williams *A History of the People of Trinidad and Tobago*, London 1964, p. 32.
- 14 Eric Williams, *ibid.*, p. 31.
- 15 In references to Africa in the introduction to his lectures in *The Philosophy of History*, Hegel gives historical, philosophical, rational expression and legitimacy to every conceivable European racist myth about Africa. Africa is even denied her own geography where it does not correspond to the myth. Thus Egypt is not part of



Africa; and North Africa is part of Europe. Africa proper is the especial home of ravenous beasts, snakes of all kinds. The African is not part of humanity. Only slavery to Europe can raise him, possibly, to the lower ranks of humanity. Slavery is good for the African. 'Slavery is in and for itself *injustice*, for the essence of humanity is *freedom*; but for this man must be matured. The gradual abolition of slavery is therefore wiser and more equitable than its sudden removal.' (Hegel *The Philosophy of History*, Dover edition, New York: 1956, pp. 91-9.) Hegel clearly reveals himself as the nineteenth-century Hitler of the intellect.

- 16 The paper is now in Akiyaga and Gachukia's *The Teaching of African Literature in Schools*, published by Kenya Literature Bureau.
- 17 Senghor, Introduction to his poems, 'Éthiopiennes, le 24 Septembre 1954', in answering the question: 'Pourquoi, dès lors, écrivez-vous en français?' Here is the whole passage in French. See how lyrical Senghor becomes as he talks of his encounter with French language and French literature.

Mais on me posera la question: 'Pourquoi, dès lors, écrivez-vous en français?' parce que nous sommes des métis culturels, parce que, si nous sentons en nègres, nous nous exprimons en français, parce que le français est une langue à vocation universelle, que notre message s'adresse aussi aux Français de France et aux autres hommes, parce que le français est une langue 'de gentillesse et d'honnêteté'. Qui a dit que c'était une langue grise et atone d'ingénieurs et de diplomates? Bien sûr, moi aussi, je l'ai dit un jour, pour les besoins de ma thèse. On me le pardonnera. Car je sais ses ressources pour l'avoir goûté, mâché, enseigné, et qu'il est la langue des dieux. Écoutez donc Corneille, La Fontaine, Rimbaud, Péguy et Claudel. Écoutez le grand Hugo. Le français, ce sont les grandes orgues qui se prêtent à tous les timbres, à tous les effets, des douceurs les plus suaves aux fulgurances de l'orage. Il est, tour à tour ou en même temps, flûte, hautbois, trompette, tamtam et même canon. Et puis le français nous a fait don de ses mots abstraits – si rares dans nos langues maternelles –, où les larmes se font pierres précieuses. Chez nous, les mots sont naturellement nimbés d'un halo de sève et de sang; les mots du français rayonnent de mille feux, comme des diamants. Des fusées qui éclairent notre nuit.

See also Senghor's reply to a question on language in an interview by Armand Guiber and published in *Présence Africaine* 1962 under the title, Léopold Sédar Senghor:

Il est vrai que le français n'est pas ma langue maternelle. J'ai commencé de l'apprendre à sept ans, par des mots comme 'confitures' et 'chocolat'. Aujourd'hui, je pense naturellement en Français, et je comprend le Français – faut-il en avoir honte? Mieux qu'aucune autre langue. C'est dire que le Français n'est plus pour moi un 'véhicule étranger' mais la forme d'expression naturelle de ma pensée.

Ce qui m'est étrange dans le français, c'est peut-être son style:

Son architecture classique. Je suis naturellement porté à gonfler d'image son cadre étroit, sans la poussée de la chaleur émotionnelle.

- 18 *Zimbabwe Herald* August 1981.
- 19 Chinua Achebe 'The African Writer and the English Language' in *Morning Yet on Creation Day* p. 59.
- 20 Most of the writers were from Universities. The readership was mainly the product of schools and colleges. As for the underlying theme of much of that literature, Achebe's statement in his paper, 'The Novelist as a Teacher', is instructive:  
'If I were God I would regard as the very worst our acceptance – for whatever reason – of racial inferiority. It is too late in the day to get worked up about it or to

blame others, much as they may deserve such blame and condemnation. What we need to do is to look back and try and find out where we went wrong, where the rain began to beat us.

'Here then is an adequate revolution for me to espouse – to help my society regain belief in itself and put away the complexes of the years of denigration and self-abasement.' *Morning Yet on Creation Day*, p. 44.

Since the peasant and the worker had never really had any doubts about their Africanness, the reference could only have been to the 'educated' or the petty-bourgeois African. In fact if one substitutes the words 'the petty-bourgeois' for the word 'our' and 'the petty-bourgeois class' for 'my society' the statement is apt, accurate, and describes well the assumed audience. Of course, an ideological revolution in this class would affect the whole society.

- 22 David Diop 'Contribution to the Debate on National Poetry', *Présence Africaine* 6, 1956.
- 23 David Diop, *ibid.*
- 24 The term 'Afro-European Literature' may seem to put too much weight on the Europeanness of the literature. Euro-African literature? Probably, the English, French, and Portuguese components would then be 'Anglo-African literature', 'Franco-African literature' or 'Luso-African literature'. What is important is that this minority literature forms a distinct tradition that needs a different term to distinguish it from *African Literature*, instead of usurping the title *African Literature* as is the current practice in literary scholarship. There have even been arrogant claims by some literary scholars who talk as if the literature written in European languages is necessarily closer to the Africanness of its inspiration than similar works in African languages, the languages of the majority. So thoroughly has the minority 'Afro-European Literature' (Euro-African literature?) usurped the name 'African literature' in the current scholarship that literature by Africans in African languages is the one that needs qualification. Albert Gérard's otherwise timely book is titled *African Language Literatures*.
- 25 Chinua Achebe 'Africa and her Writers' in *Morning Yet on Creation Day*, p. 27.

*what is the point of writing in French?*



## 2 The Language of African Theatre

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### I

Early one morning in 1976, a woman from Kamĩrũthũ village came to my house and she went straight to the point: 'We hear you have a lot of education and that you write books. Why don't you and others of your kind give some of that education to the village? We don't want the whole amount; just a little of it, and a little of your time.' There was a youth centre in the village, she went on, and it was falling apart. It needed group effort to bring it back to life. Would I be willing to help? I said I would think about it. In those days, I was the chairman of the Literature Department at the University of Nairobi but I lived near Kamĩrũthũ, Limuru, about thirty or so kilometres from the capital city. I used to drive to Nairobi and back daily except on Sundays. So Sunday was the best day to catch me at home. She came the second, the third and the fourth consecutive Sundays with the same request couched in virtually the same words. That was how I came to join others in what later was to be called Kamĩrũthũ Community Education and Cultural Centre.

### II

Kamĩrũthũ is one of several villages in Limuru originally set up in the fifties by the British colonial administration as a way of cutting off the links between the people and the guerrillas of the Kenya Land and Freedom Army, otherwise known as Mau Mau. Even after independence in 1963 the villages remained as reservoirs of cheap labour. By 1975 Kamĩrũthũ alone had grown into a population of ten thousand. The workers who live in Kamĩrũthũ, either as rent-paying tenants or as owners, fall into three broad categories. Firstly there are those who

work at Bata, the multinational shoe-making factory, at the Nile Investments Plastic Pipes and Goods factory, at the small salt-processing plants, at the timber and maize mills and at the motor and bicycle repairing garages – all part of a growing industrial proletariat. Then there are those employed in hotels, shops, petrol stations, transport buses and matatus, with donkey-pulled carriages and human-powered pushcarts – commercial and domestic workers. The third category are part of the agricultural proletariat; those who are mainly employed in the huge tea and coffee plantations and farms previously owned by the British colonial settlers but which now belong to a few wealthy Kenyans and multinationals like Lonrho, but also those who are employed as seasonal labour on farms of all sizes.

