

# Speaking in Tongues: Ngũgĩ's Gift to Workers and Peasants through *Mũrogi wa Kagogo*

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## Summary

In his article "On Writing in Gĩkũyũ", Ngũgĩ says that "[a]n African writer should write in a language that will allow him to communicate effectively with *peasants and workers* in Africa – in other words, he should write in *an African language*" (1985: 151; my italics). This article is a deconstructive reading and assessment of Ngũgĩ's performance in his latest and largest novel *Mũrogi wa Kagogo* (*Wizard of the Crow*) which is in three volumes in its Kikuyu version. The reading is premised on the Derridian idea that texts and their discourse propositions contain within themselves seeds of their own deconstruction or undoing. I argue that *Mũrogi wa Kagogo* contains within it seeds of destruction of the very ideological values that Ngũgĩ seeks to validate. In a newspaper article, Kamoche (2005) raised a fundamental question regarding this novel: "[C]an Ngũgĩ ape and hope to promote the vernacular?" His conclusion was that Ngũgĩ "inadvertently ends up perpetuating a hybrid language that is only part Gĩkũyũ". "He is preaching Gĩkũyũ while practicing Pidgin English", he "sneaks in a disproportionate volume of 'Englisms' through the backdoor". Kamoche's newspaper article, which was limited to the novel's preface, dedication, acknowledgements and the synopsis, did not touch on Ngũgĩ's stated objective: to communicate with peasants and workers. This article seeks to answer the question how far Ngũgĩ manages to reach his targeted audience of workers and peasants in his novel *Mũrogi wa Kagogo* (2004, 2006a).<sup>1</sup>

## Opsomming

In sy artikel "On Writing in Gĩkũyũ" sê Ngũgĩ: "An African writer should write in a language that will allow him to communicate effectively with peasants and workers in Africa – in other words, he should write in an African language" (1985: 151; eie beklemtoning). Hierdie artikel is 'n dekonstruktiewe interpretasie en evaluasie van Ngũgĩ se onlangse en langste roman *Mũrogi wa Kagogo* (*Wizard of the Crow*) wat in die Kikoejoeweergawe uit drie volumes bestaan. Die interpretasie is gegrond op die Derridiaanse idee dat tekste en hul diskoersstellings self die saad van hul eie dekonstruksie of vernietiging bevat. Ek voer aan dat *Mũrogi wa Kagogo* self die saad

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1. This article uses the Gĩkũyũ version of Ngũgĩ's novel *Wizard of the Crow*, published by the East African Educational publishers in two volumes: *Mũrogi wa Kagogo: Mbuku wa Mbere na ya Keri* (2004); and *Mũrogi wa Kagogo: Mbuku wa Gatatũ* (2006a).

dra vir die vernietiging van die einste ideologiese waardes wat Ngūgĩ wil bevestig. In 'n koerantartikel vra Kamoche (2005) 'n fundamentele vraag oor hierdie roman: "[C]an Ngūgĩ ape and hope to promote the vernacular?" Hy kom tot die gevolgtrekking dat Ngūgĩ "inadvertently ends up perpetuating a hybrid language that is only part Gĩkũyũ". Verder sê hy: "He is preaching Gĩkũyũ while practicing Pidgin English" en "[he] sneaks in a disproportionate volume of 'Englisms' through the backdoor". Kamoche se koerantartikel – wat beperk is tot die roman se voorwoord, opdrag, bedankings en sinopsis – het nie Ngūgĩ se gestelde doelwit om met plattelanders en werkers te kommunikeer aangeroen nie. Die doel met hierdie artikel is om die vraag te beantwoord oor tot watter mate Ngūgĩ in sy roman *Mũrogi wa Kagogo* (2004, 2006a) daarin slaag om sy teikengehoor van werkers en plattelanders te bereik.

## Introduction

Before evaluating Ngūgĩ's performance in the implementation of his own language policy, it is important to contextualise the theoretical assumptions within which he is operating. Ngūgĩ's decision to write in Gĩkũyũ can be traced back to his days in his birthplace, Limuru, in the late 1970s when he got involved in the writing and production of his first play in Gĩkũyũ titled *Ngaahika Ndeenda (I Will Marry When I Want)* (1980). Gĩkandi describes the moment as follows:

In his decision to write and produce *Ngaahika Ndeenda* [sic] in Gĩkũyũ, Ngūgĩ had finally begun to address an audience of workers and peasants who had served as central subjects in his novels and plays, but for whom his writing remained inaccessible as long as he continued to produce it in English.

(Gĩkandi 1992: 131)

Ngūgĩ himself (1985) links his decision to write in Gĩkũyũ with his experience in producing *Ngaahika Ndeenda*. He says,

I was in fact compelled by historical circumstances to resort to writing in Gĩkũyũ when I became involved in cultural work at the Kamĩrĩthũ Community Educational and Cultural Centre near Limuru, thirty kilometres outside Nairobi. Here peasants and workers wanted to establish a self-help scheme to promote literacy, and it was decided that theatre was to be central to the whole venture.

