

Recovering the Original

NGŪGĪ WA THIONG'O

HE LAY ON HIS TUMMY ON A HIGH TABLE IN THE ASSEMBLY HALL with all the students and staff present. Two teachers held his head and legs and pinned him to the table and called him monkey, as the third whiplashed his buttocks. No matter how horribly he screamed and wriggled with pain, they would not let him go. Scream Monkey. Eventually the shorts split and blood splattered out, some of it on the shirts of those who held him down, and only then did they let him go. He stood up barely able to walk, barely able to cry, and he left, never to be seen in the precincts of that government school or any other again; I have never known what happened to him. His fault? He had been caught in the act of speaking Gikuyu in the environs of the school, not once, not twice, but several times. How did the teachers come to discover his sins?

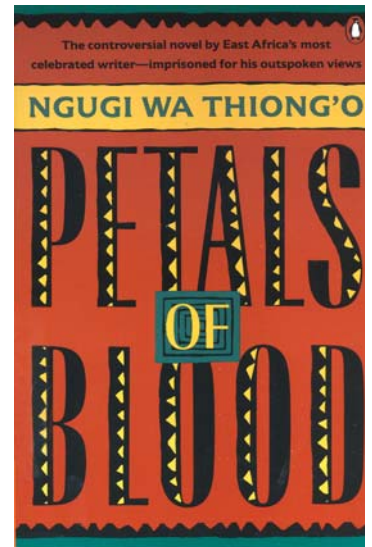
Speaking African languages in the school compound was a crime. If a student caught another speaking an African language, he would pass a token called a monitor to the culprit, who would carry it around his neck till he caught another speaking the forbidden tongues; he would pass the dreaded thing to the new culprit, and so on—children spying on one another, all day, or even tricking each other into speaking the leprous language. The one with the monitor at the end of the day was the sinner and would be punished. The above recipient of whiplashes had been a sinner for so many weeks that it looked as if he was deliberately defying the ban on Gikuyu. The teachers were determined to use him as an example to teach others a lesson.

This was the Kenya of the fifties in the last century. The country was then a British settler colony, with a sizeable white settlement in the arable heartland, which they then called White Highlands. But from its colonization in 1895, Kenya was always contested, the forces of colonial occupation being met by those of national resistance, with the clash between the two sides climaxing in the armed conflict of the fifties, when Kenyans grouped around Mau Mau (or, more appropriately, Kenya Land) and the Freedom Army took to the forests and mountains to wage a guerrilla struggle against the colonial state. The outbreak of the war was preceded by a heightened nationalist cultural awareness, with songs, poetry, and newspapers in African languages abounding. The outbreak of the war was followed by a ban on performances and publications in African languages. A similar ban applied to African-run schools—they were abolished.

I first went to Kamandura primary, a missionary set-up, in 1947. But we must have been caught up by the new nationalist awareness, because there were rumors that missionary schools were deliberately denying us children real education (*Guthimira ciana ugi*). Such schools were alleged not to be teaching Africans enough English, and some of us were pulled out of the missionary school and relocated to Manguu, a nationalist school where the emphasis was on the history and culture of Africans. In religion, some of the nationalist schools, which called themselves independent, aligned themselves with the orthodox church, thus linking themselves to the unbroken Christian tradition of Egypt and Ethiopia, way back in the first and fourth centuries of the Christian era.

I was too young to know about this linkage; all I knew was that I was going to a school where we would be taught “deep” English alongside other subjects and languages, in our case, Gikuyu. I can’t remember if the English in the nationalist school was “deeper” than that taught in the previous school—I doubt if there was any difference in approach to the teaching of English—but I do recall that a composition in Gikuyu was good enough to have me paraded in front of the class, in praise. That is how to write good Gikuyu, the teacher said after reading it aloud to the class. So in the nationalist school of my early primary schooling, mastering Gikuyu and knowing English were not in conflict. One got recognition for mastering one or both.

This peaceful co-existence of Gikuyu and English in the classroom changed suddenly a few years later, when the African independent schools were shut down, with some of them resurrected as colonial state-run institutions. Manguu



Courtesy: Penguin

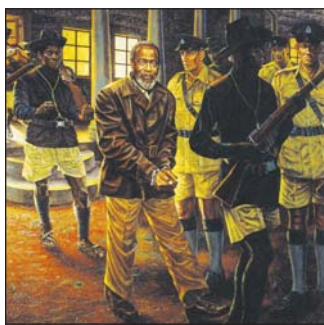
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was one of these and the emphasis on humiliating the Gikuyu language-users, as the pre-condition for acquiring English, was the most immediate outcome of the changes. It was under the new dispensation that terror was unleashed on Gikuyu. The screaming student was being thrashed to take him out of the darkness of his language to the light of English knowledge.