But the peasants are the majority. They include 'rich' peasants who employ more than family labour; middle peasants who depend solely on family labour; poor peasants who work on their own strips of land but also hire out their labour; and numerous landless peasants who rent land and hire out themselves. There are of course the many unemployed, plus part-time and full-time prostitutes and petty criminals. The other distinct type of dwellers in Kamĩrũthũ are teachers, secretaries, petty administrative officials, owners of small bars and shops, self-employed craftsmen, carpenters, musicians, market traders, and the occasional businessman – that is, the petty bourgeoisie. Most of the rich landlords, merchants, and top officials in companies or administration, and a large section of the land-owning peasantry, live outside the village.<sup>1</sup>

I mention these different classes because nearly all of them were represented among the participants at Kamĩrũthũ Community Education and Culture Centre. For instance, the committee running the centre was made up of peasants, workers, a schoolteacher and a businessman. Those of us from the University included Kĩmani, Gecaũ, Kabirũ Kinyanjui and Ngũgĩ wa Mĩriĩ who later became the co-ordinating director of all our activities. But the peasants and the workers, including the unemployed, were the real backbone of the centre which started functioning in 1976.

I have talked about the origins, the aims, and the development of the centre in my books, *Detained: A Writer's Prison Diary* and *Barrel of a Pen: Resistance to Repression in Neo-colonial Kenya*, and in various other publications. A great deal has also been written about it in newspapers, journals and research papers. But what is important, for our discussion on the language of African theatre, is that all the activities of the centre were to be linked – they would arise out of each



other – while each being a self-contained programme. Thus *theatre*, as the central focus of our cultural programme, was going to provide follow-up material and activities for the new literates from the adult literacy programme, while at the same time providing the basis for polytechnic type activities in the material culture programme.

But why theatre in the village? Were we introducing something totally alien to the community as the Provincial Commissioner was later to claim?

### III

Drama has origins in human struggles with nature and with others. In pre-colonial Kenya, the peasants in the various nationalities cleared forests, planted crops, tended them to ripeness and harvest – out of the one seed buried in the ground came many seeds. Out of death life sprouted, and this through the mediation of the human hand and the tools it held. So there were rites to bless the magic power of tools. There were other mysteries: of cows and goats and other animals and birds mating – like human beings – and out came life that helped sustain human life. So fertility rites and ceremonies to celebrate life oozing from the earth, or from between the thighs of humans and animals. Human life itself was a mystery: birth, growing up and death, but through many stages. So there were rituals and ceremonies to celebrate and mark birth, circumcision or initiation into the different stages of growth and responsibility, marriages and the burial of the dead.

But see the cruelty of nature: there were droughts and floods, threatening devastation and death. The community shall build wells and walls. But the gods need propitiation. More rituals. More ceremonies. The spirits and the gods were of course invisible but they could be represented by masks worn by humans. Nature, through works and ceremony, could be turned into a friend.

But see the cruelty of human beings. Enemies come to take away a community's wealth in goats and cattle. So there were battles to be fought to claim back one's own. Bless the spears. Bless the warriors. Bless those who defend the community from its enemies without. Victorious warriors returned to ritual and ceremony. In song and dance they acted out the battle scenes for those who were not there and for the warriors to relive the glory, drinking in the communal admiration and gratitude. There were also enemies within: evil doers,

thieves, idlers; there were stories – often with a chorus – to point the fate of those threatening the communal good.

Some of the drama could take days, weeks, or months. Among the Agikūyū of Kenya, for instance, there was the *Ituika* ceremony held every twenty-five years or so that marked the handing over of power from one generation to another. According to Kenyatta in his book *Facing Mount Kenya*, the *Ituika* was celebrated by feasting, dancing and singing over a six-months period. The laws and regulations of the new government were embodied in the words, phrases and rhythmic movements of the new songs and dances.<sup>2</sup> How *Ituika* came to be was always re-enacted in a dramatic procession. Central to all these varieties of dramatic expression were songs, dance and occasional mime!

Drama in pre-colonial Kenya was not, then, an isolated event: it was part and parcel of the rhythm of daily and seasonal life of the community. It was an activity among other activities, often drawing its energy from those other activities. It was also entertainment in the sense of involved enjoyment; it was moral instruction; and it was also a strict matter of life and death and communal survival. This drama was not performed in special buildings set aside for the purpose. It could take place anywhere – wherever there was an 'empty space', to borrow the phrase from Peter Brook. 'The empty space', among the people, was part of that tradition.<sup>3</sup>

### IV

It was the British colonialism which destroyed that tradition. The missionaries in their proselytising zeal saw many of these traditions as works of the devil. They had to be fought before the bible could hold sway in the hearts of the natives. The colonial administration also collaborated. Any gathering of the natives needed a licence: colonialism feared its own biblical saying that where two or three gathered, God would hear their cry. Why should they allow God above, or the God within the natives to hear the cry of the people? Many of these ceremonies were banned: like the *Ituika*, in 1925. But the ban reached massive proportions from 1952 to 1962 during the Mau Mau struggle when more than five people were deemed to constitute a public gathering and needed a licence. Both the missionaries and the colonial administration used the school system to destroy the concept of the



'empty space' among the people by trying to capture and confine it in government-supervised urban community halls, schoolhalls, church-buildings, and in actual theatre buildings with the proscenium stage. Between 1952 and 1962 'the empty space' was even confined behind barbed wire in prisons and detention camps where the political detainees and prisoners were encouraged to produce slavishly pro-colonial and anti-Mau Mau propaganda plays.

The social halls encouraged the concert, a kind of playlet, with simple plots often depicting the naive peasant who comes to the big town and is completely perplexed by the complexities of modern life, the stupid peasant who goes to speak to telephone wires asking them to send money to his relatives and leaving the bundle of notes under the telephone pole; and of course the long arm of the law that catches criminals and hence restores peace in the town. The school and church hall produced religious theatre with the story of the prodigal son and the Nativity being among the most popular themes. But the school also produced plays in English; in Alliance High School which I attended Shakespeare, like the *Speech Day*, was an annual event. Between 1955 and 1958 I saw *As You Like It*, *Henry IV Part One*, *King Lear* and *Midsummer Nights Dream* roughly in that order. In the fifties through the British Council and a government-appointed colony-wide drama and music officer, the school drama was systematized into an annual Schools Drama Festival. The many European-controlled theatre buildings erected in the major towns – Mombasa, Nairobi, Nakuru, Kisumu, Kitale, Eldoret – between 1948 and 1952 specialised in West End comedies and sugary musicals with occasional Shakespeare and George Bernard Shaw. The two most famous were the Donovan Maule Theatre in Nairobi, a fully fledged professional theatre and the Kenya National Theatre, a colonial government establishment, projected as a future multi-racial cultural centre. Independence in 1963 did not change the theatre status quo; the 'empty space' was still confined in similar places. West End musicals like *Annie Get Your Gun*, *Boeing Boeing*, *Jesus Christ Superstar*, *Desperate Hours* and *Alice in Wonderland* continued to hold sway, with the expatriate community dominating the professional, the semi-professional and amateur theatre. There was also an Asian language theatre tradition but this was largely confined to Kenyan-Asian community social halls and schools.

