

**NGUGI WA THIONG'O AND KENYAN THEATRE IN FOCUS**

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**ABSTRACT**

Ngugi wa Thiong'o is known throughout the world for his writing of novels, e.g. *Petals of Blood* (1977) and critical essays, e.g. *Delolonising the Mind* (1994). With the writing of *The Trail of Dedan Kimathi* (1977), in collaboration with Micere Mugo, he became known as a playwright as well. The two community plays, *I Will Marry When I Want* (1982) and *Mother, Sing for Me*, brought focus to indigenous Kenyan theatre. They were created and performed by the Kamiriithu-villagers in the theatre they have built themselves, until they were stopped by the government. The provocative *I Will Marry When I Want* was the cause of Ngugi's detainment by the Kenyan government. Ngugi used the theatre as a platform for his cultural, social and political utterances in his quest to change the society.

Very little was written about Ngugi's plays. This research intends to study the available sources and his plays carefully to formulate an overall view of the importance of this genre of Ngugi. The content, themes, characters and the indigenous cultural expressions, e.g. songs, dances and mimes will be analysed. As the community and audience involvement played a huge role in Ngugi's theatre process and performances, they will receive prominent attention.

This research project will to investigate the observations of other scholars on African theatre, as well as the different styles of theatre practiced by Ngugi. The research will

investigate the recurrent themes and explore the influence Ngugi had on the theatre of Kenya. As an activist he propagated a strong message that the masses should unite against the oppression and exploitation by the ruling regime.

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This thesis is a result of encountering African writers during my Honors. Ngugi wa Thiong'o made such an impression on me that I directed his play *I Will Marry When I Want* in 1993 at the University of Namibia with students from UNAM and the Windhoek College of Education. The fascination did not stop there; it resulted in this Masters study.

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My late husband, Kowie endured my absence, ranting and ravings for years. He listened to each bit of gained information with great love and less patience. He was however supportive and encouraged me throughout. He would have been proud to see the result of those hours of research. This one is for you.

In memory of my husband

J.P.J. (Kowie) van der Smit

1941 - 2002

## **DECLARATION**

I, Susanna Aletta van der Smit, declare hereby that this study is a true reflection of my own research, and that this work, or part thereof has not been submitted for a degree in any other institution of higher education.

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.....S.. van der Smit.....

Date...October 2007.....

## **INTRODUCTION**

**“On April 7-9, 1994 over 200 scholars from Africa, Asia, Europe, Canada and the United States gathered at the Penn State Berks Campus in Reading, Pennsylvania, to celebrate the work of Ngugi wa Thiong’o. The presentation of 150 papers, poetry readings ...and a reading by Ngugi himself, made this the largest conference ever held to discuss an African writer”** Cantalupo 1995: back of cover page).

Ngugi wa Thiong’o is a dominant figure in literature: world-renowned for his novels and critical essays. It was however his plays that awoke the longing to explore his work. It became a challenge to discover how Ngugi practiced theatre. He practiced theatre – not professional or amateur theatre: only theatre. This is why this thesis was written: to celebrate Ngugi wa Thiongo’s and his plays. Not because they are literary masterpieces, but because he passionately used them in community theatre to change his society.

This study explores the plays’ creators, how they organized their theatre, under which conditions they performed and gave an annalistic view of the plays. The formidable field of African theatre and the different theatre genres were studied as so far it had bearing on Ngugi’s work. As theatre is immediate and able to reach a large audience he used this genre to spread his message. Ngugi brought new life into Kenyan theatre when he practiced revolutionary theatre concepts such as integration of music, dance and traditional forms as story-telling and mime in his theatre.

Ngugi’s work reflected two major influences: the traditional African culture and the colonial experience and its aftermath. He argued that African writers should use their

indigenous languages when writing, rather than European languages, to build an authentic African literature.

The background information on Ngugi and Kenya is crucial to understand Ngugi's plays and the recurrent themes in the plays. The information was used to establish the importance of certain socio-economic structures for generating specific performances modes. Ngugi is a descendant of Kenyan peasants and these ties bind him to their history. It places him in relationship with his society to whom he has a responsibility. For him it was easy to use his literature for the purpose of political liberation and become involved in community theatre voicing those aspirations.

The spelling of *Gikuyu* was preferred above the spelling *Kikuyu*; the latter being the usual European way of spelling the word. Ngugi used the form of *Gikuyu* to refer to the people and language. The spelling of *Kimathi* was also seen spelled *Kimaathi* (*Detained* 1981). The British and United States spelling *theatre* was used as a matter of personal choice rather than the less formal *theater*.

This study relied heavily on available secondary sources and acknowledges them while surveying them critically. The rest of the comprehensive research is the candidate's own observation and conclusions. The choice of who and what to put in and who and what to leave out was difficult and was subjective in such decisions. Academic jargon was

avoided where possible to enable the general reader who has an interest in Ngugi wa Thiong'o and theatre to enjoy it.

I tried to, as Prof Aldo Behrens, Drama lecturer at the University of Namibia, always said, make the words work for me.

**CHAPTER 1: NGUGI WA THIONG'O - AFRICAN PLAYWRIGHT**

## **1.1 A HISTORICAL OVERVIEW OF NGUGI'S LIFE**

NGUGI: Kenyan, journalist, lecturer, novelist, essayist, playwright, diarist, literary critic, theatre and cultural activist, African nationalist, translator, writer of children's books and short stories, distinguished scholar.

Ngugi wa Thiong'o was born on January 5, 1938 in the Kamiriithu village, near Limuru in the Kiambu district, Central Province, near Nairobi, in Kenya, East Africa. The area was then known as the White Highlands. He was baptised as James Thiong'o Ngugi. He was the fifth of six children of the third of Thiong'o wa Nducu's four wives, Wanjika wa Ngugi. He thus comes from an extended polygamous Gikuyu family which provided him with as many as twenty-eight brothers and sisters. Ngugi always felt that he belonged to an even larger family: the community to whom he is known as Ngugi – writer of the people.

His education in his mother tongue started at the Church of Scotland Mission Primary School at Kamaandura near Limuru from 1946 until 1948. From 1949 - 50 he attended the Maanguu Village School in a Gikuyu Independent and Karinga Schools Association School. Here he became a devoted Christian. During the period 1948 - 50 his education was interrupted because of the Mau-Mau Resistance War of Liberation against the British. The Rebellion became a reality for the young adolescent Ngugi when his elder



brother Wallace Mwangi (Boro) as well as his uncles, cousins and friends joined the guerrillas. His mother and other family members such as his cousin Gichini Ngugi, were jailed by the British. Living in the midst of the anti-imperialist protest against the land-grabbing settlers, the true meaning of independence made a deep impression on the fourteen year old Ngugi. Years later it still exerted great influence on his writing.

As a child under the British colonial regime, Ngugi grew up in two conflicting worlds: Gikuyu/African versus Westerner/Christian. While he studied at a colonial school his family and people were engaged in the anti-colonial struggle. In his book *Moving the Centre* (1993) Ngugi relates that he was caught up in contradictions. The fact that his father, who was a peasant farmer, was forced to squat due to the British Imperial Act of 1915, made him bitter. They lived on land that belonged to a Kenyan elder of the Church of Scotland Mission.

In 1950 he resumed school. After a State of Emergency was declared in 1952, and Kenya's Independence Struggle became a full-scale war against the British, English became the language of his formal education. The use of Gikuyu was severely restricted and punished while the use of English was praised and he soon came to the conclusion: "The language of my education was no longer the language of my culture" (Cooper 1992: 134). Any achievements in spoken or written English were highly rewarded. In 1955 he attended the Alliance High School situated at Kikuyu: it was his command of English that earned him a place at this elitist school for Africans in Colonial Kenya.

According to Ngugi the aim of the British was to produce Africans who would later become proficient machines for running the colonial system. In colonial Kenya English became the yardstick of a person's intelligence and ability in most areas of life.

At Alliance High School Ngugi started to speak out sharply against Western education. This urged the headmaster to warn Ngugi against becoming a political agitator – a warning to which he paid no heed. It would shape his career, his life and his future. Gradually Ngugi became more and more outspoken. He fiercely opposed the wrongs of the past (colonialism) and the present (neo-colonialism), and rejected the injustices entrenched therein.

At Alliance High School he published two of his fictional writings in 1958 and 1959. Ngugi has read Leo Tolstoy's *Childhood, Boyhood, and Youth*. The trilogy was the inspiration for his maiden publication: *Try Witchcraft* which appeared in the Alliance school magazine. It was based on a childhood belief that if you wanted somebody to appear you whispered the name into a black pot (Ngugi 1981:128). As a scholar and student Ngugi read as much and as widely as he could. Jomo Kenyetta's book *Facing Mount Kenya* (1938) in which he expressed the realities in the then colonial Kenya was an inspiration to the young aspiring writer. Ngugi's Gikuyu primary education stimulated his identification with his peasant culture and the awareness that colonialism was oppressive. His secondary education's "Christian-colonial doctrinalism ...gave him intellectual tools with which later to attack the colonial controls" (Cantalupo 1995: 36).

Ngugi was a primary school teacher in Gatundu for a short interlude before he went to the Makerere University College in Kampala, Uganda, the first university college in East Africa, to study Economics. The university was founded in 1959 and molded in structure and curriculum after the University of London.

The Makerere Students' Dramatic Society at the university was very active and Ngugi became involved in the theatre. The society moved away from doing mostly British plays and performed dramas of Wole Soyinka and Bertolt Brecht. The society later had a travelling company which toured Kenya.

At this institution he studied and graduated with honours in English. It was the works of Tolstoy, Zola and especially those of D.H. Lawrence and Joseph Conrad (*Heart of Darkness*) that had an appeal to him and he concentrated mostly on them. He encountered some African literature by Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, Kofi Awoonor and Peter Abrahams which excited him as he could relate to its content. He developed a growing consciousness through the literature he studied as it made an immense impression on him.

While still a student at university, Ngugi edited the literary journal *Penpoint* which was established in 1958 as a departmental quarterly magazine. This literary magazine gave writers in East and Central Africa an opportunity to publish their maiden publications,

e.g. Ngugi, Mkapa and John Nagenda. Ngugi wrote his first short story, *Mugumo (The Fig Tree)*, which was later published in his book *Secret Lives* (1976), as a contribution to this journal. Ngugi said that “in a sense the stories in this collection (is) from my creative autobiography over the last twelve years” (Ngugi 1976: Preface). He continued to contribute short stories to *Penpoint* for three years. Many of these stories, e.g. *And the Rain Came Down* and *Mugumo* dealt with the relationship between children and mothers as a theme. He kept on writing short stories for those three years until he felt that his well had dried up and it was time to move on to another genre.

In 1961 Ngugi married Nyambura, who was his wife for seventeen years. Their son, Thiong’o, was soon born. This was also the year that his story, *The Black Messiah* won a competition which the East African Literature Bureau had organized.

He wrote his first play *Black Hermit*, in 1962. It was performed by the Makerere College Students’ Dramatic Society in Kampala on the stage of the Uganda National Theatre. It formed part of Uganda’s 1962 Independence celebrations. Touching on issues important in East Africa, it cuts to problems that many African countries experience, such as religion, ideology, tribal claims and love. Ngugi said about this play: “We are either on the side of the people or on the side of imperialism” (Ngugi 1977: Preface). This play clearly announced his intentions to criticise the Kenyan society for its tribalism.

On December 12, 1963, Kenya became Independent. It was also the year Ngugi received a BA cum laude from the Makerere University College. His second son, Kimunya, was born in this historic year.

During his years of study at Makerere he wrote his powerful first novel, *Weep not, Child* (1964). This creative work was the first novel to be written in English by an East African writer. After reading the novel Abiola Irele predicted the start of a significant literary career. With hindsight we know today that this prophecy became true. Ngugi wa Thiong'o established himself as one of Kenya's most important writers. Since he wrote his first novel Ngugi developed phenomenally and he soon became known as an outspoken and controversial writer. Writing became a personal experience and crusade to him. It is said that this work, just as his second novel, *The River Between* (1965), bears a strong resemblance to his own person and circumstances and can be regarded as autobiographical. The novels deal with men who are seen by their communities as clever and are educated to help them with their political and cultural dilemmas. The community looks up to these young men to help them. The character Njoroge in *Weep not, Child* (1964) is drawn as such a young man. Remi in the play *The Black Hermit* (1963) also reflects Ngugi's youth.

His second novel, *The River Between* (1965), was actually written before *Weep not, Child* (1964) while he was studying at Makerere, but published second. After completing his studies in 1964 he worked on the staff of the newspaper *Nairobi Daily*

*Nation* before continuing his studies in England. He had a Sunday newspaper column called *As I see It* and commented on social and political issues.

Soon after his arrival at the University of Leeds, in October 1964, for a two-year MA course in West Indian literature, Ngugi became engrossed in Caribbean Literature. The literature described a world “dominated by slavery and imperialism in its colonial and neo-colonial stages and of course the struggles of those people against those different stages of social oppression” (Wilkinson 1992: 132). He began to research literature extensively. His socialist beliefs, fueled by his East African experiences, was strengthened at Leeds. Ngugi became involved in various cultural activities on campus. During this period he was so busy being an organizer and editor, doing theatre and writing that Ngugi never received the master’s degree as he never made the revisions his mentors suggested.

His political awareness was energized during his years at Leeds and affected his writings progressively. The intellectual development and stimulation spurred his latent ideologies to new heights. His political beliefs were honed and the years at Leeds seem to have left him personally embittered. It was while studying at Leeds that he encountered the work of Frantz Fanon. Ngugi strongly embraced Fanon’s political ideologies that independence for oppressed people must be obtained before any changes, economical or social, could be made. Fanon’s *The Wretched of the Earth* (1967) made an unforgettable impression on him. Still more important to him became the works of Karl Marx, Lenin

and Friedrich Engels. This motivated him to analyse all situations in Marxist terms and thus further influenced his writing. It entrenched in him the will to voice his own feelings about injustices.

In 1966 he gave a brilliant lecture at the Africa Centre in London in his capacity as Professor of Literature, on the works of Wole Soyinka and T.M. Aluko under the title ‘Satire in Nigeria’. He wrote in earnest while pursuing an academic career. During his period at Leeds his third novel, *A Grain of Wheat*, was published in 1967. This novel was spurred by Ngugi’s memories. The Mau-Mau war’s bloodshed is depicted against the celebrations of the independence of Kenya. With each of his novels Ngugi progressed to a greater degree of maturity and established himself as a world-class novelist. He gradually grew from a devout Christian to a committed Marxist revolutionary reflecting this social consciousness.

At the African Scandinavian Writers’ Conference in 1967 Ngugi made the statement “When we, the black intellectuals, the black bourgeoisie, got the power, we never tried to bring about those policies which would be in harmony with the needs of the peasants and workers. I think it is time that the African writers also started to talk in the terms of these workers and peasants” (Zell 1983: 132).

On his return to his African homeland in October 1967 he began teaching at the University College of Nairobi. This institution was identified as the focus of Kenya’s cultural aspirations. He was appointed in the Department of English as a special, and the

first African, lecturer in the department. Ngugi soon became involved in various literary activities. He became editor (1967-69) of *Zuka*, a journal of East African Creative Writing which was an Oxford University Press publication. The journal had a substantial readership and created a very favourable climate for new literature to be introduced.

In 1968 he wrote the play *This Time Tomorrow*, dealing with the theme of forceful removal of squatters by the government from their houses in a process of cleaning up the city for an international congress to be held there. Two other short plays, *The Rebels* and *The Wound in the Heart* were published with *This Time Tomorrow* in 1970.

It was during October 1968 that Ngugi and several of his colleagues at the University College in Nairobi, among them Okot p'Bitek, Henry Owuor Anyumba and Taban lo Liyong, put a tremendous effort in rejecting the primacy of the English literature and culture in the university studies. The British government had made it mandatory in the 1950s. They wanted the centrality of Africa's own literature and culture brought forward. In a paper entitled *On the Abolition of the English Department* they protested that "... Nairobi, and all African Universities, would carry at the heart of their programmes the culture and philosophy of the West" (Roscoe 1977: 89). They questioned why African culture and literature could not be at the centre, and studies thereof explore the relationship of other cultures, e.g. English, to it. A new curriculum for African Literature was put on the table to give impetus to the change and give it a firm academic foundation. In this attempt they were very successful as the Department



of English was transformed into the Department of African Languages and Literature. The colonial British connotations disappeared and African literature claimed the focus. In future oral literature would be at the centre of the new syllabus; including East African literature as well as Swahili, other African, Afro-American and Caribbean literature. If literature from Europe was available in English it was used, but not as the centre of the syllabus any more.

Shortly after this momentous event, Ngugi renounced his Christianity and Christian name James, and claimed his traditional Gikuyu name Ngugi wa Thiong'o.

In 1969 he resigned from the University of Nairobi in protest against the continuous interference by government in the university which had a negative effect on academic freedom. He travelled widely and lectured on various topics at several institutions. During 1969 – 70 he presented for a year as Fellow in Creative Writing a creative writing course at Makerere University. In 1969/1970 Ngugi studied in the USA at the Northwestern University, Illinois. He also lectured there as a visiting associate professor in African Literature. Ngugi kept on writing notwithstanding a very busy programme. During this period two daughters, Mukoma and Wanjiku, were born to him and his wife. On his return in August 1971 he joined the lecturing staff of the Nairobi University where he was soon promoted to Head of the newly-created Department of Literature in April 1973. He immediately set about changing the focus of literary studies, with

African writing in the forefront of attention. His essays on African and Caribbean Literature, Culture and Politics were published that same year in *Homecoming*.

In 1972 Ngugi succeeded Chinua Achebe as the new editor of the *African Writers Series*, but soon discovered that his own writing was suffering under the huge responsibility the editorship required (Killam 2000: 5). It was during this period that Ngugi began to voice his anti-imperialist thoughts and tension between him and the government started to build up. He became committed to the cause of the workers and peasants through his writings. The fact that after independence the poverty-stricken peasants, like his father, did not receive back their land, but had to see it go to wealthy, powerful Africans who liaised with the erstwhile enemies, embittered him. He lashed out at these collaborators both in the government and the farming and business sections. The continuing Western imperialism where European and American interest were largely in control of cultural, economic and political affairs, annoyed him.

In 1976 Ngugi co-authored the historical play *The Trail of Dedan Kimathi* with Micere Githae Mugo. This play was written from personal experience as his own family was involved in the Mau-Mau rebellion in which his mother was tortured and his step-brother died.

That same year he became involved in the Kamiriithu Community Educational and Cultural Centre; little knowing that it would have far-reaching effects on him and his

writings. As a result of his work, sharing his knowledge, skills and time with the people of the Kamiriithu village, he co-scripted with Ngugi wa Mirii the Gikuyu play *Ngaahika Ndeenda (I Will Marry when I want)*. The play made the strong statement that “those who fought hardest for independence had gained least” (Foden 1998: 1). Ngugi found that the political alienation was deepening around him. The play criticised the inequalities and injustices of the Kenyan society, causing tension between himself and the Kenyan Government.

The year 1977 was in many ways a watershed in the career of Ngugi wa Thiong’o. The play *The Trail of Dedan Kimathi* was presented at Festac ’77 in Lagos.

His fourth ambitious novel, describing the bitter disillusionment of the workers and peasants in a post-independent Kenya, *Petals of Blood*, was published in July and caused quite a stir. It marked Ngugi’s personal growth as well as the development of radical African literature. The novel received praise as his most representative work. Once again Ngugi verbalised bitterly his deep disappointment in the new black elite’s treatment of the peasants and the workers. Ngugi unequivocally identified with this class’s plight. He criticised the new ruling class for their failure to live up to the promises and expectations of the people whom they had betrayed. These criticisms of both British and Kenyan rule were seen by the government as politically charged writing. With the staging of the popular play, *Ngaahika Ndeenda* in 1977 the government decided that his writings about the social and political situation in Kenya were potentially harmful, provocative and

inflammatory to them and the Kenyan nation. The revolutionary Ngugi was arrested at his home in Limuru by the Kenyan government, on the instructions of the then vice-president, Daniel arap Moi, who on December 31, 1977 signed the paper for Ngugi's detention without trial. He was placed under detention in the Kamiti Maximum Security Prison under the Public Security Act. This prison is one of the largest in post-colonial Africa. Ngugi was kept there without trial for most of 1978; a mere number: K6, 77, in a file. Not being in solitary confinement, he was able to talk with other prisoners, but prohibited from writing.

The performance of *Ngaahika Ndeenda* changed his life dramatically and irrevocably. He was first taken away for questioning and then imprisoned for his involvement in the community theatre at Kamiriithu. The performances of the play were banned. Ngugi felt "They were attempting to stop the emergence of an authentic language of Kenyan Theatre." (Ngugi 1994: 34) and he resolved to write only in his mother tongue, Gikuyu.

Ngugi used the time he spent in detention without a trial to his benefit by writing. He started his first novel in the Gikuyu language, *Caitani muthararba-ini*, on bits of toilet-paper. He also wrote down some notes of his psychological torture that would later become his memoirs when his prison writings were published in *Detained; a Writer's Prison Diary* (1981). He gave a detailed description of his ordeal at the hands of the government of whose increasingly totalitarian leadership he was very critical. The other

detainees, some being there for as many as ten years, gave him greater insight into the plight of the masses; about their poverty and lack of rights.

Various appeals, protests, especially in London, even from Nigeria's well-known writer Wole Soyinka, could not change the government's decision on keeping Ngugi in prison. His third daughter, Njooki, was born while he was detained. Eventually Ngugi was released from prison in December 1978, but only after Amnesty International designated him as a Prisoner of Conscience. His detainment cost him his professorship and position as Head of Literature at the University of Nairobi, forcing him to work as a freelance writer. The government barred him from any job at colleges and universities in Kenya. He and his family were continuously harassed and difficult conditions had to be faced. His home was searched by the Kenyan police and more than 100 books were confiscated. All this made him even more determined to speak out against injustices. He saw what happened in his life as hurdles that had to be overcome.

His writings and imprisonment made Ngugi known and respected in Kenya, Africa and the rest of the world. He became a voice of protest in the cause of social righteousness. His criticism of the country's intellectuals as being progressive in their talking, but conservative in their actions, showed clearly that he had distanced himself from that stratum and sided with the masses.

Ngugi resumed his writing as well as his theatre activities. In 1978 *The Trail of Dedan Kimathi* was translated by Ngugi and Micere Githae Mugo into Swahili and published as *Mzalendo Kimathi*.

Ngugi now became a voice that could not be stilled. His novel *Caitani mutharaba-ini* (1980) was the first modern novel to be published in the Kenyan language Gikuyu. In 1981, *Writers in Politics*, dealing with issues of literature and society in various critical essays, was published. In that year Ngugi became involved in the development of another play, *Maitu ma Njugira* which he wrote in Gikuyu in 1982. It was denied permission to be staged at the National Theatre in Nairobi. Ngugi learned that the Kenyan government planned once more to arrest and detain him when they became aware of his continued participation in the Kamiriithu Community Education Centre. Ngugi's theatre group was banned by Kenyan officials and the open-air theatre at Kamiriithu, built by the community, was destroyed by government troops in December. Fearing further reprisals Ngugi left Kenya in 1982 to help the launch of his books. The English version of *Ngaahika Ndeenda*, namely *I Will Marry When I Want*, was published as well as the English version of the Gikuyu novel *Caitani mutharaba-ini* (1980), as *Devil on the Cross*. Ngugi translated both into English. Though his book was labelled dangerous, Heinemann knew quite well that it would sell and they were keen to publish him. He was notified by members of the Kamiriithu Centre that Kenyan government officials were ready to arrest and detain him on his return to Kenya. There were even rumours of execution. This forced Ngugi into a self-imposed exile in London.

Between 1982–1988 he was actively involved in exposing the repressive nature of the Moi-Kanu government. He worked closely with the Committee for the Release of Political Prisoners in Kenya which was based in London. After the unsuccessful coup in Kenya in 1984 he wrote with renewed vigour. He was on the steering committee of the New Directions in African Literature held in London in 1984. His play *The Trail of Dedan Kimati* was performed during the conference. Ngugi delivered a passionate keynote address – the need for African writers to write in African languages as well (Gibbs 1988: 13). In 1985 he worked as Writer in Residence in the London Borough of Islington.

*Maitu ma Njugira* was published in English in 1986 as *Mother Sing for Me*. By writing in Gikuyu, Ngugi wanted to ensure that his writings reached his own people. He announced publicly that his intention was only to write in his mother tongue Gikuyu. The English translations of this important writer's works made his views available to more people than only the Gikuyu-speaking people. More of his critical essays were published in 1986 as *Decolonising the Mind*. They dealt with issues Ngugi felt strongly about, such as language and culture in literature and theatre. The novel *Matigari* soon followed. In it Ngugi addressed the same themes as he did in *Ngaahika Ndeenda*. In February 1987 *Matigari* was banned in Kenya. It was translated into English by Wangui wa Goro (1989). Once again Ngugi spoke out; returning to the same theme he addressed in the play. The critical book, *Moving the centre: The Struggle for Cultural Freedoms* in

which Ngugi dealt with the issue of a creative centre among working people in equal conditions, was published in 1993.

Ngugi wa Thiong'o is no doubt the most published playwright and acclaimed novelist in East Africa. He writes in Gikuyu but his books have been translated into English and more than thirty other languages. He is one of the most prolific African writers and his work, contributing to his literary reputation, is tremendously popular. His work shows great diversity and covers a wide literary spectrum. He remains East Africa's most articulate and influential social commentator. He truthfully reflects the essence of his time and place: speaking out with fierce criticism against imperialism, Christianity, non-African influences, neo-colonialism and the domination of multi-national companies in Africa. From colonial-cultural concerns he moves to contemporary social preoccupations. His works show his concern for his people who have been exploited and oppressed by colonialists and more recently by black politicians and businessmen. Like the Ugandan writer, Okot p'Bitek, Ngugi writes to guide his own, and other African, people. They hope that their work will increase the political awareness amongst the workers and the peasants. Ngugi finds his work a great challenge and goes about it with enormous commitment and enthusiasm.

Apart from publishing after exile, Ngugi has taken up new interests such as filming. His cultural activities include a wide range of teaching and consultative work. He started writing a series of children's books which deal with the adventures of a boy named



Njamba Nene, just before and during the armed struggle for Kenya's Independence. Three of the planned ten books of the series have already been published.

In 1961 Ngugi got married in a traditional wedding ceremony to Nyambura and they had six children: Thiong'o, Kĩmunya, Ngĩna, Ndũũhũ, Mũkoma, Wanjikũ and then a daughter Njooki. After Nyambura's death in 1996 he married Njeeri. They live with two of their children, a daughter Mumbi-Wanjiku Ngugi, and a son, Thiongo K. Ngugi, in University Hills, California. One of Ngugi's sons, his eldest, Thiong'o, lives in Windhoek, Namibia, and works at the Polytechnic as a lecturer. This son is actively involved in cultural activities and theatre, mostly with the cultural organisation *Bricks*.

Ngugi held visiting lectureships and professorships in numerous countries and has taught at various universities in the United States, e.g. between 1989 and 1992 at Yale, Smith and Amherst. He taught at the University of Bayreuth, Germany and the University of Auckland, New Zealand. Since 1992 he was Professor of Comparative Literature and Performance Studies as well as the Erich Maria Remarque Professor of Languages at the New York University until 2002. He also held a joint appointment in the Faculty of Arts and Science at the Tisch School. Ngugi has established himself as international scholar of outstanding pedigree. His outstanding work has earned him many accolades and honours. Ngugi is the recipient of various national and international awards.

(Addendum 1)

Ngugi was, and is a distinguished speaker at numerous institutions in many different countries. Some of his prestigious lectures include:

1984 The Robb Lectures at Auckland University, New Zealand

1996 The Clarendon Lecture in English at Oxford University

1999 The Ashby Lectures at Claire Hall, Cambridge University

The following comment on his works was made: “Ngugi’s approach to literature is one firmly rooted in the historical experience of the writer and his people, in an understanding of society as it is and a vision of society as it might be” (Wamalwa 1986: 13).

*Mutiiri: Njaranda ya Miiikarine* (Keystone: a journal of cultural expression) came about in 1994 after Ngugi relentlessly worked on this dream of establishing a Gikuyu-language journal to give the language’s written tradition exposure.

In April 1994 in Pennsylvania at the Penn State Berks Campus in Reading, a large conference was held to discuss the writings of Ngugi wa Thiong’o. Delegates from all over the world united in their celebration of his work. A volume was published as a result of the Conference: *Ngugi wa Thiong’o: Text and Context* by Prof. Charles Cantalupo of the Penn State University. The poet, Sonia Sanchez, wrote in honour of him:

“We are coming. Eating a little earth. We are coming to stop the imperialists incessant dawns. Ngugi has eaten a little of this earth... As I read Ngugi now it seems as if his words have taken on more flesh and are more human. They have become larger... As I read Ngugi wa Thiong’o my eyes put on more flesh and I tastes the world” (Cantalupo 1995: 367 -368).

Since the end of 2002 he is the new Director of the International Center for Writing and Translation at the University of California, Irvine; a distinguished professor, the highest level of scholarship one can achieve at this university. His mere presence gives stature to their activities and research. He is also Director of the Faculty and Staff Counseling Centre and teaches a graduate course on Post Colonialism and African Narrative. His alma mater, University of Leeds has bestowed an honorary doctorate on him, while the University of the Transkei, RSA, has given him an honorary doctorate in Literature and Philosophy.

Ngugi has a charismatic and dynamic personality and is invited all over the world to speak and lecture. He visited South Africa in September 2003 to give the Fourth Steve Biko Memorial Lecture at the University of Cape Town. Ngugi’s lecture was entitled *Consciousness and African Renaissance: South Africa in the Black Imagination*. The activities were labelled *Celebrating Ngugi / Remembering Sobukwe*. Ngugi’s journey to South Africa was to honour the late Pan Africanist Congress founder and leader, Robert Mangeliso Sobukwe. Ngugi was received a life honorary membership in the Council for

the Development of Social Sciences Research in Africa (CODESRIA) and a honorary membership of the Academy of Arts and Letters.

On August 8, 2004 Ngugi and his wife, Njeeri, a U.S. counsellor, returned to Kenya for a month-long lecture-tour through East Africa. This was the first time after 22 years of self-imposed exile in Europe that Ngugi returned to his homeland Kenya. Ngugi has sworn in 1982 that he would only return to Kenya once Daniel arap Moi was no longer president. This happened in December 2002 when Moi had to agree to the limits of the presidential terms. He stood down ahead of elections to allow Uhuru Kenyatta, his handpicked successor, to stand as the presidential candidate. But Kenya had had enough of repression and Kenyatta lost the election to Mwai Kibaki. With Kenya's long-standing president, Daniel arap Moi, out of office, the time was ripe for Ngugi to return to his homeland.

Ngugi felt that "he owes his return to the collective struggle of the Kenyan people" (BBC News, August 12) and continued by saying "I have come back with an open mind, an open heart and open arms. I have come to touch base. I have come to learn. I harbor no bitterness or desire for vengeance" (BBC News, Aug 16, 2004). He delivered various public lectures at East African universities. During his tour he was pleasantly impressed by the progress that was made in the country. Kenyans could now freely talk politics without fear of detention.

His homecoming was however marred by a vicious and violent attack on the night of Wednesday, August 11, 2004 when he and Njeeri were assaulted. The police felt that the attack was not politically motivated, but an ordinary burglary. Some money and a computer were stolen, but Ngugi was brutalized and his wife raped. Ngugi made the statement that he saw the attack as a deliberate attempt to humiliate and intimidate him as a writer rather than a simple act of violent theft. There were strong suspicions of government complicity.

The rest of the tour was immediately cancelled by Ngugi's publishers, East African Publishing House. Ngugi had one of his dreams fulfilled before they left Kenya when he and Njeeri had a traditional wedding ceremony in the small village of Mitero in the Thika district, Central Kenya, on August 28. On August 29, 2004 they returned to the United States of America. On departure he said, "We will come back. Kenya is my country and I will come over and over again" (BBC News August 30, 2004).

His latest book, the biggest ever written in Gikuyu, *Muroogi wa Kigogo* (2004) was supposed to be launched in Kenya, but in light of recent events in Kenya, it was done on August 26, 2004 in London. The English version, *The Wizard of the Crow*, is expected to be released early in 2005. In true Ngugi tradition it is a thought-provoking satirical novel that is based on a Gikuyu folk tale. It is the largest original book ever published in an African language. In November 2004 the Ngugis came back to Kenya to testify in the trial of the people accused of their attack. Among the culprits was Ngugi's nephew.

Today Ngugi is one of the most well-known post-colonial writers whose work has achieved recognition throughout the world. The interaction between cultures of Kenya, the rest of Africa, the other Third-World countries, as well as the cultures of the European peoples is still of great interest to him. The humanist content not only appeals to him, but he feels there is a harmony between the literature and culture of their struggles. He and other Kenyan writers started the Writer's Association of Kenya and since the government does not support them, Ngugi contributes 5% of his royalties to it (Cantalupo 1995: 31).

On May 24, 2004 the president of South Africa, Thabo Mbeki, dedicated his whole African Day Celebration speech to the contribution of Ngugi to the continent of Africa.

## **1.2 A CHANGE OF NAME**

Ngugi wa Thiong'o was known to Africa and the rest of the world as James Ngugi until 1970. At The Fifth General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church of East Africa in Nairobi, Kenya, Ngugi confessed that he was no longer of the Christian faith. He was confronted with the fact that his baptismal name James was a name used in the Bible, i.e. for one of the apostles of Christ, and thus a symbol of Christianity. To rectify the contradiction he made the public announcement that he was also renouncing his English/Christian name James and would be assuming his traditional Gikuyu name

Ngugi wa Thiong'o, a reversion to the traditional African name as it was pre-colonial and pre-Christian.

The *wa* in Ngugi's traditional African name means "of" and thus means Ngugi-son-of-Thiong'o. For the Gikuyu a name was of great importance. As a people they were secure in their ancestry and embodied it in their traditional way of naming.

By changing his name Ngugi made a forceful symbolic statement: he personally indicated that he was refusing not only Christianity, but also the Western identity. His African name reflects his ethnic origin and his cultural identity, of which he was proud. The heritage of his Africa, his ancestors, his father and his family became his as well. The name-change made Ngugi re-evaluate his commitment to his Gikuyu traditions. The awareness of his African roots was evident in his announcement to only use Gikuyu, his mother tongue, as the language of his writings.

Ngugi was cleansing himself of the oppressive power of British colonisation and its influence on his traditional culture. As religion (Christianity) and education (English) were instruments used by the colonial powers to oppress and demoralise his country, he shed both. "The change of names was only the first step in reinventing himself for the struggle to which he was committed" (Cox 1977: 551). Ngugi made the point that a writer should keep his writing alive and true by "changing and developing as his personality and his vision impel him to" (Olney 1973: 283).

“I am not sure that having an English Christian name would have deterred me from the task of exposing imperialist cultural domination, or spared me the attacks from those not opposed to imperialism..... I had to start by rejecting the slave tradition of acquiring the master’s name” (Ngugi 1981: xxi).

Today the name change is known to few people. His reputation as an African writer from Kenya is so well established that he is known and referred to in Africa and the world as Ngugi.

### **1.3 THE ISSUE OF LANGUAGE**

The official language of Kenya is English, the European language of the former colonial power. Its use is limited to the educated upper class. English is considered by many as the literary language of the country. Anglophone literature is the most extensive compared to any other European language outside Africa. Kenya has more than 40 national languages of which Gikuyu, the mother tongue of the largest ethnic group, the Aagikuyu, is the dominant one. Only a few Kenyans can speak a language other than their own tribal mother tongue. Most people, around 65%, are illiterate as more than 80% of the population lives in rural areas.



In Kenya all the early literature was written in English. There was no concrete tradition to fall back upon. As a scholar and student Ngugi was attracted to literature by the vast vocabulary of the English language. Chinua Achebe of Nigeria and Effua Sutherland of Ghana were but two of the African writers who used English. Others used French or Portuguese. Abiola Irele explained how it came about that these languages were used, “...modern African literature has grown out of the rupture created within our indigenous history and way of life by the colonial experience, which is naturally expressed in the tongue of our former colonial rulers” (Heywood 1977: 9).

Ngugi wrote his short stories, his first novels and the two plays *The Trail of Dedan Kimathi* and *The Black Hermit* in English. The realisation that the masses, the peasantry, of whom he wrote and for whom he writes messages through his literature, did not have access to his writings because it was in English, was a painful discovery for Ngugi. His professional use of a foreign language was in effect removing him from the majority of Africans. He started to think seriously that the language should convey the rich culture and history of the Kenyan people to them through literature. As a writer, he was convinced that a foreign language could not express his culture and history in the proper way, the imagery known to a native of Kenya would not be familiar to a foreigner: how could he then convey it properly in his writing?

In 1966 he was already troubled enough on that score and granted an interview to a newspaper at the University of Leeds. By 1976 he had more clarity and at the Kenyatta

University College he gave a public lecture *Return to the Roots: The Language Basis for a Kenyan National Literature* where he said “I called on Kenyan writers to return to the sources of their beings in the languages of their peasant mothers and fathers, to thoroughly immerse themselves in the rural community life of our people, and to seek inspiration from the daily rhythms of life and problems of the peasants” (Ngugi 1981: 182). Ngugi felt quite strongly that African literature, written by Africans, in a colonial language, is not African literature as the native tongue provides its own genealogy and syntax.

In an interview with Ingrid Bjorkman he stated, “The moment you write in English you assume a readership who can speak and read English, and in this case it can only mean the educated African elite or the foreigners who speak the language. This means that you are precluding in terms of class the peasantry, or the workers in Africa who do not read or understand these foreign languages” (Bjorkman 1989: 3).

Other questions emerged: Who does he want to reach? How can he who speaks out against lingering colonial dominance, cultural imperialism, and for the survival of his own culture, write in the language of the colonial oppressor? (Bjorkman 1989: 33). Ngugi took the view that “the languages of the former colonial powers are living symbols of domination and that a man who adopts such a language, ‘by acquiring the thought-processes and values of his adopted tongue ...becomes alienated from the values of his mother tongue, or from the language of the masses’” (Killam 1984: 71).

Africans were prohibited from using their own native languages and the foreign languages forced upon them – a direct result of the colonial oppression which had devastating effects on their culture.

In most African countries there is currently a coexistence of European and African languages. In many cases the European language is the dominant medium; the official language for instruction and communication in the government and education, while the African languages play subordinate role of social communication among the ethnic groups (Amuta 1989: 43).

Ngugi, well-known for his controversial views, decided, in the interest of the struggle for cultural independence in Africa, to abandon English as a means of literary expression. His decision thus supported his political and cultural beliefs. Frantz Fanon expressed Ngugi's own feelings when he said, "To speak means to be in a position to use a certain syntax, to grasp the morphology of this or that language, but it means above all to assume a culture, to support the weight of a civilization" (Gurnah 1993: viii).

He made this intention known in his book *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature* by announcing, "This book...is my farewell to English as a vehicle for any of my writings. From now on it is Gikuyu and Kiswahili all the way" (Ngugi 1994: xiv). With this resolution he strengthened his commitment to the

Kenyan culture. By writing in Gikuyu, Ngugi acknowledged the Gikuyu's presence and traditions as an individual group; and in pursuing their own literature he enriched them. In his book *Decolonising the Mind: the Politics of African Literature* he wrote emphatically those African writers should express themselves in indigenous languages in order to reach African masses. He felt that the dominance of the former colonial language was psychologically suppressing and destroying their culture and that national Kenyan literature must utilize the rich traditions of cultural history carried by the Kenyan languages. For Ngugi language and culture are inseparable and should be promoted by the language usage, not only for communication, but for writing as well. If marginalized groups used their own native languages they would rediscover their culture and it would serve the additional purpose of escaping the colonial past where colonial languages were imposed on the inhabitants of a colonised country. In his opinion "Only by writing and thinking in an indigenous language can one's own deepest thoughts be expressed; only in this way can the package of European assumptions and world views carried in the European language be avoided" (Cooper 1992: 119).

The language issue; the burning question of which language to write in and its implications, became a heated and problematic struggle which reached a critical phase as two dominant opposing views emerged.

Ngugi and other African writers, e.g. Obi Wali, reasoned that genuine African literature can only be written in African languages; thus opposing writers such as Wole Soyinka,

poet, novelist and playwright from Nigeria, who prefer English as their means of expression. Chinua Achebe, the Nigerian novelist, also opposed Ngugi, feeling that they “write out of an African experience and of commitment to an African destiny” (Killam 1984: 71) even if they use English. He elaborated on this by saying in his book *No Longer at Ease* (1960), “The African writer should aim to use English in a way that brings out this message best without altering the language to the extent that its value as a medium of international exchange will be lost. He should aim at fashioning out English which is at once universal and able to carry his peculiar experience” (Gurnah 1984: viii). Both Achebe and Soyinka “insist that African literature written in European languages is historically legitimate and that the use of these languages to communicate African experiences enriches both the languages in question and the literature itself” (Amuta 1989: 112). Achebe further reasoned that English “can express the need and the nature of African realities (Cooper 1992: 120). Many urbanised South Africans, for whom “English is more like another first language rather than a foreign tongue” (Cooper 1992: 120) support Achebe’s view while Ngugi and his followers as the opposition felt that they were too much under the influence of Euro-American languages and that, specifically for African writers, “English is steeped in the world views and imagery of the British” (Cooper 1992: 133) and that it alienates them from their own world. “Chinua Achebe has reduced his responses to a brief statement: anyone is free to write in any language he wants” (Larson 2001:43).

Ngugi and his followers strongly agreed with the Ugandan poet Okot p'Bitek who said, "Only by affirming the integrity of their own cultural identity will Africans find happiness a genuine fulfillment" and that he "desires to release the creative potential of Africa by making Africans conscious and proud of their own rich cultural heritage" (Killam 1984: 146). For Okot p'Bitek it was an urgent need to return to indigenous languages to express the African reality. Ngugi went so far in expressing his dissatisfaction with African literature that he said: "What in fact has so far been produced by Kenyan writers in English is *not* African literature ...it is *Afro-Saxon literature*" (Killam 1984: 231).

To Ngugi it was of fundamental importance that there should be direct communication among the cultures in Kenya. He further reasoned that Gikuyu reached a very large group of the population – the poor, the peasants, the workers. By translating his writings into Swahili it was available to an even larger public – more literate Kenyans. By translating his work eventually into English he reached both the educated upper class and the international public.

The language issue was of national-cultural importance. It was strongly felt that Africans acquired the European languages as a result of imperialism. The ideology and the language are intermeshed and it was Fanon who said that "it means above all to assume a culture..." (Gurnah 1993: viii).

He realizes that the ongoing cultural revolution needed more when he said, “Writing in our languages ... will not in itself bring about the renaissance in African cultures if that literature does not carry the content of our people’s anti-imperialist struggles to liberate their productive forces from foreign control” (Ngugi 1972: x).

With his example he set the table for more Gikuyu literature which would come. Eventually in 1994, while in exile, he played a huge role in the inspiring and launching of a journal of literature and cultural expression in the Gikuyu language, *Mutiiri: Njaranda ya Mukarire*. This journal was a platform for “poetry, short fiction, translations (\*Swahili-Gikuyu, Spanish-Gikuyu) literary and cultural criticism, excerpts from prison memoirs, biography and autobiography, political commentary, and philosophical reflection by some of the best and more promising contemporary Gikuyu writers and translators” (Killam 2000: 104). Ngugi wa Mirii is one of the contributors to the journal.

The South African poet Denis Brutus said at the 1992 Conference of African and Asian Writers that English would be the language of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. People should accept the fact and be ready to use it. It was felt that Ngugi became famous enough to get the attention of the world because he first published his writings in English and they were successful before he announced that he would only use Gikuyu and no English.

January 2000 the conference *Against All Odds: African Languages and Literatures into the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, was held in Asmara. It was attended by many writers including Ngugi. The outcome was positive: Africa must reject the colonial languages and begin anew by returning to Africa's own languages and heritage.

The controversial debate is still raging and is but one of the problems confronting the African writer.

Ngugi now writes with the same vigour and commitment as he did when he was writing in English. He insists on having his Gikuyu writings translated from the original Gikuyu and not English to open up a direct dialogue with other languages and cultures. He writes in Gikuyu out of respect for his own culture, his African identity and the Gikuyu people. He wants to see growth and development in his and other African cultures and languages. His writings now contain less realism and more fantasy and allegory to which the Gikuyu-speaking people can relate. "He argued that to provoke social change, works needed to be written in local languages and not those of the colonizers" (The Namibian Weekender, Friday, August 20, 2004 :10).

Ngugi addresses the crucial debates about the use of language in African literatures, and that of culture, in his critical essays, *Decolonising the Mind* (1986) and *Moving the Centre* (1993). He advocates a decolonising of the mind as a process to return to the use of local languages. English, or any other language for that matter, must be seen as a



language like any other spoken in the world. It, they argue, is on a par with any African language: important because of its cultural value. Ngugi feels that in translations certain things can get lost while trying to get the essence of the script across that the equivalence is not always reached as one would have hoped for.

Today he still hails the same beliefs about the power of language and displays the courage to carry on confronting the important issues in African literature as he has been doing for many years. His work at the UCI International Centre for Writing and Translation supports writing, translation, criticism and the revitalising of indigenous languages. Here important debates about issues concerning language and culture that lay close to his heart occur daily. “A national culture (and literature, theatre and languages are integral components of culture) must reflect the entire national situation, rooted as it is in the concrete experiences of the various nationalities that make up the Kenyan nation” (Ngugi 1981:195).

