

The Kenyan author, Ngugi wa Thiong'o

This Is My Country

Helen Fallon

Kenyan author Ngugi wa Thiong'o was born in 1938. Christened James Ngugi when he was baptised, he explained – in a 2004 interview – how he came to reject that name: “If an African was baptized, as evidence of his new self or his new identity, he was given an English name. Not just a biblical, but a biblical and English name. It was a symbolic replacing of one identity with another. When I realised that, I began to reject the name James and to reconnect myself to my African name which was given at birth, and that’s Ngugi wa Thiong'o, meaning Ngugi, son of Thiong.”

Ngugi studied English at Makerere University in Uganda. While there he was editor of *Penpoint*, one of the leading literary journals in East Africa at that time.

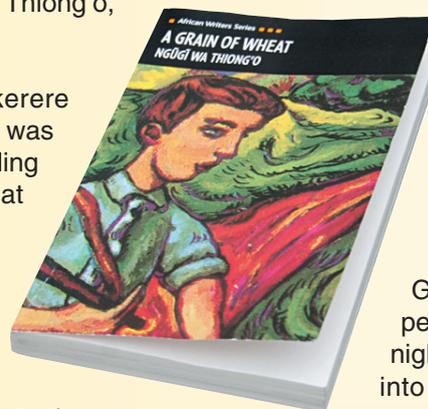
Ngugi's family were among the people who had been dispossessed when fertile land in central Kenya was taken over for white settlement. Grievances over lost land contributed to the Mau Mau nationalist revolt against the colonial power and Ngugi's first novel, *Weep Not, Child* (1964), portrays the Mau Mau conflict through the eyes of a child growing up with dreams for advancement only to be caught up in a conflict between white settlers and Mau Mau nationalists.

CASTING A COLD EYE

In 1966 he published *A Grain of Wheat*, a novel set in 1963 in a Kenyan village preparing for Independence. Through a series of flashbacks and the experiences of various characters, Ngugi portrays Kenya's struggle

(1952-1959) for Independence and the fears and expectations when it was achieved.

John Thompson, a colonial official preparing to leave Kenya, recalls the heady days when – in 1952 – Princess Elizabeth visited Kenya and shook his hand and “his heart-beat had quickened as if a covenant had been made between him and her.” Now he wonders, “What the hell was it all about!”



Mugo, a hero of the villagers who mistakenly consider him a liberation veteran, is asked to make a speech honouring the memory of a friend who was hanged by the colonial administrators. But Mugo's life is ruled by a dark secret. He is not the hero people think he is.

Gikonyo was a member of the “party”, people who “met in huts in dark places late at night, and whispered together, later breaking into belligerent laughter and fighting songs...The air was pregnant with expectation. One night it happened. Jomo Kenyatta and other leaders of the land were rounded up; Governor Baring had declared a state of emergency.” Gikonyo was among those rounded up “and taken to concentration camps – named detention centres for the world outside Kenya.”

After six years of incarceration, Gikonyo makes his way back to his village. The thought of his wife Mumbi waiting for him has sustained him through his suffering. But his return home is not the joyful occasion he has anticipated. “She looked at him for a second or two, gave an involuntary cry, almost

hoarse...Gikonyo saw a child securely strapped on her back. His raised arms remained frozen in the air. Then they slowly slumped back to his side. A lump blocked his throat."

The father of Mumbi's child is Karanja, a childhood friend of Gikonyo. The next day, "Gikonyo suddenly remembered that he was expected to report his arrival in the village to the Chief...He stood at the door of the Chief's house and the ground below him began to move. Gikonyo stared at the stern face of the Chief. Fate was mocking him. This could not be. 'Come right in,' Karanja said."

TROUBLESOME CRITIC

After Kenya gained independence in 1963, Ngugi believed the new government was too eager to embrace the white settlers and to protect their economic interests at the expense of the poor people who had opposed them. He quickly became disillusioned with President Jomo Kenyatta. In 1977 he published *Petals of Blood* which portrayed post-colonial Kenya in a harsh light.

In the 1970s, all new plays had to be approved by the government, and a licence was required for any public performance. In the town of Limuru, north of Nairobi, Ngugi founded a local theatre. His play, *I Will Marry When I Want*, dealt with the inequalities and injustices of the time and was written in Gikuyu. Its performance prompted the government to demolish the theatre and imprison Ngugi, without trial, in 1978.

While in prison he wrote *Devil on the Cross*, his first novel in Gikuyu. The decision to stop writing fiction in English and to use his native language, Gikuyu, stemmed from his belief that culture and language are inseparable. "Language is a means of communication and a carrier of culture...and culture carries the entire body of values by which we perceive ourselves and our place in the world."

Ngugi's decision was also influenced by his knowledge that his novels, written in the English language, were not accessible to the workers and peasants whom he saw to be the agents of change in a postcolonial society.

Released from prison in 1979, the year Daniel Arap Moi became President, Ngugi was barred from



Kenyan teacher, novelist, essayist, and playwright, Ngugi wa Thiong'o is an important link between the pioneers of African writing and the younger generation of postcolonial writers. After imprisonment in 1978, Ngugi abandoned using English as the primary language of his work in favour of Gikuyu, his native tongue.

(Photo: www.weberberg.de/skool)

returning to his teaching job in the literature department of the University of Nairobi and from teaching at other educational institutions. He continued to write.

EXILE AND HOMECOMING

In 1982, while promoting *Devil on the Cross* in London, Ngugi learned of plans by President Moi to arrest him. He decided not to return to Kenya. Twenty two years of exile in Europe and America followed. He continued to write fiction in Gikuyu and essays and literary criticism in English while holding professorships at Yale and at New York University. He is currently professor of English and Comparative Literature at the University of California, Irvine.

Ngugi visited Kenya in August 2004; Arap Moi was no longer President. At a press conference he said, "This is my country, for better or worse, and it's for me and everybody else to make it the Kenya that it can be." ■

Helen Fallon is Deputy Librarian at the National University of Ireland, Maynooth. She has taught at the University of Sierra Leone. *A Grain of Wheat* is published by Heinemann.