(Ngūgĩ 1985: 152)

Unfortunately Ngūgĩ was arrested and detained by the Moi government in connection with this play and had to spend 1978 in detention before he was released in December of that year. It was while he was in detention that he felt impelled to write in Kikuyu<sup>2</sup> as a way of trying to keep himself linked

2. The people would refer to themselves as Agĩkũyũ and their language is Gĩkũyũ, but generally speaking the words Kikuyu and Gĩkũyũ are widely

to the people that the government was trying to keep him away from. In his own words:

So I thought that the best way of keeping alive in those circumstances was to resist that social disconnection by attempting to re-establish my links with the community. And the only connection I could think of now was language. I felt I had to write that very language that was responsible for my imprisonment. And in terms of content, I had to seek the kind of material, or the kind of attitude toward my material, that was in harmony with what I conceived to be the needs of the peasantry. That is how I came to write *Caitani Mutharaba-inĩ* (or *Devil on the cross*) in Gĩkũyũ while I was in prison.

(Ngũgĩ 1985: 153)

The key thing to note here is that Ngũgĩ's decision to write in Gĩkũyũ was mainly determined by the peasants whom he considered to be the audience of his art and the language of their communication. Ngũgĩ's ideas on the significance of language in people's lives have since grown and widened to cover more than just workers and peasants in Kiambu to embrace workers and peasants internationally. He has written several books and essays advancing the theory that the only way any community is likely to be free of being colonised by other communities is by remaining faithful to its own language. *Writers in Politics* (1981), *Decolonizing the Mind* (1986), *Moving the Centre* (1993), and *Re-membering Africa* (2009) are some of the books that Ngũgĩ has published in pursuit of his ideology on the place of language in politics, literature, culture, identity, commerce, education and other areas. In his latest collection, *Re-membering Africa*, he argues that Europe dismembered Africa in two major ways: through slavery which separated the continent and its diaspora; and through colonisation which fragmented the continent into countries colonised by the British, the French, Portuguese, Germans, Belgians and the Spanish. In each of these cases, language was central to the dismemberment practices leading to what Ngũgĩ calls "linguicide" in the diaspora and "linguifam" or linguistic famine on the continent. This means that the Africans in the diaspora lost their native languages while those on the continent adopted foreign languages as their means of communication whether in writing or in speech, meaning that local languages experienced operational famine. This was tragic for the African personhood because "[l]anguage is a communication system and a carrier of culture by virtue of being simultaneously the means and carrier of memory" (Ngũgĩ 2009: 15). Linguicide in the diaspora therefore can be interpreted as the death of the culture and the history of the African in the diaspora while linguifam on the continent means a suppression of the culture and history of the Africans there. Ngũgĩ argues that "[t]o starve or kill a language is to

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acceptable to refer to both the people and their language. They are therefore used in this article interchangeably.

starve and kill a people's memory bank" and that it is also equally true that "to impose a language is to impose the weight of experience it carries and its conception of self and otherness – indeed the weight of its memory, which includes religion and education" (p. 15). The colonial masters imposed their languages on the countries that they colonised such that even today we speak of francophone, anglophone and lusophone Africa. The languages in effect determined not only communication but also the African memory: what to remember and how to remember it. Through language Europe not only erased African memory but it also planted its own memory in Africa. In Ngũgĩ's words,

[t]he colonizing presence sought to induce a historical amnesia on the colonized by mutilating the memory of the colonized; where that failed it dismembered it and then tried to re-member it to the colonizer's memory – to his way of defining the world, including his take on the nature of relations between colonizer and colonized.

(Ngũgĩ 2009: 82)

This was achieved in a couple of ways: planting memory on the bodies and landscape of the colonised by simply renaming them; and on the mind of the colonised through the "vast naming system of language" (p. 11) and orientation to think and express one's self through another's tongue. Europe planted her memory on the African intellect by imposing European languages on the conquered (Ngũgĩ 2005: 158). The renaming of bodies and landscape has become so entrenched that many Africans hardly find it strange that they are called such names as James, Gordon, Herbert, Antoinette, Anastasia and other meaningless and strange-sounding names. Few people in Kenya can tell that Lake Victoria was known as Namlolwe by the Luo: effectively the British colonialists wiped out the Luo memory. And the minds of Africans are so colonised that some of them are very proud of the fact that they or their children cannot speak in their mother tongues. It is for this reason that Ngũgĩ calls for the decolonisation of the mind and the re-membering of Africa both of which cannot be achieved without a reconnection to one's mother tongue. "Re-membering Africa is the only way of ensuring Africa's own full rebirth from the dark ages into which it was plunged by the European renaissance, Enlightenment, and Modernity" (p. 67). His emphasis is that "African languages are essential for the decolonization of the African mind as well as for the African renaissance". In his wisdom, Ngũgĩ makes the argument that it is not possible to contribute towards an African renaissance if writers do not access and foreground African memory through African languages.

Ngũgĩ's position is that there is a need for an African renaissance that will help remember Africa or restore her to wholeness. However, without language, it is impossible for restoration to take place. Ngũgĩ therefore prescribes that "we must reconnect with the buried alluvium of African memo-

ry and use it as a base for the further planting of African memory on the continent and in the world” (2005: 164). In writing in Gĩkũyũ, Ngũgĩ may be assumed – based on his rhetoric – to be seeking to fulfil two major goals: inscribe the African memory in local and international discourses and communicate these issues to the workers and peasants from his ethnic community.

