

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o: an Interview

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Waterlines (waterlinesproject.com) is a residency programme jointly organized by the International College of Ca’ Foscari University of Venice, Venice Foundation and San Servolo Metropolitan Services of Venice. It combines writing with other artistic disciplines to reaffirm the role of Venice as a place of artistic and cultural production. In April 2018 the programme had the privilege of hosting one of the most prominent international intellectuals, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, who lived in Venice for three weeks, participated in the literary festival “Incroci di civiltà” and two other public meetings with local artist Moulaye Niang ‘Muranero’. On 11th April, Ngũgĩ was interviewed by students from the International College and Radio Ca’ Foscari, the university web radio, on San Servolo island.

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o was born in Kenya in 1938. A many-sided intellectual, he is a novelist, essayist, playwright, journalist, editor, academic, and social activist. Imprisoned and exiled in the ’70s because of his opposition to the regime, he has taught in many American universities, including Yale and New York University, and is currently Distinguished Professor of English and Comparative Literature at the University of California, Irvine. A UCI Medalist, Ngũgĩ is recipient of twelve Honorary Doctorates from universities all over the world and has been nominated for the Nobel prize many times. Following his well-known decision to abandon the English language and start writing his books in his mother tongue, Kikuyu, he has become an advocate of linguistic diversity in Africa and all over the world. His works, several of which have also been translated into Italian, include the essays *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature* (1986), *Moving the Centre: The Struggle for Cultural Freedom* (1993), and *Secure the Base: Making Africa Visible in the Globe* (2016), the memoir *Dreams in a Time of War: A Childhood Memoir* (2010), and the works of fiction *A Grain of Wheat* (1967), *Petals of Blood* (1977) and *Wizard of the Crow* (2006). The outcome of his Waterlines residency is the collection *Venice Poems*, written in Kikuyu and translated into English by the author, which were published in December 2018 by Damocle Edizioni with an Italian translation by Barbara Del Mercato and illustrations by Daniela Murgia.

AUTHORS Thank you for meeting us. Our first question is: during your year in prison, you wrote your first novel in Kikuyu, your native Kenyan language. What did it mean to you then, to write in Kikuyu, and what does it mean now? Is abandoning English more of a sacrifice or a liberation to you?

NGŪGĨ WA THIONG It is definitely a liberation, because I think it is normal for people to always start from what's around them and then to add to the knowledge they have already acquired, so to where they come from. That's the normal cognitive process. You add what you know, you will be adding, and so on. And the more you know, the more you add, then you also get to know more, about the original space. So it is direct: you begin with the way you are, you're going to add and the further you go, the faster you see the connection between the way you are and wherever you are going. And then, the new experience makes you look at your own space, maybe with different eyes, and so on: it's mutual enrichment. That's the normal cognitive process.

Colonialism, instead, subverts that process: it seems you do not start with where you are, but with where you are not. And you can see how this works in relation to languages. It is the most normal thing, for all human communities, no matter where or who is, to start with the language - what you call mother tongue or the language of the culture in which you have grown up. And then you go and connecting that to other languages, and another language helps, a little bit more, you can even understand your own language better, by seeing it in relation to other languages. And your own knowledge of your own language can actually be put in a better position to understand other languages and other cultures. But colonialism subverts that, saying "no, if you are colonised, knowledge begins with this centre", the colony - in our case, metropolis or Europe and so on. This is obviously very negative to the colonised, because it is a sort of alienism from themselves. In the end, you identify more with "the language of glory", its history and the people who created that language. And by the same token, then, you establish a distance between your own language and the history and the culture carried by that language and by definition also from the people who created that language, so also your mother and your father and your grandparents and so on, so it is a terrible thing to be in that kind of position.

So for me writing in Kikuyu equals liberation: when I discovered my mother tongue, I reconnected with the language. But the difficulty I had, quite frankly, was to put it in a context. I was put in prison, because I was writing a play in Kikuyu language, in a place called Cameredo, *Cameredo Community Educational Cultural Centre*. It means to work with peasants, workers and so on. The play was held in November 1977 and the following month, December 1977 at

midnight, I was put in a maximum-security prison. The importance of that was two things: one, at the end I asked myself more profoundly, why would an African government, postcolonial government, put me in prison for writing in an African language? Because I am aware that it was not just the language basis, but also what the language was saying and the fact that it could have been understood by everybody, or at least the community I came from. So part of that thinking was looking at the role of language in a colonial process no long as an intellectual or an academic exercise, but really as something which affected and impacted me. I remember that at the time I was put in prison I was not only the author of four novels in English (*Weep Not, Child, The River Between, A Grain of Wheat* and *Petals of Blood*), I was the author of quite a few plays in English. Nothing much would have happened to me for writing those kind of novels, even though they were very critical of the postcolonial space and so on. So, that question of 'why' made me examine the role of language in a colonizational process and by the definition in the process of domination, in systems of domination. These thoughts I had when I was in prison in December 1978, would form, years to years later, in 1984, the basis of my work *Decolonising the Mind*. Those thoughts you find in *Decolonising the Mind* actually began systematically in prison.