As a committed and active practitioner in the language he not only brought the Gikuyu-language to the attention of the Kenyan people, but indigenous languages as such to the attention of Africa and the rest of the world. “One sure way of developing languages is to actively encourage popular drama and literature in those languages” (Ngugi 1981:194).

He also succeeded in making people aware of oral traditions as an inspiration for their work. He reasoned that if you used them, they would be saved from oblivion. Currently most written literature in Africa is done in European languages while oral literary creativity carries on mostly in the rural areas. Ngugi hopes this will change.

#### **1.4 INFLUENCES ON NGUGI WA THIONG'O**

##### **1.4.1 INFLUENCES ON HIS WRITING**

When one studies Ngugi's plays one finds certain similarities between themes from his work and the experiences of many of his fellow writers and theatre practitioners, just as there are differences, due to influences on him specifically. The theatre practitioner Bertolt Brecht, as well as the Latin-American theatre activist Augusto Boal, both made huge contributions to the theatre. Ngugi himself does not claim to be influenced by them, but does admit frequently to the influences of Frantz Fanon and Paulo Freire who are contemporaries of Boal and who share his views. Ngugi's theatre aesthetics shows however that he has been influenced by Brecht and Boal's theatre philosophies. Other writers whom he read with appreciation and who influenced his thinking and literary expression were amongst others, Aristotle, D. H. Lawrence, Karl Marx, Tolstoy, Zola, Joseph Conrad, Friedrich Engels, Lenin and Cabral. Though all of these people's

influence is important, this thesis does not aim to elaborate on all of them, but only those influences that affected Ngugi's plays and theatre practices.

One common belief that theatre activists and practitioners share is that the society must change. The only possible way that it is going to happen is through revolution by the masses. To change the society means a struggle for a new economic, political and cultural order which is free from imperialism. One of the biggest weapons in the arsenal of imperialism is culture. It is therefore logical that society should fight back by using theatre.

During his primary school years at the Church of Scotland Mission School, Ngugi read Stevenson and Charles Dickens. It was one of his English teachers, Samuel Kibicho, who introduced a variety of European literature to his classes. This opened up an exciting, but foreign world, to Ngugi. He started to wish to be able to write like those authors.

At Alliance High School he came into contact with yet another new kind of literary expression: the work of liberal writers such as Alan Paton and Leo Tolstoy. It was at Makerere University that he, for the first time, read works of African and West Indian writers. "I remember three authors and books as being particular important to me: Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, George Lumming's *In the Castle of my Skin* and Peter Abraham's *Tell Freedom*" (Black Literature Criticism: 1502). The works of each

of the writers contributed to the literary education of Ngugi in a unique way (Cook 1997: 198). “I started reading African literature which so excited me because I could identify with the assumptions, the background, the characters, the problems” (Wilkinson 1992: 132). George Lamming opened up West Indian and Caribbean literature and gave him an awareness of the political Africa which he encountered in some African writers who visited the Caribbean as well. The Nigerian Chinua Achebe introduced him to West African writers and the South African Peter Abraham an affinity to the writers from the south of Africa. In his article *The African and his Past*, Ngugi felt that he and many other African writers agreed with George Lumming when he said, “the African has not been completely severed from his roots” (Heywood 1977: 5). Ngugi stated, “This was the beginning of my interest in the literature of the African people in the Third World” (Black Literature Criticism: 1502) which introduced another world, one of hardship and suffering and to him. It influenced his view of the world considerably. “Again, I could recognize the world of Caribbean literature very well: it’s the same world that I knew, the same world dominated by slavery and imperialism in its colonial and neo-colonial stages, and of course the struggles of those people against those different stages of social oppression” (Wilkinson 1992: 132). These literatures opened a growing consciousness in Ngugi, with attendant influenced on his writings. The methodical collection of data during years of reading resulted in his identifying with the ideologies.

Leeds University took up where Makerere University had left off. Now Ngugi became exposed to a tradition of radical intellectualism and a much wider literary world. “It

made me aware of the radical literature that embraced the Third World as well as the socialist world” (Black Literature Criticism: 1502).

The first contact with Frantz Fanon was through his *The Damned* that was published as *The Wretched of the Earth* (1967). Ngugi started to address issues such as colonialism, imperialism and neo-colonialism through his own writings in this period after reading literature of writers such as Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels and Vladimir I. Lenin (Ngugi 1981: 132). It shaped his writing into a new dimension. It was however not only in respect of literature, but also in the genre of theatre that people’s writing and practices shaped Ngugi. Brecht and Gorky contributed through their progressive imaginative literature and their bold work in the theatre (Ngugi 1981: 132). Gorky’s novel *Mother* (1907) made a tremendous impression on him.

When one studies the works of the authors below, one can appreciate similarities between their output and that of Ngugi. A man as widely read and travelled as Ngugi would not only have read their works, but met some of them or attended international conferences on their work (Cook 1997: 122,185).

**JOSEPH CONRAD**

Conrad was the author Ngugi chose to concentrate on during an assignment at Makerere. “For Ngugi, the appeal of Conrad lay not only in his exploration of alienation, self-betrayal, and heroism, and in his writing ‘a borrowed language’ ... it also lay in Conrad’s political and economic themes –” (Cantalupo 1995: 38).

The Russian-born Józef Teodor Konrad Nalęcz Korzeniowski became the novelist, Joseph Conrad, who would through his writings speak to the heart and the head. Maybe it was that which had made Ngugi aware of him as Ngugi had the utmost respect for the excellent command of the English language that Conrad had.

Chinua Achebe found Conrad’s book, *Heart of Darkness* (1899) disturbing and felt that it was an unjust, racist reflection of the Africans. Words like ‘savages’ and ‘grotesk’ were to him an assault and clearly showed Conrad’s subverted vision of Africa’s people and a colonial text. It is however true that Conrad does succeed in effectively exposing the discrepancies between colonial pretence and reality which appealed to Ngugi. Where both writers were in agreement is in their conviction that colonialism was a scramble for loot and their writing reflected the horrors of that intrusion. Even Christianity was seen by them as bringing anguish to people instead of inner peace. Ngugi paints the European as greedy and heartless; the African as landless (Cook: 1997:191 and Killam 1984:137).

### D.H. LAWRENCE

David Herbert Lawrence was known for his eccentricities during his relatively short life. His poems are read by most scholars of English, then and now, and Ngugi too came into contact with them as a student. Lawrence insisted on the individual's dual and conflicting needs to be separate and to be in communion. Where this balance is not achieved the result is an utter and destructive division. Ngugi stresses in most of his writings that the colonial oppressor caused the destruction of the individual and the community.

Not only was there a stylistic relation between the two writers but also "when it came to the portraying of the thoughts of women and men and the effect of the environment or setting on their perceptions" according to Jonathan Karaira who read his first story (Cox 1997: 541). The events that happened during his childhood and later years, and the people's suffering, made an ineffaceable impression on Ngugi. It became the main theme of his work and his writing.

### MARX

**"The dominating ideas in a given society are those of the dominating class"** (Marx)

**"The proletarians have nothing to lose but chains,**

**they have a world to win,  
workingmen of all countries unite.”** (Marx)

Under reactionary Marxist influence, Ngugi asked himself what his role as a writer was in the African society, and even more so: what would his role be in the future of Africa? He could, as a Marxist, not condone the changes which colonialism had brought to Kenya. He analysed the situation in Marxist terms and came to the conclusion that one class (the bourgeoisie), in the pursuing of its own selfish interests, was exploiting another (the peasants and workers): the haves are feeding on the havenots. Ngugi felt strongly that a new revolutionary order was needed economically, politically and culturally; through struggle if need be. His plays offered a reflection of the ongoing struggle for revolutionary change in accordance with Marxist principles. Ngugi hinted in his work of the struggle needed to achieve a democratic society in Kenya and the rest of Africa.

As for Marx the choice for Ngugi too was a simple one: either the politics of Oppression or the politics of Liberation. In true Marxist fashion Ngugi suggested a revolt of the masses in his *I Will Marry When I Want* and *Petals of Blood*. He dictated further the purging of the new black elite ruling class and that capitalism is replaced by African socialism. Marx offers a systematic framework for mobilization against capitalism. Ngugi used the themes in his novels and his plays when he conscientised the people of oppression, neo-colonialism and exploitation.



Ngugi, like other Marxists Biodun Jeyifo and Omafume Onoge, concentrated on a materialistic analysis of African society and actively sought to bring about social change in his plays (Wright 2004: 46). He tried to press home his ideology and ideas on social conformity in exploring the difficulties involved in social change in a neo-colonial country in his writings and theatre. In *I Will Marry When I Want* Kiguunda was a victim of such neo-colonialism. Capitalism oppressed the proletariat – the workers – and they were seen as the group with the social power to liberate their society. As capitalism industrialised more of his country each day, Ngugi looked at the world through the eyes of the oppressed people and tried to get them to unite.

From Ngugi's dramatic texts Marxists recovered the voice of the oppressed. Such an approach argues that the established 'canon' of literature was a reflection of the ruling class' need to marginalise and contain the subversive and the oppressed. Such criticism maintained that the elite controlled the means of production of stereotypes that presented the working class as undesirable or at best substandard. The Marxists, Ngugi included, shouted cry the battle cry "Workers of the world, unite!" In this battle against the oppressing exploiters they claimed a political weapon: theatre.

Ngugi's cultural work was radical Marxist in going to the roots of the problems in Kenya, which were greedy, corrupt men who exploited their workers, e.g. by giving inadequate pay. As with Marxist criticism, Ngugi's work "...goes beyond a formal and

content analysis of artistic works, to a consideration of the very institutional process of art creation and art criticism” (Gugelberger 1985: x). Ngugi came to the conclusion that art and politics are inseparable.

The class struggle was between the bourgeoisie and proletariat. Both Marx and Engels believed in their doctrine that the class struggle between these two groups would lead inevitably to the overthrow of capitalism, thus promoting the cause of social progress. The class struggle was depicted in various ways in *I Will Marry When I Want*. The hypocrisy of the bourgeois was exposed in the blatantly polarized characterization: Kioi son, John, is a product of the neo-colonial society and Gathoni, Kiguunda’s daughter, is not acceptable as his wife as she is not his ‘class’, not his equal. Njooki says:

Rich families marry from rich families,

The poor from the poor!

*I Will Marry When I Want* (Act One, p. 32).

Not only is there a contrast in their clothes, their eating habits, their way of speaking, but most obvious in their way of doing things. Kiguunda, the peasant farmer and worker, and Kioi the rich businessman, who collaborates with capitalistic foreigners, represent the different classes through themselves and their families.

Ngugi, and many other African playwrights such as Zakes Mda, the South African playwright who wrote *We Shall Sing for the Fatherland* (1972), where Ofisiri, the Businessman and the Banker are the opposing class to Janabari and Sergeant who are ex-freedom fighters. The play is infused with the spirit of the class-struggle, the overthrow of capitalism, the dictatorship of the proletariat and the game of power politics. Namibia's playwright, Frederik B. Philander's *The Porridge Queen* (2005) is another example of the struggle between opposing classes. Queen, Takala and Capie are the representatives of the workers and Minister and Politician their opponents. These 'modern' plays reflect the class structure, conflicts and interests of their societies. The class struggle in itself is not new; playwrights such as Gorky, Ibsen and Chekhov have addressed this many years before. In Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard* (1904) the servant is the one who suffers most. Their plays are a protest against the human suffering that continues as the struggle for Freedom never ends in social reform. These Marxists exposed the weaknesses of the upper classes that formed the ruling society for the masses to see the conditions of their society. Marxism calls for a revolt of the masses and the elimination of the black bourgeoisie and capitalism to be replaced with African socialism. Ngugi reiterated that message so strongly in his play *I Will Marry When I Want* that the Kenyan regime banned the performances.

## **1.4.2 INFLUENCES ON HIS THEATRE PRACTICES**

### **AUGUSTO BOAL**

**“The theatre of the oppressed emphasizes theatre as a language that must be spoken, not a discourse that must be listened to. It also stresses theatre as a process that must be developed, rather than a finished product that must be consumed. The theatre of the oppressed goes beyond the ordinary boundaries of theatre because it asserts the oppressed are the subjects rather than the objects of theatre activity”**  
(Boal 1990: 35).

**“The theatre of the oppressed proves ... artistic creation is inherent to all human beings”** (Boal 1978).

Augusto Boal is a Brazilian cultural and theatre activist who had great influence on African Theatre for Development theorists such as Zakes Mda, Ngugi, Michael Etherton, Kees P. Epskamp and others. He is known as a most important pacesetter of the post-Brechtian political theatre. Boal was born in Rio. Although he graduated with a degree in chemical engineering from the University of Brazil in 1952, he was already into theatre activities at that stage. While studying at Columbia University, New York he was exposed to theatre directing and soon became a director. Back in Brazil, Boal started to direct controversial plays at the Arena Theatre of Sao Paulo. “I tried to do all I

could to restore democracy – by writing, directing, and political action,” Boal says. “But the authorities were not amused” (Boal 1990: 26). After being tortured and detained, he left for Argentina where he directed plays he could not stage in Brazil. Gradually he developed the Theatre of the Oppressed. He moved to Portugal where he directed plays at the National Conservatory of Theatre until he went to the Sorbonne, Paris, to teach. In 1986 he returned to Brazil on invitation of the new government. After another change in regime the theatre project he was involved in with under-privileged children, was stopped. Today he travels frequently to Europe, Africa and America, running theatre of the oppressed workshops.

The change in Theatre for Development practices began when Boal worked at the Arena Theatre in São Paulo as theatre director when his experimentation with theatre led him to new socio-dramatic forms of theatre known as the *Theatre of the Oppressed*. He invited audiences to discuss the play they have observed at the end of the performance. Boal called the audience ‘reactors’ to the action that they have seen, but they remained just viewers. In the 1960s he created a course of action whereby the audience “could stop a performance and suggest different actions for the actors, who would then carry out the audience’s suggestions. But in a now legendary development, a woman in the audience once was so outraged the actor could not understand her suggestion that she came onto the stage and showed what she meant. For Boal this was the birth of the spec-actor (not spectator) and his theatre was transformed.” (Paterson 2003: 1). In this theatre type there are *active observers* as Boal refers to the participating audience. His theatre

techniques were developed to help the spectator to become involved in the play so that what he experienced, he could apply in his own life. In conventional theatre the dramatic action on stage is a reflection of life – the passive audience can only look on, absorb, appreciate and afterwards reflect on what they have seen; but they cannot modify or in any way affect anything that occurs on the stage. For Boal the stage is not the centre of activity, but the auditorium is and therefore the auditorium must be activated to involve each person in the audience in the mobilising action into changing the status quo. How Ngugi applied this is described in Chapter 3.

The body of techniques he called the *Theatre of the Oppressed* had as the gist of it people and their circumstances. The theatre method was used to articulate and decipher their problems. They created images of their reality and reacted to these. It directly involved the spectators in a theatre that functioned “as a rehearsal for the revolution” (Boal 1990: 27) it would like to evoke. A facilitator, or Coringas (joker) as Boal called them, helped the people involved to get to the bottom of their complex problems and find solutions in a practical and participatory way. Boal used the term ‘action’ to emphasise the importance of the actors ‘doing things’ on stage – even engaging in a verbal debate with the audience (Boal 1990).

Boal’s experimentation with theatre led him to more new socio-dramatic forms of theatre known as the Forum Theatre, Image Theatre and Legislative Theatre. All these theatre forms had a profound impact on the known traditional theatre practices. He

developed Forum Theatre and Image Theatre as vehicles for his community-based performances. Forum theatre is short scenes that characterise the particular problems of a specific community on which the audience can interact by changing the characters as they did at Kamiriithu. It can also be done by improvising new solutions to the problems in hand. Image theatre uses individuals to shape events and relationships to the accompaniment of a narrative.

When the oppressed spectators become protagonists “they will be qualified to use the theatre of the oppressed tools in order to make what it should be, a theatre of liberation” (Boal 1990: 34). Boal strongly insists that “the theatre of the oppressed techniques is meant to help the oppressed; they are actually their weapons of liberation” (Boal 1990: 33) and Ngugi agrees. The techniques address specific events or problems and suggest possible actions. “If the oppressed himself perform an action, this action performed in a theatrical fiction, will allow him to change things in his real life” (Boal 1990: 42).

As a radical activist with the same reasoning as Boal, Ngugi did apply similar techniques but with his own unique adaptation. He used the workers and peasants as actors and discovered just as Boal did, that the participation of the audience in the development, and even the actual staging of the play, empowered them. They created theatre for action and the people as a community could collectively go from imagining change to actually implementing that envisioned social change through action. Boal and Ngugi realised that “Theatre became a practical vehicle for grass-roots activism” (Patterson 2003: 1). Both

theatre practitioners applied it in their communities with enthusiasm, so much so that Boal was arrested and eventually exiled to Argentina and later to self-exile in Europe; and Ngugi arrested, detained and driven into self-exile in the United Kingdom and later the United States of America. It however did not stop them carrying on using revolutionary approaches to further their theatre activities or their writings. Ngugi used the same method when he created *I Will Marry When I Want* and later *Mother, Sing for Me* with the people of Kamiriithu.

Boal used the Theatre of the Oppressed method to break the oppression: “The dominant classes crush the dominated ones through repression; The old crush the young through repression; certain races subjugate others through repression ... The ruling classes, the old, the ‘superior’ races, or the masculine sex, have their sets of values and by force, by unilateral violence, upon the oppressed classes, the young, the races they consider inferior, or woman,” they force them (Boal 1979: 51).

Boal and Ngugi used theatre as a powerful mode of expression. Their theatre was not for entertainment or art’s sake. They were in agreement with Aristophanes that a playwright should, besides giving pleasure, also advise politically. Through their revolutionary inspired work they want to sensitise communities of the increasing poverty, growing illiteracy and discrimination against them and their culture. Ngugi let Gicaamba lash out against these inhuman practices when he criticises the ruling class and their foreign partners in *I Will Marry When I Want*:



The owners of these companies are real scorpions.

They know three things only:

To oppress workers,

To take away their rights,

And to suck their blood. (Act 1, p 33)

Boal published four books of which the first, *The Theatre of the Oppressed* (1971) took the theatre world by storm.

It is astounding to see how both Boal and Ngugi as radical activists had the same thoughts on theatre. Their social backgrounds have shaped their outlooks. They are both committed political theatre activists. Ngugi's intense social and political commitment shows itself clearly in his anti-imperialist consciousness and in his socialist ideology. In that he betrays also the influences of Fanon and Cabral, as well as Marx. With his plays Ngugi states the nature of his commitment to himself, Kenya and theatre. Continents may have divided them, but they were united in using the theatre to voice their opinions and grievances against the continuing oppression of the masses by others; mostly a small minority with political power. Theatre for them provides the way to build consciousness, mobilise people for action, engage in the struggle and reflect on the struggle. Where the oppressor wants the oppressed to be subservient and submissive, their goal was to change that to equality.

Both Boal and Ngugi strongly believe in the revolutionary and liberatory role the theatre could play in the political field of the stage. Both Boal and Ngugi strove with their approach towards ultimate theatre. They made the worker aware of his circumstances and the domination of the ruling class. They used the theatre to obliterate illiteracy and encourage pride in their own national indigenous languages. The theatre of the revolutionary has a definite function – it must mirror the disgraces and deterioration of the new nation state.

Boal propagates the theatre as a weapon. Ngugi aims to use that weapon effectively to achieve awareness among the oppressed people, to educate the masses and to bring social change for those who continue to be exploited by others. Through his plays, *I Will Marry When I Want*, *Mother, Sing for Me* and novels, *Petals of Blood*, *Devil on the Cross*, and *Matigari*, he seeks to liberate his people in their respective communities; thus providing fuel for a social revolution in order to bring change.

Boal indicated that the ruling class utilised the theatre as a tool for domination (Boal 1990). Boal, Ngugi and other like-minded practitioners utilized their theatre as a tool for liberation. That way the people free themselves. They act, think for themselves and demand liberation:

Let's drive away the darkness

From all our land.

*I Will Marry When I Want* (Act 3, Scene 3, p.114)

Playwrights are the voice of the voiceless oppressed. A free social order, according to Ngugi would allow individual development and emancipation of the workers.

### **FANON**

**“Ngugi wa Thiong’o became one of the earliest advocates of an African literary practice emerging from Frantz Fanon’s call for the participation of artists in political revolution against the neocolonial ‘native bourgeoisie’ that would continue to control independent African states”** (Cantalupo 1995: 193).

Frantz Fanon, a West-Indian social theorist, psychoanalyst and commentator, was a psychiatrist born in Martinique. He formulated his revolutionary ideas on the psychology of the colonised and the coloniser. He identified oppression as a political tool in his book *Black Skin, White Mask* (1967). As many others, he experienced the struggle for independence first-hand and could speak from the heart. Fanon believed that it was not individuals who had to change, but the society. The only possible way for that change to happen was through revolution. Ngugi, under Fanon’s influence, fully agreed and propagated this message through his work.

In his novel *The Wretched of the Earth* (1967) Fanon identified the poor, cheap and exploited workers as the wretched of the earth and as the instrument of revolution. He identified oppression as a political and economic tool. Exploitation of one group by another is the essence of capitalism and he and Ngugi agreed that capitalism brings no equality. By convincing the workers that they were inferior to the owners, they were only paid a pittance to enable the owners to make bigger profits. The workers' labour is the creator of the wealth.

Prof. Grant Kamenju, a Kenyan lecturer at the University of Dar es Salaam, introduced Ngugi to Fanon's work. While Marx gave articulation to the political-economical philosophy Ngugi would adopt, Fanon contributed to the cultural-socialistic philosophy Ngugi would apply in his work (Killam 1980: 11).

Chidi Amuta says in his article *Fanon, Cabral and Ngugi on National Liberation*, "Fanon's position on culture is predicated on his essentially materialist recognition of the exploitative economic motive of colonialism as the decisive determinant of all aspects of the life of the colonized" (Ashcroft 1995: 158) – a position that Ngugi too hails in his work. "To fight for national culture means in the first place to fight for the liberation of the nation. ...There is no other fight for culture which can develop apart from the popular struggle" (Ashcroft 1995: 154). Ngugi's feelings and aims are summed up in what Fanon says in his article *National Culture* (153) "A national culture is the whole body of efforts made by a people in the sphere of thought to describe,

justify, and praise the action through which that people has created itself and keeps itself in existence... While at the beginning the native intellectual used to produce his work to be read exclusively by the oppressor, ... now the native writer progressively takes on the habit of addressing his own people. It is only from that moment that we can speak of a national literature” (Ashcroft: 155). Fanon, Cabral and others inspired Ngugi to achieve such a body of national literature. Ngugi’s writings echo their ideology in his writings. He was vehement when he stressed that sacrifices are necessary, e.g. exile.

Fanon placed the thinking of Marx in a practical African context and in his novel *A Grain of Wheat* (1967) Ngugi embraced the Fanonist Marxism by reflecting these truths. In *I Will Marry When I Want* he depicts these truths again. Ngugi feels that capitalism cannot bring equality as the essence of capitalism is the exploitation of one group by another. The struggle of the people is a recurrent theme throughout his writings. As with Fanon, Brecht and Boal, Ngugi feels that it is not the individual who must change, but the society. To change a society means a struggle for a new economic, political and cultural order that is free from imperialism. The greatest weapons of imperialism are economics and culture and theatre activists Ngugi and Fanon use culture as their shield and theatre as their weapon.

Ngugi finds in Fanon’s ideology, and that of Marx, a set of guidelines to replace the Christian-colonial doctrine inculcated at Alliance and assumed at Makerere, allowing him back to his Gikuyu national roots (Cantalupo 1995: 36).

**BERTOLT BRECHT**

The German theatre practitioner's (1898–1956) first play in which his Marxist preoccupations came to light was the well-known *The Three Penny Opera* (1928). It was a satirical attack on bourgeois society. His theories about the theatre were influential and his work had an important influence on the literary development of many an African writer. His involvement in Marxism is well documented and was reflected in his writings. We recognised that influence in Ngugi's work. Ngugi was influenced by Bertolt Brecht's ideas which linked the word "popular" with tradition and revolution. Brecht defined it as ... "taking over the people's own forms of expression and enriching them ... in such a way that it can take over leadership ... linking with tradition and taking it further" (Eherton 1982: 324).

It was in the period 1938–1945 that Brecht's humanist plays drew attention to his ideologies. His theatre became by, about and for the people utilising theatre. He wanted the theatre to bring social change. Brechtian theatre challenged people to look critically about their unacceptable circumstances and consequently change them. The question: How can the social order change to benefit the masses? was crucial to him. Ngugi's theatre practised that same ultimate aim: change; if need be through social revolution. Both theatre activists had the goal of making the worker aware of the unjust world around him; of his increasing poverty and the ruthless domination and exploitation of the ruling class. The political Theatre of Revolution has a definite function: it must mirror

these disgraces and deterioration of conditions. Through their plays they call for unity of the masses. Gigaamba calls, “Let’s rather unite in patriotic love” at the end of the play *I Will Marry When I Want*.

There is a good deal of similar universal dramatic views between Ngugi and Brecht in theatre matters such as speedy scene-shifting without the loss of continuity. Another point where Ngugi agrees with Brecht is that they do not want satisfied spectators. The audience must be profoundly disturbed with a reawakened conscience. There must be a reaction; they must become conscious how the social order is disturbed and the masses can change. Both the actors and the audience must discover through the performance how that can happen. For that reason the spectator must be involved in their plays. *I Will Marry When I Want* and *Mother, Sing for Me* are excellent examples of this principle. At Kamiriithu the actors were the workers, peasants and masses – the plays were about their lives – and the spectators became part of the process of theatre. Brecht called it, “To render reality to men in a form they can master” (Gugelberger 1985: v). Ngugi gave the Kenyans the reality they lived through his theatre. He adheres to the crucial Brechtian question: For whom does a writer write? Ngugi decided that he was writing for his own people.

**PAULO FREIRE**

Paulo Freire is a liberator, educator and the writer of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970) who wrote in this book that development evolves through the collective action of all members of society.

Freire and Augusto Boal shared a common vision for theatre – one that Ngugi adopted. Over a period of many years they strengthened this vision. At many a conference they even shared the same stage. The basis of their work as adult educators “lies in participatory research, conscientisation, and development” (Mda 1993: 10). Boal, amongst other theatre practitioners, “saw that theatre can provide a method of implementing Freire’s ideas on raising the critical awareness of the disadvantaged people in society so that they will be able to identify their problems as consequences of a particular order” (Mda 1993: 10).

At the core of community cultural development is Freire’s concept of conscientisation: the process by which one moves from thinking towards new levels of awareness. This must lead to becoming part of the process of change. His ‘pedagogy of the oppressed’ was shaped by literacy campaigns with landless peasants. At the heart of his work was the ideal to give expression to the concerns and aspirations of the marginalized society. “The truth is ...that the oppressed are not “marginals”, are not men living “outside” society. They have always been ‘inside’ – inside the structure that made them ‘beings for others’. The solution is not to ‘integrate’ them into the structure of oppression but to



transform the structure so they can become ‘beings for themselves’.....a transformation that entails changing the conditions of material existence such as relations of ownership and control of labor and the lordship” (McLaren 1993: 13). This transformation aspect Ngugi supported by appealing for the society to change.

The dominant urban elite who suppress their fellow humans, loses their humanity according to Freire (McLaren 1993: 13) and Ngugi shows this clearly in the characters Ahab Kioi, Jezebel in *I Will Marry When I Want* and Kanoru in *Mother, Sing for Me*.

Many African countries such as Kenya, Botswana, Lesotho, Malawi and Zimbabwe make use of the Freirian model in their non-formal adult education. According to Zakes Mda, “Paulo Freire challenges us to make a distinction between education as an instrument of domination and education as an instrument of liberation” (Gunner 1994: 210). Ngugi sees colonial education as an instrument of oppression and post-colonial education as an instrument to become liberated from that oppression. As a vehicle for this process they use the theatre as Freire felt that authentic dialogue must eventually lead to action. For Ngugi the participating actions of the community in the theatre deepened their comprehension of their own strengths. Kamiriithu was a practical example of this.

Freire, like Ngugi wa Thiong’o and his colleagues Ngugi wa Mirii and Micere Githae Mugo in Kenya, suffered for his work at the hands of the Brazilian government. He was exiled during a military coup in 1964 when his controversial work was criticised and

banned, but he prevailed in his humanistic approach. After years of contributing to theatre and education Paulo Freire died in May 1997.

## **CONCLUSION**

Many thinkers have influenced and shaped the mind, ideologies and writings of Ngugi wa Thiong'o. In his novel *Detained* he said "I am happy, though, for a prison reunion with Voltaire; Balzac; Molière; Zola; Flaubert; Tolstoy; Chekhov; Gorky; Sembène Ousmane; Shakespeare; Bertrand Russel; Claude McKay; and to make new acquaintances like Amadi and Thomas Mann" (Ngugi 1981: 133). He finds a way to express his own ideology boldly after being inspired by worthy men. He reads widely and applies what he feels is applicable in his work. "Gorky has shown the way. Art should encourage people to bolder and higher resolves in all their struggles to free the human spirit from the twin manacles of oppressive nature and oppressive man" (Ngugi 1981: 133). Today it is Ngugi who influences the literate young Africans of today with his writings, just as he was influenced.

## **1.5 ABOUT NGUGI'S WRITINGS**

**“My writing is really an attempt to understand myself and my situation in society and in history... I try to find the meaning of it all through my pen”** (Ngugi 1977: Preface).

“The literature of Kenya can be said to have truly started, if a date must be given, in 1964, with what were to be its most important features for some years to come: the collected works of young writers, mostly from Makerere University, and the writings of Ngugi,” says Jacqueline Bardolph in *The Literature of Kenya*. (Killam 1984: 36). Ngugi is Kenya’s most published, diverse and creative playwright and novelist. He is the best-known writer outside East Africa and received international recognition.

Ngugi wa Thiong’o is a product of particular socio-political circumstances which formed his outlook and conviction. The very nature of the colonial experience, independence and its neo-colonial aftermath, fuels his writings. Ngugi said, “Our vision of the future, of diverse possibilities of life and human potential, has roots in our experience of the past” (Heywood: 1977: 4). Through his writing he wants to deal with the past in order to change the future.

His interest in human relationships and the quality of human life itself is a focal point in his writing. “I am interested in exploring all those social forces that prevent the

realization of a more humane quality of humane life and human relationship. In our case this is imperialism and its distorting effects, including its distortion of people's capacity to evaluate themselves in relation to their environment, both natural and social. That's the perspective from which I write" (Wilkinson 1992: 131). His literature reflects the changing spirit and social stances of the Kenyan nation.

During 1960 -1964 his writing was "marked by the formative influences of Gikuyu social and cultural tradition, Christianity and Western liberal thought" (Killam 2000: 176). He nationalistically concentrated on the anti-colonial struggle and the horrendous effects on the people and the land. His writings reflect the African struggle for independence. The years 1964–1976 were influenced by his political ideologies: "Marixism, Frantz Fanon, Pan-Africanism, and the cause of black solidarity through his study of West Indian writing and the awareness of the Black Power movement in the US" (Killam 2000: 176-177). His writings now showed a gradual moving away from individual authorship to that of collective authorship. From 1972 there was a greater emphasis on critical work which was aimed at inspiring debates on matters of literacy and culture. From 1976 Ngugi became an activist who realises that the only way to bring political and cultural change in Kenya, and Africa, was "through total revolution brought about by the peasant masses" (Killam 2000: 177). He evoked a contemporary setting of Kenya and his themes took on a new view of old issues.

The year 1977 became the turning point in the ideological direction of his writing. He no longer attacked the colonial period but the present-day Kenya; reflecting in no uncertain terms the exploitation and corruption of the current regime. He now openly took sides with the peasants and workers in the class struggle. It was his resolution to write only in Gikuyu that brought the language and literature to the attention of Kenya, Africa and the world. It was the staging of *Ngaahika Ndeenda* that gave impetus to the political ideology of these Gikuyu writings.

Much of what was touched on in the plays *The Trail of Dedan Kimathi*, *I Marry When I Want*, *Mother*, *Sing for Me* – courage, patriotism, heritage /legacy, return of stolen lands and thus a desire to return to what was before colonisation – appears in the novels as recurrent themes. The legends and myths of his people with their heroes are a feeding ground for his imagination. Ngugi himself claims that “in every writer’s work there are echoes of previous literary texts” (Wilkinson 133: 92).

The East African writers might have started later than those from West Africa but once they caught on there was no holding them back. Adrian Roscoe refers to the 1962 Conference of African Writers as a watershed in *Uhuru’s Fire* (Roscoe 1977: 31) when Ngugi felt inundated by the literacy turbulence from West and Southern Africa and decided right there that that situation must be changed and the East of Africa can and must deliver such literature too. East Africa has since taken its rightful place with the rest of Africa in world literature.

Ngugi writes from the heart with a burning passion. What happened to him and his countrymen has shaped his sense of self and given him his worldview as reflected in his writings. In his collection of critical literary essays he claims that African literature came as a direct retort to the historical circumstances and that it has transformed the ideology and function of the African writer and the artistic forms they use. Addendum 2 gives an overview of his writings.

His books have been translated into more than 30 languages; spreading his messages loud and clear all over the world.

He stated on June 23, 1978 that “Kenyan writers have no alternative but to return to the roots, return to the sources of their being in the rhythms of life and speech and language of the Kenyan masses if they are to rise to the great challenge of recreating, in their poems, plays and novels, the epic grandeur of that history (of heroic struggle against foreign invaders)” (Ngugi 1981: 196).

## **1.6 ABOUT NGUGI’S CO-WRITERS**

Many writers prefer to write in isolation but Ngugi wa Thiong’o had no problem to team up with colleagues and/or fellow writers. He values the contribution and participation to such an extent that he even encouraged communal writing at Kamiriithu.

Ngugi wa Thiong'o wrote two of his seven plays in collaboration with two of his colleagues. They all saw themselves as agents of social transformation in their communities. It was the shared passion for their community, grassroots theatre and similar radical, socialistic political views that made their work together possible. Collaboratively they brought theatre to the people.

### **1.6.1 MICERE GITHAE MUGO:**

#### ***THE TRAIL OF DEDAN KIMATHI***

She was born in 1942 in Baricho, in the Kirinyaga district, in Kenya. Both her parents were teachers and her father later became school inspector and eventually chief. She had seven sisters and three brothers of whom a sister and brother had passed away. Mugo's parents were respected leaders in their community and well-known political activists in Kenya. They instilled a social awareness and what is right in their children and contributed to Mugo's mature political outlook in life. She was educated at the Kangaru Girls' Intermediate Boarding School in Embu between 1952–1957 between 1957–1960 she attended the Alliance Girls' High School, Kikuyu. In 1961 she entered the Limuru Girls' School where she was the first African student ever to be admitted to a “whites only” school in the then colonial Kenya, where she did her A levels (1961 – 1962). These schools were seen as a preparation ground for collaborating elite Africans who

were privileged to serve the colonial system in the future, by giving them excellent 'white' education which ideologically primed them.

During her school years Micere was involved in various theatrical activities. Most of the school dramatics consisted of Bible and Christmas plays and dramatisations of Western children's stories. Although it was very European-orientated it kindled her interest in theatre; a passion that she still harbours. Already in High School she wrote plays and acted in productions. She received the Best Actress Award at the Uganda Drama Festival and it encouraged her even more.

The young Mugo was at a very impressionable age when the Mau-Mau Rebellion started in the 1950s. Her school years during this period brought horrific events into her young life. They later found some release in her writings such as *The Trail of Dedan Kimathi* (Wilkinson 1992:112 -113).

She was offered an Oxford scholarship because of her top grades, but decided to further her tertiary education first at the Makerere University in Uganda, East Africa. A BA (Honours) (1963 – 1966) was followed by a P.G. teaching diploma at the University of Nairobi. She was an especially gifted student and received honours for that. She started her teaching career and rapidly moved up the ranks to become first Deputy Headmistress at the prestigious all-girls school Alliance Girls' High and then full Headmistress at the Kabare Girls' High School.



When the Commonwealth Scholarship Award was given to her she left Kenya in 1969 for a M.A. and Ph.D. in Literature at the University of New Brunswick, Fredericton, Canada where she graduated in 1973.

On returning to Kenya, Mugo accepted a teaching position in the Literature Department at the University of Nairobi. She rapidly became Senior Lecturer and later Associate Professor. In 1978 she became Dean of the Faculty of Arts – the first woman to hold that position. She soon realised that there was no academic freedom as by speaking out she and other colleagues faced persecution and incarceration. The political system restricted them as academics.

Her commitment to the history of her people came out in the processing of the legend of the Mau-Mau leader, General Dedan Kimathi, into the revolutionary play *The Trail of Dedan Kimathi*. Not only did Mugo co-author the dramatic play with Ngugi wa Thiong'o when asked, but she played the character of the Woman in it with Stephan Mwenesi as Dedan Kimathi. The play was performed by the Kenya Festac 77 Drama Group in Lagos. "Micere Mugo's contribution to this major work of the Kenyan theatre may well be seen in its strong representation of women's role in the independence struggle and a free society" (Banham 1994: 48).

Her collaboration with her colleague, Ngugi, from the Literature Department of the University of Nairobi, proved to be very fruitful. Aware of their standing as academics

and writers, they felt driven to write the play, knowing that it would raise controversy. They were committed Pan-African Marxists, sharing the same idealistic vision that the history should be kept alive in the memory of the people. Their play was “an act of literary and political intervention” (Ngugi 1994: xi). Mugo said in an interview at the University of Zimbabwe in 1986 with Adeola James that “We were using drama specifically in order to conscientize our people, to review our history with them.” (James 1990: 100). Both writers tried to show with their collective effort that they “were living through the same problem, the same issues in the struggle.... We just added poetic licence and dramatic form to it” (James 1990: 101).

Her political utterances on the dictators Kenyatta and Moi’s governments human rights abuses against the Kenyan people, led to arbitrary arrests, harassment and interrogations by the Kenyan police. Her passport was confiscated in 1982. This made the committed Marxist even more determined to speak out purposefully and expose the government’s unjust treatment of some its people, especially women. As she experienced prejudice because of her gender she became a fierce feminist activist. In 1982 she went into forced exile with her two daughters. She did not let these taxing circumstances get to her. She spent the next few years as a Visiting Professor at the University of St Lawrence, New York speaking on gender issues. Even exile did not deter her from her mission to be a spirited voice for others.

Micere Githae Mugo taught at the University of Zimbabwe 1984–1992. In 1993 she moved on to the Syracuse University to take up a professorship in the Department of African American Studies. She remains one of Kenya's great poets and a leading cultural and humanitarian activist. She writes and edits school readers, plays and stories for young adolescent audiences. Mugo received numerous international honors and awards and serves on as many advisory boards, e.g. The Women's World Organization for Rights, Literature and Development (Women's WORLD). As speaker for Amnesty International she is as determined as ever to stand up and fight for the voiceless and to contribute to causes bettering the life of others.

She is the author or editor of more than 15 books. *Daughter of My People, Sing!* (1976) was her first collection of poems. Through her poems she calls for a re-appreciation for values like "singing" that enable her people to deal with intimidating circumstances. In a much later collection *My Mother's Poem and other Songs* (1994) she bares her soul and gives praise to the women of Africa who brought dynamical transformations among their people. Other poems have been published in journals and in the following collections: *An Introduction to East African Poetry* (1976, pp.115 – 118); *Growing Up with Poetry* (1989) and *Is That the New Moon* (1989).

Besides *The Trail of Dedan Kimathi* (1977) she also published the drama *The Long Illness of Ex-Chief Kiti and Other Works* (1976), using her research on Dedan. It is set during the Emergency in colonial Kenya. The protagonist, a collaborator, is rejected by

his children for his treason. Further works include the radio play *Disillusioned* (1976) which has as its theme colour prejudice in a Christian mission; *Visions of Africa* (1978), *Orature and Human Rights* (1990), *Women on Creativity* with Ama Ata Aidoo (1994) and *Field Marshall Muthoni wa Kirima* which is forthcoming.

As a writer she creates the opportunity for people to see themselves in the pages of her books as real people with human rights and value. "I see my role as a woman writer as being that of assuming sides with oppressed women from among the peasants and workers, in their struggles to liberate themselves and fellow oppressed humankind from the shackles of imperialism and neo-colonialism" (Wilkinson 1992: 120).

Today she is a firm believer in the changeover from capitalism to socialism as an economic system of the African societies and that capitalism has impoverished the majority. "...it is wrong for just a few to possess when the majority are dispossessed" (James 1990: 93) is her strong view on what she sees as a crisis in Africa. She feels that "So long as I live on the African continent; I can carry on the struggle ... because the struggle continues ..." (James 1990: 94).

Of Ngugi she said in July 1986 in an interview "I admire somebody like Ngugi wa Thiong'o, whose example and position in life has demonstrated his commitment to the struggle of the Kenyan people" (James 1990: 96).

### **1.6.2 NGUGI WA MIRII:**

#### ***I WILL MARRY WHEN I WANT***

He was born in Roromo, Limuru in 1951 into a large peasant family. He received his high school education between 1972–1974 at the Nigeria Secondary School in Limuru. He then worked at the Kenya Posts and Telecommunications. Feeling the urge to better himself he started a professional Diploma in Adult Education at the Institute of Adult Studies, Nairobi University, in 1975. He joined the Institute of Development Studies at the same university a year later, working as a Senior Research Assistant. He is married to Margaret Wirimu and they have three daughters and two boys. He is a staunch Pan-Africanist and strongly believes in the African identity and self-expression.

He became an adult educator who specialized in literacy and research using various creative drama techniques in his work. While still at the Institute of Adult Studies he became involved with the peasants and workers in Community Development at Kamiriithu, Limuru. He was the chairperson of the education committee and later became the co-coordinating director of the Centre. At the Centre he teamed up with Ngugi wa Thiong'o who was the chairperson of the cultural committee. He and Ngugi wa Thiong'o, his cousin, namesake and old friend, shared a passion for theatre and the plight of their community. Both were committed to social and political transformation that would benefit the marginalised community. He and Ngugi were already involved in

theatre projects when the opportunity arose at the centre to train adult people in community theatre. The Ngugis became responsible for the adult literacy campaign at the Kamiriithu Cultural Centre.

As with Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Ngugi wa Mirii knew the songs, proverbs and stories of the Gikuyu people. Their passion for their culture and for theatre led them to work with each other in that field and in 1977 they co-authored the play *Ngaahika Ndeenda (I Will Marry When I Want)*. In November 1981 the two Ngugis started to develop another piece of theatre, a musical called *Maitinjugira (Mother Sing for Me)* which Ngugi wa Thiong'o wrote, at the same centre. It was his continuous involvement with Ngugi wa Thiong'o, the Kamiriithu Centre and the community theatre there, that made the government frown on Ngugi wa Mirii. It caused him, like Ngugi wa Thiong'o, to flee from his motherland, Kenya in 1982. He found refuge in Zimbabwe with his family.

He and Kimani Gecau, the director of *I Will Marry When I Want*, were both employed by the Zimbabwean government's Ministry of Education and Culture in 1982 to help them in the establishment of community-based theatre in Zimbabwe, similar to that of the Kamiriithu Theatre. They became involved with the Zimbabwe Foundation for Education with production (ZIMFEP). The organisation produced grassroots theatre projects as part of its programmes. Ngugi and Gecau worked with the Chindunduma Secondary School for ex-combatants and orphans of the liberation war. The first play they did was an adaptation of *The Trail of Dedan Kimathi* in Shona and English, to

reflect Zimbabwe's own war experiences. The play toured nationally to demonstrate widely through Zimbabwe the concept of community-based theatre (Gunner 1994: 66 and Banham 1999: 134). Ngugi also worked with S.J. Chifunyise, a Director of Arts and Crafts in the Ministry of Youth, Sport and Culture, in theatre-for-development workshops to help communities form theatre groups.

He sees his forced exile as a "rare experience of belonging to two worlds, because one could never separate themselves from their origins... I inter-marry my cultural upbringing with both my work and social life, with Zimbabwean culture" (Sunday Mirror, May 17, 2003).

Today he is at home in the Zimbabwean society where he is self-sacrificing in dedicating his life to the development of theatre. He is involved in a cultural exchange programme between Zimbabwe and Holland for youths. He joined the private organisation Zimbabwe Foundation for Education with Production (ZIMFEP) to enable him to live out his extraordinary passion for community theatre and the youth. As ZIMFEP promoter, with government support, the community-based theatre, he is currently involved in many drama groups. He played a central role in promoting the theatre model of Paulo Freire which he and Ngugi wa Thiong'o adapted for their theatre work at Kamiriithu. In Zimbabwe the socialist government was eager to promote indigenous cultural practices after independence was gained in 1979. Mirii's expertise and knowledge was a great benefit to his newly adopted country. In 1985 he was the co-

producer of *I Will Marry When I Want* when it was staged by the University of Zimbabwe's Faculty of Arts Drama. He taught the songs and dances from the Kenyan culture and thus broadened the cultural scope.