The colonial regime also encouraged radio drama with the African as a clown. If the African could be made to laugh at his own stupidity and simplicity he might forget this business of Mau Mau, Freedom, and all that. The drama of the mindless

clown was grouped around Kipanga and a few other African comedians.

With independence more and more graduates joined schools and universities and there was a gradual revolt although it was still largely confined to the four walls of the school, the social hall, the university premises, and also to the boundaries of the English language. The revolt of this African petty-bourgeoisie in the area of theatre had roots in the fifties with Alliance High School, Thika, Mang'u, Kagumo and other prominent schools producing a counter-Shakespeare and G. B. Shaw tradition with their own scripts in Kiswahili. At Alliance High School there were *Nakupenda Lakini* by Henry Kuria (who was also organizer of the Kiambu Music Festival) (1954); *Maisha ni Nini* by Kimani Nyoike (1955); *Nimelogwa nisiwe na mpenzi* by Gerishon Ngũgĩ (1956); *Atakiwa na Polisi* by B. M. Kurutu (1957) which all ended with performances at Menengai Social Hall in Nakuru, the heartland of settlerdom.

But the revolts of the sixties and the early seventies had a more nationalistic flavour. Kenyan playwrights (like Francis Imbuga, Kenneth Watene, Kibwana and Mĩcere Mũgo) and Kenyan directors (like Seth Adagala, Tirus Gathwe, Waigwa Wachiira and David Mulwa) emerged with a growing circle of actors around Voice of Kenya radio and television, the Kenya National Theatre, and the University. Prominent African playwrights and directors from other countries like John Ruganda and Joe de Graft at the University reinforced their Kenyan counterparts. Amateur theatre companies emerged, some flaring only for a day; but a few like 'The University Players' and the Mũmbi wa Maina's 'Tamaduni Players' existed for a longer period. Tamaduni Players were the most consistent in terms of the regularity of their productions, their continuous search for relevance, and their high professionalism.

The revolt took many forms: one was the sheer African petty-bourgeois assertion in the very fact of writing and directing and performing plays. It also took the form of a more and more nationalistic patriotic and anti-neocolonial, anti-imperialist content in the plays, this trend perhaps best exemplified in Mĩcere Mũgo's and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* which was performed by the Kenya Festac 77 Drama Group. It also took the form of a more sharpened criticism of the internal order as in Francis Imbuga's *Betrayal in the City* performed by the same group in Nairobi and Lagos.

But the biggest revolt was over the control of the Kenyan National Theatre, set up in the fifties and wholly dominated by British directors



and British amateur groups. It remained the preserve of the British expatriate community even after Kenya had her own national anthem and national flag in 1963. It was run by a wholly expatriate governing council with the British Council retaining a representative many years after Independence. There was an outcry over this dominance, from the Kenyan petty-bourgeoisie centred on the University and supported by a few patriotic journalists who called for the Kenyanization of the directorship and council. A statement by the staff of the Literature Department in 1970 denounced the Kenya Cultural Centre as a service station for foreign interests, a statement which was also a cultural reflection of the growing dissatisfaction with the economic and political dominance of imperialist interests in the country as a whole. There was a call for more days and weeks allowed for African theatre. The heated debates climaxed in racial violence in 1976 when one expatriate white lady had her nose bloodied by a black actor after she had called him a black bastard. The police came but in the identification parade she could not make out one African face from another. Seth Adagala, the director of the Kenya Festac 77 Drama Group, and I were later summoned to the C.I.D. headquarters after complaints by the leaders of the European Amateur Groups that we were interfering with the success of their theatrical enterprises, a complaint which was manifestly untrue. But the struggle also took the form of a debate about the whole question, concept and constitution of a National Theatre. Was it just a building? Was it the location? Was it the kind of plays presented there? Or was it simply the skin-colour of the director and the administration staff?

Some groups opted for other premises. The University Theatre, basically an education lecture hall with a stage, wide but not deep, on the same level as the first row of the auditorium, saw a wide range of experimental productions, particularly in the second half of the seventies. Education Theatre II, as it was officially called, became an alternative to the government-owned but foreign-run Kenya National Theatre and Cultural Centre. Tamaduni and other groups staged one innovative play after another under the guidance of the indefatigable Mũmbi wa Maina and other directors.

The running of the Schools Drama Festival, previously in the hands of expatriate staff in the Ministry of Education, now came under the directorship of the first Kenyan African Drama and Literature officer Mr Wasambo Were. Over the years the Festival, which now included a separate but parallel one for the Teachers Training Colleges, had become more and more nationalistic in content as more and more

graduates from the University of Nairobi joined the staff of the various schools and brought a new attitude to drama. Under the new officer the Festival took a radical departure from the past. The Festival would move from its annual location at the Kenya National Theatre to a venue in Kakamega, way out in the countryside. Thereafter it would rotate in the provinces with the winning finalist plays touring the country. The language of the plays changed with the English language being edged out by Kiswahili as the main medium of theatrical expression.

The University of Nairobi Literature Department started its own Free Travelling Theatre. The students toured urban and rural community centres and schools to acclaim by thousands. Other travelling mini-theatre groups were formed in other schools and colleges. The accent from the early to mid-seventies was on theatre to the people.

On looking back now, it is clear that Kenyan theatre in the early seventies was trying to break away from the imperialist colonial tradition whose symbols were the European-dominated Kenya National Theatre (albeit aided by the ruling regime), the Donovan Maule Theatre in Nairobi and other similar centres in the major towns.

Its main handicap was still its petty-bourgeois base in the schools and University Colleges, from where came the majority of its actors, directors and plays. Above all it was limited by the very imperialist tradition from which it was trying to break away. English was still accepted as the main medium of revolt and affirmation. Original scripts, even the most radical, were often written from the standpoints of the petty-bourgeoisie. And theatre was still confined within walls. Where it tried to break away from the confines of closed walls and curtains of a formal theatre building into rural and urban community halls, the assumption was still that theatre was to be taken to the people. People were to be given a taste of the treasures of the theatre. People had no traditions of theatre. The assumption that people were to be given theatre was of course in keeping with the government fiction that people were there to be given development particularly if they behaved themselves.

But it was imperialism that had stopped the free development of the national traditions of theatre rooted in the ritual and ceremonial practices of the peasantry. The real language of African theatre could only be found among the people – the peasantry in particular – in their life, history and struggles.



## V

Kamĩrũthũ then was not an aberration, but an attempt at reconnection with the broken roots of African civilization and its traditions of theatre. In its very location in a village within the kind of social classes described above, Kamĩrũthũ was the answer to the question of the real substance of a national theatre. Theatre is not a building. People make theatre. Their life is the very stuff of drama. Indeed Kamĩrũthũ reconnected itself to the national tradition of the empty space, of language, of content and of form.

Necessity forced the issue.

For instance, there was an actual empty space at Kamĩrũthũ. The four acres reserved for the Youth Centre had at that time, in 1977, only a falling-apart mud-walled barrack of four rooms which we used for adult literacy. The rest was grass. Nothing more. It was the peasants and workers from the village who built the stage: just a raised semi-circular platform backed by a semi-circular bamboo wall behind which was a small three-roomed house which served as the store and changing room. The stage and the auditorium – fixed long wooden seats arranged like stairs – were almost an extension of each other. It had no roof. It was an open air theatre with large empty spaces surrounding the stage and the auditorium. The flow of actors and people between the auditorium and the stage, and around the stage and the entire auditorium was uninhibited. Behind the auditorium were some tall eucalyptus trees. Birds could watch performances from these or from the top of the outer bamboo fence. And during one performance some actors, unrehearsed, had the idea of climbing up the trees and joining the singing from up there. They were performing not only to those seated before them, but to whoever could now see them and hear them – the entire village of 10,000 people was their audience.