The other thing which was very important for me was that, as a result of that thinking, making the decision now to write in Kikuyu, in prison. My argument was like this, if I can remember rightly: "I must write in the language which was the basis of my incarceration". It is kind of automatic: "you bring me here, so now I will do it, I'll do everything under your eyes". It is also kind of subversive, but this was very important for me in prison: to resist, often not in a physical sense, but in a mental sense, in a spiritual sense. Because by doing so I was affirming my right to my language. That's one thing, but something else also happened, which is psychological. Generally, the élites from formerly colonised places carry a big mountain and they don't always realise it. I realised I had it in prison. For many years I thought: "is it possible to write a novel in Kikuyu?" So you carry this body - I call it a mountain - which prevents you from seeing the obvious. "Is it logical? What's more smooth or more fluent in English or French or whatever it is? But my language, I can't even read it." So the sudden liberation of that mountain I carried made me think "Oh, my God: did I carry this burden all my life? Because, yeah, I can do it". I wrote the novel in Kikuyu in prison on the toilet paper, it is called *Devil on a Cross*. So for me that was a big act of liberation on a number of levels, first because I was in prison and I was resisting, I was asserting my right to freedom. But in another sense I was also liberating myself from the burden I had been carrying all my life.

So, I use the religious tones: I saw the light in prison and I would never want to go back to the previous situation of darkness.

AUTHORS Don't you fear that writing in Kikuyu could mean that less people can read you and so you have a less positive impact in society? A second question: I read that you use a very interesting expression: "the most dangerous weapon that colonialists have is the cultural bomb"; can you elaborate on this expression and explain what you mean by "cultural bomb"?

N.W.T. About the second question: I use this image in *Decolonising the Mind*, because you can't really think of it, when people or anybody alienates you from your own language, it's a kind of alienation really from many things. First, from the knowledge carried by that language - so the knowledge of the area, the trees, the rivers, whatever, gone. Second, from the history of the community that made that language, gone. For a Language it takes many years, hundreds of years to be where it is. So, that external power completely whips out, like a hurricane, like a bomb that comes and clears everything that was there and it tries to plant something else on this terrain or contaminated ground, that's how I call it.

About the first question, the fact that if you write in an African language you would not be available to the others. If you meet an Icelandic writer, for instance, and they write in Icelandic, you don't ask them "why are you writing in Icelandic?". That's ridiculous, if you come to think of it. So if I am English and I write in English, people don't ask me "What do you mean? You write in English? Why? Why don't you write in Chinese? Or in Zulu?". So, the question itself arose and it arose also in Africa by the way, but it's the wrong question. Because you write in whatever language you can. So firstly, your native language, and then it can be translated or not. When you write a novel in English it doesn't mean that all the speakers in the world are English, right? And they are billionaires by now - I am teaching in English now, defending my salary in universities. In reality, and I can tell you for sure, even a Nigerian writer like Chinua Achebe, even when they write in English, they still sell more books in Nigeria than they do in the rest of the world. I sell more books in Kenya myself, because Kenya is still my base, even after all these years. And I sell more books in Africa than anywhere else. So, it does not mean that if you write in English all the English speakers will be running to buy your book. There is no correlation between writing in English and having your book. It's just something in the mind. The Yoruba people, for instance, there are about forty million in Nigeria alone. In Denmark, there are 4 million of them. Why is it that 4 million people can sustain a literature and 40 million people can not? Or in Iceland, always

quoted by media, people are at least about 10 million and there are several Icelandic nations.

So, to answer your question: firstly, it's not important that you write in the world. I mean, that's fine and I am glad about what I hear and when I meet people around the world, but you don't have to write with the idea that "I am writing this, so an Italian reader can read me". It should be the other way around: "I am writing this so that the community around me will read me" and then, as the by-product, an Italian reader is able to access my work. That's a plus and a good thing, right? And then we have a historical parallel in Dante. What he says in Tuscan vernacular and this language became Italian. Some of his friends were telling him "Dante, if you write in Italian you're going to lose immortality, you will be gone. Write in Latin". The part I really like and I think is so beautiful is that Dante replies to him in perfect Latin to say "look, my vernacular is obvious to you, and it's full of muck and when you guys are very busy in Latin let me try and I write as much as I can from this 'island' full of muck". Now, those poets who were Christian men are not remembered today, but Dante is, everywhere. You deny it?