The suggestion that Ngũgĩ’s choice of language means he is limiting his communication to only his ethnic community rather than to the Kenyan nation as a whole, as has been argued by some critics, is not entirely true given that any sustained reading of Ngũgĩ’s works will indicate that he is conscious of the global brotherhood of workers and peasants and that even as he writes, he is very much aware that his books will be translated and read across the world. In fact, he translated *Mũrogi wa Kagogo* himself. He argues (1985: 155): “Writing in Gĩkũyũ does not cut me off from other language communities because there are always opportunities for translation”. By the time Ngũgĩ was writing the article quoted above, *Caitani Mũtharaba-inĩ (Devil on the Cross)* (1980) had already been translated into English, Kiswahili and Swedish directly from Gĩkũyũ. Indeed Ngũgĩ is of the view that local and international languages should be allowed to dialogue through translation. His Gĩkũyũ works should therefore be translated into Luo, Luhya, Kamba, Maasai and other local languages so that there is a dialogue between the languages in sharing their common heritage. This is universal practice and not peculiar to books written in Gĩkũyũ. It is only through translation that those who do not speak Russian, French or German have been able to access the wealth of literature originally written in those languages such as *War and Peace* and *Madam Bovary*.

Few doubt the veracity of Ngũgĩ’s view that language is central to the question of identity and that to be proud of one’s language is to be proud of one’s identity. It is also incontestable that language is the carrier of culture and the memory of a people and so the best way to express the cultural and historical consciousness of a people is to capture it in their own language. To choose a language to write in is therefore to choose an audience. This argument validates Ngũgĩ’s position that literature, even if written about Africa by Africans, in Europhone languages, inevitably produces a literature whose definition cannot escape a Europhonic tag such as Afro-European literature, as Ngũgĩ (1993) chooses to label it in his collection of essays *Moving the Centre: The Struggle for Cultural Freedoms*. The audience of that literature written in European languages is without doubt Europhile. If we agree with Ngũgĩ, we must also hold him to account in his practice and not just in his polemics.

In *Decolonizing the Mind*, Ngũgĩ describes literature written in European languages even more harshly as literature “wearing false robes of identity” and being “a pretender to the throne of the mainstream of African literature” (1986: 22). How authentic and mainstream is Ngũgĩ’s own literature and

does he speak to the workers and peasants whom he has so clearly identified as his target audience? In this article, I analyse his novel *Mũrogi wa Kagogo* with a view to providing a deconstructive critique of Ngũgĩ's performance in his stated goal to communicate to workers and peasants through authentic or mainstream African literature by writing in Gĩkũyũ. I argue that he ends up not only alienating them but also requiring that they are literate in the very language whose shackles he seeks to free them from.

First, however, we must acknowledge that the novel lives up to African contextualisation. *Mũrogi wa Kagogo* is framed against African orality in its combination of fantasy and realism. It rests on myth, legend and history. In terms of history, the narrative is clearly about dictatorship in postcolonial Africa which Ngũgĩ chooses to call Aburĩria. Indeed, the fact that the novel is set in Kenya and specifically under former president Daniel Toroitich Arap Moi's leadership is only very thinly veiled as observed by Gikandi (2005). The country, Aburĩria, has a dictator president surrounded by a retinue of lieutenants who push sycophancy to ridiculous levels by having their ears, mouths and eyes surgically elongated to symbolically represent their role as the ears, mouths and eyes of the president. As in oral narratives, the characters in this novel are given allegorical names such as Silver Sikio Kuu (Large Silver Ear), Machokali (Dangerous Eyes), and Tajirika (Seek or Get Wealthy) which are linked to their roles in the novel. Kamĩtĩ, the protagonist of the novel and who is also the mũrogi wa kagogo (wizard of the crow) – a role he shares with a female alter ego, Nyawĩra – is both real and legendary. Their achievements as wizard of the crow or *mũrogi wa kagogo* are more mythological and legendary than realistic, yet as Kamĩtĩ and Nyawĩra they are flesh and blood. Ngũgĩ's novel dexterously weaves around reality, fantasy, myth, history and legend in a way that is reminiscent of many traditional stories. This method is one of Ngũgĩ's successful attempts to speak to workers and peasants through a language and literary form that is native to their environment.

In spite of this apparent success, there are a number of issues that raise serious doubts about the success of Ngũgĩ's project now or in the future. The first thing that raises doubt is the sheer length of the novel. The novel is written in three volumes whose draft Ngũgĩ (2000) proudly announced as being a "one thousand one hundred and forty-two-page novel in Gĩkũyũ language tentatively titled *Mũrogi wa Kagogo*, in English *The Wizard of the Crow*" (p. 9). The novel was eventually published with the exact same titles in Gĩkũyũ and English respectively. The Gĩkũyũ version published by Heinemann Educational Publishers is in two separate volumes titled *Mũrogi wa Kagogo: Mbuku ya Mbere na ya Keri* (2004) [the first and second volume/book] and *Mũrogi wa Kagogo: Mbuku ya Gatatũ* (2006a) – [the third volume/book]. The English version is in one volume and runs 768 pages but broken down into books one to six. In the Gĩkũyũ version, the first and second book runs for a total 324 pages while the third book runs