Necessity forced a commonsense solution to the issue of language. Ngũgĩ wa Mirĩ and I had been asked to script the initial outline of a play that later came to be called *Ngaahika Ndeenda* (*I will marry when I want*). The question was, what language were we going to use?

Since 1960, when as a student I started to scribble words on paper, I had written all my novels and stories in English. Plays too. *The Black Hermit* meant for the celebration of Uganda's Independence was performed by Makerere Students Drama Society at the Uganda National Theatre in 1962. *This Time Tomorrow*, written in 1966, was

about the eviction of workers from near the centre of Nairobi to keep the city clean for tourists. In 1976 I had collaborated with Mĩcere Mũgo in writing *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi*. In the preface to the published script we had written what amounted to a literary manifesto calling for a radical change in the attitude of African writers to fight with the people against imperialism and the class enemies of the people. We called for a revolutionary theatre facing the consequent challenge: how to truly depict 'the masses in the only historically correct perspective: positively, heroically and as the true makers of history.' We had gone on to define good theatre as that which was on the side of the people, 'that which, without masking mistakes and weaknesses, gives people courage and urges them to higher resolves in their struggle for total liberation'. But we never asked ourselves how this revolutionary theatre was going to urge people to higher resolves in a foreign language? Indeed in all three plays, *The Black Hermit*, *This Time Tomorrow*, and *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi*, there were very obvious contradictions though these were more apparent on the stage than in the script. In the opening line of *The Black Hermit* the peasant mother is made to speak in a poetic language reminiscent in tone of T. S. Eliot. The elders from a rural outpost come to town for their son, the black hermit, and speak in impeccable English. So does Kĩmaathi, in *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi*, even when addressing his guerrilla army or the peasants and workers in court. Admittedly it is understood that the characters are speaking an African language. But this is only an illusion since they are conceived in English and they speak directly in English. There are other contradictions too: these characters speak English but when it comes to singing they quite happily and naturally fall back into their languages. So they *do* know African languages! The illusion that in speaking English they were really speaking an African language is broken. The realism in theatre collides with the historical reality it is trying to reflect. It is only petty-bourgeois characters – those who have been to schools and universities – who normally and quite freely mix English with African languages in the same sentence or speech.<sup>4</sup>

The use of English as my literary medium of expression, particularly in theatre and the novel, had always disturbed me. In a student's interview in Leeds in 1967 and in my book *Homecoming* (1969) I came back to the question. But I kept



on hedging the issue. The possibility of using an African language stayed only in the realm of possibility until I came to Kamĩrĩthũ.

It was Kamĩrĩthũ which forced me to turn to Gikũyũ and hence into what for me has amounted to 'an epistemological break' with my past, particularly in the area of theatre. The question of audience settled the problem of language choice; and the language choice settled the question of audience. But our use of Gikũyũ had other consequences in relation to other theatre issues: content for instance; actors, auditioning and rehearsals, performances and reception; theatre as a language.

*Ngaahika Ndeenda* depicts the proletarianisation of the peasantry in a neo-colonial society. Concretely it shows the way the Kĩgũũnda family, a poor peasant family, who have to supplement their subsistence on their one and a half acres with the sale of their labour, is finally deprived of even the one-and-a-half acres by a multi-national consortium of Japanese and Euro-American industrialists and bankers aided by the native comprador landlords and businessmen.

The land question is basic to an understanding of Kenya's history and contemporary politics, as indeed it is of twentieth century history wherever people have had their land taken away by conquest, unequal treaties or by the genocide of part of the population. The Mau Mau militant organization which spearheaded the armed struggle for Kenya's independence was officially called the Kenya Land and Freedom Army. The play, *Ngaahika Ndeenda*, in part drew very heavily on the history of the struggle for land and freedom; particularly the year 1952, when the Kĩmaathi-led armed struggle started and the British colonial regimes suspended all civil liberties by imposing a state of emergency; and 1963, when KANU under Kenyatta successfully negotiated for the right to fly a national flag, and to sing a national anthem and to call people to vote for a national assembly within every five years. The play showed how that independence, for which thousands of Kenyans died, had been hijacked. In other words, it showed the transition of Kenya from a colony with the British interests being dominant, to a neo-colony with the doors open to wider imperialist interests from Japan to America. But the play also depicted the contemporary social conditions particularly for workers in multi-national factories and plantations.

Now many of the workers and peasants in Kamĩrĩthũ had participated in the struggle for land and freedom either in the passive wing or in the active guerrilla wing. Many had been in the forests and the mountains, many in the colonial detention camps and prisons; while some had of course collaborated with the British enemy. Many had seen their houses burnt; their daughters raped by the British; their land taken away; their relatives killed. Indeed Kamĩrĩthũ itself was a product of that history of heroic struggle against colonialism and of the subsequent monumental betrayal into neo-colonialism. The play was celebrating that history while showing the unity and continuity of that struggle. Here the choice of language was crucial. There was now no barrier between the content of their history and the linguistic medium of its expression. Because the play was written in a language they could understand the people could participate in all the subsequent discussions on the script. They discussed its content, its language and even the form. The process, particularly for Ngũgĩ wa Mĩrĩĩ, Kĩmani Gecaũ, and myself was one of continuous learning. Learning of our history. Learning of what obtains in factories. Learning of what goes on in farms and plantations. Learning our language, for the peasants were essentially the guardians of the language through years of use. And learning anew the elements of form of the African Theatre.

What are these elements of form?

First was song and dance. Song and dance as we have seen are central to nearly all the rituals celebrating rain, birth, the second birth, circumcision, marriage, funerals or to all ordinary ceremonies. Even daily speech among peasants is interspersed with song. It can be a line or two, a verse, or a whole song. What's important is that song and dance are not just decorations; they are an integral part of that conversation, that drinking session, that ritual, that ceremony. In *Ngaahika Ndeenda* we too tried to incorporate song and dance, as part of the structure and movement of the actors. The song arises from what has gone before and it leads to what follows. The song and the dance become a continuation of the conversation and of the action. Let me illustrate by quoting a long sequence whose action and movement in time is dependent on a series of songs and dances.



The play opens with Kīgūnda and his wife, Wangeci, making preparations to receive Kīoi and his wife Jezebel. Kīgūnda and Wangeci are a peasant family. Kīoi and Jezebel are a rich landlord family with close connections in high church, banks and industry. Kīgūnda works for Kīoi. But it is the very first time that the Kīois have visited the Kīgūndas and naturally Kīgūnda and Wangeci try to puzzle out the reasons for this visit. Why should the landlord want to pay them a visit? Then suddenly it occurs to Wangeci that maybe the Kīois are coming to discuss the possibilities of a marriage between Gathoni, Kīgūnda's daughter, and John Mūhūni, Kīoi's son. Mūhūni has been dating Gathoni. The idea is so farfetched that Kīgūnda can only exclaim:

KĪGŪUNDA:

You women!

You are always thinking of weddings!

WANGECI:

Why not?

These are different times from ours.

These days they sing that love knows no fear.

In any case, can't you see

Your daughter is very beautiful?

She looks exactly the way I used to look – a perfect beauty!

KĪGŪUNDA: [*stopping dusting up the tyre sandals*]

You? A perfect beauty?

WANGECI:

Yes. Me.

KĪGŪUNDA:

Don't you know that it was only that

I felt pity for you?