So that's what it means. The question of language dominance has nothing to do with language space. But it reflects an echo of economic, political and cultural inequalities of power. It has nothing to do with languages. Because when languages meet they can borrow from each other and they can relate. But when they meet in an unequal power relationship - which is what happens with my language, for instance - it has nothing to do with the languages at all. There's no language in the world that is more than another language, there are languages reflecting an unequal power in that society. That's what history is. English, inherently, is not more of a language than French, or French more of a language than Chinese, or Chinese more of a language than Swahili. Each language has its own unique musicality, even dialects of a language, like different musical instruments. So, in music we don't say that one instrument is better than another and to ban all of the other instruments except, for instance, the piano. But we say it with languages! They are telling us, "you get one instrument" and all its thoughts and feelings to express through that sound-system. The sound of violin, guitar, piano, these instruments of every community produce together this richness we call music. Wasn't that your question?

AUTHORS We are reminded that Dante wrote the *Divina Commedia* in Italian, but when he wanted to reach more people he actually wrote other works in Latin. If your final aim is to reach also Western people, isn't it better to write in English?

N.W.T. Yeah but If I want to read Russian literature, I don't ask Russian writers to write in Kikuyu if I want to read them. There are two possibilities: I can learn Russian and therefore read the work in original, or I can still try to access the word and the tradition in translation. When you want to know more, to become an expert, then you learn Russian. In fact, if you want to reach more people then write in your language, because what people relate to in literature or arts generally is that element of Identification with whatever is been depicted. If someone speaks to you, even in translation, if the oral stories speak to me, the sense of speaking to me can only come from the self. So, the question of the self and peculiarity is very very important in all art. So, my own view that African people should not worry very much about reaching Chinese readers and so on - what language Chinese readers want to learn they can learn it, or they can wait for a book to be translated into Chinese.

What I'd like to say, what Dante says, however, is that sometimes it's a matter of necessity. All my novels and memoirs and drama and fiction now I write in Kikuyu, all my poetry. But I am also in a polemic war also, about language issues. What I am trying to argue and what Dante did, writing in Latin to his friend to show him "I can do it", is that I am making a conscious choice. And for me this is very important. In an ideal world, there's absolutely nothing wrong for an individual writer to write in a different language. You know Conrad right? Polish origins, Polish and French are his primary languages. And at 17 years old he learns English and then he writes this incredible novel in English and that's all right. But it's not that all Polish intellectuals write in English, it's an exception. However, if the whole Italian intellectual community brings their product in Chinese and they call it Italian literature, there's something a bit odd about that. Because Italian writers write in Italian. So, if there is an exception of one or two, that's fine and even interesting. But in Africa, a former colony, all of the intellectual production is in languages other than those of the countries people come from, that's the problem. If it's a question of one or two planning to write in whatever language they want to, that's very interesting. But there's something wrong when a whole intellectual community of inner group becomes captives of another language and culture.

AUTHORS There is a colonial heritage that tends to impose a tribal vision of the African people. In your opinion, can the term "tribe" be considered discriminatory, since the idea itself of tribe is produced by a colonialist vision of Africa?

N.W.T. Yes, it is. I'm fighting against this all the time in Africa: when someone says "I come from this tribe", I reply "Oh my God. What are

you saying about your people?”. Let’s start with a few facts: Icelandic people are a quarter of a million. Yoruba people are forty million and you call them a tribe. Icelandic people, a quarter of a million, are a nation or a nationality of people, while forty million are an ethnic group or a tribe. It does not compute, even mentally, you can see the absurdity. When we talk generally about, let’s say, the English, we call them the English or the English people, the Italian or the Italian people, Chinese or the Chinese people. But when we talk of Africa the word ‘people’ is thrown out of the window. Tribe. There is always a distinction between people. Everybody is ‘people’ except in Africa and some other places like Native American, those are tribes. But it becomes serious where people have internalised this and begin to call themselves like this and this is part of a negativity that will be used against them. This girl in front of me, that comes from Burkina Faso, she knows so many languages and I was so curious: she speaks Italian, English, French, Portuguese, she’s learning Chinese, but especially she knows a Burkina Faso language, Moré. I was so impressed. That’s very good. Because in reality, that’s the way I put it everywhere, if you know all the languages of the world and you don’t know your mother tongue or the language of your culture, this is actually enslavement. If you know your mother tongue or the language of your culture and all the other languages in the world there’s empowerment, as opposed to enslavement.