for 224 pages. The first book runs for only 49 pages while the second book runs for the rest of the pages. Perhaps the divisions were meant to ensure that a worker or peasant would be able to handle the text in manageable chunks, but in essence, Ngũgĩ views the text as one as demonstrated by his own description of the length of the novel. In spite of the breakdown therefore, there still remains the question whether the length of Ngũgĩ's novel is friendly to workers and peasants. These are people who normally work as manual labourers having to put in more than eight hours of hard labour. It seems hardly feasible to expect that they would find time to patiently pore through a book in three volumes even if, as I have been told informally, the people do as they used to do when *Caitani Mũtharabainĩ* was published. They would get one person who could read it aloud for the rest of the people who were not literate. I suggest that Ngũgĩ cannot ride on the success of *Caitani Mũtharabainĩ* (1981) and *Matigari* (1986) as these books were aided by a repressive regime that sought to withhold information from the populace. What that meant was that any book that was seen to contain secrets of the state or to challenge the state, became an instant hit. Banning *Matigari* did it more good than harm. I personally read a tattered copy that was secretly given to me under strict instructions not to be seen with it. The idea that it was privileged information gave it credence and popularity. Kenya is no longer in such a state and a book will have to do much more than challenge the state to gain wide currency.

Informal research conducted in my own classes suggests that out of every ten Kikuyus that I encounter, only one has read Ngũgĩ in Gĩkũyũ and more often than not, they have read *Ngaahika Ndeenda*. However, the majority, sometimes as many as nine out of ten will have read Ngũgĩ's English works such as *Weep Not Child*, *The River Between*, *Petals of Blood*, *A Grain of Wheat* or the English versions of *Matigari* and *Caitani Mũtharabainĩ*. My conclusion is that most Kikuyus well versed in the reading culture would prefer to read Ngũgĩ in English. Ngũgĩ will counter this argument by saying, as he does in his 1985 article "On Writing in Gĩkũyũ", that "the first sure sign of self-colonization is when one reaches a position where one feels that one does not know enough of one's own language, meaning that one knows more of another people's language" (1985: 152). Ngũgĩ will therefore argue that those people need to be decolonised. This argument is valid, but equally undeniable is the view that colonisation is not a myth, it is a fact. The Kikuyu readers of Ngũgĩ's works in English are therefore real products of history, and writing in Gĩkũyũ is hardly the best means of reaching them.

This leads to the second concern, which is related to Ngũgĩ's decision to write the kind of Gĩkũyũ that only an educated Kikuyu populace can read. This is not peculiar to Ngũgĩ as a writer, for only an educated populace would understand Wole Soyinka's highly sophisticated abstractions in his fiction, drama and even essays. It is not a crime for a writer to be technical once the targeted audience is identified as familiar with the technical terms.

It should therefore not be a problem if Ngũgĩ's targeted audience were elite. But Ngũgĩ argues that he writes in Gĩkũyũ in order to reach an audience that he would otherwise not reach if he wrote in English: workers and peasants. Although in recent times there is emerging, in Kenya, an educated class of people who are university graduates but who can legitimately be called workers and peasants due to the high levels of unemployment that have pushed graduates to manual and unskilled professions, ordinarily what Ngũgĩ calls "the masses" that are not highly educated and sophisticated. They are either jobless or small-scale farmers, hawkers, *matatu touts* (taxi operators), construction workers, farm labourers, domestic workers, or unskilled or semi-skilled workers. And it is not necessary to have a high level of education in order to fit in this group of people that I would define as the masses or as workers and peasants.

It is curious, in my opinion, that in trying to address this class of people Ngũgĩ chooses to litter his novel with so many "Kikuyunised" or transliterated English words some of which are quite technical even in their original contexts. Ngũgĩ does not make the road to decolonisation any easier when he chooses to write the kind of "Gĩkũyũ" that only those well steeped in the colonial language can understand. If he indeed would like to decolonise the Agĩkũyũ, then he must write for them in such a way that they can understand him without reference to English. My feeling is that he does not achieve that goal with his novel *Mũrogi wa Kagogo*. A few of these examples will suffice to demonstrate the point. In the first and second volume, *Mũrogi wa Kagogo: Mbuku ya Mbere na ya Keri* Ngũgĩ (2004: 23), he uses the term "*thothiarimu ya mwabirika*" to mean African socialism. There is nothing wrong with Kikuyunising some English words whose signified objects or concepts do not exist among the Kikuyu. Indeed that has already happened to such an extent that some of the words are now taken for granted as being Kikuyu. The phenomenon of localising foreign words is linguistically universal and English has many French, Latin, and other language words that have become part of the English lexicon. Ngũgĩ's novel *Devil on the Cross* has been translated from his Gĩkũyũ novel *Caitani Mũtharabainĩ*. *Caitani* is actually a corruption of the word *satan* (in English) or *shetani* (in Kiswahili) but is now so universally accepted amongst Kikuyus that no one would think twice about its meaning. Perhaps that is what Ngũgĩ hopes will happen to "*thothiarimu*" and no one should begrudge him the desire, but for a person bent on growing African languages it begs the question why he did not borrow from Mwalimu Julius Nyerere who translated the concept as "*ujamaa*" or borrow from a wide range of possible Kikuyu words that could be made to bear the weight of the concept with just a little help such as "*ũmũingĩ*". "*Mũingĩ*" means the mass or the people, which is why Kameme FM – a Gĩkũyũ radio station – is also called "*Kameme Kayu Ka Mũingĩ*", which could be translated as Radio Sound of the People/Mass, and therefore the term *Mũingĩ* could easily be made to



mean society in the context of socialism. And to be fair to Ngũgĩ, he does employ creative transformations of English concepts such as milkshake which he renders as *iria-mathuco* whose meaning even an illiterate Kikuyu can hazard, but these are few and far between.

