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LANGUAGE AS CARRIER OF PEOPLES' CULTURE:
AN INTERVIEW WITH NGUGI WA THIONGO

by

Hansel Ndumbe Eyoh

"It seems to me that the choice in Kenya today is between the foreign theatre in foreign languages, and the National Patriotic Community Educational and Cultural Centre in Kenya's own national languages.

"The two positions are irreconcilable because they represent two opposed interests: anti-Kenyan, foreign; pro-Kenyan, patriotic and national. The first choice can only lead Kenya to cultural sterility and death; the second would lead Kenya to cultural regeneration and strength."

--Ngugi wa Thiongo

The Guardian

Monday, June 11, 1979, p. 15

EYOH: Ngugi wa Thiongo, thank you very much for granting this interview. For me, it is an honour. You are not only a renowned writer, but certainly, one of the most talented that the African continent has produced. I will like us to talk generally about your ideas about literature. What do you see literature to be?

NGUGI: Literature is like thinking in images about the world we live in. I therefore see literature as a very important weapon, if you like, in the ideological struggle, in the battle for how we perceive ourselves -- in the struggle for communal and individual self-definition.

EYOH: And is this what is the moving force behind your writings?

NGUGI: Yes! Today! As you know, I left Kenya in 1982 and went to London. I was there to help in the launching of my book, Devil on the Cross, which was a translation from the Gikuyu original, Caitani Mutharaba Ini. While I was in London, things... there was a lot of repression in Kenya and I stayed on in London. I am now based in London as a writer.

EYOH: It is interesting that you took up writing in Gikuyu, because for a long time people have talked

so much about the language question in African creative writing. Why did you start writing in Gikuyu?

NGUGI: Well, if you look at language...culture...language is a carrier of a people's culture; culture is a carrier of a people's values; values are the basis of a people's self-definition - the basis of their consciousness. And when you destroy a people's language, you are destroying the very important aspect of their heritage...you are in fact destroying that which helps them to define themselves...that which embodies their collective memory as a people. It is precisely what imperialism in fact did. Imperialism in any one of our countries at the colonial stage wanted to control our economies. The economies of the African people. To do this, they instituted political control. But in history, economic and political control have never been complete without cultural or mental control. Because once you control how a people look at themselves, you can in fact make a move in any other direction. You know, you can plant in them, for instance, a slave mentality. And this is what imperialism tried to do through the suppression of people's languages, the suppression of people's songs, the suppression of the whole area of what is now called oral literature or orature... So, I see writing by African people as part of the whole process of reclaiming the economic and political basis of their identity and I feel that language is very very important in that process. All our nationalities speak very different languages and we should be proud of that heritage, and the beauty of our languages.

EYOH: Some people will accuse you, because you write in Gikuyu, of being parochial. How do you respond to this criticism?

NGUGI: Well, I laugh at that as an accusation because how do you become parochial when you are writing in your mother tongue? I think you do become even more parochial when you write in English or in French which is understood by a very tiny minority in each of the nationalities, whereas when I write in Gikuyu at least some peasants and workers can read the work. When I write in English, not even a single one of them can read the work. Now, but it is more important to encourage people to be proud of their mother tongues because if you are proud of your mother tongue, then you can be proud also of

languages which are closer to you and so forth.

EYOH: And this helps the process of identification and unity?

NGUGI: Yes. You see today people identify themselves with that which is farthest removed from themselves -European languages. We need to change that! You can write, let's say in the Gikuyu language, or in Igbo language or in Luo. You can then have the work translated into other languages and for the first time, you will have the languages of our different nationalities communicating within themselves instead of always having a foreign language to mediate between them.

EYOH: Some other people argue that our languages are not rich enough to be expressive of our thought structures. I don't agree with that but, then there are people who say so.

NGUGI: A language is capable of doing whatever a people want it to do. You know, when the English language was dominated by Latin, there were some people who used to argue that the English language could not cope with certain utterances and so on. When the Russian language was dominated by French and German, it was said that Russian could not express certain scientific thoughts. The Finnish language used to be dominated by the Swedish in the Seventeenth Century until some Finnish writers decided to start writing in Finnish and discovered the richness of their own language. Now, our languages can develop in any way. Every language has the potentiality of developing and coping with whatever its users want it to talk about.

EYOH: Besides writing novels you are also a dramatist and an essayist. Quite recently, you produced The Trials of Dethan Kemathi which seemed to have received very good reviews. What did you do with the play which caused so much public interest?

NGUGI: You know that the play is written together with Professor Micere Mugo who is now in the University of Zimbabwe and myself in 1976. It was performed in FESTAC in Nigeria in 1977. The London production in November 1984 was by a group that called itself WAZALENDU PLAYERS 1984. WAZALENDU means patriotic or progressive and 1984 was to remind people that it was a hundred years since the imperialists divided Africa during the Berlin Conference of 1884. So

that's why they called themselves WAZALENDO PLAYERS 1984. They came from more than 15 different nationalities and so it was a very international cast. Now, the play was part of Africa Centre's focus on Kenya. Africa Centre is based in London and organizes a series of programs which focuses on different countries. So our production was part of that program.

EYOH: You seem to have carried out interesting experiments during the rehearsal process. Could you tell us about this?

NGUGI: We borrowed two techniques which we used at Kamiriithu. I mean the Kamiriithu Educational and Cultural Centre, when we were producing Ngahika Ndeenda (I will marry when I want). You remember this centre was consequently razed to the ground by the Kenyan neo-colonialist authorities. Now the feature which we borrowed - as you know in Kamiriithu the rehearsals were public. Instead of having a perfectly rehearsed play in the theatre which is later sprung on the audiences, everybody who was around could participate in what was going on. So that is one of the features we borrowed in London. As we rehearsed the play, we took certain sections of the play and rehearsed them in different parts of London - different community centres and people would comment on that rehearsal. One of the most successful was the last one which occurred in Brixton when people literally sat from 2 o'clock to 6:30 discussing various aspects of the play and various aspects of the rehearsal which they had seen. Another feature which was quite important was the idea that there was not any dominant person and the idea that everybody could in fact contribute to the solution of problems. In fact we used to discuss so much that at the end of the production almost any member of the cast could stand before the audience and discuss every aspect of the production or of the play.

EYOH: Did you allow the cast at any time to change the lines, to re-shape the expression? Was the play altered in any way?

NGUGI: In this case it was really not much altered since they were working with a printed text. But the performance was very obviously influenced by the ideas of the cast and so on. For instance choreography or the solution of some problems to do with choreography were found through discussions

within the group. A lot of songs and dances which we used were in fact borrowed from or gotten from what the actors suggested.

EYOH: Recently, you seem to be taking a great interest in film. This reminds me about Devil on the Cross, because of the force and vividness of some of the images which you create. Could you just talk briefly about this interest?

NGUGI: I am very much interested in film as a medium. I feel film or cinema as a medium is very important for us to master. I find myself in the curious situation that I am living away from home, from my own country and I think that if I want, in film I can combine my interest in the theatre and in fiction, to create something. In my new novel, Matigari ma Njirugi, I have been influenced by film technique.

EYOH: How would you translate this into English?

NGUGI: Well, I think I would say, Those who Survived the Bullets. The whole movement is very visual. I visualize the whole movement of characters as if I was standing behind a camera.

EYOH: So you tend to write in frames?

NGUGI: Yes, I write as if each scene is captured in a frame, so the whole novel is a series of camera shots.

EYOH: Thank you very much for accepting the invitation for this interview. I wish you the best in life.

NGUGI: I equally wish you the very best.

STOCKHOLM: MARCH 30, 1985