He co-ordinates theatre activities and programmes nation-wide and many young people, such as refugee children, have benefited greatly from his work. Eventually he founded the Zimbabwean Association of Community Theatre (ZACT), a non-profit national organization, with the help of ZIMFEP. Today ZACT includes more than 200 community theatre groups in Zimbabwe which they support. ZACT includes dialogic pedagogy according to Byam (1999) in its theatre practices. As in Kamiriithu, Ngugi advocates the use of theatre practitioners from within the community rather than using "foreigners". In an article, *Funding of Arts and Culture in Zimbabwe*, he warned in April 1996 against "the dangers of imposing 'experts' as part of aid development packages, particularly experts who live far away from the activities that they are supposed to be overseeing" (Banhan 1999: 98). He feels that Africa is a victim of international politics.

As a man with big dreams and visions, he has written, directed and produced more than 30 plays of which most were published by Kimaathi Publishing House. A news article in *The Sunday Mirror*, Saturday 17 May 2003 stated, "Ngugi is currently a consultant in Development Communication, Adult Education, Participatory Research, Civic and Human Rights Education, production of Feature Films and Documentary and a consulting editor and publisher." As if that were not enough to keep him busy full-time,



he has founded the Kenzim Cultural Centre at Warren Park Din 2000; a centre which promotes arts and culture.

Ngugi wa Mirii remains an outspoken arts activist and social critic. He was described as one “who used strong anti-imperialist rhetoric” (Banham 1999: 84). His biggest dream is to set up an International Community Theatre College (ICTC), which will enable gifted artists from all over the globe to display their talents. He wants the Performing Arts at the centre of Africa’s cultural development. With is strong zest for the theatre and the community at large, it is sure that he will be able to fulfill this dream one day soon.

### **1.7 THE KAMIRIITHU COMMUNITY EDUCATIONAL AND CULTURAL CENTRE**

In 1977 Ngugi published his novel *Petals of Blood* in which he painted a very clear, unsparing and harsh view of life in neo-colonial Kenya. It paved the way for his involvement in the Kamiriithu Community Centre and his play *I Will Marry When I Want*.

In his book, *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature* (1994), Ngugi relates how in 1976 a women from the Kamiriithu village came to his

house, near the village, early one Sunday morning. She asked him: “We hear you have a lot of education and that you write books. Why don’t you and others of your kind give some of that education to the village? We don’t want the whole amount; just a little of it, and a little of your time” (Ngugi 1994: 34). She represented the illiterate peasants and workers at the centre for the youth. The woman made it clear that the centre was in a desperate state and would need a group effort to rescue it. Ngugi brushed her off with the assurance that he would think about it. He was the chairman of the Department Literature at the University of Nairobi and thus under a lot of work pressure. The woman refused to take no for an answer and persisted to come to his home for four weeks with the same request that he should use his talents to better their lives. After the fourth consecutive Sunday visit Ngugi complied.

The centre was established in 1953 as a labour reserve. “The name is a diminutive form of Mĩrĩĩthũ, meaning a flat place on which rests a pool of water defiant to drought. A trans-Africa highway has now been built through Kamiriithu and forever drained the defiant pool” (Ngugi 1981: 72).

The mud-stone village was rebuilt in 1955, mostly by the women as the men were in either in the forests as Mau-Mau guerrillas or in concentration camps. It was one of several emergency concentration villages the colonisers have set up. They wanted “to turn the emergency concentration villages into permanent features to facilitate the creation of an African landed middle class through land consolidation and the enclosure

system, while retaining the villages as permanent reservoirs of cheap labor for both the ‘white’ highlands and for the new African landlords” (Ngugi 1981: 74). When the ‘yeomen’ left the village, only those without land stayed behind. A piece of land was given for a centre for the youth and a mud barrack-type building was erected (Ngugi 1981: 74). Over the years not much has changed. In this rural area live some of the most disadvantaged and oppressed people of Kenya. As in most African countries, the majority of Kenya’s rural population is poverty-stricken, desolate and in despair. Kamiriithu is but one of many such villages. Development in this remote area has been uneven and if any, very little. The people, about ten thousand, are extremely poor and live on virtually nothing.

Most of the inhabitants of the Limuru district are farmers who live from hand to mouth. This area was taken by the white settlers during the colonial era to establish large tea plantations. The soil was fertile, conveniently situated and the weather very favourable. Today there still are tea and coffee plantations to be seen around the city. The Beta Shoe Company is operating here. The village is inhabited by various different classes and includes workers and peasants, as well as teachers and businessmen, of whom most were active in the centre. Over the weekends jobless Kamiriithu youth offer their services to the golf club as caddies or do menial chores at the race-course – both facilities which are legacies of the colonial period.

The youth centre was used as a gathering place during the War of Resistance for traditional dances. After independence the centre was controlled by the Limuru Area Council and used for carpentry classes until the Council was disbanded in 1974. The building became dilapidated and the surrounding area grazing land. In 1976 there was some cultural activity when the University of Nairobi Free Travelling Theatre, which was run by the Department of Literature where Ngugi was a lecturer, performed some plays there. Extracts from *The Trail of Dedan Kimathi* were on the program presented to the villagers. The Kamiriithu Community Educational and Cultural Centre was founded when the centre embarked on a programme of integrated rural development. Thanks to Njeeri wa Aamoni, a community officer, the centre was rebuilt with the help of a group of workers and peasants from the village. They formed a committee; Adolf Kamau, a peasant-farmer, was the first chairperson. Ngugi Mwaũra, a sales-director with a motor company, succeeded him. It was this committee that Ngugi joined to become involved with the centre.

In his prison novel *Detained* (Ngugi 1981: 75-80) Ngugi describes the rebuilding of the centre. The name was changed to Kamiriithu Community Education and Cultural Centre and a decision was taken to embark on a programme of uplifting the people and their centre. He was one of a committee that registered the centre legally as a self-help cultural project with the Department of Community Development of the Ministry of Housing and Social Services. The KANU government was giving the impression at that stage to UNESCO that they were very much in favour of “integrated rural development

with culture, including rural village theatres as a central core,” (Ngugi 1981: 80). At Kamiriithu those involved with the centre wanted to practise education as a process of demystifying knowledge.

Ngugi not only wanted to give time and knowledge, but aimed to make the people to believe in themselves, their own values and potency as a community. He wanted to put theory into practice. The centre was going to be democratically run on a collective decision-making foundation where they shared problems and experiences. In *Detained* he said that what has drawn him to the project was the attempt of the people at the centre “to build a community centre on the basis of a Harambee of sweat and talents” instead of charity donations (Ngugi 1981: 192). The centre was going to develop the people in areas of adult education, culture, health and crafts. Ngugi was chairperson of the cultural committee while Ngugi wa Mirii was of the education committee.

The first project was literacy where 55 peasants participated in June 1976 and at the end of the year they could read and write their mother tongue. As Kenya has a huge literacy problem, this was a major achievement for these people to better themselves.

Soon thereafter it was decided to venture into cultural activities and to supplement the literacy work. The people were in agreement that they should do some theatre work. Some had been in church plays; others have seen plays at the Kenya National Theatre or from the University of Nairobi Free Travelling Theatre or the Kenya Festac '77 Drama

Group's performances such as *The Trail of Dedan Kimathi*. Most of them thus had very little, or no theatre experience.

At the centre Ngugi worked with Ngugi wa Mirii. Both men changed to a collective arrangement and saw themselves as part of the community rather than teachers. Both had a profound commitment to their own people. They and some of Ngugi's colleagues from the university worked enthusiastically among the villagers. They drafted an adult literacy and cultural program for the workers and peasants of the region who wanted to become literate. At the centre the peasants took up the challenge and embraced the learning opportunity to enrich their knowledge and skills through this literacy programme with gusto. To the joy of the writers the literacy programme proved to be an immense success.

Soon the two Ngugis decided, as part of the community education literacy programme to supplement it with cultural activities in order to expand the curriculum and address political issues. They started to use educational theatre as it possess tremendous staying power and could include a range of social and age groups, while it also covered amongst others various skills, e.g. communication. "Plays would serve three main purposes. They would serve as entertainment and collective self-education; they would serve as reading material for the new literates; and they would raise money to finance the other programmes" (Ngugi 1981: 76). Gradually the idea of a popular-style play appropriate for a mass audience came to light through discussions with the villagers about their

common problems and fears. They realised that the theatre would have to speak about issues close to the people's own lives and relate to their socio-cultural environment. The selected topics would have to relate to subjects with which they and their audiences could identify. It had to expose problems, express the local culture and manifest in it for the benefit of the community as a whole.

The responsibility of producing a draft was given to Ngugi and Ngugi wa Mirii. Ngugi soon realised that the lives of the people of the centre were dramatic; their lives reflected it daily. An authentic literary culture was created. This method would then serve the dual purpose of promoting and encouraging some understanding and appreciation of theatre among the rural people and break the air of mystery that surrounded the urban elitist theatre that the whites had considered theirs. The local inhabitants were encouraged to participate in community activities and take positive action. Through theatre in the community Ngugi wanted to wipe out the people's inferiority and contempt for their own culture, language and history. The burning conflict between the masses and the emergent African bourgeoisie provided enough material to work on.

The Ngugis both had some understanding of theatre from previous experience. They wanted to create dramatic activity that did not come from, for instance the university as a finished product, but would enable the peasants to use their local themes. They wanted to mobilise the people of the village to be involved in action-oriented theatrical activities and not passively watch performances. They should become animated and rise to

cultural experiences that would enrich them. Ngugi wanted to experiment with community theatre for, about and by the people. All the actors were protagonists and chorus – similar to what Boal stated as his Joker –system.

While they drafted a script and planned the performance they had to decide what language to use for the project. It was with shock that they realised how alienated they have become from the community they wished to empower. Gikuyu should have been the obvious choice. They found that the peasants participating in the actual events knew the Gikuyu language and history much better than they did. Though it was the Ngugi's mother tongue they were not fluent in its usage such as symbolism, manifold irony and the use of community myths. The writing of the script became a shared experience. Ngugi moved from individual to collective authorship and discovered that the communal drafting of the script was an embodiment of what he had come to believe in. It was a ritual sharing in the plight of the masses in Kamiriithu and Kenya.

The theatre practised at the centre was in stark contrast to that of the state theatre; not only in shape, but in ethos as well. Those at the centre felt that the theatre practiced at Kimiriithu was much more the national theatre than the western-orientated national theatre activities they felt alienated from. Paolo Freire said that “The arts gradually cease to be the mere expression of easy life of the affluent bourgeoisie, and begin to find their inspiration in the hard life of the people” (Orkin 1991: 172) and that is what happened



with the performing arts at Kamiriithu. From the start the working class realized that the content of their work as a community would raise considerable controversy.

The logical consequence of the work at the centre was that a turning point should occur in Ngugi's career and writing. The activities at the Kamiriithu Centre fused his artistic work in popular theatre with the new liberation struggle. It actively contributed to a cause, and became protest and revolutionary theatre: challenging the government and its policies, cutting deep in their ideology. The artistic theatre became a political weapon for Ngugi with which he was conscientising the masses about their plight and what to do about it. He did not only want his writings to be revolutionary on behalf of the Kenyan under-privileged and marginalised communities; he wanted them to be actively involved in the new liberation struggle. In this he was more than successful. A culture of nationalistic bravery, resistance, courage and revolution was created; such as Dedan Kimati was possessed with.

The whole village community was incorporated into the actual creation of the play. The two Ngugi's, after deciding to use Gikuyu, came up with a working script of *Ngaahika Ndeenda* in April 1977. From there onwards the theatre project took on a life of its own and grew into a massive theatre production which the people embraced with vigour as it had an authenticity that was deeply rooted in their local soil. They realised that they could use the theatre to articulate their protest and struggle against oppression, injustice

and the abuse of worker's rights. The Ngugis provided the intellectual and ideological stimulus. That gave the peasants a clear sense of the direction they wanted to take.

The people participated with great excitement in lively discussions on and made revisions of the script. They gave inputs from their own experiences; proposed suggestions and invented interpretations. For three months they scrutinised it, analysed it, changed episodes and metaphors; commented and improved on the language and characters in their literacy groups. They added and altered the script until they were satisfied. Of the unprecedented level of community involvement Ngugi, "I saw how the people had appropriate the text ... I felt one with the people. I shared in their rediscovery of their collective strength and abilities, and in their joyous feeling that they could accomplish anything" (Ngugi 1981: 78). It appealed to the people to whom the accountability of revolutionary battle ultimately belonged. It was theatre of the oppressed in which the peasants and workers acted out their predicament in the context of a neo-colonial society driven by class contradictions.

On June 5, 1977 the rehearsals started. The performance was planned to begin on the twenty-fifth anniversary of the declaration of the State of Emergency in Kenya when the Mau-Mau Resistance War of Liberation commenced. The direction of the play resorted under Kimani Gecau, but it became a collective creative effort. An extraordinary unity emerged among the community and they became involved on a massive scale. Soon they were making suggestions on the dialogue, imagery and proverbs and what a specific

character would have said. The villagers, knowing the traditional dances well, directed the dance movements themselves.

While in prison Ngugi wrote “The six months between June and November 1977 were the most exciting in my life and the true beginning of my education. I learnt my language anew. I rediscovered the creative nature and power of collective work” (Ngugi 1981: 76).

In a spirit of collective authorship the community put their resources together – each according to his ability. They took their work seriously and divided the labour within the centre amongst themselves. The whole community had to put in an effort; the work was done physically and mentally to make the project a success. They became amazingly organised in their labour at the centre. Their organisation was certainly their strong point. Not only did they organise the theatrical performance, but they agreed that the momentum of the experiment would not stop there. Rather it would be the beginning of their journey to freedom. It created solidarity and unity among themselves. With this Ross Kidd agreed when he said, “Kamiriithu has shown that people come to a critical class consciousness, not in an abstract intellectual exercise but in the process of building an organization and struggling for their rights. The drama is part of a broader community effort, a struggle by the peasants and workers to transform Kamiriithu ...” (Kidd 1983: 303).

None of the actors selected were professionals. The characters were taken from real-life situations. The spectators became directors as well. One actor was in fact recruited by these spectator –directors after he criticised the actor who tried to portray a rich Kenyan but did not have the right posture, image or body build for the character. The man showed them what it should look like to be believable and he did it so authentically that he was kept for the role after the other spectators made it clear that he was the right one for the character. The village participation spilled over into an open rehearsal system where actors and interested observers were able to intervene, shout comments, make suggestions, offer forthright criticisms and incorporate changes to make the play during the rehearsal stage of the production. This encouraged the actors to work on their characters and the different scenes with greater eagerness, as they had no prior experience of theatre, but enthusiasm and the conviction of their hearts.

The villagers put in such an effort that it was soon apparent that the negative social practices were in decline. The women, under Gaceeri wa Waigaanjo, decided that absolutely no drinking would be permitted. Eventually this resolution spread from the centre members and actors to the audiences who attended the regular open rehearsals. By the time of the play's opening it was understood by everyone that drunkenness would not be tolerated. The village, well-known for its drunken fights, achieved through collective self-discipline the triumph that there were no incidents of brawling or disruptions during the entire six months of public rehearsals and performances (Ngugi 1981: 77). Even the crime rate dropped. The people really wanted this effort to be a

success. The discipline the people developed spilled over into keeping to the rehearsals scheduled to suit the working hours of the village, which were Saturdays and Sunday afternoons.

Being performed in the open, the play attracted a great deal of attention and soon a regular, ever-growing audience joined in. The performance at the end of the process was not a mystical experience, but part of the growing process of collectiveness. The play was analysed and discussed. They were learning the elements of form of African Theatre. The conventions of the theatrical ritual were broken by the vitality of the rehearsals.

The audience later could not believe that it was performed by people who had never been on stage – they even thought it to be professionals from the university. Ngugi remember clearly the day when the biggest crowd ever gathered to watch the dress rehearsal on Sunday, September 25, 1977. It stayed that way for weeks on end until the opening on Sunday, October 2, 1977.

The theatre was designed and built by the people themselves under the leadership of Gatoonye wa Mũgoiyo, an office messenger, though none of them had ever been inside a proper theatre. They started with a matchsticks model and ended up with an open-air structure which had a seating capacity of more than two thousand and a raised stage and roofed dressing-rooms. This was done through sheer hard labour. Dr Sultan Somjee, a

student of Ngugi's who was present at the theatre-building of Kamiriithu, in an interview with Lara Ressler, commented on the enthusiasm, excitement and spirit of renewed hope. The inhabitants of Kamiriithu were not just actors, they controlled everything, e.g. finances, building, etc. The people of the village did not allow their immediate economic circumstances to bother them. They overcame the lack of a theatre by physically erecting the stage themselves in the national tradition of "the empty space" on a chosen site at the Kamiriithu village. It was an actual empty space as the Youth Centre building in 1977 consisted of four mud-walled rooms that were in a state of disrepair and the surroundings open veld. The rooms were converted to a store and changing room. In typical African theatre fashion the semi-circular stage and raised auditorium were basically an extension of each other. The auditorium had the feature of being open; including not only the seated audience but also those beyond the boundaries. The flow of actors and people on and around the stage and auditorium was inhibited. With the system of open rehearsals that was followed during the performance-process, the play was open for everybody to follow and contribute.

The open and public rehearsals went on for four months. The people were dedicated and stayed committed; even when circumstances like the weather challenged them severely. Ngugi commented in *Detained (1981)* how the people during this time 'appropriated the text', really making it their own. They were elated about their achievement and new-found strength. The people became a unity which removed barriers of sex, age,

education and nationality. Even the spectators were euphoric about what they had experienced.

Ngugi underwent tremendous personal growth in his own work as a result of the collaboration with the village people. “Ngugi felt that he and his fellow theatrical intellectuals, like Ngugi wa Mirii and Kimani Gecau, learned far more from the peasants and workers of the Kamiriithu Centre than they ever taught to them” (Kerr 1995: 15). He claimed that “I worked with the peasants and workers at Kamiriithu, and learnt far more than I ever gave to them in the whole area of our music and dance and drama and language. I also learnt from them the meaning of sheer selfless dedication to a communal effort” (Ngugi 1981: 191). Ngugi, the academic and international writer, went back to his birthplace. Through working with his people, he claimed back his roots and stood up for what he believed in; drawing strength from them. “My only regret was that for many years I had wandered in the bourgeois jungle and the wilderness of foreign cultures and languages. Kamiriithu is my homecoming” (Ngugi 1981: 105).

The play was for a local audience and it achieved popularity among the ordinary people, as well as the surrounding rural societies where many of the ruling class lived. The audience was both appreciative and critical in their observations. The whole theatre process of acting and putting up a show had been demystified by the actors and the technical crew and the whole village became introduced to the mysteries of theatre. The

regular crowds spurred the actors on to deliver performances even they themselves were astonished about.

The play drew on all the elements – singing, dancing, stories, mime, masks and music – of African theatre traditions. The daily lives of the people were incorporated into the drama and given stimulus to recreate a traditional communalism as the village people themselves developed it. Afterwards inspired people felt ‘brave’ enough to bring their scripts to the Ngugis for evaluation. All three plays received were in Gikuyu: two by a worker and one by a teacher.

A performance licence was obtained from the office of the district commissioner, and *Ngaahika Ndeenda* opened on Sunday October 2, 1977 after nine months of preparation in the community’s open-air theatre. The “work of many hands and tongues”, Ngugi called it in his prison diary *Detained*. Those involved in the project saw their community work in the village as beneficial to them all. The performances became collective festivals and people came from all over the country to see the play and participate in the event – by taxi, buss or on foot – as long as they could only see a performance, it did not matter how they got there. From cultural dispossession there emerged a new uniqueness shaped by shared experiences which reflected their ideological aspirations. The whole village was transformed by this single event that helped them to grow. As word spread about the wonderful community cultural project some of the other villages such as



Gĩkaambura and Kanyaarĩrĩ sent delegations to Kimariithu to enquire how they too could begin a project like that at their villages.

The performances came to an abrupt halt after only ten performances when a letter to the chairman of the Kamiriithu Centre, dated 16 December, alerted the people of the intentions of the government. The official performing licence was revoked. The reason for such an extreme step was given that the play was an attempt to stir up hostility between various sections of the community on the basis of their respective roles during Kenya's freedom struggle. The KANU government used District Commissioner Kĩambu to say that "the play was calling for a class struggle in Kenya" (Ngugi 1981: 188) and "that the play was provocative and potentially subversive" (Zell 1983: 433). The play was thus stopped for political reasons under the cloak of public security.

Ngugi and the village were devastated and felt that "The peasants ... had no right to a theatre which correctly reflected their lives, fears, hopes, dreams and history of struggle; had no right to their creative efforts even in their own backyards" (Ngugi 1981: 79). D.C. Kĩambu has not seen the play himself but was quite willing to be the messenger of the bad news. This was the KANU government that had made the lofty resolutions and declarations to UNESCO in Nairobi in 1976 about rural cultural development to better people's lives.

With bitterness Ngugi claimed in his press release on March 10, 1982, “Foreign theatre can freely thrive on Kenyan soil. But there is no room for Kenyan theatre on Kenyan soil” (Barber 1997: 136).

Ngugi was arrested and imprisoned for his part in the play on December 31 and later that same year Ngugi wa Mirii had to flee. Ngugi saw his involvement as his patriotic duty to write, speak, and work for the people and that he had merely chosen a side in the class struggle (Ngugi 1981: 105). For the next three years there were no theatre activities at the Kamiriithu Centre. The adult literacy classes, with mostly women, continued. After his release from prison Ngugi stayed involved with the centre and became once more involved in theatre activities at the centre when he assembled a group to work on another play. In November / December 1981 the musical drama *Maitu Njugira (Mother, Sing for Me)* was scripted by him and soon rehearsals were held by the same group of villagers from Kamiriithu. It continued until mid-February 1982.

The musical was based on cultural expressions from different nationalities in Kenya to encourage growth and integration among the indigenous cultures. Ngugi wanted different art forms to interact. Kamiriithu was theatre *by* the people, as workers and peasants joined “in analyzing their reality and acting out their situation, rather than responding passively to the thinking and analysis of others” (Findlay 1970: 48). To Ngugi this was real theatre. It portrayed the working class as a community/unity and took theatre to the people at grass-roots. \_

It was planned that this time the actors from Kamiriithu were going to perform in the Kenya National Theatre in Nairobi; opening February 19, 1982. The rehearsals started in the same open-air theatre at Kamiriithu and then moved to the University of Nairobi's premises. Once again the rehearsals were open and it is estimated that more than 10,000 people saw the play during these sessions. This proved to be invaluable as the government once again revoked the performing licence. To ensure that the performances stayed cancelled they even padlocked the National Theatre. Once again the theatre of the Kamiriithu Centre became the target for government repression.

In a final gesture to silence the Centre's community, the police went to Kamiriithu on March 11, 1982 and banned all theatre activities in the small village and surrounding area. Early the next morning, Friday, March 12, armed policemen destroyed the entire theatre with bulldozers the community had built in 1977. The entrance board with the inscription *Mucit wa muingi* (Gikuyu) and *Mji wa umma* (Kiswahili) – both meaning *A People's Cultural Centre* was the first to be removed by the police. These actions marked the beginning of a blatant cultural repression. Both the Ngugis went into exile: Ngugi wa Thiong'o to the United Kingdom and Ngugi wa Mirii to Zimbabwe; changing their lives forever.

In 1975 Dr. Taaita Toweet, minister of Housing and Social Services, showed only contempt when the issue of a Kenyan Theatre was raised. He thought it ridiculous to call for a true Kenyan theatre, as he could see nothing. (Ngugi 1981: 190). He should

have just gone to Kamiriithu! Here theatre flourished until the government stopped it. From the small rural village came such powerful theatre. Ngugi mentions that the “*Gĩtiro* opera sequence, written word for word at the dictation of an illiterate peasant woman from Kamiriithu village and performed step by step according to her choreography, was one of the finest aesthetic experiences on the Kenyan stage ...” (Ngugi 1981: 190). The Kamiriithu workers performed Kenyan theatre; their own experience of their unique history and plight. The government had no appreciation or interest in their own theatre at all. They supported only the foreign culture, its language and theatre.

The government regarded their development duty finished when they donated three sewing machines to 10,000 women as was done at Kamiriithu. Others, including Ngugi, felt that the liberation of creative powers was true development. To them the banning of all theatre activities was extreme and an infringement of their human rights.

“Kamĩĩĩthũ has shown what peasants and workers are capable of doing in modern theatre if left alone to organize on their own terms. In their participation in the peasant and worker-based theatre, the Kamĩĩĩthũ women have joined a long line of others who have always stood for a free united Kenya, a Kenya in which if a bean falls to the ground, it is shared among the children. That is the vision that guides the Kenyan people in their anti-imperialist struggle against all forms of internal and external exploitation and oppression” (Barber 1997: 136). The experience at the centre became an inspiration

to many playwrights and culture workers in other African countries who suffered under neo-colonialism.

The name of the centre was changed by the authorities to Kamiriithu Polytechnic and Adult Literary Centre and the only 'cultural' entertainment left in the area is church and bar activities.

### **1.8 DETENTION AND EXILE DO NOT STIFLE A STRONG VOICE**

**“Twenty-two years of exile will come to an end. But in a spiritual sense I have never left Kenya. Kenya and Africa are always in my mind. But I look forward to a physical reunion with Kenya, my beloved country”** Ngugi said in an interview in May 2004 (Pozo 2005: 4).

**“...detained simply because I had written the truth about certain aspects of Kenyan life?”** (Ngugi 1981: 188).

The story of his political detainment and exile started in 1964 when it dawned on Ngugi, after coming under Marxist and Fanonist influences that in the newly independent Kenya people, free from the British colonial oppression, were politically and culturally bound by new ropes. His writing began to reflect his thoughts and concerns about the

welfare of the masses. The Kenyan government resented Ngugi's continuous outspoken onslaught on cultural imperialism and President Jomo Kenyatta and Vice-president Daniel arap Moi's administration and politics.

Attempts to awake the masses to what is the true state of affairs in the government would not be tolerated. The government knows very well what the force of an awakened organised mass of people can do. Ironically it was Kenyatta who wrote in *The Labour Monthly* in November 1933: "And the only way out is the mass organization of workers and peasants of various tribes, and by having this unity we shall be in a position to put up a strong protest against this robbery and exploitation. ... all Kenyan Africans must fight for their liberation" (Ngugi 1981: 85). In 1977 he detained Ngugi for doing just that.

Ngugi felt that his imprisonment "is not a personal affair. It's part of a wider history of attempts to bring the Kenyan people in a reactionary culture of silence and fear, and of the Kenyan people's fierce struggle against them to create a people's revolutionary culture of outspoken courage and patriotic heroism" (Ngugi 1981: 28).

Ngugi however could not be silenced: he kept speaking out against the colonial British oppression aftermath and the new regime's neo-colonialism. He rejected the values of the country's regime and elite. These were continuous themes in his work. When he highlighted these thorny issues in his powerful play *Ngaahika Ndeenda (I Will Marry*

*When I Want*) in 1977 through his work at the Kamiriithu Community Educational and Cultural Centre, he was arrested and put in Mamiti Maximum Security Prison by the Kenyan government. He was kept in prison without trial for one year, 31 December 1977 to 12 December 1978, with no charges brought against him. Putting writers in prison, confiscating literature and stopping theatre performances are the kinds of censorship which are politically motivated. The influential enemy, writers and educationalists, must be kept in detention until they 'redeem' themselves and realise the regime's point of view.

His detention was announced in the *Kenya Gazette* dated 6 January 1978 (released on 14 January). He was officially a detainee – a prisoner in cell 16.

While in detention Ngugi kept himself busy by writing an account of his experience; using toilet paper to pin down notes that would later become his prison memoirs *Detained: A Writer's Prison Diary*. He also wrote the novel *Caitani Mutharabaini*.

His detention caused disquiet and anger in and outside Kenya amongst his readers and fellow writers. Amnesty International named him a Prisoner of Conscience and launched an international campaign to assure his release one year later. This only happened after the death of President Kenyatta when all the political prisoners received amnesty. On 12 December 1978, Kenya's Independence Day, the new President of Kenya, Daniel arap

Moi, announced that Ngugi and all other political prisoners in Kenya were to be released. The amnesty formed part of the Independent Festival.

He was however barred from taking up his previous teaching post or a job in any government institution, including colleges and the university. The State described his detention as an Act of State which meant that the contract between him and the university (as belonging to the government) was dissolved.

He continued to write and was still actively involved in theatre activities. Ngugi continued to be a strong voice that criticised and made the government uncomfortable. He, once again in collaboration with the workers and peasants of the Kamiriithu Centre, performed the play *Maitu Njugira* (1986)

The English version, *I'll Marry When I Want* of his notorious *Ngaahika Ndeenda* was launched in June 1982 together with the English translation *Devil on the Cross* of his novel *Caitani Mutharabaini*. It was done in London by Heinemann Publishers and Ngugi left Kenya on June 5, 1982 to be there for the prestigious event and the promoting of his books.

He was ready to return to Kenya when word reached him on July 31 that two of his co-workers (one being Ngugi wa Mirii) of the Kamiriithu Community Educational and Cultural Centre had to flee from the police to escape arrest for their involvement at the



centre's theatre project. He too would be arrested on arrival in Kenya. He made the only, however difficult, decision he could: he stayed on in London in self-imposed exile. He vowed never to return to Kenya while President Daniel arap Moi remained in power.

Ngugi continued to criticise the people he blamed for the oppressive situation in Kenya. In 1987 his next Gikuyu novel, *Matigari*, was put into "exile" when it was banned from Kenyan bookshops.

In 1989 Ngugi moved to the U.S. where he became professor of comparative literature and performance studies at the New York University.

His exile was a severe, intense experience for him and his family. He, who reclaimed his African mother tongue and culture with such passion, was forced to abandon it in his birth country, to go and practise it from and in a foreign country. His mother, Mary Wanjiku Thiong'o, died in 1995 and his wife, Nyambura wa Thiong'o, in 1996, but Ngugi could not even attend their funerals for fear of his own safety.

In December 2002 President Daniel arap Moi agreed to step down due to term limits. Uhuru Kenyatta was picked as his successor but he lost in the election to Mwai Kibaki. The Kenyans had enough of the oppressive regime and wanted a new beginning. Ngugi's publishing company arranged for him and his wife to return to Kenya in August 2004 for a month-long book-tour through the country. Ngugi declared that twenty-two

years of exile would come to an end. Little did he know that once more he had to leave the country with a taste of bitterness in his mouth. He, his wife and a friend were brutally attacked by four robbers in the place where they were resting between Ngugi's lectures. Ngugi felt that it was a random criminal act of thievery, but speculation linked the attack to his work. Ironically he had said in an interview with the Nairobi newspaper, *East African Standard*, on his arrival in Nairobi that Kenya has changed and Kenyans could now freely talk politics: "I have not sensed that fear" (Aug 16, 2004).

The painful experience encouraged Ngugi to become more intensely involved in the need for Africa to find its cultural and political place in the world. "I harbor no bitterness or desire for vengeance," (*East African Standard*, August 16, 2004) he has said on his arrival. After the attack he maintained the same positive attitude.

Ngugi has continuously used public lectures and symposiums to make the world aware of the fascist and neo-colonial authoritarianism in Africa and Kenya in particular.

The universal declaration of human rights states unmistakably in its Article 19 that "everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression". At the time of Ngugi's detention Kenya was the president of UNESCO, the same UNESCO that was very definite about "cultural freedom and in particular the right of writers to free creative expression without state harassment." (Ngugi 1981: 191). The same Kenya that vouched

for this human rights declaration put Ngugi, the writer of *Ngaahika Ndeenda*, in detention.

On 13 June 1979 Ngugi was so firm in his belief and feeling that it is the right of any Kenyan to speak out freely on the social circumstances and reflect the reality, that in the presence of the University of Nairobi's Vice Chancellor, Professor J. Mũngai and the Registrar, Mr. Gicũhi he reiterated, "Over my detention I still regarded myself as the wronged party. I still held my position regarding the necessity of a truly patriotic Kenyan national theatre firmly rooted in the peasant cultures and languages of the various nationalities that make up Kenya. I was still opposed to the domination of our cultural life by foreign theatres and languages, and hold that Kenyan national languages and Kenyan national theatre centres should be allowed to flourish freely and to stage plays which truthfully reflect Kenyan social realities and patriotic Kenyan history" (Ngugi 1981: 210).

His principals cost him his job as Associate Professor of Literature at the University of Nairobi, but the suppression of free speech was unacceptable for Ngugi – worse than the imposition of European languages by the colonisers.

## **CHAPTER 2: NGUGI WA THIONG'O AND THEATRE**

### **2.1 WHAT IS THEATRE?**

**“... The theater is perhaps the most revolutionary art form known to man”** Wole Soyinka. (Brown 1980: 51).

**“Theatre functions as communication”** (Mda 1993: 3).

**“... rituals are an event upon which its participants depend; but theatre is an event which depends on its participants”** (Schechner 1976: 211).

**“The Art of theatre is neither acting nor the play, it is not scene nor dance, *but consists of all the elements of which these things are composed*”** Edward Gordon Craig (Fishman 1965: 11).

Prior to discussing how theatre functions for Ngugi wa Thiong'o the question *What is theatre?* will be examined synoptically by inspecting various perspectives that may give insight into the development of theatre in Kenya. This will serve as a model to reveal trends in African drama as well as the Western theatre activities in Kenya. Reviewing crucial literature in these areas will be a point of departure. The literature selected has particular relevance in that while it treats current perspectives in this discipline. It will

give a historical account of African and Kenyan theatre in particular. An overview of the literature on theatre indicates that there have been various forms, styles and developments.

The term *theatre* is derived from the Greek word *theatron* which means a place to see. This description is still applicable today. It refers to the production, presentation or performance with which the theatre is concerned. The audience as the viewer is an essential part of theatre. It is a form of art in which a series of events is acted out. In a broader sense it includes all aspects of play production like the playwright, actors, direction, scene, costume, sound and lighting designers, and of course the audience. All these elements normally work together to form a production. The German word *Gesamtkunst* reflects that togetherness of the art form very adequately.

According to Oscar Brockett the theatre is an extremely multifaceted institution, encircling all the mentioned aspects and criticism. There is a relationship to the society and its culture as it appears in and represents the social order as there are theatrical elements in every society. Edwin Wilson felt that theatre permeates and informs every aspect of our lives; and is therefore an activity that we use to describe how we live as reflecting the human experience.

The re-creation, by staging it, becomes a sharing, an interaction, between performance and audience, which is the essence of theatre. That relationship between the performer

and the audience is harder to explain. Films and videos provide a mere image, while live theatre brings a personal contact and exchange; it strikes at the core of human existence. It is a bit of pure magic; a sheer excitement that vibrates the air. It is that special indefinable quality which draws a person to the theatre. In live theatre both the audience and the performer come to life. The audience can contribute and influence the performance in subtle ways as in Western theatre or in theatre such as Ngugi's, in jubilant or triumphant ways. Theatre can embrace an extensive variety of aspects of performance.

Not only does the word *theatre* refer to a physical space or building, but also to an art form; a specific discipline. It has its unique characteristics, abilities, values, quality, coherence, integrity and veracity. Theatre is selective, provocative and timeless in its probing of the human condition to provide insights, express ideas and comment on moral dilemmas. Theatre is a collaborative art and the elements thereof namely script/text, performers, space, director and design, are all synchronized into a live performance. It is so that the art of theatre is momentary, but it lives on in the memories, texts, programs, pictures and reviews of the Western theatre. In the African theatre it is a tradition, a daily or seasonal ritual that interprets the feelings of the people and captures the spirit of the ritual in a powerful way. Theatre resembles most intimately the patterns of people's experience and offers simultaneously meaning and entertainment.

Theatre is often said to be the most complex of the arts. It is the creation of many creators who must work in harmony to create the performance which will live on as a memory and not only on paper. That is where the power of Ngugi's theatre lays: in the collaboration of the people to form a bridge between the past, the present and the future. For him theatre is not a form of 'fine' arts, but a functional art. The essence of theatre lies in its tradition of immediacy and not in the written text. Theatre is also exceptional in that it includes almost all other art forms in various ways. In modern life there are many examples of performances utilising theatrical elements, e.g. amusement parks, musical videos, staged productions based on films, extravaganzas or Olympiads' opening events. An example of the crossover of theatrical elements between the popular art of today and traditional theatre, is the elaborate presentations of rock groups, e.g. Madonna in the documentary film *Truth or Dare*. She stated empathetically: "My show is not a conventional rock show, but a theatrical presentation of my music. And like theatre, it asks questions, provokes thought, and takes you on an emotional journey – portraying good and bad, light and dark, joy and sorrow, redemption and salvation" (Wilson 2005: 4).

## **2.2 AFRICAN THEATRE**

**"In Africa the theatre must go to the people, rather than expect the people to come to it"** Kabwe Kasoma (Etherton 1975: 5).

**“The roots of theatre in Africa are ancient ...”** (Banham 1976: 3).

**“For the African life is drama. Drama is life; it is interwoven throughout every aspect of the African’s existence and experience”** (Freeman 2005: 5).

The functional roots of African theatre are ancient and lie in the shared experience of the community whose African traditions enriched the theatre. The tribal diversity of Africa resulted in an assortment and wealth of cultural forms that truly reflect their African heritage. Because African life is ritualised, it is cyclic and repetitive. African theatre reflects this. Even today it remains directly related to its ritual roots.

African and Western theatre are uniquely dissimilar, but complement each other dramatically in the modern world. Western theatre has divided its theatre into specialised genres, e.g. drama for the spoken word; ballet and mime for dance; music in concerts and operas; with fine arts for painting and sculpture. African theatre includes them all in a complex and totally integrated indivisible dramatic performance. It is a cultural manifestation and the creative arts combine with religion and politics to become functional and relevant to the community that is involved; many times having not only an entertainment value, but a didactic function. It draws on themes relevant to the community it serves and provides a forum to communicate with the community. This expressionistic communal and holistic view of indigenous African theatre opposes the individualising and fragmented nature of colonial Western theatre.



### **2.2.1. PRE-COLONIAL PERIOD**

**“Africa indisputably always has had some form of art that expressed the collective aspirations of society”** Hayes Mabweazara (2005:2).

Africa is a vast continent with numerous and varied communities and their theatre forms are just as variable. Many people believed that theatre only came to Africa when the Europeans brought their culture to the continent. This could not be further from the truth. Traditional African performance activities are a complex and ‘total’ performance. It includes genres such as community religious rituals, masquerades, mimicry, spoken poetry, imitations, impersonations, festivals, ceremonies, celebrations, music, storytelling, poetic symbolism, drama, costumes, dance and presentations thereof. It has been part of the lives of ordinary people as a dramatic mode of expression since the creation of African man. Theatre in Africa is thus part of their old tradition of oral literature and is dominated by rhythm and patterns. Performances are but a fraction of events and it is in fact difficult to distinguish between some of the forms as they integrate with one another, many of them cyclic. Those performances are part of the cyclic changes in their lives and address the needs of the people and while giving inspiration to them.

In the pre-colonial period the performing arts had a cultural relevance for the whole society and many of these rituals and traditional forms of expression were done at regular intervals with fixed patterns at venues set aside for them. Initiations, weddings and funerals, as examples, have dramatic forms that provide expression in the traditional setting. Many of these forms took place in open air spaces, used as both rehearsal areas and for staging events. Some of these areas provided a natural backdrop for performances and added to the dramatic enactments' wonder, awe and mystery, and complemented the dramatic action.

During performances there was interaction between performers and spectators so that audience participation and observing formed an integral part of the performances. Participating actions were not only in dances or musical actions such as singing or playing instruments, but took on the form of audience members running onto the performing area with tokens of appreciation for the performers and the performance itself. The line between audience and performer was blurred as participation at the communal events was significant. Many spectators get so caught up in, e.g. a dance, that they will jump up and join the dancers to express themselves. In some scenarios the performers are only the leaders of the actions and on their cue the audience will participate appropriately.

Many of these communal performances have religion at its core. Scenarios where people, animals and supernatural beings were imitated or worshipped with rituals,

dances, music or mime, are part of their worship of deities. It is used for a specific purpose such as recreation, expression of emotions and feelings, or to supplicate the gods. It becomes a means of education, worship or celebration. A strong flagrant message is communicated by all involved in the worship through their dramatic actions. The Nigerian playwright Wole Soyinka said that “theatre despite it many masks is the unending rendition of the human experience” (Banham 1999: 163). In societies the dramatic activities and the rituals had a fundamental social and educational role in the moral and societal upbringing of the youth in a community. Traditional values and behaviour were addressed and in religion the theatre fulfilled a purpose through the manifestation of rituals and presentations. The belief is that theatre ultimately derived from such ritualistic drama, but was elementary theatre where each performance was conducted for the benefit of the worshippers present who could be either passive or participating. With an audience in attendance other than the principals, the ritual becomes a dramatic performance.

In Africa theatre has a long tradition of such presentations. The performance nature of the various traditional communal rituals, masquerades, oral narratives such as ancestral myths, folklore, dances, festivals and ceremonies were rudimentary forms of theatre coming from rich local materials. The spoken word is often the least important element of the performance. Communication is achieved through other indigenous ‘languages’ such as drumming and dances. It often speaks louder than words could have done. The

visual imagery included gesticulation, mask, costume and symbolism which contribute to the total performance by supporting the message.

The oral tradition of storytelling with its gestures, mimicry and spoken verse often combines with music and dance and becomes actual forms of theatre. For modern African playwrights such as Ngugi and Soyinka the oral tradition is still a significant source of inspiration even when contemporary issues are dealt with, e.g. corruption, westernisation or conflict between rural and urban, or traditional versus modern values. Protests and discoveries are done through this medium and it brings entertainment when needed after a day's hard work.

Those rituals, festivals, celebrations and ceremonies each have their own presentation techniques and methods of staging and performing theatre concepts. There is a specific relationship between stage and audience during the performances. "It can be said that in Africa, unlike in the western world, theatre is not limited to the traditions of the curtained proscenium stage and the silent audience. The theatrical event is often performed in an open space and the audience feels free to shout, sing and participate with the performers" (Findlay 1970: 2). The spatial arrangement was quite different from the confinements of the Western structures and allowed the audience to be actively involved.

This period was characterised by relative harmony and stability and there were few changes as there was an alliance between the people. Theatre consisted of traditional rituals and ceremonies performed as part of daily life and used as a means of religion, education, protest and discovery. In a sense African theatre was more alive, positive and functional than its Western equivalent.

### **2.2.2 COLONIAL PERIOD**

**“The collision of cultures that resulted from the influx of imperial forces did strike a blow to the face of African theatre”** Hayes Mabweazara (2005:1).

Most African countries followed a similar pattern in their theatre development. Before the colonisation of the African continent an extensive assortment of cultural practices existed. People expressed themselves through rituals, ceremonies and festivals, utilising their traditional performing arts in their communities. It formed an integral and important part of the social memory to be passed on to future generations to uphold and spread their community's values and beliefs. The reason so little was known about African theatre was that it was not as comprehensively recorded as Western theatre, but had a more extensive oral tradition.

The coming of the Whites in the late nineteenth century and subsequent European colonisation changed all that. The coloniser saw himself as the one who brings

civilisation and salvation to Dark Africa. In his book *The Wretched of the Earth* (1983: 169), Fanon made the observation: "... colonial domination was indeed to convince the natives that colonialism came to enlighten their darkness" (Orkin 1991: 32). When the colonisers took over most of Africa, they came with their own culture and soon tried to establish amongst others, the European performing arts as they knew it in a more formal setting. They built 'Little Theatres', which were structured with proscenium-arch stages and reflected their Western culture; performed for a specific culture. They gathered here to escape the reality of being in a foreign country as a colonial force. It was a culture form which articulated, reinforced and enforced the foreign ideology. The popular indigenous theatre was suppressed. Banham refers to this period as "theatre of surrender to colonist" (2001: 30). The oppressive banning of pre-colonial traditional performances by the Europeans indicates that they recognized the power of those cultural activities. Eventually some of the anti-colonial forces used the theatre as a means of mobilising their people to oppose the colonial regime.

The relationship between Africa and the West was not only political and economical, but cultural as well. In contrast to the Western 'progressive and enlightened' culture, that of Africa was viewed as 'backward and barbaric'. Some sculptures, masks and drums were burnt as 'unclean fetishes' and 'pagan' by the civilised' colonisers. The misjudgment of Africans by the Europeans was evident in many cultural fields, e.g. masks, an integral part of a ritual performance, were seen as demonic. Andreas Lommel says in *Prehistoric and Primitive Man* "A mask is, however, not only the expression of demonism... The

mask is much more a means whereby these demons can be vanquished.... The tremendous psychological power of the African manner of coming to terms with the demons within us has never been understood in Europe” (Lommel 1976: 169). The same prejudice applied to the traditional African dances. The European missionaries experienced it as heathen and vulgar, while to the Africans it was a vital energetic part of inner self expression. The indigenous forms and performance conditions persisted but many of the traditional cultural practices were affected by changes (Kerr 1995:112). The traditional performing arts were regarded in negative terms such as iniquitous, uncivilised, primitive and heathen. It was denigrated by the colonisers who looked down on the traditional African performing arts and with subtlety they turned many Africans against their own artistic practices by continuously oppressing and ridiculing them. Through manipulation they gave the overall impression that the imported Western theatrical forms were superior (Kerr 1995:106).

Western cultural practices were entrenched and promoted; mostly restricted to the urban areas’ larger cities. They had all the wealth, facilities and technical expertise. There were no theatre facilities for Africans erected and neither were they allowed to use any of those built solely for the Whites. Many of the traditional sacred and private rituals were demystified when it became no more functional but mere entertainment for public audiences. The emphasis on the colonial theatre was now on the attractive; the entertaining. Only those songs, dances and dramatic actions that were highly

entertaining and had colourful costumes or 'suitable' masks were presented. The purpose of it, e.g. religious, was ignored without any consideration of the implications.