My argument is that there are too many words that Ngũgĩ borrows from English even when there are clear options from the Gĩkũyũ language or Kiswahili, which is closer to Gĩkũyũ than English, that Ngũgĩ could have borrowed from and which is a language spoken by Kikuyu readers across boundaries of economic class. A simple thing such as loudspeaker is translated by Ngugi (2004: 8) as “*raundithibika*” when the words “*kipasa sauti*” in Kiswahili and “*kimero*” in Gĩkũyũ are available to describe a device that does pretty much the same thing as a loudspeaker. Similarly, Ngũgĩ refers to members of parliament as “*maemubii*”, a transliteration of the word MP (member of parliament), when the words used among the contemporary Gĩkũyũ speakers are *mumbunge* (singular) and *ambunge* (plural). The Gĩkũyũ words are actually derived from the Kiswahili words *mbunge* and *wambunge* respectively. “[*M*]aemubii” is basically inaccessible to illiterate workers and peasants in Kikuyuland. In fact a larger audience would probably be reached by simply using the word Ma MPs.

The trouble is not just with the words that Ngũgĩ chooses to localise but also with the method of localisation. Two ways in which Ngũgĩ localises English words are phonologically and morphologically. In the Gĩkũyũ language, it is common to Kikuyunise English words by translating the /s/ sound into a /ð/ sound and to replace the /l/ sound, which does not exist in Kikuyu, with the /r/ sound. Also, Kikuyu words never end with a consonant, so all English words that end with consonant sounds have to be made to end with a vowel. Settler, for example, becomes “*thetera*”. Ngũgĩ’s faithfulness to this principle leads him to ignore obvious deviations from this practice that are now common currency among contemporary Kikuyu. He therefore transforms the word “ceiling” into “*thiring’i*”. This would be acceptable using the rule discussed above, but few people, perhaps very old people, would go that route in reference to that word. Even my 82-year-old mother would easily understand if Ngũgĩ had written *ciiring* instead of “*thiringi*”. Ngũgĩ knows of such deviations because in his novel *Caitani Mũtharabainĩ* he did not render the word satan (the devil) as *thaitani* but “*caitani*”. Ngũgĩ more often than not chooses English rather Kiswahili words to Kikuyunise, and his choice and methodology to do so suggest that he is entering the Kikuyu world from an English linguistic world’s perspective or as a person largely linguistically alienated from the people he wishes to reach. It almost suggests that he is thinking in English and translating into Kikuyu, which means that his novel is first in English in his mind before he translates it into Kikuyu in print. This is perhaps almost expected given that Ngũgĩ now lives in America where reality forces him to speak in English more often

than in *Gikūyū*, but that perhaps should also make him choose his words a little more carefully than he does in *Mũrogi wa Kagogo*.

The third factor that complicates Ngũgĩ's attempt to reach workers and peasants using Kikuyu is the level of intertextuality that he chooses to operate from. It clearly reflects his preference for the Western world. In *Mũrogi wa Kagogo*, other than clichéd Kikuyu proverbs and a few Kiswahili ones, Ngũgĩ, makes little reference to African scholars. Instead he references Karl Marx, Descartes, Shakespeare, Indian culture and philosophy, etc. He does not borrow much from African traditions and culture. There is a mention of *Ndumo* and *Gitiiro* (both of which are traditional genres of music) but only in passing and it is not clear what we are supposed to borrow from them. If Ngũgĩ's intention is to address workers and peasants, then his choice of intertextual references are at best questionable. In Volumes one and two of the novel, for example, Ngũgĩ is narrating Kamĩtĩ's first dramatised astral projection in which Kamĩtĩ, the main protagonist of the novel, watches as city council workers nearly bury his body in refuse. He manages to return to his body before it is buried and then mysteriously escapes the wrath and scrutiny of the soldiers of Christ who are patrolling the area looking for the devil that has apparently been terrorising the villagers, and specifically a couple that argues the devil has been tempting them to commit adultery. Kamĩtĩ then feels very hungry and while in that state a paper is blown by the wind towards him, which he mistakes for a piece of chapati, a kind of bread eaten in East Africa, which he therefore quickly grabs and puts in his mouth. He then discovers that rather than being bread, it is only a piece of paper that has information that visitors from the world bank, who have come into the country to assess the viability of the construction of a skyscraper that would extend to the heavens in honour of the president, would be treated to a dinner that night. This becomes like food which he cannot reach and he begins to feel as if he is becoming "*Tantalus wa Eldares*" (p. 54). Ngũgĩ does not explain who Tantalus was. He takes it for granted that his readers would know and link Kamĩtĩ's experience with the English word "tantalising" whose etymology is the story of Tantalus, a son of the Greek god, Zeus, and who was punished for sinning against the gods by being buried in water up to his neck with fruits hanging just above his head. Whenever he tried to reach for the fruits a wind would blow them away and whenever he tried to bend and drink water it would all drain away. It is only by a stretch of imagination that Ngũgĩ can assume that workers and peasants would know this piece of information; it is not even widely known amongst intellectuals. Ngũgĩ does not even explain this term either parenthetically in the text or by providing a glossary of terms. It is possible to argue that Ngũgĩ is engaging in an intellectual discourse using Kikuyu and that therefore his target audience is a sophisticated Kikuyu academia. This would be correct and completely within Ngũgĩ's right to target such an audience, but I argue that this would