I enjoyed English under all dispensations, but the image of the screaming student haunted me and even puzzled me for a long time. The student was hounded out of the school for speaking Gikuyu, the language I had once been praised for writing well. Maybe there was something wrong with the teachers who had so praised me; the evidence of this was that they had all lost their jobs under the new colonial position on the importance of English. The new teachers, all African, all black, all Gikuyu, devised all sorts of methods for associating African languages with negative images, including making linguistic sinners carry placards that asserted that they were asses. It was a war of attrition that gradually eroded pride and confidence in my language. There was nothing this language could teach me, at least nothing that could make me become educated and modern. Gore to the students who spoke Gikuyu; glory to those who showed a mastery of English. I grew up distancing myself from the gore in my own language to attain the glory in English mastery.

There were rewards. A good performance in English meant success up the ladder of education. And it was this that took me from Manguu, under its colonial tutelage, to Alliance High School, the most prestigious institution for Africans at the time, and eventually to Makerere University College in Kampala, Uganda, where I studied English literature.

It was there, at Makerere, in the sixties—the heyday of decolonization, with country after country in Africa becoming independent—that I wrote what eventually became *The River Between*; *Weep Not, Child*; and several short stories and plays, all of them in English. When later I went to Leeds University in England, where I wrote the novel *A Grain of Wheat*, I truly felt joy in trying to make English words sing and capture the color and contours of my life. During the composition of *A Grain of Wheat*, much of it done in my room at Bodington, a student residence hall near the Yorkshire Moors (the setting of Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*), I often played Beethoven's Fifth Symphony in the background, and I aspired to similarly weave several movements into a seamless whole. I wanted to climb on English words to the highest peak of the mountain of human experience. But why choose English as the vehicle of my ambitions? It was not a question of choice. By this time in my education, and with



The arrest of Jomo Kenyatta on October 20, 1952, during the Mau Mau rebellion. Kenyatta later became the first prime minister (1963–64) and first president (1964–78) of Kenya.

Source: Kenyatta International Conference Center

everything that surrounded me at schools in Africa and abroad, writing in English seemed the most natural thing to do. I had been socialized into regarding writing in English as normal and desirable, even when the subject matter was the drama of decolonization and independence, a major theme in my work.

In all my writings I drew on the life and culture of Gikuyu and African peo-

ples. Their history, particularly that of anticolonial resistance, was at the center of my writing. But this history and culture were negotiated through Gikuyu and other African languages. Mau Mau fighters against the British colonial state, in their hideouts in the forests and mountains, did not strategize and plan in English; they talked Gikuyu, Kiswahili, and other Kenyan languages. Yet I wrote as if they were doing so in English. I heard their voices in Gikuyu but wrote them down in English sounds. What I was doing, of course, was a mental translation. This means that for every novel that I wrote in English, there was an original text. What happens to this original text, since in fact it exists only in the mind and is not written down? It is lost, and we can only access it through English. In my educated hands, Gikuyu language, culture, and history came out wearing an English-language mask.

I believe there is genius in every language. It does not matter how many people speak it: the genius of a language is not dependent on the quantity of its speakers. I was taking away from the genius of Gikuyu to add to the genius of English. I was taking away from the product of one genius to enrich the form of another.

But language is not simply an arrangement of sounds. Language is the people who speak it. There was more to my act of writing in English than simply enriching it at the expense of Gikuyu. I was taking away from the people who created Gikuyu and its genius, making sure that they could only access the rendering of their history through another tongue. In my early writings, I did not think about this; I was thrilled to see myself in print and reviewed in the English-language press, in Africa and abroad. But the situation was beginning to annoy me. For whom was I writing?

A Grain of Wheat came out in 1967. I was visiting Beirut, Lebanon, when I got a copy of the *London Observer*, which carried a tribute to the novel. The warm sentiment was the same in the rest of the press reviews. But despite the very good reception, I felt uneasy about the implications of the linguistic form. Back in Leeds, in an interview with a student newspaper, I said that after *A Grain of Wheat* I did not think I would write novels anymore. Why? Because I knew about whom I was writing but I did not know for whom I was doing it. The people about whom I wrote so eloquently

would never be in a position to read the drama of their lives in their own language. On looking back, what I now find striking was that I thought of *not writing anymore* instead of switching languages to write in the one accessible to the subjects of the narratives. I still accepted English as the only possible means of my literary deliverance. What a choice is implied in my response! Write in English or not at all. And indeed my next novel, *Petals of Blood*, which came out in 1977, was written in English although littered with Gikuyu and Swahili words—almost as if, in the text, I was announcing the contradiction in my position and practice.