WANGECI:

You, who used to waylay me everywhere all the time?

In the morning,

In the evening,

As I came home from the river,

As I came home from the market,

Or as I came back home from work in the settlers' farms?

Can't you remember how you used to plead with me,

Saying you had never in your life seen a beauty like me?

KĪGŪUNDA: [*Going back in time*]

That was long before the state of Emergency.

Your heels used to shine bright,

Your face shone like the clear moon at night,

Your eyes like the stars in heaven.

Your teeth, it seemed, were always washed with milk.

Your voice sounded like a precious instrument.

Your breasts were full and pointed like the tip of the sharpest thorn.

As you walked it seemed as if they were whistling beautiful tunes.

WANGECI: [*Also mesmerized by memories of their past youth*]

In those days

We used to dance in Kīneeni forest.

KĪGŪUNDA:

A dance would cost only twenty-five cents.

WANGECI:

In those days there was not a single girl from Ndeiya up to Gīthāga

Who did not die to dance with you.

KĪGŪUNDA:

You too would swing your skirt

Till the guitar player was moved to breaking the strings.

And the guitars used to sound tunes

That silenced the entire forest,

Making even the trees listen . . .

*The sound of guitars and other instruments as if KĪGŪUNDA and WANGECI can hear them in the memory. KĪGŪUNDA and WANGECI start dancing. Then they are joined by the guitar players and players of other instruments and DANCERS. They dance, KĪGŪUNDA and WANGECI among them.*

*Nyaangwīcū let's shake the skirt*

*Nyaangwīcū let's shake the skirt*

*Sister shake it and make it yield its precious yields.*

*Sister shake it and make it yield its precious yields.*

*Nyaangwīcū is danced on one leg*

*Nyaangwīcū is danced on one leg*

*The other is merely for pleasing the body.*

*The other is merely for pleasing the body.*

*Wangeci the beautiful one*

*Wangeci the beautiful one*

*With a body slim and straight like the eucalyptus.*



*With a body slim and straight like the eucalyptus.*

*Wangeci the little maiden  
Wangeci the little maiden  
When I see her I am unable to walk.  
When I see her I am unable to walk.*

*Wangeci let's cultivate the fruit garden  
Wangeci let's cultivate the fruit garden  
This garden that belongs to Kīgūūnda wa Gathoni.  
This garden that belongs to Kīgūūnda wa Gathoni.*

*Wangeci, our mother, we now refuse  
Wangeci, our mother, we now refuse  
To be slaves in our home,  
To be slaves in our home.*

*When this is over, WANGECI says, 'Oh my favourite was Mwomboko.' And KĪGŪŪNDA replies: 'Oh in those days we used to tear the right or left side of trouser legs from the knee downwards. Those were our bell bottoms with which we danced Mwomboko.' Now the guitar players and the accordion players start. The Mwomboko DANCERS enter. KĪGŪŪNDA and WANGECI lead them in the Mwomboko dance. Guitars, iron rings and the accordions are played with vigour and the dancers' feet add embellishments.*

*The Mwomboko dance is not difficult,  
It's just two steps and a turn.  
I'll swing you so beautifully that,  
Your mother being in the fields,  
Your father in a beer feast,  
You'll tell me where your father's purse is hidden.*

*Take care of me  
I take care of you  
Problems can be settled in jokes.*

*Limuru is my home  
Here I have come to loaf about  
Wangeci, my young lady  
Be the way you are  
And don't add frills  
To your present gait.  
Take care of me*

*I take care of you  
Problems can be settled in jokes.  
This is your place  
Famed for ripe bananas  
I'll sing to you till you cry  
Or failing to cry  
You'll be so overcome with feelings  
That you'll take your life.  
Take care of me  
I take care of you  
Problems can be settled in jokes.  
I brewed liquor for you  
And now you've turned against me!  
A cripple often turns against his benefactors  
Our son of Gathoni  
Good fortune, unexpected, found Wacū in the Field  
And she sat down to feast on it.  
Take care of me  
I take care of you  
Problems can be settled in jokes.  
Have you taken one too many  
Or are you simply drunk  
I'll not say anything,  
Oh, Wangeci my little fruit,  
Until seven years are over . . .*

*The voices of men and the sound of guitars, accordions and other instruments end abruptly. The DANCERS leave the stage. KĪGŪŪNDA and WANGECI remain frozen in the act of dancing. KĪGŪŪNDA shakes his head as if he is still engrossed in memories of the past. They disengage slowly!*

**KĪGŪŪNDA:**

*Oh, the seven years were not even over  
When we began  
To sing new songs with new voices,  
Songs and voices demanding  
Freedom for Kenya, our motherland.*

*A procession enters the stage singing freedom songs.*



Freedom  
Freedom  
Freedom for Kenya our motherland

A land of limitless joy  
A land rich in green fields and forests  
Kenya is an African people's country.

We do not mind being jailed  
We do not mind being exiled  
For we shall never never stop  
Agitating for and demanding back our lands  
For Kenya is an African people's country . . .

As the SINGERS leave the stage WANGECI takes over the remembrance of things past.

WANGECI:

I myself have always remembered  
The Olengurueni women,  
The ones driven from their lands around Nakuru  
To be exiled to Yatta, the land of black rocks.  
They passed through Limuru  
Caged with barbed wire in the backs of several lorries.  
But still they sang songs  
With words that pierced one's heart like a spear.  
The songs were sad, true,  
But the women were completely fearless  
For they had faith and were sure that,  
One day, this soil will be returned to us.

A procession of women SINGERS enters the stage singing.

Pray in Truth  
Beseech Him with Truth  
For he is the same Ngai within us.  
One woman died  
After being tortured  
Because she refused to sell out.

Pray in Truth  
Beseech Him with Truth  
For he is the same Ngai within us.

Great love I found there  
Among women and children  
A bean fell to the ground  
And it was shared among them.  
Pray in Truth  
Beseech Him with Truth  
For he is the same Ngai within us.

The SINGERS leave the stage.

KĪGŪŪNDA:

It was then  
That the state of Emergency was declared over Kenya.  
Our patriots,  
Men and women of  
Limuru and the whole country,  
Were arrested!  
The Emergency laws became very oppressive.  
Our homes were burnt down.  
We were jailed,  
We were taken to detention camps,  
Some of us were crippled through beatings.  
Others were castrated.  
Our women were raped with bottles.  
Our wives and daughters raped before our eyes!

[Moved by the bitter memories, KĪGŪŪNDA pauses for a few seconds]

But through Mau Mau  
Led by Kimaathi and Matheenge,  
And through the organized unity of the masses  
We beat the whites  
And freedom came . . .  
We raised high our national flag.

A jubilant procession of men, women and children enters the stage singing songs and dances in praise of freedom.