So, we were speaking about tribe. Tribe is a negative connotation. And even when I was in India I was talking with a community there and they called themselves a tribe, I asked “why do you have to call yourself a tribe, so they call you like this? You are people, like other people are, they are names you call yourself, I am Italian, that’s fine but they don’t do it in Africa, they don’t say “I am a tribesman” all the time.

AUTHORS Another question concerning language: you said that if you don’t know your mother tongue or the language of your ancestors, this is a kind of enslavement. What about the African countries, like the North African countries or like Egypt, Sudan, Tunisia, Lybia, Algeria that are still undergoing waves of arabisation that have led to the loss of some of their native languages. Do you consider it as also a kind of enslavement?

N.W.T. Wait, this is a bit complex. Because from what I understand, now Arabic is spoken by almost everybody.

AUTHORS Yes, Tunisia and Egypt are almost fully Arabophone right now. In Algeria and Morocco there are still significant Amazigh communities. But officially speaking, Arabic is used.

N.W.T. So, let me turn to the case of Arabic and Amazigh. These are colonial troubles, by the way, especially in Algeria, we all followed that war and I remember that the question of the Arabic language was very important in the struggle against the French, because it was a symbol of fighting, even in a linguistic and cultural way. But now, within Algerians and Moroccan, the Amazigh language is marginalised by Arabic: it's as if we reproduce the whole hierarchical relationship back into our own communities. So, Arabic is spoken a lot by people in Egypt, while Arabic marginalises the native African or the languages which are native to that area, like Amazigh – that's a good example – and others. In the end, for Amazigh people it's enslavement: they abandoned their languages and they speak only Arabic. Liberation would be like this: speaking Amazigh, then Arabic, as the language of power, then maybe French, English or whatever. That's empowerment.

AUTHORS What about the generations that do not speak Amazigh?

N.W.T. They have to start with whatever they have: in Africa, in Kenya, there are children who were brought up by their parents without any knowledge of their mother tongue. So, their parents have consciously put them in a little prison. But when you are put on a prison, you break out, not physically. How do you break out? Not by saying I got this language, Arabic or English, for instance. But if I have to make one more choice, what language do I add? I would add the language they led me to abandon. So that way I am using the power of the language that I have, that is now my mother tongue, Arabic or French, it doesn't matter, and I connect the language of the community. That's power.

AUTHORS Another question concerns the psychological factor attached to the mother tongue. What is the importance of using one's native language with its four dimensions: the social one, the psychological one, the issue of preservation of the cultural heritage and that of rebellion against colonisation?

N.W.T. The problem we have, and it's a good problem to have, is this: all languages have their own unique musicality. So Arabic has its musicality and French as well. And in themselves they produce great literatures and so on which I want to read, you want to read, everyone wants to read and so on. The problem, as I said earlier, is when we say that the musicality of a specific language is the only musicality possible or the ideal musicality. The musicality is something like a loan, you know. To make it very clear: if you are born a speaker of a given language, even though it is an acquired language as English or Arabic, you can not say "ah I abandon it". As an individual this time, if you have to add another language, that would be the language of the community.

Now we are talking about communities, not about individuals: I think there will be a gorgeous struggle within Africa and outside Africa for a recognition of multilingualism as an equally valid basis for nation, development and so on, so that we fight to change the policies. You see, in Morocco or Algeria there is nothing wrong with Arabic: what's wrong is not 'Arabicness', it is its relation to Amazigh. Amazigh can have a very mutually and enriching relation with Arabic and even French, to be a productive and creative relationship. Even when they say Amazigh must be down there and Arabic or French or another language becomes the 'graveyard' of Amazigh. This is what we really have to change. So, there is a distinction with individual choice: if you are born here in Italy, for instance, Italian is your mother tongue, but if you want to connect to another language and you learn it, this is a conscious choice and, to me, a path of empowerment.

AUTHORS With all the scars left by colonialism and the problems of the tribal visions, would it be possible to envision a united Africa, like a federal community, along the lines of Europe or the United States?

