

Report

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o

Reading from: *The Birth of a Dreamweaver* (2016)
University of Vienna, Main Library, May 4, 2017

In cooperation with
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Diaspora Research Platform



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The reading started with several speakers who referred to Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o and his works and thanked each other for their cooperation. Maria Seissl, Head Librarian of the Vienna University Library opened the reading. Secondly, Michael A. Oyugi, Ambassador of the Republic of Kenya emphasized the popularity of Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o’s books beyond Africa and their importance to cultural diplomacy, which stood for cultural exchanges and activities. Professor Adams Bodomu, Head of the Department of African Studies and the Global African Diaspora Research Platform (GADS), mentioned that Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o will read from the book “Birth of a Dream Weaver” that had won many prizes. Although Mr. Bodomu is from far away Ghana, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o became his hero decades ago. Mrs. Irène Hochauer-Kpoda, project manager of the VIDC pointed out the historical connection between the VIDC and Kenya. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o writes in his book about one of the fathers of Kenya’s independence, namely the trade unionist Tom Mboya. He was one of the VIDC founders in the 1960’s and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o referred to him as a moderator of the first panafrikan student conference. She explained that “Birth of a Dream Weaver” was a memoir of a writer awakening and that it was written in the context of the colonization and decolonization of not only Kenya and Uganda, but the whole African continent.

Then Martina Kopf, Senior Lecturer of the Department of African Studies and moderator of the reading thanked Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o and explained which chapter he would read first.

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o started by mentioning that it was his second time in Vienna and how he thought that the Austrian people must be very religious, due to the golden decoration in St. Stephen’s Cathedral. He appreciated everybody’s presence, especially that of the ambassador, whose presence gave him a sense of home. He explained that his memoir was a narration of everything he remembered about his student days in Uganda. In his book “Birth of a Dream Weaver” wa Thiong’o writes: *“I entered Makerere University College in July 1959, subject of a British Crown Colony, and left in March 1964, citizen of an independent African state. Between subject and citizen, a writer was born”*. Mr. wa Thiong’o emphasized the fact that he had never gone further than the African borders during his student days, because people expected him to have started writing when he went to university in Britain. However, he started writing in Africa and he also received his first prize there. Africa made him and he is proud of that.

Before he read from the chapter “Reds and Blacks” Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o spoke about Makerere University in Kampala, which was far away from his Kenyan rural village and according to him felt like another world. In 1959 he left Kenya, which was in a state of emergency as the war for liberation by the Land Freedom Army took place. In comparison, Africans in Uganda could walk around freely. Then he began to read about his first social encounter in Makere. The students lived in residential halls and the dining room was turned into a dance hall with a live band for their social evenings. A highlight of this social evening was the ladies, who dressed up nicely and with whom the men wanted to dance. However, they were all too shy to ask for the first dance and only got the courage when one of them succeeded in doing so. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o read how his first encounter with social events was an embarrassing experience, which led him to take up dancing classes.

Afterwards he continued to read from his chapter “Penpoints and Fig Trees”, which narrated how he wrote his first short story. Student magazines were very important in Makerere. The writers of the student magazine “Penpoint” were seen as heroes and one of them was Jonathan Kariara, who played an important role in Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o first short story. He explained how he spoke to Jonathan Kariara when they met for the second time and asked him if he would like to read his story, which Kariara agreed to do. But in reality he Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o had not started writing and was only thinking about it. Thus, he had to come up with a story during the night, which developed into “The Fig Tree”, his first publication in “Penpoint”, and a story based on his memories. *“I was able to capture the senseless violence I had seen in my Father’s house against my Mother, years ago. I wrote feverishly. I had not realized that I still carried the heaviness of the past. It was a relief when it all came out.”* After Kariara’s feedback, he wrote several drafts and years later he would send “The Fig Tree” and other stories to the publishing house Hutchinson in London, which were rejected. Yet he mentioned how they were interested in him writing a novel. In the end, he wrote one between 1960 and 1961, which is now known as “The River Between”.

The chapter “Writing for the Money of It” told the story of his first novel. The title gave away that he wrote the novel in the context of a competition, where he could win 50 dollars. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o told how one night a melody came into his mind, which was sang in school in Mangou and revolved around the struggle for land, freedom and education in a colonial state.

“My imagination digs up history. It’s a living history [...] The collective mania for education, the collective dreams for a meaningful tomorrow. I want to tell how it all began, the struggle for school. The barefoot teacher was at the center of the dream. He is the interpreter of the world; he brings the world to the people; he is the prophet of a tomorrow. I want to write about this s[so?] bad[ly?], it’s like a fever that has seized me again and intensified.” Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o finished his novel 1961, which at first was called “Wrestling with God”, then “The Black Messiah” and finally published under the title “The River Between”.