Some of these communal traditional rites and dances were adapted as they were regarded as obscene, vulgar, immoral and uncivilised by the Europeans who saw themselves as refined, civilised and above all superior in culture. The rituals and dances soon became tourist attractions or amusement at official functions and airports to welcome dignitaries and foreigners visiting the country; a spectacle with only entertainment value – totally different from the original function they were created for by the community (Kerr 1995:115). Devoid of its initial utility and milieu the traditional culture was of no consequence any more. Not only did it become a show, money was now asked for performances that were part of a society's daily existence. Gradually new foreign and modern dances, many a variety of a traditional one, came in to being. Some people reasoned that it was a positive development. Others were appalled by it. Previously rituals and dances were a collective expression and now it became more individualistic and out of context. For many of the villagers, especially the elderly, that individualism and the exposure of the traditional to foreigners, were desecration of god-given rites which should not be touched. Many of these rituals and dances became adaptations to mock the European behaviour and became a tool in the abhorrence that the inhabitants had for the intruders. Strange communal phenomena were portrayed as comic, alien, and took on a satiric nature.



The colonial administration invested state funding by contributing substantially into cultural facilities and activities for the whites. It was colonial establishments that propagandised a foreign culture alien to the locals. Their Western Theatre had as a function merely entertainment (Cook 1997:106). Professional companies of actors and technicians organised and staged productions in national theatres that were not open for the nationals of that country. They exclusively promoted the development of European culture (Ngugi 1997: 63). It became a privilege for only the white audiences who tried to protect and preserve the European civilisation at the expense of the indigenous theatre. The Africans were excluded from the theatre events. During the colonial oppression the dramas gave the impression that the worker is either dumb, a clown, an up-to-no-good or shown as a servant, inferior, replaceable, cheap labour or voiceless slave.

The African literature drama genre began with the first African play published 1935 in English: *The Girl Who Killed to Save: Nongquase the Liberator* by Herbert Isaac Ernest Dhlomo of South Africa. The theme was a recurrent one in later African drama: resistance to white oppression. Late 1940 The Nairobi African Dramatic Society was formed. They took theatre to the towns surrounding Nairobi. In 1955 the group took the bold step to enter a white-dominated National Drama Festival. Their play *Not Guilty* by Graham Hyslop won several awards.

During the 1950's there was a gradual awakening movement in Africa. It parallels the political liberation many of the states of the continent experienced. Gradually the

African people started to reassert their own culture. For the first time African plays were performed at National Drama Festivals. Eventually a National Drama School was established. Artists such as Frank Kimotho and Kenneth Watene were products of this institution.

Theatre became an agent for the liberation struggle and carried that sense of purpose into the post-independence era. As the political resistance to oppression gained momentum the cultural activities, e.g. performances, changed. Many political tensions found expression in the indigenous theatrical forms. During the fierce political struggle certain dances and dramatic actions were performed to encourage and mobilise people to join the cause and become militants. At the rallies held by political parties traditional dances became a form of expression and entertainment to entice people to the gatherings to hear the political propaganda. New versions of songs emerged that were patriotic and political commentaries to inform people about the state of affairs (Lakoju 1989:159).

Another arena where theatre activities changed was in the society. People became urbanised, travel became easier and a political awareness developed. Some changes were gradual, others immediate. In the villages rituals were performed to fulfil a private function in the community, e.g. initiation, but in the urban centres they were public performances consisting of traditional dancing and theatricals to popularise them.

In the African schools the missionaries concentrated mostly on dramatisation of biblical stories. In the beginning it was a blend of Christian ethics with African traditional arts. British plays, e.g. Shakespeare, Shaw, Sheridan and the like were studied in the secondary school.

It was the expertise, many times from another country, that gave impetus to plays or a specific type of theatre in Africa. Many of the playwrights wrote from their own practical experience. They kept an open mind through post-graduate studies and theatre workshops, and a willingness to be positively influenced by other African countries, though they had different sets of traditional aesthetic criteria and wide-ranging approaches.

Universities played an important role in the African theatre's development. Many had theatre departments and it became the cultural centre in countries such as Ghana, Nigeria, Kenya, South Africa and Uganda. Where the university theatre was strong and active, the African theatre was alive and developing. It provided a chance for the local people to continue with the drama interest which the schools had kindled. Some universities were not entirely for the professionals and made room for local amateurs to join them in some productions; especially those that were taken to the rural areas. At these departments the theatre was not the exclusive domain of the Whites. The emphasis was on various aspects of acting, directing and developing plays. A variety of performance spaces was used due to practicalities – limited budgets and the influence of

indigenous practices. African theatre displays these unique features of utilising amateurs rather than professional actors and a willingness to perform in a variety of performing spaces whereas the Western theatre involved playwrights and professional actors as a creative force in companies which only performed in well-equipped theatres.

The Free Makerere Travelling Theatre was established in the English Department of the University of Nairobi with founding members Margaret Macpherson, David Cook and Hugh Dinwiddy in 1960. They were invaluable for the development of theatre they practised. The company toured the rural country annually and the African people welcomed their sporadic performances at schools and market places as the masses were starved for theatre (Cook 1997:135). The large audiences demonstrated that there was a need for community-based theatre. The tours underlined that the theatre must appeal to the people on grassroots level and involve the community's concerns and performing arts activities.

During colonisation the predominating theatre from abroad centered round the National Theatre. James Gibbs wrote "The origin of a national theatre is not in bricks and mortar, but in theme, thought, experiment, research, and discussion" (Roscoe 1977: 273). The theatre was thus a subtle demonstration of mastery as a broad consequence of colonialism was the insinuation that European cultural standards were better and the indigenous cultures inferior. Serious undermining and disjunction was created within the process of cultural development and self-assertion. The theatre clubs encouraged a

separate cultural life and promoted a European heritage. Under both colonialism and neo-colonialism the dominating classes have used theatre for the dissemination of their ideologies. The difference between the two ideologies is that the European theatre is capitalistic and oppressive in its segregation while the neo-colonialists do not practise the segregation. European actors and directors, even theatre technicians were brought into African countries to produce theatre that was European. Drama, ballet and opera performances were imported at enormous cost from Europe for the urban elite audiences' cultural taste, and had no interest or value for the indigenous peoples. Drama clubs and training for performing arts were exclusively for whites. After gaining independence the National Theatre Organisations introduced significant shifts in their policies. They tried to incorporate black theatre artists; thus claiming to be 'national' which would allow them to receive financial support from the new black government, even when no noteworthy changes were made in respect of objectives, selection of plays, audiences, ownership or the utilisation of the theatre facilities.

Many of the African playwrights were preoccupied with the political oppression and other related issues: John Ruganda (Uganda) *The Floods* (1980), Francis Imbuga (Kenya) *Game of Silence* (1977), Robert Serumaga (Uganda) *Majangwa* (1974) all dealt with major political problems in their respective countries. Later topics from West African plays included parent–children conflict and intercultural marriage. Wole Soyinka's social themes in plays such as *The Swamp-Dwellers* (written 1957; published 1963) were very popular. Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *The Black Hermit* (written 1962;

published 1968) was East Africa's debut in drama. Many of these dramas were in the beginning copying western forms and only later progressed to experimenting with more traditional theatre forms and indigenous languages. Today in contemporary African theatre there is a mixture of both traditional African sources and Western forms that complement, rather than contrapose each other, to give the theatre its unique vitality and relevance.

It was the unsettling political atmosphere on the African continent that affected the drama genre so significantly. Playwrights delivered stringent political comments of which Nigerians Femi Osofisan's *Once Upon Four Robbers* (1980) and *A play of Gaints* (1984) by Wole Soyinka were fine examples. In South Africa playwrights enlightened the world on the political situation with powerful plays such as *Sizwe Banzi Is Dead* (1973), Percy Mtwa's *Bopha!* (1986) and *Master Harold and the Boys* (1982) from Athol Fugard. The powerful *Woza Albert!* was written collaboratively by Mtwa, Mbongeni Ngema and Barney Simon (1986).

West Africa has dominated African theatre with its flamboyant yet solid dramatic presence of playwrights Wole Soyinka, Hubert Ogunde, J.P.Clark, Sembene Ousmanes, Wale Ogunyemi, Ola Rotimis and many others. For a long time it was only Ngugi (Kenya), Okot p'Bitek (Uganda) and Athol Fugard (South Africa) that were known outside their own borders until other areas and emergent names slowly asserted themselves. The formal, institutionalised theatre flourished in settled societies under

more stable conditions. West Africa, and to a lesser extent South Africa, were trendsetters. The dense urbanisation was a strong factor. Many of the educated in an earlier era playwrights wrote plays that were mainly literary as opposed to oral and leaned to publication rather than performance. A considerable number of the plays were influenced by the writers' European education and Western influences where playwright and dialogue dominated.

In several of the countries under colonial oppression, e.g. Kenya, radical and innovative theatre was practised in the nationalist liberation struggle in guerrilla camps. The Moral Rearmament Group traveled to detention camps with pro-imperialist performances. They tried to get the political prisoners to present naivety plays. The Mau-Mau however metamorphosed into militant patriotism and the combatants used it to communicate the people's role, aspirations and resolve to gain independence in an articulated expression in the Mau-Mau Freedom War. It was used as an instrument to bind the community together. Slogans, chants, storytelling, dramatisations, songs, poetry and dances promoted the liberation struggle and were all utilised in the mobilisation of peasant combats for the rebellion. The popular forms of indigenous theatre activities concretised the ideology of socialism in a dynamic manner. Theatre was used as a revolutionary instrument for articulating the political insurgence of the indigenous people. Biblical passages, dramatising sacrifice, become favoured. In Nyeri plays in Gikuyu were staged by Theuri and in the Mau-Mau hide-outs the fighters performed their patriotic theatre with the theme "death to British imperialism" (Ngugi 1981: 69). At detention camps

such as Athi River, severe censorship was applied to the cultural expression of the people. “They (the freedom fighters) rediscovered the old songs – they had never completely lost touch with them – and reshaped them to meet the new needs of their struggle. They also created new songs and dances with new rhythms where the old ones were found inadequate” (Ngugi 1972: 30). It became theatre in the service of the liberation struggle.

The colonial government soon banned all theatrical endeavour. After the war was won and independence achieved, there was very little time for the returnees to stay involved in theatre activities. Many were appointed in government positions or absorbed into the army. There were no structures in place for cultural workers and in the newly liberated societies the previously dynamic activities soon declined. Schools enacted performances on the victims and heroes of the Liberation war. “The object of this type of theatre was to conscientise the people ... about the history of the revolution” (Gunner 1994: 56). It was used to keep memories alive.

“The communal theatre activism of the Kamiriithu Centre is a re-assertion of an indigenous artistic tradition which had been suppressed by cultural imperialism” (Hutchison 1996: 16). For Ngugi the decolonising of the practice of theatre is a necessary step to unite people.



### **2.2.3 POST-INDEPENDENCE PERIOD**

Even before independence there was a deep-seated longing for lost cultural heritage in most African countries. People began to give serious thought to their traditional African cultural entail. On the one hand there was the body of traditional performing arts and on the other the Western elitist theatre. An intensified growing concern sprang up over the African and national cultural heritage. People began to investigate the preservation and promotion of traditional forms and the performing arts. The turning point came when leading people started to establish an authentic African theatre among their own people.

Many of the culture and theatre forms were taken from village to city to revive the traditional in an attempt to reclaim the original purpose it was utilise for. There dance groups performed the rural community dances to urban audiences. It reinforced the traditional but being done out of context these dances lost their “magic” and mystery and still did not serve their function. They became detached from their social milieu of practical and symbolic use until demystified and mostly pure entertainment without their original value. Dramatic actions and themes were adapted to suit the contemporary theatre as some dramatists claimed that the audiences favoured those popular plays with less intellectual or philosophical themes. There were four main categories into which most plays fell during this period:

1. Traditional plays – they dealt with issues like tradition versus

modernity, voluntary love versus customary love, witchcraft and infertility. A village setting was often the background. Ngugi's first four plays fall into this group, e.g. *The Black Hermit*.

2. Modern urban society plays which dealt with corruption, crime, poverty, insanity, unemployment and alcoholism, e.g. *This Time Tomorrow*.
3. Political plays that addressed the spirit of liberation. *I Will Marry When I Want* and *Mother, Sing for Me* are examples.
4. Historical plays. Here *The Trail of Dedan Kimathi* comes to mind.

When independence came it brought the realisation in many African countries that the own indigenous cultural practices were weakened. The question of an own cultural identity came to the fore and soon became a quest. Many countries immediately launched a research into traditional forms. Banham refers to this period as "theatre of re-awakening" (2001: 30). Cries went up for the establishment of an authentic African theatre belonging to the people in each country, each with their own national identity. This awareness that their theatre had a place in the cultural development gave impetus to many playwrights' creative works. The new governments vowed to support and promote the performing arts by re-educating the people to make them aware of the richness of their cultural heritage. Ngugi called this process a "decolonizing of the mind". During many independence festivals national dances and songs were performed in a celebration of claiming back their own. Governments pledged sponsorship and encouraged the

establishing of national cultural groups. Officially there were departments created to foster the arts with aims of promoting and presenting national culture with assistance, especially financial, of the new government. They were to make recommendations and foster the traditional arts. It was a decolonising process of those minds that saw their own as inferior, felt ashamed of their culture or thought that they had none of their own. People were to be made conscious of their heritage and required to instil a pride in it.

It was a major challenge to turn around the foreign-dominated theatre. Many governments made compromises and erected little theatres. “In a survey carried out in Africa he (Dickson Mwansa) showed how Zambia still has the largest number of little theatres in Africa” (Findlay 1970: 67). In many urban centres there still is a clinging to the colonised styles of culture. A faction of African elite still continues with the colonial cultural values and sees their own as inferior. Some of the western practices became an integral part of the contemporary theatrical culture. In many cases the formally staged dramas expanded their restricted horizons.

A new kind of theatre developed from the conflict between traditional and modern (Western) theatre activities. It had as its aim a new social, cultural and political function. It was generally called Popular Theatre. After independence most theatre activities gravitated towards this variety of theatre. One example is Ngugi’s play *I Will Marry When I Want* which caused so much controversy. It was a unique theatrical experiment in its creation, presentation, utilisation of the Kamiriithu open-air theatre and audience

participation. It was an experiment in its usage of traditional dance and music to enhance the production as well as one in using unmistakably outspoken dialogue, as well as breaking the neo-colonial conception of well-made plays.

In the late 1970s a turning point came in African theatre. The social contradictions in class, created by neo-colonialism, became plainly visible. Political and social polarisation expressed itself in the theatre and nowhere was it more evident than in *The Trail of Dedan Kimathi* when it was performed at FESTAC in front of a predominantly working-class audience. Not only was the content inspiring to the masses, but the form was appreciated by the large crowds in Nairobi before it was taken to Lagos.

The play created a charged atmosphere with its utilisation of communal song, dance and solidarity which served to highlight the role that a truly national theatre could play, thereby exposing the exclusiveness of the so-called National theatre as a political ploy in the hands of the minority group of ruling elite. The question of who controlled the art facilities in the country raised the more fundamental question of who controlled the economy. However, participants in this new and dynamic theatre were not ideologically united. It is within the context of this quest for a national theatre that the performance of *I Will Marry When I Want* by Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Ngugi wa Mirii in 1977 should be seen. In 1993 Francis Imbuga would poke fun in his satirical novel *Shrine of Tears* at the National Theatre (the Shrine) and the dominating foreign performing arts in an attempt to show the Kenyans the problems, e.g. black cultural groups are effectively restricted

from performances by very expensive hiring fees (Kurtz 1998: 63-64). Imbuga delivered critical commentary on the post-colonial socio-politics which Ngugi had condemned years before.

Gradually there was a move away from the Popular-style theatre. Among the drawbacks of the Popular Theatre was the fact that revolutionary theatre as a rule met with government harassments, the universities presented themselves as the experts and became exclusive to amateurs, open-air theatres were seasonal and there were no follow-ups on the performances done. To be on the safe side of the government the plays became watered-down which resulted in poor turn outs at performances. Audiences became passive onlookers. There was thus a movement towards a theatre who was aesthetically familiar to the Western theatre. It was aimed at the urban elite who could afford the high prices of tickets at the urban theatres when the performing arts were taken to theatre houses where the theatre was absorbed into the mainstream. The only difference was that more local themes were used as well as the popular theatre-in-the-round-staging.

Today the idea that the traditional performing arts should merge with modern theatre, is welcomed by many theatre groups in different African countries. This way skills and techniques could melt into a unique contemporary theatre. However, the harsh realities of life in a newly independent country soon became a problem for the performing arts which underestimated the help that was to be forthcoming. Pressing issues such as the

economy, political propaganda, education, health and corruption became more urgent than the arts. Significant changes were made in these countries in areas such as politics and the economy, but internal problems did nothing to narrow the imbalances between rich/poor or rural/urban. Soon the predominant problem of all theatre activities was sponsorships. Groups wanted to go beyond the limitations of a small theatre that required more in the way of staging, but experienced financial problems. In some countries the councils entrusted with the goal to promote culture did no more than organising cultural festivals and dances as adornment to functions. They were badly organised and administrated or became mere job suppliers to 'artists' who never delivered quality work. In a few countries the new governments were so insecure that where there was some theatre going on, they were quicker to stifle these theatre activities with censorship than support them. It took courage to produce plays. Other countries took initiatives to rectify the colonial inheritance and make theatre emanate from groups or individuals and not so much from the government itself. As the disillusionment of independence was felt, the performing arts became politically and socially prejudiced, criticising the new government and the status quo. The own national productions were often subsidized by the European musicals.

Most contemporary theatre was educational, developmental and/or propagandist work and tried to make an important, meaningful contribution to the society. During recent years theatre was used to conscientise the people about the history of their independence. Orature was used to make modern statements of social importance to the

youth. A drawback in many African countries is however that “every theatre group must register with the government, and performance licenses are granted only after rigorous security checks and after each script has been read and approved by the administration” (Banham 1999: 48). This type of censorship stifled the spontaneous development of the theatre. Another disadvantage is that most countries have national theatres but the top cadre of government seldom supports the theatre as an audience unless a dignitary is attending. This sends out the subtle message that theatre is nothing but a mere showpiece. The elite are seldom in attendance unless they need to be seen and are totally uninterested. They prefer television and videos – though the same people are quick to make public statements to blame both for the violence and social decline of their nation.

The failure to establish a substitute for the European theatre with its own supporters as audience, and to sustain it, as well as the failure to produce plays worth performing, all contributed to the failure to renovate traditional theatre in many African countries between 1980 and 1990. As most media in Africa are still foreign-owned and produce what is the cheapest, or free, it brings to the screen an imported culture which most countries have embraced. In some African countries, like Zimbabwe, the youth are not interested in the traditional or local; but are very interested in the imported American television. In other countries, like Nigeria, the people scarcely bother with the imported, but support the locally produced drama when screened; even though it is in English.

Present-day African theatre was inevitably influenced by European economic and political domination, and reflected that. “Contemporary African theatre retains a sense of function in the sense that it serves a purpose within the communities and cultures that is much greater than simply that of entertainment or diversion. This functional quality gives the theatre a sense of purpose, and influences not only its material but also the nature of its performance and reception. The present-day theatre is enriched and complemented by its co-existence with traditional forms, skills and understanding” (Banham 1994: 3).

Today theatre in Africa uses a variety of indigenous languages as well as European languages. Most of the colonised countries did not succeed in getting rid of their colonial past and “consequently, their theatrical customs include both European and African conventions, sometimes quite separate, at others intermingled.” (Brockett 1999: 274). Good examples of such an intermingling are to be found in Nigeria and Kenya. “African theatre will almost certainly move away not only from the naturalistic forms of the three-act realistic drama of the European stage but ...will strive to create a theatre capable of exploiting traditional modes of expression for contemporary purposes.” (Nicoll 1976: 899).



#### **2.2.4 EAST AFRICAN THEATRE**

**“Drama in East Africa is mainly in the hands of the amateur” and European plays are of “little relevance to conditions and problems in East Africa”** (Ngugi 1977: vii).

The East was inspired by the spurt of literary theatre in the West; however the English influenced theatre in East Africa differently from West African theatre, making the former distinct in both its culture and language. The Kenyans deem masks, rituals and para-theatrical activities that are significant in West Africa, as less important. Swahili, the prevailing national language of Kenya is not spoken west of the Zairian border. The historic, social and political forces that slowed development became driving forces. They blended with the burgeoning economic prosperity which brought a growing media world, desires for effective education and the establishment of national identities. The theatre, whether literary or for development, was striving for purpose and application in its society.

*“Michezo ya Kuigiza, or theatre and drama, in East Africa, relate to rituals, ceremonies, story-telling, drumming and dance, and to the practicality and spirit of the East African peoples”* (Killam 2000: 81). The pre-colonial theatre had its origins in the human struggles with nature and with each other and was not isolated events: it was part of the rhythm of daily and seasonal life with the whole community part of the celebrations,

festivals or commemorations in true African spirit. The theatre involved drumming, dance and story-telling to reflect the expediency and strength of mind of East Africans. The work of Robert Serumaga, a Uganda playwright, is an excellent example, notably *Renga Moi* (1972).

According to Killam “East African drama and theatre follow two traditions: classical theatre is in English; popular theatre in indigenous languages uses song and dance to reach its audience” (2000: 82). Colonials tried to destroy the local traditions when the missionaries saw the practices as pagan, shamanistic and ‘from the devil’. Their European Christian schools and churches used drama to teach the English culture and this practice was continued at Makerere University College in Kampala, Uganda. The media, e.g. the textbooks, during the colonial period were often regarded as cultural imperialism and indoctrination due to their colonial origins and control. Drama was confined to government-supervised halls; being school, church or community halls. The school drama festivals were very popular.

East African theatre, as all African, has a tradition of political awareness. Many plays had a legendary figure, especially from the freedom fight for independence, as protagonist. The theme of the rebel as liberator hero, who had to face the white oppressor, was a popular one.

In the 1960s at the University of Dar es Salaam and Makerere University in Uganda there was a strong tradition of theatre. Both Western and African theatre were explored and produced. Creative writing was encouraged and the input of dynamic people such as David Cook was a huge force to enrich the theatre tradition at the Makerere University which made Uganda the pace-setter in East Africa theatre. The Free Travelling Theatre used a variety of languages to overcome the language barrier and developed themes important to the culture and needs of the new nation. This type of theatre became very popular. It made a tremendous impact on the rural people to whom it was taken to and was welcomed with enthusiasm. The travelling theatre performed plays that were a mixture of local tradition blending with modern experimental modes as Erisa Kivonde's successful Ugandan transforming of Synge's *The Shadow of the Glen* and Robert Serumaga's *A Play* and *Renga Moi* can testify to. The upcoming playwrights on this side of the continent showed influences of an extensive assortment of dramatists, both European and African, such as Brecht, Soyinka, Beckett and Clark.

Tanzania's University College was the first in East Africa with a Department of Theatre Arts. Theatre in Tanzania had a definite ideology and was used "as an instrument of education, of shaping political awareness, of furthering the physical process of development, of feeding national pride" (Roscoe 1977: 268) in the chosen language Swahili. Ebrahim Hussein, a Tanzanian playwright, wrote *Kinjeketile* (1970) to motivate social action and it was hailed a masterpiece in East African theatre.

Zambia and Malawi had similar development and approaches when it came to their theatre. Schools' drama festivals and traveling theatres were important. Both countries rejected the Western proscenium arch in favour of outdoor theatres. Michael Etherton and later David Kerr, both well-known theatre practitioners, developed theatre at the universities and in using the outdoor Chikwakwa theatre which according to Etherton was "to develop through self-help, a theatre place that would allow an expansion of the traditional performing arts into drama in which the spoken words developed the action" (Roscoe 1977: 269). This theatre served all levels of the Zambian society and specially the rural areas to ensure a national theatre awakening. Malawi showed commitment to African modes of theatre but remained open in its approaches.

Today there are many well-known playwrights such as Robert Serumaga and John Ruganda, both with theatre experience from the Makerere University, who are keeping the literary genre alive. They also support the belief in the strong attempt to indigenise East African Theatre. The theatre of East Africa has become a practical instrument in the socio-political teaching of the people.

#### **2.2.5 KENYAN THEATRE**

**"The real language of African Theatre could only be found among the people – the peasantry in particular – in their life, history and struggles"** (Ngugi 1994: 41).

In *Decolonizing the Mind* Ngugi explains that pre-colonial Kenyan drama was not an isolated event. It was part of the rhythm of the tribe's daily and seasonal community life, their moral instruction and entertainment in the sense of involved enjoyment and also a strict matter of life and death and communal survival. Wherever there was an 'empty space' (as Peter Brook has coined it) there drama was performed. Certainly not in special buildings which were set aside only for that purpose as with Western theatre. The concept of the 'empty space' among the people is part of their tradition – a tradition that the British colonialists gradually destroyed since 1895. The free development of their national theatre traditions, rooted in ritual and ceremonial practices of the peasantry, were banned and stopped when the missionaries claimed that many of the Kenyan traditions were the works of the devil. In the townships comedies poking fun at the colonists and social themes became popular. The theatre reflected the social relations between the inhabitants and the colonialists. The spear and shield contradicted the British crown emblem in their plays. "Negative characters in the plays were made to wear imperialist designs as a strategy of ridiculing them" (Banham 2005: 218).

Eventually the colonial administration ruled that any gathering of more than five people needed a licence which made it difficult, and in many cases impossible, for the masses to perform their traditions.

On 27 December 1950 the Kenya National Theatre was established "to provide a theatrical and literary forum to Kenyans without distinction of race or creed" (Banham

2005: 218). Prior to independence the Kenya National Theatre was a symbol of European colonial culture as it followed the model from abroad and was designed primarily for the need of an elitist European audience. Plays such as *The King and I* and *Jesus Christ Superstar* were not in the taste of the locals. The theatre activities and performances consisted of mostly international dramas. Nairobi's Donovan Maule Theatre in Nairobi had British plays dominating the stage and there was a total disregard for African culture.

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The British gave Kenya European controlled theatre buildings in the major towns. The colonisers opened theatre clubs and a Little Theatre Mombassa for the British in 1948. Ngugi described the theatre in the 1950's as a reaction to the "resurgence of a popular dance and theatre following the embittered Kenyan soldiers from the European-generated Second World War." (Ngugi 1981: 67. The Mũthuũ dances gained popularity among the people. Kimathi began with the Gĩcamu theatre in Nyeri and the patriotic theatre was evident in the people's schools. "Soon a European drama and music officer was appointed to control the growth of African theatre in all Kenyan schools." (Ngugi 1981: 67). Plays such as Shakespeare's were done by most schools as part of their cultural activities to enforce the imperialist cultural programme. The Maule Theatre too was erected in 1952 by the colonial regime with the help of the British Council as part of a cultural centre. This centre's productions entertained the white British soldiers and administration staff; giving theatre audiences a finished vision of the world with the well-made plays and musicals such as *Champagne from Vienna*. Later a number of

educated Kenyan African petty bourgeoisie which accepted the colonial culture, were allowed. This theatre was nothing but an attempt to mollify the Kenyans and was supposed to bring an end to residential segregation. Through theatre the Europeans wanted to get the goodwill of the Africans.

One of the many barriers that kept the Africans out of the theatre was the English language. It was only understood by a limited number of the educated upper class. To safeguard the European interest, English was taught in the schools to ensure that the Africans would have the same views, culture, values and standards as their colonial masters. The usage of English was encouraged by introducing an annual drama festival for schools in 1951. A type of drama of the mindless was created and the African was made to laugh at himself, e.g. a native peasant, up to no good, lost in the big confusing city, a clown. The colonial message was clear: Africans are dumb, simple-minded and stupid. The idea portrayed was that a police force was needed to save the Africans from themselves. Through this type of theatre Africans were made to believe that they were inferior to the Europeans.

These issues regarding theatre were not unique to Kenya. Most colonised African states went the same path. Even here in Namibia the situation was very similar. The National Theatre in Windhoek, performing its Shakespeare, Shaw and other well-made plays, in Afrikaans, English and German, were for Whites only until 1970. After this date it was open to all races but local performances were not attended by most Whites when staged.

After independence in 1963 nothing much of the status quo changed to accommodate the new initiative of a non-racial culture. Plays focusing on relevant African themes were slowly emerging, but the National Theatre was not yet consistent with the expectations people had. The 'empty space' was still confined to the confinement of four walls in state-buildings, e.g. halls at schools, churches, community centres and the university.

Locally written and African plays were totally ignored. Even after independence the ruling class strove to take permanent hold of the theatre to use it as a tool for domination. In fact the state-funded National Theatre was not allowed to stage performances of plays that criticised the government or countered its policy as ruling class. What happened to Ngugi and his plays are an example of this. Laws protected the government's foreign interest by suppressing the interests of the masses.

With the establishment of the travelling theatre to be of service to the rural areas the university broke the mould of being accessible to only a few privileged ones, and becoming part of the community. This helped to discard the ivory tower image of the institution. In Kenya theatre mostly follow two traditions: the classical European/Western theatre in English for the elite; and the popular theatre in indigenous languages which uses song and dance to reach its bourgeois audience.



In Kenya, as with most African countries, many of the East African plays have evolved around legendary figures from the country's history. Ngugi and Micere Githae Mugo wrote *The Trail of Dedan Kimathi* as a rejoinder to Kenneth Watene's moderate approach to historical issues in his play *Dedan Kimathi*. The two writers stated in the preface of *The Trail of Dedan Kimathi* "We believe that good theatre is that which is on the side of the people." The trail of Dedan Kimathi, a Mau-Mau leader, serves as a giant metaphor for the history of the struggle of all oppressed people in Kenya, Africa and the world. In these plays the rebels became the heroes of the people as they were the political personalities who stood up against the white oppressor. Those Freedom fighters liberated Africa from colonialism – but in many theatres they are painted as backward barbarians in direct contrast to the Western enlightened civilisation. These erroneous impressions were one of the reasons why Ngugi wrote *The Trail of Dedan Kimathi* as he did. He included known traditional songs and dances to emphasize the true historical facts about a great Kenyan leader.

In 1968 the first African Seth Adagala, a Kenyan was appointed director of the Kenya National Theatre (Banham 2005: 218). He established a theatre school, but the curriculum was once again Eurocentric. Ngugi complained that "the Kenya National Theatre, despite the insertion of Kenyan voices courtesy of the Kenya Theatre Company, remained an elitist space" (Ngugi 1986: 39). From 1970 onwards there were strong drives to indigenise East African literature and the theatre. Developments at the University of Nairobi are commented on in Adrian Roscoe's *Uhuru's Fire*. He describes

how T.P. Gorman and later the playwright from Ghana, Joe de Graaft, guided the work there. The symbolic Africanisation of the theatre scene came in when, inspired by the Makerere University's Free Travelling Theatre, Nairobi University developed its own travelling theatre group in 1974 which took plays in the 1970s to the rural areas where they were performed in halls and market-places. These were welcomed with great enthusiasm and enjoyment. Strides made by the people's theatre in Kiswahili to bridge the gap between drama and audience were seen as a priority and the use of indigenous forms and material was widely encouraged. Ngugi felt that during this period traditional dramatic forms re-established themselves in the community and political theatre.

In an attempt at of general retrieval of cultural dignity, values and heritage the primary mission of many of the African writers was to show that indigenous theatre did not cease to exist. In fact many African traditions were worth retaining. Many conferences during 1950 to 1980 concentrated on a theory of the indigenous and advocated the developing and indigenization of African Theatre. To bridge the gap between dramatist and audience it was suggested that indigenous languages should be used. Ngugi and his colleagues seized the responsibility and opportunity to discuss local issues in an indigenous language proving how successful this was experimented with at Kamiriithu. Currently East African drama is gradually changing from an alien literary genre to a weapon of social and political education. The dimension of immediate and direct communication that the theatre possessed was very important for Ngugi. The impact, total group involvement and the special kind of joy theatre had, appealed to him.

Ngugi strongly believes in “the necessity of a truly patriotic Kenyan national theatre firmly rooted in the peasant cultures and languages of the various nationalities that made up Kenya” and in the staging of “plays which truly reflect Kenyan social realities and patriotic Kenyan history.” (Ngugi 1981: 210). He felt that what was needed is a community theatre in a language and imagery that the ordinary people could understand and relate to. Since 1975 he voiced his criticism of foreign imperialist interests at the Kenya Cultural Centre and the Kenya National Theatre. The mere fact that the council was under the chairmanship of the British showed clearly on which side the loyalties were. Companies such as The City Players and The Theatre Group were seen as European, foreign and definitely not Kenyan. After independence the status quo continued at the National Theatre. It was not democratised and continued to cater for foreign interests. Both British and European plays with no relevance to the cultural life of the Kenyan masses were staged. The revolt against the theatre of nobility took on many forms. The biggest revolt was over the control of the Kenya National Theatre which was dominated by the British in spite of the outcry of the masses. Ngugi pleaded in 1979 his case for the National Theatre to be a true Kenyan ‘national’ theatre in an article in *The Guardian*. It remained preserved for the British community even after Kenya had her own national anthem and flag. This institutional structure reflected the political and social relationships between the government and their foreign collaborators against the masses clearly. Even the Kenya Cultural Centre too was no more than ‘a

service station' for foreign interests. People were dissatisfied with the dominance of the imperialist interest and wanted more African theatre.

Indigenous Kenyan theatre first developed within the colonial education system when in 1959 the annual Kenya Drama Festival, an off shoot of the School Drama Festival, came along. The plays, the competition criteria and the British adjudicators were all foreign. The annual National Schools' Drama festivals were held between February and April in the Kenya National Theatre. It was the biggest Drama Festival in the country. It propagated amateur theatre productions. It was under the auspices of the British Council and the East African Theatre Guild until 1969 when the Kenyan Ministry of Education took over (Banham 2005: 217). In 1971 the Olkejuado Secondary School won with *Olkirkenyi*, a play in Maasai. It was the first play in an indigenous language to have won this competition. During the late 1970s a Chief Inspector of Schools, Wasambo Were, organized the popular Schools' and Colleges' Drama festivals in such a way that the competition started at local level and moved on to district level and then to Nairobi. These festivals were mainly attended by the organisers, participants and their teachers and the white adjudicators from Britain. That however changed. Under Wasambo's skillful guidance and vision a touring theatre group was established in 1982. The three plays that won after the local, regional and eventually national eliminations, were performed in the National Theatre at Nairobi and then taken back to the people by this touring theatre group to the rural areas so that more people could see them. Currently the Festival rotates between the eight provinces of Kenya. The spirit in which the local

people embraced these plays encouraged Mugo and the Ngugis to work, as Were, with the dynamism of the community to achieve the general educational goals of the Kamiriithu Centre.

The 1970s brought a new theatre trend: Theatre for Development. The theatre now became an educational tool. The themes were still political, but concealed in comedy or satire. The multi-party politics in Kenya brought new life in the community theatre. Traditional art forms such as story-telling and mime are reviving. Indigenous theatre movements often reflected Western models, but were eventually replaced by the indigenous again. Western education determined elements of contemporary theatrical forms, but playwrights such as Ngugi worked increasingly in socialist theatre on their own terms and asserted a powerful cultural and political identity. The early plays might have been significantly influenced by Western theatre, but they were deeply African in their themes and performance features. Their popular theatre was no separation from life, but life itself.

Ngugi's play, *I Will Marry When I Want*, was collective community-based theatre and had an invigorating effect on East African drama. The efforts to make his work more accessible to mass audiences was important as it helped Kenyan theatre to break away from imperialist traditions, symbolized by the Kenya National Theatre and Western theatre. It had a grass-roots focus and was a collective project: a national theatre for a national audience in a national language and in direct contrast to Western theatre. Ngugi

had all the rehearsals of the play at the Kamiriithu Centre in the open. This led to the demystification of the whole theatrical process. Western-style theatre rehearses in private, and then performs the final product to the audience. The audience does not share the process; they do not share the knowledge: therefore they are alienated from the production, and can only view it from the outside as audience. This type of theatre creates active 'stars' and passive, undifferentiated audiences. Ngugi's theatre breaks away from these Western traditions. He opened the door for the whole community to participate energetically in various ways such as being part of cast and crew or being spectator-director at grass-roots level on local issues. That empowered the community – they know they were part of the growing process and the performance was no mystical experience – it was what it has always been: part of their existence. The theatre became an expression of their daily lives: the struggle, hope, fear, aspiration and conflict in their midst, vastly different from Western theatre experiences. Even the open-air structure that the Kamiriithu people built themselves was in direct contrast with the formal theatre venue of the National Theatre of Nairobi. As part of his 2002 Performance Study course at the Tisch School of the Arts at the New York University Ngugi examined performance space and popular theatre movements in Africa in the light of the politics of performance space. He was referring directly to the National Theatre and the Kamiriithu theatre. The community project introduced theatre to many who had no time for it because of work demands or previously had no access to theatre. Besides entertainment at churches and bars there are few other sources of relaxation for the people in most villages. In the cities there are sport facilities, night-clubs, cathedrals and the National

theatre who gives preference to white cultural demands, rather than the culture of the people. Yet when the village performed their own play at their own open-air facility it was banned on the pretext of public security by a government that claims to have the social welfare of its people at heart (Ngugi 1981:79).

For many years the Kenyan theatre endured tough times and was the fear of detention a restricting factor. In the 1980s some indigenous artists like Konga Mbandu and John Sibi Okumu made headway with various theatre groups like the Donovan Maule Theatre and the Phoenix Players. Most productions were however still European in themes and casts. This decade produced only a few productions, two of which were TWP's *Dream on a Monkey Mountain* and Alaki Mboya's *Otongalia*. The political atmosphere was still very unstable and the government ready to censure everything. Against this background Ngugi's *Mother, Sing for Me* (1981) showed just how the theatre was revolutionary and sensitises the people on political issues. In a challenge to dilute the European dominance of the Kenyan theatre stage, Peter Mudamba formed, with the Kenya Politechnic, the Mbalamwezi Players in 1986 (KilaKitu 2007:1).

Today the Kenyan theatre "is not dictated by the system but by the public" (Kenya 1999: 3). Gradually there was a shift from political plays to entertainment. In 1997 the Kisima Awards, a Kenyan equivalent of the Oscars, came to life but soon financial problems brought about its death. Lack of media support resulted in, amongst other problems, very few local theatre productions being aired on radio or television. The

Western productions are still firmly in place and the Africans have stayed, to a large extent, consumers of imported foreign culture.

The last few years saw a reinforcement of Kenyan theatre on various levels. The Kenyan National Schools' Drama Festival is still a highlight on the theatre calendar in Kenya (Herbert 1997: 142). The 3<sup>rd</sup> IDEA World Congress of Drama, Theatre and Education was held in Kisumu in 1998 and was a first international congress on drama in Kenya and Africa. The long-standing Free Travelling Theatre showed once more that they were leading by example in the theatre world in Kenya and that on university level they are every year busier than ever. Their performances in the rural areas are the highlight in a dull existence for many inhabitants. The communities often remembered regular performers who were there previously. They included these groups in the local gossip they have picked up and craved the news and fashions from the cities. That the theatre group is from the 'outside' gave them an exotic appeal to the communities. Robert Serumaga played a significant role with his humour and incorporation of indigenous forms of music and dance in such performances (Killam 2000: 263 -264).

Theatre in Kenya is regularly used for social education, but tends to be local performances of foreign plays. Ngugi called for a decolonising of the mind so that people would reclaim their heritage. After the long years of colonial domination there is now a slow revival of the African culture. Throughout Kenya there is a lively interest in theatre, but the core is still centralised in Nairobi where interest is at its peak. Besides



activities at The National Theatre there are several theatre companies. The leading professional group, Phoenix Theatre, was commissioned for the first time to perform a Kenyan playwright's work when *Benta* by Cajetan Boy was staged in August 1998. Christian theatre has been active since the earliest years of colonisation and still is active amongst various church groups of whom some have even developed into conventional theatre groups which address issues such as abuse, poverty and HIV/AIDS.

“Kenyan theatre seems to have come of age locally and is taking its first steps on to the world stage,” (Herbert 2000: 143) Opiyo Mumma, theatre director and member of the Drama and Theatre Education Department of the University of Nairobi, declared in a recent report to the International Theatre Institute. It may be a bit late as in April 1999 there was serious concern about the Kenya National Theatre's poor condition and some serious doubt about its future. A national organisation which aims to bring together all the performing artists, the National Association of Performing Artists (NAPA), was formed and in June 2003 a theatre academy was to be opened under the auspices of the Kenya Cultural Centre. (Artmatters 2003: 1). Another current trend of broad comedy by stand-up comedians attracts large audiences at Kenyan theatres. The amount of theatre activity has increased significantly, both at the community-based and university levels. The themes became more relevant to the culture of the people, and the rich traditions expressed in traditional festivals and ceremonies, contribute to the theatre.

### **2.3 THEATRE AS NGUGI'S WEAPONS IN THE STRUGGLE**

**“In many parts of the underdeveloped world theatre is being used as a medium of education, problem-solving, dialogue and mobilization on development issues such as literacy, health, sanitation, agriculture self-help projects and co-operatives”** (Gunner 1994: 211).

Shared traditional spirituality and community values are still a vital part of the African social fabric. These inspiring experiences help to support the moral survival of the community, and theatre is a cultural and aesthetic phenomenon in the society. That type of practical theatre was called many different names: development, popular or people's theatre and was shaped by the unique conditions and circumstances of the society at their specific localities.

The types of theatre which Ngugi uses are numerous. Many of them integrate with each other in their objective, methodology, style and structure. The plots, themes, and moral messages sometimes blur and overlap. It can however be said that all of them have the community and their problems as base. They take the theatre to the people, or come from within the community and have the intention of transforming the society one way or the other. Their role is to fulfil a social, political and/or cultural purpose. This study will look synoptically at those types of theatre which are used by Ngugi, namely Development, Popular, People's, Political and Protest theatre to understand his work

better. Ngugi himself has never claimed that he used a specific type of theatre except that by reading his plays and the literature available, one comes to the conclusion that his was “a theatre of the people for the people and by the people” (Findlay 1970: 34). The participatory nature of these theatre forms relates closely to those that were practiced in the years before colonialism and Ngugi propagates the people should return to.

### **2.3.1 DEVELOPMENT THEATRE**

**“Theatre itself is development.”** Jan Cohen Cruz, Associate Professor of Drama, New York University (Banham 1999: 115).

A brief study of the nature and functions of Theatre for Development revealed that the late 1970s saw the first flush of the movement. According to David Kerr “A frequent aspiration of the university traveling theatre movement has been to interact with non-academic theatre campaigns aimed at community renewal, particularly in the rural areas of Africa. This wider mode of drama is commonly referred to as ‘Theatre for Development’. There have been two major sources of Theatre for Development: the colonial tradition of theatre as propaganda, and another more radical tradition of community theatre” (Kerr 1995: 149).

Theatre for development has been acknowledged as one medium which could guide people towards the achieving of development objectives such as the improvement of people's quality of life. "The aim of the project was to use theatre as a medium of development communication, and secondly to use theatre for motivating communities into initiating and/or participating in development activities" (Gunner 1994: 204 – 205). The improvement of a community through a process of social transformation is an ultimate goal of this process. Ngugi hoped to achieve that with his theatre at Kamiriithu.

In many countries it was NGOs that used theatre as a main channel to take educational messages to the populations throughout the country. Depending on the target group – urban or rural – they used the local languages. In some countries a research group also evaluated periodically the impact of these performances and that also ensures the quality of performances. In the theatre for development the concept of critical awareness is an important one. By critically examining and analyzing a community's situation with them through discussions and performing, the people can become drawn into the whole process and come to a decision and take resolutions about solving their issues themselves.

The first African theatre for development projects began in 1973 after the theatre style of the Brazilian educator, Paulo Freire. He had a powerful influence on achieving an approach that would include the community more in creating a truly active participatory theatre. He felt that the plentiful human resources needed channeling and that

participatory theatre was just the instrument to break ground. Soon other countries such as Zambia (David Kerr), Nigeria (Steve Abah) and Kenya (Ngugi wa Thiong'o) who were familiar with the work of Paulo Freire and Augusto Boal, followed. Botswana, South Africa, Zimbabwe, Malawi and Lesotho all use Development Theatre with great success. Chris Kamlongera, Zakes Mda, Kimani Gecau and Ngugi wa Mirii are some of the dedicated theatre practitioners who are doing outstanding work in various communities. They practised this to eradicate under-development by establishing the causes and applying strategies towards solving the problems, e.g. poverty, of the community by stimulating dialogue through theatre.

Byam (1999) feels that the success of theatre for development is calculated by the degree to which popular participation occurs throughout the process of conscientisation and the development of critical thinking, problem solving and thematic investigation in which the outcome of the investigation is staged and further discussed in codes that the community itself values. Without communication between the community members themselves and between them and the facilitators, there will be very little or no success. The participatory research on themes and social interaction ensures meaningful development. According to Zakes Mda many projects failed to achieve their goal due to communication problems of people from outside the community who come and decide what is good for a community. The projects are imposed upon the community without finding out from the 'beneficiaries' what their needs are. "People feel that things are

being done for them, ... They see themselves as mere recipients – an attitude which reinforces dependency” (Gunner 1994: 203). Communities in most cases resent ‘outsiders’ and ‘foreigners’ to just come and tell them what to do and how to go about it; especially if it is controversial issues. Theatre for Development or Participatory Theatre requires that the community members themselves become performers. Ngugi did not become a ‘performer’, but was one of the villagers himself who experienced the same suffering that they did. By being involved in the whole process from page to stage he ensured an unprecedented level of participation which ensured better co-operation and became a rehearsal for life.