then beat the logic of Ngũgĩ's choice of Kikuyu as the medium of communication. Indeed, Ngũgĩ and his supporters might argue that it is still within his right to encourage the Kikuyu academia to discourse in their mother tongue. Again I would be happy to buy the argument, but unfortunately Ngũgĩ has given his rationale for using Gĩkũyũ as his medium of communication: to reach peasants and workers. I submit that *Mũrogi wa Kagogo* then is a failure in as far as that project is concerned and its failure has everything to do with Ngũgĩ's incapacity to formulate a discourse that workers and peasants would understand and relate to within their own language. He ends up coming with the kind of Kikuyu that the readers may admire if not understand to paraphrase what Achebe says of the secretary of the Umuofia Progressive Union in his novel *No Longer at Ease*. The secretary "wrote the kind of English they [members of the Umuofia Progressive Union] admired if not understood: the kind that filled the mouth, like the proverbial dry meat" (Achebe 1961: 29). Ngũgĩ ends up doing a similar thing by writing the kind of Kikuyu that merely fills the mouth but ends up not being understood by the targeted audience.

Fourthly Ngũgĩ remains inaccessible to Gĩkũyũ speakers not well versed in the English language because even where it is clearly necessary, Ngũgĩ does not provide a glossary of terms that would explain new words he has coined from English. He appears to take it for granted that his readers will also have studied English. It may be argued that this is not an unreasonable expectation, since anyone who has gone through the Kenyan education system will have encountered English in the course of their schooling. However, there is an earlier generation of Kenyans born and brought up in the days of colonialism who never proceeded beyond lower primary. These Kenyans can read Gĩkũyũ but not English. Indeed these groups of people exist in other African countries if we are to take Ken Saro-Wiwa's (1992) decision to write a novel in Khana for his then 72-year-old mother whose only text available in Khana was the Bible. In Kenya, even amongst the youth, those who studied in the villages and perhaps did not proceed with formal education beyond primary school will perhaps be more at home in Gĩkũyũ than in English. However, they will not be at home with Ngũgĩ's writing because his Kikuyu assumes a high level of English competence. *Mũrogi wa Ka-gogo*, for instance, begins with the concept of "theory" which Ngũgĩ translates as "thiorĩ". It is not clear if, by this word, Ngũgĩ means much more than mere speculation in which case, if it does, the word is being technically used. If, however, he simply means to indicate that people in Aburĩria were speculating on the causes of the ill health of their president, there are several choices that could have been used to indicate the fact that rumours were being circulated to explain the source of the president's ill health.

While it may be argued that some of the words that Ngũgĩ transliterates are pretty clear given their structural positioning in the sentences, some are

sufficiently inaccessible as to seriously inhibit semantic appreciation. An example is when Kaniūru, a man who has been tasked with investigating mysterious lines of people in Aburīria, issues summons to his boss, Tajirika, with a view to investigating him. Tajirika is the chairman of *Matheeca Itu* which really means “that which pierces the sky” but which Ngūgī translates as the Committee for Marching to Heaven in the English version of the novel *Wizard of the Crow*. The committee is tasked with the responsibility of building the skyscraper that would touch heaven. Kaniūrū is Tajirika’s deputy in this committee. Kaniūrū is then made chairman of the Commission of Inquiry into the Queuing Mania. Kaniūrū, not averse to discrediting his chairman so that he can possibly ascend to the chairmanship position of the Committee for Marching to Heaven, summons his boss. Ngūgī describes this as “*thamanji*”. Writers cannot of course explain every word/phrase they use and readers are expected to have a fair command of the languages they read in. However, Ngūgī is creating a new Gĩkũyũ word, and it seems to me that a writer determined to address a populace that may not necessarily be literate in English, and who does not want to require English literacy of his readers, should at the very least provide a glossary of terms or words whose meaning may not be clear. There is no dictionary, to the best of my knowledge that explains the meaning of this word, “*thamanji*”, whose meaning is not straightforward even in English. This argument applies for many other words used in this novel, such as “*rogo*” for logo, “*bũthitiinĩ*” translated as police station in the English version even though it sounds like a post office in Gĩkũyũ, “*endĩta*” for editor, “*baathi thibeco*” for special pass and many others. These are not accessible to non-English speakers, some are difficult even for English speakers, and they will not be found in an average Kikuyu dictionary. Perhaps someone will have to come up with a Ngūgī Gĩkũyũ English dictionary but until someone does, this novel remains inaccessible to workers and peasants.

