

## An Interview with Ngugi Wa Thiong'o

By Michael Pozo

Ngugi Wa Thiong'o is Distinguished Professor of English and Comparative Literature and Director of the International Center for Writing and Translation at the University of California at Irvine. A Kenyan writer of Gikuyu descent, Ngugi is the author of various novels such as *Weep Not Child* (1964), *The River Between* (1965), *A Grain of Wheat* (1967) and *Petals of Blood* (1977). In 1980 Ngugi published the first modern novel ever written in Gikuyu called *Devil on the Cross*. Ngugi's critical works include *Homecoming* (1972), *Detained: A Writer's Prison Diary* (1981), *Decolonizing the Mind* (1986) and *Moving the Center* (1993). As a novelist, playwright and critical thinker Ngugi has dealt with the concerns most affecting his native Kenya including issues of Colonialism, Nationalism and Post-Colonialism. During the late 70's his commitment to art and community led him to form communal theater groups in villages, which showcased some of his most indicting plays. These works portrayed the political corruption of Post-Colonial life in Kenya and the people's struggle to define an identity despite years of harsh political and social transitions. In 1977 Ngugi was arrested for his involvement with the communal theaters. While in prison, Ngugi reflected on the urgency in forming a truly African literature and at the same time wrote *Devil on the Cross* on prison issued toilet paper. He subsequently would abandon English for his native Gikuyu for all his future novels. After being released from prison, Ngugi lost a University position and his family suffered from constant harassment. In 1982, Ngugi left Kenya and has been in exile ever since. Ngugi Wa Thiong'o is the recipient of numerous awards including the Paul Robeson Award for Artistic Excellence, Political Conscience and Integrity (1992); Gwendolyn Brooks Center Contributors Award for Significant Contribution to the Black Literary Arts (1994); Fonlon-Nichols Prize (1996); and the Distinguished Africanist Award by the New York African Studies Association (1996).

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**MP**- Looking at your body of work, so much of it displays not just an artistic but a cultural growth and progression through the medium of Literature. In other words, as an artist and a socially concerned citizen each novel seems to develop a clearer definition of their inseparable nature. Could you say more about this?

**Ngugi-** Like all artists, I am interested in human relationships and their quality. This is what I explore in my work. Human relationships do not occur in a vacuum. They develop in the context of ecology, economics, politics, culture, and psyche. All these aspects of our society affect those relationships profoundly. These aspects are inseparable. They are connected. The most intimate is connected with the most earthly. As an artist you examine the particulars to explore the interconnection of phenomena to open a window into the human soul. The material of life opens out into the spirituality of human life.

**MP-** When we arrive to *Devil on the Cross* it is a definitive moment in your life and career because you begin to write solely in your native, Gikuyu. How has your personal understanding of an aesthetic and social/political experience changed since relinquishing English as your means of artistic communication?

**Ngugi-** There is no doubt about the centrality of *Devil on the Cross* in my life and art. But it is not the first work that I wrote in Gikuyu. That honor goes to the play, *Ngaahika Ndenda*, (I Will Marry When I Want, in English) jointly written by Ngugi wa Mirii and me. But it was developed with the village participants at the Kamiriithu Community and Cultural Center, Limuru, Kenya. Working with the community is what forced me to start writing in Gikuyu, after years of intellectual dithering. My work in the village sent me to a Maximum Security Prison for a year, without trial. And while in the maximum, I thought a great deal about the relationship between English, as the imperial language, and now the language of power in a postcolonial state, and African languages, and I took the irrevocable position never to write my fiction and drama in English again. *Devil on the Cross*, written on toilet paper, was the first outcome of that decision.

**MP-** What can you impart on others wishing to reach a specific audience from languages, long ignored? How should concerns about the marketability of their work to a wider audience be approached?

**Ngugi-** Intellectuals, from what we at the International Center for Writing and Translation at the University of California Irvine call marginalised languages – we call them marginalised but not marginal – have to realize that their primary audience is that of the language and cultural community that gave them. It's only they who can produce knowledge in their own languages for that audience defined by their access to that language, and then later, through translation, auto-translation, or by another person, open the works to audiences outside their original language community. A good work of art is always marketable.

**MP-** Since you began writing in Gikuyu, have you seen attitudes change in readers unaccustomed to writers eschewing the traditional English market for smaller, more private audiences first?

**Ngugi-** When my position on English and African languages became known through my book, *Decolonizing the Mind* in 1986, I was initially greeted with cynicism or downright hostility in some quarters. But now I see a change in attitude. There may not be a majority acceptance of the position articulated in *Decolonizing the Mind*, but the concerns raised receive more attention and involved debate. The book itself is among the more popular of my theoretical works.

**MP-**I remember in *The River Between* the anguish Waiyaki (the main protagonist) goes through when being forced to choose between his wife (a Christian) and the community (non-Christian). But this has been a constant theme throughout your work, about the importance of the commitment to the community. For you as a writer, is there such a thing as being detached?

**Ngugi-** Of course as a writer, you have to be sufficiently detached to see issues clearly. But that is detachment arising from one's attachment. A writer or artist has to simultaneously swim in the river and also sit at the bank to see it flow. I am a product of the community and I would like to contribute something to that community.

**MP-** Is the idea of being detached or being an "outsider" then, more a European or Western attitude, especially in which we have come to know the "artist" only through the often, solitary depictions and pessimistic conceptions of his role in society?