Martina Kopf continued and revealed that she had talked with several people about Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o and his work and realized how much his writings bear a meaning to so many people with different backgrounds. She mentioned an Upper Austrian activist and scholar, who was inspired by “Decolonizing the Mind” and its reconstruction of Afro-Austrian history, a feminist friend, who was impressed by how he dealt with the topic of genital mutilation in the context of the anti-colonial resistance, a Kenyan teacher, who has read all of his novels, and the director of a peace research institute, who remembers the book “A Grain of Wheat”, which he read as a student. Martina Kopf concluded in regard to his writings: *“Once you read it, it stays with you. You can remember what you read. It becomes part of your mind and it alters the colour of your mind.”* She referred to Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o as a great novelist, who has written all his novels since “Caitani mutharaba-Ini” (“Devil on the Cross”, 1982) in Gikuyu. Moreover, she described him as a brilliant essayist, powerful dramatist and in regard to his memories, which covered the period from his childhood up to his university years in Makerere, against the historical background of colonization and anti-colonial war, as a *“historic witness and very acute observer, who meets the storyteller and the history writer in these beautifully rich and moving narratives of lived history”*. All of his memoirs were translated into German by Thomas Brückner, from the Department of African Studies in Leipzig, who is currently translating “Decolonizing the Mind”.

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o continued reading from his chapter “Black Dolls and Black Masks” He wrote about negritude and the discovery of his blackness in Kampala, where he thought that being black or white would not matter. According to him, his first real discovery of blackness happened when a white officer look at him with surprised incomprehension because Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o used the wrong bathroom. He had other encounters, which made him realize his blackness, f.e. when he was imprisoned during high school on the order of a white officer for not paying taxes. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o said that he got a job at the library in Makerere, where

most of the people where Whites and once he went to the bathroom, where he met a white officer, who looked at him as if he had seen a ghost and another officer had the same reaction. In the end, the head of the library, Lady V. and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o discussed the use of bathrooms for officers only, where the young black student said that there wasn’t a sign, which implied they were only for Whites. There were further experiences of negritude he talked about.

Last but not least, he read from his chapter “Boxers and Black Hermits”, since it revolved around the theater plays. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o mentioned the people involved in his play “The Black Hermits” and the difficulties they faced during the production. But it was also a personal success for the author. The East African Creative Writing Competition Committee awarded him with the first prize.

Theatre might have had a bigger impact on his life than his fiction. In 1977, the author was imprisoned because of his theatre play ‘Ngaahika Ndeenda’. It was a new form of local theatre which sought to liberate the theatrical process from what he considered “*the general bourgeois education system.*” His decision to write in Gikuyu was also related to theater. He then told about his first major play, which he wrote as a student in Makere for the celebration of the independence of Uganda.

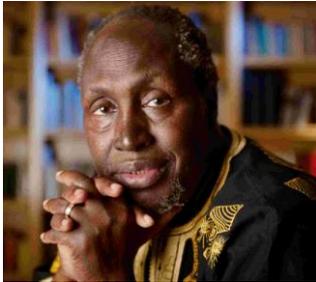
After he finished reading, Martina Kopf alluded to the independence schools which were run by the Gikuyu Independence School Association GISA in the 1950s. She referred to the current movement of “Decolonizing Universities”, which started in South Africa and spread across Europe and the United States. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o explained that he was taken aback by how people received his book “Decolonizing the Mind”. When he stayed in Johannesburg a couple of weeks ago, 2500 people came in order to listen to him talk about secure based decolonization of the mind. Among the audience were students, faculty members, lawyers and politicians. The same thing happened in Capetown. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o recognized how decolonizing the mind became a slogan – a way of changing power relationships and acquiring knowledge. By adding to one’s knowledge, one tends to see differences and contrasts. With a metaphor-like story, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o explained the relationship between empowerment and knowledge and how the colonial system destroyed that. Children, who run around, always look back to ensure that their parents are still there. He described their desire to know more about where they grew up and how the absence of that knowledge makes them

uneasy. In this regard, knowledge is very important. An individual gets more and more empowered by acquiring knowledge. However, colonial systems worldwide prevented people from empowering themselves by closing down schools, prohibiting them to speak their native language and forcing them to learn about Europe. In Africa, people built their own schools due to the restricted access to colonial schools. The first college of higher education in Kenya was built by Africans. However, in 1952, the British colonizers banned all colleges run by Africans and, as an act of humiliation, they were turned into prisons. Seeking validation from the outside is very problematic; self-reliance is the solution to liberate a country.

In conclusion, Martina Kopf added that Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o’s memoirs teach important lessons to their readers. His memories teach readers how much one can learn from a history which has been purposely destroyed and interrupted, and they reveal how one should go back and continue from the point where he or she left off.

More than 250 people attended the reading and were very impressed by Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o as an author, as a narrator, as a historian and as a brilliant political observer.

Biographies



Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Distinguished Professor of English and Comparative Literature at the University of California, Irvine, is one of Africa's most important writers and intellectuals. He was born in Kenya in 1938 into a large peasant family, attended university in Uganda and in England and started his career as a novelist in the 1960s. His novels include *Weep Not Child* (1964), *Matigari* (1986) and *Murogi wa Kagogo* (transl. *Wizard of the Crow* 2006). He is author of the essay collections *Decolonising the Mind* (1986) and *Something Torn and New: An African Renaissance* (2009). Since the 1970s, he has been a powerful voice in struggles for cultural decolonisation and in the promotion of African languages.



Martina Kopf is Senior Lecturer in African Literatures and starting with July 2017 Elise-Richter-Fellow with a research project on "Concepts of development in postcolonial Kenyan writing", funded by the Austrian Science Funds (FWF) at the Department of African Studies, University of Vienna. Her research areas are African literatures of the 20th and 21st centuries; colonial and post-colonial narratives of development; representations of gender and feminist theory; trauma, memory and the ethics of representation.