I therefore find Ngūgī’s project and polemics problematic on several fronts. First, in this novel Ngūgī fails to take cognisance of an emerging Sheng-speaking generation that prefers to mix languages rather than stick to one. Sheng is a hybrid language mainly spoken in urban marginalised areas but which is gaining currency across the country among both the rich and the poor. Sheng has English and Swahili as the base languages after which words are borrowed from the language communities of Kenya. During the 2002 presidential campaigns Sheng’s mainstreaming became visible in one of the presidential campaign theme songs by Gidi Gidi Maji Maji which has the following lyrics:

I am *unbwogable* (my italics)  
 I am unbeatable  
 I am unsueable  
 So if you like ma song sing it for me I say

Gidi Gidi Maji Maji took a Luo word and morphologically manipulated it using the English affix “un” to negate it. The two lines that follow suggest the meaning of the word. To be “unbwogable” is to be unbeatable or unsueable. This is typical of the growth of Sheng. The language borrows from English, Kiswahili and local languages hence capturing some nuances that are not present in any of the languages on their own. The net effect and import of that song has been well captured by Nyairo and Ogude (2005). In recent times President Mwai Kibaki has become famous for finishing his address to the nation, especially during festive occasions or seasons, with “*na mujiyenjoy*” which means “and enjoy yourself”, testifying to what Nyairo and Ogude (2005) in their abstract would call Sheng’s occupation of the “centre-stage in the political arena of Kenya’s ...” public space. In *Mũrogi wa Kagogo*, Ngũgĩ has only a few lines from Sheng, but they sound old and tired, and he knows that because his characters say so. Sheng is mainly spoken by a young and largely detribalised cosmopolitan group of people. The current demographics suggest that Kenya’s population is mainly composed of young people below the age of 35 years. Indeed according to the 2009 census results released in August 2010 nearly 8 million Kenyans out of a population of approximately 39 million people are aged between 15-24 years. These are people who would probably be more at home reading Sheng than Kikuyu. Indeed it has been argued by some scholars that Sheng has “become the basic urban vernacular of the youth in Kenya” and that rural youth also commonly use it (Bosire 2006: 185). This group of people would be more encouraged to read Kikuyu if the language accommodated more Sheng than English. And there are specific instances in which Ngũgĩ would have sounded more realistic if he had employed Sheng rather than Kiswahili clichés. Beggars, for example, in Kenya today are highly unlikely to use the phrase “*saidia maskini*”, as happens in *Mũrogi wa Kagogo*, even if their target audience were a white one. They would either use Sheng for locals and broken English for a Western audience. Ngũgĩ here appears to be linguistically out of touch with the people on the ground and therefore his novel does not respond to the current linguistic realities of the society in which it was published.

Ngũgĩ’s argument that we need to express ourselves in our own languages and that our full potential is acquired if we learn first in our own languages is beyond reproach. It is widely accepted now that children first taught in their own language will learn faster than children who have to learn a different language first. Research indicates that children who learn first in their mother tongue grasp concepts better even in such fields as mathematics. Six-year-olds, for example, can be introduced to mathematical concepts in their own language that they would otherwise not grasp if they had to wait to learn the language of communication first, given that children normally start primary-school level at about six years old. This argument is well articulated by Diop (1996) when he suggests that African children

learning in a foreign language are forced to learn first the language of communication and then use the language to learn concepts that could very well have been taught in their mother tongue in the first place at an early age. However, and although it is not within the scope of this article to engage the concept mother tongue or first language in the context of urban multicultural cities like Nairobi, suffice it to say that for many children, and now also for some adults, mother tongue is not necessarily a language that is indigenous to Africa. And this is not to argue that the languages they speak are necessarily identical to those spoken in Western countries or where the languages may have originated from. The point is that they speak a language whose origin is foreign but which may have undergone several transformations such that it is significantly different in terms of phonetics, syntax, semantics, morphology and other aspects of language in its use in Africa. It may not be fair to term such languages foreign to these speakers anymore. It is perhaps this phenomenon that led Mazrui and Mazrui (1998) to make the argument that it is possible to deracialise, indigenise, and domesticate language to make it serve the interests of postcolonial Africa.

This introduces the second and very important problematic dimension to the debate on the language of African literature in the context of Ngũgĩ's praxis. If the argument is that African writers should write in an African language and specifically their mother tongue, how should we define mother tongue or African language? Is it possible to make the argument that Africans have indigenised English to such an extent that a variety of English that is distinctly Kenyan, Nigerian or Ghanaian is emerging or has emerged? I can remember in the late 1980s Prof. Okoth Okombo arguing that only a Kikuyu would respond to an insult "dog" with "even you" as happens in one of Ngũgĩ's early fiction. The response is in English but Kikuyu English. The Sheng speakers do not care about speaking English like the English. They are not suffering from Tajirika's disease of wanting to be white or like the white man. They have transcended that. They are proud to sing and dance in Sheng, a language which carries their aspirations, hopes and culture. In Kenya, David Maillu's book *Without Kiimua Mgongo* is an example of a novel that deliberately foregrounds the African's choice to marry languages for effective communication. In Nigeria, the pidgin speakers have also indigenised English. Ken Saro-Wiwa's novel *Sozaboy* attests to this departure from the linguistic world created by colonialists and imposed on Africans to a world of their own that is cognisant of the complex historical underpinnings of their existence in a postcolonial country.