This type of theatre requires that theatre practitioners and extension workers become catalysts and have specialist skills in theatre and community development, and work in an organised way in targeted communities. If one reads Ngugi and his cousin Ngugi wa Mirii’s biographies then it shows clearly that they were perfect for their roles as democratic theatre practitioners. They listened and facilitated the verbalisation of the people’s circumstances to enable theatre as an appropriate intermediate to bring about life-changing reform. A flow of information was what they brought about with their open rehearsal system. A system of open rehearsals might attract more people to come and join in the discussions and actual performance. Valuable input can be gained this way. With the rehearsals of *I Will Marry When I Want* and *Mother, Sing for Me* this turned out to be a bonus as the one play was only performed for a few nights and the other never before they were banned.

Mda made the observation that “In the rural community there is also a strong tradition of contributing to a discussion in a disciplined way, with each speaker being given a chance to speak in turn without interruption until he or she finishes.” But in the urban areas “this did not exist and efforts to promote dialogue between performers and audience often collapsed into questions being answered by an undifferentiated chorus of shouts” (Gunner 1994: 222). For meaningful communication to take place there should be an atmosphere conducive to participation among the attendants, even if there are differences in opinions among them. Each point of view should be considered as valuable and should be heard. The attitude of the people, their eagerness to find solutions and their willingness to contribute will certainly also be factors that influence the outcome of the process. The difference in rural and urban circumstances, problems and type of audience should thus be taken into account.

To achieve exhilarating participatory theatre it is absolutely vital that the people are drawn into all the different phases of the course of action. It creates awareness amongst the people. It becomes ‘applied’ theatre from which the people can benefit when it is community-based theatre steeped in their traditional culture and oral literature. It is always better if the theatre develops from themselves and their deep-rooted tribulations. The under-represented people in the communities can collectively express their problems and strive for solutions. Botswana was one of the countries where theatre blossomed when the community awoke. Zakes Mda, South African poet, theatre for

development practitioner, playwright and communications researcher, said in *When People Play People* (1993: 4) "...the locus for change is not set within the individual, and problems of underdevelopment do not lie with villagers as individuals who are ignorant and traditional, and who must therefore be stimulated into action. Failed development lies within larger political and economic structures."

In this process a further aim is to set up shared communication between the performers and the audience as for ongoing transformation. Ngugi aims for communication, giving more of the population access to the messages created to invigorate their cultural expression. Much information can be conveyed through songs, puppetry and drama on important issues such as HIV/AIDS, immunization, breast-feeding, income generating activities for rural people, child survival, deforestation and other themes. In Ngugi's case he utilised the history to expose the social imbalances of the present by incorporating traditional songs and dances to send a political message.

Experience has revealed that there can be limitations for this type of theatre. In certain communities, mostly those in one-party states, theatre needs to take party politics very seriously and operate within that country's political structures. As it curtails freedom of expression it means that the theatre has to work in a restrictive way. Another restriction can be noise. In rural areas the gathering is mostly outdoors and the children not much of a disturbance. In urban areas the venues are mostly indoors and the conditions are not always desirable, e.g. children can be interruptive and a disturbance to the adults



working on matters that do not concern youngsters. Children's Theatre would be a solution in keeping them occupied and constructive while their parents are busy.

The creative frenzy of the play with its toying with ideas, discussing and planning, often delivers the most conscious-raising moments about the problem rather than the actual performance. Often when controversial issues are raised skilled facilitators are needed to ensure that the process of exploration and discovery advances in a logical and constructive manner to the benefit of the participants. The theatre may be entertaining, spontaneous and exhilarating due to the humorous handling of the material, but should always convey the message to the community. A possible solution is given through the performance, audience participation or after the performance in a discussion with the audience until they are satisfied with the different approaches to solving the problem. Sometimes using actors as audience to stimulate spontaneous communication within the performance works wonders; at times they are not even needed.

When the audience becomes the actors the method becomes much more effective in producing and distributing the message. That is using the rich potential of the community's human resources to the fullest. The theatre practitioners can begin the process with a story containing a local social problem; and here the script of the Ngugi's comes to mind. The action is followed by the community members who will by improvising; rehearse a possible solution on which the audience is invited to comment. Anybody from the audience may substitute an actor and then pilot the action in a way

that is more suitable to the actor until the audience is in agreement and convinced that the best solution has been found. It is an exercise in informing and guiding people to their benefit.

The Theatre for Development suited Ngugi quite well as this type of theatre relies in every stage of the process on the contribution of participant-spectators to contribute to the creation of the play. Their interaction and reactions are not optional extras without which the drama will go ahead anyway, but the very basis of the drama without which there will be no drama. In Theatre for Development everyone who is present at a rehearsal or a performance is a participant-performer and a participant-spectator. This type of theatre gives the opportunity to shift between the two positions and is yet another of the mechanisms which gives Theatre for Development its staying power. This offers various opportunities to explore new relationships within the drama and a further possibility of re-enacting them as possible solutions to the problem.

Paulo Freire was a firm believer that the underlying principle of the Theatre for Development is the theory of education wherein the passive 'audience' of people is discarded. Through the shared participatory approach to learning members of a group learn from each other. Each individual brings different knowledge to the community and by exchanging it, acquires more knowledge and a greater understanding of the problematic situation they might find themselves in; often a political one. Ngugi used the theatre in developing communication amongst the literacy group and then even

wider, the rest of the villagers in an outgrowth of using theatre for fundamental educational purposes. Follow-up activities, ongoing practice of exchange of ideas and problem-solving are very important. Theatre functions as communication and should be kept alive. With the performances banned and Ngugi in prison this aspect could not be practised at Kamiriithu.

Theatre for Development is currently used widely in several African countries. In Kenya itself it is used frequently, as well as other major theatre forms such as Participatory Educational Theatre and Theatre in Education. That these development theatre forms have a tremendous effect and influence on the people and governments the events at Kamirithu can testify to. Workshops, made possible by organisations such as UNICEF, ensure that theatre practitioners and development extension workers are committed and skilled in working methods, trends in development financial support and model projects.

### **2.3.2 POPULAR THEATRE**

**“The concept of the ‘popular’, as Bourdieu observed, is always ambiguous because it comes to us inscribed with the history of political and cultural struggles” (Barber 1997: 3).**

Ngugi, as well as Boal, agree with Bourdieu in that statement and even lean further to Brecht for the term 'Popular Theatre'. "Our conception of popular refers to the people who are not only fully involved in the process of development but are actually taking it over, forcing it, deciding it" (Boal 1979: 324-325). With taking over he meant that the people should take over the culture and the initiative therein, from the bourgeoisie. They must lead it; utilise it. Brecht saw the masses as subject matter and target audience and most importantly as the makers of their own revolutionary drama. Ngugi strives to reach those goals in his work. When Brecht said that popular theatre is "by the oppressed, about the oppressed and for them" (Boal 1979: 325) Ngugi did just that at Kamirithu by staging plays, e.g. *I Will Marry When I Want* and *Mother Sing for Me* in that style. The characters and actors from these plays were peasants and workers and the spectators contributed to the ongoing process from their realities of exploitation and oppression.

They as theatre practitioners feel strongly that theatre is significant if the audiences are not only audiences. As with Ngugi's plays they must become actors and creators of drama. Ngugi used this method of popular communal theatre as a form of communication and expression to bring conscientisation and cultural development to the oppressed masses. His radical, political plays and folk musicals were popular among the people. Etherton says, "By people's culture we mean the culture that exists and manifests itself in a spontaneous and natural way through music, customs, values, etc. It is a culture dominated and absorbed by the ruling culture, and which has been able to impose across time values foreign to the popular interest and favorable to the ruling

class. By popular culture we mean the culture that preserves, rescues and incorporates elements content, is eminently popular, that is to say the culture which strengthens ethnic and class consciousness. Boal confusingly, uses 'people's theatre' in the opposite sense, to mean 'truly in the interest of the people', but does not explicitly draw a distinction between 'people's' and 'popular'" (Barber 1997: 9) nor does Ngugi distinguish pertinently between the terms when he practises theatre within the community. It was called popular because the performances were meant for the entire community and not only that upper-class who were educated. The performances were often in the local languages so that more people would be able to understand it as it dealt particularly with the problems of the people. "Of the term 'popular', it is generally agreed to have an empirical sociological basis, that is, to refer in some way to an existing social category: 'the people'. 'The people', then, in this usage, corresponds to a class, or a group of classes, though the boundaries are not usually clearly specified" (Barber 1997: 3).

Popular Theatre, with its own theatre aesthetics, became to a large extent the most characteristic form of theatre in many African countries. It not only offered entertainment but more importantly, education to people. Popular culture was permeated with the accepted wisdom of self-improvement. It was taking theatre to the rural people; using their own indigenous forms and enriching them. For theatre practitioners, like Ngugi, to turn their backs on the comforts of the 'Little Theatres' was revolutionary. It meant playing in dilapidated halls, village clearings or wherever there was an open space

– but it was theatre: popular people’s theatre; expressed in the collective ethics and sentiments to the popular audience. The colonisers saw the people’s culture as low class and common as opposed to their, the ruling class’s, high culture. Theatre thus became another class distinction which emphasised the enormous differentials between the rich and the poor. Modern popular theatre, unlike traditional theatre, charged admission. Gradually people became used to pay entrance fees for their theatre entertainment. Most rural theatre only asked admission to cover their overheads.

Paulo Freire’s ideas of conscientisation and rising communal and political consciousness in the masses became a philosophy for Popular Theatre. The people realized that they had to reclaim their culture’s rightful place back from the bourgeoisie. For both Boal and Ngugi the peoples’ culture manifest through their own dances, music and customs and in the involvement of as many as possible members of the community in the process of creating a play and the actual performance. Lewis Nkosi made the point in his book *Home and Exile* (1965) that traditional African theatre is communal theatre. This is in agreement with the editors of *West African Popular Theatre* (1997) in their definition of popular theatre: “ ‘popular’ defined in social (class) terms: popular is what is produced and/or consumed by “the people” as opposed to the wealthy and well-educated elite.” (xvii / Introduction).

Popular theatre was what the Theatre for Development was called in the 70s. Popular theatre speaks directly about important issues that concern the people. Social, economic,

educational and political subjects are addressed and mobilised the communities for social change. It became much more than mere entertainment. Ross Kidd, a co-founder of the Botswana popular theatre movement claimed, “It is a new tradition that has been built on a long history of people’s songs, drama, dance and drumming being used in resistance against colonial and other forms of oppression” (Kidd 1980: 10).

Augusto Boal is one of the prominent figures in this type of theatre. He practises Theatre of the Oppressed. His ideas and those of Ngugi correspond in many aspects and not only in using the theatre as a weapon. Their theatre has the ultimate aim of making the peasant and the worker aware of the world around him: the world of oppression – full of injustice, deceit, exploitation, cruelty and betrayal. They want to break the repression. “The dominant classes crush the dominated ones through repression; the old crush the young through repression; certain races subjugate others through repression” (Boal 1979: 149). These opinions are traceable in many of Ngugi’s plays, e.g. Remi in *The Black Hermit* are outspoken about oppression:

To you tribalism and colonialism, the tyranny of the tribe  
and the settler are an abstraction. To me they are real. I have  
felt their shaft here. Yes, they have made a wound here.

(Act 2, Scene 3. p 47)

One of the many differences between African and Western theatre lies in the fact that Western theatre is restricted to a theatre building, while indigenous African theatre can create and produce popular theatre anywhere there is an open space. “Popular theatre is a medium of encouraging participation, raising community issues, fostering discussion, and promoting collective action” ... (Gunner 1994: 13). At the Kamiriithu Centre the adult literacy classes used art, which included Popular Theatre, with its power in the society, in exactly that method. Ngugi’s example of Popular Theatre was later used by many groups to initiate social change. “It was through the popular theatre that Ngugi wa Thiong’o’s Kimiriithu phenomenon lived on in similar theatre projects... Ngugi’s idea continued to be felt on the Kenyan theatre scene. Theatre based on people’s perception of self became vibrant in different sections of the country” (Banham 2005: 227).

### **2.3.3 PEOPLE’S THEATRE**

**“We believe that good theatre is that which is on the side of the people, that which, without masking mistakes and weaknesses, give people courage and urges them to higher resolves in their struggle for total liberation”** Ngugi 1977: Preface).

**“The real language of African theatre can be found among the people – the peasantry in particular – in their life, history and struggles”** (Ngugi 1994: 41).



The term 'People's Theatre' distinguished it from the commercial urban theatre. This popular (and often protest) theatre allowed the workers and peasants participation to strengthen solidarity. People's Theatre is in effect Popular Theatre and in Africa includes forms such as Community Theatre and Theatre for Development. Community theatre is the "work of many hands and tongues," according to Ngugi (1981:8). Ngugi played an important role in taking the theatre to the people to develop it with them to make real live theatre that merged the still existing traditional with the popular. Together with the people, the centre of People's Theatre, he developed new theatre aesthetics that was their own. Their language, cultural traditions and economic situation determined the theatre. They were trying to generate their identity through returning to their traditional culture. By using ordinary people they practised typical Brechtian theatre. Throughout time, war and turmoil, the peasants were the guardians of theatre. It lies in myths, rituals, festivals and their daily lives. Ngugi's plays portray that African way of life when the people make their theatre vibrant and alive.

Ngugi and Boal use theatre as a powerful mode of expression to voice the people's feelings and experiences. The theatre must be put to work for them and bring them insight. Through their work – which is revolutionary-inspired – they want to make their respective communities conscious of the increasing poverty, the growing illiteracy and discrimination against them and their national culture. That education and languages are oppressed and dominated by the ruling class and foreigners are revealed by Ngugi:

Today all the good school belong

to the rich .....

All belong to the rich.....

*I Will Marry When I Want* (Act 1, p. 38)

“Kamiriithu is a concrete example of what a people’s national theatre should be: accessible to and controlled by the masses, performed in their languages, adopting their forms of cultural expression and addressing their issues. It provides an alternative version for developing national culture. Instead of elitist and neo-colonial institutions of culture in the capital, popular centres of culture could be created in every village, where a type of theatre which correctly reflects the lives, fears, hopes, dreams, and history of struggle of the local people themselves manifest” (Findlay 1970: 50).

That was the People’s Theatre Ngugi practised among the worker community where he approached theatre with a matter-of-fact attitude: it is an effective medium to make the people aware of their situation and has tremendous power to bring about change. R. M. Kavanagh in his book *Making People’s Theatre* (1997) defines People’s theatre as “a theatre that is practised by the broad majority in society” It is with them, workers and peasants of his hometown village that Ngugi developed a critical consciousness as a key component of the neo-colonial struggle, through his theatre activities.

### **2.3.4 POLITICAL THEATRE**

**“Popular performance proceeds from pure entertainment through class awareness to the formation of an instrument in the liberation struggle”** David Kerr. (Banham 1999: 145).

“Kamiriithu ...was a frankly political, in fact, revolutionary cultural campaign, involving a direct challenge to a patently tyrannical neo-colonial regime” (Gunner 1994: 220). Political Theatre is a style which developed out of Popular Theatre. In Ngugi’s theatre the concept ‘popular’ takes on a moral political connotation similar to that of Boal, the Latin American theatre activist, who saw popular as “being that which functions in the interests of the masses. They seem to combine the political consciousness of the ‘popular’ with the spontaneous grassroots support of the ‘people’s” (Barber 1997: 5). By practising Political Theatre with the people at Kamiriithu, Ngugi could express his political militancy.

“.... All theater is necessarily political, because all the activities of man are political and theater is one of them....The theater is a weapon. A very efficient weapon. For this reason one must fight for it. For this reason the ruling classes strive to take permanent hold of the theater and utilize it as a tool for domination... But the theater can also be a weapon for liberation. For that, it is necessary to create appropriate theatrical forms” (Boal 1979: 155). Ngugi has acknowledged his similar political intentions when he

wrote the radical dramas *The Black Hermit*, *The Trail of Dedan Kimathi* and especially *I Will Marry When I Want* and *Mother Sing for Me*. His ideological political vision springs from material derived from his own Kenyan background. He expresses himself boldly on subjects of colonialism and neo-colonialism. He opposes the new post-independence leaders – those new elite for taking on First World values and thus oppressing the peasants' values. Ngugi feels that the elite, as prominent political figures in the new Kenya, are now exploiting their own kind. The political discontent that Ngugi voices through his characters such as Remi, Gigaamba and Kariuki, is a consequence of the tendency of the ruling African elite toward capitalism and imperialism. In *The Trail of Dedan Kimathi* the statement was made that imperialism is the enemy of all working people. This is emphasised in *This Time Tomorrow*, *The Black Hermit*, *I Will Marry When I Want* and in the multi-cultural musical *Mother, Sing for Me*. His theatre expresses the agony of their oppression in angry revolutionary terms.

Theatre and politics are human activities – a reflection of their world. It shows what is wrong in their society. George Weideman's '*n Smerige Geskiedenis* (1998) en Athol Fugard's *Sophiatown* in *The Township Plays* (1993) are examples of Namibia and South Africa's history where society had plenty to be ashamed of. As there was much wrong in his country Ngugi took a socio-political stand and advocated the cause of the people. He attempts with his active theatre to inspire people to a collective and radical reassessment of their society. Thus he, Boal and Brecht are "concerned with theatre as an instrument in the process of achieving radical social change" (Parker 1978: 51). In *The Black*

*Hermit* Remi speaks out against tribalism and its devastating effect on people. Ngugi speaks through the mouth of Remi, who after new insight into his duty to his tribe, changed his attitude for the better, and decided to go back to change them:

I must now rise and go to the country.

For I must serve our people,

Save them from traditions and bad customs,

Free them from tribal manacles.

Now.

*The Black Hermit* (Act 2, Scene 3, p. 45)

Theatre became his tool in the political, cultural and social development of the masses; giving theatre an educational purpose. Ngugi's theatre also responded with that of Boal's in that it is not for entertainment. Indeed a most effective weapon in educating for an immediate end – theatre advocates man's cause and/or instructs the audience. His audience had a huge influence in the development in the actual dramas done at Kamiriithu. Ngugi created "collective theatre, which not only reflected popular struggles but made an important contribution" (Hutchison 1996: 15) to the concerns and aspirations of the people at Kamiriithu through the arts. David Kerr sees the theatre that was practised by Ngugi and the people at Kamiriithu as "liberating, emancipative aspects of popular art forms in the process of creating theatre, of bringing it to an

audience with a political message, but more important, as a show that is in itself a political statement” (Breitinger 1994: 146).

The main objective with the theatre of the oppressed was to development in the spectators a craving for social transformation. In the play *I Will Marry When I Want* Ngugi uses creatively the present situation to provide fuel for a social revolution. In *The Trail of Dedan Kimati* the playwright use the past to explore the horrors of colonialism. Both the past and the present form a means to an end to influence the masses against the current oppression and exploitation. He summons the peasants and workers to become aware of the wrong. In this Ngugi and Boal identify with the ideas of Brecht. They do not want the spectators to feel satisfied after a play: they want to disturb them; to feel uncomfortable with their conscience; to get reaction and change attitudes. Brecht constructed his dramas in such a way that the spectators were able to think how the social order and the masses could be changed for the better according to Etherton (1982: 343). Ngugi molded his plays on that idea. The actors and audience had to make their own discoveries of how to claim back their heritage through their process and performance. Boal states, “Theatre is change and not simple presentation of what exists: it is becoming and not being” (Boal 1979: 55). The spectator must become involved, participate and go through the process to change. Both *I Will Marry When I Want* and *Mother Sing for Me* were plays in which Ngugi used the peasants and workers as actors, and they, and the audience, were part of the process of changing the status quo.

Boal says that theatre is political and Ngugi agrees. For him the theatre has a political commitment and he thus agrees with Biodun Jeyifo too who feels that commitment in contemporary African drama has taken a decisive turn and that the main subject is revolution. Ngugi opposes the new elite class of corrupt politicians and businessmen. As capitalism is the cause of poverty, Ngugi propagates that it must be replaced by African socialism. When independence came the fruits of it went to the neo-colonial oppressors; the wealth distribution was again unequal:

The fact is  
 That the wealth of our land  
 Has been grabbed by a tiny group  
 Of the Kioi's and the Ndugires  
 In partnership with foreigners!

*I Will Marry When I Want* (Act 2, Scene 1, p. 62)

Through theatre Ngugi wants to raise the political consciousness of the masses to free themselves, by revolution if need be. The passive victims (audience) must become active, committed participants (spec-actors) in the liberation process. In this he agrees with Aristophanes who felt that the playwright should, besides giving pleasure, also advise his spectators politically. Their theatre has a define function – it mirrors the failures, disgraces and exploiting of the new nation-state.

### **2.3.5 PROTEST THEATRE**

“Theatre is a weapon ... a weapon for liberation.” (Boal 1979: ix).

Ngugi feels that his people must have pride in their history and their colour. His dramatic performances attempt to convert and persuade the audiences to his point of view. In the broadest sense his theatre could be seen as propaganda. The re-enactment of historical events in *The Trail of Dedan Kimahti*, *I Will Marry When I Want* and *Mother, Sing for Me* gave a feeling of national unity and gained the support of the masses. Erwin Piscator and Bertolt Brecht established most of the political theatre's techniques used in the propaganda theatre that Ngugi utilised. The slide technique that they used was also utilized in *Mother, Sing for Me* to make the audience connect with the shown events with their world at large; and with the purpose of making the audience understand the social mechanisms which shaped that world. It helps to make the audience identify with a specific ideology or political line and change attitudes and conditions. It protests directly against injustices in neo-colonial Kenya.

Brown (1980: 50) claims that “Drama would seem to be the better bet as a medium for protest. Of its very nature it is a communal experience and has to do with a corporate rather than an individual response – it will move more people more quickly.” In *Lower Depths* (1902) Gorky depicted the poverty and degrading of human life, the double-



dealing, the seeking to take advantage of others and the political implications thereof. In *The Cherry Orchard* (1904) Chekhov dealt subtly and indirectly with the same theme, while Ngugi tackles these issues head-on.

Indeed, drama has been identified by African writers as the obvious genre for the writer with revolutionary ideas” and suits the liberal Ngugi just fine so that he agrees with Biodun Jeyifo who says “the functions and social uses of theatre cannot be separated from the total condition, the entire political, social, economic and cultural circumstances of the popular masses themselves.” (Jeyifo in Hutchison 1996: 14). Through his protest plays Ngugi implies a belief in a better tomorrow.

#### **2.4. NGUGI WA THIONG’O AS THEATRE PRACTITIONER**

**“In a sense I did not choose theatre, but theatre chose me,”** Ngugi said in an interview with Jane Wilkinson. (Wilkinson 1992: 123-124).

Ngugi, like Freire and Boal, started his involvement in theatre not as a theatre practitioner; that would only come later. Ngugi, as Modhumita Roy relates (Cantalupo 1995: 170) became engrossed with theatre in approximately 1969 while at Makerere University. It soon became a major part of his life. Theatre was seen by him and many other African academics as a most effective tool for political mobilisation of all cultural

productions. His approach to theatre is embedded in his historical experience and in his understanding of the society as it currently is and what it should be. The university had a strong theatrical tradition and explored both African and Western drama. With his play *The Black Hermit* and the three short plays in *This Time Tomorrow* he offered a small, but distinctive contribution to the theatre while studying there. They were in reaction to the social problems that he experienced. With the commissioned *The Trail of Dedan Kimathi* Micere Mugo and Ngugi used the theatre in celebrating independence and commemorating one of Kenya's heroes. Here he was not only the playwright, but became a theatre practitioner. His next involvement with theatre came when he and Ngugi wa Mirii used the theatre as a medium for non-formal tutoring to educate and involve the Kamiriithu community in a literary campaign to improve their quality of life and express their economic, social and political concerns as they emerge from the community.

Ngugi's theatre developed for different reasons:

- \* as a socialist he condemns the inequality between people
- \* the masses were isolated and deprived of their traditional cultural forms
- \* they were cut off from art as it was only for the nobility – the colonisers
- \* as a reaction on colonialism and neo-colonialism
- \* it became a political attempt to force the new ruling class to face the causes of poverty in the lives of the workers
- \* “Humans are theatre” said Augusto Boal and it is out of compassion for

his people that Ngugi practised his theatre.

As a theorist Ngugi, in analysing pre-colonial theatre, does not differ largely from essentialist or revivalist theories. He feels that the ritual and functional features of Kenya's pre-colonial theatre is part of the daily and seasonal life of the community. Ngugi had the chance to put theatre theory into practise at the Kamiriithu Centre. He practiced an indigenous African tradition of collective creativity and in doing so rekindled the tradition of using an open, empty space. As with Boal, Ngugi's theatre manifest through dance, music and customs. His commitment to theatre and his community led him and Ngugi wa Mirii to form the communal theatre with a group of the people at Kamiriithu. "I am a product of the community and I would like to contribute something to that community" (Pozo 2005: 2).

Unlike the highly individualistically centered western theatre, the Ngugi theatre at Kamiriithu was essentially community-focused. Though there was enough possibility for individual learning and development, it was intended for the communal society rather than individuals.

Ngugi theatre has definite functions too. It is an instrument for education and developing politics. Like Boal Ngugi chooses to "emphasise the social and political heart of his work" (Cohen-Cruz 1990: 43). Ngugi declares that "Theatre ... an expression of the drama in the lives of the people – that is, as an expression of their struggles, their

conflicts, their hopes, and fears, their aspirations – can make a people view themselves positively, and even be the beginning of an awakening of the slumbering powers within them” (Baker 1997: 131). The people and their dire circumstances were his main concern. The plays are processes of consciousness-building, leading up to revolutionary action. He uses what the community is familiar with to strengthen their awareness of their circumstances; whether social, economical, political, environmental or cultural, in his theatre.

For Ngugi theatre is not something separate from life, as he felt that people make theatre as their lives are the very substance of drama. “The real language of African theatre could only be found among the people – the peasantry in particular” (Ngugi 1994: 41). It is the community that came up with what the focus of the play should be by suggesting the problem, and what could be done about the problem. To call it a theatre of community empowerment would be very appropriate because according to Dr. Sultan Somjee, a student who helped to built the Kamiriithu theatre “The theater was created to unite and empower the people ...and was a grass-roots production celebrating the people and their culture and criticizing the government” (Ressler 2005: 3).

Ngugi embraced the concept of collectiveness. He was the writer of the drafts, but the community in their functional social relationship with the theatre, helped with the process. It became a collective festival. With Western theatre the playwright is an individual who mostly has nothing to do with the staging of the play. The community’s

social relationship with theatre is much more functional. Like Paulo Freire Ngugi feels that the peasants must help devise the very way in which they are going to learn. Ngugi sees the theatre as the real language of the African as it is capable of being utilized by all. It can be placed at the service of the oppressed in their struggles. By using this 'new language' they can discover new concepts. Then the theatre becomes a process of social development and a way to express the voice of the new nations of Africa. The theatre must then be molded by the experience of many for it to become a part of society for the process of social development to become a reality. The theatre must help the society to develop in a way that benefits the masses and convey the message of change to the community. By engaging the whole community proved to be far more effective than only going to the theatre. The purpose of using theatre with the Kamiriithu community was to develop ways for them to think problems through, discuss them and become involved in finding solutions. To a large extent the success of the Ngugi plays lay in their intimate knowledge of Kamiriithu, its people and culture, and their strong beliefs in the struggle for a better life for the village. Ngugi wrote as a community member with insight into problems experienced. Rather than didactic, his theatre is pedagogic to ensure that they learn together. His theatre became representative in many ways of the cumulative awakening of the masses' consciousness and conscience. It gives inspiration and hope.

The process and not only the end product, was as much the goal for Ngugi. That was precisely why his collective plays were such a success in their creation and

performances. The process only ended long afterwards the script was written, the cast performed and the audience applauded. In effect, if it lingered on in the minds of the people, the process was still ongoing. The chance for change was still there.

Ngugi is committed to the art of theatre and what it can do in his society. His theatre is a reflection of his social beliefs and advocates radical social transformation. It develops what already exists in germinal state. Just as Chinua Achebe, Ngugi rejects the western conception of 'art for art's sake' and "he embraces the conception of art at the heart of African oral traditions and values: 'art is, and always was, at the service of man' he writes. 'Our ancestors created their myths and told their stories with a human purpose; hence 'any good story, any good novel, should have a message, should have a purpose' ” (Global Literacy Project 2006: 2). That accounts for his theatre as well. Ngugi's theatre wants to change society – not conform to the existing social ethos of a foreign culture. His theory is that theatre should never conform to society. Ngugi differs here from Aristotle's coercive system who feels that individuals should conform to the existing social ethos, not striving to change it. Aristotle constructed the first powerful poetic-political system for the intimidation of the spectator; for the elimination of the audience. This system is utilised in conventional theatre through the common basis in Aristotelian poetics for the repression of the people. Aristotle claims further that theatre has nothing to do with politics. Reality tells Ngugi something else: all arts, especially theatre, are political. Ngugi let his theatre become political when the need therefore arose and then the whole ethos and nuance within which he gives expression to it comes naturally to

him as a Marxist. Ngugi practise an explicitly socialist theatre whose process and performances speak directly to social and economic issues. Theatre is a vehicle to achieve his ideological objectives to bring about radical transformation. He successfully links the cultural form theatre with active resistance in his exploring of the relationship between performance and politics.

He invented a new theatrical form with the text and performance that representatively reflected a signifying system. The recovered traditional material was decoded to yield a comprehensive significance. He reintroduces indigenous elements in the plays to create these new forms and style of theatre. The people used the traditional to create the modern.

Ngugi used the theatre as his medium for a reconstruction of history. He uses history realistically, even in slides as Meyerhold and Brecht did, and for the same reason: to shock the audience in remembrance of the truth. He presents to those involved their past and present and calls on them to determine their future. His theatre does not aim to entertain in Western Theatre-style, but wants to liberate. His theatre aims to make the worker aware of the world around him – an unjust world full of cruelty and deceit; as a mirror of their world. His theatre revives the social and cultural structures of the past as the reality of the future. His work displays a shift from the colonial cultural concerns to contemporary social pre-occupation.

Ngugi was deeply concerned about his people's communal and cultural heritage and articulated the need to restore the African people's social values and identity. He aimed to return to the community's roots by using theatre's cultural function to define and affirm the community's cultural 'personality' in the face of continuing cultural subjugation. With his community theatre Ngugi recuperated social and cultural traditions and narratives. The theatre was used very effectively as a cultural medium of confrontation against the ruling elite just as it was done during the Liberation war. In the process he gave the indigenous languages and performing arts their rightful place – the dominant one.

Ngugi's theatre used naturalism: it attempts to 'mirror life' on stage, e.g. the hypocrisy of the ruling class. Naturalism is an important element in the development of twentieth century world drama, especially African drama which wants to reflect contemporary experiences. It is in every instance a formal response to the imposition of dramatic forms utilised by the former oppressive colonial power's intellectuals; a creative interpretation of traditional culture and contemporary material; thus traditional theatre with elements adopted from Western wherein he handles the material so that there is a correlation between form, content and meaning.

"Boal showed how theatre is not necessarily a closed system – and not something reserved for experts" (Cohen-Cruz 1990: 48). Another opinion Ngugi agrees with. Ngugi practised 'open' theatre in his process in comparison to the 'closed' Western theatre



which builds actors and rehearses in private secrecy and a finished, perfected product is sprung on the audience who just for that short period of the actual performance will (passively) enjoy the finished product. In his theatre the roles are not predetermined: the actor, playwright and director all can change. Ngugi raged against stereotype theatre practices such as to present to audiences productions without statements, doctrines or any involvement. Those performances reflected the dominant ideology of the aristocrats. Boal terms it 'theatre of aristocracy' – either by birth or by money because certain people may act while others remain seated as receptive spectators. There was a barrier between the actors and the spectators: the curtain, the raised stage and the space between stage and the seating caused a physical barrier. There was a psychological one as well as the audience knew that all they could do was observe with only applause as token of appreciation. The European theatre further created more division; even between the actors: some will be protagonists, normally the aristocrats, and the rest the chorus – symbolizing the masses. Ngugi removed this barrier, raised by the ruling class in adopting foreign theatre practices, between the actors and spectators. Then the barrier between the protagonist and the chorus was attacked. For Ngugi all must be simultaneously chorus and protagonists in the necessary transformations of the society. It reminds of Boal's Joker system. The poetics of the oppressed is thus enforced. Ngugi's revolutionary theatre practices in the political field, and his line of reasoning, is as radical as that of theatre activists Boal, Fanon, Freire and Cabral. They are united in their striving towards ultimate theatre to achieve their goals. Ngugi fused his political philosophy into an artistic language; a language he refers to as "theatre of the

community”. “The dialectical process of reorientation that Cabral stipulated for intellectuals involved in the struggle for social change is evident in Ngugi’s work at the Community Centre” (Cantalupo 1995: 171).

One of Brecht’s main beliefs finds manifestation in Ngugi’s theatre: active spectators. Spectators brought their own analogous problems into the theatre process with the purpose of how reality can be changed. Each theatre event of Ngugi’s was live, immediate, and unique in its audience participation (dealt with in chapter 3).

Another barrier that Ngugi, who values local oral traditions highly, removed was the linguistic one. He felt that it was important to reach his audience in their own language and solved it by writing in Gikuyu through which the whole community worked together and created the plays. Ngugi convincingly shows the benefits of working in the local language within the local traditions when he claims that the theatre in Kenya “has another dimension which I think is quite important and this is its capacity for immediate communication” (Wilkinson 1992: 125). Here Zakes Mda (1993) agrees with him that the impact theatre has on those involved is direct to have the desired effect. They could express themselves, discover new concepts and make important cultural and social contributions in their rural community. His success in bridging the cultural divisions is brought by the use of more than one language as could be heard in *Mother, Sing for Me*. Ngugi succeeded in translating the social and historical reality onto the stage in several languages.

It is thus clear that his expectations about techniques, theatrical space, realism and the actors are vastly different from that of the Western theatre. He breaks away from Western theatre's individual authorship, the written script, the stage, division between actor and role, division between audience and performers. Western theatre creates active actors and passive audiences but Ngugi in contrast ensured that the whole community participated so that the theatre became a communication.

Ngugi challenges some of the major fundamental principles of Western theatre in his people's theatre. He agrees with Artaud (1930) who felt that Western theatre only preserves the Western culture, their ethos, their needs. Both see that theatre as commercial, as it is based on profit and capitalism; trivial and shallow as it is mere entertainment. The fact that it is only the property of the White elite group and out of reach of the masses due to its location and the prices of the tickets made Ngugi determined to practice the communal theatre he did.

Every playwright is devoted to something further than his art. It was Ngugi who brought the new type of socio-political drama to the people of Kenya. He practised total theatre. His theatre is a powerful mode of expression that gives impetus, shape and direction to the forces in the society, e.g. social, cultural and political. He became a spokesperson for the voiceless as his theatre represents their cause and addresses the worsening circumstances of most Kenyans against a background of past European imperialism and present neo-colonialism which honours values in word but not in deed. He wants the

people to realise the increasing poverty, growing illiteracy and discrimination against their culture and languages is the work of the ruling class. His plays rediscover the forgotten, suppressed heritage, values and truths and urges spectators to claim back what is theirs. Boal said, "I think that theatre of the oppressed methods should be used to help others" (Cohen-Cruz 1990: 46). Ngugi wholeheartedly agrees. He is adamant that his plays should be performed by others and even adapted to suit their people's needs. The fact that the government banned his Kamiriithu plays showed what a powerful force his relevant theatre was. Ngugi's plays are an innovative starting point for Kenya's own theatre. His plays are not his major contribution; rather the shift he brought in Kenyan theatre practice.

### **CHAPTER 3: NGUGI WA THIONG'O'S PLAYS**

Ngugi's story it is not **“a personal one, but the story of his people who are living history and legend and whose lives, richly informed with their own traditional past, are the stuff of mythology”** (Olney 1973: 77).

The literature studied by the candidate mentions five plays in partial detail. There are intermittent references to *The Black Hermit*, *This Time Tomorrow* and *Mother, Sing for Me*. This latter play was studied in detail by Ingrid Björkman as part of People's Theatre in Kenya and how culture relates to the society-structure. *The Trail of Dedan Kimathi*, alongside with *I Will Marry When I Want* received the most attention from scholars who studied his novels.

In general the plays of Ngugi are only mentioned as a component of his writings when the novels are discussed. In their book *Ngugi wa Thiong'o: An Exploration of his writings* David Cook and Michael Okenimkpe were very critical of Ngugi's plays, especially those that he wrote alone: “The characterization is rudimentary. Key figures tend to become mouthpieces for preconceived attitudes, so that the themes seemed forced. The outcome is often clumsy didacticism” (1997: 166). Critics have not always granted his plays their due place in Ngugi's dramatic canon. They are seen as possessing less quality, but nevertheless make a contribution to the literature of Kenya, Africa and our time. The novel writing of Ngugi has been praised for its creativity, excellence, but

not so the plays. He is first seen as an African novel-artist and then as a playwright-protagonist. The plays are however living works of art and are a true reflection of the social conditions in the country. Ngugi's changing outlook promotes a genuine nationalistic theatre, culture and language. The plays reflect an insight that makes them valuable for discussion. They are extremely playable. He uses the past and the present in them to influence the masses against exploitation and oppression in an appeal for social change in the future. They were never meant to be literary masterpieces: rather to be functional in their society.

The approach to his playwriting was never the same for Ngugi as to the writing of his novels although there is a parallelism in themes. With the plays it was not a deliberate sitting down to write. They were all structured to be applicable to the immediate realities. Ngugi said, "I've always written plays as a result of some kind of request, so there's always been some kind of communal demand for me to present a script" (Wilkinson 1992: 124). His plays became a mode of expression – they depended more on the historical circumstances in a contemporary setting. His plays became theatre in a period of social unrest. Each examines the consequences of political events as they have an effect on the lives of members of the community.

As Ngugi's political disillusionment increased, his plays display the same gradual, escalating shift from colonial cultural concerns to contemporary social preoccupations as his novels do. Thematically the first plays dealt mostly with conflicts between parent

and child, and between rural and urban, the old (traditional) and the new (modern). Gradually his plays became more political than artistic when they started to reflect an increased political disillusionment with life in Kenya. With his passion for a just society he commits himself to expose it. He expresses his ideas very clearly and concisely in his later plays. They reflect his deep-seated sympathy for human suffering and his anger and outrage at the intolerable injustices. The cry for human dignity is vibrant in his theatrical works. He wants to change the people's attitude from submissiveness to activity. *The Guerilla Goatherd* (2000), a play by a Namibian playwright, Dorian Haarhoff, touches on the same thorny issues of class division and colonial oppression. Through the history of the Bondelswarts and the clever usage of sheep and goats as metaphors, Haarhoff drives home the point of oppression. Harold Pinter is another playwright who reveals how people oppress their own kind when they are those in power in his *Mountain Language* (1988).

Ngugi's work developed from a nationalist position into a progressive social, anti-imperialist commitment to the struggle of the working people and is affected by his liberal education and socialist ideological leanings. His plays show the same parallel development. It started as individual authorship and blossomed into a collective one with the emphasis on the Gikuyu language.

Ngugi writes about what concerns him and often bases it on his own (and the community's) traumatic experiences in life. He reflects the tone and temper of his time

and place, writing with realism and compassion. His humanist ideas are firmly rooted in certain social norms and reflect the aspirations of the masses. His anger, bitterness and disillusionment are an attack which he launches on the current affairs in Kenya. Through his confrontational plays the society has become more actively engaged in the current political situation.

Ngugi's plays have another unique quality – they can be adapted to suit most Third World countries and all of colonized Africa. That is in fact what Ngugi suggests and encourages people to do. His plays have a universal essence. In August 1984 *The Trail of Dedan Kimathi* was performed in London and even there it was relevant according to Mugo. All over the world people are suffering and fighting the same battles: against class, economic decline, unimaginable poverty, oppression, political instability, corruption, neo-colonialism and exploitation.

Gikandi feels that “Ngugi cannot be considered a major African playwright” (2000: 160). He feels that Ngugi ranks with other African playwrights such as Wole Soyinka, Athol Fugard, Zakes Mda and Ebrahim Hussein. He contributed to the Kenyan theatre when they needed the impetus. Many of the younger playwrights, e.g. Wahome Mutahi and Opiyo Mumma, were inspired by him (Banham 2005: 222).



### **3.1 CONTENT**

**“Modern drama is not a mere emotional entertainment. It is a source of ideas, a cultural and educational factor, an agency for propaganda, and, above all, it is literature”** (Kruger 1995: 29).

Ngugi tells haunting tales of how liberation brought freedom but also lost hopes and soured, crushed dreams; of the hardship which simple, ordinary people, disillusioned and abandoned, suffered at the hands of others without conscience. The content of the plays that Ngugi wrote individually or in collaboration with other playwrights, derived from historical or social-political issues. A preoccupation with the specific history of Kenya – mainly the history of colonialism and the struggle for independence led to *The Wound in the Heart*, *The Trail of Dedan Kamathi*, *I Will Marry When I Want* and *Mother, Sing for Me*. *The Black Hermit* and *This Time Tomorrow* seek to reveal the truth about their disrupted society and attempt to ascertain a deeper actuality. The content of the plays relates to the everyday problems facing the audience and the style is unadorned and without subtlety.

#### **3.1.1 THE BLACK HERMIT (1962)**

This three-act play was the beginning of East Africa’s dramatic writing. It was the first full-length play to be written by an African in English and to be performed at the

Uganda National Theatre. It was written and produced in 1962 as part of the Uganda Independence celebrations because the people wanted something different to celebrate their break with the past. The students and staff of the Makerere University where Ngugi was a student at that time performed it. David Cook said in *African Literature* (1977) that the play was not Ngugi's most polished piece of work, but it developed characteristic patterns of ideas. Chesaina and Mwangi said that "the play is important because it captures the tensions between the traditional life and modernity ushered in by the colonialism" (Banham 2005: 219). In a review, "Black Hermit", in *The Makererean* some weaknesses were mentioned but the achievement it brought to East Africa overshadowed it. "The opening performance moved many in the audience to tears" (Cantalupo 1995: 40). The play has been described as a simple, effective play; written from the heart. Here Ngugi shows his very personal style. Killiam (1984) describes it as a sense of historical perspective into which he relates his personal predicaments to collective destiny. This would be true of all his plays. In *The Black Hermit* Ngugi shares with Remi the fact that he too had to go as chosen to higher education in a strange city. These personal touches added honesty, truth and compassion to the content of the plays.

In 1968 the play was published after some revisions were made by Ngugi who was discontented with the form and political ideas. Some of the names of the characters were made more general African and less Central Kenyan (Cantaplupo 1995: 44). The translation into Swahili enabled most Kenyans to read it.

The play follows the fortunes of a young man, Remi, who is the first of his tribe to go to a university in a city; chosen by his people as the one with leadership qualities and enquiring mind. Western education was seen by them as the line of attack to transform their society to keep abreast with changes. The education he receives confuses him and he finds himself in conflict with the traditions of his tribe and the religion of his parents. The choices between two loyalties make him an outcast to both. He had to cope with many conflicting realities. He no longer can accept their tribal customs and feels trapped when confronted by the custom of marrying his brother's widow, Thoni, as he now lives in the city with a white woman, Jane, with whom he found love and a new life. Toini and his mother, Nyobi, cannot understand his prolonged absence from the tribe and his wife. The tribe appeals to the leaders, the tribe's elders, as the forces of the tribe and its tradition and the Pastor, to get Remi to return. The priest is representative of the alien colonial traditions. They decide to go to the city to persuade Remi to fulfill his tribal duty as every individual has a responsibility to his tribe and the traditional values are binding. In the city Remi, working as a clerk with an oil company, believes that Thoni has and always will love his brother, carries on with the new life he found with a white girl, Jane. After the visit of the elders and the Pastor, Remi decides to return to his tribe out of duty. On his return to the village he addresses the tribe and lashes out at them for their tribalism. He refuses to see Thoni and in her despair and shame she takes her own life. Only then Remi realizes the truth of her love for him:

And she is gone now,

Gone from me and my heart,  
With her words of love  
Still ringing in my heart.

Oh, what have I done?

... I never gave you a chance,

I came back to break Tribe and Custom,  
Instead, I've broken you and me.       (Act 3, Scene 2, p. 76).

Ngugi is very interested in the 'inner' lives of people and brings care and understanding in the creation of his characters. He activates our sympathy. Through this play he speaks to his generation that there must be reconciliation between old and new.

The play is full of contrasts: urban – rural, individual – collective society needs and, old – young. The village people know only the traditional way of life with authentic culture and simple virtues, but Remi has been exposed to the Western with its cynical and mercenary corruptness as well, both with immediate influence. Remi tries to find a middle way to unite them. It leaves him alienated, emancipated, detribalised and urbanised. Franz Fanon once said that those intellectuals come back to their people as foreigners. The educated African is estranged from his African roots. The tradition of

taking his brother's wife after his death is a symbol of the tribe. The freedom to choose a wife becomes the symbol of modern education and ideology.

Banham (1976: 82) describes Remi as a hermit in the city, shutting himself away from the demands of his kinsmen. Exclusion from his people brings individual loneliness. In the traditional society the individual is primarily part of a communal whole: "Everything has a moral and social reference" (Cook 1997: 4). When Jane, his white girlfriend says his life in the city contradicts the term hermit, Remi replies:

Seclusion from what was formerly around you is solitude.