**Ngugi-** Being detached in order to see better is not the same thing as pessimism. So, in that sense, being detached is not necessarily western. All societies have talked of prophets who had to withdraw into the wilderness or into the mountains to meditate on their society. These are the seers of the community. A writer is a special seer. The conception of human life as that of being solitary, the Hobbesian notion, is more bourgeois than it is racial.

**MP-** Do you think aesthetics, that which is beautiful in art, can also mean that which is relevant to the reader's world? Is the beautiful also linked to its ability to reconnect one with a community rather than ostracizing them from it?

**Ngugi-** Aesthetics does not develop in a social vacuum. The aesthetic conception of life is a product of life itself which it then reflects. A flower, so beautiful, is the product of the entire tree. But a flower is also an important marker of the identity of a particular group of plants or even of a particular individual plant. The flower, so delicate, also contains the seeds for the continuation of that plant. A product of the past of that plant, it also becomes the future of the same plant.

**MP-** I read once about Marx's impressions of the type of living-communism the Iroquois Indians practiced. Marx saw it as unfit for a European way of life because the Iroquois shared the land and resources evenly; he called it a "primitive" form of communism yet to me it seemed to be a living example of certain aspects of his theories. Time and again, I can't help but wonder that so much of the conflicts between Europe/United States and the "Third World" has been a basic (but devastating) misunderstanding of the definition of a "community". Can you share any thoughts on this?

**Ngugi-** No, I don't think that there is a harmonious third world position and a harmonious Euroamerican position. Wherever there are classes in society there will always be conflicts in the world outlooks of the various social groups. In a world divided into a minority of nations that rule the majority of nations, there has to be a difference in outlook. But within nations, western or third world, there are differences in the world outlook of the social haves and the social have-nots.

**MP-** You have stressed that marginalized groups rediscover their own cultures through their own native languages and not those imposed by Colonialism. In doing so, one seems to move the center away from "English" or the "West" and allows the center to come to the margins. Does such an approach disallow for the (often fetishized) idea of hybridity in culture and identity?

**Ngugi-** Aimé Césaire has talked eloquently about exchange being the oxygen of civilisation. But not short-changing which is the carbon oxide of civilisation. Exchange based on equality. I like the idea of a dance of centers that are equidistant from the human center. They are in a circle. They all contribute to and also draw from the center. Like spokes in a bicycle wheel. But there is a difference. Human spokes must also borrow from one another.

**MP-** How do you view the problems of defining one's cultural identity in the United States? For many, it seems they live a split-identity between one's ethnic culture and the culture of the United States. Do you think this raises even more problematic and complex issues over language and communication?

**Ngugi-** I find the USA a most fascinating scene. All religions, all cultures, all languages in the world, all ethnicities in the world are represented here. But there is a tendency to gloss over this in the notion of a melting pot. The co-existence of so many identities within an overall American identity should be seen as a source of strength not weakness. This is what America should be exporting to the world and not bombs.

**MP-** In *Homecoming* you raised many concerns about English departments when you were both a student and professor in Africa. One of the safest approaches to "diversify" a curriculum is to throw in a non-western writer into the mix. It happens today as it did in your days. You described the situation in *Homecoming* as "a rather apologetic attempt to smuggle African writing into an English syllabus"(146). Can English departments go beyond the occasional anomaly course or will there always be separate (but equal) departments or courses?

**Ngugi-** Because of the global reach of English and the intellectual production in English from all corners of the globe, English Departments should be reflecting that diversity. Of course you also need other language departments and these too should be reflecting that global dimension.

**MP-** Do you have any ideas on a working model or prototype for a reformed English Department in the United States?

**Ngugi-** No, I don't have one, but in one of my essays in my book, *Moving the Center*, I have argued for a greater degree of comparativity in the makeup of the various language/national literature departments. Translations, now more than ever, can help in ensuring that comparativity. Insularity is dangerous for any department and English Departments that think of themselves as museums of English 'national' literature, ignoring even those intellectual productions by new immigrants, can only lead to sterility.

**MP-** I have read recently on the Internet that you have a new novel coming out? Could you reveal some details about it?

**Ngugi-** The novel is called, *Murogi wa Kagogo*, in Gikuyu. It is not out yet, but should be published this year. The English translation will be published by Pantheon and should come out later this year 2004 or early next year. It is a big novel, a kind of global epic that speaks to our world today. I have been working on it since May 1997. So you see, the writing spans two centuries.

**MP-** What are your thoughts about contemporary fiction in Kenya? What have been some of the more recent texts in Gikuyu that have had an impact on you?

**Ngugi-** There are several writers who now write in Gikuyu. Ms. Waithira Mbutia is very prolific. But so is Gitahi Gititi, now a professor of English, but writing in Gikuyu. Mwangi

Mutahi is another who has published three novels in Gikuyu. There is also Gatua wa Mbugua, a poet and a scientist. He has just completed and successfully defended a scientific thesis written entirely in Gikuyu for the Department of Crop Science at Cornell. There are many more. Most of these writers are contributors to the Gikuyu language journal, *Mutiiri*, originally based at New York University, but now at the University of California Irvine.

**MP-** Finally, I also read in the *L.A. Times* this past summer that you were planning to return to Kenya?

**Ngugi-** Not yet. But I am returning to Kenya in August 2004, for a visit, first time since I was forced into exile in 1982. Twenty two years of exile will come to an end. But in a spiritual sense I have never left Kenya. Kenya and Africa are always in my mind. But I look forward to a physical reunion with Kenya, my beloved country.

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Michael Pozo will be entering the PhD program in the Literature Department at UC San Diego in the fall of 2004. He earned his BA from St. John's, and graduated from St. John's with his MA in English in January, 2004. He is a past co-editor of this publication.