It is a flag of three colours  
Raise the flag high  
Green is for our earth  
Raise the flag high  
Red is for our blood  
Raise the flag high



*Black is for Africa  
Raise the flag high.*

[*They change to a new song and dance*]

SOLOIST:

*Great our patriots for me . . .  
Where did the whites come from?*

CHORUS:

*Where did the whites come from?  
Where did the whites come from?  
They came through Mūrang'a,  
And they spent a night at Waiyaki's home,  
If you want to know that these foreigners were no good,  
Ask yourself:  
Where is Waiyaki's grave today?  
We must protect our patriots  
So they don't meet Waiyaki's fate.*

SOLOIST:

*Kīmaathi's patriots are brave  
Where did the whites come from?*

[*They continue singing as they walk off the stage.*]

KĪGŪŪNDA:

*How the times run!  
How many years have gone  
Since we got independence?  
Ten and over,  
Quite a good number of years!  
And now look at me!*

[*KĪGŪŪNDA looks at himself, points to the title-deed and goes near it*]

*One and a half acres of land in dry plains.  
Our family land was given to homeguards.  
Today I am just a labourer  
On farms owned by Aham Kīoi wa Kanoru.  
My trousers are pure tatters.  
Look at you.  
See what the years of freedom in poverty  
Have done to you!  
Poverty has hauled down your former splendour.  
Poverty has dug trenches on your face,  
Your heels are now so many cracks,*

*Your breasts have fallen,  
They have nowhere to hold.  
Now you look like an old basket  
That has lost all shape.*

WANGECI:

*Away with you,  
Haven't you heard it said that  
A flower is robbed of the colours by the fruit it bears!*

[*Changing the tone of voice*]

*Stop this habit of thinking too much about the past  
Often losing your sleep over things that had better been  
forgotten.*

*Think about today and tomorrow.*

*Think about our home.*

*Poverty has no permanent roots!*

*Poverty is a sword for sharpening the digging sticks . . .*

[*Pauses, as if caught by a new thought*]

*Tell me:*

*What does Kīoi and his family*

*Want with us today?<sup>5</sup>*

As you have seen, the sequence begins with the 'why' of Kīoi's visit, goes through the entire history of the armed struggle of the fifties including the achievement of a national flag, and comes back to the 'why' of Kīoi's intended visit. Indeed in *Ngaahika Ndeenda* the past and the future are often recreated through song and dance and mime.

Mime in fact is the other most important element of form. The best example is Kīgūūnda's intended church wedding ceremony. That sequence starts with Kīgūūnda and Wangeci who are now admiring their wedding suits and robes having been persuaded to mortgage their land to a bank to get the means to finance the renewal of their marriage in church as their African wedding is regarded by the Kīois as sinful and not valid. They try them on and with mime, music and dance go through the entire exercise climaxing in their cutting an imaginary five storied cake.

That mime sequence is also a good illustration of ceremony but one, in this case, emptied of its grandeur and dignity. The christian ceremony is externally imposed and lacks the appropriate symbols rooted in the soil. It becomes a caricature of the national traditions of ceremony. This is contrasted with the *Ngurario* sequence where,



through the *Gitiuro* opera, the dignity of a national ceremony is recreated.

When it came to song, dance and ceremony, the peasants, who of course knew all about it, were particular about the accuracy of detail. Their approach was very serious.

They were also particular about language which, of course, is another element of form. They were concerned that the various characters, depending on age and occupation, be given the appropriate language. 'An old man cannot speak like that' they would say. 'If you want him to have dignity, he has to use this or that kind of proverb.' Levels of language and language-use and the nuances of words and phrases were discussed heatedly.

But what gives any form its tautness and special character and shape is the content. This is even more true in drama. Drama is closer to the dialectics of life than poetry and the fiction. Life is movement arising from the inherent contradiction and unity of opposites. Man and woman meet in a united dance of opposites out of which comes a human life separate from the two that gave it birth but incorporating features of both in such a way that it is recognisable at a glance that so and so is really a product of so and so. The growth of that life depends on some cells dying and others being born. Social life itself arises out of the contradiction between man and nature. But man is part of nature. Karl Marx has said: 'He opposes himself to nature as one of her own forces, setting in motion arms, legs, head and hands, the natural forces of his body, in order to appropriate nature's production to his own wants. By thus acting on the external nature and changing it, he at the same time changes his own nature.'<sup>6</sup> Drama encapsulates within itself this principle of the struggle of opposites which generates movement. There is in drama a movement from apparent harmony, a kind of rest, through conflict to a comic or tragic resolution of that conflict. We end with harmony at a different level, a kind of temporary rest, which of course is the beginning of another movement. The balance of opposing ideas and social forces, of all the contending forces is important in shaping the form of drama and theatre.

The participants were most particular about the representation of history, their history. And they were quick to point out and argue against any incorrect positioning and representation of the various forces – even the enemy forces – at work in the struggle against imperialism. They would compare notes from their own actual experience, whether it was in making guns in the forests, in stealing arms from the British enemy, in carrying bullets through the enemy

lines, or in the various strategies for survival. Land and freedom. Economic and political independence. Those were the aims of their struggle and they did not want *Ngaabika Ndeenda* to distort them. The one who made imitation guns for the play at Kamirithū was the very person who used to make actual guns for the Mau Mau guerrillas in the fifties. The workers were keen that the details of the exploitation and the harsh conditions of life in the multinational factories be laid bare. I remember for instance how one group who worked in a particular department at the nearby Bata shoe factory sat down to work out the process and quantity of their exploitation in order to explain it all to those of us who had never worked in a factory. Within a single day they would make shoes to the value of all the monthly wages for the entire work force of three thousand. So they worked for themselves for one day. For whom were they working for the other twenty-nine days? They calculated *what* of *what* they produced went for wear and tear of the machinery and for the repayment of initial capital, and because the company had been there since 1938 they assumed that the initial investment had been repaid a long time ago. To whom did the rest go? To the owners in Canada. What about entrepreneurial skills – the brainpower – which regulated the entire system though seated in offices in Nairobi or far away in Canada? What about the shareholder whose money made the entire system work? Ah, well. They had never seen that brainpower and that shareholder once lift a hammer to make a shoe. If they could make guns and set up armament factories in the harsh conditions of the forest and mountains without the brainpower and money-power of any shareholder from abroad, could they not run a shoemaking factory? The discussion would go on. Thus they were very clear about labour, their labour, being the creator of wealth. But what did that labour get every fortnight or every month? A mere pittance! And what's more, people do die in those factories. Did you know that? People die, people have died. 'Let's count . . . so and so . . .!' I remember one person who as evidence removed his shirt. His body was burned all over. 'Gases', he said. 'And what did I get as compensation? Dismissal. Laid off. Without even a watch for my faithfulness in service.'

The details of the struggle between capital and labour which are described in a long dramatic monologue by one of the worker characters, Gicaamba, were worked out in discussions. Central to Gicaamba's monologue explaining to Kigūnda that workers are not necessarily better off than the peasants, that the worker and the peasant



both suffer from the same system of imperialist capitalism, was the question assumed by the struggle between capital and labour in the twentieth century:

To have factories and even big industries  
Is good, very good!  
It is a means of developing the country.  
The question is this: who owns the industries?  
Whose children gain from the industries?<sup>7</sup>

The content of the play was asking many questions about the nature of Kenyan society and this generated ever more heated discussions on form and content during the entire period of the play's evolution. Sometimes these involved not just the actual participants but the ever widening circle of the audience.

Auditions and rehearsals for instance were in the open. I must say that this was initially forced on us by the empty space but it was also part of the growing conviction that a democratic participation even in the solution of artistic problems, however slow and chaotic it at times seemed, was producing results of a high artistic order and was forging a communal spirit in a community of artistic workers. PhDs from the university of Nairobi: PhDs from the university of the factory and the plantation: PhDs from Gorke's 'university of the streets' – each person's worth was judged by the scale of each person's contribution to the group effort. The open auditions and the rehearsals with everybody seeing all the elements that went into making a whole had the effect of demystifying the theatrical process.