To be a hermit means escaping from what's around you.

My tribe was around me. (Act 2, Scene 3, p. 46).

### **3.1.2 THIS TIME TOMORROW (1968)**

This play was Ngugi's second and forms part of three short plays. It was included in the anthology *Eleven Short African Plays* (Cosmo Pieterse (ed.) 1972). In 1967 it was broadcast by the BBC African Service. In 1970 it was adapted from the radio play into a one-act play to be published with two other plays by the East African Literature bureau. Banham refers to it as "an effective piece of theatre, though probably better suited to radio ... than the stage" (1976: 83). As with the other two plays, this one deals with the

disastrous effects of colonisation on lives and the disastrous results when ethics clash with each other. They express the author's anger about the failure of the country to change since independence; and disillusionment at the inability of the people to obtain the rights and the dignity they dreamt of. The play is critical of the new black elite. Roscoe calls the play "a tight piece of social protest" (1977: 265). The title, as with all Ngugi's titles, is significant and requires that one pause and think about the future. In this play the conflict between generations is evident in Njango and her daughter Wanjiru.

The short play is based on social and historical realities and set in a modern African city where the shanty town must be demolished in a clean-up of the city to make a better impression on foreign visitors and to protect the income from tourism. The municipality's city fathers see the place as a slum which leaves an unfavorable impression with foreign tourists. It is however the home and livelihood of many inhabitants, such as old Njango who has lost her husband and sells food for an income. The contrast in opinions causes friction and conflict. The opinions of those who live in affluence have more weight than the inhabitants of Uhuru Market, as the suburb was called: the shacks must be destroyed by the bulldozers. For Njango there is no future but she encourages her daughter, Wanjiru, to listen to the Stranger. He as an outsider has an objective view of their situation. The people's "disillusionment at the inability of the people to obtain the rights and dignity they dream of," (Banham 1976: 83) is a concern to him. According to him the country belongs to the poor farmers and the labourers who

have fought for Uhuru, and not the elite. A Sunday Paper's reporter introduce and spurs the action. His comments are reminiscent of a Greek chorus.

The play is based on an actual slum-clearing in Nairobi and was a heartfelt protest from Ngugi against the event. In *Urban Obsessions Urban Fears* J. Roger Kurtz gives a detailed explanation for the rapid rise of the shanty towns in the city and reveals that "As early as 1901, municipal authorities tried to control "squatters" by passing a law that allowed the forcible removal of "unauthorized people" and says "it was becoming obvious that urbanization was far outstripping the city's social services, infrastructure, housing and employment opportunities. By 1970, it was clear; Nairobi was in a state of crisis" (Kurtz 1998: 79). One of the reasons for the slums was the migrant worker system and the inequality between white/rich and blacks/poor. This play brings to mind the similar forceful removals (dealt with under the themes).

### **3.1.3 THE WOUND IN THE HEART (1960)**

*The Rebels* too was produced for Radio Uganda. The title already tells Ngugi's frame of mind. Just as with *The Black Hermit*, *The Wound in the Heart* and *This Time Tomorrow* this play has an attitude of anger and rebellion about it. Both these brief and unpretentious plays deal with a similar storyline with only a slight variation. In *The Rebels* the young protagonist returns from gaining western education with a wife from outside the tribe. Charles, the returning son, is actually expected to marry the daughter of

the Chief whom the elders have chosen for him. He does not believe in the dominance of the tribe and rebels against their traditions and his tribal duty. In the play Charles voices the predicament of the educated African when he says “Torn between two worlds. I wish I wish I were not myself. Then I would not have to choose between a father’s curse, a tribe’s anger, and the anguish of a betrayed heart” (13). This conflict was one that Ngugi personally experienced.

#### **3.1.4. THE REBELS (1961)**

In *The Wound in the Heart* a young man, Jacob, is returning from being held in detention during the struggle against imperialism; only to find that his wife has just given birth to the child of the white District Officer. Here Ngugi explored the theme of how the uncompromising attitude of the society compels individuals to become rebels within their societies. Exclusion from his people leads to individual loneliness and demonstrates the futility of the individual’s effort to survive outside the collective will of his people. Both plays illustrate that narrow interpretation of loyalties in the community, but stress the need of brotherhood and of standing together for the black races.

According to Banham (1976: 84) the plays are dramatically static and rather forced and moralistic, but they are greatly enriched by the passion of hurt and anger; and the intellect of Ngugi. Both plays remind of *The Black Hermit* as they all deal with a theme



which was close to Ngugi's heart: return and disillusionment. A further theme is the failure of the world to reform after the country was freed from colonisation; also at the inability of the Africans to claim the rights and dignity they have envisioned and earned. The character of the Stranger that Ngugi used in *This Time Tomorrow* appears in *The Rebels* as well.

### **3.1.5 THE TRAIL OF DEDAN KIMATHI (1976)**

Ngugi wrote this patriotic play in collaboration with a colleague of his, Micere Githae Mugo. Both were lecturers at the University of Nairobi. Her contribution to this play "may well be seen in its strong representation of women's role in the independence struggle and a free society" (Banham 1999: 48) The play was directed by Seth Adagala. Mumbi Kaigwa was named Actress of the Year for her part in this controversial play. It was written for the Pan-African celebrations at FESTAC. It was refused staging for unknown reasons; the authors suspected for political ones. It was only after intervention by the Ministry of Social Services that it was performed. In the preface the playwrights confirmed their commitment to Kenya, literature and theatre.

Today the play still forms part of traditional African festivals as a representation of past occurrences. Theatre done by Ngugi and Mugo was a deliberate attempt to reclaim a part of Kenyan history. According to G.D. Killiam (1980), well-known writer, cultural activist and Professor in English, the play, a combination of prose and verse, ranks with

those of Wole Soyinka and Athol Fugard's. It bears testimony of the Revolutionary Theatre Ngugi practised.

The play centres on the prominent legendary Mau-Mau leader, general Dedan Kimathi, and his leading role in the revolutionary struggle for Kenyan liberation. He is portrayed as a compassionate man. It is a court-room drama that realigned the Kenyan history of 1956. Ngugi felt compelled to liberate Kimathi from political and literary interment to ensure that he and his heroism as a martyr of Kenyan nationalism will live forever in the collective psyche of his people. Kimathi became a metaphor for the history of the struggle of all oppressed people.

According to Crow Ngugi implicitly likens Kimathi to the Savior when he accuses his betrayers of being 'Judases'. During his 'temptations and trail, he is forced to undergo the same humiliations and attempts to divert him from his duty as Christ. The breaking of the bread in the court to reveal the gun is another Christian symbol used (Crow 1996: 16). Kimathi became a martyred redeemer and the history surrounding him a popular Gikuyu myth, one that the oral narrative tradition of, inspired the play.

In the first instance the play contains the story of how a female peasant activist, Woman, attempts to help the imprisoned Dedan Kimati. In the process two young people are won over to the cause of freedom. In the final scene they make their brave act of commitment. In the second place the play contains the temptations of Kimathi. He is

tempted with bribes by various characters. They all try to lure him into betraying the struggle. The four temptations are also how the Kenyans are betrayed: by the colonists (Henderson); by the economy (bankers); by the collaborators who represent the nationalization of Africa (the Businessman, Politician and Priest) and again by the aftermath of colonization (Henderson). Thirdly the play deals with the responsibilities which the leader of the revolution had to face towards his people (Etherton 1982: 343).

The series imaginary scenes present, in the Brechtian manner of the epic theatre, a series of trails upon Kimathi's courage and will. The Brecht influence is also the reason why the characters are presented as types rather than individuals and are spokespersons for attitudes. Gerhard Moore felt that the issues raised, e.g. family and sexual love, religion and nation ideology, were explored intensely (Jahn 1972: 258). The play too has universality.

### **3.1.6 I WILL MARRY WHEN I WANT (1977)**

This was the first of two plays which Ngugi did with the community of the Kamiriithu Centre. It was the first modern play in a Kenyan language. This communal drama was rich with the rhythms of the African People. Ngugi used the play rhetoric to articulate a socialist ideology. Ngugi emphasised the role of women in the play to honor their contribution to independence. He furthermore made the community aware of their own culture's rich cultural heritage; amongst others their theatre culture.

Michael Loudon said in his book *Critical Survey of Drama* (1994: 1722), "*I Will Marry When I Want* represents the enactment of Dedan Kimathi's teaching: unite, drive out the enemy and control your own riches, enjoy the fruit of your sweat." Here too is a dramatic construction that is a true tragedy: man's fault and fate produce devastation. What happens in Kiguunda's community is a metaphor for the developments throughout Kenya.

It is a complex play with numerous issues raised. Many of Brecht's techniques e.g. narration and special effects were used by Ngugi. As with Brecht the props, which were used sparingly, were an intrinsic part and reinforcement of the play, e.g. Jezebel's gun (modern) versus Kiguunda's sword (traditional). The title deed becomes a symbol of the land issue.

Kiguunda, a farm labourer who works for a wealthy African landowner, Ahab Kioi wa Kanoru and his wife Jezebel, lives with his wife, Wangeci and their daughter Gathoni, in a small shack. Out of the blue Kiguunda brings the news that his employer will be visiting them at home. Wangeci is in a frantic state of cooking for their important guests. In trying to come up with a reason for the visit she draws the conclusion that John, who is currently taking Gathoni out, wants to marry her and his parents therefore are coming over to discuss the matter. Little did they know the sorrow this dubious 'love' affair would cause.

Their neighbours, Gicaamba and Njooki, come over for a visit. Njooki is sharp in her observation that the idea of a wedding between Gathoni and John is not going to materialise. Gicaamba becomes very vocal about the current system of economic and political oppression and exploitation of the workers by the landlords and factory owners. His political utterances make a huge impression on Kiguunda.

When the Kioi's arrive they are accompanied by friends, the Ndugire's: husband and wife, Samuel and Helen. The visitors start an impromptu spiritual witnessing which disturbs Kiguunda. Kioi asks Kiguunda and Wangeci to stop living in sin and get a Christian wedding. Kiguunda chases them out of his house and Wangeci is upset as she feels that it prevented them of coming to, what she believes, the real reason of their visit: the relationship between Gathoni and John and the wedding.

Despite the warnings of their neighbours, Kiguunda and Wangeci decide to go ahead with a proper Christian wedding for themselves in hoping that that would open the door for a wedding between John and Gathoni. When money is needed for the wedding Kiguunda mortgages his farm, unaware that that was the plan Kioi plotted from the beginning to acquire the land.

Gathoni becomes pregnant with John's baby, but he refuses to marry her and abandons her. This causes Kiguunda and Wangeci to call off their wedding. In a fury Kiguunda threatens Kioi, and Jezebel shoots at Kiguunda.

When he is unable, due to the fact that he lost his job at Kioi's farm, to pay back the bank, they foreclose on Kiguunga's only valuable possession, the plot he cherishes above all. He, Wangeci and Gathoni are left desolate, without a roof over their heads after Kioi, aided by religion, get the land he coveted. With his business partner, Ikuua Nditika, Kioi intends to erect an insecticide factory in collaboration with Western partners on it. Gigaamba calls for the community to unite against this economic and political power.

In the *Garment Worker*, March/April 1941, the garment workers of South Africa's newspaper, the following was written:

The only way we get our rights  
 is when we all unite,  
 when all the workers together stand  
 then we can win our fight.

In 1977 Ngugi let Gigaamba virtually say the same:

Development will come from our unity.  
 Unity is our strength and wealth. (Act 3, Scene 3, p. 115).

The wedding concept plays a significant role in the play. During a wedding ceremony “permanent bonds are socio-culturally established and sanctioned.” (Cantalupo 1995: 340). The failure of Kiguunda and Wangeci’s planned Christian wedding signifies that their traditional one was enough. Gathoni’s wedding was only a dream in her and her mother’s mind and serves to highlight the hypocrisy of the rich.

The play was performed in 1985 at the University of Zimbabwe by Ngugi wa Mirii and in 1993 by Suzette van der Smit at the Space Theatre of the University of Namibia with 63 students. In 2000 Jane Plastow directed the play at the *Against All Odds: Africa Languages and Literatures into the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* in Eritrea with 50 people in the cast and Ngugi wa Thiong’o in the audience (Banham 2001: 208). In March 2003 The National Association of Performing Artists in Kenya hosted an Arts Festival at the Kenya National Theatre. The play, with a cast of 500, was directed by Conrad Makeni.

### **3.1.7 MOTHER, SING FOR ME (1982) \_**

With the active collaboration of the peasants, Ngugi wrote a second play in November 1981. This three-act musical folk drama is set in Kenya in the 1920-1930s and Ngugi focuses heavily on the events during the resistance to the colonial oppression in Kenya. The musical is an attempt by Ngugi to decolonise some of Kenya’s history and deal with a period less known to the people. Ngugi researched the period extensively before writing the script. Strict laws concerning a person’s movement and employment were

passed between 1895 – 1939. They were called “Kipande” laws referring to the small metal box which hanged around black people’s necks, containing the necessary information and documentation of the person. The play *Mother, Sing for Me* covers these memories of mental humiliation and colonization. “The events surrounding *Mother, Sing for Me* serve to remind us that “staging” the deplorable condition of life of the average Kenyan is not simply another literacy critical celebration of performativity – people there risk imprisonment and death for attempting to act out their lives”(Cantalupo 1995:172)

The importance of the play moreover lies in Ngugi’s negotiating a new association of structure, content and occasion of performance; using recurring African oral tradition motifs. This domestic-made play was a statement: this was the authentic language of African Theatre. Ngugi combined elements of realism, orature and history into theatre. The form itself performed a cultural purpose. No more idle entertainment and passive audiences who sit in the dark while a few performers act under glaring lights! His theatre embodied a communal ethos and gave a palpable vision of the future: Kenyan theatre for Kenyans with this play.

In the first act George Scott, a white colonial plantation–owner, is brought onto the stage in a rickshaw. Kanoru, as he is called by the Africans, treats his workers very badly. He controls them with a whip and through his foreman, Nyabaara. The presence of the old man on stage is important - he mimes with his actions and sticks that one can be broken



easily, but together the unity of many sticks cannot be broken. The workers are forced by law to wear the kipande. When they burn it there is an interrogation to find the ringleader. Mwendanda betrays Kang'ethe. Mwendanda is promoted and given the new name Nyatai, while Kang'ethe is executed. A pregnant woman is beaten until she miscarriages. One of the workers, Kariuki, is dressed in Kang'ethe's clothes and he gradually takes on Kang'ethe's role. A young village woman, Nyathira, is raped by Kanoru. Soon thereafter Kanoru, Nyabaara and Mwendanda are portrayed as Christians and priests. Kariuki takes on the leader role of the workers.

In the second act Karuiki is tortured while the abused mother seeks her child. After Karuiki is spared by Kanoru, in a mimed birth-process, the woman gives birth to Karuiki who gets a new life – just as his name suggests, and leads the workers in a rebellion. Nyathira joins the movement. The workers go to war and rejoice when a peace conference is called. As Karuiki cannot speak English, Mwendanda accompanies him and the priest. Only Mwendanda returns with the news that the kipande is abolished and they can buy their land back.

When the third act begins the woman, pregnant again, is still searching for her lost child. Mwendanda is now in the rickshaw in Western attire, complete with whistle and whip. He has adopted Kanoru's role, even in the raping of Nyathira. The priest praises Mwendanda as a good man. Kariuki is mutilated, but, with effort, he lets the bundles of sticks fall to send the audience a strong message of unity with which the play ends.

### **3.2 STRUCTURE**

All those criticisms that Ngugi's plays have weak structures fall away when taking into consideration that they were never meant to be well-made or literary plays. Nobody doing the experiment at Kamiriithu was even aware of creating plays that were 'structured'. With *The Trail of Dedan Kimathi* and the two Kamiriithu plays the close link with tradition accounts for the structural or formal characteristics of his plays. The stories and ideas used equally determined the structure. The narratives and experiences of the community became the structured framework for the imaginatively varied dramatic action of the plays. Instead of showing everything event after event Ngugi explored other ways of communicating the message to the audience. These communication devices are discussed in greater detail in Chapter 3.6.

The first plays followed the traditional Western pattern: exposition, climax and denouncement. The structures were experimental in *The Trail of Dedan Kimathi* and the Kamiriithu plays. Ngugi's reasons for doing that were to make the impact on the audience more powerful. He used a technique of broken chronology by including traditional songs, dances, drumming and narrative devices which they were familiar with. It gave an overwhelming effect. Through the interrupted accounts of individual stories Ngugi changed the order of events to achieve particular effects. The audience could relate to these stories and were swept up in the passion of their suffering. At stages it becomes a story within a story to enable Ngugi to bring in past events from the

colonial period to reflect on current issues. In *The Trail of Dedan Kimathi* the Woman, Boy and Girl tell their stories while history is enacted during Dedan's story. All are integrated to form a whole.

The structure of the plays was also determined by a logical progression of ideas to incorporate the issues the community felt strongly about. The play moves freely from the present to the early pre-colonial times and highlights certain events, e.g. the slavery and the Mau-Mau freedom fighters in the forest, before it goes back to real time. All the plays, except *Mother, Sing for Me*, begin in the present and the past is seen through the eyes of the characters. History serves to remind the audience of the present through its relevance.

### **3.3 THEMES**

**“The dominant theme overall is the usurpation of power and wealth by the traitors and the people’s persistent struggle to make them disgorge their ill-gotten gains”**

(Killam 2000: 177).

Ngugi is unique in his directness of messages. He writes about what concerns him and his community. The themes are often based on their personal and collective traumatic experiences. They are the history, suffering, biblical reference, arguments, songs and dreams of tomorrow.

There is a good deal of overlapping in the themes from his short stories, novels and plays. He is preoccupied with certain issues and reflects them continuously. Themes such as land, political liberation, socio-economic exploitation, religious hypocrisy, governmental corruption and brutality are recurrent and central to his work. The themes remain the same throughout and supplement each other as one theme leads to another; linking issues. The themes bring to light the bliss of African life before European colonization; the injustice of colonisation, how Africans fought for independence and now suffer in a neo-colonial country. The social and political themes are of national and international importance. They are a rich blend of powerful experiences of what has happened to the people and bring to the consciousness the problems of the masses. They express the peoples' cultural values.

Addressing the themes was an effort to develop the community culturally and to show them the disruption of their lives and how to deal with their oppression. The need for change is clearly demonstrated. The themes are emotionally charged in their exposure and treatment of community problems. Many of his themes are universal and reflect a concentration upon 'economic' themes such as land, unemployment, poverty and urbanisation. They reflect strong common principals and values.

Ngugi is committed to his political philosophy and the themes are leitmotifs to the human interchanges the plays explore. Ngugi is concerned with the aspirations of the

peasantry and their continuing struggle, e.g. the Mau-Mau leader Dedan Kimathi had fought the pre-independence struggle against imperialism and the forces behind it. Today Ngugi is fighting the post-independence struggle. Through his plays he brings to life that past which the ruling party so deliberately plays down. Dedan Kimathi has become a symbol of what was fought for but never received. Today Ngugi is a symbol of the present struggle. In *The Trail of Dedan Kimathi* the past, present and future struggles are suggested through the themes. In *Mother, Sing for Me* and *I Will Marry When I Want* Ngugi shows that the people are betrayed by the new bourgeoisie – their own kind to whom everything is a commodity.

His recurrent outspoken themes earned him as much respect from the public as trouble from Kenya's authorities. The thematic interests Ngugi focuses on are numerous, but all sprout from one core: the alienation of the land. It created an endless cycle of oppression and exploitation that brings forth a destructive spiralling effect. Only some of the main themes are discussed in this study.

**LAND:** Each of Ngugi's plays deals in some way or the other with this theme. The peasants were forcefully removed from their confiscated land by the colonisers to a small dry area where they were crowded together. The European settlement and its consequences on the people, is dealt with from a historical point of view. The ownership of the land is presented as life to the African community and a basis of power. In *I Will Marry When I Want* Kiguunda's one and a half acres of land gave him a feeling of

belonging, of wealth. Kioi's urge to possess the land will give him more power and enhance his social standing. The characters in the plays are in relationship with the land and each other. The theme is a personalised account of the disruption of their lives and the failure of the new regime to live up to the pre-independence expectations. The people realise that the final victory of their prolonged struggle will only be over when the masses have reclaimed what was taken from them.

**LABOUR:** The worker community, alienated from ancestral land, became a source of wealth for first the coloniser and then his African heirs:

Without workers,

There is no property, there is no wealth.

The labour of our hands is the real wealth of the country.

The blood of the worker ...

Is the true creator of the wealth of nations.

*I Will Marry When I Want* (Act 1, p.38).

The Africans are forced to work and harvest their own estranged land without reaping benefits. Kiguunda calls himself a slave and feels that the new elite class neglects the interest of their workers who make great sacrifices, e.g. he milks the cows very early while Kioi still sleeps. Ngugi reveals that this exploitation is done through the coercive methods of state, church and police. Unfair dismissals, low wages and harsh working

conditions leave the workers with rebellion as their only recourse. The collusion of corrupt Kenyan landlords with the international economic comprador bourgeoisie has brought misery to the workers:

Labour is the creator of wealth  
African employers are no different  
From Indian employers  
Or from the Boer white landlords.

*I Will Marry When I Want* (Act 1, p. 20).

After the freedom struggle which brought independence, those who fought and suffered still had not reaped their expected rewards: they still have nothing although Uhuru has come. Kiguunda was once a free, proud man, now he became a humiliated slave:

How many years have gone  
Since we got independence?  
Ten and over ...  
And now look at me ...!  
Our family land was given to homeguards  
Today I am just a labourer ...

*I Will Marry When I Want* (Act 1, pp. 28 -29).

Zakes Mda's play *Sing for the Fatherland* relates to this theme when Sergeant and Janibari express their disappointment with affairs after independence. The same issue is currently (2006) being raised by ex-fighters in Namibia. Njooki sings with bitterness what they feel:

*When we fought for freedom*

*I'd thought that we the poor would milk grade cows.*

*In the past I used to eat wild spinach,*

*Today I am eating the same.*

*I Will Marry When I Want* (Act 1, p. 39).

“And there is only one cure: a strong organization of the workers and peasants of the land, together with those whose eyes and ears are now open and alert” (Ngugi 1977: 205). Marx urged the workers of the world to unite as they could only lose their chains. Ngugi reiterates his loathing for the oppressors and he too calls upon his people to unite so that:

We must kill the lie

That black people never invented anything

Lay for ever to rest that inferiority

complex

Implanted in our minds by centuries



of oppression

Rise, Rise workers and peasants ...

*The Trail of Dedan Kimathi* (Second Movement, p. 68).

The money of the capitalist gives them the power to control the wages of the workers on which they are dependent for their living. The capitalists make it sound as if they are doing the workers a favor by giving them work and threaten them continuously with dismissal or displacement to keep them submissive. Thus their jobs, manner of living, their very living depends on forces alien to them; putting them in the power of employers without any mercy. With the realisation that they are exploited comes the bitterness:

Wages can never equal the work

Wages can never really compensate for your labour ...

The owners of these companies are real scorpions

They know three things only:

To oppress workers,

To take away their rights

And to suck their blood

*I Will Marry When I Want* (Act 1, p. 33).

**OPPRESSION and EXPLOIRATION:** This is a major theme that dominated Ngugi's work since 1967 and is prevalent in all his plays. Ngugi aims at exposing the exploitation of the ordinary people are exploited and oppressed. He felt strongly "that black should exploit black is not what Uhuru was won for" (Roscoe 1977: 186). The Kikuyu proverb *Muthunu etaga ungi mukoroku* means "He, who has finished eating, calls the hungry one greedy" (Van Rensburg 1992: 24). It is an appropriate way of describing the new ruling elite's oppression and exploiting of the peasants and the workers. This entrepreneurial class is obsessed with self-enrichment, private property and accumulation, and cannot see the needs of the poor, but begrudges them everything, as Kioi illustrates:

These workers cannot let you accumulate!

Every day: I want an increment.

Workers are like the ogres said to have two insatiable mouths.

When they are not demanding a rise in wages

They are asking you for an advance.

My mother is in hospital!

My child has been expelled from school,

Because I have not paid his school fees!

*I Will Marry When I Want* (Act 2, Scene 2, p. 78).

Worse are the explanations given for the pitiable conditions of the poor which range from blaming it on Christian religion's morality that they brought it upon themselves by not being good Christians; or on their lack of education that keeps them illiterate, while it is these capitalists that collaborate with foreigners. It is they, the ruling party, who have no feeling for the suffering masses and their needs. The greedy elite is in league with similarly greedy foreign businesses to reap resources, labour and land. Together these neo-colonial oppressors have taken all the fruits of independence for themselves. In *The Trail of Dedan Kimathi* Ngugi focused on the continuing struggle:

My life is our People  
Struggling  
Fighting  
Not like you to maintain  
Slavery  
Oppression  
But  
To end slavery, exploitation  
Modern cannibalism, Out. Rat.  
Go back to your masters  
And tell them:  
Kimathi will never sell Kenya  
To the British or to any other

Breed of man-eaters, now or in the years to come.

*The Trail of Dedan Kimati* (Second Movement, pp. 35 – 36).

Ngugi, Mda, Brecht, Gorky, Chekov and many other playwrights through the ages saw the plight of their oppressed people and realized that the current social structure oppressed the masses and it is mostly the poor, weak peasants and the workers who are exploited because they are the labouring class:

The power of our hands goes to feed three people

Imperialists from Europe,

Imperialists from America,

Imperialists from Japan.

*I Will Marry When I Want* (Act 1, p. 38).

In his plays Ngugi mirrors the despair and disillusionment of the oppressed in Njooki's song:

*When we fought for freedom*

*I'd thought that we the poor would milk grade cows.*

*In the past I used to eat wild spinach.*

*Today I am eating the same.*

*I Will Marry When I Want* (Act 1, p.39).

His plays do not offer an easy solution to the on-going problem; he merely stirs the people into consciousness, revolution and new freedom. Remi expresses his bitterness in *The Black Hermit* (Act 2, Scene 3, p. 47) to make the people aware of the past in order to highlight the plight of the present. The ruling classes have their sets of values and will oppress those they consider inferior by force if need be. Their intolerant attitude is an extension of colonialism. Gicaamba lashes out against them and their foreign partners in *I Will Marry When I Want*:

The owners of these companies are real scorpions.

They know three things only:

To oppress workers,

To take away their rights,

And suck their blood. (Act 1, p. 33).

When Dedan Kimati addresses his oppressors during his imprisonment, he voices the feelings of the Freedom fighters, as well as the Kenyan people of today:

For four hundred years the oppressor

Has exploited and tortured our people.

For four hundred years we have risen

and fought against oppression,

against humiliation,

against enslavement of body

mind and soul.

Our people will never surrender.

*The Trail of Dedan Kimati* (Second Movement, p. 58).

The political statement of the play is directed at the new politicians in Kenya and elsewhere. It is not only the voice of Ngugi which can be heard on this issue, but that of important writers such as Wole Soyinka, Zakes Mda and Ama Ata Aidoo too. Ngugi used some of the characters very cleverly in different roles to send a direct message. An example is Kanoru, the landowner, who in the court scene becomes the judge and in the church scene the bishop. According to Björkman it reaffirms that “the land expropriation, the Christian Church and the administration are only different expressions of one and the same oppression” (1989: 76).

**IMPERIALISM:** This is another central motif is this theme. Ngugi sees imperialism as the enemy of all working people. Ngugi condemns the wealth-distribution as unequal: it went to a few before independence and now after independence it still does:

If all the wealth we create with our hands

Remained in the country,

What would we not have in our village.

Good public schools.

Good houses for the workers ...peasants

*I Will Marry When I Want* (Act 1, p.36).

The distribution of the nation's wealth is managed by a minority who milks the nation dry with the help of powerful foreign industrialized countries. They live in luxury; mindless of the vast majority who are perishing in unthinkable misery. They capitalise like greedy vultures and scavengers on the misery of others causing economic inequality and gross social injustice. Their new symbols of wealth, status, and power, e.g. houses and cars make them believe that they are superior to the workers. Imperialism only benefits the capitalists at the expense for the masses as they have no share in the profits of their labour. The plays address the need of the people to liberate themselves from this oppressive imperialism.

Our own food eaten and leftovers thrown to us –

in our land, where we should have the whole share.

We buy wood from our own forest;

sweat on our own soil for the profit of our own oppressors.

Kimathi's teaching is unite, drive out the enemy

and control your own riches, enjoy the fruit of your sweat.”

*The Trail of Dedan Kimathi* (Act 1, p. 18).

**CAPITALISM:** Ngugi links this theme to imperialism. Kiguunda and his family, Wangeci and Gathoni, are portrayed as the symbols of the exploitation of peasant people by unscrupulous foreign capitalists in league with the Kenyan entrepreneurial class who is represented by Ahab Kioi and his family, Jezebel and John, in *I Will Marry When I Want*. The exploitation of one group by another is the real meaning of capitalism and will never bring about equality for the people.

The neo-colonial domination of the vital sectors of contemporary national life in Kenya by foreign interests and institutions is a concern for Ngugi. The exploitation of the workers is only a small part of the expropriation which brings profits to the companies they work for. The literature is mainly English by foreign authors; the film industry is from America; the media and publishing houses are in foreign Western hands and the National Theatre is controlled by foreign plays. The quest for the acquisition of personal wealth based on the labour of the masses remains an outrage to him. Capitalism, corruption and politics, being the aftermath of colonialism, now gave way to neo-colonialism. Above all the land they have fought to claim back went to a few people, not all of them Gikuyu, when Kenyatta, through his reconciliation policies, failed to be the Black Messiah they had hailed him before.

The capitalistic ideology is alien to the African people who functioned for many ages with a system of tribalism where everything was shared. Ngugi thus wants capitalism to be replaced by an African socialistic system.



**CORRUPTION:** Corruption and nepotism are but two of the practices of the contemporary Kenyan bourgeoisie that harm the masses. The naïve masses cannot decode the rapacity actions of corrupt politicians and need intellectuals to unveil it through theatre. Ngugi therefore tackles this theme in his plays when he exposes the corrupt practices of the comprador bourgeoisie in contemporary Kenya. He reveals how it creeps into all spheres of life – the civil service, the economy, and the social life. Among the new economic elite of Kenya crime and money-doubling, nepotism and materialism is rife. Dishonesty and hypocrisy (political double-dealers) are tools to fool the nation when dealing with them.

**POVERTY:** This according to Ngugi is the result of oppression, exploitation, imperialism and capitalism. He feels that the upper classes are oblivious of the people's feelings of fear, resentment and embitterment as a consequence of their dire circumstances. "The so-called underdeveloped world feeds and clothes and shelters the imperialist world, financing its luxury and arts and sciences and technology, but this underdeveloped world remains impoverished and an object of charity, like the hunting dog that ends up feeding on bones after the master has finished all the meat"(Black Literary Criticism: 1503).

**CHRISTIANITY:** This theme too is reflected in all Ngugi's work. He sees Christianity as the agent of capitalist exploitation and portrays it as a divisive force which destroys

the individual, the family and society. Ngugi feels religion and Western education have attributed to injustices. He finds the factual values of Christianity and the Western way of life as practised and as preached by the white man, confusing. The true values, such as love, mercy, forgiveness and salvation are hidden – only vengeance and destruction are revealed. The irony is that “the message of Christian love and compassion will provide a decent and upright life too often prompts the opposite behavior” (Killam 1980: 77). Religious hypocrisy shows in many of his characters, e.g. Samuel Ndugire and Ahab Kioi wa Kanoru and their wives. These characters’ self-righteous attitude, dishonesty and arrogance portray Christianity as a negative religion. Christianity has brought a division between people – mostly because accepting God without living the principles have turned them into using it as a weapon against people.

He writes blatantly about the effect of religious factionalism which according to him has its origins in colonialism – he dramatises the effect of these antagonisms on the sensibilities of individuals and personal relationships. He wants people to recognise the harmful effect that it has on their society.

Religion is not the same as God.

All the religions that now sit on us

Were brought here by the whites

The white man wanted us

To be drunk with religion  
While he,  
In the meantime,  
Was mapping and grabbing our land.

*I Will Marry When I Want* (Act 2, Scene 1, pp. 56 -57).

He shows that it makes the community poorer, divides them and leads them to abandon their traditional religion. By ruthlessly satirizing Christianity he exposes the Christian ideologies as in conflict with the Gikuyu tribal values.

Ngugi has a good knowledge of and an intimacy with the Bible as do most Kenyans. In the foreign mission schools colonialism was hailed as beneficial to the Kenyans. Ngugi writes in a religious idiom that they understand as many of the Bible passages have an association with the circumstances in Kenya. Ngugi uses them as a metaphoric framework for the stories he tells, e.g. the basic analogy with the history of Nabot for Kioi's deception in *I Will Marry When I Want*.

**RETURN:** This is another recurrent theme that Ngugi uses frequently. In *I Will Marry When I Want* he lets Gigaamba deal with the plea for a return to human values such as tolerance, co-operation, compassion and understanding:

Whatever the weight of our problems

Let's not fight amongst ourselves.

Let's not turn violence within us against us,

*I Will Marry When I Want* (Act 3, Scene 3, p. 110).

In *The Trail of Dedan Kimati* Ngugi encounters the return of the freedom fighters from the forest and concentration camps; coming home from war to a world filled with intense uncertainties and disruption. For Ngugi the necessity of homecoming as a way of reconnecting with fragments of a past torn apart by the colonial experience, the putting together of shreds from a past which would ensure continuity, is important. In *The Black Hermit* Ngugi lets Remi return from the city to take up his duty in his village and help his tribe. In *I Will Marry When I Want* he displays the new ruling class's return to the oppressive ways of the colonialists. By using the Gikuyu language and traditional activities for the play Ngugi also returned to his cultural roots through his theatre practices.

**BETRAYAL**: This is another theme Ngugi engages throughout his writings. The betrayal of leaders in Kenya's freedom struggle is addressed in his plays: *Dedan Kimati* and *J.M. Kariuki* paid the highest price, their lives, during the struggle while *Kiguunda* suffered even after independence. The subsequent betrayal and repudiation by leaders of the struggle continued the oppression of the people.

Kenya is governed in the name of the people, but in the spirit of aristocracy. The British colonisers were displaced by an aristocracy of Kenyans. This ruling class's policy benefited the elite and capitalists at the expense of the masses who have no share in the wealth of the land. Ngugi shows that the people are betrayed by the new bourgeoisie – their own kind to whom everything is a commodity:

They are clansmen

They know only how to take from the poor.

They turned into sucking, grabbing and taking away.

That group is now ready to sell the whole country to foreigners

Eaters of that which has been produced by others

*I Will Marry When I Want* (Act 3, Scene 3, pp. 112-113).

He lashes out at the Kenyans who had supported the British and were given posts in the new government; now *they* enforced the harsh oppressive laws. During the Mau-Mau period the betrayal of the community, fellow-fighters or the nation became widespread entrenched and is reflected in *The Trail of Dedan Kimati* and *Mother, Sing for Me*. Wambararia, Kimati's own brother was such a traitor.

**HEROES:** Ngugi strongly felt that there should be solidarity with the (neglected) liberation heroes from the past in the bid to liberate the future. The characters in the plays, Kimati, Kiguunda, Gigaamba and Kariuki who have participated in the Mau-Mau uprising, have an acute political consciousness and send a strong, uncensored political message to the audience. Through historical reconstruction the themes surrounding these heroes are revealed and analyzed again to bring better understanding. The plays proffer positive heroes who embody the character of their struggle and resistance.

Ngugi felt that there was a lack of literature depicting the heroic resistance of those who fought against colonial domination, e.g. Harry Thuku, Joseph Kang'ethe, and J.M. Kariuki. He uses characters such as Dedan Kimati, Gigaamba and Kiguunda to honour those who had the courage to stand up against the British, in his reflection of the history.

**LIBERATION:** The theme is articulated by the plays and embodied in the community's ideals and actions which they share with the heroic characters. They gain strength from revisiting past experiences during the colonial struggle for freedom. Independence did not change people's lives for the better nor did the new regime improve their lives. In fact Ngugi lashes out at the small ruling class who broke their pre-independence promises and currently disparages their own people. The audience can identify with these feelings of disillusionment and growing bitter over betrayed ideals and injustices. Those who fought the hardest for independence had gained the least – the Uhuru they had been fighting for turned out to be only for a few privileged ones. Through political

themes in his plays Ngugi aims for resistance against neo-colonial domination and for political reform. He points out that what is needed is another war of liberation which will put the land and its wealth back in the hands of the owners:

We change to new songs  
For the revolution is near  
We are tired of exploitation  
We are tired of charity and abuses

There are two sides in the struggle,  
The side of the exploiters and that of the exploited  
On which side will you be when  
The trumpet  
Of the workers is finally blown?

*I Will Marry When I When* (Act 3, Scene 3, pp. 114, 116).

**FORCED REMOVALS:** The theme of forceful removal is hardly surprising – when one remembers Ngugi’s horrific experience on his first visit home from Alliance High School when he found his village destroyed and the inhabitants relocated by the colonial government. They destroyed all the villages that were a base of support and supply for the Mau-Mau guerrilla fighters.

In *This Time Tomorrow* Ngugi relates the destruction of a shanty town that is intruding on to the streets and consciousness of a modern African city. Ngugi wa Thiong'o writes about this forceful removal in Nairobi, Kenya and it brings to mind other plays that deal with this very theme: forceful removals to suit government purposes. Athol Fugard wrote *Boesman and Lena* (1969) about Port Elizabeth, South Africa and the Namibian playwright Frederick B. Philander *The Curse* (1990) accounts the moving of people in 1959 to Katutura from Pioneerspark in Windhoek, Namibia. In 2002 Zimbabwe removed thousands of people from their homes to "clean" areas in an operation called *Murambatsvina* (Remove the rubbish). September 2006 a new onslaught was made on areas around Harare that escaped the 2002 clean-up (Thondhlana 2006: 1). Currently in South Africa Johannesburg's mid-town is being cleaned of slum-areas by the Sheriff's Red Ants (called that because of the red overalls they are wearing for their cleaning-up operations) to have a 'clean' image for the 2010 Soccer World Cup.

In all these operations the ending is similar to that of Ngugi's play: the people had no say and the removal is a fact. The place must be "clean" for the benefit of foreigners and the "offensive" masses must be out of sight.

**WOMEN:** In Kenya and in many other African countries, women are the most oppressed and exploited section of the entire working class. In these societies sexual exploitation and discrimination are dominant factors. The concern with women is not something new for Ngugi. He is sensitive to their plight and sees them as a feminine



tradition of struggle and resistance. He pointed out that the women too fought for independence.

In the African tradition women were given very few opportunities to develop to their potential and are constantly at the mercy of men for their livelihood. Gathoni in *I Will Marry When I Want* is an example of how women are exploited. She must work without any hope of education so that her brothers can be educated. Gigaamba admits this when he says:

We the parents have not put much effort

In the education of our girls.

Even before colonialism,

We oppressed women

*I Will Marry When I Want* (Act 3, Scene 3, p. 104 -105).

Gigaamba realises that the derogative lines in the song are wrong, e.g.

*Women and property are not friends,*

*Two women are two pots of poison*

*Women and the heavens are unpredictable,*

*Women cannot keep secrets,*

*A woman's word is believed only after the event.*

*I Will Marry When I Want* (Act 3, Scene 3, p. 104-105).

The theme of women and their abuse under oppressive and prejudiced men is touched on in most of his plays as secondary. Ngugi feels that the sexual conflict between men and women is part of the destructive rivalry on which modern Kenyan capitalism thrives, and through which injustices and inequalities are perpetuated.

The theme of pregnancy features often in the plays. In an African society an individual's life is relatively public and it is not easy to keep a secret. A young unmarried girl experiences motherhood as a curse when the man responsible will not admit it, and she is abandoned because of the pregnancy. It is unfortunate that most of the time she will become an outcast among her family. Gathoni is such an example in *I Will Marry When I Want* when John, after treating her as a sexual object, refuses to marry her when she falls pregnant. The dual nature of her exploitation is visible when she is exploited as a worker and as a woman in the course of the play. Not only does she earn a pittance which is given to other family members, but John pays her no respect – he only hoots for her in a very rude way – and she must be available and ready. Ngugi uses her character to address the problems of rapid social change and the particular difficulties women have to face in contemporary Kenyan society. The title of the play *I Will Marry When I Want* reflects the rebellious nature of Gathoni when shedding the traditional wisdom of her parents. She becomes the symbol of modern Kenyan womanhood as she will decide when to marry and not they.

Another play that deals with the same hardship those women such as Njingo suffers is Frederik B Philander's *The Porridge Queen* (2005). He paints a picture of a woman who needs to sell porridge to workers to be able to survive. Both writers show the hardship the marginalised women and their families must undergo without any support from the government who would rather sustain foreign enterprise.

The play *The Trail of Dedan Kimathi* was written in honour of the women in the struggle. The Woman becomes a representative of all exploited, oppressed Kenyan women.

**COMMITMENT:** Ngugi values certain qualities in life greatly and uses them as themes in his plays. Commitment is one ideal that appears to be important to him. He shows great admiration for the character that has a purpose in life. Dedan Kimathi and Gigaamba are some of the characters who display unfailing loyalty to that purpose and who go out of their way to direct their energies towards their goals; despite formidable opposing forces. That the attempts to achieve what they consider the ideal, do not come without sacrifices are reflected in the play. Ngugi links this commitment to hope and not despair. Though people may fluctuate between disappointment, despair and bitterness, there is hope: Gigaamba's urgent call for unity gives strength to their future. Unity is another one of Ngugi's most valued ideals and another central theme. When disunity sets in, the society will disintegrate. Ngugi therefore shows how changes in the society

occur and affect both individuals and society. Hate becomes an instrument of division them, as with Kiguunda and Kioi; as well as reunion, as with Kiguunda and Gigaamba.

**CLASS:** The ideological conflict between classes “according to Colin Leys (1975)...is absolutely central to neocolonialism, is the formation of classes or strata within the colony which are closely allied to and dependent on foreign capital” (Rodney 2005: 1). Ngugi observed that the rich and powerful ruthlessly control every aspect of life. “Ngugi depicts a society where decent optimism is replaced by brutal self-interest, without love, idealism, honesty – a society with no moral base” (Killam 1980: 83). Ngugi stated that “Classes and class struggle were the very essence of Kenyan history” (Killam 1984: 138).

**CULTURE:** Under this generic theme Ngugi addresses many issues. The colonising powers attacked the traditional ways, values and worldviews of the Africans and aimed to destroy them. The foreign language became a tool of cultural domination and the Western culture was hailed as superior and many Africans abandoned their own traditions and values. The break-up of traditional values and morality in the society due to the influence of modern values which bring contradictions and ambiguities can be traced back to British rule that caused the process of social disintegration. “African culture had no place in school and the language and culture of schooling had no relevance in their lives in the communities” (Wright 2004: 108). Ngugi calls for a decolonising of the mind. He uses oral literature as an important model for his plays. He

uses the characters to reinforce an own culture, e.g. Njooki voices her pride in the wedding traditions of her people as opposed to the Christian wedding that Wangeci plans.

The conflict between the old and the modern in society is reflected in Gathoni as a representative of the new society of rebellious children torn by changes they cannot control. Her downfall is as much the fault of the new society with its materialistic and spiritual changes, as her own. Social problems, such as abuse and prostitution, are caused by rapid urbanisation and the loss of respect for traditional authority. The people are caught between old and new; when Gathoni leaves the house to accompany John to the coast she is torn between him and her parents; and when Remi stays on in the city he feels guilty about his tribe. The turbulent relationship between generations is also a theme that Ngugi frequently weaves into his plots.

Conflict arises mostly because the young have been exposed to a different (new) system of cultural values through their Western education while their parents and the elders only know, and rigidly adhere to, the traditional (old) way of life. Ngugi uses the conflict between African and European as an ongoing theme. The suppression of the traditional culture, e.g. languages, caused Ngugi to rebel against it. He makes characters like Ahab Kioi, Jezebel, Samuel and Helen represents the European superiority, the ruling elite, who are branding all traditional African things as inferior. At the other end are Kiguunda, Wangeci, Njooki and Gigaamba as torch-bearers of the traditional. Ngugi

wants to revive the value of traditional African society as it was before the colonial onslaught. He portrays the past as a time of unity and sensibility and the contemporary as bleak and without hope.

**EDUCATION:** Ngugi recognises education as a necessary qualification for advancement. He depicts it in his plays as the crucial instrument to defeat the white man with. This explains the enthusiasm in his characters for the pursuit of education. Remi became the hope of his tribe in *The Black Hermit* and Gathoni sees education as a door to emancipation, progress and a successful life. Formal schooling was introduced by the colonials to prepare Africans for life in their social structure. Only minimal schooling was given so that the Africans could do the low-level jobs. Those destined for political and economical government service were sent to better European-modelled schools and universities, creating a small black elite class. “Colonial education was purely Western in all respects, and it therefore did not acknowledge the existence of (let alone incorporate aspects of) the content and methodologies of traditional African education” (Wright 2004: 106). Ngugi reveals how it tainted the thinking of the African and alienated him from his own culture, e.g. Remi who finds himself a stranger to old ways and can no longer participate fully in the rituals of the tribe.

The fact that girls do not receive the same education as boys is touched on in the plays. Gathoni raised this issue, as well as Wanjiro in *This Time Tomorrow* (p.187):

Mother, you mock me with your talk of clothes  
 And school. Where is my brother? You sent him to  
 my uncle in the country so that he might attend  
 school. Me, you kept here to work for you.