N.W.T. I believe in Africa's unity, without making a distinction between Africa and North Africa. I do not accept Sahara as a division. I do not accept the idea that there is somehow an Africa that is not a proper Africa; a European Africa, and that there is an Africa that is sub-Saharan, and a proper Africa. This is a fiction that was passed in the 19th century and was highly articulated by the German philosopher Hegel. They saw a given civilisation that lasted over than three thousand years with an incredible work in architecture, art, astronomy, mathematics and more. The system of government in the States, although embodied in the Pharaonic society, they cannot credit it to Africa. They say there is a 'proper Africa', the South of the Sahara, and a Mediterranean or a European Africa which is North of the Sahara. They say that the northern part is good because it is European, whereas the 'proper Africa' is inhabited by savages. Those stereotypes are internalised by Africans themselves; they internalised negativity about themselves, their countries, history, people and continent, to the point that they come to see themselves and the related communities through the eyes of the colonizers. What is the responsibility of Africa on Africa? This is exactly what I talk about in *Decolonising the Mind*.

AUTHORS A question about gender and colonialism: could we have, potentially, a book titled *The History of Kenya Written by its Women*? Are there language varieties spoken by women?

N.W.T. The question of the culture of language differentiation within African languages is very important. Those languages per se have

nothing inherently more democratic in them. Languages reflect other conditions, economic and political. So, if there is any kind of gender inequality or any other inequality, the author will reflect that through the language. And the dominant group – be it males or social wealth groups – will always try to use the language in such a way that the only usage of that language in the world will be through their eyes. I address this issue in my novel *The Wizard of the Crow*. One of the characters in the novel, she is a leader of a revolutionary movement. Nawira is a name of a woman, and it also means ‘walker’, and she is the leader of this movement. Nawira talks about all of the issues of women, be it class, gender or colour, which are all connected issues that have to be addressed together. What Nawira says is that the liberation of the woman walker would actually mean the liberation of all women. So, we say that all women can identify in a way or another with that *woman walker*, even a queen of a country as a woman whose economic situation is better can find a connection with that *woman walker*. The importance of all of these factors lies in the way they relate to one another. In fact, I can go further and give an example that I mentioned in my fable *The Upright Revolution* in which the body and the way it is structured. You look at the head, the top, a mixture of reason and coolness. And the body, arms and heart, the productive system are a mixture emotion and production. Production is very important, and one of the most primary productions is the one made by women who carry a human being for nine months. What I find interesting in all societies is that people who produce are always marginalised by people in power. The walking people, the ones who make life possible, and make all things be. So, the *woman walker’s* liberation is a liberation of all women.

AUTHORS Do you think that the word ‘ethnicity’ is a colonial heritage like the word ‘tribe’?

N.W.T. They of course do not carry the same connotation, although ethnicity has a colour connotation. The idea of tribe with all of the colonial connotations it carries, infers a kind of fear in people. That is why you can fear an Afghan leader described as Yoruba tribesman. When it comes to the analysis of African politics, instead of looking at the situation’s complexity, in the West, particularly the press, they just check which community a person comes from and journalists do not try to find the cultural, political, philosophical and ideological differences between the so-called ‘tribes’, they instead say, for instance, “this comes from tribe Morocco and the other from tribe Italy”. Therefore, the problem is reduced to the fact that one is Moroccan and the other is Italian. It is a very simplistic way of looking at African problems. The tribal concept has also the notion of not having arrived yet at the

model. The word tribe for me has a very negative connotation. My own solution is simple: we can call the people by the name they call themselves. If a person calls him/herself Amazigh, then we can call him/her Amazigh, just like we would call a person English or Italian.

AUTHORS How can young diasporic people who live in Italy, who came here when they were kids and are no longer connected to their root cultures, reconnect to them?

N.W.T. It always starts with who you are, even if you are born here in Rome. It is always about the choices you make. You can choose to reconnect with your language or forget it. If I am here in Italy I will try to learn as much Italian as possible. But then, it is about the other choices you make. You can always learn your own language and add it to Italian, and it is the most logically organic thing to do. You do not replace Italian, you add a language to Italian. This will help you to contribute to your African language from the very fact that you have an experience from the outside. The problem I see with diaspora is that the way the culture in which we grow, the dominant culture, looks at Africa is very negative and that one actually can internalise it. To me, using a religious terminology, diaspora youth can add something positive to their native cultures by looking at the story of Moses, who is brought up in Egypt: he later uses that knowledge and upbringing to help his relatives to find their way to Palestine. So, everybody has their 'Palestine', so to speak. So, the knowledge we have here, we should not see it in a negative sense unless we internalise the negativity that one culture carries about the other. But if we can use that knowledge, it should be extremely liberating.