In the theatre that I was used to in school and colleges and in amateur circles, the actors rehearsed more or less in secrecy and then sprung their finished perfection on an unsuspecting audience who were of course surprised into envious admiration: oh, what perfection, what talent, what inspired gifts – I certainly could never do such a thing! Such a theatre is part of the general bourgeois education system which practises education as a process of weakening people, of making them feel they cannot do this or that – oh, it must take such brains! – In other words education as a means of mystifying knowledge and hence reality. Education, far from giving people the confidence in their ability and capacities to overcome obstacles or to become masters of the laws governing external nature as human beings, tends to make them feel their inadequacies, their weaknesses and their incapacities in the face of reality; and their inability to do anything about the conditions governing their lives. They become more and more

alienated from themselves and from their natural and social environment. Education as a process of alienation produces a gallery of active stars and an undifferentiated mass of grateful admirers. The Olympian gods of the Greek mythology or the dashing knights of the middle ages are reborn in the twentieth century as superstar politicians, scientists, sportsmen, actors, the handsome doers or heroes, with the ordinary people watching passively, gratefully, admiringly. Kamirũthũ was the opposite of this. The Kamirũthũ practice was part of education as a process of demystifying knowledge and hence reality. People could see how the actors evolved from the time they could hardly move their legs or say their lines to a time when they could talk and move about the stage as if they were born talking those lines or moving on that stage. Some people in fact were recruited into the acting team after they had intervened to show how such and such a character should be portrayed. The audience applauded them into continuing doing the part. Perfection was thus shown to be a process, a historical social process, but it was admired no less. On the contrary they identified with that perfection even more because it was a product of themselves and their collective contribution. It was a heightening of themselves as a community.

The research on the script of *Ngaabika Ndeenda*, the writing of the outline, the readings and the discussions of the outline, the auditions and rehearsals and the construction of the open-air theatre took in all about nine months – from January to September 1977. The readings, the discussions and the rehearsals were timed to keep in rhythm with the lives of the people. So these were set sometimes on Saturday afternoon but always on Sunday afternoons. Even Sunday afternoon was chosen so that Kamirũthũ theatre would not interfere with church attendance in the mornings.

The results of all this effort to evolve an authentic language of African theatre were obvious when the play opened to a paying audience on 2 October 1977. Once again the performances were timed for Sunday afternoons. Evenings would have been too cold for everybody. *Ngaabika Ndeenda* was an immediate success with people coming from afar, even in hired buses and taxis, to see the show. Theatre became what it had always been: part of a collective festival. Some people knew the lines almost as well as the actors and their joy was in seeing the variations by the actors on different occasions to different audiences. There was an identification with the characters. Some people called themselves by the names of their favourite peasant and worker characters like Kigũnda; Gĩcaamba; Wangeci; Gathoni.



But they also used the names of such characters as *Kĩoi*, *Nditika*, *Ikuua*, and *Ndugĩre*, to refer to those, in and outside the village, who had anti-people tendencies. The language of *Ngaabika Ndeenda* was becoming part of the people's daily vocabulary and frame of reference. There were some touching moments. I remember one Sunday when it rained and people rushed to the nearest shelters under the trees or under the roofs. When it stopped, and all the actors resumed, the auditorium was as full as before. The performance was interrupted about three times on that afternoon but the audience would not go away. The people's identification with Kamĩrĩthũ was now complete.

Later they were driven away, not by the rain, not by any natural disaster, but by the authoritarian measures of an anti-people regime. On 16 November 1977 the Kenya government banned any further public performances of *Ngaabika Ndeenda* by the simple act of withdrawing the licence for any public 'gathering' at the centre. I myself was arrested on 31 December 1977 and spent the whole of 1978 in a maximum security prison, detained without even the doubtful benefit of a trial. They were attempting to stop the emergence of an authentic language of Kenyan theatre.

But that was not the end of Kamĩrĩthũ's search for an authentic language of African theatre in form and content.

In November 1981 they regrouped for another effort, the production of *Maitũ Njugĩra* (*Mother sing for me*). Auditions were set for 7, 14 and 15 November 1981, almost as if Kamĩrĩthũ was resuming the search from the very date and month it had been stopped. I have narrated the fate of this second production in my book, *Barrel of a Pen: Resistance to Repression in Neo-Colonial Kenya*. Here I would like to simply point out that all the elements of theatre developed in 1977 were employed and further extended. *Maitũ Njugĩra* depicted the heroic struggle of Kenyan workers against the early phase of imperialist capitalist 'primitive' accumulation with confiscation of land, forced labour on the same stolen land and heavy taxation to finance its development into settler run plantations.

Dance, mime, song were more dominant than words in telling this story of repression and resistance. The visual and the sound images carried the burden of the narrative and the analysis. The medium of slides was also introduced to give authentic visual images of the period of the twenties and thirties. And at every stage in its evolution more people from many of the Kenyan nationalities were involved. *Maitũ Njugĩra* (*Mother sing for me*), a drama in music, had more than eighty songs from more than eight nationalities in Kenya all depicting the joy,

the sorrow, the gains, the losses, the unity, the divisions, and the march forward as well as the setbacks in Kenyan people's struggles.

Kamĩrĩthũ was due to put on the musical drama at the Kenya National Theatre on 19 February 1982 after more than ten weeks of strenuous work by what had now become an important alliance from all nationalities of workers, peasants and progressive teachers and students. By going to perform at the Kenya National Theatre the alliance was going to make the point that an authentic language of African theatre, no matter in what specific African tongue it found expression, would communicate to people of all the nationalities. It was also going to prove that this trend had the support of Kenyan people of all the nationalities. Where else to prove this than on the premises of the so-called Kenya National Theatre. It was booked to be the longest run ever even though it was during the off theatre season, at the beginning of the year after Christmas.

The peasants and workers were about to bring national theatre to the capital city. But this was not to be. This time the authorities would not even deign to give a licence, instructions were sent to the management to padlock the doors, and the police were sent to ensure public peace and public security. Our attempts to continue with open rehearsals at the University premises – the famous Theatre II – were again frustrated after about ten such 'rehearsals' seen by about 10,000 people! The University authorities were instructed to padlock the doors of Theatre II. That was on Thursday 25 February 1982. On Thursday 11 March 1982 the government outlawed Kamĩrĩthũ Community Education and Cultural Centre and banned all theatre activities in the entire area. An 'independent' Kenyan government had followed in the footsteps of its colonial predecessors: it banned all the peasant and worker basis for genuine national traditions in theatre. But this time, the neo-colonial regime overreached itself. On 12 March 1982 three truckloads of armed policemen were sent to Kamĩrĩthũ Community Education and Cultural Centre and razed the open-air theatre to the ground. By so doing it ensured the immortality of the Kamĩrĩthũ experiments and search for peasant/worker-based language of African theatre.

A collective theatre, or what Boal has called a 'theatre of the oppressed', was produced by a range of factors: a content with which people could identify carried in a form which they could recognise and identify; their participation in its evolution through the research stages, that is by the collection of raw material like details of work conditions in farms and firms; the collection of old songs and dances like *Mũthĩrĩgũ*, *Mũcũng'wa*, and *Mwomboko* and opera forms like



*Gitiro* etc; their participation, through discussion on the scripts and therefore on the content and form; through the public auditions and rehearsals; and of course through the performances. The real language of African theatre is to be found in the struggles of the oppressed, for it is out of those struggles that a new Africa is being born. The peasants and workers of Africa are making a tomorrow out of the present of toil and turmoil. The authentic language of African theatre should reflect this even as it is given birth by that very toil and turmoil. Such a theatre will find response in the hearts and lives of the participants; and even in the hearts of those living outside the immediate environment of its physical being and operation.