*I Will Marry When I Want* (Act 1, p. 16).

### **3.4 PLOTS**

Ngugi says what he, Micere Githae Mugo, Ngugi wa Mirii and the Kimriithu community, have to say, boldly. There are recurring themes that form the thread which binds the various plots and incidents in the play together. The plots are mere vehicles to hang on their themes and to reveal the characters in their environment. The formulation of pressing social problems is of great importance. The plots are their presentation of the history of and events in the community with the addition of factors that need to be shown so that people will open their eyes and react. The plots derived from the characters and their behaviour.

The domestic plots are clear-cut but vigilantly crafted around the centrality of the class question in a capitalist society. Not only an individual but the entire community is ultimately affected by the major event(s) of the orature. They are based on stories and actions from the community's real life (dealt with in Chapter 3.1). It was community popular theatre that served the purpose of sending a message. It is not always told

chronologically but sometimes with the help of flashbacks. Told like that it must have been a moving experience for those who were involved or watched. Incorporated into the plots was a great deal of devices, e.g. mimes:

*[Coolies and Swahilis building the Railway. They are driven away by Nandi warriors led by Koitalel.]*

*The Trail of Dedan Kimathi (Second Movement, p.39).*

This mime indicated clearly what Dedan thought and revealed to the audience the lie, that they build the railway, the banker told. Mime helped to plot the story and came closer to traditional storytelling. Asking the audience a direct question is another device, e.g. Gigaamba asking them on whose side they are. Certain Brechtian devices were used as well, e.g. music, narration and special effects like slides, to bring the plots into perspective.

### **3.5 CHARACTERISATION**

**“Political Africa, in the widest sense, is the background to the stories, and what happens to the characters in the stories can be taken as a metaphor of what is happening in the land” (Killam 1980:74).**



In general Ngugi's characters are taken directly from life to which the audience could relate. They were ordinary people who, even in appearance, were representative of the community. The audience could identify with them. They recognised the characters from memory if the audience's reaction was anything to go by. It was in fact the community, which was the audience that helped to form the characters to their liking. They used the characters to express the beliefs and portray the feelings of Kenya: their bitterness and anger. The distinction between Ngugi, the community and certain characters is faint. Their ideas are spoken through the 'people' they have created. Subtle gestures and facial expressions indicated the nature of the character to the audience who understood it all.

As with the themes there is overlapping between the characters of his novels, short stories and those in his plays. In the latter Ngugi used certain characters to flesh out his themes, some of them fictitious, but recognisable by the audience in motives, situation, problems, actions and reactions as real, not only in their community, but as applicable for all time and all conditions of life.

The characters tend to be symbolic and his concern lies with both individual and communal identity. The characters are therefore significant as images of men and women of their society. Ngugi's portrayal of the characters obviously intended to carry a serious and important social meaning beyond the present. The characters become symbols of what happened in the past and present to make Kenya what it is today. Some take on a symbolic value; some have a high degree of realism, but all convey Ngugi's

central themes. The resonant characters are made to carry the political and socialistic message of Ngugi and the community to others. Ngugi is often accused that he puts opinions in the mouths of his characters and that he and his fellow playwrights depict their own hatred, disappointments with the post-colonial situation and bitter experiences in the plays. He certainly addresses the audiences through both theatre and characters using them to tell the story of Kenya before and after independence in a commentary on the situation in their country. He relays the personal feelings and beliefs of the different characters on several important issues through the plot and sub-plots of the play.

Ngugi is constantly concerned with the deeper side of his characters and wants to reveal those finer feelings. “Because Ngugi is so very interested in the ‘inner’ lives of his characters, the way human beings reason and what motivates them, he frequently goes out of his way in his writing to reveal to us the conflict within individual characters. He opens up their hearts and their minds so that we can see how laboured are the decisions these characters make and the agonies they go through in their daily lives” (Gachukia 1983: 17). Ngugi’s shifting attitudes are evident in his characters as well as their thoughts, feelings and struggles. He concentrates on emphasising certain personality features and eliminating others to show us their lives.

The characters are from diverse backgrounds. They are fashioned to symbolize class values within the conflict of the play and can be divided into two basic, contrasting groups: those who exploit and those who are exploited. Ngugi’s sympathies are with the

latter group. There is a sharp contrast between the class values of the two sets of characters. The difference lies between the characters' morality and attitude. Their relationship is determined by the soil, wealth/poverty and the social inequality between them. It brings contrast and conflict to the plays as a dramatic device. One of the attractive features of Ngugi's plays is the care and understanding that Ngugi brings to the creation of his characters. Even those with a brief exposure are drawn with tenderness, care and sensitivity.

Many of the characters are presented as types rather as individuals – they are the spokespersons for particular attitudes and thus lack the subtleties and contradictions of ordinary mortals. But these limitations are demanded by the sort of graphic and immediately graspable plays Ngugi and the other the authors were aiming at. That they have succeeded could be seen in the tremendous audience participation and appreciation. Despite being types, Ngugi still succeeded in creating memorable, distinct characters which were clearly delineated.

In a performance the characters are revealed to us almost immediately. Their development in the plays is very little. It is more about the content of their dialogue than about their characters.

All the plays have large casts. The group is made larger by a flexible number of singers, dancers, musicians, children, workers, Mau-Mau guerillas, British soldiers and African

home guards; depending on who is needed and how many people are available. The plays centred around certain main characters, but the minor characters were essential. The characters changed with the changing circumstances; lending significance to their actions and their relations to the other characters in terms of the play as a whole.

Ngugi used even in his plays a number of principal characters and a host of minor ones, whose lives are interwoven. To be able to cover the characters in all the plays they will be discussed under related headings below.

## **MALE**

The male characters are more fully developed than the female ones. Ngugi indicate through the experiences of his principal male characters what should be done against oppression and exploitation. He achieves this effect in the performances by a reliance on coincidence, exaggeration and melodrama, especially in the scenes devoted to the issues of land and worker-abuse.

### **(i) PROTAGONISTS, e.g. Dedan Kimathi, Kiguunda, Remi**

These men are the embodiment of manliness and possess endurance, strength, commitment to truth, courage and loyalty. Ngugi uses realistic protagonists in his plays – not members of nobility – but ordinary men, e.g. Kiguunda who represents the

peasants. They are symbols of their culture and society. Their inner torment shows that they are torn between cultures – Remi and Kiguunda are examples. They strive for a synthesis between the indigenous which is familiar and known to them and that which the West has brought to Kenya.

Many of Ngugi's protagonists are heroes who follow a code, according to Ressler in her article *Uhuru: A Study of Ngugi wa Thiong'o*. They have a set of rules for right and wrong to guide them in their complex world. "They strive towards ultimate good for the social group; fighting for freedom (from oppression, corruption). The code hero is characterized by strength, bravery, outspokenness" (Ressler 2005: 4-6). Their words carry conviction as their individual histories gives authority. The heroes, brave and pure of motive, are willing to die for the collective cause of the community: to free their people from colonial/neo-colonial oppression, like Dedan.

They are portrayed sympathetically as humane persons and products of their circumstances which lead to their downfall; reminding us of the early Greek tragic heroes. They are caught up in situations from which there is no escape. They are riddled with faults, but that is accepted by the audience who understands the difficult circumstances and has such compassion that the heroes are not condemned for their weaknesses, but accepted with their shortcomings as real people.

The protagonists of the plays came from different backgrounds. The young Remi, an intellectual young man came from a marginalised community that had great expectations for him: he must reconcile the traditional and the modern societies. He too portrays the same hero-characteristics as Dedan Kimati who, with little formal education, became a force behind the liberation of his people. Kiguunda is a farm labourer and former freedom fighter. He as a prototype of the comprador bourgeoisie, is proud, instilled with the values of his Gikuyu traditional culture.

They are betrayed by the colonials and their own people, the local Kenyan representatives of the foreign imperialists, which serves to emphasize their sacrifices and the psychological humiliation they undergo. All of these protagonists are wrecked, defeated, broken and crushed in the end. Ngugi has compassion with his main characters and their monumental struggle, many times out of personal experience; otherwise he presents them with a certain detached irony. He let them triumph when they overcome the betrayal, showing strength of character and determination to fight back.

**(ii) ANTAGONISTS e.g. Ahab Kioi wa Kanoru, Mwendanda, Ikuua**

In the plays they are exposed as imperialists on the side of the exploiters and oppressors of the masses with the help of foreigners. This group of deceitful, arrogant men is representatives of neo-colonial African domination. They represent the post-colonial African ruling class elite who have embraced the values of the white colonials and

rejected their own traditional cultural values without discrimination. They are in opposition to the protagonists and their contrasting set of traditional criteria. They were the black successors of the white settlers.

They are unscrupulous, intolerant, and cold-hearted; have no conscience and treat women and workers inhumanely. They have learnt well from their former colonial masters. They try to be Western by wearing the same clothes, living in the same houses. Ngugi uses biting satirical characterising for them. In Kenya most of the rich men develop what the Kenyans refer to as 'public opinion' when they want to describe the physical appearance of such a rich man, namely that "they are very fat, they develop very big tummies and these tummies are called public opinions because they put their noses or their stomach-noses into other people's affairs" (Wilkinson 1992: 125). The amused audiences recognised them immediately as Western clones, totalitarian and essentially egomaniacs that were made powerful by colonialism's aftermath.

Most of them are hypocritical, pious Christians reminiscent of greedy vultures as they use religion as a vehicle to get their way. They scheme deceitfully through corruption, the downfall of their fellowmen. They have become zealous converts to Christianity because it has benefits for them. They feed on the powerlessness and suffering of others. For these merciless collaborators everything revolves around their individual wealth and not the benefit of the people. Ngugi reveals contempt through the other characters:

That the wealth of our land  
Has been grabbed by a tiny group  
Of the Kios and the Ndugires  
In partnership with foreigners!

*I Will Marry When I Want* (Act 2, Scene 1, p. 62).

They are selfish to the extreme and will destroy anyone who stands in their way to make more money, consuming through corruption the land and livelihood of the poor. Other characteristics that these manipulative men share are vindictiveness, blatant abuse of power, pompousness, lust and greed. They do not care for the African sense of proprietorship, only their own individual wealth. They deny everything that should be sacred to them for monetary reward and political power.

**(iii) OTHER SUPPORTING MALE CHARACTERS:**

**(a) VIRTUOUS: Gigaamba, Stranger, Boy**

In the portrayal of these mature men Ngugi acknowledges and pays tribute to the personal sacrifices and contributions of the workers. The characters are politically-conscious revolutionary leaders who are the spokespersons for workers. They are activists for what they believe in and fight for their people's freedom and social reform. The characters are adept at argument and shrewd in political judgment.



They are preoccupied with justice, duty and action and are frustrated by the social realities of modern Kenya. Their purpose is clear: to overthrow the system. They speak out directly on political matters and are adamant that the people to organise themselves if they hope to improve their lot and change their miserable situation. They provide inspiration for the contemporary struggle and call for unity. They optimistically believe that the yearning for their land and freedom is as strong as it has been before Uhuru and lead others in the cause of national liberation. Their role is to support the protagonist and help sharpen his consciousness of the class struggle. Together they constitute the vital alliance between the peasantry and the working class in the African revolution (Amuta 1989: 166). They refuse to accept status and seek an answer in the collective struggle.

These characters became symbols of the struggle. They embody the courage, sacrifices and loyalty required. They show powerful characteristics such as passion, single-mindedness and consistency. They remain concerned for the welfare of their people and outspoken against the enemy. They seek truth and unity:

Let us unite against our enemies.

Let's rather unite in patriotic love:

Unity is our strength and wealth.

*I Will Marry When I Want* (Act 3, Scene 3, pp. 112-113).

**(b) CORRUPTED: Samuel Ndugire, Ikuua wa Nditika, Priests, Banker,  
Businessmen**

These characters represent the new black elite of despised hypocritical African imperialists. They have the same characteristics as the antagonists; in many cases they are their stooges and embody exploitation. They are unprincipled and ruthless businessmen who became rich after independence by exploiting their own people. They have renounced the past and the tribe's traditions. This nouveau riche group is poked fun at by Ngugi who exposes their self-righteousness, cruelty, arrogance, intolerance and clinging to the money-god. They are shown as unthinking characters who do not regard other peoples' feelings or needs.

They have accepted the white man's religion with exaggerated enthusiasm without living it. The audience was neither impressed nor convinced by their confessions or arguments and saw that on the outside they are Christian, but there is no change of heart on the inside and that they fail to find, or live the true meaning of Christianity. All these hypocrites with their skew vision of Christianity are very eloquent to pursue people to convert to Christianity or they utilise it to justify themselves when the shallowness of their faith is revealed. Ngugi uses them as strong and extravagant metaphors.

Ngugi uses the mysterious character of John Muhuuni in *I Will Marry When I Want* with a specific purpose. He is the son of Ahab Kioi and Jezebel, rich upper-middle-class parents. Although he never appears on the stage (he only hoots) he is made known to us by what the other characters say about him. Ngugi builds him skilfully into a real character we can recognise in life. Gradually we learn that he is a weak man, amoral, lacks character and commitment, and is motivated by lust, self-centered, a liar and a spoilt rich kid. He is projected as a negative character and an exploiter of loyalties. He is attracted to the beautiful Gathoni, but she is from a different stratum of life. He manipulates her by giving her presents and impresses her with his wealth. He has what she as a peasant could only dream of: a car, money and ‘status’. He is older than she and though from a “Christian” home has no ethical values and his morality and sense of duty is rotten to the core. Ngugi uses him to show the community the repulsiveness of “sugar daddies”:

Accompanied by men old enough to be their fathers,

And the girls cooing up to them, sugardaddy, sugardaddy!

*I Will Marry When I Want* (Act 1, p.18).

By using a European name for him, Ngugi indicates that his behaviour is a colonial culture, foreign and unacceptable to the community. He, as Kioi and Ndugire, has what the Kenyans refer to as ‘public opinion’: fat with a big abdomen. “These tummies are

called public opinions because they put their noses or their stomach-noses into other people's affairs" (Wilkinson 1992:125).

**(iii) TRAITORS: Mambararia, Mwendanda**

This group has sold their birthright to the imperial-colonists and has turned on their own people for various reasons, mostly wealth and status. They share the same characteristics as the antagonists and corrupted characters. As collaborators the people despised them.

**FEMALE**

Ngugi depicted women with sensitivity and compassion, but they are still essentially secondary to the male characters. His female protagonists are from abusive or oppressive backgrounds and are subject to the control of fathers, husbands, lovers and bosses. The women become a tribute to those fierce courageous women who fought in the Mau-Mau Freedom War: Me Kitilili, Muraa wa Ngiti, Mary Mũthoni Nyanjirũ (*Detained* 1981). Women became to Ngugi symbols of the community's cultural identity; guardians of traditions. Here too we have basic groups of characters: virtuous, corrupted and young. The virtuous is represented by the traditional, the corrupted by the Western and the young by the new generation.

**(i) VIRTUOUS: Njango, Wancegi, Njooki, Woman**

These women embody the forces of good. They are the salt of the earth, mature, humane, full of wisdom and marital love, understanding, support and generosity. They are totally committed to culture, husband and tradition. They exemplify the courage and the spirit of the true Gikuyu women who participated in the struggle, but are also the backbone of their household and family; their world revolves around husband, children and home; they would do anything for them. They are most of the time unfamiliar with the ways of modern urban life. For these rural women the traditions of their community are still important and as they are always blessed with the power of speech and gladly share traditional wisdom. These women of the soil are determined to work hard and are in direct contrast to the idle bourgeois lives of the wives of the new elite. As friends or neighbours they are inquisitive, concerned and helpful. In their homes and communities they are towers of strength and when things fall apart they become the strong ones with inner strength to support themselves as well as others. They are symbols of the entire working class through their experience of what happened in the country at social level and the lessons life had taught them.

Ngugi created these strong pragmatic women, marginalised in their very existence, who resisted and struggled against the circumstances that they are caught up in. They became symbols of all those who are exploited and oppressed.

**(ii) CORRUPTED: Jezebel, Helen,**

These new elite (Black) women are ridiculed for trying to imitate the foreign (European) women. Africans use these characters to satirise the glorification of European values. They are depicted as hollow, shallow and idle with no occupation other than decking themselves out in expensive clothes and jewellery and chasing wealth. They are personifications of money in its antagonistic relationship with labour (Amuta 1989: 166). They give the audience a satiric glimpse of the hypocrisy and evil of the elite with their snobbish attitudes. They lead a kind of frivolous life that bears resemblance to lives once reserved for the white colonial women.

They are shameless and a manipulating elite. Their high life is enjoyed at the expense of the masses for which independence has brought nothing. They are without any respect for human lives, their workers' dignity and do not care for their poverty. In Christianity they see the possibility to shine, while they are hypocrites. They are wicked and evil.

**(iii) OTHER SUPPORTING FEMALE CHARACTERS: Gathoni,****Wanjiro, Nyathira**

Ngugi examines the plight of young rural women in Kenya as a concern. Of one such a girl Ngugi says "She is a result of two worlds and can no longer cleave to the old one nor fit in the new one. Semi-educated, with no roots, no social ties and no community,

she is a prototype of the lost, disillusioned Kenyan of the post- colonial Kenya” (Ressler 2005: 4). They are typical of a new, confused generation that attempts to live a productive life and is pushed onto a path of prostitution and degradation (bar or house maid).

They are portrayed as wanting to shed the old traditions for the modern Western. Their parents expect them to live obediently within the confines of their traditions, but they are dissatisfied and rebellious with life at home. In *This Time Tomorrow* Wanjiro says:

I want to get out of here, out of these slums. Look at me.

I don't have clothes like other girls (p. 196).

I long for the pleasures of this glittering city. I want a frock.

And shoes – high heels – so that I can walk like a European

lady. (p. 198).

They rebel against traditional education and see western education and urban life as the key to progress, a better life and liberation. Ngugi uses these characters to highlight the particular dilemma of women in a rapidly changing society and their exploitation in terms of class and sex. He reveals a legacy of male oppression that has done great injustice to girls.

Tired of the sacrifices for their families, ashamed of poverty and preoccupied with what is out of their reach, they want to be independent in a male-dominated society; they sometimes commit acts of resistance to parental supervision. There is however no maturity of judgment in their decisions or caution in their approach to life. They do not have the experience to see the hidden intentions of others, e.g. John Muhuuni's sexual exploitation, and are fooled into believing promises of prosperity. In money and class they see their salvation. The cruel reality only brings heartache and they are left defeated, confused and with shattered confidence. They end up as maids or prostitutes. They often are part of an even larger oppressive system due to the fact that they are female.

### **STEREOTYPES**

Certain characters have only type names: the Waiter, the Securicor watchman, Customers, Shoemaker, Boy or Girl. They are stock characters – identifiable, simplified social types. Some of these stock type characters can appear mediocre, but not if they are real. For Ngugi's audience they were extensions of themselves: they were those people they saw on stage. These characters represent the oppressed workers and are used functionally in subservient positions to reveal them as symbols and concrete victims of the oppressive system so that the audience can recognise the similarity of their own state.



The Securicor watchman and the workers who are afraid of the barking dogs were put into the play to reflect the culture of fear that the foreigners and those collaborating Kenyans instilled into the under-privileged people. They employed the British Securicor guards with their dogs to protect them and under the rich Kenyans (such as Kioi) it became a status symbol.

The drunk, Kamande wa Muyui, in *I Will Marry When I Want* portrays the hopelessness of life's realities: alcohol is an escape from poverty and also a protest against the system that devoured him. He has a further function namely to relieve the domestic tension in the Kiguunda's home caused by the poverty and the coming visit of the Kioi's. His song is very important as it is a ribald protest against the institution of marriage. It presages the real, anticipated and attempted marriages that will follow in the play.

Micere Githae Mugo, referring to the cast of *Dedan Kimathi*, said: "Some of the scenes, the movements, would make absolutely no meaning without the presence of people who actually say nothing but occupy the stage, sometime as mimers, other times as singers and dancers and other times as mere members of the crowds. You know, the sheer people volume of the cast really creates a spirit of collective involvement and participation" (Wilkinson 1992:112). Each of Ngugi's Kamiriithu plays had large numbers of people participating.

The singers, dancers, mimes, musicians, workers, Mau-Mau guerrillas and children function as back-up for the protagonist and the “good side” of the community. The antagonists and “bad side” are backed by those from the colonial and neo-colonial system: the British soldiers, African home guards and traitors. Under this group fall all the hypocritical church-goers with their fanatical Christian evangelicalism with which they try to convert everybody in sight.

### NAMES

For his characters Ngugi uses fictional, but symbolic, names mixed with historical names to strengthen the illusion of fictional reality and become illustrators of how the past had become the present, e.g. Kimathi and Karuiki. “Kang’ethe and Kariuki are based on the historical figures of Joseph Kang’ethe and J. M. Kariuki – to emphasize the timeless necessity of courage, unity, and struggle” (Cox 1997: 552).

The characters’ names are according to Amuta (1989: 167) symbolic pointers to the process of demystification. Ahab Kioi wa Kanoru and Jezebel were named after the king and queen of Israel (1 Kings 21). They share the same scheming wickedness and disrespect for others’ possessions, in this case ancestral land.

Njooki means born again: she who comes back from the dead. This is also the name of Ngugi's third daughter who was born while he was detained in 1977. Kariuki's name too, meaning born again, deserved his name when he became the fighter for freedom after a rebirth ritual. Remi, the symbol of the hopes and aspirations of the younger generation, means disobedient or obstinate.

Names like Helen, George Scott, Jezebel and Samuel are typically foreign and contrast with the traditional indigenous names purposely to ridicule those elite who like to adopt foreign names. The name Kanoru is a clever bit of wordplay by Ngugi as it referred to a transformation of the settler name "Connor" By inserting a syllable in KANU, the ruling party's acronym, one gets Kanoru. The "wa Kanoru" means then son of KANU.

### **3.6 DIALOGUE, SONGS, DANCES, MIMES, SLIDES,**

#### **FLASHBACKS AND USAGE OF THE BIBLE**

**"Theatre has its own language. We should use all ... not just talk"** (Kavanagh 1997: 82).

With his first four plays, written in English, Ngugi used more dialogue. The next one, *The Trail of Dedan Kimathi*, had songs, dances and mimes incorporated. With the last two plays, which he did with the Kamiriithu community and wrote in his mother tongue, Gikuyu, Ngugi used much less dialogue. It consisted of a great number of songs, music,

dances, drumming, mimes and audience responses. He combined it with modern theatre forms of communication, e.g. flashbacks and slides. “The revival of traditional African Cultures became an integral part of nationalist struggles for independence all over Africa.” (Banham 2001: 30). Ngugi incorporated the artistic forms of other dramatic orature techniques to show that the peasantry would like to reclaim their traditional culture.

### **DIALOGUE**

The language Ngugi used for the dialogue of his plays was predominantly Standard English. At times non-English words were used but they were not a hindrance on stage as the meaning was quite clear in the context in which they occurred, e.g. *The Trail of Dedan Kimati* teems with Swahili words such as *Uhuru* and *harambee*. Ngugi uses the way people really speak, edited and shaped for dramatic purposes, to write the dialogue of his plays. It was a reflection of the African mode of thinking: a mixture of prose and poetry. Whereas Ngugi’s characters in his first plays, written in English, spoke meticulous English whether they were literate or not and social background notwithstanding, the characters of his latter plays spoke Gikuyu; their language that of the people they portrayed. The characters utilised the Gikuyu recognisable diction and reflect the astuteness and exquisiteness of the Gikuyu linguistic society. The language is compact, not laboured or complicated and words are not wasted. He brought along social

and cultural cohesion, especially by using Gikuyu and Swahili. Due to the fact that the performers were often enthusiastic illiterate amateurs, the plays had an easily memorised type of verse.

The dialogue uses the wry self-revealing humour that is apparent in the imagery which is vivid and forceful:

There's no maiden who makes a home in her father's backyard,  
 And there's no maiden worth the name who wants to get grey  
 Hairs at her parents' home.

*I Will Marry When I Want* (Act 1, p.17).

Ngugi's texts abound with riddles that are familiar to the audiences; both in the dialogue and songs. At times it becomes a duel of words. Such sparring would create interplay with the audience who has to 'read between the lines'. The political song *Muthirigi*, in *Mother, Sing for Me*, is an example. The strikingly lively speech patterns are rich with metaphors and similes, imagery and proverbs, e.g.

They said that a vulture eats alone  
 That no bird of prey preys for another

*I Will Marry When I Want* (Act 3, Scene 3, p. 113).

Two hands can carry a beehive,  
One man's ability is not enough,  
One finger cannot kill a louse,  
Many hands make work light.

*I Will Marry When I Want* (Act 3, Scene 3, p. 114).

Rhetorical questions, used frequently, were more statements and used to give the reality of the circumstances and the inner turmoil of characters. It demands an answer, but none is given. It gives the audience the privilege to share and be informed. Ngugi employs this stylistic device to express intense feelings. Irony, satire, figurative language and internal monologues, single or in combination, are also used often. Ngugi uses irony and satire frequently; often to amuse the indigenous people in the audience who understand the nuances immediately. Another example of Ngugi's usage of irony is in the title of *I Will Marry When I Want*. Even if the rebellious Gathoni wants to marry, John does not want her. The marriage was only in her head. The irony heightens the impact of what we later learn.

Ngugi utilises the richness of myth, proverbs and sayings known to his audience to colour the dialogue. He alternates between verse and prose not in a planned manner, but as part of the natural writing process. It has great effect as the people enjoy the sharpness and humour. In the scene in *Mother, Sing for Me* where Kang'ethe hits Nyabaara with

the spanner, the audience immediately picked up the words for traitor and enjoyed the pun tremendously.

The dialogue clearly distinguishes the different characters. The audience is captivated with sharp, though stereotypical, characterisation of which their unique speech are part to get an emotional response from them. The individual characters and their dialogue are a vivid representation of the audience itself. For many characters the dialogue is sparse, concentrated and nothing beyond a functional purpose. The dialogue reveals how the characters are interrelated and states plainly the facts which advance the action of the play. At times the dialogue informs the audience or evokes specific information, especially certain particular historical moments. The colonialists are often, though they speak indigenous languages such as Swahili or Gikuyu, portrayed as ridiculous and unable to understand the subtleties of the language; marking them as foreign. Ngugi uses a linkage to the oral tradition to achieve this. The language also serves to show the collaborators up as isolated from their own people and culturally rootless. The dialogue is therefore a variable and flexible. The poetry in the language comes across clearly.

Other interesting aspects of Ngugi's clever usage of language are his use of props to 'speak'. In *Mother, Sing for Me* the British Kanoru can only communicate through a whip or whistle like a circus animal tamer or a mediator, Nyabaara, with his workers. At times he lets silence do the talking. The contrast in voices (solo and chorus; women, men, children; young and old) establishes variety of tone, tempo and rhythm.

The dialogue is a remarkable combination of simplicity with a vast range and variety. He uses short sentences and clear-cut vocabulary, but it does not mean simple expressions. The flexible use of punctuation brings out the full effect of dramatic arrangements.

### **SONGS**

**“Song as an indirect mode of communicating pleas and demands is more effective than direct speech”** (Gachukia: 1983: 27).

The songs used in the plays took on the form of a dialogue in the plays. Some were revolutionary, others praise songs. They were accurate expressions of the people’s functional culture in everyday life. “They sang their own history, their present realities, and their future aspirations” (Lakoju 1989: 159). This was used to great effect by Ngugi and the theatre group to provide unity and meaning. In the plays they spoke louder than only the direct dialogue. The songs that emphasised the themes, experiences, emotions and feelings of the people, serve as a chorus and commentary for the plays’ events. The political commentaries and social criticism in the songs are carried over into the performances. The dramatic satire was open support for the new struggle for democratic freedom. The songs and imitative movements of some of the characters was Ngugi’s way of acknowledging reality.



Ngugi used traditional Gikuyu and other indigenous songs together with traditional music from the colonial era which express strong emotions like the yearning for freedom from the oppressive suffering. The communal songs and dances brought solidarity.

We change to new songs

For the revolution is near.

*I Will Marry When I Want* (Act 3, Scene 3, p. 115).

They were familiar to most of the people since childhood. The British banned many of them and in the context that Ngugi used them they gained a deeper meaning, becoming powerful and exciting. The fact that the Europeans did not allow indigenous theatre with its songs, dances and other performance activities, is a clear indication of the powerful cultural force it has.

The lyrics, many of them ironic, of the songs used, fitted the needs of the plot. They became cleverly incorporated as part of the conversations to illustrate certain aspects of the themes. The familiar melodies, the same in most of the indigenous languages, e.g. *Muthirigu*, evoke the oral literature which transmitted the community's own experience and perspective of their history of the struggle and the roles played by the heroes such as Dedan Kimathi, as well as by the traitors. The history of all the carnage committed against the people by the imperialist forces is also packaged into the songs according to Lokoju (1989: 155).

The popular rhythmic songs had many more functions in the different plays. Amongst others they evoked a specific atmospheric mood, e.g. longing, suffering, or anger, causing the audience to become emotionally involved with much weeping, jeering and applauding. The songs were full of references and allusions to ‘thoughts’; and had abundant meaning. The audience enjoyed the clever alternation of religious and political words which the characters used to ‘fool’ the colonials with. The relevant songs gave critique on the government and made statements. For the rest it was a unifying force – through different ethnic songs, creating togetherness in the audiences in a collective vision and spirit of resistance, freedom and a better future which the songs proclaimed. The songs articulated the collective spirit and strength of mind of the people.

In *Mother, Sing for Me* almost 100 songs were sung. The Kamba opening song, *Kaleso*, already sent a strong unifying message that the play was for all ethnic groups – not only the Gikuyu community. During the play the song *Maitu Njugira* (Mother, Sing for Me) was so popular because the crowd knew it meant the trilling of *ngemi* – the symbol of honor, friendship and happiness (Björkman 1989: 83). The song that Nyathira sang initiated a dialogue with the audience in which they actively participated. The climax and moral of the performance which came at the end, was in the form of a protest song, called *Twiyuumiririe* (Let us stand firm) and once again united everybody. Freedom songs at the end reinforced the fundamental message: the only alternative for the people

is to unite in their struggle to bring about change for themselves and freedom from oppression.

There was a great variety, e.g. religious, revolutionary and patriotic songs, chants, lullabies, slogans and rhetoric.

### **DANCES**

In the plays the dances were a visual imagery that together with the songs and music became a concrete form of expression. They articulated the contents of shared experiences to the audience. The traditional dances had a way of bringing together forms of expression that were ordinarily kept apart in a spontaneous celebration. They helped to break down the traditional taboos, called for a political awakening through the traditional movements and gave contemporary theatre a dynamic culture.

“Dance is an expression of an individual as well as a communal meaning of life within the African community, an indication of life” (Heywood 1977: 152). Ngugi cleverly used the traditional dance rituals to revive that African culture which the colonials tried to suppress. The dances lent a vibrant atmosphere. They gave the audience the opportunity to participate. In *The Trail of Dedan Kimathi* they served the purpose of showing the different dances of Kenya’s peoples and how they expressed different

functions and feelings, e.g. for marriages, funerals, struggle, fear and humiliation (Second Movement p.37).

With the dances traditional costumes and drumming were used. That too became a language all understood.

### **MIMES**

Mime is part of Africa's performing arts tradition. Therefore Ngugi uses it in his theatre. The expressive mimes served an important role in the plays to communicate and convey messages to the audience. They strengthened the dialogue, gave color to the stage activities and heightened the atmosphere of the plays. In a vivid visual fashion they say more than words, e.g. in *The Trail of Dedan Kimathi* Ngugi allows it to tell the audience what goes on in Dedan's mind.

In *I Will Marry When I Want* Kiguunda and Wangeci show the audience a glimpse of their moves for the coming Christian wedding day. By mimicking the foreigners' traditions, customs, fashions, and styles they show how entirely inappropriate and rather ridiculous these are in an African setting. The purpose was to expose the folly and pretensions of the Africans who tried blindly to copy the lifestyles of Europeans (*The Black Hermit*). By showing their traditional wedding Njooki indicated that they should be proud of their own culture.

In *Mother, Sing for Me* the concept of the sticks – one can be broken, many not – is familiar to the audience. Seeing it recurrently mimed on stage to reinforce the concept of unity sent a powerful message: as long as the people (workers) stand united they are stronger. For Ngugi the theatre also unites people and makes them stronger.

### **SLIDES**

In *Mother, Sing for Me* Ngugi resorted to a Brechtian technique: the use of projected slides of information. Meyerhold and Brecht both used this medium for the same reason: to tell the audiences never to forget that the ‘story’ on stage is not a mere imitation – it is the truth. To link the past with the present Ngugi used in the first two acts authentic visual images of official documentation from the British colonial period and in the third act some identical documentation from contemporary Kenya. These images were shown to emphasise that what the audience saw on screen and experienced on stage was the truth. It was a powerful reinforcement of the message: one that the whole audience clearly understood. Pictures of well-known heroes, e.g. Harry Thuku, was another unifying cipher as they were national symbols for all Kenyans.

Signs like *Mbwa Kali* (Dangerous Dogs) evoked immediate memories and emotions of fear for many in the audience. To enforce it Ngugi added the angry sound of attacking dogs barking with some of the workers being chased by invisible dogs across the stage.

Ingeniously Ngugi shows that this colonial sign meant for keeping the Africans away, now appear on the gates of the Black elite – thus becoming a symbol of class.

### **FLASHBACKS**

Ngugi in most of his creative writings has used this technique with great success. He used it for the first time in a play in *The Trail of Dedan Kimati*. Ngugi brought to the stage the colonial history only in slices of the past. He picked those parts of the vast early history of Kenya which he knew had the greatest impact on people in order to convey what he wished to the audience. By using flashbacks the history is told in an engaging way that grips the audience instead of boring them. Ngugi uses memory, not only as part of the narrative, but to ensure meaning would come out of the memories. It allows for the expressive use of commentary and wit.

Through flashbacks the background is constantly shifting and moves from place to place or incident to incident. It is held together by the central characters. It is true that there might be some difficulties involved in moving backwards and forwards through time, and across one experience to another as the play does. Maintaining interest after a shift in the play requires a guarantee that the audience is always clear as to which period of time is referred to. The spectator may be absorbed in one sequence of events and may be reluctant to be snatched away to another situation by the playwright.

Ngugi said in an interview with D. Venkat Rao that “the linear story telling structure is not true to reality. Because in reality people do not tell each other stories in a linear mode. They constantly interrupted each other” (Rao 1999: 168). Ngugi and his co-writers have succeeded in controlling the movement from present to past and back to present with aptitude. The audience is eased from one consecutively related scene to another by some connection to it, a memory stirred or by characters confiding in each other.

An example is in Act 1 of *I Will Marry When I Want* where Kiguunda and Wangegi remember their youth and the dancers and singers join them in a flashback for the *Mwomboko*-dance. Then Kiguunda remembers that

Oh, the seven years were not even over  
 When we began  
 To sing new songs with new voices,  
 Songs and voices demanding  
 Freedom for Kenya, our motherland

(Act 1, p.25).

Then a procession started freedom songs, putting the flashback seven years later at the time of the Liberation war. When they leave Kiguunda ensures that the audience knows they are back from the past in the present by saying:

How the times run!

How many years have gone

Since we got independence?

Ten and over,

Quite a good number of years!

And now look at me!

(Act 1, p.28).

The flashback fragments convey not only the history, but stir the emotions. They give vital and sufficient information of the past; what went wrong that it turned to what it is now in the present. These flashbacks show, amongst others, that the past and the future are irrevocably related. The flashbacks of the past are only highlights. They also indicate how the activities and the destinations of the assortment of characters are connected. They illuminate the psychological structure of the characters and their specific behaviour in specific circumstances. They bare the past and the soul of the characters for the audience to understand.

The flashbacks help to maintain the storyline and are useful in keeping the audience's interest and curiosity in the play with its variety of the theatre techniques. They bring suspense into that storyline as they build up to the climax piece by piece. Only after all the crucial information of past and present are gathered and form a whole picture, can



we pass judgment. At the end of the play we know the background and the characters well enough to identify with and feel empathy for them in their misery. In *The Trail of Dedan Kimathi* flashbacks show that even Dedan's own men collude with the enemy in secret negotiations. They reveal information to the audience which will enable them to understand his reactions better.

The events in some of the plays are not staged in chronological order and there is a constant shift in the plays from the present to the past, past to present, e.g. the traditional wedding of Njooki where the couple is joined by singers, musicians and dancers to celebrate with them in their joy. This scene expresses a cultural rejuvenation and confirms the indigenous through the ululations and songs. It forms a vast contrast with the Western wedding that is later shown in mime. It brings a new dimension to the play.

"Ngugi's use of time-shifts in order to emphasise, amid the varied experience of his characters, patterns which would be obscured by a simple chronological portrayal of events" are discussed by Cook (1997: 117). He uses it as "a method of annihilating time so as to raise vital issues concerning the relationship between the past and the present itself" (Cook 1997: 117). Flashbacks are not an utilisation of chronology. They are never used arbitrarily but aim at revealing the past, present and future in an interlocking way. This freedom with form expresses directly Ngugi's vision. Ngugi stimulates his audience to relive the past to wake them up for the present.

### **USAGE OF THE BIBLE**

One of the legacies of the missionaries was that the Kenyan people were familiar with the Bible. Ngugi says they cannot escape the influence of the church and religion (Killam 1980: 8). The generation that grew up during the colonialism was schooled through the usage of the Bible. Ngugi himself had such schooling. He uses references to the Bible as he knows that his audience will be able to understand the symbolism. The use is both symbolic and linguistic. It should be seen in a historical context and as a weapon against imperialism. Christianity was part of the weaponry of colonialism and for many of the people the Bible was the only book available that they could read. Most literate Africans were therefore acquainted with the content, the stories, of the Bible. Even in neo-colonial Kenya the churches and the bars are the only options for people's entertainment. Even today churches are erected at an alarming rate, but other needs such as schools are overlooked. The Bible is thus part of the colonial legacy and when Ngugi uses it as frequently as he does, he refers to a universal body of knowledge which he and his audience are sharing. The sharing is not founded on Christian belief but in the fact that it is part of the common information they share. Ngugi utilised the Bible to support the cause of liberation.

Ngugi shows clearly how the followers of Christ and by implication readers of the Bible, use it to mislead people, e.g. Kiguunda and Wangeci. In many cases it paved the way for

the alienation of land. In the Bible land, the acquisition and the liberation thereof, plays an important role. To this Kenyans can relate. Ngugi uses the parallelism of the coveting of land in the Bible (1 Kings 21) cleverly in *I Will Marry When I Want*. It helps the audience to understand some of the thematic concerns better.

The usage of Christian songs, e.g. the “Crush Satan” one, has a direct reference to some of the characters in the plays. Kioi is the Satan in *I Will Marry When I Want* and must be destroyed. In *The Trail of Dedan Kimathi* Dedan is compared to Christ the Saviour in his actions. Ngugi uses the events in Christ’s life to create similarities in Dedan’s life.

The utilisation of Biblical images is effective and important as it explores the themes in the plays. It is clear that some of the Biblical language, allusions and clever symbolism heighten the ironic effect in Ngugi’s plays greatly. These allusions heighten the effects of what Ngugi conveys to the audience as they conjure up ironic associations in their minds. The audience enjoys these references immensely.

### **3.7 MILIEU**

**“The disruption of African history by the European imperial powers has created a range of political, economic and cultural problems of enormous magnitude”** (Crow 1996: 69).

(i) **HISTORICAL CONTEXT**

Banham said, “Drama as a performing art, provides an imaginative expression through which a society learns to adapt to its changing historical circumstances”(2005: 217). Ngugi created his plays in total context of the economic, political, historical, cultural and social structures of the society (rural and urban) from which it originated. The colonial take-over of Kenya had in fact destroyed every traditional aspect of the Kenyan people’s existence. The origins of the social and political milieu lie in the history. “The nature of the contemporary theatre in Africa can only be fully understood in the context of its historical roots” (Banham 1976: 1) and Ngugi’s playwriting and theatre centre around the Kenyan history as it provides a prime source of material and solid background.

Ngugi’s creative response to and observation of the times he is living in, enables him to use the historical events of Kenya in a unique manner. The context of his plays, e.g. *Mother, Sing for Me*, reflects the foreign oppression during the colonial period. He uses the indigenous stories of his tribe told to him and his ability as writer to accomplish his role as the people’s griot as “the griot is the guardian of his tribe’s history” (Freeman 2005: 1)

A brief look at the historical background especially from the Gikuyu perspective is necessary as factors that have influenced his literature. Ngugi’s historical consciousness

came from what he experienced and observed in the midst of the turbulent anti-colonial struggle. The physical and cultural violence made a deep impression on him. In the colonial history of land grabbing he sees the root of Kenya's problems of today.

The hunter-gathers were the first indigenous people to wander into Kenya. Today there are many Gikuyu legends about the Kenyan forests the Gikuyu people migrated to over scores of ages (Richards 1995: 16). Kenya has earned the title 'Cradle of Humanity' because of the famous Rift valley archeology discoveries of Leakey. The East African coast was known as Azania and traded ivory, rhino horns and tortoise shells by the 8<sup>th</sup> century. Through the years of trading the Arab traders intermarried with the Kenyans, creating the Swahili culture. Vasco da Gama's explorations opened the country up for the harsh Portuguese colonialism until in 1698 when the Sultan of Oman and Zanzibar took over the rule.

The first Europeans came to East Africa in the 16<sup>th</sup> Century as explorers, missionaries and traders (Richards 1995: 16). Religious sects and prophetic movements multiplied and influenced the inhabitants. In the 1800s those settlers moved inland into Kenya to start large tea and coffee farms near Lake Naivasha, Limuru, in an area known as the 'White Highlands'. By the late 19<sup>th</sup> century the Mombassa-Uganda railway was built.

In 1890 the Anglo-German Agreement was signed and the interior of Kenya was given to Britain (Richards 1995: 20). In 1982 Waiyaki wa Hiinga, a South Gikuyuland chief,

rebelled against the British occupation, but was violently put down. Between 1895 and 1905 the whole of Kenya was colonised and declared a British protectorate. All land was claimed and regarded as crown land and farms, consisting mostly of Gikuyu land, was alienated and given to whites. The rightful owners were moved to land so unproductive and dry that the people called it the Land of Black Rocks. The political changes enforced by the colonisers changed the lives of the people too. Taxation was introduced by the British government. The Kenyan farmers were forbidden to cultivate crops to earn cash. They were thus forced to become migrant workers for the European plantation owners. The economic survival of the people hinged on the fertile land – ancestral land that no longer belonged to them and forced them into servitude. They became the *ahoi*, squatters on farms that historically were their own” (Kurtz 1998: 25).

The big influx of European settlers came after World War I (Richards 1995:21). These people did not know a great deal about tea or coffee plantations and depended on the knowledge of their workers to make a success of this farming. The status of Kenya changed from a protectorate to a crown colony in 1920.

As over-population (23 million people inhabiting 225, 000 square miles of which only one-third is suitable for habitation), poor terms of employment on white-owned farms and land hunger intensified, the Gikuyu’s bitterness increased. The land’s dispossession, the suppression of their indigenous culture and the handling of the economy by a foreign

government that used it for their own enrichment, as well as the domination by foreigners, called for a revolution.

After World War I the discontent grew into organised resistance to gain Uhuru (Independence). In 1920 the Gikuyu Central Association was formed with Henry Thuku as leader of the workers' movement (Richards 1995: 21). Through their political activities action was taken against the many oppressive settler laws. A petition stating their grievances concerning land, forced labour with slave wages, beating of workers, teenage prostitution by the plantation owners, taxation and the compulsory carrying of a registration identity card was drawn up. Thuku was arrested and in an upheaval in front of the Police Station, 23 Africans were killed (Richards 1995: 22). In 1922 Mary Mũthoni Nyanjirũ led the biggest worker's demonstration ever to demand Thuku's release from prison. She and 150 others were killed in what is now called the 1922 Massacre (Ngugi 1981:82). Also in 1922 Johnstone Kamau, later called Jomo Kenyatta, joined the Association. Soon he earned himself the title of 'the burning spear' and was hailed as the coming saviour of Kenya. Ngugi used him and the saviour concept in many of his plays.

At the end of the 1940s a secret armed organization, consisting out of mostly Gikuyu people, the Mau-Mau was formed to demand the return of the land. The Gikuyu has a body of myths which they believe, through oral tradition, gave them sacred right to the land granted to them by the gods. The legends tell them that the land will be theirs for

eternity; no matter how powerful those who want to steal it. It was with this myth implanted in their hearts that the Kenyan Land and Freedom Army fought armed resistance for years.

Their goal was to drive the whites and Christianity out of Kenya with violence. Everybody, white or black, who supported the oppressor government, was considered the enemy and brutally killed. The Mau-Mau moved into the Aberdare forests of Mount Kenya from where they launched their guerrilla attacks. The Freedom organisation was outlawed in 1951 (Richards 1995: 22).

The Gikuyu leader, Jomo Kenyatta and other KAU leaders were caught. He was accused of being the master-mind behind the Mau-Mau and imprisoned in 1952. That same year a State of Emergency was declared on October 20, due to the political unrest (Richards 1995: 23). The colonial regime decided on a ten-year plan of mass internment of the workers and peasants in various concentration camps, e.g. Langata and Mageta. The rest of the masses were forced into villages, such as Kamiriithu, that served as concentration areas. "It was one of the largest and most brutal mass arrests, incarcerations and displacements of peoples in history, to instill into a community of millions the culture of fear and the slave aesthetic of abject submission to tyranny" (Ngugi 1981: 49). It was an extremely turbulent period. Ngugi reflects on this period in his plays through flashbacks and themes such as return.