There is also the much bigger problem of cosmopolitan children born in Nairobi and other urban centres who speak English as a first language. They do not speak their so-called mother tongues; in most cases these languages are really their father tongues since they are defined by the genealogy of their fathers. Some of these children are from mixed marriages because their parents are from different ethnic groups. They are multicultural children not

just because they are multi-ethnic biologically but also because they have grown up in a multi-ethnic environment and their accents reflect their multi-ethnic background due to both biological and environmental cultural diversity. I would like to submit that for these children the argument that to be authentic you need an indigenous African language does not hold water. This is a new tribe whose authenticity is defined by an indigenised foreign language and which Ngũgĩ's polemics do not seem to take cognisance of.

The third problem is the consideration of ethnic polarisation in many African countries. One of the ways in which people are identified with their tribes is the language that they speak. During the post-election violence of 2007/2008 in Kenya, children and some adults were traumatised by being asked to speak their mother tongue. They were terrorised if they were unable to speak their languages even if they belonged to those communities ethnically. One of the arguments we can make here is that they should know better and learn their languages if they want to be identified as belonging to those communities, but it is also possible to argue that language in that context was not necessarily liberating but an internal tool of oppression. It means that language is a tool in the hands of people and that therefore if you change the minds of the people, it does not matter which language they use. It is therefore not English as a language that was racist but rather the English as a people who were racist. In the context of ethnically polarised countries like Kenya, an obsessive focus on the indigenous languages can actually be counterproductive. The search for and engineering of a language that can help Africa transcend narrow ethnic chauvinism may be the best way out. The argument that we can indigenise and deracialise English is not far-fetched, but its efficacy is doubtful with any attempts at purism. Deracialisation of English will not happen in England as long as there are racists in that country, but the English varieties outside Europe can not only be deracialised but also, to paraphrase and negate Audre Lorde, can become the master's tools that will undo the master's house. This will happen as soon as writers become conscious of the fact that power is not in the language per se but in the use to which language is put. This is what the Mau Mau did in Kenya when they realised that religious tunes could be laced with subversive anti-colonial messages so that the colonialists would think the Mau Mau were singing reactionary religious songs when in fact they were singing songs of resistance. The Mau Mau saw religion as a tool used by the colonialists to oppress Africans but the Mau Mau decided to use the same tool to liberate the very same Africans. I think this is what James Baldwin meant when he said:

My quarrel with English language has been that the language reflected none of my experience. But now I began to see the matter in quite another way .... Perhaps the language was not my own because I had never attempted to use it, had only learned to imitate it. If this were so, then it might be made to

bear the burden of my experience if I could find the stamina to challenge it, and me, to such a test.

(James Baldwin quoted by Achebe [1965]1997: 349)

What a study of Ngũgĩ's project, at both theoretical and practical levels, raises is a complexity of possibilities in Africa's attempt to deal with her historical-sociological linguistic heritage. In spite of the solution that Ngũgĩ offers, and whose veracity he tries to demonstrate in his choice of writing in Gĩkũyũ, he is still speaking in tongues – just as he did when he wrote in English – to the workers and peasants he seeks to reach. In spite of his good intentions there are still pressing language issues that scholars, policy makers, and practitioners like Ngũgĩ must engage.

## Conclusion

It seems to me in revisiting the problem raised by Obi Wali (1963) that Africans, and specifically African writers, are still faced with several difficult choices. The first is to insist on learning and growing indigenous African languages alongside foreign or colonial languages. Indigenous languages refer to those languages that children pick up as they grow up as a matter of necessity because they are the languages of communication at home and in the community. Foreign languages are those languages that have to be formally taught. Indigenous languages in this context are inevitable, but the foreign languages are dependent on the formal schooling system. They are defined as indigenous or foreign depending on the manner of acquisition which is directly linked to the historicity of their existence in the target African community. This approach insists that indigenous African languages are equal partners in the world's linguistic marketplace. Taking this route means every effort must be made to invest in those indigenous languages to ensure that neither linguifam nor linguicide as articulated by Ngũgĩ takes place. Pursuing this line of thought means that indigenous African languages will be viewed not merely as tools of internal or intra-community communication but also as tools of trade and officialdom for local and international purposes. This is the only way they can survive.

The second is to embrace the foreign languages and seek to master them as well as, if not better than, the native speakers of those languages. This approach is best served by the assimilationist model pursued by the French and the Portuguese. In a contemporary setting, this would mean accepting that Africa's encounter with the colonialists has dealt an inescapable death-blow to our native tongues. This route will argue that it is not worth the investment to fight linguifam or linguicide. These are inevitable consequences for languages whose practical use is dwindling due to historical realities. To fight the linguistic movement towards this end is to fight a



losing battle. Ken Saro-Wiwa's (1992) and Chinua Achebe's (1962) argument gravitate towards this end with both viewing English as a gift for Africa to express herself locally and abroad.

The third option is to transform those learned foreign languages to make them carry Africa's burdens as argued by James Baldwin (quoted by Achebe [1965]1997). If this route is followed it means encouraging mutations of those learned languages to reflect African communities' peculiarities, including embracing the fact that colonisation is part of the continent's history. This route will encourage flourishing of pidgin English, Sheng and other varieties. This will also mean accepting that for example Kenyans will speak English that is peculiar to them so that eventually we can have Kenyan English just as we now have Australian, American, Canadian and New Zealand English. In the Kenyan context this will mean embracing the fact that there is a growing generation of English speakers who speak the language as their mother tongue. This position need not deter those who wish to continue speaking, writing and communicating in their mother tongue.

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