A 70 year old participant, Njoki wa Njikira, was interviewed in *The Daily Nation* of Friday 22 January 1982:

'When the Kamirithu Theatre group started', Njoki said, 'we old people found we could be useful by teaching the young some of the things they did not know. I felt I was doing something important to the nation by teaching the songs that we used in *Ngaahika Ndeenda* and that is why I am involved in *Maitu Njugira*' . . . To Njoki the *Ngaahika Ndeenda* experience showed how history can be brought to the fore through drama so that 'children may know what their past was like and so that they may help in the building of a healthy society. The new play, *Maitu Njugira*, is equally important because very few Kenyans today know what it meant to be colonized in the 1930's which is what the play is about.'<sup>8</sup>

Similar sentiments were expressed by all the others interviewed in the same issue and by others interviewed in *The Standard* of Friday 29 January 1982. Wanjiru wa Ngigi, a young secretary and mother of two summarised it all:

During rehearsal so far, I have discovered so much I did not know about my own history. I can say with confidence that I know and I'm still learning – a great deal more about my own culture. Knowing more about my past has made me ore sensitive to my present situation and that of my future and the future of my children.<sup>9</sup>

In its short period of physical existence Kamirithu had an effect on that movement in Kenyan theatre described earlier in this chapter. There was the move towards the people and the gradual but growing confidence in people's languages and their use in theatre. There was also the emergence of people-based cultural festivals like the annual Vihiga Cultural Festival in western Kenya. They were not a copy of

Kamirithu but were inspired by a similar felt need for a renaissance of Kenyan culture which would be achieved by going to the roots of its being in the lives and languages of the people. The destruction of Kamirithu was thus much more than a destruction of an open air theatre. In its search for an authentic language of African theatre, Kamirithu had given palpable form to a vision of Kenya's future – a Kenya for Kenyans, a self-reliant Kenya for a self-reliant people, a vision embodying a communal ethos of democracy and independence. This vision was diametrically opposed to the subservience to the USA and western imperialist interests represented by the neo-colonial regime of both Kenyatta and Moi, which is now embodied in the slogan of Nyayoism which means 'Follow in my footsteps'.

There has been an interesting twist to the Kamirithu story. In February 1984 President Moi made 'a surprise visit' to Kamirithu and he shed tears at the poverty he saw around the centre: how can human beings live in such conditions? On 'an impulse', 'an unrehearsed' act of 'personal' generosity, he there and then gave a donation towards the building of a polytechnic where the open air theatre used to be. No mention of the Kamirithu Community Education and Cultural Centre. But the people were not deceived. A polytechnic was what they were hoping to build. They would welcome one built by the government for after all it was their money. But the regime has different hopes. By its wanton act of destruction of Kamirithu Theatre in 1982, it had shown its anti-people neo-colonial colours and it had become further alienated from the people. Its intensified repression of Kenyans in 1982 – through detentions without trial or imprisonment on trumped-up charges, particularly of university lecturers and students – did not improve its image and its further alienation from the people. It hopes that people can forget the alternative vision, even though unrealised, but embodied in the Kamirithu experience. Kamirithu must not be allowed to become a revolutionary shrine. People have to be taught the virtues of subservience and gratitude to a gallery of stars.

But can an idea be killed? Can you destroy a revolutionary shrine itself enshrined in the revolutionary spirit of a people?

I was in Europe in June 1982 when I heard the news: Dr Kimani Gecau, chairman of the Literature Department and director of *Ngaahika Ndeenda* in 1977 and co-director, with Waigwa Wachira, of *Maitu Njugira* in 1981–82, had fled to Zimbabwe. Ngugi wa Mirii, a most dedicated and indefatigable worker for a people's cause, and the coordinating director of Kamirithu



Community Education and Cultural Centre also had to flee a few hours ahead of those with a warrant for his arrest and possible detention. They have been helping to set up rural-based cultural centres and in 1983 produced *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* in the Shona language. It was in the same months of June and July 1982 that, as I was about to return to Kenya, I received frantic messages from different directions: orders were out for my arrest and detention without trial on arrival at the Jomo Kenyatta Airport in Nairobi. Should I not delay my return? I did and I have been telling the Kamĩrĩthũ story wherever and whenever I have a chance. For on a personal level it has changed my life.

It has led me to prison, yes; it got me banned from teaching at the University of Nairobi, yes; and it has now led me into exile. But as a writer it has also made me confront the whole question of the language of African theatre – which then led me to confront the language of African fiction.

*- note had become really a part of political dimension of play.*

## Notes

- 1 See also Ngũgĩ wa Mirĩ *On Literary Content* Working paper no. 340, IDS, Nairobi, April 1979. He places his discussion of the literary content at Kamĩrĩthũ Community Educational and Cultural Centre in a class analysis of the village community.
- 2 Jomo Kenyatta *Facing Mount Kenya*, London 1938.
- 3 I am indebted to Wasambo Were for the comparison between *The Empty Space* of Peter Brook's title, and the practice of African literature during a discussion I had with him on Theatre in Kenya in London 1983.
- 4 Compare also with Wole Soyinka's *The Lion and the Jewel*, the exchange between Lakunle, the school teacher who quotes abuses from the *Shorter Oxford Dictionary* and Sidi, the illiterate village woman who presumably speaks Yoruba. In what language is Lakunle speaking: Yoruba or English? What about Sidi? In the text they are both speaking English, of course.
- 5 Ngũgĩ and Ngũgĩ *I Will Marry When I Want*, Nairobi and London 1982, pp. 21–9.
- 6 Karl Marx *Capital*, Vol. I, Chap. VII, p. 177.
- 7 Ngũgĩ and Ngũgĩ *I Will Marry When I Want*, Nairobi and London 1982, p. 39.
- 8 *Daily Nation* 22 January 1982.
- 9 *The Standard* 29 January 1982. The two features by *The Daily Nation* and *The Standard* carry many other comments and direct quotes from participants which give an insight into the popular base of theatre.

# 3 The Language of African Fiction

## I

One of my books *Detained* has the subtitle *A Writer's Prison Diary*. Why a writer's prison diary? Because the main theme was the process of writing a novel under prison conditions. *Caitaani Mũtharabainĩ* (in English *Devil on the Cross*) was published by Heinemann in 1980 and it was the first novel of its kind in scope and size in the Gĩkũyũ language. *detained*

In discussing the language of African fiction I shall draw heavily on the experience of writing *Caitaani Mũtharabainĩ* and I hope that in the process I shall demonstrate the wider issues and problems of the existence, the origins, the growth and the development of the African novel. *Devil*

At the time of my arrest at my home on 31 December 1977 I was, in addition to being an active participant in theatre at Kamĩrĩthũ Community Educational and Cultural Centre, the Chairman of the Literature Department at the University of Nairobi and Associate Professor. I remember my last lecture. It was to my third year students. 'Next year,' I told them in parting, 'I want to attempt a class analysis of Chinua Achebe's fiction from *Things Fall Apart* up to *Girls at War*. I want in particular to trace the development of the messenger class from its inception as actual messengers, clerks, soldiers, policemen, catechists and road foremen in colonialism as seen in *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God*, to their position as the educated 'been-tos' in *No Longer at Ease*; to their assumption and exercise of power in *A Man of the People*; to their plunging the nation into intra-class civil war in *Girls at War*. And before we meet to discuss all these problems, I urge you to read two books without which I believe it is impossible to understand what informs African writing, particularly novels written by Africans. They are Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*, mostly the chapter titled 'the pitfalls of national consciousness' and V. I. Lenin's *Imperialism, The Highest Stage of Capitalism*. *Fanon*