The Mau-Mau was suppressed by the British troops in 1956, but the State of Emergency, which the British government declared in 1952, continued until 1960.

Gradually changes were made. The Kenya African National Union (KANU) was formed in March 1960 and Kenyatta was elected party president. The party vowed to eradicate all the dictatorial and arbitrary practices as part of their anti-imperialist campaign; clearly acknowledging national aspirations. In August 1961 Jomo Kenyatta was eventually released and sent to London under house arrest. The preparations for independence started in earnest when on June 1, 1963 self-government for Kenya was proclaimed with a released Kenyatta as prime minister of the KANU ruling party government. When on December 12, 1963 Kenya became independent, he, as member of the KANU party, was the first president. Kenya was the last of the East African countries to receive its independence; and then only after the country was torn apart.

Kenyatta hailed the motto *Harambee* – ‘*Let’s all pull together*’. After the initial solidarity under Kenyatta and period of adjustment there was a redefinition of values. What was seen by the Western world as a stable and prosperous African state was not what the inhabitants experienced. For many disillusioned people Kenya was no different after colonialism than before. The colonial culture just continued. “In alliance with foreign interest and the Kenyan clique they murdered the militant KANU spirit” (Ngugi 1981: 52). The remaining Europeans were however assured by Joma Kenyatta in his first

speech as president, “that the ... Kenya Government will not deprive them of their property or rights of ownership” (Björkman 1989: 33).

The people witnessed a gradual betrayal of the aspirations for which the peasants and workers waged the Mau-Mau struggle against British colonialism. Not all the inhabitants of the newly independent state were happy. The guerrilla fighters and peasants received no compensation for their lost land. Currently in Namibia the same issue is causing political tremors. In a cruel and ironic twist of fate the Gikuyu were allowed to buy land – their own which was stolen from them – from those Europeans who left for Britain after independence. Only a small group of wealthy unscrupulous Kenyans could afford to buy land and they just carried on with practices of paying low wages, exploiting on and oppressing the masses.

The KANU government, that on June 10, 1982 became the only acknowledged party in Kenya after the constitution was changed, encouraged foreign investment and control most of Kenya’s economy and culture. The upper and middle class saw the future in terms of national capitalism whereas the lower classes saw their future in socialism (Ngugi 1981: 52).

Those recruited by the colonisers and had worked hand in glove with the former colonial regime before independence, just carried on with their foreign economic interests; ensuring unrestricted freedom to Kenya’s riches for both themselves and the foreigners.

Nationalisation meant nothing more than “tax-financed private property” (Ngugi 1981: 55). Ngugi sees it the same way as Frantz Fanon who once said that this class “...has an extreme, incurable wish for permanent identification with the culture of the imperialist bourgeoisie.” (Ngugi 1981: 56). Only the name KANU was left by 1977 and nothing of its original nationalistic origins it started off with in 1960.

Jomo Kenyatta died in Mombassa on August 22, 1978. His successor was the vice-president Daniel Toroitich arap Moi, a Tugen tribe member, who became president on October 6, 1978. His motto was *Nyayo – To follow in the footsteps*. He did just that in prohibiting any criticism of himself or his regime. Moi and his loyal followers wanted it all and in their own way. This corrupt self-enrichment came to an end when the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank stopped their aid and requested concessions be made to opposition demands. An election in 1993 resulted in a victory for Moi when the opposition lost because they could not unite. In Daniel arap Moi’s footsteps followed eventually an opposition leader, Mwai Kibaki who was elected in December 2002 after Moi stepped down and Uhuru Kenyatta, KANU’s candidate, lost.

Corruption, population expansion and increasing social, economic and political chaos, are still rife in Kenya today. In *The Namibian* of Monday January 23, 2006 it was stated blatantly that “Kenyans list official corruption as one of their chief concerns, and major Western donors such as former colonial power Britain have labeled Kibaki’s government as ‘gluttonous’ as that of his predecessor Daniel arap Moi.”

This was the background of Ngugi's childhood and his formative years. It was therefore natural that it is reflected distinctively in the background of his writings. It stimulated him to criticise the colonial system, to applaud the gaining of independence, to lash out at neo-colonial oppression and condemn multinational companies fleeing African countries in collaboration with the ruling government. His work in the theatre showed those developments. Fanon sees the system of colonisation as "essentially a system of economic exploitation and political oppression ..." (Killam 1984: 168). Ngugi agrees. His fierce criticism of the colonial rule, Christianity and neo-colonial oppression and abuses has caused him to take an increasingly radical political stand.

He had the reputation from early on in his writing career of being an outspoken African nationalist and his writings reflected his declared political commitment. A consistent development from being a nationalist into an anti-imperialist Marxist with a strong commitment to the plight of the workers and peasants in the Kenya of today, made him unflinching in his commentary. He is admired and respected by readers in Kenya, Africa and the world, but barely tolerated by the authorities whose leadership he challenges. He feels that colonialism was an attempt to silence the African writer, but the neo-colonial regime went further and tried to divest him of his own culture.

**(ii) CULTURAL CONTEXT**

Ngugi feels that culture cannot be separated from its historical, political and economic base and that base has become corrupt. Foreign and political influences on culture, and especially on the arts, have been a disruptive factor. Even today Kenya imports a great deal of foreign culture from Europe and America. Almost all theatre is still foreign. Indigenous traditions and customs were, and still are, suppressed. Ngugi was “Jailed partly because of his virulent denunciation of the stifling of Kenyan arts, drama and language as a result of western cultural imperialism.” (Cox 1997: 537).

Ngugi believes culture proved itself an effective vehicle for social transformation. He uses orature to make the community’s historical and cultural experience become communal as he feels vehemently that it is the African writer’s duty to attest to his cultural integrity. The post-colonial struggle for a patriotic national culture is an important one to him. He terms it the people’s culture. Ngugi and Micere Mugo aimed for cultural retrieval of heritage in *The Trail of Dedan Kimathi* with their traditional-based theatre. They, and Ngugi later with his other plays, have returned to their roots in form and style to draw from the familiar performance traditions of the people. He feels that his writing is an attempt to understand himself and his position in history. In a way he makes his past his future. In combining politics and art he revives social and cultural structures of the past as a reality of the future.

**(iii) SOCIAL CONTEXT**

As with other societies, Kenya is multi-cultural due to the penetration of most cultural barriers by colonisation. Social transformation caused by the loss of land, livelihood, pride and the subsequent militant reaction to these conditions, seems a mere dream. Above all there is an enormous gap between the poor, who lives in despair, and the rich, who just become richer. Ngugi's "theatre of the oppressed" was acted out in the context of a neo-colonial society obsessed with class contradictions. The misery of the masses and the vast social inequities are legacies from colonialism and seem to increase under a system of neo-colonialism. "The basic social structures of the colonial era remain essentially intact and in some ways more entrenched than ever" (Kurtz 1998: 35-36).

Ngugi's politically charged writing therefore displays a gradual shift from colonial cultural concern to contemporary social preoccupations; testifying to a spirit of deep disillusionment with the current way things are in Kenya. In general Africa's literature has become critical of the neo-colonial comprador societies and started to voice it. Ngugi is one of the moving spirits of these writers. Today he aims to expose the wrongs in his country for a better and just society in the future. He feels, as the majority of his people (and others in Africa), betrayed by those in positions of power. He made through his plays the nation conscious of their social past, present and future history. He is concerned with the present as far as it influences the future.

**(iii) ECONOMICAL / ENVIRONMENTAL CONTEXT**

In Kenya the economics was modified after independence to suit the imperatives of the imperialists. The country was saddled with escalating foreign obligations. Gradually large-scale corruption and under-development did away with even the minimum acceptable living standards or opportunities for a decent life for the Kenyans (or most Africans in their countries).

Agencies of globalisation such as the World Bank, World Trade Organization, and International Monetary Fund demand that measures are put into place to bring forth reductions in public expenditure: job cuts, wage freeze, cuts in health and education and other necessities such as social welfare services, as well as currency devaluation – all leading to greater impoverishment of people already dispossessed. Ngugi deals with this in most of his plays.

**(iv) POLITICAL CONTEXT**

In a radical political context the plays were designed for propaganda and became a vehicle for conscientisation. Ngugi agrees with Makhan Singh, a Kenyan of Asian origin who was actively involved in the Labour Trade Union of Kenya and who saw the

economic emancipation of workers in political terms, when he declared in court that “... the British had no right to rule Kenya, that country should have a worker’s government with a parliament freely elected by the people and only answerable to the country’s workers and peasants through their organizations,” (Ngugi 1981: 94).

Through his plays and novels Ngugi fuses the political with the literary. In an artistic way he propagates the old Agikuyu myths to life to call for an insurgency to claim back their sanctified soil. In the land they saw the restoration of their social and economic dignity.

**Conclusion:** A reawaking of black cultural and literary activity in Africa was born out of these social-historical-political circumstances and experiences – once the masses saw what they did not see before, the ruling regime was unmasked. This is the background of the struggling people of Kenya. It is within this context that we evaluate events and characters in the plays.

### **3.8 STAGE-ABILITY**

**“An open-air theatre was constructed by a ‘harambee of sweat’ – i.e. self-help and labour”** (Banham 1994: 48)



All of Ngugi's plays are playable,actable and performable. That was his, his co-writers' and the Kamiriithu community's aim – a play through which a message would be transmitted.

The Kamiriithu theatre broke away from the confines of a stage, closed walls and curtains of the formal theatre. There was a total difference in shape and ethos from the National Theatre. The stage was developed by the whole cast, crew and community to suit their unique performance. The actors and crew worked towards ensemble performance. They were living the reality of the play and kept the play as close to that as possible. They appreciated their own effort so much more.

Ngugi used multiple staging, e.g. in *I Will Marry When I Want* both the Kiguunda's and Kioi's homes are set on stage together. The action alternates between the places with other action taking place in the open area sandwiched between them. *This Time Tomorrow* uses the journalist on the side to comment on the action, showing Ngugi's clever usage of the stage. Though the action in *Mother, Sing for Me* moves rapidly the drama is stageable and the audience knows what is happening.

The word 'Harambee' symbolises communal dedication. Ngugi made the observation that "in most Third World countries 'charity' and its corollary 'begging' has become the highest ethical goal, preached every weekend at political rallies and at every state occasion. They definitely do not wish to remove the social conditions that make charity

possible” (Barber 1997: 131). Ngugi wrote his plays staged by ordinary people at any place so that the community would be able to do it together without hand-outs.

Etherton commented that “All are suitable for performance by either professional or amateur companies, with or without theatre experience” (1975: 2).

### **3.9 COMMUNITY AND AUDIENCE INVOLVEMENT**

#### **COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT**

**“Theatre is very much a communal effort because even if you want to write a script it still needs a director, it still needs actors and, finally, it still needs an audience”**

Ngugi wa Thiong’o (Wilkinson 1992: 125).

**“The community, not the state, has been the ‘home base’ of all major African writers”** Wole Ogundele (Cantalupo 1995: 113).

In true African spirit the contribution to the welfare of the community is foremost and individualism is frowned upon. “In the Gikuyu community there is no really individual affair, for everything has a moral and social reference. Deviation from typical behaviour is deliberately discouraged in the young, and for the majority becomes unthinkable in

later life” (Cook 1977: 4). That is the reason why Ngugi agreed to help at The Kamiriithu Centre – he wanted to contribute to the community of which he saw himself as part. He shared the same history and knew about their circumstances as an oppressed group.

The two playwrights, Micere Githae Mugo and Ngugi wa Mirii, with whom Ngugi worked, were in consensus that their plays should be about the people; that it should be taken from and to the people. It became people’s community theatre where the collective playmaking used development techniques and processes, as well as theatre practices from Boal.

Plays, such as *The Black Hermit* and *The Trail of Dedan Kimathi*, were specially created for commemorative days and became regulars at community theatre festivals. “The strategy of collective-play creation has enabled theatre groups to present performances that dealt with issues of concern to the community and are consistent with the themes of these national and international days” (Gunner 1994: 67). Ngugi used community theatre because it has a political orientation and strong links with liberation movements and in utilising it he can create useful and relevant political and solidarity theatre. He realised that the community identified with the plays’ ideology and political message. It got them talking and engaged in the activity itself. Through theatre activities he made the marginalised community aware of their socio-political problems and that through unity, they can change the status quo. The Kamiriithu community involvement showed how

they utilised theatre to identify development problems, seek their solutions and collectively implemented strategies to solve the problems.

The grassroots theatre has power and a significant impact when a community is actively involved. The effectiveness as media for development and change is phenomenal, e.g. it was community theatre that created the plays at Kamiriithu to support campaigns in such areas as literacy. It encouraged people to stay involved in theatre activities and the establishment of full-time theatre groups, mainly comprising school leavers, was a natural outcome. The idea and success of collective productions created solidarity among the community as well as with struggling people in other communities.

On a social level the theatre Ngugi involved the people. Thus theatre became a tool for social change. It encouraged the community to activate themselves and take charge of their situations. It challenged and spurred them on to change their lives, and it was performing arts that made history, experiences, and situations come alive. The performances became collective assets that revived the community. Ngugi intended it to benefit large sections of Kenyan communities.

When the Kamiriithu community was doing the plays they identified with the characters they performed or saw, as they were familiar with the history and re-lived the creation of their history as it appeared before their eyes on stage. They recognised the characters and were involved – even if it was in remembering. They recognised family, friends and

known situations. Dedan Kimathi was as they had known or imagined him. It was rumoured that the actor playing Kimathi even showed a strong resemblance to the real person in their desire for the character to be him. In reliving past experiences and re-creating history those who had not participated in the real events, could share them through enactment. When culture and historical experiences are shared by a community it becomes collective.

For Ngugi the contribution of the communities reached even wider. The orature of Kenya is told to the youth by mothers, fathers and grandparents who rekindle it by putting the narratives into modern statements in a variety of literary and performing genres. Mugo said, “The techniques we are employing today in order to use drama as a vehicle of communication and conscientization in social development ....are being borrowed from an orature set-up.... Orature theatre is very community-conscious” (Wilkinson 1992: 116). She and Ngugi used orature to dramatise some of the milestones in Kenya’s history in their homage to the oral tradition of the Gikuyu literature.

In the community the theatre is utilised for different social functions. Not only is it a method to teach children, or a performance for people to come and watch, but Mugo relates in her London interview that drama was also used a great deal among the Mau-Mau fighters in the forest to pass messages to the community. When the fighters found their morale going low they would have a group enact a historical scene in which people were strengthened by what took place, just so as to uplift their dampened spirits. Theatre

became part of the Rebellion. Ngugi used it for the Kamiriithu literary campaigns and to cut down ethnic barriers as with the multi-cultural *Mother, Sing for Me*.

*I Will Marry When I Want* brought a new, independent community-based theatre phenomenon. The play aroused unprecedented interest from town and rural people in Kamiriithu where Ngugi tapped a bottomless fountain of creativity in an ordinary group of people. They delivered work of a high quality and even in terms of acting did professional work. Ngugi saw the results when the community put together their resources in a collective spirit: each person contributed what he had –knowledge, talent, and advice, even though the process was not always easy. Through the involvement of the people in making theatre their audience could feel the impact and experience the joy it provided.

Theatre has the capacity to involve people. In 1962 when Ngugi wrote *The Black Hermit* community involvement was restricted to the playwright, those who acted and those who came to watch the performances. With *I Will Marry When I Want* the involvement of the community was much more than only acting or being audience. The development of the script alone involved the whole community. In collaboration with them and Ngugi wa Mirii ideas for the play were created into a script. After the first draft the villagers read it and came with suggestions, comments and alterations. Especially the language received attention as both the Ngugis were more used to expressing their thoughts in English and the villagers much more skilled in Gikuyu. The improvements and additions done to the

script during the rehearsal stage resulted in a play. People chopped or changed until it was the work of many. This active community involvement applied in *I Will Marry When I Want*, was trebled in *Mother, Sing for Me* where not only Gikuyu was used, but the languages and cultures of other indigenous tribes as well.

The fact that the rehearsals were open to the community served more than one purpose. It involved the rest of the villagers as spectators, but also as directors and critics. When one of the actors was unable to portray a specific image, that of a rich man, due to his physical appearance, one of the spectators demonstrated what was needed so well that he eventually got the role in the play. In *I Will Marry When I Want* e.g. the elderly people came forward and told them that “if you want an old man to speak with dignity he uses this kind of imagery or this kind of proverb...” (Wilkinson 1992: 125).

The two Ngugis saw themselves as coordinators. They used bits of stories about people’s lives from an ordinary society, the different scraps of information that they have seen, heard, experienced and stored in their minds and hearts for a long time, was recreated into *I Will Marry When I Want*. They were like editors who gave the orature a form: theatre. Theatre is replete with communal and communicative possibilities and by using it Ngugi opened up that venue of cultural activities for the masses to express themselves in collective festivals. The many songs and dances from *Mother, Sing for Me* had to come from people from the community as Ngugi did not have a wide enough variety to be incorporate into the play as he had visualised it. The involvement of all the

different nationalities in the community gave a feeling of belonging; a spirit of unity. Even the fact that the scripts of the play were translated into English by the Ngugis was seen as a joint effort. Ngugi identified with the working-class poor, the masses; and they identified with his plays.

There was great eagerness to participate in all areas. The technical aspects of the productions were planned, produced and handled by the community themselves, e.g. costumes, décor, lights and sound, as well as constructing the large open-air 'auditorium' which had a seating capacity of over 2,000, and the stage itself. Kamiriithu is one of the poorest villages in Kenya, but in a communal effort they erected an imposing theatre building and made theatre.

### **AUDIENCE INVOLVEMENT**

**“I am convinced that drama is *nothing* unless there is a rapport between the performers on stage and the audience”** Micere Githae Mugo (Wilkinson 1992: 112).

**“African theatre ‘creates an intermediary space by which audiences are drawn into an active process of meaning and making’... theatre is ‘a coming together of human beings ...’ ”** Ato Quayson. (Banham 1999: 165).



In pre-colonial times direct audience participation was part of the ceremonies, celebrations and rituals of the community. The spectators were part of the whole process. They could talk to each other, move about and join in the dancing and dramatic activities. They even had the freedom to change things if they felt very strongly about them. “The dancing, music, and song have a communal character, and audiences responded by clapping in rhythm, singing refrains, repeating phrases, or making comments” (Brockett 1999: 274).

Colonial times brought the foreign raised proscenium stage that caused the barrier between actors and audience. According to Boal’s theory, which Ngugi endorses, the barriers between actors and spectators must be destroyed so that all can act. Like a true Marxist Ngugi strove for the destruction of that barrier and performed his plays in true African style which demands no division between actor and audience. Ngugi and Boal regard theatre from the audience’s point of view and thus place their focus on the process of consumption. The direct communication with the audience worked well for Ngugi. The performers were readily accessible to the audience for not being constrained to the stage or a designated area; they moved unrestricted around the stage and among the audience. The actors were uninhibited. The entry of some of the performers through the audience was in direct contravention of Western theatre use and showed how Ngugi applied his total theatre to the fullest. His powerful plays were direct statements to the audience, compelling them to become involved in theatre.

Ngugi was adamant that decisions be taken by the audience so that the transition from oppression to national can take place – bringing class and cultural liberation. According to Boal's Joker-system all must be protagonists in this necessary transformation of society. When the spectator becomes the actor it has revolutionary potential for transformation. Ngugi and Boal see popular theatre as a means of achieving political consciousness and through that, transformation. For them theatre is part of the creative process of raising that political consciousness. The plays attain popularity during the process of production and the process becomes part of the goal. Performances spoke directly to the audience about social, political and economical issues through a rendition of their history. When the peasants and workers identify with their history, present realities and future aspirations; as with *The Trail of Dedan Kimathi*, *I Will Marry When I Want* and *Mother, Sing for Me*, it becomes a process through which the masses learn: society must change – the struggle goes on.

Audience involvement started right from the beginning when everybody at the Kamiriithu Centre became collaboratively involved in the process. The composition of the dialogue, traditional songs and dances was worked out on the basis of an initial outline and with the co-operative interaction of the people who trained themselves. The plays, e.g. *The Trail of Dedan Kimati* had an atmosphere of communal song, dance and solidarity.

The audiences consisted of ordinary non-literary and non-academic people; called *wananchi*, as well as business-people. The different classes joined together to create, perform, teach and protest. For them it was “a return to the roots of our being ... To express the authentic culture being of its people” (Crow 1996: 9). Ngugi contributed the enthusiastic reaction of the audiences (before the government banned the plays) to the fact that the performing group’s relationship to the audience was so different from that of the Western theatre’s performers to their audiences at the national theatre. At Kamiriithu the people were not mere spectators, but participants in a celebration of the history that the actors were celebrating. The language was no longer a barrier and through participating in the theatre experience the imaginations were fired so that they were enriched and gained knowledge about themselves, their culture and their suffering. By being part of the process the oppressed people can liberate themselves and make the theatre their own as Kimariithu did. Kabwe Kasoma says it beautifully: “Bring theatre to the people, not the people to the theatre!” (Boal 1979: 121).

As audience the community became uniquely involved in the events on the stage during the performances of Ngugi’s plays by their response. At a performance a play’s cast could easily become larger by the many spec-actors joining in the singing and dancing of the play in a spontaneous reaction, especially if they knew the words or movements. The more caught up in the spirit of the performance, the more the audience will join in the activities. The spontaneous involvement was not always restricted to where the audience sat or stood. As they become involved it even happened that some members of

the audience got on the stage during a performance to join the actors. The audience shouted comments, suggestions and advice, joined in songs and participated in the dancing. Their response became rowdily as they were totally absorbed in the action and they even intervened at certain stages. Their behaviour was absolutely in contrast with the hushed atmosphere at a Western theatre. The very nature of community theatre allowed the instantaneous, unprompted and participatory reaction of a community as an audience to a performance. A lively discussion was held after the performances between the audience and the cast and crew, contributing further to the demystifying of the theatre process.

A natural outcome of the committed community's and audience involvement was the tremendous development and promotion of theatre skills among them, especially the youth, in the surrounding rural areas. Eventually the enthusiasm spread through the country and to neighbouring countries. Even other collective activities, e.g. sewing projects, became the focus of the community afterwards.

## CONCLUSION

Ngugi feels as a socialistic writer he has a responsibility and as a Kenyan a mission to advocate human rights. His politically charged writings conscientise the people of their dire circumstances of cultural, social, economical and political oppression. Ngugi's work developed from a nationalist position into a progressive social, anti-imperialist commitment to the struggle of the working people and is affected by his liberal education and socialist ideological leanings. His plays show the same parallel development. Ngugi writes about what concerns him and he used the theatre as a platform to reflect those social relations between the inhabitants and the colonialists/neo-colonialists. This theatre, whether literary or for development, was striving for purpose and application in its society. His cultural, social and political utterances in his quest to change that corrupt society. Ngugi is committed to his political philosophy and the themes are leitmotifs to the human interchanges the plays explore.

Ngugi's theatre thus has definite functions. For Ngugi theatre is not something separate from life, as he felt that people make theatre everyday as their lives are the very substance of drama. Ngugi's play, *I Will Marry When I Want*, was collective community-based theatre and had an invigorating effect on East African drama. The efforts to make his work more accessible to mass audiences was important as it helped Kenyan theatre to break away from imperialist traditions, symbolized by the Kenya

National Theatre and Western theatre. Ngugi challenged some of the major fundamental principles of Western theatre in his people's theatre.

His theatre practice had a grass-roots focus and was a collective project: a national theatre for a national audience in a national language and in direct contrast to Western theatre. Western-style theatre rehearses in private, and then performs the final product to the audience. This type of theatre creates active 'stars' and passive, undifferentiated audiences. Ngugi's theatre broke away from these Western traditions. His theatre became an expression of daily lives: the struggle, hope, fear, aspiration and conflict in their midst; vastly different from Western theatre experiences.

The two community plays, *I Will Marry When I Want* (1982) and *Mother, Sing for Me*, brought focus to indigenous Kenyan theatre. The open-air structure that the Kamiriithu people built themselves was in direct contrast with the formal theatre venue of the National Theatre at Nairobi. As part of his 2002 Performance Study course at the Tisch School of the Arts at the New York University Ngugi examined performance space and popular theatre movements in Africa in the light of the politics of performance space. He was referring directly to the National Theatre and the Kamiriithu theatre. The community project introduced theatre to many who had no time for it because of work demands or previously had no access to theatre. Today the Kenyan theatre "is not dictated by the system but by the public" (Kenya 1999: 3). The last few years saw a

reinforcement of Kenyan theatre on various levels. The Kenyan National Schools' Drama Festival is still a highlight on the theatre calendar in Kenya.

Theatre in Kenya is regularly used for social education, but tends to be local performances of foreign plays. Besides current activities at The National Theatre there are several theatre companies. "Kenyan theatre seems to have come of age locally and is taking its first steps on to the world stage," (Herbert 2000: 143). The amount of theatre activity has increased significantly, both at the community-based and university levels. The themes became more relevant to the culture of the people, and the rich traditions expressed in traditional festivals and ceremonies, contribute to the theatre. That was what Ngugi envisioned when he and Mugo staged *The Trail of Dedan Kimathi*.

As with Ngugi's plays they must become actors and creators of drama. Ngugi used this method of popular communal theatre as a form of communication and expression to bring conscientisation and cultural development to the oppressed masses. His radical, political plays and folk musicals were popular among the people. Ngugi saw the audience as an essential part of theatre. The audience can contribute and influence the performance in subtle ways as in Western theatre or in theatre such as Ngugi's, in jubilant or triumphant ways. At Kamiriithu the audiences was participants in the theatre in a demystifying process where the audience collectively expressed their problems and explored solutions. In appropriating the traditional cultural forms in their indigenous languages Ngugi ensured that the whole community participated so that the theatre

became a communication. Ngugi experienced that grass-roots theatre has power and a significant impact when a community is actively involved.

The people's history was used to highlight the current situation and the context of Ngugi's plays, e.g. *Mother, Sing for Me*, reflects the foreign oppression during the colonial period, but has bearing on the present-day neo-colonialism exploitation. Ngugi's historical consciousness came from what he experienced and observed in the midst of the turbulent anti-colonial struggle. The shared culture and historical experiences of the Kamiriithu community became collective and from them developed a new kind of theatre. Ngugi practiced that theatre as a powerful mode of expression to voice the people's feelings and experiences. The Ngugi plays negotiated a new association of structure, content and occasion of performance; using recurring African oral tradition motifs. These domestic-made plays were a statement: this was the authentic language of African Theatre, rich with the rhythms of the African People. Ngugi combined elements of realism, orature and history into theatre. The form itself performed a cultural purpose. Ngugi called for a decolonising of the mind so that people would reclaim their heritage.



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## **ADDENDUM 1**

### **NGUGI WA THIONG'O: AWARDS**

The Medal of the Presidency of the Italian Cabinet by the International Scientific Committee of the Pio Manzu International Research Centre in Rimini, Italy.(ICWT)

1962 East Africa Novel Prize

1963 UNESCO First Prize for the novel *Weep not, Child*

1965 Dakar Festival of Negro Arts Award, and the  
East African Literature Bureau Award for his novel *Weep not,  
Child*.

1973 Lotus Prize for Afro-Asian Literature

1983 Noma Children's Book Award.

1992 Paul Robeson Award for Artistic Excellence, Conscience and  
Integrity.

1993 Zora-Neale Hurston-Paul Robeson Award

1994 Gwendolyn Books Centre Contributors Award for Significant  
Contribution to Black Literary Arts.

1996 Fonlo-Nichols Prize.

1996 Distinguished Africanist Award by the New York African Studies  
Association.

2001 Nonino International Prize.



## **ADDENDUM 2**

### **LIST OF NGUGI WA THIONG'O'S WRITINGS:**

#### **Short stories**

- \* Secret Lives, and Other Stories, 1976

#### **Novels**

- \* Weep Not, Child, 1964
- \* The River Between, 1965
- \* A Grain of Wheat, 1967
- \* Petals of Blood, 1977
- \* Caitani Mutharaba-Ini (translated into English by Ngugi as Devil on the Cross), 1980
- \* Matigari ma Njiruungi, 1986 (translated into English by Wangui wa Goro as Matigari)
- \* Muroogi wa Kigogo (2004)

#### **Drama / Plays**

- \* The Rebels. In *Penpoint* (October 1961)
- \* The Black Hermit, 1963

- \* This Time Tomorrow, 1970 (Three plays, including the title play, The Rebels and The wound in the Heart)
- \* The Trail of Dedan Kimathi, 1976 (with Micere Githae Mugo)
- \* Ngaahika Ndeenda: Ithaako ria ngerekano 1980 (I Will Marry When I Want), 1982 (with Ngugi wa Mirii)
- \* Maitu ma Njugira (Mother, Sing for Me) 1986

### **Criticism**

- \* Homecoming: Essays on African and Caribbean Literature, Culture and Politics, 1972
- \* Detained: a Writer's Prison Diary (Autobiography) 1981
- \* Writers in Politics: Essays, 1981
- \* Barrel of a Pen: Resistance to Oppression in Neo-Colonial Kenya, 1983
- \* Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature, 1986
- \* Writing against Neo-Colonialism, 1986
- \* Moving the Centre: The Struggle for Cultural Freedoms, 1993
- \* Penpoints, Gunpoints and Dreams: The Performance on Literature and Power in Post-Colonial Africa, (Clarendon Lectures in English Literature), 1998

**Children's' Books**

- \* Njamba Nene na Mbaathi ĩ Mathagu (Njamba Nene and the Flying Bus), 1982
- \* Njamba Nene na Cibu King'ang'i (Njamba Nene and the Cruel Chief), 1984
- \* Bathitoora ya Njamba Nene (Njamba Nene's Pistol), 1986

**Translations**

- \* Devil on the Cross. Trans. by Ngugi wa Thiongo. 1982
- \* I Will Marry When I Want, with Ngugi wa Mirii. Trans. by Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Ngugi wa Mirii. 1982
- \* Mother Sing for Me. Trans. By Ngugi wa Thiong'o. 1986
- \* Njamba Nene and the Flying Bus. Trans. by Wangui wa Goro. 1986
- \* Njamba Nene's New Pistol. Trans. by Wangui wa Goro. 1986
- \* Njamba Nene and the Cruel Chief. Trans. by Wangui wa Goro. 1988
- \* Matigari. Trans. By Wangui wa Goro. 1989

### **ADDENDUM 3**

#### **NGUGI'S WRITINGS**

##### **1.7.1 THE SHORT STORIES**

###### **1976 *Secret Lives and Other Stories***

This collection of stories forms part of the African Writers Series: 150. It was collected over a period of 12 years and is like a creative autobiography of what affected Ngugi deeply over those years: his own existence, social order, Kenya's history – reflecting the indigenous Gikuyu culture. They give an image of village life before colonialism. It reflects the political ongoing in the country e.g. the effects of a foreign religion in schools and church on people and the effects of neo-colonialism such as capitalism, class-consciousness and human alienation (Killam 1980: 74).

Though the short stories are moderately uncomplicated and immature they have the unusual ability to draw one into the worlds of sorrow and hardship with great empathy. Legends and superstition play an important role in the Kikuyu society and Ngugi used it to his benefit. These compassionate stories were forerunners of his later novels and plays who included the same or similar themes and characters as those dealt within many of

the short stories. The biting social satirical comments and metaphors found in his early work were to be found in his later writings as well.

The story *Mugumo (The Fig Tree)* was his first commercial writing and together with the other stories, won several prizes in competitions.

### **1.7. 2 THE PLAYS**

Ngugi wrote seven plays. They are dealt with in Chapter 2 and 3 in detail and are therefore not included here.

### **1.7. 3 THE NOVELS**

From the 1960's onwards East Africa experienced a sudden increase of writing on which Ngugi had a noticeable influence on the prose genre. In all of his novels Ngugi touches on the tremendous effect the history Kenya. As he identifies closely with the historical events, he builds his novels around them in so much that it has changed the aesthetics of his novel writing. After his first novels were published he soon became known as a controversial writer. As a novelist he used his characters, their surroundings and circumstances to voice his concerns. Gerald Moore made the observation that the heroes bear a striking resemblance to the character and circumstance of Ngugi (Moore 1983: 263).

With each novel Ngugi progressed to maturity. He became more explicit and vocal over the human rights abuses and injustices by the government against his people. He captured their awareness and adulation for his novels to which they became folk epics.

**1964 *Weep Not, Child***

Ngugi made his debut with this novel which he started while he was a scholar in England. It was the first major novel in English to be published by an East African writer. It was written and published under the name of James Ngugi and reveals him as a Christian humanist and not the militant socialist he would later become.

The novel chronicles a young boy, Njoroge, whose further education is lost during the Mau-Mau rebellion. It describes his experience of the conflict between the Africans and British colonial rulers, and how it affected him, other individuals and families. It reflects Njoroge's hopes and dreams as he finds himself relentlessly drawn into tragedy. Ngugi's own childhood and youth are reflected biographically in that of Njoroge's history: Ngugi's youth when his parents were forced to live as labourers on ancestral land in poverty. He shared the same dream of freeing his family of misery once he was educated.

The *Bildungsroman* format was used by Ngugi with great effect in this novel (Kirjasto 2005: 1). Like his characters, Ngugi was fired up with hope that soon independence would bring democracy and unity – a hope that never materialized as after independence it was only a continuation of the current state of affairs.

The book received a lot of critical acclaim. It received the 1966 Dakar Festival of Negro Arts and the East African Literature Bureau Awards. It was translated into Swahili, German and Russian.

### **1965 *The River Between***

This second published novel came from the period when Ngugi's creative talent came to light at Makerere. It was drafted in 1961, before *Weep Not, Child*, under the title '*The Black Messiah*', which is referring to Jomo Kenyatta, and won a first prize in an East African Literature Bureau competition.

This is the tragic story of two Gikuyu communities who are living on opposite banks on the Honia River; each with its own religion. Ngugi expose how the traditional African village life is torn apart when it came into conflict with the Western religion and education. This theme appears in *The Black Hermit* as well. As with *Weep Not, Child* (1964) the background is the period between the late 1920's – 1940's Mau-Mau war. As

'voice' for his Gikuyu people Ngugi started to gently nudge them towards political awareness of their oppression; activating subsequent growing resistance.

This novel, and the rest to follow, was written in a period of disillusionment for the socialistic Ngugi. He became stringent in his criticism of those elite who took advantage of the peasants.

### **1967 *A Grain of Wheat***

This novel marked Ngugi's break with cultural nationalism and his embracement of Fanonist-Marxism. It has been referred to as a 'socialist' novel by some critics. The theme is, as in previous novels, once again the "national struggle, the courage, sacrifices and loyalties it requires" (Zell 1983: 131).

In the poignant story of four people are caught up in a historical whirlwind's aftermath. Ngugi gives a multi-textured and integrated portrayal of a period and the people therein. The hero is Mugo, a detention camp veteran who had betrayed unknown to others, the cause during the struggle to save himself.

The influence of Joseph Conrad on Ngugi's writing can be detected "where the sources of individual guilt are gradually revealed, then followed by expiation of various kinds" (Killam 2000: 108 – 109). The character Mugo reminds too strong to be coincidental of



Conrad's Razumov in his *Under Western Eyes*, but Ngugi's deep empathy and opinionated convictions differ vastly from Conrad's deep adversary of revolutionary politics. He certainly learned from a master but colored it with his own experience.

The novel received high praise as being more artistically mature and was considered his most ambitious and successful novel when published.

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### **1977 *Petals of Blood***

This epic novel, started in 1970 after an idea in 1969, was finished 1976. Ngugi takes up the responsibility of exclaiming his commitment to the people of his country who in his mind is the true owners of the land (Zell 1983: 133). The powerful novel is an outspoken attack on the current Kenyan regime's exploitation and corruption, as well as the inequalities and hypocrisy. It was his harshest criticism of the situation that prevailed. He focuses also on the plight of the former Freedom Fighters and the recent history of independent Kenya. The realities of the harsh life for workers and peasants in neo-colonial Kenya was given bluntly. The strong message Ngugi wanted to convey through the complex plot was one of political redemption and hope in an ultimate victory for the masses in the future. The people he wanted to reach were the masses. It upset Ngugi tremendously that the people he wrote about in the novel and to whom he directed his message could not read the book due to the fact that it was written in English, a language most could not read. He felt his writing was futile.

Even though the book was criticized for its Marxist argument which was felt weakened the novel, the book was received with much emphatic critical acclaim in Kenya and the rest of the world. His effective use of irony showed what a good writer he is.

### **1982 *Devil on the Cross***

After his release from prison Ngugi published in rapid succession a few publications. Among them the satirical Gikuyu novel, *Caitani Mutharaba-ini* (1980) about the Kenyan society, started while detained in prison in 1977 /1978. He used, as Wole Soyinka and other detainees before him, the familiar tactics of a writer in prison: he wrote on toilet paper scraps and hid it from the wardens.

This symbolic novel deals with the outrage against Kenya being caught up in the pincers of capitalism. He criticized corrupt Kenyans for their conspiracy with foreigners to the detriment of the workers. Ngugi used traditional oral storytelling techniques in a manner that reminds of the traditional ballad singers (Black History 2005: 3). He uses his favorite motif, the journey, to write this allegory. He brutally satirizes Christianity which he blames as a colonization tool. In honor of women who played a role in the colonial and neocolonial struggle he made Wariinga the hero of the story to represent all the people suffering.

In some of the characters a glimpse of Ngugi shimmers through: Muturi who is working to end neocolonialism; Wangari who is arrested by the police; and Gatuiria with his academic knowledge who speaks Gikuyu and English and tries to reconnect himself with Africa. Contrasting them (him) is the businessman who stands as a neocolonial beacon and the bus driver with his individualistic greed. This novel heralds a new phase in Ngugi's literary life.

**1986 *Matigari* (translated 1989)**

This novel *Matigari maNjiruungi* was written during Ngugi's first year of exile in London. The story takes place in a nameless country and the events and characters are not restricted to fixed time or space. This gives a universal flavor. It is however clear from the many references that it is set in the period of Daniel arap Moi. Kenya becomes ultimately a metaphor for all the nominally independent countries where neocolonialism reigns.

The book was banned in February 1987 and Kenyan bookshops were not allowed to sell it until 1996. F. Odun Balogun claims that "*Matigari* is a brilliant post-modernist reconstitution of old realism into new realism" (Cantalupo 1995: 121).

**2004 *Murogi wa Kagogo*** (spelling Kagoogo also found)

Ngugi's latest novel can be best described as a kind of global epic that speaks to our world today. He worked on the script for eight years, spanning two centuries and is the largest original book in an African language. The story of Murogi wa Kagogo, a collective figure who echoes different facets of the Kenyan history, is told in six volumes. The protagonist again takes on a type of Messiah figure. When Ngugi was asked about it he commented: "The biblical myth is there; the notion of birth, death, and resurrection. There are allusions to the Last Supper, Christ and his disciples" (Wilkinson 1992: 133). In an interview with the magazine *Lifestyle* Ngugi said that the novel is an ambitious attempt "to sum up Africa of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century in the context of 2000 years of world history." An imaginary country called Aburiria, under the leadership of His Excellency President the Second, forms the background of the novel. The satirical novel gives a view of the cult of dictatorship in Africa and proceeds from the theme of *Matigari*. He made use of characters, incidents and themes from his previous works, e.g. the legendary Dedan Kimathi.

**1. 7. 4 THE LITERARY ESSAYS**

Ngugi started to publish literary critique and cultural comments in 1972 in various literary magazines such as *Penpoint*, *Translations*, *Zuka* and *The New African*. He soon became an influential writer of critical essays. In his African literary criticism he moved from aesthetics to politics when he became candid and radical in his Marxist-nationalist

views of colonial and post-colonial literature and art. As a writer he showed a developing maturity with each new book of literary criticism.

**1972 *Homecoming: Essays on African and Caribbean Literature, Culture, and Politics***

It covers essays and talks between 1962 – 1970 on topics such as the relation between society, language, literature and the nature of culture, especially in Africa and even more specific, Kenya. According to Ngugi it was the duty of African writers “to attest to their cultural integrity” (Zell 1983: 43) He wrote about the works of well-known African writers such as Wole Soyinka, Chinua Achebe, Okot p’Bitek and T.M. Aluko and their views on and contribution to African literature. In *Homecoming* Ngugi tried to offer some positive solutions and hope for the African society. In his mind it could be achieved only by revolution if it was wished by the devoted. Even violence would be justifiable for Ngugi to achieve social change: “Violence in order to change an intolerable, unjust social order is not savagery: It purifies man,” he claimed in this book.

**1981 *Writers in Politics: A re-engagement with issues of literature and society***

This second collection of essays contains a variety of different kinds of writing, collected over a period of ten years, 1970 – 1980, about the relevance of literature to life. It consists of critical essays, newspaper articles and public talks wherein more than ever

Ngugi was emphasizing Kenya's problems and the need for drastic radical reform. He states his political commitment to his people. He claims in the book's preface that "literature cannot escape from the class power structures that shape our everyday life."

The need to write in African languages and the obligation for writers to become involve in their society, not only with the intellectual and educated elite, but the peasants and the workers too, was strongly emphasized.

**1983 *Barrel of a Pen: Resistance to Repression in Neo-Colonial Kenya***

In this book Ngugi shows how the writers need to be a fighter against the numerous problems that confronts Africans daily. He place emphasis on the fact that the situation is worsening.

**1986 *Writing against Neocolonialism***

This book contains a considerable variety of essays which offers a fair representation of Ngugi's criticisms. Ngugi reveals (1986: 15) that the power of a neocolonial government is in its police and army with which he controls the people. The fact that these rulers misuse their power and abuse without conscience those they are suppose to serve is disgusting. Writers should not keep silent, but write about it.

**1986 *Decolonising the Mind: The politics of Language in African Literature***

These theoretical essays deal significant issues, e.g. the development of an African literary and critical discourse based on the need to use indigenous African languages to reach the African masses. In the introduction Ngugi declared: “This book ...is my farewell to English as a vehicle for ant of my writings. From now on it is Gikuyu and Kiswahili all the way” (Ngugi 1986: p.xi). He emphasized the need to create literature that conveys the true African experience from the local’s perspective. That way the local tradition, which is preserved in the local language, e.g. stories and songs, can be passed on. His arguments are logic and largely convincing in his criticisms.

**1993 *Moving the Centre: the Struggle for Cultural Freedoms***

This book contains essays and lectures which refer to a variety of issues concerning culture. Ngugi talks of moving the centre between and within nations in order to free world cultures from the restraining fortifications around them. He urges the establishment of a “real creative centre among working people in conditions of racial, religious and gender equality” Ngugi addresses with more intellectual depth. Most of the ideas as familiar: exploitation, land alienation, the usage of powerful cultural activities in the liberation process and how history reveals examples of the greed, betrayal and corruption of the imperialists.

**1996 *Penpoints, Gunpoints, and Dreams: Towards a Critical Theory of the Arts and the State in Africa (Clarendon Lectures in English Literature)***

The book, which is hailed as an incredible achievement, is divided into four lectures, each containing well supported philosophies, which is down to earth in its information on art and culture. Ngugi deals in each lecture with ideas that he practically applies. The relationship between art and the political power in society is under scrutiny, concentrating on “their struggle for the control of performance space in territorial, temporal, social and even psychic contexts” (Ashcroft 1995: 2) As a point of departure Ngugi has taken the experience of writers in modern Africa where these writers are often branded as the enemy of the postcolonial state. He pleads for the confederation between art and what he calls ‘people power’ to enable art to be active and claiming what it has always been: the expression of human dreams.

**1.7.5 THE DIARY**

**1981 *Detained: A Writer’s Prison Diary***

The integrated writing was the direct result of Ngugi’s detention during 1977 - 1978. In a vivid detailed chronicle of prison memoirs he gives an expression of a personal visualization of the life of a political prisoner of conscience. He reveals the social reality; of the degradation and humiliation he had suffered behind bars. He touched on



various key issues in contemporary Kenya's society and politics; reflected on his work, detailing the Kamiriithu –experience, and expressed his views on the way forward for the exploited masses.

Ressler described it as “a strongly anti-government, anti-oppression and anti-suppression autobiography, marking a new era in his life” (Ressler 2005: 4). It were these issues, dealt with in the novel *Petals of Blood* and the play *I Will Marry When I Want*, that landed him in prison, but he kept on pointing them out.

#### **1.7.6 THE CHILDREN'S BOOKS**

Ngugi felt that there should be more children's books in the language and idiom of his people. It should deal with their familiar surroundings en customs, rather than imported foreign books. In 1981 he created a character, Njamba Nene / Karenga, the wise young hero, a small Kenyan boy, as the continuing character of the series of ten children's books planned. Ngugi hopes that the boy's adventures, before and during the struggle for Kenya's Independence, will open up the history and culture for the young readers. The English translations were done by Wangui wa Goro. The first Njamaba Nene book received Honourable Mention at the 1983 Noma Award.

\* *Njamba Nene na Mbaathi I Mathagu* (1982) (trans. *Njamba Nene and The Flying Bus*) (1986)

\* *Bathitoora ya Njamba Nene* (1983) (trans. *Njamba Nene's Pistol*)

(1988)

\* *Njamba Nene na Cibu King'ang'I* (1986) (trans. *Njamba Nene and the*

*Chief Crocodile*) (1989)