Two events in my life changed my relationship to English and Gikuyu. In 1976, while a professor of literature at Nairobi University, I was invited to work at Kamirithu Community Education and Cultural Center, a village near Limuru town, thirty or so kilometers from Nairobi. It was an education and cultural project charged with providing literacy skills and cultural material. Dramatic performance became a natural means of achieving both. The Kamirithu community spoke Gikuyu, and there was no way that we could work in the village without working in the language of the community. For the first time in my life, I was being forced by the practical needs to face the Gikuyu language. *Ngaahika Ndeenda* (in English, *I Will Marry When I Want*), co-authored with Ngũgĩ wa Mirii, was the immediate outcome, and it was received warmly by the community. But it was received with hostility by the postcolonial state. The performance took place on November 11, 1977; on December 31, I was arrested by the Kenyan government and detained at Kamiti Maximum Security Prison. I have written about this in many of my books, principally *Detained: A Writer's Prison Diary*.

What I have not mentioned in those narratives is the parallel between those events at Kamirithu in 1977 and those of my primary-school experience almost thirty years earlier. This was the first time I had been seriously engaged in writing in Gikuyu since that early effort at Manguu in its nationalist phase. The teachers and the students of the nationalist school had praised me for writing in Gikuyu. In the same way, the reception of the play by the community years later was fabulous. The applause in the primary school was followed by the takeover of the school by the colonial state, with terror unleashed on the speakers of the language in the school compound. The screaming student was forced out of the school. In my case, the community's applause was followed by my imprisonment; I was forced out of all classrooms and later into exile.

It could be argued that it was my contact with Kamirithu that reconnected me with the genius of Gikuyu. To a certain extent, this is true. The peasantry had retained their faith in the language. They kept it alive by using it. I

learnt a great deal from them. But it was in Cell 16, at a maximum-security prison, that I really came into contact with the genius of Gikuyu. I had been imprisoned by an African government for writing in an African language. Why? The question made me revisit the language, colonialism, and my relationship to both. I had to find a way of connecting with the language for which I had been incarcerated. It was not a matter of nostalgia. I was not being sentimental. I needed to make that contact in order to survive. It was an act of resistance. So I wrote the very first novel ever written in Gikuyu, on toilet paper, in a room provided "free" by the postcolonial state. The novel, *Caitani Mutharabaini*, was published in 1980 to oral critical review. It was subsequently translated into English under the title *Devil on the Cross* and came out in 1982 to literary acclaim in the English-language press—but this time only after it had been reviewed by the community. By the time I came out of prison in 1978, the decision had already been made. I would no longer write fiction in English (except through the translation of an existing Gikuyu text); from then onward, Gikuyu would be the primary language of my creative acts. I have not looked back since.

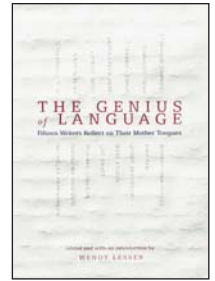
Devil on the Cross was followed by *Matigari*, and I have just finished a manuscript that I started in May 1997. When *Murogi wa Kagogo* comes out, it will be the longest novel ever written in Gikuyu. (The English translation will be published under the title *Wizard of the Crow*.)

More important has been the rise of other novelists, poets, and playwrights in Gikuyu. A new literature has been born. If this tradition has a discernible beginning and a location, it is in Cell 16, in Kenya's Kamiti Maximum Security Prison in 1977–78. Or maybe it was earlier, on the day I witnessed the plight of the screaming student. In trying to run away from his plight, perhaps I was running toward his fate. Only the genius of the language kept me alive to tell the tale.

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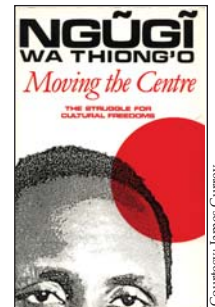
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EDITORIAL NOTE: Ngũgĩ's latest novel, *Wizard of the Crow*, is forthcoming from Pantheon Books. For ordering information, visit the Pantheon Web site (www.randomhouse.com/pantheon).



Cover of *The Genius of Language: Fifteen Writers Reflect on Their Mother Tongue*, ed. Wendy Lesser (2004)

Courtesy: Pantheon



Cover of Ngũgĩ's *Moving the Centre: The Struggle for Cultural Freedoms* (1992)

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